

# Jazz Backstory Podcast

## Episode #2 — Beginnings Part 2

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome. That succinct musical offering is called “Riff City.” My name is Monk Rowe. I am the Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College and host of the Jazz Backstory podcast. Our 2nd episode is entitled “Beginnings part 2,” more stories of early inspiration drawn from the childhood memories of respected jazz musicians. Our anecdotes from Episode 1 featured tales of Italian parades, Buddy Rich on stage, junior high romance, and a juke box in Toledo, Ohio. We’ll begin today with two tales that have technology at their center. Today’s technology borders on science fiction. It’s easy to forget that every generation had their own high tech, most notably in the fields of entertainment and communication. In 1920, the Westinghouse Corporation launched radio station KDKA, one of the first in the country. By 1939, 80% of American households owned at least one crystal set and radio quickly became the dominant provider of news and entertainment, offering everything from Little Orphan Annie, baseball and boxing broadcasts, fireside chats, and programs of live and recorded music. Jazz combos vied with big bands for airtime and impressionable young musicians could be enticed to the life by the pros they heard on the air.

Kenny Davern was an incomparable clarinetist, a pure musician at his core. Kenny experienced a less than ideal childhood. In his early teens he was in serious need of direction and he found it in the kitchen, with a sound emanating from the top of the ice box. Here is Kenny Davern from our March 2001 interview, conducted at the Clearwater Beach Jazz Party.

MR: I want to take you back in your career a little bit. I’m trying to think now, you were born in 1935.

KD: Um hum.

MR: So about the time as a kid when you were starting to absorb music around you, what was going on in your household that you were being exposed to? Anything in particular?

KD: Nothing I can really remember. Because nobody in my family — I mean it was the height of the depression 1935, all the way ‘till the second world war, there was not much of anything going on except my mother just related that I would bounce in a high chair when she turned on the radio, to the point where I was so strong in the high chair that she had wondered whether or not I was going to tumble onto the floor, which maybe would have been a good thing. No, that’s about as much as I remember. Also, you know, hearing well basically the radio, that was probably the primary listening device. And then I can just remember when I finally — you see I was in nine

foster homes before the age of six, so this wasn't much fun. One didn't really think about music between two and six let's say, right?

MR: I'm not sure if you're kidding.

KD: No I'm not kidding.

MR: You were in nine foster homes before the age of six.

KD: That's correct.

MR: Okay.

KD: I had a very ambivalent mother.

MR: What put a clarinet in your hands as a young kid?

KD: The fact, one I couldn't figure out how to play a trumpet, and we couldn't afford a piano. That was my first love was the piano. Second I wanted to learn the trumpet. I didn't know how you could get all those notes out of just three values, there was something wrong with that picture. I mean math was not my strong point. Then I heard Artie Shaw play the Clarinet Concerto on the radio. I guess this had to be about 1945 or 6. And I fantasized you know with this instrument sailing over the whole band and I liked that whole concept you know. Plus it was made of wood, which was part of a growing tree at one time, all kinds of romantic ideas that came in my head. And well lo and behold we got a clarinet. But it was a \$35 one at the time and it was a C clarinet and an Albert System.

MR: No kidding. A C clarinet.

KD: Yeah. And an Albert System. And we couldn't find anybody to teach me, because it was an old fashioned system and practically everybody played the Boehm, and we did find an old Italian teacher, which was on the line where Brooklyn and Queens met you see, his name was Mr. Bruno. Louis Bruno. Or Luigi Bruno. And he taught both systems, Albert and Boehm system clarinet.

MR: Was he a typical — this teacher — was he a typical kind of taskmaster?

KD: Well I thought he was you know at first. I mean he'd tap the pencil on the music stand and I'd play these different exercises and stuff, but I would catch him sort of dreaming, looking out the window while I was playing. And if I didn't do my homework, I would improvise. You know I just kept the time going right, and he wouldn't catch it. That's when I knew it was time to change teachers, when I said well hmmm this guy — he's not catching me doing all this funny stuff see. But it was the beginning of improvisation.

MR: That's great. You were starting to take a ride already.

KD: Well they used to call it faking it in those days.

MR: Faking it, yes.

KD: Faking it, yeah. That's a true story.

MR: Yeah that's neat. Was there a point where you said music is going to be my career?

KD: Right.

