Jazz Backstory Podcast
Episode #26 — The Band Leaders — Basie

[audio introduction]

Here's a quote from George T. Simon's book "The Big Bands" one of the go-to resources regarding Swing Era personalities. "Some band leaders were completely devoted to the music, others entirely to the money it could bring. Some possessed great talent, others possessed none. Some really loved people, others merely used them. Some were daring, others stodgily conservative and some were motivated by their emotions, others by a carefully calculated course of action." End quote.

Welcome to Episode 26 of our Jazz Backstory podcast. Our first few episodes of Season 4 focus on band leaders, all of whom had various levels of talent, daring, devotion and people skills. In Episode 25 we heard heartfelt testimonials from a number of musicians proclaiming Duke Ellington as King of the Hill, A#1, Top of the Heap. I'm guessing that a portion of our listeners are saying, wait a minute, not so fast. What about Count Basie? I am among them. For pure swing, dynamics and excitement, I'm a Basie guy. I love his recordings and I borrow his classic ending- plink, plink, plink, multiple times on every gig. But, first things first. I promised to start this episode with the conclusion of Clark Terry's story from Episode 25. A quick synopsis. In 1951 Clark Terry was a member of Basie's short-lived sextet. Duke Ellington desired Mr. Terry's trumpet talents for his band. Clark was ready for a change of scenery and the offer of better bread, but there was a unwritten leaders and sidemen protocol to follow. We pick up the story from the spot Clark has informed Basie that he needs some "time off."

CT: I put my notice in, I said, "no Bas', I'm just not feeling good, I just need to go home and just get on." And he said, "Okay, well when you get yourself together you can come on back, because this is always home for you." So I said, "Thanks, Bill, I appreciate it very much." I left and went with the band. I stayed with the band for almost ten years you know? And years later, I went up to the Carnegie Hall when Basie was already sick and he had to take a little side elevator to ride up, this was before they installed the thing that they've got there now. And I went backstage to see him and I'm standing at the top and he's coming up and I said "You know one thing?" And he said, "Yeah, so what's that?" I said, "I have a confession to make to you, something that's been bugging me for years and years." He said, "Yeah? So what is it?" I said, "When I left the band you know, I told you I was sick and going home," I said, "I wasn't really sick." He said, "Um humm." I said, "the reason I did that is because Duke had made me an offer I couldn't pass up."

He said, “Um hum.” He said, “Why do you think I took the raise back, you think I didn’t know that?” All these years I’ve been bugged myself you know.

All these years he’d been bugged. But Basie knew it all the time, very little got by him. The life of big band sidemen and leaders was not an easy one. In addition in the ‘30s and ‘40s there was a distinct difference between the day to day schedules of the white bands and black bands, an inequality that extended into the commercial music world as well. Basie alum, Harry “Sweets” Edison spoke about the motivation and necessity of embracing the vagabond lifestyle.

SE: In my era, as you know, there was a lot of prejudice toward the musicians because we couldn’t play in a studio band, they had radio bands that were getting paid weekly, they were on a salary. They had musicians here at Fox Studio, MGM, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, they were all on staff. And they got paid whenever they worked or played. But they didn’t have black musicians at the time. So our only course was to play solos. And that was the only way that you could exist, is play jazz. Because there was no place for us to play but dance halls. I joined Count Basie in 1938 and he used to do like three hundred one-nighters a year, you know? Where Benny Goodman or one of those bands would be in a hotel six months in New York and the hotel in Chicago for three months, you know, they always were sitting some place where they could play ball or whatever they wanted to do. They could be with their families, you know? But we had to take to the road. But those trumpet players in those days, Wendell Cully, I imagine you remember the pretty solo he played on “L’il Darlin’” with Count Basie.

MR: Yes. We were just talking about that section that he was in.

