

# Jazz Backstory Podcast

## Episode #40 — Potpourri Part 2

[audio introduction]

Greetings and welcome to Episode 40, the wrap-up for season five of our Jazz Backstory podcast. If you happen to be tuning in for the first time, I am Monk Rowe, the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Our podcast episodes are based on stories chosen from the 500 plus video interviews with jazz personalities we have conducted over the last thirty years. As promised in episode 33, this half hour plus will offer a second potpourri of jazz anecdotes covering a smorgasbord of subjects, or perhaps a charcuterie of topics. I just wanted to see if I could use those words in a sentence.

First up, two musical giants, from a conversation recorded in 1995, during a jazz cruise in the Caribbean. Yes folks, I do have a tough job. Oscar Peterson shares a childhood memory with his friend and ours, vocalist Joe Williams:

JW: I heard you talking to Andre Previn. And the two of you were discussing Art Tatum, and you were telling a story I thought was marvelous, about the first time you heard him. Your father brought home recordings?

OP: Yeah. I was studying classical piano, and I was doing pretty good at it. And I was also into the jazz scene a little bit, and I was getting pretty cocky, you know, because at that time I could outplay most of my fellow students in the jazz scene. And my father sensed this, and he had a, he knew a tenor saxophone player by the name of George Sealy who had a record collection. And he showed up this day, he brought George Sealy home with him, and he said, “hey I’ve got something for you to hear.” I said, “yeah? What is it?” He says, “it’s another piano player.” And I should have known better when he said “another” piano player. And he put on this record, I’ll never forget the record it was “Tiger Rag” by Art. And it stopped me cold. I was decimated. I went to sleep that night, I had nightmares of keyboards chasing me, and I really did. I dreamt all kinds of foolishness, you know, and all pertaining to the piano. The strange thing is Art wasn’t in any of it. But all I knew was that I heard all these notes and I saw these keyboards coming at me. And I was so

messed up, that I didn't play for a month. I didn't go near the piano for a month, you know, I didn't want any part of it. I was dejected. And then finally I started to come back and I started to get curious about how he did this, and how this man could get to these heights, and I started listening. And luckily, one good thing, as much as I have loved Art, and I say it without any remorse, one good thing is that I didn't let it overcome me. I didn't set out to do everything, or play everything that he played, the way he played it. I learned, what I learned was the, I think was the overall picture of how he looked at the piano. And it was confirmed when I had the opportunity of meeting him in person in Washington, D.C. later on.

JW: Yeah, he was one of a kind, really.

OP: That's right. Well Art was a consummate soloist. He was the epitome of a solo pianist, regardless of what medium we are talking about — jazz, classical, or what have you. And that's what he set out to do and he did that. I went the other way. I went the way of trios, because I was also a Nat Cole fan, as you know. I always believed that a group as small as a trio could stomp as hard as a big band if they were all doing the right thing. And that's the way we used to operate. You know we'd go in, I won't call any names, we went into Basin Street for instance, opposite a big band, a well known big band. And we finished our set and the leader got up on the stand and said, "we don't know what to follow that with." Because we were really stomping in our own medium. We weren't trying to do what they were doing, we were doing what we do best, in our own medium.

JW: At that time you guys did that thing better than anybody in the world, I'm telling you. And I remember seeing you at the Village Vanguard once. And I must tell this story, I don't know if I told you or not. But my wife is a very discerning person. This was in the 50s still. And she said, two things in the world that were perfect for her. One was Sam Snead's golf swing, and Ella Fitzgerald singing. And after your engagement at the Village Vanguard the second time we came to see you during that engagement, she said, "I'm very much afraid I'm going to have to put Oscar Peterson in that category with things that are perfect." Really.

OP: Thank you.

JW: And this is from like somebody that thinks that Glenn Miller was the best thing that ever happened since sliced bread. But suddenly she rose to the occasion when you played the piano. She saw something else in the music.

