Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #37 — All it Takes is One Note

[audio interlude]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Season 5, Episode 37, titled "All it Takes is One Note." This is Monk Rowe, coming to you from the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. The topic of developing an original sound as a jazz artist frequently comes up during our oral history sessions, usually without prompting from me. The most respected musicians, those that have stood the test of time, all had a sound of their own, a distinctive audio fingerprint. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that the best of the best can be recognized with one note, that's all it takes. Let's jump right in with a comment from Harry "Sweets" Edison from our September 1995 interview.

SE: The big bands were so popular in those days, until, and they, most of the musicians in those days demanded respect because they were an artist. And they were all individualists. Everybody had a sound of their own. They could be identified on the record like if Billie Holiday would sing on the record you'd know it's nobody but Billie Holiday. She's the only one sounds like that. If Louis Armstrong, he can hit one note on a record, and you know it's Louis Armstrong. Nobody sounded like Lester Young. Like Coleman Hawkins. Like Bunny Berigan. Like Benny Goodman, Chu Berry, Dizzy Gillespie. They all had a sound that they could be recognized. And that was our ambition in my day to not be an imitator, but an originator, you know. And as they used to say they'd rather be the world's worst originator than the world's greatest imitator. Because there's nobody like the man that first sounded like that. You can never capture his feeling. So we all wanted to be individualists. I made many, many records with Billie Holiday and it was always a joy just to be in her company because she was just absolutely — I met her when she was about 19 years old. And what a voluptuous, beautiful girl she was. She was absolutely just gorgeous. And she had a sound that when you hear her on a record, you know that's Billie Holiday. And that's what we strived for in those days. Nowadays it seems like musicians have their idols and they don't venture any place else but what their idol is playing. Like Charlie Parker. All alto players sound

like Charlie Parker. All the tenor players nowadays sound like John Coltrane. All the trumpet players either sound like Miles or Dizzy. So there's no originality nowadays with the musicians.

MR: Finding that original sound I guess is not that easy.

SE: Well we did it.

MR: You sure did.

SE: Not that my sound is to be, you know, I don't know anybody that sounds like me, and I don't blame them.

The distinctive sound of Sweets Edison's trumpet can be heard on numerous Count Basie recordings, on LPs under his own name, and in collaborations with iconic vocalists. Sweets would be placed on a stool at Frank Sinatra recording sessions with the instruction, "play whatever you hear." He became adept at inserting licks at the right moment, treading lightly when the Chairman of the Board was vocalizing.

Here's a legitimate question with a caveat that it is only partially answerable. What goes into creating an identifiable sound on an instrument? The parameters vary between players of woodwinds, brass, strings, percussion and keyboards. Let's consider the personal gear of the saxophonist. There is the instrument first. Nowadays you can purchase saxes for a few hundred dollars, assembled in Taiwan and available at WalMart or Target, or you can consider the vintage horn, usually a specific model made by Selmer in France or the U.S. That few hundred dollar WalMart price tag will have added zeros. And then the never ending search for the perfect mouthpiece with the baffle and tip opening that Michael Brecker or John Coltrane played. What about the reed? Should I go with the traditional cane reed or the high tech synthetic? What reed strength should I use? And don't forget the ligature to hold it in place. Even the manufacturers of neck straps will tout their product as the key to the sound you've been looking for. Interestingly, the topic of instruments and musical gear rarely came up in our oral history sessions. Our interviewees were way beyond obsessing over all the mechanical end of things. They had long ago settled on what worked for them. Here's an anecdote from Phil Woods, recorded in Delaware Water Gap, onstage at the iconic jazz club, the Deer Head Inn. I asked Mr. Woods about an encounter with jazz icon Charlie Parker.

MR: What kind of person was he to you?

