Jazz Backstory Podcast
Episode #32 — Jazz Advice:
The Practical and the Profound, Part 2

[audio introduction]
Welcome to Episode 32, the Season 4 finale of our Jazz Backstory podcast. If you happen to land here as a first time listener and like what you hear, a special welcome and an invitation to go back to the top (or the head as the jazz players say) and start in on the previous 31 episodes. In our previous session we heard veteran jazz personalities offer practical advice on fashioning a career in the jazz world. Part 2 of this conversation goes a bit deeper, transitioning from practical to profound. There is a lot of wisdom to share here so let's get started. Saxophonist Charles McPherson, now 85 years young, shares his personal artistic mindset and concept of an individual sound inherent in his approach to the music.

MR: Did you always think of jazz — this is a tough question — but did you always think of jazz as an art form? And if not, do you?

CM: Well I'll tell you — I started playing when I was 13, 14 years old, and I started playing or trying to play jazz. Okay so by the time I was 18 or 19, I don't know if I actually thought of it as being art. I don't know if I even though about art at all. Since then of course I think of it as art. And the older you get you start thinking about definitions and all that stuff. And by the time you're 35 years old you're into defining everything. But you know as a youngster, I never thought of it. I don't think I thought of classical music as an art. Probably I thought only art was a picture. Art is almost anything that human beings do that actually alters, to some degree, whatever God or nature does. You know? I mean everything in nature is already there. I mean there's sounds, there's some kind of music, you know there's birds singing, there's trees falling, there's wind blowing. Everything has a note. To us it sounds unorganized and maybe it is maybe it isn't. But the minute that it becomes organized or if we think so, by humans, then it's the beginning of art right there, along with the vanity. You can't have art without vanity of some sort.

MR: I like that statement.

CM: In the broad sense of the term, I'm not just saying egotism, but the fact that you even care is vanity.

MR: In that you have a desire to make it better.

CM: The desire, and also to want to look at it after it's done, you know what I mean? It's all this vanity. It's vanity. If you did these things and just said [grunts] and then walked away and never want to hear it, never want to see it, you could say it's devoid somewhat

of vanity. But it becomes art. I think of black and white photos like art, as opposed to maybe color photos. I'm being a little bit — only because black and white is something that man does. I mean it's more of an imprint of a human being or something. Color is something that's already here. I mean it's in nature you see. So I mean black and white photos are more arty. It's just my subjective opinion. But there's more of an artness to them in some sort of way. You know I could say this too — one of things about jazz, at least for me, and just from the little history that I've read about certain performers and the origins in the beginnings of jazz music, one thing that might be different in some sort of way about the early musicians, like Buddy Bolden, I mean way back, is that I think they, either on a conscious level or unconscious, always thought of an instrument as trying to make it sound like the human voice, as opposed to I'm playing the saxophone so I want it to sound like a saxophone. Now of course I want it to sound like a saxophone. But I really want it to be an extension of my voice, the humanity, the human situation with it. And I don't want to commit any errors in like making it sound like unsaxophonish. I want it to sound like a saxophone. But I'm really trying to make this sound — I'm bending and making and trying to make this horn sound like my voice as much as possible, as opposed to I'm just playing a saxophone. And this is probably why — part of the elements that make jazz what it is, like bending the note, not being literal but being surrealistic to a point where you want an impression of a note, and all these little elements that make it what it is, probably comes from that thought process. Because the voice bends. When you sing a note, any singer, I don't care who it is, it doesn't have to be a jazz singer, they sing the note but there's a natural tendency to slightly bend the note a bit because it's human and it's something to do with the right kind of emotionality. I mean you know it's the right thing to do. Horns, you know when guys think of a horn as just a mechanical-physical frozen structure, and they're not thinking humanity, then they tend — it tends just to be that. But if you're thinking, I want this to be an extension of my voice, then you are going to bend these notes, you are going to have an impressionistic. Because you're not just playing a piece of metal. You're making this be human as much as possible.

MR: Maybe that's the art we were talking about.

CM: Well it's certainly part of it, yeah, definitely.

Mr. McPherson continues to create his distinct style of art. His recent recording entitled "Reverence" pays homage to his musical heroes and acknowledges the tradition of passing the music from one generation to the next.

Vibraphonist Stefon Harris, while remaining humble, is aware of his responsibility as an artist and the potential for playing a positive role in society. From our November 2020 interview, here's Stefon Harris:

MR: With your students or someone looking for advice, a young up and coming musician, do you have anything you can tell them that you think is worthwhile for them to constantly pay attention to as they try to build a career?