SE: Yes. He was from Boston and one of the finest students Schlossberg had. And his ambition was to play in the Boston Pops because he was from Boston. But he ended up with Noble Sissle. He couldn’t get a job. They didn’t hire black musicians in symphony bands in those days. So we all ended up doing one-nighters. You know we’d pass each other on the road going to Birmingham or Texas or Mississippi. We played every nook and corner in the United States.

[audio interlude]

The Basie band grew out of the Kansas City based Bennie Moten Orchestra and played their first gigs in 1935 and their last with Basie as leader in 1984. In 1950, economic realities caused numerous big bands to fold their tents and for two years Basie survived in the business with six members instead of sixteen. Bassist Jimmy Lewis vividly recalls how the Count could still engage an audience with this pared down band.

MR: Is this when Basie had the small group?

JL: Yes, the small group. Yes, a small group, we had Wardell Gray, Clark Terry, Gus Johnson on drums, Freddie Green on guitar, me on bass and like we used Buddy DeFranco playing clarinet.

MR: Can I read something that Joe Williams said about that group?

JL: Okay.

MR: He says, “I worked with them at the Brass Rail when he had Clark Terry, Wardell Gray, Buddy DeFranco, and in the rhythm section Freddie Green, Jimmy Lewis and Gus Johnson. Talk about swinging? They’d get into some things that would swing you into bad health.”

JL: You know he’d come walking on the bandstand and he used to sing these little love songs you know, just real sweet and then he’d walk off the stand. And I said I wonder why Basie likes him so well. And so I asked Basie one day. I said, “Basie, what do you see in Joe Williams?” He say, “You just wait.” He said, “I see something that maybe nobody else sees.” But he said, “That man can sing.” I said okay. So I stayed with Basie and we worked the Brass Rail down at the Loop. We opened up one night and all the people were sitting at the tables you know, and so Basie started off real soft. We started playing soft you know. I thought I was playing louder than anybody, I mean I’m just playing it. Basie says, “Don’t play so loud.” He said, “They’ll hear ya.” So I cut down on the bass. And Basie set a tempo and then he’d watch the people’s feet. He said, “Okay, everybody’s starting to feel you over the conversation.” He said, “Now Gus, pick up your sticks.” Gus was playing with brushes. He said, “Pick up your sticks.” He said, “We’ve got ‘em now.” And we’d make the thing sound like a 16-piece band. And Freddie Green boy, he was like a metronome sitting there. And you couldn’t get away from him. The tempo might move up a little bit, I’d get excited, and Freddie would say, “Come back here. Right here.” And boy that thing would take off. And Basie, he’d sit there and give signs. He had all kinds of signs. He’d do his face, you know when he’d want you to play louder or softer you know. And when he’d get ready to close a number he’d double his fists you know. And like if he wanted some excitement, he’d stand up from the piano and look at you you know. And boy, and Gus was sitting on the drums and you’d hear this thing, it sounded like it was coming up out of the floor. And boy the people just went crazy.

How come the people went crazy? Well, Basie set them up. He knew that music at a low volume tends to make people listen harder, even if they’re not aware that they’re doing so. Think about it, there is no such thing as loud unless there is a soft for contrast. Seek out Basie’s recording of “All of Me” for a perfect demonstration.

As hip as it was, six musicians was not enough for Count Basie. Before long he was back with a powerhouse group that became known as the New Testament Band. His intuitive sense of tempo, time and dynamics kept these sixteen men swinging. We'll call once again on Clark Terry and Joe Williams.

