

# **Jazz Backstory Podcast**

## **Episode #27 — The Band Leaders — Benny Goodman**

[audio introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Season 3, Episode 27, this is Monk Rowe offering up a third take on bandleaders. We have arbitrarily, but with justification, cited Ellington and Basie as numbers one and two on the jazz royalty leader board, a Duke and a Count. There was another guy who played the licorice stick and literally carried the title “The King of Swing.” While this “king” business may have been jump started by an astute publicist, Benny Goodman can lay a strong claim to leading the most successful big band during the swing era, as well as sharing the best clarinetist title with rival Artie Shaw. And he is hands down, the head of the pack as far as being the subject of stories, myths and jazz lore.

Bassist and author Bill Crow gathered hundreds of musician stories in his marvelous “Jazz Anecdotes” book. He opened the chapter on Benny Goodman with this description of The Swing King:

Benny Goodman has probably generated more anecdotes than any other musician. He was a superior instrumentalist and an extremely successful bandleader. He was also absent-minded, inscrutable, ruthless, and often infuriating. His eccentricities on and off the bandstand gave the musicians who worked for him abundant material for backstage stories.

Here’s a couple of them:

One of the best Goodman stories came from vocalist Peggy Lee, concerning the time when he and Peggy jumped into a cab outside the RCA building. Awaiting instructions, the driver remained motionless while Benny sat there quietly for a few minutes. Finally the driver said “Well buddy?” Benny looked up with a start and said, “Ah, how much is that?” as he searched for his wallet and started to get out of the cab.

A second story is credited to pianist Andre Previn:

Benny came to the Roundtable in Manhattan to hear my trio. He wanted us to record with him and said he’d like us to be at his house in Connecticut at nine a.m. the next day to rehearse. “But Benny,” I said, “we work here until 4 a.m.” He suggested a solution, that we go straight home after the gig. During rehearsal we had a lot of trouble because it was bitterly cold in his house and our fingers were practically numb. Helen Ward, who was singing on the date, finally said: “Benny, you know what the trouble is? It’s just terribly cold in here.” “Benny said, “You’re absolutely right.” And he promptly put on a warm sweater and resumed rehearsing.”

Benny Goodman had a habit of absently staring for minutes at a time, and not off into space, but at individuals. His sidemen dubbed it “the ray” and nothing good usually followed it. Sonny Igoe filled the drum chair in Benny’s band for two years starting in 1948 and shares his “ray” experience.

SI: But it was funny in those days the way everybody said, “You’ve got to watch, boy you’re working for Benny — did you get ‘the ray’ yet?” Talk about the ray. I have a story about “the ray” if you’re interested.

MR: I am.

SI: Have you heard about that?

MR: I’ve heard about it but please go ahead.

SI: The thing is that he would, he even said to us one night at the Palladium in Hollywood he says, “You’ve heard a lot about the ray” he says, “I’m not really mad at anybody.” He said, “Sometimes I daydream and my mind wanders and I just happen to be looking in somebody’s direction. I’m not trying to stare them down or anything like that” you know blah-blah-blah. So okay. So now we’re in Canada doing a whole string of one-nighters in the hockey rinks. They used to put the boards down on the ice so people could dance, and then they would build this tremendous movie set for the band. Like they’d have the saxes down here and each section up. The drums were like up there. Way up at the top. Unbelievable. You couldn’t hear anything. You couldn’t hear the band you were so far away. And so and Benny’s down there. So we play the first set and Benny, he’s looking around and puzzled. And he looks up at me, and I had another small set down in front for the small group. So he looked up at me and he goes, “You come on down here and play down here.” Okay? So not a word was said. So I pick up my sticks and brushes and go down to the other set. And I played a set down there and I’m in seventh heaven because the whole band is right here in my ear. Oh what a feeling that is. But when you have the brilliance of the brass and the saxophones right, oh man, it’s hi-fi, the original hi-fi. So anyway okay we take a break. Now we’re coming back up and I’m down front now and I got a little closer and got myself comfortable and I have my music stand here in case I need some charts. And Benny’s right over my music stand like this, eye level. I’m kind of kitty corner to him. If I look there, there he is. Now he had the habit of having his clarinet under his arm like this, holding it this way. So he was in that pose looking right at me. And I could hear some murmurs in the background, guys in the sax section saying, “uh-oh, looks like it’s Sonny’s turn in the barrel tonight” or something like that and all these kinds of things. So he’s just looking at me over the top of my stand. Just staring at me. And Jeez I’d had enough. So I stood up, and this is true, I stood up and I went like this in front of his eyes. He never budged. And the band, everybody’s having hysterics. They probably thought I’d get canned right then. He said, “Sit down kid, what are you doing?” He never knew I did it. So he says, “Okay let’s go.” And we went on to the next number. That story got around town in New York even. “Jeez I heard what you did to Benny.” It

was funny. He never even acknowledged it. But I did see him ride some guys sometimes and I felt sorry for them. I think it was one of those things that every once in a while if he got in that mood if he knew he could ride you he'd ride you. There are people like that. If they know they can take advantage of you they'll do it, or try.

