

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #1 — Beginnings Part 1

[Musical Introduction]

[Scats] I can't quite hit that note. Nice lick though —or is it a riff? We'll address that question in a bit. Welcome to Season 1, Episode 1 of our Jazz Backstory podcast. In the words of Herbie Hancock, our "maiden voyage." My name is Monk Rowe. I am the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. In 1995, thanks to the efforts of Milt Fillius Junior, class of '44, and with the support of his friend, vocalist Joe Williams, a jazz oral history project was initiated. In a classic case of right place, right time, I landed the gig of conducting the interviews and a dream gig it has been. To date we have gathered 440 sessions with jazz artists whose careers span the 1930s to the present. What you will hear and experience in this podcast are moments drawn from these interviews that demand sharing. Moments particular to jazz performers that are poignant, informative, thought-provoking and on occasion hilarious, all part and parcel of the jazz life. Periodically we'll introduce a few jazz vocabulary terms and we'll hear the occasional well placed lick from our Orchestra in a Nutshell, a mighty two piece house band, a lick like this one.

[Musical Interlude]

That's a good one, short and sweet. Or as Louis Jordan said, "Reet, Petite & Gone."

Let's begin where the jazz players began. Careers in music typically begin at an early age. Thanks to YouTube, we are now accustomed to child prodigies in the classical realm, an 8-year-old pianist nailing a Beethoven piano sonata and the like. Decades ago, jazz prodigies were less common, the average parents would have looked skeptically on a career in that jazz music, and keep in mind the typical venue, a smoky nightclub where the 4-5 hour gig started at 9 pm. Our episode 1 anecdotes are not about outstanding young talent, instead our interviewees share a musical epiphany, an a-ha moment that inspired an impressionable young person to start the process of becoming an outstanding talent. Bassist Keter Betts is up first, from our 1996 interview, with a tale involving a simple errand, a parade, and an irresistible sound.

MR: And you started out on drums?

KB: I started out on drums, I was in the fifth grade. And we had an account at a little Italian store around the corner and my mother sent me to the store to get a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk. And an Italian parade came by. And I came back about four hours later with the milk and the bread, and my mother liked to kill me, because she was worried, you know, one block away and I was going all over town following this. I realize now that it only takes a second for you to see

something to impress you and then you want to investigate what is this, and I was following this parade all around town, fascinated by that. And so I did get a whipping, because — at least I could have come back and said Ma I wanted to follow the parade, instead of just going. But what I realize is that she — I said I want to play drums. After the whipping. “I want to play drums.” So I guess she figured well if he takes a lickin’ and keeps on tickin’ he must really want to do it.

MR: She impressed the beat on the seat of your pants, right?

Keter lead a highly successful career as a jazz bassist, performing and recording with Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Byrd, Cannonball Adderley, and surprisingly, with me. In 1999 Keter consented to play on my CD, entitled “Jazz Life.” Here he is, with a solo spot on a tune called “The Gates of Swing.” And let's behave out there, no talking during the bass solo.

[Musical Interlude]

Thanks Keter. Down the road we may come back to the issue of bass solos and conversation.

Musicians rarely think ahead about the future logistics connected to their instrument choice, but I can assure you that flute players are pleased with their decision when they watch bassists negotiating their instruments through an airport. Dave Valentin was a highly accomplished flautist, especially celebrated in the Latin jazz genre. From our April 2000 interview, Dave describes a romantic inspiration to embrace the flute.

MR: You started out on percussion?

DV: As a percussionist. My father was a Merchant Marine. And he traveled to Brazil. He was on a luxury liner, a passenger ship, like a cruise ship. He was a first class steward in fact. And he brought me back some bongos and congas and little gourds and maracas, and I started playing when I was five. I started playing percussion. And by the time I was ten, eleven, I was already playing in a band. I had timbales. I wanted to be like Tito Puente. So they had to pick me up and bring me back. I made like ten dollars a night. But at that time I was like a novelty playing with men, I was a little kid on timbales.

MR: Who directed you to the flute?