PW: Sweet. Very nice. I remember one day he asked me, “did you eat today, young man.” I mean he didn’t know me from a hole in the wall, I was just another alto player licking at his heels, and he said, “did you eat today.” The misconception is that Charlie Parker was stealing everybody’s money and using it to buy drugs, but he was very nice to young musicians. Sometimes that’s often overlooked. A little later on — this is my only real Charlie Parker story, I mean up close — I was working in a place called the Nut Club in the Village, Sheridan Square. Playing for strippers, “Harlem Nocturne” ten times a night. In fact this joint had so much class they would hand you like little wooden hammers as you walked in the door, so you could beat the shit out of the table for your favorite strippers.

MR: Is that right?

PW: Everybody got a hammer. Not the — you know they do that in Maryland but it’s to break crab claws. This is just to beat the heck out of the table. So somebody said, “Bird’s across the street jamming.” And he was over at Arthur’s Café. Arthur’s Bar, which is still there to this day, it’s a little dinky joint. And I walked in and there was Bird and he was playing on the baritone sax. Now let me just preface this, at this period I didn’t know whether my mouthpiece was right, I didn’t like the reed, I don’t like this horn, it’s not happening, I need new stuff, you know. So I got up my nerve and said, “Mr. Parker, perhaps you’d like to play my alto?” And he said, “that would be very nice, son.” Man I ran across Seventh Avenue and I got my horn, and I’m sitting — Bird was there and I was sitting there and the piano was there, just a drummer, just a snare drum and a piano and Bird. And I’m sitting there. I hand him the horn. He played “Long Ago and Far Away,” Jerome Kern. And I’m listening to this guy and it seems to me there’s nothing wrong with my saxophone. The saxophone sounds pretty darn good, you know what I mean? And he says, “now you play.” And I says oh Jesus. When kids talk about being awestruck, I know about awestruck. I did my feeble imitation of the master. He said, “sounds real good, son.” Oh man, this time I flew over Seventh Avenue, and I played the Bejesus out of “Harlem Nocturne” that night. But I mean just those few words were so important.

MR: Great story. No more blaming it on the horn.

PW: No I went out and practiced.

Phil Woods went out and practiced, a lot, and became a worthy successor to his idol. I have never had a lot of patience for the gear-obsessed musicians who think they are one more purchase away from finding the sound and fulfilling their dream. As an aside, it's the amateur musicians, those with lucrative day gigs, who own the most expensive stuff. I do admit to one exception regarding personal sound and instruments, predictably it involves my sax idol, Cannonball Adderley. Charles McPherson, a respected and still an active saxophonist, had his King alto sax with him during our 1998 interview.

MR: Can we get a shot of you holding your horn? I'm trying to recognize what kind of horn.

CM: It's a King. Most people play a Selmer, and this is a King Super 20.

MR: Yeah. Cannonball used to play.

CM: Yeah Cannonball and Bird. Yeah. And it's a very nice horn, it's very human-like. Very much like the human voice.

MR: It's interesting you say that because when I hear your tone, I mean I like — actually the things that will attract me to a player is the tone first. And I hear that in your sound. And I noticed when Cannonball switched from King to Selmer I think that I was disappointed.

CM: Unbelievable. I mean I know that. But I'm surprised that — well you said you play saxophone.

MR: Yeah, but I heard it.

CM: And you heard the difference.

MR: I heard the difference.

CM: Isn't that something, because I did too. And so you really do know. Because that's a subtle thing, but it is a difference. And I remember there's a CD or record, whatever, where he did play Selmer for a while. And it was great, and it's still great 'cause he's great. And I remember that oh this is great, but it was like, you know it doesn't have that pop, or that warmth either. Because there was something — but it's still great. And the Selmer is a great horn you know, and he sounded great on it. But this King, it was just something about that that, I don't know just Cannonball sounded great on this. And

Charlie Parker sounded great on this horn. I've heard other people on this horn that don't sound so great, and I hope I'm not one of them.

