Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #7 — A Slice of the Jazz Life Part 1

"I think jazz is only for those that have no choice. I think if you're a young man and you're entertaining thoughts of becoming a brain surgeon or a jazz tenor man, I'd go with the brain surgery, you know what I mean? If you have a choice. If you've got two burning desires, don't pick jazz."

"I've been one of the most fortunate musicians I guess in the country. Most of the things I did I did with people I enjoyed doing them with. Most of the music I was involved with I got great enjoyment out of, and I still do."

[Musical Interlude]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, my name is Monk Rowe, and we just heard from saxophonist Phil Woods and trumpeter Joe Wilder with contrasting comments on living a life in jazz. I believe Episodes 7 and 8, collectively titled "A Slice of the Jazz Life" will, in the words of Lester Young, "ring a bell" with you. Think of these two episodes as a smorgasbord of jazz anecdotes ranging from poignant to ludicrous.

First up is the celebrated pianist George Shearing in conversation with his dear friend, vocalist Joe Williams. Born in England in 1919, Mr. Shearing was blind from birth and gained early experience playing in a band of unsighted musicians. When George vocalizes a swish swish swish sound, try and picture a tuxedoed conductor whipping an extra long baton through the air. From March 1996 recorded in New York City, here are George and Joe:

JW: George, I've often wondered how an Englishman like you comes to the point you are with the music, and the legacy and the history of the music, and to understand it so well, and to go to innovations of your own from where you came from, relating to this music. How did you get to this music I want to know? The jazz, that good sound that you give us all over.

GS: I was brought up on Jimmy Lunceford.

JW: Ohhhhh.

GS: There was an all blind band in 1937. Fifteen musicians. Fifteen blind guys, taught to be musicians, from being chair caners, buskins makers—

JW: What?

GS: They caned chairs. They made buskins, and they were taught to play instruments and be musicians. And the scores were done in Braille. We had Lunceford's "Stratosphere," Benny Carter's "Night Fall."

JW: Oh my God. Did you have his suite too?

GS: Yeah, we had all the Braille charts. And I'm the only one that didn't need it, and I'd pick it up by ear right away. The theme song for the band by the way was "I'll See You In My Dreams." And the only fully sighted man was a man named Claude Bampton, who was a kind of semi-professional band leader in England. He had this huge baton, you know whit, whit, whit, [sings] "I'll See You In My Dreams." One night, you know blind people always have to set up in a theater a little bit earlier than the sighted. It takes us a bit longer. And Claude said, "Okay fellas, you ready?" One guy said, "No, just a minute, I lost my eye." His glass eye had fallen out, rolled across the stage, and there was 15 blind guys down on the floor—

JW: Oh, wait a minute, George—

GS: I kid you not, this is the God's honest truth. Fifteen blind guys down on the floor looking for this eye.

JW: And you found it?

GS: They found it. And they didn't massacre it at all, they found it. He put it in. Whit, whit, whit — "I'll See You In —"

I loved Joe's reaction to the eye rolling across the stage. "Oh wait a minute George." Like fisherman's tales, musician anecdotes evolve over time, we'll call it Jazz Lore, although I am not suggesting that the rolling eye incident was a fabrication. Joe Williams graciously offered his support to our oral history project when it began in 1995. He also interviewed bassist Milt Hinton. Here they are chatting about Milt's introduction to the "big time" with Cab Calloway. Try and imagine the south side of Chicago, 1936:

MH: And Cab Calloway had to come back east without a bass player, with Budd Johnson's brother, Keg Johnson was in Cab's band, and he say, "Well look, check out Milt Hinton

if you're going through Chicago. He's down to the Three Deuces with Zutty Singleton and Art Tatum and Lee Childs." I'm down there with them guys, $35 a week, best job in town.

JW: I know, I know. Deuces was the best gig.

MH: That's right that's where it was, the Deuces —

JW: And broadcasting too.

MH: That's right. And Fletcher Henderson was at the Grand Terrace, $35 a week, with John Kirby on bass, trumpet player?

JW: Roy Eldridge.

MH: Roy Eldridge.

JW: And Chu Berry.

MH: Chu Berry. And they was always looking for a jam session. After they got through at the Grand Terrace they'd come down to the Three Deuces and jam with us. So Cab came down to the Three Deuces and saw the band down there, and he never said a word to me. He was all dressed up in a big cool tan coat and that derby and he was walking around and people say, "That's Cab," he walked over to Zutty and said something to Zutty, he says, "How's that bass player?" So Zutty says, "He's okay, this kid's okay." So Cab says, "Can I have him?" So Zut says, "Yeah you can have him" and nobody asked me nothing. Zutty just gave me to Cab.

