

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #3 — The Learning Process Part 1

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to Episode 3 of our Jazz Backstories podcast. My name is Monk Rowe. If you have previously tuned in you know that I have a dream gig, gathering interviews with Americas finest jazz artists. In our first two episodes we heard tales of childhood inspiration, cited by our interviewees as the moment their career path was set in motion. Now an a-ha moment is a fine thing to have early on, the next issue is how to build on it. Today's inspired jazz student will most likely come from a hip high school, having studied with a private teacher who has coached them for the competitive jazz conservatory audition. Jazz is now recognized as an important American art form, and rightly so. To seriously study and master it, we now have institutes of higher education where the tenets of the music have been codified and pedagogy created that will justify a bachelor's, master's or Ph.D. in jazz studies. Louis Armstrong and his fellow innovators would be astounded by this phenomenon.

It is worth noting that organized jazz education has existed for less than half of the music's one hundred year plus history. How did those inspired and aspiring young musicians from our first two episodes learn this craft before Berklee, Julliard, the Eastman School of Music and the hundreds of other jazz schools.

A fine place to start is with trumpeter Harry Sweets Edison, who entered the jazz life by joining the Count Basie Orchestra in 1937, at the age of 19. Sweets shared his learning process during our September 1995 interview.

SE: I've been fortunate. God has blessed me because I've been chosen to do things I guess just because of my sound you know. And I'm still trying you know. What little success that I have, and I still have, I'm grateful. God has blessed me, as I said before, and I've tried to carry myself and well — as I always say in my era we had a lot of respect for each other. Musicians had so much respect for each other, and New York was such a beautiful place to be at that time, because it was so competitive. When I first went to New

York, I couldn't get any sleep. I stayed up so long 'til I fell out on Seventh Avenue one night and had to go to the hospital. I just stayed up.

MR: So much going on.

SE: I couldn't miss it. I couldn't go to bed. I lived on 130th and Seventh Avenue. Art Tatum was playing on 131st Street, Don Redman was playing across the street at 132nd Street, Billie Holiday was singing at 138th Street at a place called the Yeah Man Club, there was Small's Paradise on 135th Street. Everything was in Harlem. You know you could walk, and I walked so much 'til I just passed out. I just couldn't miss anything. So everybody was, you could see everybody that you wanted to see in the daytime on Seventh Avenue. Louis Armstrong, Ellington, James P. Johnson, Willie "The Lion" was at the Rhythm Club. It was just, it was amazing and it held my, I just, I was just in awe at all of these people that I had seen on the stage in Columbus, Ohio at a dance. Cab Calloway. Here I am walking down Seventh Avenue, and looking at these people you know and saying hello to them. And Count Basie introduced me to all these people. He was like a father. When I first joined the band I was 19 and he just took a liking to me and he introduced me to Ellington, James P. Johnson, Art Tatum, Louis Armstrong, oh my goodness. It was just absolutely a thrill.

MR: At the time you joined the Basie band, how much of the music was written out?

SE: We didn't have any music.

MR: That was my question. Now how did that work? And how did you learn what to play when you first got in there?

SE: Well, that's an interesting question. Because when I first joined the band, everybody in the Count Basie band had played with Bennie Moten's band. So they all knew what they wanted to play. They all had notes to different — like "One O'Clock Jump," "Swinging the Blues," "Out the Window." It was a head arrangement you know. They just, the brass section would get together and they would play, set a riff behind a melody Basie would play on the piano. The saxophones would go in to another room and they would set a riff. And when we all came back to the rehearsal hall, we'd all have an arrangement, you know? So that went on with me for about a couple of years. And finally I told Basie I said, "I'm going to quit." He says, "Why? You sound good." I said, "Well all these arrangements that you play every night — I can't find a note. I can't find a note to

‘Swinging the Blues’ and playing it fast.” I haven’t had a chance — I really was disgusted.

MR: Discouraged, huh?

SE: Yes. So I said, “I’d rather for you to take my notice.” He said, “Well if you find a note tonight that sounds good, play the same damn note every night.” So that’s what I did. He encouraged me to sit there. And it was very difficult. Because when they played a tune like “Out the Window” or of course “One O’clock Jump” wasn’t too fast, you could find a note, but “Jumpin’ at the Woodside.” Hell they’re playing you know and you’re trying to find a note to play, and it’s past, and they’re finished before you can find a note.