DV: Well that happened, believe it or not I had no interest in the flute at all. I wanted to meet a girl. Her name was Irene. She had blonde hair and blue eyes. For me, the only girl in the South Bronx who had that you know. And I wanted to meet her. So I went up to her in class and said, “Irene, can you show me something on the flute?” And she was playing flute. So she said okay. And she showed me a C major scale. [Scats a scale] And she gave me her flute and it was kind of an erotic experience because I was playing on her flute. I really started to feel, I’m getting close here. So I played the scale immediately, immediately. And she went, “Oh my — it takes about a

week to get a sound. That's great." I'm going yeah. So I borrowed a flute from school. And I went home and I practiced boy. I bought a Herbie Mann record. Learned "The Joker" and "Comin' Home Baby." Came back a month later and I said I got her now, I'm going to get her now. And I played for her. And you know what, she wouldn't talk to me ever again. She said "Go away. I never want to see you. I took lessons for years and you come in a month — and get away from me" And that's a true story. And later on of course she came to the shows and I would credit her. True story.

MR: Well you take inspiration wherever you can get it.

DV: Yes. Definitely. I'm glad because she had like five kids and she got kind of hefty. So maybe it was the right choice not to pursue it.

[Musical Interlude]

That funky lick brings us to our Episode 1 jazz vocabulary. Feel free to take notes, perhaps we'll have an End of Season 1 quiz. At the top of the show we heard [scats] our brief but catchy podcast theme. I called it a lick, a jazz word describing a combination of notes and rhythms that an improvising musician spontaneously invents during a solo. Those listening might say, "Hey, nice lick." A fellow musician might take it, adapt it, and then use it for their own. If a lick is repeated enough it can grow into a riff and be played purposely, by multiple players. The first Count Basie Orchestra made a living out of being a riff-based band. An astute arranger might take note of a particular riff, write it down, making it the core of a new tune. Thus: Lick, Riff, Tune. The original lick creator may or may not know that they gave birth to a potential classic. Duke Ellington was well known for paying attention to the warm-up routines of his band members, as they provided a constant source of potential tunes.

[Musical Interlude]

Have you ever watched a band set up and tear down for a gig? The drummers need to be the first to arrive and will be the last to leave, burdened with more gear than all their bandmates. It requires an extra measure of musical passion and you can hear it in the anecdotes of our next guests, drummers Sherrie Maricle and Ed Shaughnessy, interviewed for the Fillius Jazz Archive in 2001 and 1995 respectively.

SM: I actually grew up in Endicott, New York, but born in Buffalo, and I go to Buffalo at least a couple of times a year. Some of my friends are still there and a lot of my family was still there. Where I grew up was a town called Endicott, New York, and Binghamton. Of course you know where that is. And that was amazing to grow up there. Slam Stewart, the jazz bass player, lived there, and every big band that there was came through town. Buddy Rich and Woody Herman and Count Basie. I saw all of those bands. And I was lucky to have a teacher that took me, because when I was eleven a teacher took me to see Buddy Rich and his Killer Force Orchestra,

and that was when I was eleven that I really said that was exactly what I wanted to do then was just play the drums. And I never changed, ever, from that.

MR: Wow. You anticipated a question.

SM: Oh I did?

MR: That's good. I was going to ask if there was a kind of pivotal moment when you were young, seeing or hearing something?

SM: I remember, well that definitely set me right off in my direction and I literally never, ever thought of anything else. I remember telling my eighth grade teacher, I know exactly what I'm going to do, and I have to move to New York. I mean really, I remember having this conversation with this guy when I was twelve years old. But prior to that when you were first allowed to take musical instruments, fourth grade or whatever, I went up to the teacher and, "I want to play the trumpet." "No, girls don't play the trumpet, here's a metal clarinet" and he gave me this thing to squeak and squawk on. I was horrible and he was horrible and I quit. I was like I don't want to play music, this is terrible, this teacher, you know. And then the teacher actually called the house, I think he was a little unsteady, like unstable, called my mother and said, "She is so talented." And I was really, I was terrible. I could barely make a sound on this metal clarinet. But he begged for me to be in the school band so I went back. And then somehow I started on the cello and played that for like three years and then desperately one day someone needed someone to hit the bass drum. And I was like, "I'll do it." Any chance to hit something. So I went back and played the bass drum and then kind of just stuck with drums after that.

