Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #38 — “You’re a funny guy!”

[audio introduction]
If Season 5 of our Jazz Backstory podcast was a big band arrangement we would be at that point in the chart where we’ve had the solos and the shout chorus and we’re returning to the head and coda. Welcome to Episode 38 titled “You’re a funny guy!”

I do my best to avoid generalizations about music and its players, but in the thirty years that I have been conducting video interviews for the Fillius Jazz Archive and observing musicians in groups I can safely say that jazz and humor comprise a perfect duet. Jazz musicians laugh, a lot. This is especially true for the generation of jazz cats who learned their trade on the road, from mentors on stage, pre jazz academia. Humor helped them deal with the road travails, racial injustices, quirky band leaders, and the uncertainty of the career itself. During our June 2023 interview, saxophonist Lou Marini offered insight and an anecdote relevant to our topic. The cast of characters include bandleaders Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, and legendary drummer Elvin Jones.

LM: Well you know that was one thing about like the Ken Burns documentary. It was absolutely devoid of humor. And when I think of my life as a musician and you know I am a jazz musician but I’ve played so many different things that I don’t know if everybody considers me a jazz musician but I’ve certainly, you know, like you can’t remember the music with Thad and Mel that night when Elvin came in to the dressing room and said he wanted to sit in and Mel said no. And Thad is standing between him and the two of them start arguing and Elvin can’t believe that Mel won’t let him sit in and they get hotter and hotter and Thad is looking at him, it looked like a tennis match. And finally Elvin says, “Why won’t you let me sit in?” And Mel says, “Because the last time you sat in you cracked my favorite cymbal, you’re not sitting in.” You know? You remember that. You remember the funny stuff that happened. And you know one thing I think about with musicians is we are laughing all the time. We are cracking — when I think about my life as a musician you know I think of the delight that I’ve had in knowing all these maniacs. And I think that one thing that happens is that when you

spend so much time by yourself practicing there's — you sharpen your personality. I think that something happens that you become more singular. And that in your own, whatever your particular manner is you know. So you get these personalities that are so unique you know. I don't know, maybe I'm dreaming or delusional but I really think that you know.

Singular personalities. Maybe that explains it. On occasion, I am asked, "what are these jazz people like?" No generalizations here, it's easier to tell you what they're not like. Rarely boring. To function in the jazz world, a robust sense of humor became an unwritten requirement, along with skill, determination, passion and spontaneity.

A term often used to describe jazz improvisation is "playing in the moment." Occasionally musicians find the need to respond to a moment when they're not even close to a bandstand. Our topic for this episode demands a replay from episode 13, Life on the Road. The Lucky Millinder Band regularly toured the southern U.S. during the late 1940s. It was a "mixed band" and trouble was a constant companion. Trumpeter Joe Wilder described a typical encounter.

MR: You had told me about an incident with one of the bands you were with in the south, I think it was South Carolina?

JW: Oh, Lucky Millinder, yeah.

MR: Yes. And it was the first time you'd been down there with an integrated band?

JW: Yeah. We were in South Carolina. And Lucky Millinder, Lucky was a very nice fellow. He was not a musician, but he had a lot of natural talent for selecting the right kinds of tunes and tempos and things of that nature. But we had — I think six of the members of the band were white. And we arrived early in South Carolina at this hall where we were going to play, and suddenly up drove the sheriff with his deputy in the police car, and he said, "who's in charge here?" And so Lucky said, "I am." He said, "well I'm just here to tell you there's not going to be any mixed bands playing down here in Charleston." And Lucky looked at this guy, and Lucky — you know the reason I think they called him Lucky, he would take a chance on anything — he looked this guy dead in the eye and said, "this is not a mixed band." And some of the guys were blonde with blue eyes you know, there was no way in the world anybody would have mistaken any of these guys for being black you know. And so he went to each guy. I think if he had said, "are you

black?" he might have gotten a different answer. But he went to each of these guys and asked, he said, "are you colored?" And each of the guys, going along with what Lucky had said, would say yes. And so he would shake his head. And finally the last of the guys he asked was Porky Cohen, who was our first trombone player. And he had a slight lisp. And when he asked him, now Porky is responding more emphatically than the other guys, and he said, "why thertainly" with this lisp. And at this point we had all been starting to chew on our tongues and everything, trying not to break up because it was so ludicrous. And when he did this you could almost feel the ground tremble, with the guys laughing and we were trying not to let the sheriff see it. But anyway he turned to the deputy and he said, "well I guess if they all say they're colored, there ain't nothing we can do about it, is there, Jeff?" And so he said, "no sheriff." And they got in the car and they drove off. And we played that dance that night. It was very funny. And it might, as I mentioned to you, it might have been the first time that an integrated band played there. It's very possible that that was the first time.

