Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #36 — The Art of Accompanying

[audio interlude]

Greetings. My name is Monk Rowe. I am the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Thanks for tuning in to our Jazz Backstory podcast. Episode 36 is titled "The Art of Accompanying," a logical follow up to our previous topic on jazz vocalists. Of all the things that singers may lose sleep over, the number one issue is, who's going to play for me.

There are certain jazz terms that have definitions outside of the music world. The first listings in The Webster Dictionary for "accompanying" read: "Go somewhere with someone as a companion." followed by, "be present at the same time as something else." This actually describes how an effective accompanist thinks. Wherever the singer or soloist is going I'm going there too, at the same time, hopefully. Accompanying is indeed an art and excellent accompanists are highly valued and rewarded in multiple genres of music. The piano is the instrument most often called upon for musical support and in the classical world, the pianist is playing specifically what the composer wrote while staying alert to the phrasing, tempo and dynamics that the soloist delivers during any given performance. A jazz pianist frequently works from a lead sheet, sheet music that only displays the melody and relevant chord symbols. Sometimes they get less than that. They are in effect, improvising, but in a supportive fashion. When done well, a singer and pianist achieve a balance, a musical collaboration that is difficult to define. Joe Williams, the celebrated vocalist and co-founder of the Fillius Jazz Archive offers some insight on this synchronicity:

JW: Ah, first of all we're not talking about accompanist here. Those of us that understand what transpires between a piano player or a guitarist or an orchestra and a soloist, be it voice or one of the other instruments, is one, what they do, they support the soloist. You make a statement like the statement might be in the blues, say, "You don't love me and I don't even care." Now there's a space there for a piano, a guitar, or a horn to comment about that. People are laughing. The language has, you know the people are laughing.

Because they don't expect that. You know they expect, "You don't love me and I'm sad as I can be." Instead you say, "You don't love me and I don't even care." You know. And right away the people are laughing. Now what the piano or guitar or an instrument does is say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah that's so — I know it is." And then lead into the next phrase harmonically you see. And where a lot of people don't know it's happening, or what it's about it a lot of the young people are afraid of making the mistake of, percussion instruments particularly, that if something is happening and people say "Yeah, yeah," then they would like to do it as well. "I can do that too." And they do it with you instead of adding something to it, which is what you should do. You should be able to listen to it and corroborate maybe. Maybe make a corroborative statement as opposed to "Yeah I can do that too."

Joe's words of wisdom about space will be echoed later in this episode. Let's talk about the traditional elements of music for a moment. If you consult music theory books, or search the all-knowing Internet, you will find lists with at least four music elements. Every list will include rhythm, melody and harmony. Have you ever been involved in a "Name That Tune" contest? No one plays the harmony or the rhythm for the contestants, it's all about the melody. Church organists and pianists include the melody when playing hymns, it's written in their music. Accompanists in jazz and popular music rarely, if ever, actually play the tune. The melody is the personal domain of the singer or instrumental soloist and doubling it from the piano will earn you a "look," anywhere from puzzled to pissed off. Norman Simmons, the favorite accompanist of Joe Williams, describes how his formative years of learning the piano set him up to be an effective musical partner.

NS: What makes me a great accompanist is Duke Ellington first, to start with. Duke is what I heard through the floor, and Duke is what I tried to copy. And the thing about Duke Ellington is Duke Ellington wrote for his men, the men in the band. And when I started to play the piano I didn't start as a piano player, I started copying Duke's band. So it was good to have someone else play the melody while I just make up the arrangement. So in accompanying I always feel like I am creating an arrangement behind the vocal line. And there's a great freedom there because I don't have to search for the vocal line. It was a

long time before I could even find a vocal line on the piano. But I was creating a harmony and a rhythm and I got a great kick out of that. And in Chicago, where I was born, it's a rhythm town. So again, that was like a real enjoyment of just being in a rhythm section, being able to make things happen as opposed to being out on the front line. For a long time I didn't know how to maybe take a solo. I knew how to play in the background. So I think that that has a lot to do with it, the fact that I see accompanying as creating/composing an arrangement behind the vocal line.

