

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #4 — The Learning Process Part 2

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to our podcast and to Episode 4 of Jazz Backstory. My name is Monk Rowe of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Our musician tales continue with stories regarding the learning process in jazz before it was considered a legitimate art form. I believe the art form issue is significant. Academia long ago deemed it acceptable and necessary to study Beethoven, Shakespeare, Picasso and Martha Graham as pillars and innovators of our sacred art forms. Armstrong and Ellington had to wait for jazz to rise above the level of popular music in America, especially in the minds of the movers and shakers in higher education. A young, aspiring musician in the first half of the twentieth century learned the craft of jazz without the benefit or impediment of a classroom. “Playing it by ear” was literally an accepted form of jazz pedagogy.

Our first interview excerpt comes from a 1996 session with saxophonist Jerry Jerome. Jerry was first inspired by a vaudevillian drummer, who was required to provide a wide variety of sound effects as well as keep time. After this initial inspiration, his parents, and a particular 300 pound music teacher contributed to his eventual career in jazz.

JJ: So I'd go home and assemble all kinds of little things on the table — get two butter knives and go through what he was doing. Nine or ten years old. My mother thought, oooh, he's a strange kid. And you know we were very poor and lessons were about three dollars a lesson, my father delivered bread and when I expressed a strong interest in wanting to be a drummer, he said, “I'll see.” And he had a customer he delivered bread to, Professor Churchillo, Italian, one of those three hundred pound guys you know, and my father worked out a deal where he gave him bread and he gave me lessons on drums. And the first day I come in there I walk in with a pair of drum sticks that someone had given me for Christmas and I says, he started talking to me about this book *Solfeggio* by Bona. I says, “I want to play drums.” [sound of slap] He says “I do the talking here.” This is the way he wanted it. And I went home and told my father what happened. [sound of slap] “You listen to Professor Churchillo.” And what he was trying to tell me was that the old Italian method of teaching musicians was to teach them solfeggio, the ear training, no

music, no musical instruments, no drums, you just look at the part and you sing it. [scats] Learn the intervals. I didn't realize it but it was an enormous help towards the ear training. And after I got through with that I went to drums and I went very quickly and I played in his band and marched up and down these little towns in Jersey on Columbus Day and you know different things. It was great. A nice uniform with the green epaulets and you know, Italian style. Loved it. At home I'd practice you know. My mother said, "I wish you'd find something nice like a violin." She says, "Drums — bang, bang, bang." I was then in the garage you know. So I says all right. Violin didn't interest me at all, Monk, that sound, not my style. And I'm left handed you know. So one day I saw an ad in my uncle's grocery store and it showed a guy with two beautiful chicks on his arms, looking up at him adoringly, and the caption said, "If you want to be the life of the party, play a C melody Conn saxophone." I said that's what I want to do, be a saxophone player.

MR: It's interesting that they even said "C melody."

JJ: Oh, yeah, that was it. I don't think the tenor and alto were — well they weren't publicized. They were trying to push a new thing because the idea of a C melody saxophone — no transposition, you read it all. And it showed guys playing over the piano you know, just reading the piano parts. So I said well that's it. So I got this beautiful nickel plated Conn C Melody sax with little green buttons and little red things here and like that, and it came with a little book that said black means push it down, white means leave it open. Hey, only ten or twelve looks good to me. So I pushed it down and I learned how to play. And you know I actually didn't get a teacher yet at that time, because I felt that that was enough. Then I got a teacher and started brushing up on it, and coming from a small town like Plainfield, New Jersey, I literally was one of the few saxophone players in town. And when the good one left to get a job in New York, they called me and I was not ready at all. You know I had no idea about these things. I was a terrible reader, I couldn't read beans. But I had an ear though that was unbelievable. And I can recall, you know, guys would, the piano player would go to Woolworth's on Saturday and pick up the latest tune that was published. It would be like "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" you know this is the twenties, about 1925, 26 you know, and it was incredible. I'd just get on the job and I wouldn't — you know I'd listen and play around

him, you know just jazzing, which was kind of a style then [scats] everybody was peppy, you know, jazzy. And I played long enough to earn some money and help my father out. So in a sense I paid back the saxophone in a short period of time.

Jerry Jerome eventually played a role in the success of both the Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman Orchestras. After the big band era, he fashioned a successful career as a producer of commercial music and jingles, notably hiring jazz singer Joe Williams to sing the praises of a then popular beer. If I recall it went something like: “Carlsberg Light it's all right. Give a cheer for one good beer.” Joe Williams sang it *way* better.