MR: Interesting.

SM: Yeah. But then when I saw Buddy, that was it.

MR: At age eleven.

SM: Yeah, eleven, um hum.

MR: And that's when you kind of started on the whole drum set?

SM: I actually pleaded with my mother to buy me a drum set which was like there is just no way, you know, my daughter is not playing the drums kind of attitude. But then after my pleading and screaming I remember she bought me a, I begged for a snare drum, which is the first drum you would get, and she came home and didn't know a drum from anything, and went to the music store and the guy told her, "this is a snare drum." And this was this big like funky weird brown tom-tom, and just the fact that she bought it for me, I've told her now but I could never tell her for years it was the wrong drum.

MR: Did your mother ever, or I shouldn't say ever, at what point did she become adjusted to the idea that you were going to become a professional musician?

SM: I think when she — she didn't come to all the high school performances but some of them, and I think — I won't say when I started to make money, but when she heard people clapping. She's like oh that's my daughter. And like the funniest thing was in New York when I got to sub in my first Broadway show, which is a good aspiration for a musician, it's a good job and everything and it's fun. So I was subbing for one of my friends on a stage part to the "Cabaret" revival, which was I think it was in '89, with Joel Grey. That was a couple of years ago, and that was the very first time I'd ever done it. I had to memorize the music. So they wheel the all-girl band in there with their fishnet stockings and their skimpy little sequins costumes out on the stage. And I'm looking in the fourth row and it's my mother going like this, like waving. And I'm like oh my God, this is not Binghamton High School stuff, stop it. You know, sinking in horror.

MR: Right. Poking the people next to her, that's my daughter.

SM: This is New York, this is Broadway. It was embarrassing.

MR: That's a nice story though.

SM: It's cute, yeah, it was cute.

ES: Oh, my first drum set? Yeah I guess you know the story. My dad, who was a Teamster, he worked on the docks, he had loaned \$20 to somebody, and the fellow was up against it, he couldn't give him the \$20, and he said to my dad, "Doesn't your son like music?" And he said "oh yeah, my kid, he just loves his music, he loves everything about music." And he was a mellow guy, my dad. So the guy said "Well look, I can't give you the 20 bucks, but I've got these two drums, a bass drum and a snare drum with a stand you know and a little pedal" and I think a beat up old cymbal, and he said, "would you take that in place of the 20 bucks?" So my dad, we didn't have a car, we never had a car, he brought them home from New York on the subway that went from New York to New Jersey. We didn't have a car. And you know I appreciated how he did that, he brought them home and on the bus, from the subway to home. Right? And I can't explain it to you, but something fascinating happened when I opened them up. It took me half a day to set the snare drum up on the stand right I think, and put the pedal on. You know I didn't know anything about drums. But I'd been fooling around with some drum sticks that somebody had given me, and I wasn't enamored of the piano. I saw a movie that influenced me a lot — "Blues in the Night" — do you ever remember a movie called "Blues in the Night?"

MR: Some people have mentioned that.

ES: Well it's a late 30's like '39 or '40, but it's terrific because it's a jazz band movie with a couple of the ex dead end kids playing roles, and oh that movie turned my life around. I thought, that's what I want to be. I want to be one of those jazz guys on the road. Even though they had a terrible life in the movie. But it was glamorous, you know? When they were hot they were hot. And I became a madman. I would practice — even going to school I was practicing 4-6 hours a day, which means, I mean that's a real nut, that's a kid who's a nut. But I loved every minute of it. It was like I'd really found something. And may God be my judge, I am not varnishing it at all. It's not very glamorous sitting in an old beat up cellar playing on old beat up drums, but that is the way it started.