Benny was very particular about his drummers, perhaps that explains why Sonny Igoe was not the drummer for the Benny Goodman European tour of 1950. Remember Ed Shaughnessy from our Basie episode? At age 21 he found himself in the hot seat.

MR: Did you like working with Benny?

ES: I liked working with Benny a lot because I loved, he was playing great at that time and I got along with Benny, who was hard to get along with, everybody knows that. Most people know that and don't know what instrument he played. But when I used to sit in with Lionel Hampton's band, he said to me one night "I hear you're going with the old man." I said "Yeah I'm going to go to Europe with Benny." I was 21. And here's what he said to me. He said "Now if he gets weird on you, get weirder." I said "This is the key?" He said "This is the key." He said, "Didn't I get along great with him?" I said, "Yeah, you seemed to have a good relationship with him." He said, "Well just — if he gets a little out, go a little outer." So when this happened and I was late at a rehearsal, and I walked through the thing and he looked at me and he put the glasses down with the famous ray, and he started in, I said "Jesus, Benny, are we just here to jerk around or are we going to rehearse?" May God be my judge, that's what I said. I tried to go as far out as I could. And he said, here's what he said. He said, "The kid's right. Let's play." And he never said a word. And I was over 35, 40 minutes late. And this was Paris, his biggest concert. So you know he was going to chew my thing out real good, and I did a Hamp, and I went out on him, and I went out. And I'll tell you, every, I did it one other time in a lesser way, and he never bothered me. I think he thought the kid is definitely crazy but he's a nice little drummer, leave him alone. But he picked on everybody else, see. He cut out Roy Eldridge's solos in certain places because he was getting too much applause. He cut out Zoot Sims' solos all through Scandinavia because Zoot was more popular than he was. And may God be my judge, this is the truth I'm telling you. You know he was a very strange man. But thank God for Hamp — Hamp straightened me out, just go a little further baby and it worked like a charm. Isn't that a funny story?

MR: That's great, yeah.

ES: I never, he never told me a thing about playing. I mean a lot of people said to me, "You are going to get crucified by him. You're a bebop drummer." I said, "No, no, no, no. I'm known as a bebop drummer but I know how to play for Benny Goodman." What do you do? You play simpler, you play straighter. I mean you got to be a rocket scientist? You don't play behind Benny Goodman the way you'd play behind Bud Powell. I mean I don't understand when people think that.

There were a few musicians who did not have to resort to out-maneuvering Benny and truly enjoyed the experience of playing beside him. And perhaps opposites do attract. If there was a contest for the nicest jazz musician, guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli would be in the running. Here's Bucky from our 2003 interview.

BP: Then I went away with Benny Goodman in 1970, I went away for six weeks, with Ruth. I thought it was important to go with him because I always wanted to play with him. I had done a few gigs with him at the Waldorf, but this was a serious gig and I said let's do it.

MR: Well you seem to have a great relationship with him for, what almost twenty years?

BP: Oh Benny was the king, the king. I loved Benny Goodman. He was a teacher, he was almost like a father to me. We discussed a lot of things and we knew where each — I knew where he was and he knew where I was. And we always had a good time.

MR: You knew what he wanted?

BP: Yeah. I told you, I said he never — he rarely counted off. He would start the number and that was the tempo you had to pick — know where that second beat was. See? And I was so close to him, I'd watch his foot all the time, so I knew exactly where he was.

MR: Why did so many people have a tough time with him?

BP: They didn't understand him. You know they knew that he was tough, and then they would get smart with him, and then they'd start bumping heads, and Benny was the type of guy that was a sideman like they were, two times over. So he knew all the jokes and he always got the last word in. Always. One time we were going down south, and I won't name the trombone player, but when they got there he said, "Benny, we've got time to play golf." Benny said, "That's a good idea, let's go." They went to the golf course and played some. And when they got to the gig that night Benny introduces the trombone player to play a solo. The trombone player goes up to the microphone and says, "Well you all know this leader here as being the King of Swing, I played golf with him today, and his name is now the King of No Swing." Everybody chuckled and laughed. Now the guys playing a solo, and at the end of the solo, trying to hit a high note, and he's struggling to hit the high note, see? And Benny gets the clarinet and hits it for him, and he says, "All you gotta do is keep your head down."