[Musical Interlude]

You may recall from Episode 3, how the young drummer Eddie Locke was dramatically schooled on the bandstand by Roy Eldridge. Finding a mentor or a more experienced musician like Roy Eldridge to emulate was a critical part of the jazz learning curve. In some cases the age difference was minimal, but a few years of on-the-gig experience was significant and valuable in these pre jazz education decades. Dr. Billy Taylor, born in 1921, was a highly respected pianist, composer, educator and jazz spokesperson. In his formative years, he found veteran musicians to be an invaluable source of knowledge and inspiration. Here is Dr. Taylor, speaking in 1995:

BT: Well for me in the generation that I came up in the relationship between the older, more experienced musicians and the younger musicians was a good one. I mean they were very helpful, they were very — throughout my early days there was always some older, wiser musician that I could go to and say, “well how do you do this,” or, “what about so-and-so” or “what happens if—” and get an answer. And I didn’t represent a threat to them and you know, unlike the young man with a horn syndrome that people write about a lot, they had no, they were so secure in what they do, I was a kid, they say, “yeah come on kid — do whatever — you know, no problem.” It wasn’t teach you by shot.

MW: There wasn’t this gunslinger mentality.

BT: No, not at all. Even when I was older, and I mean I was as rash and brash as any other guys just coming out of college, man, I mean I thought I was pretty mean, you know, so I’m ready to you know, shoot down anybody that came along. I mean I got spanked and put in my place, just like everybody else. “Oh yeah you think you can do that? Try this.”

MW: And a little bit of that’s healthy.

BT: Oh, yeah, oh yeah. Because it went hand in hand with encouragement. I mean it wasn't a put down, you'll never make it, or you don't have any talent, it was you know, "you can do that but you can't do this."

Some fifty years later, a young trumpeter named Derrick Gardner had the good fortune to be a member of the Count Basie Orchestra, under the direction of Frank Foster. With plenty of time to fill on the band bus, the idea of big band arranging took hold. Frank Foster, affectionately referred to as "Fos'," was a master of this craft and Derrick wisely took the walk forward between the bus seats to tap into the resource. He shared that moment in our 2013 interview.

DG: When I first joined the band, in 1991, Frank Foster was directing the band. And he would, in between cities on the bus he'd be sitting at the front of the bus in his seat with a pad of manuscript paper a chart for big band instrumentation, and a black felt-tipped pen, and with no piano or anything you know. And he was doing saxophones [scats]; trumpets [scats]; trombone [scats]. And I was thinking about him doing that and I said wow, that's pretty slick man I think. I thought I wonder if I can do that. I got some ideas about writing, about a tune I wanted to arrange you know. And so I bought a big pad of score paper, manuscript paper, got my pencil, and I said [scats] and I wrote about eight to ten measures or something you know. And I figured, I said, man I've got one of the greatest arrangers in the history of this music at arm's length distance to me. I've got to learn something from him. So after I wrote out my few little measures I went to the front of the bus about a couple of weeks later and I said, "Hey, Fos', would you kindly take a look at this and see if I'm on the right path here you know." He said, "Okay." And he took it and looked at it and he says, "um hum, um hum" and while he's going "um hum" he took his cap from his black pen and he went "um hum," grabbed his red pen took the cap off and he said "okay that's all wrong, and this should be a B natural instead of B flat, and why'd you put a G sharp there that shouldn't be G sharp, and make that a G natural. And this thing" he caught a flat five here. "Why'd you put a flat five here when you've got a sharp five, don't do that, that's gonna clash in this chord." And he kind of did this oral thing, I don't know, but he said, "check that out." And he looked at it and he basically just bled all over my page. I said, "okay." So we were basically back on the bus and I touched my leg and said "whew." So we got to the hotel, and fortunately the hotel had a piano. And I played through all the corrections he made, you know, I said okay, I see, oh wow, boy, I

sure was off in my thinking here, wow. And so the next thing I did was I bought a little keyboard, you know, and about a month later I wrote about ten or twelve measures or something you know. And we're on the bus and I went to Fos' and said, "hey, Fos', would you take a look at this?" And so he took the cap off to the red pen and he says "well that's okay. These ones here, now that's wrong, you should do it like this." Each time, so I'd bring it back to him, so he said "okay," and each time I went back to him I had less blood on my page, you know.

Derrick is now a respected arranger and band leader in his own rite and cites Frank Foster as instrumental to his success.

It's jazz vocabulary time. First a quick review. Starting with Episode 1 we have taken note of the riff, the lick, vocalese, blue notes and the gig. We could have a jazz quiz. Nah, there's no quizzing in jazz, at least on this show. Today we'll spotlight a pair of connected terms, both have been part of jazz from the very first downbeat. First up, the jam session. Pretty much what it sounds like. Simply put, a session where players voluntarily get together, call tunes and improvise on them. Jam is slang for improvising, much like the terms, take a ride, get off, and fake it. Jam sessions provide a platform for young players to test their skill level against their peers. Jam sessions have also jump started innovations in jazz styles, most notably, bebop, practically born in these informal settings. Jam sessions are typically friendly and inviting but when reputations are on the line we enter the arena of the cutting contest, the extreme jam. Jazz lore provides us with numerous examples of the new cat in town who either makes or breaks their reputation in intense "battling" with potential rivals. Coming out on top at a cutting contest could actually lead to employment and record deals so the stakes were not imaginary. The cutting contest, which seemed to have thrived in noisy, smoke filled bars, is rather a relic now, while the jam session remains a useful tool for aspiring players.