JW: Sure, that's right.

MH: Zutty say, "Kid you're going," I say, "I'm going where?" He say, "Cab just asked me for you" in that New Orleans style, "Cab just asked me for you. You're gone."

JW: He's going, baby. He's got it made.

MH: I had to call my mother up, it was three o'clock in the morning. Called my Momma and said, "Look, I got this job and I gotta leave in the morning at nine o'clock." And she had a little canvas bag with a clean suit and underwear and I had to have a gabardine suit," and I had to go to the South Street Station, and got on that bandstand.

JW: She didn't give you a little brown bag to take too?

MH: Yeah well she had a little fried chicken.

JW: A little fried chicken in there.

MH: And I got on at the South Street Station. I'd never been on a Pullman in my life, Joe. You know I didn't come from Mississippi on no Pullman.

JW: I'm sure.

MH: I get on this Pullman, and there was all these great musicians on there, Doc Cheatham, Keg Johnson, Foots Thomas and all these guys. And I said Keg Johnson got me the gig, he recommended me, and I said to Keg, I say, "Keg , I didn't ask Cab about no money or nothing," I say, "He just told me to be here at nine o'clock." He say, "Everybody in this band makes $100 a week." I almost fainted. I almost fainted. I said I'll be a millionaire in two months.

JW: Well, and sure enough you are.

MH: And listen to this. Ben Webster was drunk, got on late, drunk. And I must have weighed about 109 pounds soaking wet. And Ben Webster staggered to the men's room and looked at me standing there being introduced to the band, and he said, not "who is that?" He said, "what is that" talking about me. And Cab say, "That's the new bass player." He said, "A new what?" And I said I'd never like him as long as I lived. He turned out to be my dearest friend.

Jazz has unwritten rules of etiquette , dating back to the early days in New Orleans. One prominent rule: band leaders don't steal sidemen from one another — definitely bad form. Cab Calloway asked Zutty Singleton if he could have his bassist and Zutty said go ahead and take him. Apparently the etiquette did not include asking the musician in question if they even wanted to go. Milt Hinton stayed with Cab Calloway for 15 years and went on to become one of the most loved and recorded musicians in jazz and popular music, as well as a highly skilled and respected photographer. I should add that Joe Wilder, George Shearing, Joe Williams and Milt Hinton all received honorary degrees from Hamilton College.

[Musical Interlude]

If you look at the Dec. 2021 DownBeat Readers' Poll, you will find the number one spots in the categories of big band, album of the year, composer and arranger are all occupied by one Maria Schneider. Maria has been a creative force in jazz since 1988 and shared a fascinating story of her journey from the sticks of Minnesota to New York City and a Grammy Award winning career.

MS: When that woman, Mrs. Butler, moved to Windom, I was five years old. And my parents invited her to come up to our house for dinner, and after dinner she sat down at the piano and played. And I remember she played like this classical thing, actually something I'd recognized from my mother's records. And then she started playing stride jazz. And I immediately could feel that there was something in that that wasn't the same as the other thing. I remember recognizing somehow the difference between pop and classical at that moment. But the personality that came through — she had red hair, she was flamboyant, she was eccentric, she wore bright green moo moos and purple slippers. She was just intense. And the intensity came through the music. She was like Dorothy Donegan. And when she would play she would be laughing and accidentally go off the end of the piano, Victor Borge style. Such technique, but soul. And that thing for me was just so incredibly important in the music. And so when I went into my own music and I started playing, for me it was like fantasy. You know I would play something and I would shut my eyes — I could play for hours. And I used to fantasize when I'd play piano, I'd fantasize that there were talent scouts from cars that would drive past Windom. Because Windom was in the sticks. It was nowhere. And my dream was like to go to New York someday. Even though I had no idea what New York was you know. Maybe I psychically kind of knew what might come someday. So I used to fantasize that there were talent scouts in cars that had machinery that could hear inside of homes and that they were listening to me. So I was always full of fantasy in my music. And you know when you're a child you experience disappointment for the first time, sadness, romantic love maybe, intensity, fear, all the emotions you have are the most intense in your childhood, because that's the first experience you have. So many things touch you then. So I always go back to that.

I was pleased to learn that I was not the only one with a musical fantasy, in fact most musicians invent a happy ending fairy tale of some kind to keep them motivated. Maria Schneider's came true.