It's jazz vocabulary time, with a brief off ramp to sports. Numerous jazz musicians are avid golfers, and Benny's crack about keeping your head down, was a put down to the trombonist who thought he could make the clarinetist the butt of his joke. Actually, for wind instrument players, keep your head up is an instruction often delivered by a annoyed instructors. Benny Goodman anecdotes frequently include the term, "Pops." Benny called everyone Pops, thus freeing himself of remembering names. Louis Armstrong also employed "Pops" for the same purpose while Lionel Hampton preferred "Gates". Lastly, Ed Shaughnessey referred to "bebop drumming", historically more active and less predictable than the previous swing style of

keeping time. Bill Crow's book includes a relevant entry about saxophonist Lester "Prez" Young, a swing era icon.

"In those days drummers were beginning to use the bass drum for accents rather than steady rhythm. Lester Young preferred the style of drumming he grew up with. "No bombs," he told the drummers, "Just chink-ty boom for Prez." Benny Goodman went for the chink-ty boom as well.

[audio interlude]

As a means to survival, sidemen frequently devised inside phrases and jokes to lighten the darker aspects of touring and dealing with a band leader's idiosyncrasies. Saxophonists Jerry Dodgion and Flip Phillips were section mates during a second European tour with the King of Swing.

Here's Jerry:

JD: All the Benny Goodman stories are true you know. That tells a lot right there. And I just learned a lot with Flip Phillips, what a wonderful musician he is. And he is to this day. He's 80 now and he still plays wonderfully, amazing, just great. And he was such a moving spirit in this band. I mean he always had a great sense of humor. And of course Bill Harris has a sense of humor. And we did a lot of laughing. It was great. Whenever Benny would start to get a little tense and you'd think what's going to happen now, Flip would call Benny aside and say, "Benny I'd like to talk to you for a minute." And he'd talk to him for a minute, and get him laughing, and come back and we'd be okay for about three days. He'd be laughing and having really fun. The music was better and everything's better. And then Benny would start to get — Flip would say, "Come here." He'd talk to him about, he'd talk to him. I remember hearing him talk to him once he said to Benny he says, "You know Pops, you don't have to make a name for yourself, you're already the King of Swing. And you know you should be having a good time playing music, like we are." He said, "You don't pay us enough that we should get nervous here." And it was just great. And then pretty soon he ended up by telling him, "Now you have to remember this: remember I-W-S." And Benny says, "I-W-S? What's that?" He says, "I won't snap." And oh, and just everybody would laugh and so that was the slogan of the tour: I-W-S. And without Flip it could have been very, you know, a lot different. It was just great in every way. Musically he played great all the time, every time.

And Flip Phillips:

MR: You spent a little time touring with Benny Goodman too.

FP: Yeah.

MR: Jerry Dodgion.

FP: Yeah. I saw — I didn't see him he called me before I came here. He's quite a player, Jerry.

MR: Nice guy. He told me to ask you about something. The I-W-S Tour. He made me promise I'd ask.

FP: I-W-S.

MR: You want to talk about that for a moment?

FP: I put it on my horn, on my saxophone case, I-W-S. Well he told you to say that. Well Benny used to pick on everybody you know. He picked on everybody but me, let's put it that way. And I-W-S was "I Won't Snap." I don't care what you say, I won't snap you know. And when people used to get mad at him, I'd go, "I-W-S." He'd go, "Okay." That's where that came from. I won't snap. Which I did one time. No I didn't snap, but Benny used to pick on everybody you know. So I got fed up. I went in his dressing room one time and I said, "Look, Pops, what are you putting down?" I said, "You're the best clarinet player in the world. You played Carnegie Hall, you played Symphony Hall, you played all over, the only place you haven't played is the moon." And I said, "Go on and play your clarinet. You play better than anybody." And his answer was, "You know, Pops, you're right." And since that time he went out and played and he played better than he ever played ever in his life. His wife, John Hammond came over, and said, "I never heard him play like that." He was like a baby, he needed a little

MR: Wow. He just needed someone to tell him—

FP: He needed someone to tell him. He was picking on every — which I told him the truth you know. He was the best clarinet player. He played all over. But he was picking on things. He had some kind of a complex I think. I said, "Just go out and play your clarinet. You've been all over the world," I said, "Go out and play your clarinet." He goes, "You know Pops, you're right." And that straightened him out. And he could play. Right after that, everybody was astounded. It just woke him up like.

A quick reminder, you can listen and view the complete videos of all these interviews , currently numbering 500+, on the Fillius — that's F-I-L-L-I-U-S, the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. Admission is free.