Based on the historical record, this incident could have ended in a very different fashion. I can imagine the coverage in the Charleston Post and Courier, "Bandleader and band spend the night the hoosegow after public disturbance." Lucky Millinder may have had his share of good luck but he also knew how to operate in the moment, as did his band members. Humor as self preservation. Make a note to yourself, check out Life on the Road, episodes 12 and 13. The stories are all as rich as this one.

A select group developed their humor so well that their jazz became an accompaniment to stand up routines. Comic jazz man Pete Barbutti spoke about the connection during our 2022 session.

MR: When you discovered, at some point, I'm not sure if it would have been the accordion or the trumpet, but that you could play music that wasn't specifically written on a piece of paper. Did that feeling eventually help your comedy routines?

PB: Oh yeah. Yeah. Because comedy — I just talked to somebody that was a great entertainer, he's living back in the New England states now and we talked about it a little bit. He said, "You came into my dressing room, we're working together, and you gave me this big lecture about jazz and comedy being the same thing. He says, "I still remember." It was a long time ago. But yeah, I was a crusader for that because it's the

> same thing. When you're playing jazz you're still — it's obligatory that you stick to the same chord structure, and you can't add a beat whenever you want to, you're — you know the specific number of beats. And what you do is within this framework you take the liberties and you change the melody but you're still obligated to stay within the same number of bars and whatever it is, the same chord structure. Comedy is the same thing. There has to be a believability you know, the infamous pig joke that I did on the Tonight Show. You start off with something that's really real and it's true and you went to this guy's farm and he had the pig and you know, and you go through this whole thing, but there has to be a reality to it. You can't say there was this elephant flying over, you know, I mean right away people know there's nothing to that. So you have a reality to it and then you ad lib it. You know you change the ending or change the —

Yes indeed, melody followed by improvisation. I'm guessing there are a few of you out there thinking, "what's the infamous pig joke?" My exhaustive internet search did not yield a film of Pete Barbutti telling the pig joke, but I do have a memory of watching him deliver it on the Tonight Show. I believe this is gist of the pig joke.

One day a man drove by a farm and saw a three-legged pig. The man went up to the farmer and said, "Excuse me, but why does that pig only have 3 legs?"
"Well," said the farmer, "that pig is very special. One time my wife was cooking something she stepped out of the kitchen and it caught on fire. No one in the house knew about it but the pig, and he saved me, my wife, and my 2 kids."
"That's amazing!" said the man, but why does the pig only have three legs?"
"Well, there was that time the pig saw a big storm coming and we didn't. The pig ran into the house and dragged us out to the storm cellar. If it weren't for that pig we would all be dead."
"But still, that doesn't explain why the pig only has 3 legs."
"Well I remember the time my youngest son was stuck up a tree, but he was too far away to hear his cries for help. The pig ran to me and led me to where he was."
"Well, that's a miracle, but how come the pig only has 3 legs?" the man said quite annoyed at this point.
"Well," said the farmer, "with a pig that special, you have to eat 'em real slow."

Yea, I know, don't quit my day gig.

I laughed most of the way through the interview with Mr. Barbutti. He had no lack of “let me tell you about this gig” stories. Here’s one about a casino date, where Pete was thrown in with a bunch of impersonators.

PB: So I went down there and I got there and the band was a rock band, like a trio, and they had no idea what I was doing you know. So rather than go through a whole thing and lose my cool or anything I just said, “Look when I go like this or I say this, just play a B flat chord or something — you know, no use fighting it. And so that’s good enough, because most of it I did mostly, you know instead of the music I did mostly just straight stand-up. And I found the opening act was an Elvis impersonator, and then there was a girl who did an impersonation of Stevie Nicks, who is a rock & roll singer, and then the next act was a group of four or five guys who did the Temptations, you know, sang all their songs and so forth. And then I went on and just before I let them close the show and then they said, “On the weekends we go out and stand in the casino behind the theater row and the people come by and we thank them for coming in and shake their hand.” I said fine. So I went out there and the people were coming by and they were saying to me, “You look just like him.” There was no response. There was no appropriate response. What am I going to say, “I am him?” or “Thank you?”

MR: “Why thank you, my impersonations must have been a success.”

