Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #35 — Vocalists

[audio interlude]

Greetings. Monk Rowe here, Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College, and your podcast host. This Season 5 Episode, Number 35, focuses on jazz vocalists.

Let's start with a multiple choice question, go ahead and respond out loud if you'd like. The question is: Do you think a vocalist who does not play an instrument is a musician? Choose (A) Of course they are. (B) Well no, not really. And (C) Why is this even a question? Here's a bit of music while you decide.

[audio interlude]

Time's up.

I'm guessing that the majority of the (A) responses, of course they are, came from vocalists and (B) responses, not really, came from instrumentalists, especially those who have worked with those who chose (A).

And hopefully we'll illuminate why (C) like why is this a question, was even included.

[audio interlude]

Here is a personal and debatable observation. If we consider the role of singers in the popular music forms of rock, blues, jazz, funk, folk, hip hop and the all-encompassing, roots music, vocalists comparatively, have played the most limited role in the jazz idiom. Of course we acknowledge the iconic voices of Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Joe Williams, and numerous other singers, but since it's gelling as a musical style in the early twentieth century, jazz has been predominantly an instrumental music with melodies played typically by wind instruments. But the jazz landscape in 2025 is vastly different than the scene in 1935 where the big bands found it necessary to carry a so-called "chirper" or a boy singer, who spent the majority of a performance sitting stage left, waiting to be introduced for a song or two. Major concert venues, festivals, and clubs now seek out jazz singers as headliners. Catherine Russell, Gregory Porter, Kurt Elling and Samara Joy have definitely "made it" in the business. We're going to divide this podcast into two parts. We'll first hear from the jazz vocalists who

have enjoyed success in the field, followed by a bit of advice for those singers who hope to. If you're an aspiring singer, you might want to take notes.

Have I mentioned that I am an avid fan of saxophonist Cannonball Adderley and that my favorite Cannonball recording is his 1961 session with vocalist Nancy Wilson? Early on in our oral history project I was fortunate to speak with Nancy Wilson Here she is, from our November 1995 conversation.

NW: I have to say about jazz critics. They really gave me fits for a while. They felt that the Cannonball Adderley album was a compromise for Cannon. Because I was a pop artist.

MR: No kidding?

NW: Oh, yes. You don't know the stuff they did to us. But my point that I've always tried to stress is I came into this business with a gift, the voice is a given. It was a gift from God. I didn't put any labels on it. I also decided to leave my home to do this, to be commercial. I mean the object of the game for me was why would I want to, why would anybody in their right mind want to give up their security, their home, all the things that mean happiness to me, to go out to only want to fulfill somebody else's idea of who and what I am. I figured that I was going to do this on a major scale or I didn't want to do it. Because I could go home, go to Carnegie Tech as opposed to Central State, and be a doctor or be something in medicine, and I'd have been fine. But the voice was always out front. But I have never apologized for being a commercial artist. That is why I do what I do, is to sell. I want to be heard, I want to reach as many people as I can. I believe in that mass thing. You know I want everybody to know who I am if I'm going to do it.

MR: There's nothing wrong with that.

NW: So when I listen to the things that Leonard — Leonard Feather used to get on me. It would be I was not as jazz, I mean I was not a true jazz artist. Well I've never professed to be. What does that mean, being a true jazz artist?

MR: Good question. What does a true jazz vocalist mean?

Vocalist Janis Siegel, who sang jazz for fifty years with the Manhattan Transfer and now pursues a solo career, addresses this question:

MR: Okay. What makes a jazz singer a jazz singer?

JS: Well I think there's a few characteristics. I mean the jury is out as to whether improvisation is one of them. But it's a phrasing thing I think, and a sophistication that is one of the characteristics, I think, of a jazz singer. And there's a truth to it. It's a funny subject. I think a jazz singer would be one that is really more of a musician than just a singer. Because you have to be inside all of these chords, and understand what's going on, how the melody relates to the chord and the structure that's going by, how to play within it, and then a level of emotion that has to come through too I think.

MR: How does a singer make it more likely that the instrumentalists are going to think of that singer as a musician?

JS: Well you have to be a musician. You have to know how to communicate with the instrumentalists, you have to know how to count off, you have to speak in the language of the musician. Not say, well I mean just know how to talk about the structure of a tune and know what you want, and being able to direct without being bossy of course. But know how to — you have to know what you're doing for goodness sake. When you're tackling something like improvising or even just singing a standard, you have to come in knowing the melody. And you'd be surprised how many kids in high school and college level even come in to sing a song and they don't know the melody.