CT: But I'll tell you about this cat, Basie, he, although Ellington was more endowed with harmony and theory and so forth, Basie was the king of mother wit as far as tempo, and he taught us all the greatest lesson in the world and that is the utilization of space and time. All the musicians in the world, and they say he learned it through the medium of just socializing at Kansas City at the Cherry Blossom and the little places where you would have people sit, in a small room like this where you would have gingham table cloths and he'd play a little bit with Jo Jones and Walter Page or Freddie and The Fiddler, or whoever was there, and he'd go socializing. Bing-a-dink and he'd go over there socialize, "Yeah, baby, how you doing?" He goes, bing-a-dink, go over there and have another taste over there and have two or three tastes. Meanwhile Jo Jones and Biggun are still going [scats]. And he'd come in and [scats]. So he was so endowed with rhythm and utilization of space and time, so he knew exactly the way a tune should be before you played it. Now the one, the best example of that is when Neal Hefti was writing for the band, he brought in a tune and passed it out, and Basie played it and Basie shook his head. He said, "What's the matter, you don't like the arrangement, Chief?" He said, "No." He said, "What's wrong with it?" He said, "The tempo." So he said — well the tune was about here [claps]. So he said, "Well what do you think it should be?" "About here" [claps slowly] Well the tune was [scats]. He brought it in to be [scats].

JW: That was "L'il Darlin'."

CT: He heard it. Right away he said, "Uh oh." And look at the result. If he'd a kept it up there it would have just been another also ran tune .

JW: And you're talking about stealing from himself, I mean like "Cute."

CT: Oh, yeah.
[scatting]

CT: Yeah, he was the king of space, time.

JW: Yes he was.

Like Clark Terry, trombonist Grover Mitchell was a sideman with both Ellington and Basie. He adds his observations regarding the Count's impeccable sense of tempo and groove.

MR: Basie had a way of tailoring arrangements to feature his sound?

GM: Yeah. What he did, a good example of that was "L'il Darling." When Neal brought "L'il Darling" in it was supposed to be fast. Did you know that?

MR: No I didn't.

GM: [scats]. And Basie says, "It's a nice song but it's terrible," and he slowed it way back [scats]. And there was a couple of more he did that way. And he could do just the opposite with something that was maybe would play faster. He was very good at tempo. Now you see he came through that Vaudeville school you know with the dancers and all that kind of stuff, and he had really good insight. A lot of that sparse piano style of his came from accompanying dancers. If you could remember how piano players used to accompany tap dancers. So you see what I mean, it was just a removal from that, and taking advantage of this real sparse musical type of thing with the band. If you could imagine a piano player that had to accompany tap dancers, Basie was a perfect example of that. That's how that little plink here and a plink there got to be part of, well to a great degree it got to be part of what he was doing. He was a Vaudevillian you know.

Basie was a vaudevillian, there's our cue for this episode's jazz vocabulary spot. Vaudeville was an early 20th century style of music hall entertainment that included singers, tap dancers, comedians, jugglers and animal acts. Aspiring jazz players often paid the bills by playing in the pit for vaudeville shows where they were expected to have a fine-tuned sense of timing, tempo and spontaneity.

And this is a first, a musician's name as a jazz vocabulary term. Jimmy Lewis spoke of Freddie Greene as the sextet member who kept the tempo intact, no speeding up allowed. Freddie Green strummed quarter notes on his acoustic guitar for nearly five decades as a member of Basie's All American rhythm section. "Just do the Freddie Greene" is a common directive to big band guitarists. And lastly, "have a taste." If you don't know what that means, you must be a teetotaler. And you can Google that term.

[audio interlude]

Playing lead trumpet with the Count Basie band was a coveted gig. No one filled the chair better than Snooky Young. From our 1996 interview, here's Snooky chatting with fellow trumpeter Gerald Wilson.

GW: So I had a great time with Basie's band, I loved his band. I really — I was with him when he disbanded. I was actually with Count Basie when he disbanded.

MR: Was that because of the economics of the time?

GW: Yes.

SY: I foreseen it coming, that's why I split. Really. That's the truth. I seen it coming in California and I split. They didn't know where I was. But I had gone home. I mean, I'm a

youngster and I didn't pay it no attention, I said, well I'm going home you know. I packed my bags.

MR: Back to Dayton?

SY: Yeah Back to Dayton, Yeah. I stayed for ten years. Almost a mistake.

MR: Almost.