MR: A definite—

KD: A definite — I can remember it like it was yesterday. There used to be Ted Husing's bandstand. Ted Husing I think originally was a sports car, you know, enthusiast or whatever. And he had, he played popular music like from three to six everyday, I forget what the station was, WJZ or WOR or something like that. And the last 15 minutes he played Dixieland band music you know. And I liked that. I liked the way those bands sounded. I liked it especially because the clarinet was free. And then on Saturday mornings from 11 to 12 he'd play a whole hour of all these different people, you know, Dixieland jazz bands, whether it be, you know, Tony Parenti or Wild Bill Davison or you know, you name it, whoever was around at that time. And one day he played a Muggsy Spanier recording of Muggsy Spanier's Ragtime and they were playing "Memphis Blues." And I was just standing in the kitchen listening I remember and I heard this, because the radio was on top of the ice box. And I heard this instrument growling and grunting and [scats], and this beautiful background like organ in the back of him, you know the band playing whole notes.

[Musical Interlude "Memphis Blues"]

And it was Pee Wee Russell playing clarinet. Well you know you can go look at paintings, you can read books, you can see movies, you can listen to music, and if you haven't had a musical experience from any one of those things you're never really going to be hooked. I mean if a book can make you laugh and cry and the same with a painting or whatever, if you can experience something well that was — you know prior to that you just listen, you know, like a fan. Yeah that's good, yay. But if it doesn't really grab you emotionally — and I stood there transfixed looking at that radio. And I said that's it, I want to do that for the rest of my life. I was about 14. Kenny fashioned a life and career as a pure jazz soloist, avoiding potentially profitable studio work and the frequent Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw type tribute gigs He always knew exactly what he wanted out of a performance and whomever he shared the bandstand with. Kenny invited me to sit in during one of his frequent appearances at Hamilton College and graciously allowed me to choose the tune. When I said "Summertime" he responded emphatically, "No, that's my number." He played it later that night and proved his point. We'll hear more from Kenny in subsequent episodes.

How about a riff from our Orchestra in A Nutshell

[Musical Interlude]

I had my own memorable radio moment, although it did not come from the top of an ice box, but from a hand held transistor radio, AM only, and a single ear plug . It was a high tech then, a prized possession and in my early teens I discovered Harry Abraham, a late night jazz DJ on WHAM from Rochester NY. Harry possessed the required jazz DJ voice, deep, deliberate, a bit mysterious, and with evidence of a two pack a day habit. Late night meant the radio was next to my ear in bed, well after lights out. One night this piano tune came through the air waves.

[Musical Interlude — Opening strains of “Harlem Lullaby”]

The full recording was followed by (pardon the home-made rendition) “That was the Junior Mance Trio with the title track from their latest LP, ‘Harlem Lullaby.’” I can't describe why that song got me then or why it still gets me now. Somehow it made me nostalgic for something I had never even experienced. Imagine the thrill when 30 years later I sat with pianist Junior Mance for an interview. I have learned that an astute interviewer does not engage in telling their own stories but I didn't know that then so I shared it with Junior Mance, the story I just shared with you. Here is his response from our July 1995 session.

JM: But what you say about under the sheets, well I guess I was about ten years old and my dad asked me one Christmas, “What do you want for Christmas?” You know I said, “I want a table radio.” You know this was before they had the little battery portables and all of that. And he was shocked. He thought what does he want a radio for? Well they would listen to all the broadcasts at night, you know like Earl Hines would broadcast from the Grand Terrace. And there was also another place in Chicago I think called the Gerrick Show Lounge, where I remember Don Byas and J.C. Higginbotham were in a small group there. And they would catch all — you know that was the days when there were more radio broadcasts than there were records. But they came on so late and my folks wouldn't let me stay up to listen. But I'd ease up and crack the door you know and I'd sit there and listen. So I says I'll fix this, you know, and I asked for a radio. So they gave me the radio for Christmas you know. So I remember I would listen and Earl Hines would come on I'd search and I'd turn the volume down real low until I found it you know. Then I would get under the covers with the pillow and all, and listen to it. And every night this went on and they were none the wiser you know so then after it was over I'd put it back on the table you know. After it was over that was a time when mothers usually come in and tuck you in, you know, and I'd fake like I'm sleeping. Well one night, I fell asleep before the broadcast was over. The radio and me and everything is under the pillow and I'm sound asleep. So it woke me up you know and she pulled the pillow back and I says uh oh, this is it, I'm know I'm going to get it.

She called me father in and they laughed. They said look at that. So then after that they started letting me listen, as long as I was in bed, and I could turn it on and listen to it.

Junior's parents were rewarded as their son pursued the sound he heard from the radio, playing his first gig at ten years old. After a series of apprenticeships with Cannonball Adderley, Dizzy Gillespie and Dinah Washington he fashioned a successful career as a leader of his own trios. My transistor radio is long gone, but the "Harlem Lullaby" LP is still on my shelf, graced with Junior Mance's autograph.