MR: Well how about the really just nitty gritty things of knowing your keys and having —

JS: Oh yeah, there's a whole list of things that you really should know before you get up on a bandstand.

MR: Give me a couple if you don't mind.

JS: Well you should know how to count off a tune, in the feel that you want in the time signature that you want, in the tempo that you want. One of the most horrible things I think you could ever do is if a tune starts and it's too slow, to turn around and start — that's not cool at all. I think you have to know how to end a tune. I mean there's different ways you could do it. You have to be ready for certain turnarounds that are very standard, and you have to be able to direct that. And then again, I mean if you're improvising you have to know the tune. You have to feel the changes coming by and be able to spontaneously compose something that is a story, not just quotes, but it's a difficult thing to do.

MR: Do you think they're teaching it in the New School and all that?

JS: I think that there are some schools and some teachers mainly that are teaching it, teaching everything. Not just — you know Charlie Parker, one of the famous things he said, "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn." Well I think that that should be taught a lot more in schools. Especially at Berklee, where it's just as important to live and to tell a story when you're playing, as it is to go through the chords — play the scales. Anyone can play the scales, really.

Jazz vocalist Giacomo Gates has one foot in 2025 and the other somewhere around 1955. He has the bop thing down and peppers his language with terms like "straight ahead", "solid baby" and "you've got to learn to hang." He expands on Janis Siegel's comments on defining jazz singing and vocalists as musicians.

GG: I could read, at least I could speak the musician's language. As a singer, I'm on the bandstand and I'm part of the band, as opposed to in front of the band.

MR: Boy that really is a distinction and I was going to ask you, as a musician who, part of the way you work is to come into town and play with a group and you may or may not have played with some of them or all of them.

GG: Mostly not.

MR: How do you get the sidemen on your side?

GG: I think part of it is the repertoire. Because when I first started to do this, you know, even learning the music, I mean I always dug the *Great American Songbook*. But I sing a jazz repertoire. There's a whole lot of jazz singers out there and they're singing — how many jazz singers does it take to sing "My Funny Valentine"? All of them. So I mean it's a great song but I don't sing it. Chet Baker owns it as far as I'm concerned. But I sing Thelonious Monk. I sing Charlie Parker. I sing some Dexter Gordon songs. I sing standards, but when I first started to go into New York City when I moved back to Connecticut and I started to go into New York City, there used to be a lot of sessions. And now there aren't. But as a singer, you know, they used to have a sign-up sheet and you'd write down your name and what you play. Well there weren't, and I don't think there are, that many male singers. So I ain't pretty. I know that. So I'm not going to get called up on the bandstand because I'm pretty. "Come on up here, baby and sing"

whatever you know. So I would go up there and sing “Well You Needn’t.” I’d sing “Yardbird Suite.” I’d sing — not a singer’s repertoire. And they dug it.

MR: So if you went up to the bandstand in that situation and you wanted to do a standard, do you feel compelled to do it in the original key or do you — you have your keys together?

GG: Well I’m lucky. A lot of the songs that I sing I sing in the standard key, which certainly makes them happy. I mean you play, you know a good musician can play in any key. But they’re comfortable in the keys that the songs are in. I mean if I could sing — you know it does make a difference I mean if I sing something in A flat and in B flat, there’s a big difference for me, especially if I’m singing the solo, there’s a bigger range, so I need to be in my sweet spot. But you’ll make a musician happy if you can call “Well You Needn’t” in F as opposed to E flat. Because he’s not used to playing it in E flat. So I want them to be able to not think and just play and have a good time, so we can all have a good time as opposed to being busy reading, or, you know, can we do “Lush Life” in D. D? What is that too fast?

MR: I’m going to remember that one. That was a good one.

MR: Why do some instrumentalists not think of singers as musicians? What causes that?

GG: Well I think that there’s probably — I mean certainly there are a lot of singers who are musicians. But there’s a whole lot of singers who aren’t. And what I mean by that is I mean I learned how to play the piano when I started to sing seriously. But I would never do a gig on the piano because I don’t play that well. But I could sit down and play the changes. I can hear the notes that are in the changes. I know what the bridge is as opposed to “the middle.” So I want to speak their language. It makes them comfortable, it makes me comfortable. You know it’s more than the language, there’s a certain — I believe there’s a certain protocol up there on the bandstand. You know there’s a certain je ne sais quoi that’s supposed to happen. And a lot of people don’t know about that. And maybe because today it’s a different world.

MR: Do you feel that you have the license to ask a person to play differently?

