Jazz Backstory Podcast
Episode #33 — Potpourri

[audio interlude]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Season 5. My name is Monk Rowe and I am the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Since 1995, we have been gathering interviews with jazz personalities from across the country. You can view these interviews on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. This podcast offers choice moments chosen from these 500 sessions, the actual voices of jazz personalities who were there, in the studio, on the concert hall stage, in the smoky night clubs and on the endless bus rides to get from one gig to the next. Our first three seasons featured themed shows on various jazz topics. This episode, number 33, will start with a story sampler, a potpourri of memorable anecdotes that just can't wait to be heard.

First, a bit of bumper music from our house band, the much in demand, Orchestra in a Nutshell.

[audio interlude]

Hmm, nice doit at the end. All right, first up, Mr. Skitch Henderson, a pianist, musical entrepreneur, television personality, and twice a leader of the Tonight Show Band with Steve Allen and Johnny Carson. Mr. Henderson speaks about his early years in the music business:

MR: What brought your family to the United States? You were a teenager?

SH: Yes I was a teenager, I was in England, but my mother died when I was very young and my father sent me to live with his sister who lived in Minnesota. I was obedient at the beginning and then the minute that she turned her back I ran away.

MR: No kidding?

SH: Yeah. I played with territory bands, pretended to learn how to improvise, and began to see what the truth in music was.

MR: The truth in music. I was curious you probably had classical lessons.

SH: I was a total, total, total square, still am in many facets, yeah.

MR: When you got your first inkling that there was more beyond the notes on the page, when was that, in the territory bands?

SH: Yeah, well even before that. I played in a saloon — excuse me, night club you're supposed to say I suppose but to me, I don't know, it was probably a partial brothel. They were building the Fort Peck Dam in Montana, and I played at a place, I can see its vision in my eyes, the Red Rooster was the name of it. That's where the "rowdies" as they called them, that were building the dam came at night to revel with the ladies who were in attendance. And there was a gentleman there, an Indian, his name was Art Hopple, he played tenor saxophone. And I thought he was wonderful. I mean I didn't know but it was incredible to me that they could say a song or something and he'd play it. That was unheard of to me. And he was wonderful. He had great patience, and said you know, "You must learn" you know "that everything isn't on the page and start experimenting." It was really, it was the beginning of another education.

MR: What was the repertory at that time. Swing tunes?

SH: Well I don't think we — only maybe "Honeysuckle Rose" was supposed to swing. "Lady Be Good" I think, that's about as contemporary as I got you know. And then there were, I'm ashamed to say I don't remember them now, but there were pop songs so-called. But that's when I first learned what standards were, you know Victor Young, "Sweet Sue," songs like that I began to learn. And then I began to learn what time meant, which is my — if you've been around my spa here, I collect clocks. I live in a time factory. That was really a tremendous beginning, which I didn't realize at the time.

MR: I guess in an atmosphere like a roadhouse or night club, you learned the importance of playing requests?

SH: Immediately. Immediately. He also was wonderful because he taught me to have a glass with color in your glass and he didn't want me ever to drink and he was an alcoholic. He didn't want me to start drinking. I was a teenager. And there was many lessons that were very meaningful in my life. Art Hopple. I loved him. I tried desperately in the years when I was, during the NBC years when "The Tonight Show" was really heavy and we had such viewership all over, I tried through every station owner in Montana and North Dakota, South Dakota, to find him, and I never found him again.

Musicians call this paying dues, learning on the job, what to do and what not to do. If they survived, most of them would then be required to pay monetary dues to the Musicians Union. Lyle Russell Henderson became Skitch because of his ability to quickly "re-sketch" any song in any key, a talent appreciated by singers, including Bing Crosby who encouraged him to permanently adopt the nickname. For another Skitch Henderson story check out Episode 27 entitled "The King of Swing" or view his complete interview on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel.

From the 1930s into the early ‘50s, the majority of aspiring jazz musicians spent time in large ensembles, the Swing Era big bands, when jazz-oriented music dominated the airwaves and filled the dance halls. Swing band musicians provide us with a never ending supply of anecdotes, as they moved from C bands to B bands and hopefully to an A band. Here’s one from our 1995 interview with trombonist Benny Powell concerning the Count Basie Orchestra, one of the elite A+ bands.