A number of jazz icons, including Louis Armstrong and Lester Young, experienced a jump start to their careers, performing for the public before they were teenagers. We can add vocalist, actress and lyricist Annie Ross to that list. The daughter of Scottish vaudevillians, she was born Annabelle McCauley Short, in Surry, England in 1930 and by age three, Annie was part of the family act. Her early career itinerary included residencies in New York, Los Angeles, London and Paris, eventually leading to her association with Dave Lambert and Jon Hendricks, the same Jon we heard from in Episode 1. Annie spoke about those formative years during our January 2001 interview.

MR: In your home before you came over, you said you were precocious and were you singing and doing all that over there?

AR: My mother and father had an act. I had three brothers and at that time my little sister wasn't born, but we used to work bandstands in the park. And then my father would pass the hat. So we all had to do something. Someone would — you know we didn't have tickets, because we weren't that rich to print tickets. But we all played a part in the show. My mother was a comedienne and sang, my father sang and my brothers sang, so it was a natural kind of development.

MR: What kind of songs would you have sung?

AR: Songs that my father wrote.

MR: No kidding?

AR: Yeah. I'd pretend I was lost. I'd walk up to the little bandstand and pretend I was lost and there was an actor playing a policeman and he was chewing on a big Danish or something. And I would say, "You know I'm hungry and I'm lost." And he'd say, "Well if I give you a bite of this, what can you do?" And I'd say, "Oh I can sing and I can dance." At which point my father would play an arpeggio on the accordion and I'd start to sing.

MR: That's neat. And then when you got to New York, you must have been in some kind of contest for child actresses?

AR: Yeah. I had a little playmate in the building I was staying in and she told me her father had a radio show. So when her father walked in I said I should be on it, and it was a contest for children, and the man was Paul Whiteman.

MR: It was Paul Whiteman?

AR: Yeah. So I won. I had a kilt and a Glengarry and all those Scottish things, and I went out to Hollywood. And my mother thought I was going to be, you know, a Shirley Temple. Well they already had a Shirley Temple. So I just settled down and went to school.

MR: And so you say your family went back to Europe and you followed?

AR: Back to Scotland. No I didn't see them until I was 17.

MR: Wow.

AR: And then I stayed a couple of weeks and went down to London. I got a job in a club, bought a second-hand dress and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

MR: Can you recall what kind of wages you were working for back then?

AR: Oh yes, seven pound ten a week.

MR: And that translates to?

AR: About ten bucks a week. But I didn't care. You know it was enough to pay my rent. I could eat at the club, I was singing many obscure Rogers & Hart and Cole Porter and Jerome Kern. I mean they had never heard that before. It was a private club, very snooty. But they did give me a little button to switch on when I got up to sing, which gave me a little spotlight. A bit like Marilyn Monroe in "Bus Stop."

MR: Yeah. Was that — is the word "cabaret singer" appropriate here?

AR: No.

MR: No. Okay.

AR: A cabaret singer gives a performance. I didn't give a performance, I sang with a band, which was as it should be. I was starting out, it was the best experience.

MR: And again, what kind of tunes would that particular band have been doing?

AR: Oh, "I've Got Five Dollars," and you know, all the great standards of the time.

MR: When was your first chance to record?

AR: When I went to Paris. I was living in Paris and Moody, James Moody, had written a tune with no words, which was kind of prophetic in a way, because I've sung many songs without words, and it was called "Le Vent Vert" and that was the very first time I ever made a record.

MR: Did you set the words to it?

AR: No, it was ooooooh.

MR: You just ooooooh-ed it. And so it was a single record? An A and a B side?

AR: Yep. A 78.

MR: It was a 78. Did you like the way it came out? You were like in heaven, right?

AR: Yeah. With James Moody? You know, I had just heard “Things to Come,” Dizzy Gillespie’s tune. And that hit me like a freight train. I didn’t know what was going on. It went by like a bullet train. I’d never heard musicians play like that. And so you know I was acquiring my knowledge of Dizzy’s band and — not so much Basie’s band because that came later — but all the great musicians. And many of them were in Paris, you know, because of the exodus of the black musicians to Paris for the acceptance of their music. And you know it was Kenny Clarke and Don Byas and Rex Stewart and on and on and on.