When I interviewed our next guest in April of 1996 I recall thinking, if a bull in a china shop could play the saxophone and write jazz arrangements, his name would be Dave Pell. Starting out as a member of a relief band, Mr. Pell rose in the ranks through talent, mixed with extreme confidence and a bit of intentional clumsiness, as we'll hear in this excerpt.

DP: A relief band is — the main attraction has got to go out and get a 20 minute break, and they don't want — not like now, where they play records or something like that. There you had to have a live band on stage. And usually a different kind of band so that you could do the rumba, like we had a Latin band playing a Four Brothers type tenor book. And then we'd play Freddie Martin style and then we'd play Latin and then we'd do this and then the other bands, whoever the name band was at The Palladium, which was every four or five weeks, we'd just sat there and said hello the guys and you know it was great. But I stayed in L.A. and I didn't have to go on the road so I really enjoyed it.

MR: And then you went with Tony Pastor later on?

DP: No I was with Tony Pastor getting there. And the story about Tony Pastor, I get to California and I say, "Gee Tony, this is great. Good-bye. I'm quitting." He says, 'you can't leave me in L.A., this is wilderness. There's no guys. I can't get a guy that'll leave California, they don't want to come here." I said, "good-bye." And so he says, "well stay with me until we leave California and then you can quit. So six weeks later I left the band. But I had fun with Tony because I'd run out the microphone to beat him to his own solos. Because he didn't really like to play. But the only way I could get to play was to be a cocky kid and run up to the mic when he's ready to play and I'm up there playing already. "Sorry, Tony."

MR: Sounds like you didn't lack for self confidence.

DP: Oh, no, I was a smart ass, it was terrible. I was just terrible. But that's kind of a thing that you have to do. It's almost like the sidemen on the band that keeps watching the leader. And watching all the mistakes he makes. And all the wrong things he does. Because in the back of his mind, I'm going to be a leader some day and I ain't never gonna put myself — I mean Les Brown, I had a great time with Lester's band and played on every tune, you know I had a great, great book to play, and we had [Don] Fagerquist and all the good players. And I remember as I went out every time to play a solo out front, we'd just didn't stand up, we'd go out front — show biz. And I remember kicking over Lester's horn at least once a night. "Oh, I tripped, ohhh, I'm so sorry, oh, Les I'll fix it later." Well he didn't play too well. And we didn't like him playing in the band with us, because the saxes sounded so good. But when he played he played awful. And so if his horn didn't work, he wouldn't play. And Les after years and years he finally figured out I was doing

it on purpose. You know, “I’m so clumsy, Les, I’m sorry.” But I was kicking over his horn so he wouldn’t play. Terrible, terrible.

Terrible indeed, but excellent jazz lore. The only musician I have met that could match Dave Pell for sheer chutzpah is Terry Gibbs, a human spark plug that has been burning up the vibes for close to seven decades. Terry Gibbs was a pure bebopper and rose to every musical occasion except when the king of bebop, Charlie Parker, better known as Bird, showed up on one of his gigs. Terry was 97 years old at the time of our second interview but he could still recall the intimidating presence of the legendary Charlie Parker as he blew his alto sax three feet away from him.

MR: I understand that Charlie Parker, in order to borrow money would sometimes promise to show up on your gig. Is that correct?

TG: Yes. He did show up on my job, this is when I was just learning bebop of which unfortunately he showed up and scared the hell out of me. First of all you’d walk down to Birdland and he’d be standing there and he’d say, “Give me a quarter” or “give me a half dollar.” That was a lot of money in those days. And, and these musicians would say, “I don’t have it.” And he’d say, “Where are you playing tomorrow I’ll come and sit in with you.” And they gave him the money and people would get all, “Bird’s going to come and sit in.” He never would show up. He never would know who you were. But I had a great rapport with Bird. The first thing I did was tell him off after he asked me for some money, I said, “You’re the greatest musician in the world begging and all that.” I really let him know it. And then he said, “Where are you playing tomorrow?” I said, “Over at Georgie Auld’s, Tin Pan Alley.” And I gave him a dollar. You know I mean I knew he never showed up. The place was packed when I got to work. We were the first sixteen bars of “Out of Nowhere,” the song, and I’m playing the melody and all of a sudden he walks with one of his plastic horns around him, and he came and played the next sixteen bars and he’s standing next to me now. You ask me would I rather follow him playing and then start playing or fight Mike Tyson? Mike Tyson, one punch I’m out that’s the end of it. Here I’ve got to stand here while he plays 30 choruses and when I come in to play trying not to play anything he just played you know? And so what I did, what I did on the 30th bar, it was only a 32 bar chorus. On the 30th bar, because I knew I wanted to see him go into another chorus, I bent down to tie my shoe. I was on the floor. When he