I can recall giving Sherri a knowing nod, when she mentioned the metal clarinet. I too experienced the joys of that instrument, typically the one that was left after all the others had been passed out. Even after I moved to the saxophone, I kept my metal clarinet, it's now a lamp, presently lighting my basement podcast studio. Ed Shaughnessy fashioned a spectacular career, playing in every imaginable jazz setting. If you watched "The Tonight Show" between 1972 and 1992 you heard our Ed after that other Ed as in Here's Johnny [scats]. Whatever drummers call that intro lick, a double paradiddle, a triplet flamacue, Ed Shaughnessy never flubbed it.

Our last anecdote comes from the talented and irrepressible Jon Hendricks. Dubbed the "James Joyce of Jive" by Time magazine, Jon was a master of the complex art of vocalese, which requires creative skills as a lyricist, poet, vocalist and storyteller. This was one of those memorable sessions where a simple question prompted an unforgettable answer.

MR: When did you get the first idea of listening to an improvised solo, and doing what you do with it?

JH: I have to laugh because I'm just thinking about all that stuff. Because I'm going to write my book you know. So I started to thinking about that and it's amazing. Where I got the idea to write with what is now known as vocalese, was when I was a kid, you know, it was in the middle of the depression. And you have no idea how hard times were in the depression. I mean people talk of hard times now. These are luxury hard times, you know, compared to those times. Redd Foxx had something in his act about that. He said "Times were so hard that one day my father was sitting on the front step and he hollered up and said, 'Martha — the garbage man's coming.' And she said, 'Tell him to leave three cans.'"

MR: Oh, that is hard. That is hard.

JH: That's right, times were tough and there were, my father and my mother and 15 children. Twelve boys and three girls in the depression. So it was very, very difficult. So I didn't have nickel to

buy popcorn, and a dime to go into the movie theater. You know with all my brothers and sisters you know my father just couldn't afford to give everybody a dime to get in and a nickel to buy popcorn. So we all had to find some way of finding 15 cents on Saturdays to go to the movies. And so my brothers would go out and get what we called "junk" you know they would go junking, which was they'd walk through the alleys. At that time every street had a back part which was the alley, and people would throw away things — papers, old lamps that broke you know — all these they would pick up in a wagon or a cart and take them to the junkyard. And you'd be surprised how everything is worth something. And this guy would buy the things off them maybe for 25 cents. Well there's a quarter, you've got — you can take somebody else to the movies, and you've got a nickel for the popcorn you know. So we used to do that. I used to go to the men's room of the bus station or the train station and when somebody was going to put a nickel into the slot that goes to the lavatory, I'd say, "wait a minute! Just give me the nickel." And I would crawl down underneath, open the door, and make 15 cents. After I did that three times I would go to the movies and have a nickel for the popcorn. Then I found out something else. People played the juke box. And it cost a nickel. So I loved all that stuff that was on the juke box, and I could hum most of those songs. So I said why don't you learn those songs? And so I would learn the solos and then I would stand in front of the juke box and then when somebody was going to play I'd say, "Wait a minute, don't put the nickel in yet, what are you going to play?" And they would say, "Yard Dog Mazurka" by Jimmy Lunceford. I said, "Don't put it in there, give it to me and I'll sing it." And they couldn't resist that you know. So you know they would give me the nickel and I would say [scats]. I would sing the whole thing — solo and all — and the whole place would be —

MR: Oh that's fantastic. And how old were you then?

JH: I was about 13. And I would earn enough money, and then I would go to the movies. And I forgot about that until I wrote "Sing a Song of Basie." And I said, hey, yeah, I know how to do this.

Debuting in 1957, with "Sing A Song of Basie," Lambert Hendricks & Ross set the standard for all jazz vocal groups to come. We will hear from Mr. Hendricks again in future episodes.

One more jazz vocabulary term "the break." A jazz set always leads to one. If this had been a gig in a smoky night club we might step outside for some air, head to the bar for a taste or check to make sure someone is collecting the cover charge at the door. A quick thank you to our Orchestra in A Nutshell, to Romy Britell for interview transcriptions and content advice and to Hamilton College's Library and IT

Services. Episode 2 will offer additional where it all started stories from Kenny Davern, Nat Adderley, Annie Ross and Junior Mance. I hope you'll tune in. See you on the flip side.

[Musical Interlude]