

# Jazz Backstory Podcast

## Episode #39 — Tunes, Titles, and Intent

Welcome to Episode 39 of our Jazz Backstory podcast. This is Monk Rowe. Our topic today is “Tunes, Titles, and Intent.” It was not really my intent to do this topic today, but I received some feedback and comments about the podcast, and one particular person asked me, “Has anyone ever asked you the kind of questions that you direct at these interviews, especially about composing and arranging. Actually no one ever has, and it’s a favorite topic of mind. So I’m going to devote this particular episode and gab a little bit about my own process. Why do I write? How do I write? And what inspires me to write?”

When I started this podcast, I knew there would be music needed, a minimum of a theme song and some bumper music. I love that term “bumper music” and I looked it up today. I landed on Wictionary — a new service to me, a combination of dictionary and Wikipedia. They define bumper music as “short clips of signature or theme music used to buffer transitions between programming elements of a radio broadcast [or in our case, a podcast]. Now I could have obtained bumper music anywhere. You can lift things with no particular worry about where they come from. But then I read page 38 in the *NPR Guide to Creating a Podcast* and it was talking about Fair Use, licensing, the Harry Fox Agency, and on and on. I thought I’m going to save myself some time and money and just do this myself. The short bits of music you’ve heard in all our 38 episodes so far all come from a pencil and pen and me sitting at the piano. They started as “licks,” little phrases. You might call them “riffs” depending on what part of the country you come from. These licks become riffs hopefully develop into little melodies with some kind of background and chord changes. I knew I would need a fast swing bumper music piece, a medium swing, a Latin groove, and something like a funky Saturday Night Live vibe. They were all written for this podcast and I choose them depending on what interview they follow. They don’t necessarily have interesting titles. For instance there’s “fast swing #9” [clip of music]. And then there’s MS #2 — medium swing [clip of music]. I also have a few examples to follow-up musicians that also play pop or fusion music. So we have the reggae ska short version [clip of music], and lastly the funky groove [clip of music]. Our theme song, “Riff City” started at the piano. I had the first lick [scats]. I was interrupted to take the dog for a walk and it’s around a large block. By the time I got back I basically had the tune, a little variation on that little riff, and

that became our theme song. You've heard it at the beginning of every episode of Jazz Backstory. I wrote these because I needed them. It was a bit like a work for hire. If you've ever done a copyright form for a work of art, especially a song, there's a little box to check. It says, "Is this a work for hire?" So basically it was. I hired myself because I needed a theme and some bumper music.

Inspiration can come from a lot of places though. I have to say one of the most inspiring things I've ever done is the Fillius Jazz Archive podcast Jazz Backstory. Meeting with these people was just an incredible experience. About three years in I started to get some musical inspiration creeping in. How would I portray some of my favorite interviewees, sort of depending on the kind of music they played, their age, certain things they said, and I decided to give it a try. I came up eventually with nine tunes and created a record called "Jazz Life" [I should say a CD]. Check out the people I had on "Jazz Life": Dennis Mackrel on drums, Keter Betts on the bass, Rick Montalbano on the piano, Bill Watrous on the trombone, Jerome Richardson on the alto sax, and Wendell Brunious on the trumpet. I played tenor sax and honestly I felt like the odd man out, as if if I wasn't paying these people I would not be in this band. Nonetheless it was an amazing experience and we recorded altogether, not one at a time like most records are made

The first tune is called "The Gates of Swing." It appears on the "Jazz Life" and there was a particular day, October 18, 1995 I was in a New York hotel room with my cameraman interviewing Jon Hendricks, it turns out one of my favorites. Just as we wrapped up there was a knock on the door and in came Lionel Hampton in a wheelchair with an assistant. Lionel looked at Jon Hendricks and said, "Hey Gates." Jon replied, "Hey Gates" one of those all-purpose nicknames that jazz players use. You didn't have to remember anybody's name, they just became Gates, or Pops. That particular tune was written because I could hear a vibraphone playing the melody with Lionel Hampton behind the set. It's called "The Gates of Swing" and it features that all-star cast. There's a couple of cool things about it, some simultaneous improvisation, a quote by Bill Watrous of "Things Ain't What they Used to Be" if you listen carefully. Also there's a moment right at the beginning of the wind players having a little impromptu say on their horns, totally improvised over a held chord by the rhythm section. I put myself last and when I was searching my last note to add to what everybody else was sustaining I ended up playing a note that was kind of dissonant. And someone asked me, "Why'd you choose that note?" Well I could have launched into this thing, "Well we had to create a five chord, in this case an F because it's

in B flat, and I wanted a sharp nine flat six etcetera chord. When in fact I needed to play note with just one hand on the sax because I had to cut everybody off with my right hand. Don't you love the logistics of things? Here it is, "The Gates of Swing."