Norman was fortunate to have an upstairs neighbor who played Ellington LPs with great gusto, thus "hearing Duke through the floor. An experienced musician once said, "If jazz improvisation is the spontaneous creation of a melody, then jazz accompaniment is the spontaneous creation of an arrangement." Actually, I said that. And you can quote me. The accompanist is playing a song without one of the key elements of music. Speaking of "Name That Tune," see if you can get this one without hearing that element. I'm going to pretend that a singer just told me the song they wanted, followed by this instruction, "Just give me a bell tone."

[audio interlude]

Did you get it? Did your memory fill in the missing melody? If not, don't fret. It's not how the game is played. Here's a melodic hint, [sings] ta-ta. Okay, I'll bet everyone got it now. You can go back and sing along with it.

Singers and soloists spread the word about what piano players are best to work. And the late Mike Longo was one of them. In January of 2019 I visited Mr. Longo in his New York apartment, where he spoke about our topic.

MR: I wanted to ask you about comping behind Joe Williams and Nancy Wilson and Jimmy Witherspoon. How does a piano player learn to be an accompanist that vocalists want to work with?

ML: Well without getting real technical, the main way would be listen. Listening. And you have to have your voice leading together so that you're playing contrapuntally. So the basis of simple counterpoint is when the main theme is moving, you're standing still. When that stops then you move. And so I would listen to something the vocalist did and then play in between the phrases, and then we'd lock up together. And so the singers all

like to work with me. Nancy, she told somebody in Florida, “Mike Longo really knows how to play for a singer” or something like that.

MR: Do you like to see a lead sheet — maybe you’re obviously way beyond this. But when I play behind a singer I kind of like to know what note they’re going to be singing — at least a lead sheet of how the song normally goes.

ML: Well sure. Well you look at a lead sheet as information. And so yeah. Look man, Aaron Copland said, “The art of classical music is the art of melody.” So melody is number one. And so if the singer is singing the melody you don’t want to be playing something that’s going to clash with that. And so if you’re playing contrapuntally you’re playing something that complements. And so we have to be involved with — there are five elements to music. Melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, and form. And so you have to have yourself trained to deal with all five of those things. And if the singer is the melody then you’re doing the counterpoint, the rhythm — and so rhythm is primary. In our music rhythm and melody almost mean the same thing. Dizzy used to use the term the “melodization of rhythm.”

[audio interlude]

Hmm, the Melodization of Rhythm, that’s what that lick was. Boo ba dat, Boo ba dat, Boo ba da bop bop ba dat doo bop. The rhythm gave birth to the melody, just as Dizzy Gillespie described. Sounds like a good lead in to our jazz vocabulary segment.

I used the term “bell tone.” One pitch, the simplest introduction possible for a vocalist. It can be tricky though, some singers like the actual first pitch they need to start on, others like the fifth tone of the key, it was this latter version I played in our brief “Name That Tune” selection.

Mike Longo mentioned counterpoint. J.S. Bach was the master of it in the classical realm. In jazz it’s an improvised melodic phrase used sparingly, that runs counter to the melody. Counterpoint with singers works best when played during the rests or under long, held notes.

And comping. A singer might say to an accompanist, “I like your comping,” or “can you comp less?” during the bridge of this tune. Comp and comping are abbreviations of accompany and specifically refer to how a pianist or guitarist chooses to play chords behind a soloist.

Check out this off beat guitar comping from our Orchestra in a Nutshell.
[audio interlude]
Nice groove.

Guitarist Howard Alden is also a prized accompanist and figured out how to make himself valuable in multiple settings, thus making his phone ring.

HA: Being a guitar player and being in the rhythm section I get called to play with a lot of different people, more so than a horn player I think, because a horn player is either going to be a soloist, or part of a group sometimes, but usually either a major soloist or else play in a section in a big band. So I tend to get called to play in a lot of small groups with different people. Joe Bushkin again wanted one thing out of a guitar player, which was thrilling to play with him, he's a great piano player and a great personality too. Right after Bushkin I ran into Joe Williams and he asked me join him for some engagements, which was a slightly different thing. He was very easy to work with, great guy. Ruby Braff, the cornet player, I got to know around New York and I started to work with him and he had — once he saw I was open to suggestions he would suggest various things to me too, as far as my complement, as far as my playing, as far as my soloing even. And Kenny Davern I play a completely different way with when I play with him.