I must admit that I was flying high after that session. Charles McPherson thought I was hip. Cool! Most jazz musicians make a living by being versatile and recognize the necessity of tweaking their sound to fit particular situations. Ernie Watts has been called on hundreds of times to add sax solos to recordings, many became major hits. He spoke about sound and how it impacted his success.

(Laughter)

MR: You know you've got a very distinctive sound. And I'm wondering was there a period of trying different mouthpieces and all that, and were you trying to sound like somebody to arrive at your own thing?

EW: No it evolved through the music business. The only person I ever really tried to sound like was Trane. Because that was where I'm coming from. That's where I plugged into. Everybody has someone they emulate when they're a kid, when they're learning how to play. And so Coltrane was it for me. I developed my sound, interestingly enough, from playing pop music. It's set up a certain way, production-wise it's set up a certain way, harmonically it's very simple structured music. As a soloist within that genre you can't do anything harmonically. You can't play chromatically through that music. You can't do anything in that music that is intricate or evolved on a technical or harmonic level. Because at that point it's not pop music. You take that music to a different place and it's out of context with the music, therefore it is not right for the music. So you don't go to a pop session and play a Charlie Parker solo. So what happens is the idiom of the music is so simple harmonically that the only way you can establish a style is to have a sound that is recognizable. So that when you play one note, when you play three notes it's recognizable because it's a unique tone quality. And I recognized that in the music. And so I developed my sound. It's a combination of the stuff I grew up listening to, it's a combination of Coltrane with a softer edge but it's still that center and it's still that intensity but it's just very simplified.

In addition to his twenty plus recordings as a leader, Ernie Watts can be heard on records by the Rolling Stones, Frank Zappa, Marvin Gaye, Rickie Lee Jones and Paul McCartney. He found his sound and they liked it.

There have been a significant number of recordings that combined disparate personal sounds, seemingly on opposite ends of the spectrum. The typical jazz fan, and I include myself, might think certain pairings couldn't possibly work. The Dave Brubeck Quartet with Jimmy Rushing? John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman? Sonny Rollins playing on a Rolling Stones tune? But they all worked. Pianist Billy Taylor spoke about the musical phenomenon of melding individual tones into a cohesive sound.

BT: There is so much of the tradition, the individuality when you look at the Basie band and the Ellington band, and you look first of all at what the band sounds like. You listen to what the band sounds like. Then you look at the fact at how can that band sound so together with individual sounds that are so different? I mean when you think about the Basie reed section — the traditional reed section — I mean you've got Lester Young and Herschel Evans, how can they sound good? I mean it's totally different sounds that you're blending together. That's one of the beauties of jazz. The Ellington band with the Hodges and Ben Webster and Otto Hardwick, and how do you make those things come together? There is a camaraderie. There is a mutual respect musically that musicians earn, therefore when they work together, something happens that does not happen when they're playing singly. And so you hear this mass of sound from the Basie band, and someone will get up and you will say well gee that works, and it will be Sweets Edison or somebody. And someone will get up at another point and you say well that sounds like Sweets but it's different — that's Joe Newman. And I mean and so you come up with, then you'll have the two Franks battling or you'll have all of these kinds of sounds. When Lockjaw Davis went with the band, this guy was such an individual, I said he can't possibly sound good in that context. Because I had heard him at Minton's and playing all his own stuff, and he was so individual. I said he's going to stick out like a sore thumb. But he didn't. I mean you know? And I think this is something that jazz musicians do that needs to be studied. I think that if we could find out what that is, what makes that

possible, we'd be, we'd go a long way to understanding what it is that makes music have the kind of impact that it has on the psyche of people who are not musicians. Jazz is an individual expression which I believe takes all of the — takes one particular element that we hold dear in our society, and that is the individual, the right of the individual to express himself. And when you look at jazz, that's really what it's about. Every great jazz artist makes a personal statement and you would not mistake any of the major artists for any other artist. Even though Dizzy Gillespie was highly influenced by Roy Eldridge, who was highly influenced by Louis Armstrong, you know. Miles Davis, highly influenced by Dizzy Gillespie but had to go somewhere else. He didn't have that kind of facility.