SH: Well it's an interesting angle because my take on it is that it's about service and remembering that we're no more important than any other profession out here. We have to provide service to society at large. You have to wrap your head around what is it that you're providing and who is it that you want to be of service to. Once you can see that it becomes increasingly clear how you want to present yourself. The idea that I want to be a star or something is such an abstract concept, and you end up chasing a pipeline that's probably from the past, and it's probably a losing battle. Most people who rise to the top rise to the top because of authentic artistic expression. Really, it's just like movies or sports. I'm a boxing fan, I like basketball, and I remember being a kid and watching Michael Jordan play on television when he had the flu. And I'm thinking oh my goodness, this guy is like making every shot and he's going over and he's sick, he's laying down, he gets back up. And I just remember being in high school thinking yeah, like I want that. I think I have that kind of drive in me and if he can do it I'm going to push myself to do it. So as an artist you really need — people are going to come to you because they see a bit of themselves in the art that it is that you're creating. Not because you're so smart or so creative. It's because you make them feel alive in ways that they're not able to express on their own. So service first and foremost. And then the commerce part I think when you really have a clear sense of who you're serving, it becomes easier. It's never easy, but you know, I never create with money in mind. I first create authentically from the bottom of the heart, and then I look around and I say well where is this piece of art relevant?

[audio interlude]

Austrian-born saxophonist Karolina Strassmayer echoes Stefon's commitment about providing a service through art. As a woman musician in a traditionally male dominated field, she has worked tirelessly to embody the spirit of jazz while enabling other women musicians in their music careers.

KS: In my personal journey, what I experienced was of course being, coming from a very conservative background from my country but also from my family, and I see this from a lot of women, especially so of my generation. I'm 52 now. Growing up with certain cultural and social messages that really say as a girl you be nice and you be polite, be quiet, be acquiescent, just listen and see how you can fit in and be pretty and be pleasant and don't rock the boat, don't create any stress, don't make any trouble, be nice and sweet. And I realized being a jazz artist is like the opposite of that. Like how can I be sweet and cute and — I mean I still like to think of myself, I do have sweetness, but the other — it's like the full spectrum of the human experience is not there if you're just always trying to like not rock the boat and not make any problems. I realized how can I be an expressive person? How can I embody the spirit of jazz if I'm concerned whether people like me or they think that I'm pretty or they think that I'm nice? You know. So I found, I realized that there's such a contradiction between my socialization as a girl, as a woman, and the music that I play. And you know for instance one thing that many women struggle, including myself, struggle with that — I felt that in order, you know you're on stage and you present yourself I felt like that being good looking is a very important thing for a woman who are trying or aspiring to that. But if you're too good looking, if you dress up too much, you're not taken seriously. It creates this double bind. On one hand you want to be good looking, otherwise you won't even be accepted, but if you're too good looking you're not being taken seriously. So this creates a very, very narrow room for operating between — okay, being attractive so that you can even get in there; but not too attractive because then you're going to be not taken seriously. Or as a woman for instance I never learned how to communicate clearly and directly to say let's do this, I would like to do that, you know can we do this, no I don't want to do that. I mean it's so simple but this was so difficult for me to learn and I still see that in girls today and also older women are finding that it's so difficult. And these mindsets are very hard to overcome because they are baked into us. They are in every fiber you know. And I'm very interested in how I can help women overcome these things.

I just skimmed an article that states the left brain right brain deal is basically a myth with minimal scientific basis in fact. Maybe so, but the phrase will continue to be cited as indication of a balance between an analytical mindset and the creative impulse. Maria Schneider, a highly influential composer and band leader offers profound observations about balancing math and beauty and how it can translate into individuality.