PB: Yeah. It was very strange. I’ve never had that happen before or since.

MR: Yeah. It’s funny you say that about, you know warm up acts. I played in a rock & roll band for years and one time we showed up in Rochester and we were warming up for a turtle race. “Yeah, my career is really on the upswing here.”

PB: That’s a spin-off about the old joke about the band who works New Year’s Eve and the club owner says “You guys are great, I’d like to have you again for New Year’s Eve.” And the drummer says, “Oh that’s great, can I leave my drums here?”

The funniest guys seemed to be on the west coast. Pete Barbutti was matched wit for wit by trumpeter Jack Sheldon and sax man Dave Pell. Jack’s voice will sound familiar. Besides being a first class trumpet player, Jack was the School House Rock, Conjunction Junction character. His escapades with comedian Lenny Bruce made for some wild and crazy guys moments.

JS: But Lenny Bruce and I did this show called “Stars” or something. A guy had a show that he had a car dealership on Wilshire and Western. And it was Stairway to the Stars or Rocket to Stardom — Rocket to Stardom, I think that was it. Yeah. So we went on and at this time there was another guy, Jay Caruso, who sold cars and had been indicted for cheating everybody or doing something terrible. So Lenny and I went on it. He was starting to sing [sings] without a song, but he couldn’t get the right key, and he was going: withou —with —wi, withou, without a song. And I was playing stuff in the background. And then he finally says, “Caruso is innocent.” And they chased us out of this place. We ran, and we went back to Pete Jolly’s house, who you just interviewed. Pete Jolly, we went to his house. Stan Levey and Richie Kamuca were there.

MR: Lenny Bruce must have been something to hang out with, if offstage he was anything like on stage.

JS: Yeah, well he was a lot of fun, we did have fun working with him. We worked Joe Maini and myself and Kenny Drew and Philly Joe Jones and Leroy Vinnegar. We opened this burlesque club called Duffy’s. And we worked there with Lenny and Lenny’s wife Honey, she sang at the time. She had stripped before but she didn’t want to strip anymore, or Lenny didn’t want her to. And so we worked there and we opened the place up. And about two o’clock in the morning, everybody would be swinging. They closed the club so one time I brought everybody home to my house. Well this night Yvonne DeCarlo’s mother had come in there with a gigolo, with a guy with a pinstripe suit and a little moustache, black and white shoes, slick hair. Looked a lot like you in fact. And so she got up on the stage and they were fixing the stage at the time and it had a hole in it. And she fell in this hole and just her legs were sticking up. So I took everybody to my house and I was married at the time. My wife woke up and kicked everybody out. And she was fighting with a gigolo out on the lawn, and the cops came, and they got arrested, and they were written up in *Confidential Magazine*, which was one of the first magazines back then. I remember Robert Mitchum was in it with Lila Leeds, getting busted. Went to the road camp out in Malibu.

MR: You’ve led a pretty boring life haven’t you?

JS: No I’ve had a great life, I really have had a great life.

I’ll admit to a bit of confusion when Lenny Bruce yelled “Caruso is innocent”. I assumed he was somehow referring to the early 20th century opera star, Enrico Caruso. This time the Internet

yielded this bizarre story, humorous now, probably not then. Printed in the New York Times on Nov. 16, 1906

Signor Enrico Caruso, tenor, was charged with an indecent act allegedly committed in the monkey house of New York's Central Park Zoo. The police accused him of pinching the buttocks of a married woman. Caruso claimed a monkey did the bottom-pinching. He was later found guilty and fined 10 dollars, although evidence suggested that he may have been entrapped by the victim and the arresting officer. New York's opera-going high society was outraged by the incident, which received extensive coverage, but it was soon forgotten and Caruso's popularity was unaffected.

Now what does this have to do with jazz? Nothing, accept I'm sure Enrico would have preferred to be a jazz singer. Too bad for him that it hadn't been invented yet. We'll complete our west coast comic trio with an anecdote from Dave Pell. You may recall hearing from Dave Pell back in episode seven where he admitted to purposely knocking over the saxophone of bandleader Les Brown so he wouldn't have to suffer through his solos. At one point in his career Dave led a band with a slick style for commercial recordings and social events. Who enters the picture? Jack Sheldon of course.