saw he started to play more I got up so then when the 30 bars came closer to 30 bars I went down and untied my shoe. And then once again I had loosened my vibes, I had tied them down — I didn't know what I was doing. But after about 16 choruses on the floor, my piano player who didn't think he was even going to follow him because I would come in next, he panicked how he looked at me on the floor like he's having a nervous breakdown, he says, "I know what you're doing if you think I'm going to follow him you're crazy." We were almost like a bunch of scared little kids. You know Charlie Parker was so far ahead of everybody.

[Musical Interlude]

It's time to hear from two significant women in the jazz world. First up, a personality who had a different view of the bandstand, a jazz fan. When Jean Bach passed away in May of 2013, the *New York Times* described her as a lifelong jazz zealot. Jean could scat classic saxophone solos and constantly spoke out against segregation in the entertainment world. She also produced the award winning documentary, "A Great Day in Harlem," based on the iconic 1958 jazz assemblage photo published in *Esquire* magazine. Jean was particularly enamored of Duke Ellington and his music, as we'll hear in an excerpt from our October 1995 interview. Following Jean will be another Ellington admirer Margaret Marian McPartland. A British transplant, she received this review early in her career from the noted jazz critic Leonard Feather: "She is English, white and a woman, three hopeless strikes against her." Marian showed him, fashioning a lengthy career as a pianist, composer and host of the NPR series "Piano Jazz." You'll hear Margaret, better known as Marian, reminisce about the reaction of her aristocratic family in regards to her career choice:

JB: I met Ellington the night I graduated from prep school. And that was in June of 1936. And my date, we were all dressed up in party clothes, you know it was graduation night. And he said, "Where do you want to go?" Well Ellington was playing a two week engagement at the Congress Hotel in Chicago. So I said, "I'd like to go and hear Ellington." Because I'd had all his records. So we got there and my date said, "Shall we ask him over to have a glass of champagne?" I said, "Oh, wow, yes, let's do." So he came over and he stood at the table and he said, "Miss Enzinger, what are your plans?" Oh, first I said, "I'm so thrilled to meet you," I said, "You and Stravinsky are my two favorite composers." He said, "I'm jealous of Stravinsky." I mean he was like this all the time. So

I told him I was going to Vassar. So he said, “Oh well that’s not far from where I live, we must get together, now make sure we do.” And I said, “Yes.” So I got to school, and my roommate, we were getting acquainted and I brought all these recordings with me, and I said, “We’ll have music.” And she said, “Well that’s great, while we study.” So then I told her about meeting Ellington, and she said, “Well I hope you’re going to take him up on it.” I said, “Oh Smith, how can I?” She said, “I’ll bet you you haven’t got nerve to do it.” And I said, “What’s the bet?” She said, “Well, if you don’t go you have to give me this cashmere sweater.” And I said, “What if I do go?” She said, “Then you’ll have had the experience and you’ll win.” So that was enough. And can you believe he was in the phone book? So I just went, it was about 2 or 2:30 in the afternoon and it really tells you about innocence. You know it really pays to be innocent. You just walk into these things. It was heaven. And I knocked on the door, and this elderly gentleman came to the door, “Yes can I help you?” It was Ellington’s father. I said, “He told me to come by.” He said, “Fine, I’ll go get him. Do be seated.” Well I mean the curtains were drawn, it was like midnight in there you know, ‘cause it was to them, midnight. It was very dark in the living room.

MR: They were kind of night owls.

JB: That’s it. So Ellington finally came in, in a stunning silk robe, and very courtly, “How lovely to see you.” I said, “Well you did say to come by.” I looked like, well I can’t say co-ed, ‘cause we only had girls and boys schools then, but you know I had the little bowler hat and the polo coat and the little white gloves and everything. I was interviewed by somebody from the Black Entertainment Network, she came to my house. And she said, “You don’t look like a jazz groupie, to be following the band.” Well boy I was. I was the first jazz groupie. I mean I’d hear Ellington was playing in Rock Island, Illinois, and if I wasn’t doing anything that day, I’d get on the train and just go and hear the band. So I heard him quite a lot. But then we would go out afterward, and you didn’t go out in midtown Chicago, you went to the south side. There was a drug store out there called The Ritz Drugstore. And they had something like 27 flavors of ice cream. So we’d all sit around, the whole band and Ellington, and we’d be dipping in each other’s ice cream, very unsanitary. Ellington coined a word, “seagulling.” And he said that’s what you do when you steal something off someone else’s plate. And he said, they had their own, as

you know, private car. They had to travel that way because they couldn't stay in hotels. And I think they had their own diner too. And he said at mealtime, the master seagull doesn't order anything for dinner, he just orders a service plate, and he just walks down the aisle and says, "what do you have that goes good with my dinner," and helps himself.