True confessions. I also thought Glenn Miller was the greatest thing since sliced bread. My first significant accomplishment as a young saxophonist was to be able to play “In the Mood” along with the record. Key of A flat if you’re keeping score. You can check out similar tales to this one in Jazz Backstory Episodes 1 and 2, entitled “Childhood Beginnings.”

Eddie Bert played in the trombone section of most of the popular big bands, including ensembles led by Woody Herman, Stan Kenton and Benny Goodman. During our 2001 interview, he shared his own childhood story, followed by an anecdote describing a mid-life career decision.

MR: What made you gravitate — and was trombone your first instrument?

EB: Not really. You see I grew up in the Bronx. Then when I was ten I moved to Mount Vernon. And in the Bronx they didn’t have any band so I didn’t know where that radio, the radio stuff came from. I heard the radio and I heard music but I didn’t know anything about it. So then when I got to Mount Vernon they had a band in the school, in the elementary school. And the teacher said, “here, try this trumpet.” So I played the trumpet. And she said yeah, you’d be a good trumpet player, tell your father to get you a horn. Nothing. So I had to take what was there. And they had an E flat alto horn. And you don’t do too much with that. When the tuba goes oomph, you go pah. Oomph-pah, oomph-pah, oomph. And that got kind of boring. So one day we were playing a concert in one of the schools and we were playing the “Skater’s Waltz,” and the drummer couldn’t play three-four. So I said let me play that. Because I had some friends in the drum section you know. So anyway I started playing bass drum and we were right in back of the trombones. And they had these counter melodies in the marches and stuff like that. And I said yeah, I like that. So I had a broken umbrella. And, you know the part that goes up? So I did that, and I had a razzar. You know what a razzar is?

MR: I think so.

EB: One of those big rubber things brrumph, brrumpt, brrumph. So I'd walk down the street going like that. So finally my father says what are you doing? I says playing trombone. But it isn't a trombone. I said yeah but I don't have one. So he finally got me one of these stupid, it was like what we call a pea shooter. It was made by Wurlitzer. And it was a terrible horn but it was a horn. So I played it for a little bit. But I had to figure out a way to get off the road because it was getting to be like I'd get in town and you'd try to get established and there was a lot of guys working and that — don't forget, every radio station had a band. And there was hotels, every hotel had a band. And there were theaters. That's all gone. There were a lot of clubs. I mean 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, that was for a while, but then there was other clubs after that. And I mean guys were established in New York. And you'd come in and they'd say, "don't hire him he's a roadie." So I'd have to go back on the road. So my wife says, "why don't you use the GI bill?" So I went to Manhattan School of Music and it took me seven years to get a masters but meanwhile they heard I was in town so guys would call up and say can you do a date, like and I'd have to borrow a horn and run down and do a date. But finally I got in with the thing and I got established.

The thing Eddie got established in was the thriving New York studio and Broadway scene. Versatile jazz musicians could make a decent living in these settings and still play the occasional creative gig or concert in town. Ironically, this opportunity only opened up for Eddie after he went to the trouble of achieving a public school teaching degree. At his first teaching job, his plan ended abruptly. He asked the principal for a day off to play a record date. The principal replied "what's a record date?"

[audio interlude]

Everyone keeps a calendar, in their phone, a pocket version in their briefcase or the kind with the landscape photos, attached to the refrigerator. Professional musicians are wise to have all three and their calendars have a distinct look, reflecting the ever shifting day-to-day gig life. A working musician is constantly booking engagements and searching for the next promising

opportunity. During our 2020 interview, saxophonist Charlie Gabriel, a New Orleans native, shares a couple of “woulda, shoulda, coulda” stories.