MR: Is it possible to be specific about that?

HA: Yeah, well, okay, let's see. First, like Kenny Davern basically likes rhythm guitar for accompaniment. He likes, you know, chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk behind him, for nice, soft support for what he does. And then occasionally I play some parts with him, like clarinet and like that. Ruby Braff likes different accompaniment, like some punctuations in the chords, he doesn't like rhythm all the time, he likes it sometimes. Again he likes, when you do play a part with him he wants to hear it fully you know. Joe Bushkin also, when I first started playing with him I figured he's playing a lot of piano all the time, so I figured with bass, drums and guitar, I'll just play light rhythm guitar with him. He says, "Nope! No rhythm guitar. Play horn riffs." You know, he wants a lot of active stuff.

MR: He wants lines.

HA: Yeah. He wants a lot of punctuation and stuff like that. So basically I kind of listen to the players and try to decide what is most fitting for them and what's going to make them feel most comfortable and what's going to make them sound the best.

This is a different art, how to accompany when part of a rhythm section. A rule of thumb, more players, play less. I have always felt that a bassist can make or break a band, especially when the group is in an accompaniment mode. During our September 1997 interview, bassist Michael Moore brought up a key term, wait for it at the end of this excerpt.

Insert Michael Moore

MM: Well I do a lot of teaching and I think that the bass is probably — maybe as Dizzy said that's the first thing he'd get for a big band was a good bass player, and he'd go from there. And I think it is probably that — I wouldn't say the most important — but right in there with the drums and the piano and the rhythm, it's very essential. And the feel, the team spirit that you have to develop as a bass player I think is very important. I mean I don't care about the solos, that can come later. But I always tell bass players, time, feeling, is the most important thing that you have to shoot for right away, and work towards that. And solos later on, or at the same time, but never, never forgetting the function of the instrument. And you really have to, in a way, a lot of times a great bass player I think is not noticed. I correlate it to being a catcher. I used to be a catcher in baseball. And I think about it as kind of the catcher. He's not noticed on a ball field, until he makes a mistake. And the bass player is kind of the same way. You shouldn't be noticed that much. You should be felt, and the rhythm should sound good, but the bass shouldn't — until it comes to the solo — he shouldn't stand out as like playing a lot of tricks and things like this. There have been a lot of bass players through the last century that stand out no matter what they do. But I think when you're accompanying you should not disappear, but you should not be so noticeable until it comes time to play solos. And that takes a certain amount of almost Zen attitude of thinking about the unit and putting yourself out in front of the audience and saying how is the band sounding, and thinking about the rhythm section as a unit. And volume has a lot to do with it. You can't be too

loud because then you overpower the acoustic instruments on the bandstand. It's very important to set your volume, if you're using an amplifier, to the keyboards, the piano in particular, the acoustic piano. Because it can't get any louder than that is. So if you crank up the amplifier, then the whole thing is destroyed. You haven't got a chance. So there's a lot of elements that go into it, but mainly being a team player, and kind of maybe subjugating your ego just a little bit, to do it.

I'm envisioning a book titled "So You Want to Be an Accompanist." Chapter 1 "How's your ego?" Mr. Moore suggested "kind of maybe subjugating your ego just a little bit." In my experience there is no "kind of maybe" or "a little bit." As Quincy Jones said to all the pop stars who participated in the 1985 "We Are the World" recording session, "Leave your ego at the door." I would go one step further and say if you constantly have to subjugate your ego while accompanying, you probably aren't suited for it. Simply put, your ego has to be stroked by the fact that you're excellent in the role.

Wise drummers know how and when to be accompanists. Gregory Caputo reminded me that synchronicity scenario is not always with singer or soloists, but can be a collaboration with folks that aren't even in the band, as well as the musicians who are.