MS: I try to show that there is math behind all this beauty. Just like if you look at a tree and you say oh that tree is so beautiful and it feels so good and it shades me or whatever. But

if you go back into when that tree started growing, immediately in the growth of those branches you can see the Fibonacci series. You know? The spiral is going the opposite way and it's always in a progression of one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen and so that to me in the world there is math behind the beauty. So if you can find beauty, chances are there is organization behind that. So I try to encourage students to look for something that just feels good, then try to find the logic in it, keep developing the logic, but kind of let their left and right brain work together so that it doesn't become too analytical. And never thinking what do they think I should write, what's going to be hip. What should I adopt to be cool. But try to stay inside. I always feel like the thing that makes each person unique is that you are you, nobody on earth can imitate you, nobody can be more you than you are. So that your job is to become you to the deepest degree that you can, and that's where your beauty and that's where your mastery is, in developing yourself. I think so often in jazz it's really easy to look at other people and say oh he's a master, I have to try to be like that, I have to follow him. No, you have to find the depth of yourself and be disciplined and develop yourself to the same degree that those people were disciplined and developed themselves. And that's the thing that nobody can imitate. And that's where your strength, and that's where your gift is. That's what people want to see, is feel the uniqueness of each other. That's where you really communicate something fresh with somebody. It's hard to do that.

It is hard to do that, to resist a copycat mentality, believing that it's a pathway to success. Each generation of musicians tends to think that achieving a personal sound and translating it into work and success is more difficult that it was "back in the day." There is justification for that when we consider the radical changes in technology and its effect on how music is created and listened to. Which brings us to saxophonist and music educator extraordinaire and Maynard Ferguson alum Denis DiBlasio. His observations and advice are practical, they make my profound list because he admittedly longs for the past but recognizes the present reality. In so doing, his students get the best of both worlds, his experience from working with the legends and his suggestions on how they might become one. On May 1st, 2019, Denis and I chatted about the realities of a jazz career. He was profound, I profoundly listened.

DD: I was introduced to Basie. We played a gig together. I met Woody, through Maynard, Buddy, all these bands were still out doing it. But it was kind of leaving the room you know. Looking back now these bands that would go out and you could play in these bands, they're not you know they're just not around for people to do that. So I felt that that era that I look at, like I'm looking at this photo this "Great Day in Harlem" with everyone on the steps — that was an era that I think all of us wish we could have been

around you know. And when they talk about it, when Sonny Rollins talks about how he was right down the street from Coleman Hawkins, I mean that have been — we just dream about what that must be like you know. So yeah, I think we would all like to be in that era and I just felt like I was lucky to meet — when I look at that photo there's quite a few guys in that photo that I've actually met. But when I think about how lucky I was to meet a lot of these people through Maynard's connection with that era, I just feel like aww, we did miss the era. But I'm not dying too — and I don't want to go down that road because it's not a happy road. But it is something — I don't want to say I don't think about, but it is something I think about.

MR: Do you have jazz majors?

DD: Yeah.

MR: So are you able to give them advice on what their possibilities are after they graduate?

DD: The advice that I — they can't do what I did, because what I did doesn't exist anymore. You know you go out in the big band, maybe get a name. I mean almost everything that happened to me happened because I was on Maynard's band and I maybe took advantage of it afterwards. But now that whole band thing doesn't exist. So — and I don't want to say it shouldn't, it just doesn't. It is what it is. But when a student starts talking now about you know what am I going to do when I get out, I get them in my office and we look at YouTube. And I talk to them about how certain people have to — well you have to kind of design your own life. There's nothing that you're going to go to and join and that's going to be your life in jazz. You know it's not going to exist. However, you look up — look at some of the people who are creating their own thing, and I'll pull up you know Leo Pellegrino? Too Many Zooz? He's a baritone sax player. He's playing.

MR: Yes.

DD: And so I'll pull that up. You develop your own audience so your audience comes and sees you, where before you would play a gig to sell your CDs. Now you're giving away CDs to hope they come to your gig kind of, because you have to have, how do you develop your audience? You've got to have an online presence. It's all the stuff that didn't exist before. Have a website. People start to follow you. People ask you questions, you answer them back, you have to be — and I have a couple of students that have gone out and been successful but part of the work is this online activity that is very much a part of it all. In fact I've asked, we have a Music Industry major at our school. And these guys that teach it like they're all about this thing. They're all about this online thing. And I asked one of the guys, I said, "How do you get a record deal these days?" Because the record deal thing the way it used to work was different. You know you have a name like Sal Nestico. Played with Woody Herman, great tenor player. Sal gets off the band, Sal's got recordings, ooh let's follow Sal. That's over. How do we do this? And he goes, "Well