CG: I don’t want to tell you about all my downfalls but I have to tell you anyway, because it’s true. I was directing for the Joe Simon Band. He was a singer, singing the blues. “Pretty Little Bitty One” you know, Joe sang it. He was at the Apollo Theater and he had the big headline and they had, under him, the Five Step Brothers and the Jackson 5. So I went — Five Step Brothers came on first and I heard them little kids playing. I said, “Oh man, look at them kids playing this music.” I went back and I told Joe, I says, “Joe, you’ve got to come out here and see these kids play this music.” “Oh, man, don’t worry about that.” This was the Five Step Brothers. “I wouldn’t worry about that.” He’s the headliner. So after Five Step Brothers came out then the Jackson 5 came out. Joe Jackson was playing the guitar. And his group, his brothers were all over the thing — and I saw, I said, oh man they’ve got to come and see these kids. These kids is badder than these other kids. He goes, “Aww, don’t worry about it.” I said okay. Then he came out on that stage, and man, them boys burnt that stage — that stage was so hot. I’m the director and I said, “Okay fellas, here” [scats] “Joe Simon” everybody — the curtain opened up and he comes walking out there and the people just looked at him. He couldn’t do nothing. That stage was too hot. He started singing “Frankie and Johnny went hunting” — or whatever that was. Them two boys — I met old man Joe, he talked to me and he said man, I need some help with these kids, by me being in the band. I said, “Well may I say I’m trying to talk to Joe, to get Joe to talk to you, ‘cause they had a recording company in Nashville, and maybe we can do something with them kids, you know? Nothing happened. I met Joe, I met Michael Jackson then, he was only 11 years old, 11 or 12 years old and blew that thing — Diana Ross came out right back behind me and took them down to Motown and the rest is history. I could have been a millionaire now. That’s not bad. But listen to this one. My little nephew came and said, “Uncle Charles, you’ve got to hear the little blind boy play this piano.” He was living on the same block as my nephew, on Humboldt Street, in the same block in Detroit as my brother with my sister. Oh they worried the hell out of us— he said, “Come and hear the blind boy play.” Stevie Wonder come down to my sister’s house and he must have been about 10 years old. He came and I said, “Go

ahead and play.” Oh he was just playing. Well by me being such an old musician I see other young musicians, young kids playing much more than what Stevie playing. To me. Now maybe Stevie was playing a lot but I wasn’t paying attention that good. So I said, oh yeah, yeah, and he went on about his business. Two years later Joe Hunter let Stevie Wonder — took him down to Motown. The rest is history. I had some bad breaks.

MR: That could have been another million, your second million.

CG: I had some bad breaks, man. Oh, so I know that would make you laugh. Two giants. I missed both of them.

I am pleased to report, that despite those missed opportunities, Charlie Gabriel enjoyed a productive career and is still playing in and around New Orleans, at age 92. If you time it right, you can catch him at Preservation Hall. According to reliable internet photos, Taylor Swift did just that. And she tipped the band.

The gig calendars we mentioned will include a wide variety of performances, some challenging and lucrative, some not. Musicians are not immune to on-the-job monotony and it’s apparent when a musician is not “bringing it.” Bassist Steve Gilmore speaks about his preparation for getting up for the gig and playing well.

MR: In your statement “when I’m playing well,” is there a mindset that comes to you, a thinking process, that, I don’t know like all the gears become meshed with your ear and so forth, for you to consider that you were playing well on that particular thing. Or doesn’t it even get that far?

SG: I try to, over the years I think I’ve learned how to get myself in the proper frame of mind to go and perform on a gig that’s really important. You have to realize that not all the jobs I play are terribly important. I play weddings and shows and anything to make a buck these days. But when I know I’m going to be playing good music, I make sure I get enough sleep if possible the day before, and have the right food so I’m not stuffed with carbohydrates and all that stuff, and just kind of really prepare myself physically and mentally, kind of be relaxed, kind of leave your troubles behind you and go to the job and just focus on just peace and love and playing with your friends and making some really

good music together. Over the years I think I've learned how to do that, although I do fail many times. It's not always visible to the listener out front that you're playing really well, and I think you know yourself that there's a lot of people who come to hear music and the music may be really good but not up to my standards or anybody's standards, but they really don't always know the difference. They can just hear some nice things going on and they're very appreciative and I'm very appreciative too. Before when I was younger, when people used to say, "Oh you sounded beautiful," I'd say, "ah, I sounded like shit tonight." But I do that, but that's really a stupid thing to do though. You should never really do that. You should say, "Thank you very much I'm really glad you enjoyed the music." And now that's kind of the way I prepare myself.