[audio interlude]

We're more than halfway through this episode and you may well be wondering when our interviewees are going to reveal the actual secret to finding an original sound, because you want one. Actually, there is no secret to be revealed. There's a long list of factors beyond the instruments and gear, including the surroundings you grew up in, your listening habits, your musical mentors, your level of music education and your own unique personality and soul. But let's keep going, because these musicians at least lead us in the right direction. Bassist Larry Ridley speaks about one factor that young musicians should not overlook in their personal sound search.

LR: They've got to learn tunes. The more songs that you know that have melodic content — the brain is like a computer. You have to — if you put garbage in you're going to get garbage out. So you have to put something up there. And one of the things that I always stress to my students when they're in the workshops and things I do, how many melodies do you know? I remember a woman coming up to Sonny Stitt, he came through Indianapolis playing at this club and he was up there just taking it easy because he thought well I'm in Indianapolis I'll just kind of take it easy. This woman came up to him and she says, "Sonny Stitt, let me tell you something. I spent my last five dollars to come in here to hear you play because I like your music." She said, "But you better stop bullshitting on that stage or I'm going to take one of these chairs and go upside your head." So he said, "Oh, excuse me, madam" and commenced to bear down and start

playing. They're learning too many things like exercises that take you through the two-five-one progression. Or I'm going to play the Dorian or the Lydiot or Idiot scale.

MR: I like the Lydiot.

LR: Or the demented scale. And they have to understand that you're composing music. And you have to relate to your audience. Nobody wants to come and hear you practice. I don't want to come and hear you sit up and play exercises. I mean do that in your house or in your practice room or something like that. You have to learn how to compose music. That's the beauty of jazz. You're called upon to be an instantaneous composer. You know you have to have an introduction, you introduce your theme, your thesis, you develop it, you recapitulate, you do a summarization and then you lock up and bow as Kenny Dorham used to say. Kenny used to say, "Get two choruses of your best shit together baby, and lock up and bow out." And Charlie Parker used to say, "It's always best to leave people wanting more." And Milt Jackson told me that Charlie Parker used to tell him, "Once you get past the third chorus you're practicing." Yes we are all influenced by different people but I'm tired of hearing Coltrane clones. Find your own sound. That's what's so beautiful about when you go back and listen to these guys. I mean Lester Young was Lester Young. Stan Getz is Stan Getz. Zoot Sims is Zoot Sims. Hank Mobley is Hank Mobley. Sonny Stitt is Sonny Stitt. On and on and on. We can do that on all the instruments. And what makes them special is because they are themselves. And if you're not trying to find your own identity I mean Ernest Hemingway is not trying to be William Shakespeare. Bach wasn't — you know Mozart wasn't trying to be Bach. Stravinsky was not trying to be Wagner. You know I mean people in the arts, just like actors and actresses. And it's true in all professions when we look at it. So it's not something that's just only in music or even in art. Gauguin and Rembrandt. Renoir. All these people are different. They found their thing that becomes them. Frank Lloyd Wright. I.M. Pei.

Ready for a Jazz Backstory podcast quiz? In Episode #35, "For the Vocalists", we heard a memorable phrase from vocalist Joe Williams, quite relevant to our topic. Do you recall what he said? I'll give you a moment.

[whistles]

Ok times up. Here 'tis.

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

The three ations. Maybe that's the secret. I was attracted by the opposite ends of iconic alto sax players and imitated and hopefully assimilated Paul Desmond and Cannonball Adderley. I'm a long way from innovation, most of us are.

It's jazz vocabulary time, more specifically it's sound vocabulary time.

Let's start with vibrato. A wavering in pitch, technically moving slightly above and below, that can vary in speed and width. Think of opera singers or the soprano sax of Sidney Bechet, for extreme examples. The use of vibrato or absence of vibrato is in important element of any original sound.