[Musical Interlude]

As a child, Holly Hofmann learned jazz standards on the flute-a-phone, accompanied by her guitar playing father. She is now one of the finest jazz flute players in the business. Holly experienced a jazz education trial by fire when her mentor, Slide Hampton, inserted her in what he hoped would be a jam session, that quickly morphed into that other extreme thing. From 1998, here is Holly Hofmann:

MR: Was this a concert situation?

HH: This was a very big concert situation. This was many, many people. So it'd be a toss up. The cutting session was a nightmare of its own though.

MR: Well if you don't mind, tell me about that. Because I've often wondered what that would be like — I've never been in I think a real cutting session like that. Was it the tunes they called?

HH: It was the tunes and the tempos.

MR: The tunes and the tempos.

HH: It was a very famous group in New York City who were quite appalled that Slide brought this little flute player in to sit in with them, and they just decided that they were going to see if I could play. Thank God my dad had given me a list of cutting session tunes, like "Cherokee," and you know the ones that they really you know do it to you on. And they called "Cherokee," and it's one-one-one-one. It's so fast that they can't play it, but it doesn't matter because they want to see if you can play it.

MR: Put you on the spot.

HH: Right. And then the saxophone player who shall remain nameless came over and said "Well honey, do you think you can play 'Just Friends?'" And I said, "Yes I can." He says, "Okay, B major, one-two, one-two-three-four."

MR: Get out. He did that?

HH: Yeah. And Slide went over and said, "Guys, you know, don't do this, because it's making you look bad." And Slide just said — you will stay — I wanted to get off the stage and he said, "You will stand there and you will play because this is the tradition. This is what's been done. This is what Diz did to Miles. This is what has been done to people over the years as long as jazz has been an art form." So he said just go with it and do it, and to do the best you can, and I did okay. And you know, "Just Friends" in B major is a real trip. But thank God I was playing by ear.

MR: Yeah. Thank God you had started when you were five with your father doing that.

When I interviewed Holly Hofmann in San Diego she seemed to have recovered from the ordeal in fine shape as evidenced by her collaborations with Ray Brown, Frank Wess, Mike Wofford and numerous others.

Let's turn to saxophonist Phil Woods for a wrap up to this set. I can tell you from experience that veteran musicians like to school their students in experiences that no longer exist, perhaps requiring them to hand copy music despite sophisticated composition software, or insisting that they read liner notes from the back of LP jackets. Even though the days of touring big bands is long past, Phil Woods proposed a re-creation of the day-to-day grind of life on the road. His message to students, that there is a good deal more to learn about the jazz life than just the music, remains relevant.

MR: There's a couple of statements that I read that were kind of humorous from you yourself, about part of jazz education should be getting in a bus and riding around.

PW: Yeah. Get some ill-fitting uniforms, you know, very uncomfortable. The lightweight in winter, the heavyweight in the summer. A bus whose windows don't open and no air conditioning, no Walkmans allowed. Everybody's got to double. All the saxophones have got to have at least four or five cases to carry, and a big thick book of about 400 charts. Put everybody on the bus and just drive around in circles on the campus for about twelve, fifteen hours you know. Then get off the bus, everybody put on these terrible uniforms, call out a set, and the book is never in order. It's like Gene Quill style, you know, 1-2-47-93-207-5. Call out the set real quick — everybody gets all their instruments out. Okay, put the instruments back. Put the music back. Put your book in order. Hang up your suit. Get back on the bus. Drive around for another twelve or fifteen hours. Do it once again. And I think you might cut the wheat from the chaff.

MR: See how many kids graduate now.

PW: Who wants to do this? I mean it's an exaggeration on all points, because there are no more big bands where you could even do this. But I mean that's the way it used to be. I don't think it has to be that way. But nevertheless the hardest part of the music business is the traveling, whether it's a bus or a plane, or just the idea of existing. I mean it ain't about playing. The playing is easy. It's all the nonsense you go through to bring your horn up to the bandstand. That's the altar. That's the safe place.

I love that phrase, the bandstand as an altar, the safe place. In fact, my conversation with Mr. Woods occurred on a bandstand from which he frequently performed, the stage at the Deer Head Inn, an historic jazz club in the Poconos.

Thanks for tuning in to Jazz Backstory, Episode 4. In our next session we'll listen to jazz artists speak about the intriguing practice we call jamming, faking, taking a ride, the get off, the improvisation. I hope you'll tune in. See you on the flip side.

[Musical Interlude]