[audio interlude]

Our Jazz Backstory Episode 16 focused on record producers, including George Avakian, Orrin Keepnews, Helen Dance and Joel Dorn who stated that it helps to be a little crazy to do what we do. Here is an offering from studio musician and producer Steve Buckingham, whose resume includes 24 gold and 17 platinum records:

MR: When you became a producer, and I'm thinking about people coming out of music schools and so forth, and they wanted to get into this whatever is left of the business — you assume that these musicians are good players but what else do they have to bring or not bring in order to keep getting hired again.

SB: That's a good thing you just said, "or not bring." One of the great session guitarists of all time who just died in January, Reggie Young, who played on thousands of records, "Son of a Preacher Man," Dusty Springfield, "Drift Away" Dobie Gray. Reggie was one of my idols. And one time he told me, it's what you don't play. And another, I can't remember who it was said, "Air is a note too." Open space is a note. And Reggie, that was one of his things I learned. It's what you don't play. You don't play all over the place. That's where most people make their mistake. They come in and like look what I can do. It's — you have to play as an ensemble immediately. Now there's guys you have worked with in most cases, but in some cases you've not worked with them but you have to come

together, literally, on the rundown, as a band. You have to be a band like you're played together for years together, on the rundown. And you have to be an ensemble immediately. And that's what separates the ones who want to do it from the ones who did it. I think that's one of the things. There are more things.

MR: So what happens if a producer comes out and maybe they played guitar once and they're trying to tell you, you know, do it like this and they're holding their hands out and they're going like that. And you know that that's not the thing to do.

SB: Yup. Many times. I learned as much from the great producers — the bad producers — as I did from the great producers. What not to do. I could play. A lot of producers couldn't play. But there were also some great producers who didn't play. But oh gosh I've had them stand there in front of me humming something that had nothing to do with the track, the demo or the track. And you just nod and then you do it the way you know it should be done. And then you go in the control and you go, "Thanks for that input. Thanks for that direction." Because I've always said a producer in music is more like a film director. You pick the location, (the studio), you pick the tech crew (your engineers), you pick the musicians, who are like bit players, and the artist is the artist, and the script is the song, the lyrics. It's a misnomer. A music producer is more like a film director in music. That's it in a nutshell.

Another studio story, this one from multi instrumentalist Howard Johnson. From the baritone sax to the pennywhistle, Howard had a knack for providing what was needed, in this case, corralling a horn section that was making no progress during John Lennon's Double Fantasy recording sessions.

MR: Do you remember much about the John Lennon sessions?

HJ: Oh I'd say everything. It was a horn section. John had the track all ready and we were going to put horns on it. And he had this idea that he explained to us that horn players are real musicians, not like guys who just play guitar and drums and that sort of thing. And if you put a bunch of them together they'll just make magic happen. Well I knew most of the other guys. I knew that wasn't going to happen with this bunch because they were crabby and critical and stuff like that. And we spent, it was supposed to be two three hour



sessions. Double session. And after that period of time we had nothing you know? I didn't want to say anything because I've been in situations before with one of those characters who when I was trying to help and improve something on some other gig, he said, "Well who made you the arranger?" You know? So I'm just trying to help you know. But I didn't say anything more after that. So we had only worked on one tune and we didn't have anything. And I spoke up and said, "Well look at this point I know the track very well from listening to it for over two hours, and I have some ideas if nobody minds." You know, aimed at these crabby guys. And they said, "For God's sake yes." So we played my ideas and that became the arrangement for that tune. And he said, he was very happy, he said, "We can do this again. Come tomorrow at the same time and we'll work through you if you don't mind." I said, "No, only too glad.