GG: It depends. If I hire musicians for a date then I’m hiring them to play what they play. I’m hiring them to play them. If I’m working with a trio and I don’t know the trio, or even if I do, if I want less from somebody, or if I want more space, I don’t have a problem in

asking them for more space. And that's what I'll do. I'll ask them. Could you give me more space.

MR: And that's the word you would use.

GG: Yeah.

MR: Okay.

GG: But I'm not going to tell anybody how to play. I might ask for someone to play softer, but I'll never say, "Hey man, could you play more like Freddie Green?" I don't think that's right. "Could you play more like, you know, Ben Riley?" "Well why don't you call Ben Riley if you wanted that?" I mean I had the good fortune to record with Ben Riley.

MR: No kidding.

GG: And there were several Monk tunes on the record that the record company cat, Marc Edelman from Sharp Nine Records. He put together the band. It was David Hazeltine on piano, Peter Washington, Jim Rotundi on trumpet, and Ben Riley. I show up and I see Ben Riley and I went wow. We're doing "Epistrophy" with my lyrics, "Ask Me Now," "Speed Ball," a couple of tunes like that. And Ben Riley is looking at the list of songs. And he says to me, "You a tenor player?" I said, "No, I'm a singer." Can I use French on this?

MR: Of course.

GG: He said to me, "A singer? You going to sing this shit?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "My man." So that, I mean there you go. I mean Ben Riley, I got all the respect in the world for Ben Riley. But he was happy that I was singing "Speed Ball" and "Night in Tunisia" because I'm singing a real, what I like to think of as a real jazz repertoire.

I don't think Giacomo would mind if I shed a bit of light on the "Lush Life" joke. Billy Strayhorn wrote the song in D flat, now designated as the standard key. Requesting that the band do it in D might generate some puzzled looks from the accompanist, resulting in Giacomo's response "What is that too fast?" His description of a typical jazz recording session is worth noting. He may show up for a recording session arranged by his producer. He may or may not know all the players and they may have no idea of what tunes are going down on wax that day. We can safely assume that Beyonce, Michael Buble and Taylor Swift don't work like this.

[audio interlude]

The necessity of creating and maintaining your own sound, your own voice, has been stated by a lengthy list of our interviewees. During our October 2001 interview, celebrated vocalist Dianne Reeves defines her approach and describes the role of jazz in her life.

DR: Well I feel that I come from a place, a foundation that allows for the celebration of uniqueness. That's how I view jazz music. And through that I am able to take the kinds of songs, lyrics, ideas and give them that kind of freedom, free sensibility, the ability to change from night to night and that's what I love. Because to me that's what life is. And I think jazz is life. I equate jazz with life and life experience. And so I guess that's what I mean when I say that. I need to be able to take the music and breathe life in it, just like I learned. Just — when I listen to — any time I put on a great jazz musician or a great jazz vocalist, there's life in the music. How do you make that? How do you draw a picture and make it have dimension? You know? And I think that's — you look at it, you see how, for me I see how it addresses my life and sometimes there are songs that don't necessarily address my life but they are places that I need to get to. And I believe that there is power in words, and so that's why I select them to sing because I'm trying to get to that place.

I sometimes wonder if the "uniqueness" that Diane Reeves mentioned becomes more difficult to achieve as the years go by and the list of innovative musicians grows longer and longer. Ben Sidran is a pianist, vocalist, songwriter and masterful interviewer. It was rather a treat interviewing an interviewer. Ben addressed the unique sound topic, here are his words: "All the interviews I've done really affected my playing. The first thing that people tell you is to be yourself. If you're trying to sound like somebody else, you're doomed to be second best, they're already doing it." End quote. Joe Williams was a man who had his own sound. He was also co-founder of the Fillius Jazz Archive. I'm not sure who actually summed up these words of wisdom about achieving your own identity but they sound memorable coming from Mr. Williams, here are "the three ations."

JW: Start by imitating, you don't be afraid to imitate someone. We all did. And you go from imitation to assimilation. And from assimilation, to innovation. But you can't improvise if you don't know the melody.

I love it! Imitation, assimilation, innovation. Did you write that down?

It's jazz vocabulary time. Let's focus on a few of the terms offered by the vocalists in this episode: First up, the bridge. Essentially the B part of the tried and true 32 bar song form, organized as A-A-B-A, eight measures each. Every member of the band should be able to know when the bridge is coming. Sometimes called the release, avoid calling it "the middle."
Next, Standards and the Great American Song Book. For jazz players, these terms mean almost the same thing, songs mostly written in the '30s and '40s that were adopted by jazz musicians. If you are serious about the music, you should be able to perform them on the spot, in multiple keys without referring to a Real Book, an iPad or your smart phone.