Mr. Edison found those notes, and road the Basie band bus for almost 20 years. You heard Sweets use the term "set a riff." A riff happened to be our jazz vocabulary words from Episode 1 The riffs created spontaneously by the Basie band members were copied, learned by ear and memorized. Musicologists cite this as an example of oral culture, in this case, the opposite of reading notes on the printed page, created by someone else. If you'll bear with me, I would like all of you to take a moment and spell oral to yourselves. I'm guessing most of you spelled it "o r a l" and that is indeed the spelling used in most jazz history books. I have a minor issue with this and I submit that o r a l describes speaking. Sweets Edison was not told what to play by the trumpet players on either side of him, the tradition was to hear it, as in a u r a l l y, with your ears. Hear it, try it, if it works and it's no one else's note, keep it, if not start over.

[Musical Interlude]

Sweets Edison used his ears to find a note in an ensemble setting, where he could use that same damn note every night. Fellow trumpeter Clark Terry employed the time proven a u r a l learning technique so he could play something different every night, a fundamental part of improvisation. Here Clark Terry speaks about the role of the ear, music theory, and the blues.

CT: You’ve got to remember, that years before people who gave into their feelings, years before they knew anything about theory or harmony, composition, counterpoint, etc., they gave vent to their feelings. And they were indulging in, for lack of a better term they called it “get off.” This is long before the term “improvisation” was coined, you know

before it was in the dictionary, pertaining to playing music you know. They used to call it “get off,” which simply meant that the first chorus you played a melody, and thereafter you’d use the melody as a guidewire to simply superimpose extemporaneously a melody around this given melody. So that’s what it became “get off,” so you “get off” the melody. Even then the guys were giving vent to their feelings and expressing themselves and they would use certain things that would help them get from point A to point B. First of all the one thing that we teach our students today, and I’m sure you do too, regardless of how much theory or harmony or counterpoint or composition will get in their brain, they’ve got to know when to use it. They’ve got to listen for when to use it. Know how to use it. There’s a zillion educated fools walking around the street today. Heads loaded with something they don’t know how to use it, don’t know where to use it or when to use it. So this is a lesson that we try real hard to get our students to understand. Back in those days, they didn’t know anything as you mention about these technical terms. They had nobody around to teach it. But they were determined to give vent to their feelings and express themselves, and “get off.” So what’d they do? They played the blues as the main vehicle, they played the blues, and they played the standard tunes, and then superimposed melody around it. But on the blues they figured out a good way to give vent to their feelings is that somebody had to change the melody, even without knowledge, to figure out, there’s the tonic, that’s the one; then you go up the scale, one two three, that’s the third, they’d lower that a half-step, that’s the minor third; you go up one, two, three, four, five, lower that, so you’ve got a tonic, a minor third, a flatted fifth, and they didn’t know then that it constituted a half diminished. They couldn’t care less, you know. All they knew is they called them the “blue notes.” “Man you’ve got your blue notes?” “Yeah, baby I’ve got ‘em down, I’m working on F sharp now, but I’m going to have that tomorrow.

Clark Terry enjoyed a stellar career as a member of the Ellington, Basie and Tonight Show bands. He became an international star, a pioneer in the jazz education field and he never abandoned the primacy of the ear in mastering the art of jazz.

It's time for our jazz vocabulary spotlight, and what could be more appropriate than THE BLUE NOTES. Clark Terry vocalized those particular altered notes, the 3rd and 5th tones of our familiar eight note scale. In solfege we would have do mi so [music]. Blues singers, in a tradition dating back over a hundred years, lowered those pitches to express emotion and enhance the musical story telling. So instead of this [music], we got this [music]. And of course you have to sing those blues notes with an attitude. Let's suppose you had a lyric, "Oh my baby left me, and now my nights are long." [Sings] Now if we put those notes back where they started [music], you have to change the words, because that ain't the blues. "Oh my baby left me, and I'm so glad she's gone." So the blue notes were something the blues instrumentalists and the jazz instrumentalists could copy, they copied the way the singers were singing and that set them off on the path to find the other color tones, or as Clark Terry said, "Yeah baby, tomorrow I'll have F sharp."

Legend has it that W.C. Handy, already an established composer of concert music in the early 1900s was waiting for the late train in a southern rail station. A lone singer with a guitar, sharing the platform, unwittingly provided Mr. Handy with his a-ha moment, playing and singing in a manner foreign but inspiring. It was the blue notes and this chance encounter resulted in the Handy composition the "St Louis Blues," soon to be heard emanating from pianos in parlors across America. Speaking of blue notes

[Musical Interlude]

Pizzarelli is a name known to most jazz fans, especially guitarists. John Pizzarelli Jr. has shaped a successful career as a vocalist, jazz guitarist and radio host and he had the good, and sometimes stressful fortune to have Bucky Pizzarelli as his father, a man who literally played guitar with everyone.