the first thing the rec" — I said, "What would the record companies even do?" He says, "If you came to a record company" one of the guys told me that the record company is going to look at your social media to see how many followers you have. And if you have enough followers then I'll just create a real nice slick video for you and we're just going to post it on the followers that you've already made and there's your audience. So if you have enough followers you're more apt to get a record deal, not that the music isn't that important but it's almost not as important as how many followers you have. But they need to know that. And as a teacher teaching something that is like an art form, you know it's an art form, and the society around it is changing so quickly you can't look at it like the way it used to work. But it's do-able and there are some kids doing it. So some of my students they get on it, it's not that foreign for a lot of them, and they have a big presence. Because now it used to be the club would advertise it and you would go and play and you know you get paid and hopefully somebody would show up. But now they want a guarantee that you're going to bring your peeps to the gig, right? So you have to guarantee like 35 people before you get — but for some kids it's not a problem because they're active on the social media. And that's a thing that never happened — that didn't even exist before. And when I had to learn that, I won't say it was a bitter pill but it was so opposite of how I came up. But we talk about it and we look and Colin Stetson, this fella plays bass saxophone and he sets up a loop, he does these concerts — it's great playing. It's unbelievable playing. I never heard it. I put it up there and I'm showing — I have about five different people that I show my students look at what they're doing. This is what you have to do if you want to have a future in it. Because what I did is gone. It's not a bad thing, it's just what it is.

[audio interlude]

Our interview process began in 1995 and we purposely sought out the most veteran musicians that were still with us. I was ready and anxious to hear their jazz stories but unprepared for the eloquent observations on life and how to live it, a way to be. The thoughts they shared are treasures and I believe a direct result of the challenging and fulfilling lives they've led. Here are three of the most memorable passages, the first from vocalist Joe Williams, a co-founder of the Fillius Jazz Archive with Milt Fillius Jr., Class of '44 at Hamilton College.

JW: Several years ago, I think it was about '72 maybe, Duke Ellington had his fellowship, not fellowship but what is that, oh the Conservatory Without Walls at Yale University. And Kingman Brewster was there to present medals to those of us that Ellington chose to be a part of that. I forgot about it. I've got this marvelous medal that I am a Yale Fellow. You

know? And Marian Anderson, the colored mezzo-soprano from the Metropolitan and concert stage couldn't be there to receive her medal, and I was asked to receive it for her. And I remembered something that her mother told her. "Wherever you go and whatever you do, darling, someone might be watching and would like to be like you. Please try not to disappoint them." And so when you ask about how I see it, I said each one of us has a radiance of our own, that people could see us and think gee, I think, yeah, I think I'd like to assimilate some of that and incorporate that maybe. And thus we become extensions of each other, and I mean a positive extension of the one thing that brought us here in the first place, love. The Pope wrote some marvelous lyrics and prose years ago when he was a priest. And they wrote some music to it and Sarah Vaughan recorded it. I don't know if you heard — did you hear any of that? Oh marvelous things. He says, "The miracle, we are the miracle. We are the miracle, you know, the greatest miracle of it all." He talks about how, "I am many people all trying to speak through me" and what-have-you. And "I, with problems of my own. Foibles" he says, "Foibles of my own" you know. "I have my own faults you know. And this is the Pope talking, as a priest. And we all I think, like Jack Kennedy, I think he knew what he was saying. He said, "God's work is our own and we must do it." And that we must relate to each other. And I don't know how many of us there are, but here we are, the direct result of love itself. Take some and leave some. And I find that that applies to almost everything, including overeating or playing or working. Whatever. Take some and leave some. You cannot get it all. Forget that. That's been done and they're all dead, those that got it all. I wrote a thing, I wrote a couple of things actually, but one in particular because of the way things have turned out for me those who seek the harmony of life rather than the discord truly inherit a kingdom of love. Things that are very very good you should share I think. Like I was very young, about 16 I guess or 17, and I was sitting in a nightclub and some people were performing, and I happened to be sitting with the guy that ran the place. And I said to him, "Well I can sing better than that." And he said to me, "You sit here and pay attention. And I vowed within myself then that if ever I found someone who wanted that microphone as badly as I wanted it then, I would share it with them. My manager gives me, you know, John, he used to give me hell about it. Because he says, "You share your space and your time with the musicians and everything" he says, "you have people that, like wow." And you say, "Put the attention on somebody else, the spotlight on someone else." You know. He said, "Then you have to go back, then he's got to go back and grab them again." Well I feel as though I can. I can afford to present someone. Because I don't have to stand there and have it be "Keep that spotlight on me now. Hey, hey you, put that spotlight back over here. I'm over here." That kind of — I don't have to do that I don't think. Besides, when

you're 6 foot 1, 215 pounds and black, you seem bigger than you are anyway. As they say in Sweden, Ska vi gå nu — shall we go now?