BP: I’ll tell you the essence of my experience with Basie. I don’t know if it’s the essence but it’s certainly the beginning. I was at the Apollo Theater working for a week in Joe Thomas’ band. Also in the band was Charlie Fowlkes, who had been with Basie. Basie was on a hiatus and he was about to form another band. So Charlie Fowlkes told me where the rehearsal was going to be, and invited me to the rehearsal. So I went, and it was nice. Pretty uneventful. I can’t remember, you know, I don’t think — at this particular time there were a couple of jobs I wanted. The job with Charlie Ventura. Bennie Green had been there and he was about to leave, so I really wanted a small situation to play in. Then I was waiting to hear from Illinois Jacquet also. In the meantime, the Basie thing comes up, I make the rehearsal and that’s fine. Charlie Fowlkes tells me when the next rehearsal is. And I come back and I make that also. I don’t know how many rehearsals we did, but pretty soon we started working, and the first date I played with Basie was October 31 I think, 1951. So I think at this time we would go out of town for maybe one night or two nights a weekend, and come back in town. Well this went on for just a little while, a couple of weeks. In the meantime, from Basie I’m trying to find out if I’m hired, if I have a job or shall I tell Illinois Jacquet that, you know, no. But there was a strange quirk about Basie. If he had something that you wanted, he would sort of play a cat and mouse with you, you know, dangle it in front of you. Anyway, he knew I wanted him to say yes, Benny, you’re hired. So the first time I, well you know I was sort of in awe of him anyway. I think I was all of 21 and he was the world famous Count Basie, so I would sort of find myself next to him by my own design, and I would say, “Well, Mr. Basie, how do you like the trombone section?” He’d say, “It sounds all right.” And that’s all I got out of that conversation. So maybe the next weekend I got brave enough to say, “Well Mr. Basie, are you satisfied with the trombones?” He said, “Yeah, it sounds pretty good.” That’s all I got out of that one. Next time I went to him, I can’t remember, each time I would disguise it. But finally I said, “Mr. Basie, what I’m trying to find out is, you know, am I hired? Am I with the band?”

He said, “You’re here aren’t you kid?” And every time after that for about four or five times, that’s what I’d get. “You’re here aren’t you, kid?” So finally I stopped asking him. And during the 12 years, I don’t think he ever said yes, Benny, you’ve got a job. You’re hired. But he was a wonderful man. I loved him. I was always in awe of older musicians. My dad died when I was seven, and I didn’t have any big brothers or uncles. So the jazz musicians — Lester Young became my uncle. Illinois Jacquet and Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. I have some funny stories about the bebop thing. I’m a bebop baby. Although I was born in New Orleans, it was the beginning of the 1940s when I was ten or eleven and so forth that bebop started. So I was deeply interested in bebop, so much so that I wanted to really, and they had all sorts of things, they wore berets and horn rimmed glasses—

MW: It was more than just the music, wasn’t it.

BP: No it was a culture. Yeah it was, it was a whole lifestyle. So anyway I saw these horn rimmed glasses, so I had to have a pair of horn rimmed glasses. So I started squinting around and bumping into things and so forth. But my mother, she was hip to what I was doing, but she finally broke down and bought me some horn rimmed glasses. So I expected to put on my horn rimmed glasses and come out and everybody’d say wow, look at that bebop musician. Unfortunately, there was a character in the news funnies. We were at war with Japan. His name was Mr. Tojo. Mr. Tojo also wore horn rimmed glasses. So when I came out expecting to be called Charlie Parker, “Oh, look at Mr. Tojo.” I was crushed. But that was, I went through the whole bit, man, you know, I guess that’s why I have a beard today because those guys had beards you know. I really like that whole, well, you were speaking of a sense of humor. That’s what I loved about the beboppers so much. Dizzy Gillespie was exactly that. He was nuts.

MW: He was a champion prankster.

I’m sure Benny Powell, a self-proclaimed “bebop baby,” had the greatest respect for John Birks Gillespie, and meant ‘nuts’ in the best possible way.

Trumpeter Joe Wilder aspired to a career in classical music but American society in the 1940s was not ready for African American musicians in symphony orchestras. Instead, Joe spent time with a number of big bands and relates how the members established a policy to maintain their self-respect as they crisscrossed the country in trains and buses.

MR: I read something, I think it may have been with Hampton, about the Barracuda?

JW: Oh, geez. Barracuda was a mythical person who came to clean up everything that was unsavory or whatever. Lionel Hampton for instance, his wife would buy a hat for him, a Stetson hat or some expensive hat, and when they put it on him in the shop it looked just great. And when he'd come out he'd have it on. Then the first time he took it off and put it on again, instead of the brim being like this it would be way, and of course he had it turned at an angle, and the guys would say, "You know that hat looks pretty bad" and someone would say, "yeah probably before the night is over Barracuda will have it." And before the night would be over, Lionel would go to sleep in the bus or on the train, and the hat would disappear, gone out the door of the train or someplace, they'd throw it away. Or if they had some arrangements, we'd get some arrangements, and nobody particularly liked it, and the guys would say, "well I think before this week is out Barracuda will probably end up with the first trumpet part, and the first alto part or something," and sure enough, Lionel would call that tune a couple of nights later and guys would start fishing and say, "Geez, I can't find the first trumpet part," and, "the lead alto part is gone." And "the trombone parts are gone." And it would be gone. They'd throw it away. With Dinah Washington, was with us, she joined the orchestra, and we were on a train making a long trip and she had these bedroom slippers on, like rabbit fur, and the guys would say, "You know this really brings the band down," you know, the guys were saying, "don't worry, Barracuda will take care of it." And of course she woke up the next morning and she had one slipper. They would do things like that.