MR: One last thing I'd like to ask: when your parents found out that you were going to leave school to play in a Vaudeville act, I guess that they were not really in favor of this.

MM: Oh, God. Well I didn't really know I was going to do that. I had gone to this piano player, Billy Mayall, thinking he would give me a few pointers about jazz. And I mean I was so stupid, he wasn't really a jazz player so much as a popular player, but of course he did play good chords and good harmony and everything and rhythms. And I didn't know he was starting this four-piano group and I guess I impressed him enough that he hired me right then. Of course anyway they were shocked and my father offered me a thousand pounds if I wouldn't go. And I said, "No, I want to go." And of course I did go, and I'm sure that there must have been terrible scenes in the family. I mean I didn't realize until years later how awful that would be to my family. And anyway—

MR: And did they ever have the opportunity to see you doing your thing?

MM: Unfortunately they didn't. One of my — he wasn't really an uncle he was a second cousin who was the Mayor of Windsor — Sir Cyril Dyson — he and his wife came over. They had a convocation of mayors or something like that, and he came to The Hickory House. And he really looked appalled. And after the set he said to me, "Margaret! Does your father know what you are doing?" It was like I was playing in a brothel or something.

MR: No kidding.

MM: And I said, "well I'm only playing you know, I'm not—" Of course I was sitting in the center of the bar and they had all these bottles of booze all around the bar, it wasn't the most elegant spot, but it was a great jazz place. But I always loved that. But no they didn't see me. But they read a lot of write-ups, and I suppose they might have been proud of me. But I think they were sort of mystified, like why would she want to do that when she could have settled down and got married to a lawyer or a doctor or something like that. Because what I did was not considered "nice" by them, definitely not nice.

MR: Well we're very glad you did.

MM: Oh, I'm very glad too, Monk.

We'll wrap up with a brief anecdote from another British pianist who immigrated to the states. Derek Smith relates his experience with the NY City Musician's Union as he sought to break into the jazz scene:

DS: First of all, you know I came to New York not knowing a soul, but I found out where the Musician's Union was, and, you've got to remember that when I was in England they talked about the American Musician's Union as being so powerful, and a great union, and they'll take care of you. So I went straight down there. And the guy heard my English accent and he said, "You from England?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You can't join." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "There's a feud between the two unions" (the English union and the American union). "Over there they won't allow American musicians to join, so you can't join." And he put the thing out in my face. And I said "How will I make a living?" He said, "That's your problem." So, but he did say, "You can come back in six months. If you can prove that you've been in New York for six months then you can join." So I got a job in insurance.

MR: I read that. That you sold insurance.

DS: No, I didn't sell insurance. I showed up every day at an office, and luckily I didn't do too much damage. I didn't ruin the company. But I really had very little aptitude for it. I looked kind of busy and went through the motions. But six months to the day I left and went back to the union, and that's another story. The same guy was there. He said, "You again?" So I said, "Yes, and now, you know I really need it." So he says, "Well you've got to take an audition." I said, "Fine" — you know I'd been practicing. So he says, "go in there" and I had to follow the lady in — there was a lady in there and she was taking the audition on maracas, do you believe this? She was a singer, but she wanted to join the musician's union so she took it on maracas. So they said "Next." So I go into this room, there's the piano. And he says, "What's that instrument over there?" I said, "What are you talking about?" I says, "A piano." He says, "You're in. Now go upstairs and pay your hundred dollars." I said, "What?" I started roaring. He says, "that's very nice, now go upstairs."

When I reflect on the 400 plus interviews we have conducted for the Fillius Jazz Archive, one thing I can say for sure, the life of a full time musician is rarely boring. The constant search for gigs and the travel to them as well as the interaction with an ever changing roster of fellow musicians and demanding fans, creates scenarios that are far more interesting than any author could create.

We'll hear another set of jazz life tales in Episode 8, including anecdotes from Joe Wilder, Phil Woods, Ruth Brown and yours truly. Until then. I'll see you on the flip side.
[Musical Interlude]