John could have taken the jazz conservatory path but he was too busy already gigging. During our January 2000 interview, John described his on-the-gig lessons with his father Bucky, where he was forced to rely on his ears and his patience.

JP: My first gig with my dad was eight weeks at the Pierre Hotel in 1980, the summer of 1980. July and August. And the first night I knew about eight songs. And if I only knew,

we had to play four hours. And I remember him saying “Mountain Greenery.” “What?” And he’d go [scats] and he’d look at me and he’d be pounding these melodies out, and wouldn’t tell me anything. And maybe once in a while he’d hit a G7 like you didn’t hear G7? Oh, and it was the longest eight weeks. But I mean I learned, started to learn songs. And I, it was the best — I figured it out along the way that the way he learned was by watching Joe Mooney at Sandy’s when he was twelve. He’d go down on Sundays with his uncles and watch Joe Mooney rehearse at this club in Paterson. And Joe Mooney was blind and he had the accordion with Andy Fitzgerald on clarinet and Jack Hotop on guitar and Gate Reeger. And they’d be playing and Joe would say, “Here’s how it goes,” and he’d go [scats] and here’s what you play, and this is what you play. And that’s how he taught me. He’d go zip, zip, zip and that’s what you’d do. And then he’d say, “Let’s fake this tune.” Rehearsals — there was never written out music. And it’s the best thing, and it was the hardest thing.

MR: Was it aggravating at the time?

JP: Oh, it was just hell. I mean, I used to, I was angry for the whole time, and I’d say stupid things to my father, like, “All right already.” You know I was just grinding my teeth you know. And I sang too at that time. I got a nice review in the *Times*. John Wilson came down and reviewed us. But it was really hard. It’s still hard. And I used to say to him every once in a while, “Could maybe you — could just call the chords out?” You know, “If there’s a chord you want to hear, could you just tell me C7? That would help.” And he’d go ahhh.

MR: You sound like him.

JP: Well it’s so funny. As stubborn as a mule and it just drove me up the wall. But the thing that I’m appreciative of is the fact that you watch kids, you watch these kids today. And they get that damn *Real Book* out and they open the *Real Book* up and they say okay “Body and Soul” page 6, and they’re all sitting there with music stands and it makes me want to puke. That’s the best word I can use. It’s like get rid of the damn book. You should have these songs in your head.

In a future episode we’ll discuss *The Real Book* and why it gives John agita. I happened to be in the audience to witness a wonderful sort of “Circle of Life” moment with the Pizzarellis. John

was playing a swanky New York City supper club with his trio and had just finished a an uptempo number, complete with an awe-inspiring guitar solo. Just as the applause finished a voice from the audience commented loudly, “That's not so hard.” John of course responded, “What do you mean that’s not so hard?” The voice repeated, “That's not that hard.” John replied, “Well if it’s not that hard perhaps you’d like to come up on stage and do it yourself.” Of course, who came out of the audience? Bucky Pizzarelli. It was perfectly set up, and perfectly entertaining and the duet that followed was perfect music.

We'll wrap up this set with one of my favorite interview moments. In January of 2001 I met with drummer Eddie Locke. Eddie was not a household name but he had distinguished himself supporting a long list of jazz luminaries, including saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and trumpet player Roy “Little Jazz” Eldridge. Jazz performance goes far beyond the notes and Eddie received a stern and succinct lesson one night from the competitive Roy Eldridge.

MR: Roy had quite a competitive spirit, didn't he?

EL: I've never played with anyone that loved to play as much as him. Never. And my greatest story, every time I tell somebody this, they always, they love it, but I'm going to tell this so this will be on film forever. I will never forget, we were playing in a place and there was no one in the place, just like this room we're in now, with the band. We were up there playing. And I was just like that [scats]. And he turned around and he leaned over the drum set at me and he said, “What are you doing?” And I said, “Well Roy” I says, “there’s nobody in here.” He looked me right in — I mean he got closer — he said, “I’m here.” That was the scariest thing, I mean and the way he said it, you know what I mean? But it made a difference in me. He said “I’m here.” Now let’s play. Because that’s what he did. I mean I’ve heard him play some of the greatest music I ever heard, in a room just like this with nobody in it. He loved that horn. It was just like — that’s why at his funeral, when Dizzy said, He said “Y’all gotta find something else to do now,” he said, “because this is the only person that was ever named Jazz.” He said “He’s is the only one who was ever named Jazz. And that’s what he was.

And that story is a perfect example of o r a l teaching and learning. You can watch the complete video interview with all these artists on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. Our next Jazz

Backstory episode will offer more tales about the learning process that has led to so much iconic music. See you on the flip side.

[Musical Interlude]