Imagine being crabby at a session with John Lennon. I find it fascinating that Lennon thought of horn players as real musicians and that their contribution would just happen spontaneously. Perhaps he forgot about George Martin's writing for brass and strings in that band that he was formerly in.

It is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fillius Jazz Archive's oral history project, so s'cuse while I reminisce. This actually has been a dream gig, I have met many of my musical heroes. But predictably, there have been a number of awkward moments during our 500 sessions. There was the time (pre cell phone) when I asked the noted impresario George Wein to me at the front door of a legendary New York hotel where we were set up to film. Well, there were two front doors. By the time we connected he was beyond aggravated, definitely not in an interview mood. Damage control alert. Or when I asked saxophonist Billy Mitchell what it was like to solo with the Count Basie rhythm section. Unimpressed with my question, he replied "What do you think?" And clarinetist Sol Yaged, who brought his instrument, refusing to let me end the interview, and launching into a demonstration of his musical memory in the form of "I'm going to play a tune for every letter of the alphabet". A - All of me [scats], B - Blue Bossa [scats], C - Caravan [scats]. You get the idea. Perhaps I should have said, "Hold on Sol, it's jazz vocabulary time". Which it is, a regular feature of our episodes, a moment to make sense of the inside language we often hear in these excerpts. Eddie Bert mentioned roadies. We know roadies as the

worker bees that travel with rock bands, setting up and tearing down, doing the sound and lights, driving the trucks. Eddie defined roadies as those musicians who either by choice or necessity, played in traveling big bands, road warriors. New York City music contractors avoided calling the roadies, knowing they would not be consistently available for recording dates. “Oh yeah, Eddie. He was in town but left with Kenton again.” Charlie Gabriel mentioned directing for singer Joe Simon. A music director carries large responsibilities, rehearsing and conducting the band, writing arrangements, dealing with multiple musician personalities, basically doing anything necessary to make the person whose name is on the marquee look and sound good. And here is a term you’ll hear in our episode wrap up: “In the pocket.” The rare night when an oft played song beautifully blossoms. The tempo, the balance, the accompaniment, all the pieces, all aligned. In the pocket. (fade out music) You can’t predict it or cause it to happen. An awkward session could still be worthwhile.

In February of 1999 I attended the L.A. Classic Jazz Festival and met with clarinetist Eiji Kitamura from Japan. We heard Eiji talk about his first encounter with the clarinet in Episode 23. This session was a bit bizarre. Eiji spoke English but with a distinct accent and the occasional pause for the correct word. He brought an interpreter, also with an accent, who sat behind me and would whisper helpful explanations when needed. His prompts sounded like this [whispers] “Eiji says he was cheated by his manager”. Between the two of them I felt like I had forgotten how to talk. Nonetheless, the interview was memorable and significant for our oral history resource. Here is Eiji Kitamura from 1999:

MR: Well you were playing out on jobs in the 50s already. Have you been able to make your living as a musician since then pretty much? Have you made your living as a musician all your life?

Eiji’s interpreter relays the question to Eiji]

EK: I think that jazz is my life. Sometimes if I don’t have no money, it’s okay. But I have good music, good jazz.

MR: Over here we call that “paying your dues.” That sometimes you’re working and sometimes you’re not, but you still do it for the music.

EK: When I play the clarinet, if I didn't take breakfast, nothing, no money, but when I play clarinet, my heart feeling like luck filled.

MR: That's great.

EK: And in 1950, I had a job—  
[consults with interpreter]

TR: He was cheated by his manager in the 1950s.

MR: I'm sorry, say it again?

TR: His manager in the 1950s was cheating him.

MR: Your manager — oh, oh.

EK: Very bad manager.

MR: You had a bad manager in the 50s.

EK: He stole all the money and ran away. And I had my quintet, I should pay money every week.

MR: You were paying the men in the band.

EK: That manager, ran away, and he stole one year's fee. And then when I went — I got money and paid all my members. I couldn't buy some food, nothing. And every day I ate potatoes and onions.

MR: Gee — I guess you were paying some dues.