MR: Well it's important to try to establish a sound, like Shearing did, you know he had —

DP: Same thing. The left hand is playing with the guitar underneath. And it was all that kind of sound. And it was a very commercial sound. We could do albums of Rodgers and Hart and Berlin and Jimmy VanHeusen and all those things like they're doing now, we did them 45 years ago, which was, they said, "oh, Pell, you're so commercial." I said, "yeah, but I'm home every night, I'm not on the road, I work every weekend, I work college dates, we do a jazz concert, but we also do a dance. We behave." You know when Jack Sheldon came on the band, and I'm trying to behave, and he's such an unbridled character, and I'm saying, "Jack, play the melody." And he says, "oh, what is this? I want to play jazz, what is this?" "No, Jack, we're playing a prom, everybody's dressed out there, they're going to remember this all their lives, and here you are." And he got up one time and started playing a solo. And he says, "key of F" and you know everybody plays medleys, Med Flory would get up and sing, Ray Simms would play and sing and Jack calls out a tune, "three flats." And the piano player modulates into three flats, and Jack

sits there and plays about bup-bup-bup-bup. And he does a whole chorus of just bup-bup. And afterwards we said, “well what tune was that, Jack?” He says, “Jumpin’ at the Woodside” the third trumpet part. And we died you know. And here you are in a lovely prom and everybody’s so dressed up and everything, and here’s this great jazz player playing bup-bup.

Ah, the third trumpet part. Some of the most intricate and celebrated jazz arrangements had inner parts that were far from interesting. The saxes could be playing finger busting lines, the first trumpet is wailing, the rhythm section swinging like crazy, meanwhile the third trumpet and fourth trombone are playing bup bup, bup bup. Pete Barbutti actually fashioned a comic routine about it that plays especially well with brass players.

Any interviewer likes to feel that they have some measure of control during a recorded conversation. Drummer Jake Hanna could be the fourth member of the west coast jazz comic combo. I met with him at the Jerome Jazz Party in Aspen, Colorado on October 11, 1997. Within the first thirty seconds I abandoned all hope of having any influence on where this interview was going to go.

MR: We are in Aspen, Colorado, filming for the Hamilton College Jazz Archive. And I’ve been waiting for this for quite a while now. We’re filming with Jake Hanna, one of the great jazz drummers and conversationalists.

JH: Conversationalist, yes. I love your name, Monk. I’m going to start using that name, Monk Rowe. I’ve been using Sneed Hern for years. But Monk Rowe, that’s a hell of a name. I never heard a name like that either. Thelonious Monk was far out, but Monk Rowe.

MR: I’ll be expecting some checks in the mail though if you start to do that I think.

JH: Oh, yeah, yeah, good. I’ll send you back yours if it bounces to me it’ll bounce back to you. Sounds like basketball.

MR: Oh, my. I’m going to read something here—

JH: All right.

MR: Okay? That you told to a very famous lady. You had three childhood heroes: Brace Beemer—

JH: Brace Beemer, The Lone Ranger. Ross Tompkins knows him.

MR: Okay. Benny Goodman—.

JH: B.G., yeah.

MR: And Ted Williams.

JH: Big Ted, yeah.

MR: Now, what happened to Brace Beemer?

JH: Brace passed away. I think he moved to Florida, well yeah, he moved to Florida, because Ross Tompkins' father knew him in Detroit. And I think he died. I think he took over that Lone Ranger Show.

MR: We should tell our viewers who he was, in case they don't know.

JH: Well he played the part of the Lone Ranger. He actually produced the show originally I think and somebody else played the Lone Ranger. They all started leaving and going somewhere else. So he just took over the role, plus the show. He was a very popular guy I guess. "The Lone Ranger, played by your announcer Brace Beemer." So maybe two guys did the whole show, who knows.

MR: And of course Ted Williams.

JH: The best, yeah, the best. The King of Swing. A real King of Swing. I'll tell you, he was really something. Yeah I liked him because he was like a salmon, you know, like Buddy Rich, he swam upstream. Everything was coming against him and the press was one hundred percent against him. Not the press, but a guy named Parker, Colonel Dave Parker, a real bad apple. And Ted just frumped them all, and one and one, and beat them all down, yeah. Just single handed. You know, fantastic. They pulled a shift on him, you know, still the most ferocious shift ever pulled on any ball player. They had one for Stanley Musial too, a hell of a hitter too. But they all did — everybody was over to the side, all the fans, everybody got over to one side of the field. The dogs, the cats, the guys that sold the hot dogs, they all got over to one side. Mondello — Tootsie Mondello's father was a hot dog salesman, and he got over on the right side. And he hit again them, it threw them. And who the hell wants to see him hit over there to left field? But he did, one time they were playing Cleveland and they all pulled over and he popped one over the left field wall which was a very short fence anyway. He said, "See I can do that anytime I want." They said, "Yeah, we know that."