GC: When I play for dancers, I simplify. That's what I do. And all of the big bands that I've performed with have two books. There's a concert book and there's a dance book. And yes the Artie Shaw Big Band has a dance book and I simplify. It's like I give them backbeat and time. I concentrate on the time, rather than syncopation, as I do in the other book, the concert book. I lay it down and it keeps me working. So when I play for dancers it's time.

MR: To get drum specific, when you say you lay it down, what — do you play more of something on your set, less or something on your set, I mean can you define "laying it down" for me?

GC: Well when I play jazz for instance my bass drum becomes a separate voice. There's nothing definite that I play, it becomes a separate voice. Everything becomes a separate voice, as in bebop. But with swing music, or dance music, I will keep an ostinato four on

the bass drum. And two and four on the hi-hat. And a swing rhythm is two and four on the snare drum, to simplify it mostly. It's laying, it's locking in the time. Therefore, just leaving a nice pillow for the other musicians to play on. If they feel confident in the time, the band will sound good, and they'll be able to create. There'll be a like what we call "in the pocket" feel, if the musicians feel comfortable.

MR: That was a good answer. I like that.

GC: Thank you.

MR: Because it's easy to say you've got to be in the pocket, or any other cliché, but exactly what that means sometimes can change from one situation to another I guess.

GC: It does. Each band has a special need. And it's my job to find out as soon as I can, either from knowing who's on it, just by knowing the personalities, or listening to them play, within the first four bars I know what I have to work with in the rhythm section and what I have to adjust to.

[audio interlude]

Here is a rarely heard phrase when referring to a sax, trumpet or trombone player, "oh yeah, wonderful accompanist." But it's not an uncommon position for a horn player to be in, playing with the singer. Remember, no melody playing, and no counterpoint that interferes with it. Trombonist Al Grey, known as "Fab" for fabulous, spoke about the challenge of playing behind Joe Williams during his Count Basie years:

AG: I used to play all the fills for Joe Williams, when Joe would sing. And when I first started doing it I used to have problems doing it. Many years ago when I was with Lionel Hampton they had a blues singer, Sonny Parker, and he would start singing the blues and he would get stuck for words and there would be such a big gap in between until I started filling in these gaps. And so Lionel Hampton said, "Well leave it in, Gates." And so that's where I like started. And so through history I come along and I started playing fills for Ella Fitzgerald and Bing Crosby and for Sarah Vaughan. And see now I come in to Count Basie's orchestra, and I started playing the part of making these fills for Joe. But sometimes Joe would sing lyrics and I would cover him up. And so one night Joe didn't

like it at all, you know. “You know you done covered up my lyrics, Fab,” I can hear him saying it now. And so Basie called the two of us aside. He said “here’s what I want you to do. Anytime Joe sings, just stay out of his way. Now if you find a crack to get in there, get in there, see, but otherwise, stay out of Joe’s way.” And that’s when I learned that when Basie, he was like a coach. And he used to tell me, see because when we made a recording, “Going to Chicago and sorry I can’t take you” and this is where I would make this fills [humms]. It’s like somebody who’s getting ready to have all kinds of affairs going on so this is where I could get in there. But if you covered the lyrics, which I really did find out it was very bad. And so that was one of my first lessons.

Years ago I was on a gig with my guitar/vocalist partner. A local sax player asked to sit in and proceeded to noodle aimlessly, from the beginning of the song to the end, searching for any notes that might sound good. He is partly the reason I chose this topic. My partner forged ahead but I could feel his anger mounting. As we packed up at the end of the night he gave me a look and said, “Don’t ever let the guy play with us again.” I hope that guy hears this episode.

So there it is. Making a living as a jazz musician has never been easy. Establishing a reputation as an effective and sympathetic accompanist can help fill your gig calendar. To paraphrase a local musician and dear friend, “Your ego won’t pay the rent.”

If you enjoyed this Jazz Backstory topic I highly recommend starting back at the top, Season 1, Episode 1. And you can watch the full video interviews with all our podcast voices on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. Thanks for joining in, I’ll see you on the flip side.

[Music to fade out: Monk Rowe’s ‘The Gates of Swing.”]