Skitch Henderson was a precursor to Doc Severinsen and was a household name when Johnny Carson hosted the Tonight Show in New York City. Mr. Henderson was a pianist and conductor and could list Frank Sinatra, The NY Pops Orchestra and the Tonight Show Band on his resume. During our 1998 interview he shared a revealing story about Benny Goodman:

SH: This was a funny night with Goodman. I asked Goodman, I think I must have asked him for two or three years to come and do the show, and he never would do it. Benny was Benny. "No, Pops, forget it, Pops. I'm not going to come down and have to rehearse." So at last I saw him one day and I said, "Benny, I'm going to give you a gift." I said, "I'm

going to get all of Fletcher's old charts and they have been blown up just a bit, there are five saxophones instead of four, and I want you to just — it would be good for you, and I want you to do it for the guys in the band. I asked him who he wanted to play piano, and it's interesting that he called Marian McPartland, as opposed to Teddy Wilson, which fascinated me. Anyway it was a hell of a night. Two years pass, and I'm conducting in Brisbane, Australia. Now I'm not in Omaha, I'm in Brisbane. And the phone rings and it's Benny. I mean I hear this voice. "Hey Pops, I left my braces in Sidney, do you have any spare braces?" You know, suspenders. So I said, "Yeah I guess so." And then that night after that concert he and I sat and talked in this smelly gymnasium where they played, and it kind of broke my heart because I said, we had a confession period to each other. He was talking to me about his unhappiness that he hadn't, even though he was a very successful player and guest, he had no placement with a group because nobody would work for him, he was so mean, let's face it. So I in this strange night in Australia said, "Benny, I have very few things that ever made me smile on The Tonight Show because there was always rankling from upstairs about the clients," and I said, "the band took care of itself and I just had to work out the schedule." But I said, "The night you came on and played it really thrilled me to hear that, that you could have that kind of virtuosity in every chair." I mean there wasn't a guy there that hadn't paid their dues a hundred times over. And there was dead silence and he looks at me and said, "Yeah, Pops, but it didn't swing." And then he launched into a tirade. He had just toured with a British band of five brass, four saxophones and three rhythm, like the old, old Benny, 1936 Benny Goodman Band. And that's what he was happy with. I'll never forget that. "Yeah, Pops, but it didn't swing." That, Bucky and I, Bucky Pizzarelli and I talk about. Because Bucky was good to the end. He'd go to the house in Connecticut and play with Benny, just the two of them, just to make him play. But it was strange that he had that.

MR: He wasn't even happy with perfection it seems like.

SH: Yeah. And he was such a perfectionist. "Yeah, Pops, but it didn't swing." That was, for me, almost like a curtain coming down in Benny's life with me. And I told the guys. Of course they thought what else do you expect him to say?

[audio interlude]

I suppose there is now a label for Benny Goodman's behavior, mindset and personality. There's a line in the tune, "It Had to Be You" that goes "with all of your faults I love you still". I can't say how many of Benny's sidemen loved him but he did have his fans dancing in the aisles at Carnegie Hall and importantly made a significant contribution to American society. In 1947 Jackie Robinson jogged out to the ball field with his Brooklyn Dodgers team mates and became the first African American baseball player in the major leagues. It was national and international news. Nine years before that a less publicized but equally momentous event jump started a major shift in the music and entertainment world. While racially mixed jazz groups had been recording

for some years previous, the inclusion of Lionel Hampton, Teddy Wilson and Charlie Christian at Benny Goodman Orchestra concerts opened the doors for mixed bands and eventually integrated audiences. Music has always been ahead of multiple curves. We'll call on the now familiar voice of Jon Hendricks for a wrap up on the King of Swing and Episode 27.

JH: Absolutely. Benny Goodman is an American social hero. He is a hero in the development of American society. Outside of music, Benny Goodman is a social hero. Because his love for the music was so pure that he just did not understand why he couldn't have Lionel Hampton in his band, and then Charlie Christian and then Teddy Wilson you know. He just didn't understand that. And the bean counters and the accountants and the lawyers, they tried to explain to him, "Benny, you'll lose your show, they will not renew you on the 'Camel Caravan' if you do this." So they gave him all those very hard and fast business reasons. But he refused to understand it. He said, "I like those guys. So he did what people have to march now to achieve. And it's because of the power of the music, a love of the music."

[audio interlude]

Tune in next week for Episode 28, our last focus on band leaders, a sampler offering that includes anecdotes about Buddy Rich, Glenn Miller, Stan Kenton and a band that had 2 ½ leaders. You might wonder how that worked out.

This is Monk Rowe for the Fillius Jazz Archive, thanks for tuning in.

I'll see you on the flip side.