Articulation is the use of the tongue to separate one note from the other on wind instruments, as we do when we use consonants in our speech. Every consonant involves using your tongue, try speaking without it. Well known saxophonists Stan Getz and Ben Webster played as if they had no tongue, all slurs, almost all the time. Current sax phenom Derek Brown employs "slap tonguing," an extreme articulation that makes him immediately recognizable. Vibrato and articulation are part and parcel with a player's embouchure, that whole thing that happens with your mouth, lips and teeth when playing a wind instrument.

Our last vocabulary term has to do with harmony. I am envious of people who have developed a sophisticated and colorful vocabulary, using melancholy instead of sad, or cerulean instead of kind of blue. (Yes, the jazz reference was intentional.) For our purposes, the equivalent to a sophisticated vocabulary can be called a harmonic palette. Jazz has never sat still. The note choices of today's jazz player would have mystified the jazz stars of 1930. That generation mostly improvised inside the chords, preferring notes that fit the harmony. Going outside is the inclusion of notes that may seem to clash, depending the ears and age of the listeners. This

inside/outside bit is a major element of an identifiable sound. Which brings us to the end of our jazz vocabulary and to Rick Margitza.

Saxophonist Rick Margitza came on the scene in the 1980s, recorded for Blue Note Records and performed for a long list of jazz luminaries, including Miles Davis. He currently teaches at a distinguished conservatory in Paris and is the author of *365 Days of Practice*. Previous to our interview, I had studied a number of transcriptions of his recorded solos. I found them highly adventurous and asked what he practices to prepare him for these complex improvisations. You might want to take notes, there might be another quiz.

RM: Part of this practice method is a thing called the "Intervallic Families" and it comes from dividing up the octave. So there's half steps, whole steps, minor thirds, major thirds, fourths, tritones, and fifths. And after fifths any interval bigger than that could be — what's the word — reverted back to one of the other intervals. So say for example a minor sixth, from C to A flat is just an inversion of a major third, from A flat to C. And in a major sixth, from C to A is just an inversion of a minor third. So basically you have half steps, whole steps, minor thirds, major thirds, fourths and fifths. So if you memorize those groups then you start seeing how you can get from any note in any key over any chord. So say for example you say A minor and then you say C sharp. So if you think about A minor moving up in major thirds, so that gives you A minor, C sharp minor, and F minor. So we're thinking about A is the root, and moving up in major thirds. Right? So A minor, C sharp minor, F minor. So that C sharp, although against an A chord, it's the major third, but it's the root of C sharp minor. So if you play — something goes from C sharp minor down to A minor, or you can go up, C sharp minor, F minor to A minor, the parallel nature of what you're playing justifies that wrong sound. You have to practice patterns to not be afraid of that C sharp over A minor because you know how to get back to where you need to be. And then slowly but surely when you practice this way it just becomes a natural way of hearing music as opposed to — so to me you want to be able to kind of really combine the brain and the heart and the ears. So the brain comes in when you're studying the theory and practicing all the patterns. And then the ears come is like when I hear an A minor on the piano I hear that C sharp now as part of the — it's a

totally acceptable note to use. It's not anything to be afraid of because I know how to relate it back to the A minor.

Whew! That is an excellent example of where the level of jazz soloing and pedagogy currently exists. A key phrase Rick said was "know how to get back to where you need to be." His spontaneous compositions are not random, they have a path and a destination. During our earlier Jazz Backstory episode on improvisation trombonist Bill Watrous offered a variation on this topic. Bill said, "if you're going to play outside, you better damn well know where the inside is."

[audio interlude]
Creating an excellent sound on your instrument is not just a goal in the jazz world. The best classical orchestras have players with superior individual sounds but sounds that can blend with others, just as the players in the Ellington and Basie bands. Holly Hofmann discovered the importance of maintaining her orchestral flute sound when she decided it would be expedient to also play the saxophone.