SY: Almost a mistake. I got out just in time. I will say that. I got out just in time. Because if I'd have stayed another two or three years I would have lost any desire to get back into the fast company, you see? And it wasn't easy coming back, I'll tell you that.

MR: What was the first fast company you came back into?

SY: Count Basie. And that was when he was the hottest. I mean his next trip around, "The Comeback." Joe Williams was in the band then, you know? And oh, that was, Thad Jones, Joe Newman, Wendell Culley and myself was the trumpet section. Henry Coker, Al Grey and Benny Powell were the trombone section. And the reeds was Marshall Royal, baritone was Charlie Fowlkes, Frank Wess, Frank Foster, and Billy Mitchell. Billy Mitchell. And the rhythm section was of course Freddie Green, Jo Jones, Eddie Jones and Sonny Payne and Count Basie. And that was his next bad band, I think so far as, compared to his other bands, people used to try to compare the bands, but I was in both of them and I don't think it's fair to compare either one.

MR: Yeah. They're both great. What was Basie like to work for?

GW: Beautiful. Beautiful. I was lucky. I lived in Count Basie's home with him for about eight weeks.

SY: All you had to do for Basie is play. Play. Because he would kind of let you mess up a little bit, but not too much. He didn't want to be, you know what I mean, like catch some guys overdoing it and drinking and whatnot. But he'll let you go on and do that 'cause he like the taste himself a little bit you know, from time to time. But they didn't want you to mess up. He was pretty flexible. He was a nice guy. I loved Basie.

GW: Wonderful man.

MR: That's marvelous.

SY: All the sporting life people loved Basie too, the racetrack people and all these kind of people, the hustlers and whatnot. They all loved Basie.

GW: Sure, he bet on the race horses all the time. He loved to gamble.

SY: They all loved Basie, man.

In Episode 25, Grover Mitchell described Duke Ellington's hands-off approach to band discipline. Basie was less forgiving with his sidemen.

GM: You walked into Basie's band late, and you walked up on that bandstand, and you know the very fastest solo possible, you're cold, you're going to play right then. He had all

kinds of ways, all kinds of ways of punishing you, you know what I mean? Awful. Jesus, he was just mean. Or some tight solo you know darn well you can't play, you know, because you haven't warmed up, or some high ballad or something like that, and you've got to play it right there on the spot. He didn't say anything.

MR: He didn't bawl you out.

GM: Yeah. You're messing it up you know, and he's sitting over there. And if you say anything he'd say, "Well that's your job, that's your solo."

MR: Lot to be learned from that.

GM: That's right. Oh he was something else. He was great though.

Count Basie called vocalist Joe Williams his Number One Son and their names will forever be linked in jazz lore. The 1955 LP "Count Basie Swings, Joe Williams Sings" took the band to a whole 'nother level and it stayed there. Joe made a practice of watching Basie interact with his sidemen in a manner that nowadays would be identified as positive reinforcement.

JW: As a leader, I watched him, observed him. He never saw mistakes. If something-those of us who knew, felt it was like, gee that wasn't what we do 98 times out of a hundred. That was an accident. And so instead of looking where it came from he'd always happen to be looking someplace else. "Hey." Somebody over there. You know? He missed it. He never heard it. But when you did something marvelously unusual he'd light up like a Christmas tree.

While he was a man of few words and soft spoken ones at that, the The Count always made it clear what he wanted from his band on stage and in the studio. He occasionally called on drummer Ed Shaughnessy for recording work when he wanted a particular sound and style to fit a themed album. Here's Ed with an inside the studio story.

ES: You want to hear a fun story?

MR: Sure do.