Annie Ross became as respected in the jazz world as the players she was enthralled with. The seven LPs recorded with Lambert Hendricks and Ross remain as consummate examples of vocal jazz arranging, scatting and vocalese. We included vocalese in our jazz vocabulary during Episode 1. The word for today is basic to all performing musicians. I speak of “the gig.” It was one of the first words my two daughters understood, at least they knew that dad was loading things into the car and would be gone for the night or perhaps for a week. Jazz musicians in particular are constantly in search of the next gig whether it be a one-nighter or an extended road trip. The word dates back to the 1920s, derived from “engagement.” The abbreviation is understandable, what hip musician wants to say, “I procured an engagement this evening,” when they can say “I got a gig.” Musicians are not pleased that the term gig has now been usurped in multiple ways. First it was the DJs. It wasn’t enough that one non or former musician with a sound system could replace a band, but to have them use our word — well — what’s that term beyond the pale? Or a drag? One or the other. Let the DJs have an engagement. And now we have the gig economy? We weren’t aware that gigs even registered in the economy. But then I read a definition Gig Economy — a free market system in which temporary positions are common and organizations hire independent workers for short-term commitments, typically without benefits and regularly prone to cancellations. I thought well that is a gig and it’s our jazz vocabulary word for Episode 2. Speaking of gigs, I have one tonight so let’s wrap up with another of our favorite sessions. [Musical Interlude]

Even the casual jazz fan has heard the name Adderley, at least I would like to think so. Julian “Cannonball” Adderley has been and remains my favorite saxophonist and his brother Nat played a key role in the success of the Cannonball Adderley Quintet. Nat was the band’s one man brass section and composed the majority of the band’s most memorable tunes, including “Hummin,” “Jive Samba,” and the “Work Song,” the subject of our last excerpt. Nat referred to it as his Social Security song as the

frequent cover versions provided him with income above and beyond gigs. It begs the question, what if anything inspires songs that become successful and iconic in the genre? Nat had a response to this but before we listen it would be worthwhile to hear a bit of the tune.

[Musical Interlude]

That's it. Here is Nat Adderley from our May 1995 interview, sharing a childhood memory that paid dividends later in life.

NA: Now I have done songs on the spur of the moment that are not particularly extraordinary one way or the other, that were done because we were on a record date or because we needed a certain kind of song. But generally, like my most famous song, "The Work Song" is a song that was based on when I was a child, they were paving the street in front of my house in Tallahassee, Florida. There was, the penal system was the chain gang. And they had the chain gang people paving the street. But I was not even in school yet, so I was sitting and watching them do it, and they fascinated me, these men. Because they sang these songs where there was one guy and then a row of maybe six abreast, two guys. And there was red clay, very hard. And they had to break this clay so that they could come along and pave the street. It was a major highway between Jacksonville, Florida and Pensacola. Tallahassee is right in the middle. Well, when these guys, the guy in front would hit — thumpf — and he'd drop his hammer, and he'd sing something [hums]. And then everybody else would hit — whoom — and they'd answer [hums]. And it kept repeating. And I was sitting there fascinated, just, I loved it. And I never forgot it.

MR: You held that until —

NA: Sure. Because I used to, as I went along, now and then when I was humming something, I'd just hum a question and answer thing and remember that. I also remembered it because I went in the house and made lemonade for these guys who were doing that. My mother would come home from school, she was an elementary school teacher. My mother came home and said, "Where are all my lemons and the sugar?" The sugar was expensive. And I said, "Well I was giving those guys, you know, the guys out front." And after that — you know I liked the guys, you know, and they'd let me talk to them, and they all seemed to like me. And Mama said, "Listen, those guys are out there because they did some-thing wrong." Well I couldn't grasp that too well. They're still singing. So I went on, I got a couple of spankings about that. In my house spankings were, they became a bit violent, you know, spanking. But the point is, later on, when someone asked me for a song, as a matter of fact I go and tell it exactly like it was. A bass player named Keter Betts, plays with Ella Fitzgerald.

MR: We've heard his name a few times today.

NA: Keter was getting ready to do a record date. We were now professional musicians, Cannonball and I, and Keter said, “Why don’t you write one of them songs for me?” And I went to the hotel in Washington, and I was doing the “Work Song.” And the more I did it, the more I thought about it and I liked it, and so I stopped. I finished writing it, and then I wrote another song and decided to give Keter another song. Because I had a record date coming up and I decided I wanted to do that song on my record date. That’s one example of where the inspiration for a song comes from. It is perhaps the most poignant example that I could give for the way that I see where the music comes from, where it goes there are other reasons for others, but that is probably the best one that I could do.

Nat mentions Keter Betts, who was almost the recipient of the “Work Song,” the same Keter who reminisced about following the Italian parade in our first episode. Nat Adderley enjoyed a long career, composing more Social-Security-worthy songs, recording numerous records with his brother and mentoring Nat Adderley Junior who became a noted keyboardist and music director for Luther VanDross.

I believe our set has gone into overtime. Fortunately, I see our saxophonist is back in place to play us out. Our next episode will explore the learning process that young jazz players experienced, occasionally in, but mostly outside the classroom. I encourage you to check out the complete video interviews of these artists on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel as well as their recorded music. Thanks for tuning into Jazz Backstory. We'll see you on the flip side.

[Musical Interlude]