HH: And many of the flute players, including Hubert Laws, well Moody still doubles, I'm thinking Herbie Mann, a lot of those guys just don't double anymore because it's a tremendous embouchure change. And it's been really — the fact that he does it so well, it just amazes me. When I on the other hand tried to play saxophone in college, because everybody told me that I would get no gigs being just a flute player, I would have to double so I could play in big bands. And I very seriously studied the saxophone for nine months until one of the conductors one day said, "Madam assistant principal flute, I don't know what you're doing with your sound but stop it."

MR: Ooh. Ouch. Did he say this in front of the—

HH: In front of 79 other people. And I said I probably should stop it.

MR: Did he know what you were doing?

HH: No.

MR: Okay. But he knew something was going on that was effecting your sound.

HH: And I guess I kind of knew but I was kind of hoping that it would just straighten itself out.

You would assume that a jazz player would be intimately familiar with his or her own sound. We'll wrap up with an amusing story from woodwind doubler Lou Marini. Lou is best known as a marvelous tenor sax player, a veteran of the Saturday Night and Blues Brothers bands. He currently tours with James Taylor, expertly playing as many woodwinds as the roadie can handle. When I interviewed Lou in June of 2023 I had in front of me a seemingly endless list of artists that he has recorded with. I randomly chose one and asked if he had any memory of the date.

MR: Do you remember 1981 Peter Tosh, "Wanted Dread or Alive"?

LM: Yeah you know what's funny about that is my wife and I were on vacation in St. John's and we were going into Cruise Bay and we discovered this Surf Bar that played nothing but reggae and it was really a cool bar. And we were in there one night. We'd been in there a couple of times before, and this tune came on and the saxophone solo started, and I was singing along with the saxophone solo you know. And I thought why does this solo sound so familiar? I said, "Who is this?" And so we got the name — when we got back and got on the internet at the hotel and here comes Saturday Night Live and Peter Tosh and Mick Jagger and me playing the solo. It was me. I didn't realize — no wonder I knew the solo, I played it.

MR: Oh that's a good one. Okay.

LM: I was totally blank you know. It was like it sounds so familiar who is this you know.

MR: Was it done in a New York City recording —

LM: Studio. Yeah.

MR: Okay. And I'm curious like you get a call, who calls you normally for a one-off like that?

LM: Well it used to be that we had a musicians' answering service that the companies would call. But in the case of something like that I was probably called direct by either the writer or the producer who knew my playing and felt that I was appropriate for it. But there was a lot of times when you would be — you know there were certain companies where you were the second call guy. The first call guy was George Young. So if George couldn't do it then they called me next. And if I couldn't do it then they called Dave Tofani. Other companies Dave Tofani would be the first guy and I would be the third, so

if the first two guys couldn't do it then I would get the call. So we were rotating around like that you know.

Years ago I received a call for a gig that I could not do. I suggested other sax players and the replies went like this, "Oh yeah, I already called him; no, I tried her too, she's busy; oh sure I reached out to him first." And on and on. Apparently I was not high on the rotation, no identifiable sound perhaps?

It's just not feasible that every jazz musician can be identified after one note. The majority of jazz players remind us of artists that came before them and it's perfectly acceptable to be a working musician and have a sound reminiscent of someone else. You make it your own business to figure out ways to add your own little bit and personalize it, an extra ingredient in the recipe. My two cents? Listen in a compare and contrast mode, from opposite ends of the sound spectrum. Take note of what makes Bill Evans sound entirely different from Thelonious Monk and Billie Holiday from Ella Fitzgerald. What distinguishes Dizzy from Miles and Paul Desmond from Cannonball Adderley? If you find your own sound in the middle of these giants, consider yourself lucky.

Thanks for tuning into Episode 37. You can view the full video interviews with all these featured artists on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. And I would be happy to hear your comments and suggestions. Email me a note at mrowe @ Hamilton.edu and please tune into Episode 38.

We'll see you on the flip side.
[Outgoing music "Standard Time" by Monk Rowe]