ES: I guess — got enough time for a fun story? It will only take a minute. We come to this studio to make the first album, and we sit down and we had no dividers between any of the band. Basie did not like to record that way. Therefore he set the band up almost like real life, you know? Almost the same as you would on a stage, almost. And we start running the first tune down and play it. Kind of a medium tempo tune, nothing real hot. And I'm playing and filling and doing the stuff that I normally would do. And he says, I mean we stop, and the engineer says over the thing "Well, the producer wants to talk to you, Count." So Count says "Well talk on the thing." He says "Well do you want to talk over the mics?" Count says "Yeah, what is it? Come on, let's get going." So the producer

leans over the mic he says “We think the drums should probably be about half as loud as they are and we think that that would be a lot better for this recording.” And Basie, who very seldom does this, went [screams] “rahhhhhh, and hit his fist on the piano.” And all the band went like [screams] “rahhhhh” I swear to God, including me. It scared the crap out of us. He’s sitting there with this yachting cap, [screams] and he roared like a lion.

MR: Count Basie.

ES: Count Basie, yeah. And I found out later this was one of his rare moments. And he leans over to the mic. Now after he does this, now he’s Mister Cool and he says “Mr. Shaughnessy’s here because I like the way he plays in a big band. Your job is to get it all down on record.” And he looked at me and he says “Play your way.” And that was the last time we got a word about, in five record dates, to make the first album, never a word came from the booth. And you know something? They got it all down okay. I didn’t modify anything. But man, that’s what, it scared the crap out of all of us. It was like, well, you know he made the point right in the very — because we were going to make a couple of albums for this company. He made the point that this band is going to play the way it plays. We’re not going to play studio style, where we kind of don’t play, you know what I mean or we modify everything. He wants the fire. The main thing is he wants the fire.

Oh, to be a fly on the wall at that session. We’ll wrap up Episode 26 with the eminently quotable Jon Hendricks who offers one more insight into Count Basie, the man and jazz legend.

MR: And you had quite a wonderful association with Count Basie.

JH: Oh, yeah. It was gorgeous. He was a great man. I mean he was great in such a quiet way. There wasn’t any flamboyance about him. What it was about him, I think was his magnetism. He just set still and was quiet. But nothing happened until he moved. I mean the band would be on the bandstand, and everybody would be sitting there and he’d come and make that introduction, and the whole band would come to life. He and Duke Ellington had that same thing, and Basie was so honest. You know he was such an honest man that it was funny, I mean it was joke the way he would just let the truth come out of his mouth. Like one time we went to London with him. And he asked me to come by his hotel you know, because he was going to do an interview with the London Times. And he was kind of worried about it, and wanted to make sure that everything went well. So he wanted me there in case I had to translate for him for the reporter. So this man sits down and he says, “Tell me, Mr. Bahsie” he says, “you have a style of playing the piano” he says, “you don’t seem to play too many notes. You’re sort of economical in your style of playing.” He says, “How did you arrive at such a style?” And Basie said, “I just can’t play no more piano.” And I of course was sitting there and I went into the bathroom and cracked up. Because it was so true but totally unexpected. And then when we saw the

article the next day, the guy remarked on how Mr. Basie was so — what did he call it — so modest. He said he was so modest. He wasn't modest, he was telling the truth. You know the "One O'clock Jump" if you listen to that record, Basie could only play in E flat.

MR: In E flat?

JH: When he started out that was it. E flat. And that song is in D you know when the band comes in. So he plays his two choruses in E flat, and he makes the modulation to D and the band plays.

MR: And then he can kind of lay out and just do his thing here and there.

JH: Find a note, man.

[audio interlude "The Gates of Swing"]

Happily, the Count Basie Orchestra continues to swing. After Basie passed in 1984 the band was skillfully directed first by Thad Jones, then Frank Foster and Grover Mitchell, all Basie alums. Now led by Scotty Barnhart, the current group just earned a 2024 Grammy Award for the recording "Basie Swings the Blues." That he did and that he still does.

Tune in next week when we'll focus on the musician that spawned more anecdotes and contrasting opinions than any other band leader. I am speaking of the cat who was crowned "The King of Swing."

See you on the flip side.