[audio interlude, "The Gates of Swing."]

The crowd goes wild! I hope they didn't talk during the bass solo.

The subject of this next tune was sort of about my favorite musician, Cannonball Adderley. Cannonball died in 1974, so I was not able to interview him on this project. But I did have the great fortune to sit with Nat Adderley, his brother and brass section and composer of much of the Cannonball Adderley Quintet repertoire. Jazz hits that he recorded on his own as well. Meeting with him was just a gas. This particular tune, entitled "One for Nat" was based on a Cannonball and Nat tune called "Sack O' Woe." Not Sack OF Woe, Sack O' Woe. What was distinctive about it is it started out with what we call straight eighth notes, kind of funky [scats], and it's got a little bluesy melody over the top. And in the bridge it transitions to straight ahead swing [scats]. So I used that as a model for "One for Nat," from funky groove, to straight ahead swing. Here it is, "One for Nat"

[Audio interlude, "One for Nat."]

If this were a live gig at this point I might say something like, "Well it's time to slow it down a little bit." This is a tune that was written for a musician whose name you probably wouldn't know, a pianist, arranger/composer, a baseball stadium organist, a person who did everything, a woman named Jane Jarvis. She impressed me at the time with her versatility and her determination, making a living in the jazz business is even harder for women, especially years ago when she got started. I spent a lot of time in this particular song, trying to get it to sound like a standard you might have heard and found in the *Great American Songbook*. It has a kind of melody that someone might set lyrics to, it uses the 32-bar song form, an A-A-B-A format. If I'm a little objective it's probably the best playing that I did on the "Jazz Life recording on the soprano sax. This is called "Standard Time" for Jane Jarvis.

[Audio interlude "Standard Time."]

That's three tunes from the "Jazz Life" CD. We used to say, "Stop down to your local record store and get a copy." Now you can gravitate to Spotify.

Next up we're going to go backwards chronologically, back to 1989 and my first CD, recorded at a point in my life where I did not have a band or a crew of musicians that I worked regularly with. So I decided to take advantage of what at the time was hi-tech: 24-track technology with two inch analog tape. I played most of the parts myself. This particular song was an attempt to write a tune that had no improvising at all. Jazz composers assume that there's going to be extended improvising in the middle of the tune. You play the head, everybody does their thing, you play the head again. So when you write a tune that does not have improvising it's a bit more challenging. Every note has to be written down and you don't get five or six or seven minutes out of writing an eleven second melody like John Coltrane did with "Mr. P.C." This tune is entitled "There and Back Again." Any J.R.R. Tolkien fans out there? You may remember at the end of the third book Bilbo and Frodo are collaborating on the book about their adventures. It's called "There and Back Again." It sounded like the perfect title to me. The song ends up where it started with something different in the middle. And it sort of tells a story, you can insert your own meaning to it. Hope you enjoy it. "There and Back Again."

[Audio interlude "There and Back Again."]

We're going to wrap up with one more tune from "Out Standing in his Field." You know inspiration, as I said, comes from a lot of places. One thing that can inspire is panic. I had this recording date set, and I needed one more tune. I didn't really have an opener, something to jump off the record" as we used to say. So I was just fussing around in the key of E flat at the piano, and came up with a bass line, a few chords, we call them 6-9 chords with a certain aura to them, thinking okay the saxophone is going to play the melody. Eventually it morphed into this particular tune because I really needed it. The title: "That's What I Needed." And it's the first tune, opens up the record, straight eighths, not really a jazz tune. You can head to the dance floor on this one.

[Audio interlude "That's What I Needed."]

I hope you hang out for Episode 40 and the end of Season 5 in our Jazz Backstory.

I'd like to thank all our people involved in this project: Students Michael Ko and Leo You, and Jason Lever; Doug Higgins and Romy Britell. That's my team. We've done five seasons, 40 episodes. I hope you enjoyed "That's What I needed" Over and out. See you on the flip side.