EK: But when I play clarinet, my feeling is like my heart feels luck filled.

When he plays the clarinet, his heart is luck filled. Who could ask for anything more?

[audio interlude]

A few years ago I caught an Austin City Limits show featuring Ruthie Foster. She was new to me but I immediately was drawn to her soulful singing and gospel-inflected original tunes. We'll close with an excerpt from our 2023 interview where she reminds us why musicians are compelled to perform:

MR: Talking about that spirit that occurs, I was watching the recent Crescent City Blues performance of yours and your band. You played a song by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. And it

was happening. And at the end you were going “Woo” and you said, “I had to grab my knees on that one. Something swooped down and caught me.” So if I have a question here it’s can you describe what that feels like? And can you make it happen?

RF: Oh. Can I describe what that feels like? Mmm. To me it feels like it’s just spirit you know. Because sometimes I mean we do these songs every weekend, sometimes three, four times a week. And there’s that something that happens on that third night or that fourth night and you’re doing the song and it just feels different. Everybody is in the pocket. Everyone on the stage that’s playing the song with me, which is in the pocket. We’re feeling it. And I think it has a lot to do with everybody going through their own thing. You know I have a bass player, I have a piano player, drummer, and sometimes guitarist. And sometimes I’m playing guitar and it’s a lot of work for me to try to — I’m singing and playing guitar and trying to be a decent rhythm player. And it’s a lot of work. And sometimes, you know the song is all I have to lean into and lean on. And I find myself really digging into the song vocally, energy-wise, and I’ve got people in front of me sometimes that are really into it. And that particular day, the Crescent City Blues Festival, these people were jazzed and they were just, you could feel it. And you see it when people just decide to just stand up. And that takes me back to church because that’s what you do in church, you stand up when you just feel it. And you just want to witness it. You want to get closer to that energy. And you’ve got people that are walking down front, they’re leaving their chairs. That’s what was happening that day. There’s something about “Up Above My Head” is the Sister Rosetta Tharpe song that felt really on point that night. And that’s why, yeah, after the song I was wiped, after one song. And it just made me feel like okay. And it just felt like I just did a one-on-one basketball game with somebody. I needed to grab my knees and rest for a bit. Yeah. I don’t know any other way to describe that feeling but I do remember it just touched me that night. Yeah.

MR: The jazz singer Sheila Jordan talked about very rare occurrences where she left her body and she was as if she was watching herself sing.

RF: It’s very much that. I’ve sat with my friends and shared that too, that I do feel more of just a conduit, and I’m just there to remind you that the energy is here. It’s everywhere, and I’m letting it go through me so that I can give it to you, so that you can give it back and it comes through me again, and you just start feeling that. That’s what’s building as

the night rolls on. Yeah. And that's a lot to do with why I talk. I give a little bit of a background for a song but a lot of times it's about giving myself time to come back down and prepare for the next song. It's very vibration oriented.

I hope you felt some good vibrations during these eight episodes. If you started your listening with this season 5 there are four earlier ones to check out. The complete videos from the interviews can be accessed on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel, that's Fillius, F-I-L-L-I-U-S, named for our Founder, Milt Fillius Junior, class of '44 at Hamilton College. My thanks to our Hamilton students assistants Michel Ko and Leo You, to Doug Higgins and Romy Britell for tech and content expertise and to our Orchestra in a Nutshell musicians, Tom McGrath, John Hutson and Sean Peters. If you liked the sax playing, it was me. If you didn't, it was Kenny Gee. I would be pleased to receive your comments and suggestions. Send a shout out to mrowe @ Hamilton.edu. I am taking the rest of the day off before starting on Season Six. I suggest you put on some jazz and do the same. We'll play this out with our long version of "Riff City," featuring a trio of Hamiltonians: our new jazz prof Gabe Condon, Cos Castellano, class of '74, and Abbi Rich on drums, class of 2028, playing a long version of our podcast theme, "Riff City." From Monk Rowe and Hamilton College, see you on the flip side.