Not just yet Joe, we need to hear from sax player you shared the stage with on occasion. In January of 2001 I attended a massive gathering of jazz artists, educators and fans, many hundreds of established and hopeful musicians networking and jockeying for some vague position. In the lobby I came face to face with someone who looked like someone, I think you know what I mean. Fortunately, name tags were part of the convention garb and I read the name Harold Ousley, a saxophonist I was mildly familiar with. Mr. Ousley, being an astute musician/business man, read that I was from a college, the preferred gig destination even back in 2001. What followed was an unscheduled but fortuitous interview where Harold Ousley proved himself worthy of authoring a self help book. Here is an excerpt from that session.

MR: It was kind of a fortuitous meeting that we just met last night.

HO: Yeah. Well this is what propels me in my life — to feel that there is a reason, there is a force, there is something that has created all of this, because it takes intelligence to do this. You know we are sitting here talking but this planet is going through space at a tremendous speed, it's turning over, and then it's circling around and it's not bumping headlong into any other planets, and it's been doing it for a long time. You see what I mean? And out of all the stars and planets in the universe that are working, things are working in harmony with each other. Because if not, things couldn't exist. But I feel that we are learning who we are and why we are. And as we get to that point, then we begin to do what we are here to do, to help everything to work together better. You know I think we've been put here to improve everything on this planet, like caretakers, or whatever we can do, whether we're doing it through music or whatever we're doing, if we're helping to add some meaning to other people's lives. Like in music a lot of times people are going through a lot of things in their life, a lot of tension, you know, a lot of things they're uptight about, they go to a musical concert and this helps to, that moment in their life becomes a beautiful moment. And it gives them incentive to go for another day. You know I've even had people say well thank you so much for that. You know what I mean? Because we have to have something to take us to that next moment. So we need to stay inspired, to have a goal, to believe that we can achieve that goal, and to believe that there is help outside, from another source other than ourselves. Because there are so many things that we don't have the ability to deal with. I believe in life there is yin and yang. There is drama in everybody's life. So there are moments that we'd rather not have, or you know, that can be disappointing or maybe there may be moments when cash flow is short or there may be moments when we don't feel well. But we have to, at those

moments, have to be able to go through those moments to stay centered and have that determination to get over this. And so that we can get back to that point where we're feeling good and we're feeling energetic and inspired, and then we can go out and work on a plan. And so it's important to have those kind of inner feelings. And I think that's part of the spirit. So if we have that inner incentive and knowledge we can do that. And if we believe well okay, I have an affirmation that I do. I feel that I say that I believe things are working out beneficial for me, you know, and that the things that I need are coming to me. And that I ask to gain understanding and wisdom to be able to find out how to get the knowledge. But at the same time I'm trying to be the best that I can be, and to each experience help me to be a positive person in whatever activity I'm in, whether it's playing music or maybe giving somebody information on the street, how to get to someplace where they're going. We have these opportunities each day to do this.

Thank you Harold Ousley, Joe Williams and the rest of our contributors in this episode.
As I mentioned at the top, there are 32 total episodes of the Jazz Backstory podcast with topics from life on the road to improvisation, most anything you can imagine. The full video interviews from these artists and 400+ more are viewable on the Fillius Jazz Archive YouTube channel. Our thanks to production assistants Michael Ko, Romy Britell, and Doug Higgins, to our Orchestra in a Nutshell and to all the jazz cats who have kept the music vital and alive. The last word is provided by drummer Gregory Caputo, who with equal skill and joy can lead the Count Basie Orchestra through the shout chorus from "Shiny Stockings" and follow that with the subtlest hi-hat and brushes beat for a piano trio ballad. Here is Gregory from our March 1998 interview. I will see you on the flip side.

GC: I think you have to live the music. I think if you want to be a professional musician you have to live it. You have to spend twenty-four hours a day practicing, listening, performing, play all you can. And I think one of the sure ingredients to failure is to try to please everyone. Be true to yourself, build your style, and stick with it. Always have open ears and want to learn. But have your own style. And everybody is not going to like the way you play, and don't be discouraged about it. Joe Morello passed that along to me. If you are satisfying sixty percent of the people, you're doing great. There's people that just aren't going to like you for the clothes you wear, the color of your set, don't let it bother you, and don't ever, ever, ever give up.

[audio interlude]