Janis Siegel mentioned being able to count off a song. It seems obvious, but there is a technique to it. First, get the tempo right and importantly, add the proper vocal inflection, body language, hand claps, finger snaps, whatever it takes to set up the groove. This is not the purposely stilted elementary school band count off as in: 1-2, 1,2, ready go. It's more like "OK all, Take the A Train (counts) or in the case of a jazz/funk tune: "Okay all, Cantaloupe Island (counts). It takes practice! And a bit of scatting! Speaking of scatting, the ability to scat is often cited as a requirement for true jazz singers. Basically it is improvisation, but with a voice rather than a sax or trumpet. The singer improvises melodic riffs with combinations of vowels and consonants. The voice becomes an instrument.

Lastly, a term I never heard on the bandstand. The soapbox. The Webster Dictionary definition, an improvised platform used by a self-appointed, informal orators.
Which brings us to part two of this episode, where the host climbs up on a soapbox and orates a few tips for aspiring singers who hope to fit in with the band.

Let me share three anecdotes that demonstrate how to get off on the wrong foot. Years ago I was a subbing on a solo piano gig, providing background music at a popular Central New York restaurant. I'll play both roles in this all-too-familiar exchange. "Oh you play beautifully, would you mind if I sang a song with you? "Well, okay, what would you like to sing?" "Well I'm not

sure, what do you know? “How about “Wind Beneath My Wings,” it’s quite popular now”. “Oh yes, I love that song! Do you have the words”?

A second story was related to me from the pianist who normally plays that gig. This time the singer does have a song in mind, and actually knows the lyrics but not the key. The pianist has to make his best guess. He plays an intro, the singer starts, then stops and says, “That’s too high, can you do it minor?”

Lastly, an informal summer jazz concert. I’m sharing the stage with six instrumentalists and a vocalist who is asked “What would you like to sing?” The response, “How about Summertime?” So far, so good. “And what’s your key?” The singer responds with a dismissive laugh “Oh God, I don’t know.” Now if you are a singer listening to these anecdotes and your response is “So, where’s the problem” you have some work to do.

After many years of playing in bands with lead singers and working as a vocal accompanist I feel qualified to offer a few do’s and don’ts to singers hoping to enter the gig scene. And I’m stepping onto the soap box.

Do: Have your own collection of lead sheets with chords, intros, endings and an indication of style. A written out melody will result in the best possible accompaniment. How do you assemble this? You engage a qualified pianist or guitarist, to prepare them. This is a vocalist’s version of paying for lessons like all instrumentalists do.
Do: Learn the etiquette of sitting in when invited, followed by developing a stage presence that connects to the audience and is inclusive of the band members.
Do: Know your lyrics. If you forget a line, don’t stop, learn to operate off the cuff. Check out the Ella Fitzgerald recording where she drew a blank while singing “Mack the Knife.” Ella kept swinging with improvised lyrics and brought the house down.
Do: Buy your own quality microphone, cord and stand. Suppose I was called to sub for a saxophonist on a particular gig. I show up and say, “Well do you have a sax for me?” Too many vocalists think it’s okay to ask “Where’s my mic?” Your instrument may be conveniently in your throat but that does not relieve you making an investment in gear like everyone else on stage.

And go a step further. Learn how a PA works and offer to help load out at the end of the gig. The band will notice.

A few “Don’ts”:
Don’t: Give your accompanist dirty looks if they make a mistake. It will not inspire them to play better.
Don’t: Be careless with other people’s equipment.
Avoid the current practice of holding a smart phone to read lyrics. It screams amateur!
Don’t commit the faux pas of stepping on someone’s instrumental solo. Learn the song form and performance etiquette.
The Oxford Dictionary defines “diva” as a self-important person who is temperamental and difficult to please, usually in the field of music. Don’t even think about being one.

And do: Go back in this podcast and re-listen to Janis Siegel’s advice about the singer as musician.
I’m stepping down from the soapbox.

You can check out the full video interviews with these vocalists and many more on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. Our thanks to Doug Higgins and Michael Ko for assembling these podcast episodes and to Romy Britell for transcriptions and content advice. Episode 36 will focus on accompanists, and we’ll hear from some of the best. Let’s go out with some serious scatting. Contractually, I cannot divulge this artists’ name but I’m guessing most of you will get it.

See you on the flip side.
[scatting audio interlude]