Well, at least we learned about the Ted Williams outfield shift. We did eventually talk about jazz and his career but I recall being exhausted after that hour, struggling to match wits with Mr. Hanna. Jake's career went back far enough for him to be aware of the relationship between

drummers and comedy. During the vaudeville era it was expected that the drummer in the orchestra pit would “catch” moments in the on-stage routines, by accentuating the jokes, pratfalls, and physical delivery of the comedian. This short anecdote about Jake from trombonist Bill Watrous can be placed in the painfully funny category.

MR: There must have been some funny moments with Jake Hanna.

BW: He was very — “so many drummers, so little time.”

MR: Now you told me about some guy who fell off the scaffolding?

BW: Oh yeah, a guy came falling off the boom, he was the boom operator, and he lost his balance and fell down and bounced all the way down hitting things and finally caught himself in the leg, and Jake goes [scats drums]. He caught him, yeah, he nailed him. The guy broke his leg in three places and Jake was buzzed. “Gee, and I caught him too.

Back in Episode 8 we used the term “a gig is a gig”. In order to pay the bills, jazz musicians routinely played engagements where little or no jazz was involved. The most humorous anecdotes often came from those non-jazz jobs and yes, they are funny now, usually not amusing when they occurred. I’ll close this episode with a couple of mine.

There was a period of years where rock guys and girls from the 60s would do summer nostalgia tours, playing their hits, sometimes just the one hit wonder they had for fans who used to own the 45 rpm records. When they arrived in town, the booking agent was supposed to have lined up a back up band. I frequently played these gigs, much to my delight, as I owned those 45s. Del Shannon, of “Runaway” fame, you know, “wah, wha, wha, wha, wonder,” came to Utica and when I got the call to play keyboards with him I immediately started learning the classic solo, played originally on an early synthesizer called a Novatron. (plays keyboard solo in “Runaway”) It’s one of those perfect instrumental moments. I had it down, could have played it with my eyes closed. During the brief pre-concert run through Del called “Runaway,” looked at me and said, “Monk, you know that synth part in the middle?” “Sure thing” I replied. “Well play something else, I hate that damn solo.” What!? I was bummed. I wish I could say that I played it anyway but I don’t think I did as Del kept me on for three more gigs around Central NY.

We have a thriving casino in the area and they frequently bring in oldies acts and veteran comedians. Joan Rivers is booked, wants a nine piece band to play her on and off. She does not

have one, nor any music for a band to play. I get the gig, book the players, compose an upbeat Tonight Show type walk on and we gather on stage two hours before show. Ms. Rivers comes out and goes through the routine, first warning all the musicians NOT to help her when she asked for assistance in moving the huge potted plants, situated stage right and left. She then explains to me that there's a warm up comic, and she'll be in the wings introducing him. "When I say his name you hit it." I got it. Showtime. Joan and the warm up guy, his name was Tony something, are in the wings. She is enthusiastically greeting the audience, a full house, she's into it, gesticulating with every word. On stage, there's no monitors, what I'm hearing is (mumbles). Crap, I don't know what she's saying! Panic. Finally she makes one over the top gesture, I hear (mumbles) and decide that's it, hit it guys! The band nails the tune. Yea, I'm conducting for Joan Rivers! The next thing I know, Joan Rivers marches out onstage, comes up to me and says, into her mic, "No, no, no! That's not what you're supposed to do!" My heart stopped as I cut off the band. Then I witnessed a real pro, with the spontaneity that comedians share with jazz cats. She made it look like it was part of the act, calmly explaining to me, the band and the audience how the second try was going to go. I'm trying to play into her shtick, "yes Ms. Rivers, sure thing Ms. Rivers, thank you Ms. Rivers." Take 2 went as originally planned and I did take some solace in the fact that despite her begging and pleading for help moving the plants, no one in the band moved a muscle. The most successful thing we did that night was nothing. All musicians have their favorite stories, this was one of mine, but I assure I was not laughing on the way home.

That's all folks. Thanks go out to my team, Michael Ko, Leo You, Romy Britell, Doug Higgins and our Orchestra in a Nutshell. You can view the full video interviews with these jazz humorists on the Fillius Jazz Archive YouTube channel. Drop me a comment or suggestion at mrowe @ Hamilton.edu.

I hope you tune into Episodes 39 and 40. See you on the flip side.

[fade out music]