MR: But to throw away the one is even better too. You know, if they're both missing — but one is perfect.

JW: That's who "Barracuda" was. We never discovered exactly who he was but he was there.

[audio interlude]

Our final swing band story comes courtesy of the irrepressible bassist, Chubby Jackson. As a member of the Woody Herman First Herd Orchestra from 1941 to 1945. Chubby had his share of ups and downs with the band, playing a concert one night at Town Hall theater in New York, the next night, a Sadie Hawkins dance at an Elks Club in Passaic New Jersey, and the night after that, no gig and no payday. In the early 1940s a number of classical composers became curious about jazz and the Woody Herman band was chosen by none other than Igor Stravinsky for his "jazz" (I'm making quote signs) experiment. The result, titled the "Ebony Concerto," didn't exactly swing. Chubby Jackson, as a jazz bassist, was used to providing a steady walking bass and reading chord changes. He shares the Igor Stravinsky experience.

CJ: Stravinsky, I got the bass parts two weeks before. It was like this. First note, one-two — four. I said oh man, you know I've been playing all these Ralph Burns things, Neil Hefti. I said look at this bass part. He came on, this little guy, and he went, "von-two-three-four." I got lost in the first bar. You know why? He didn't have the rhythm section together. The drums are playing [scats] over here, the guitar player was off in left field somewhere shagging flies, and the piano player was hitting [scats]. And I'm going bump — I fainted. But then, after the thing was over — oh, you know he wrote a hard thing for Flip Phillips. So Flip is struggling through the thing. So he stops the band, this little guy, Igor Stravinsky, and he said to Flip, "My goot fellow, what you are playing is vedy nice, but what I have written is much better." That did it. The whole band collapsed. Flip was sitting there smiling. But all those things were very exciting. We played Carnegie Hall with Walter Hendl playing, and that was such a victory for all of us. And the next night we played the Lyric Theater or something in Baltimore, and we're playing "Ebony Concerto," and there was somebody else — Walter Hendl couldn't make it. So one of Stravinsky's pupils, sidemen, whatever you call it, came in. The band got completely lost, and for the first time in my career, we got booed. Imagine? The night before it's one of these. We walked down Seventh Avenue and Broadway like we owned it. The next night we were booed. Shows you what life is, huh? Cheers, boos, cheers, boos. All through life.

I don't profess to be a classical music critic, but Stravinsky might have had better luck scoring his "Ebony Concerto" for the NY Philharmonic. Take a listen, you'll see what I mean.

[audio interlude]

A quick reminder that there are 32 previous Jazz Backstory episodes to check out, covering a wide variety of jazz topics. And the full length video versions of these interviews can be viewed on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. That's Fillius F-I-L-L-I-U-S. Become a subscriber, your hip quotient will increase dramatically.

It's jazz vocabulary time, a regular feature of this podcast. Every genre of music has its own set of terms, protocols and traditions. Skitch Henderson mentioned "territory bands." These were swing bands that played primarily for dancing throughout the midwest, following a circuit that crisscrossed between two or three states. A tough life but one that kept hundreds of young musicians working while they continued to learn and pay dues. Mr. Henderson also mentioned "casuals." Think casual attire, a gig that was not fancy or high pressure, perhaps a reception, birthday party or simply music to drink beer by. Casuals were usually played by pick up bands, one musician gets the gig then makes the phone work to gather a group for the night. Lastly, I mentioned a "doit" after our Orchestra in A Nutshell played a riff for us. A doit is a note falling upward, like falling up the stairs, that would be a physical doit. Don't try it. I once had my classical saxophone teacher at SUNY Fredonia ask me to explain and demonstrate a doit. It was a proud moment. It sounded pretty much like this one.

[audio interlude]

Speaking of territory bands and a tough life, vocalist Ruth Brown knew all about it. The "Queen of R&B" spoke to us in 1995, the first year of our oral history project.

RB: But the music transcended all of that and as I say, it was very personal in that we had to go to the people to present this music. And when I say go to the people, I mean go wherever there was a place that enabled them to dance. Most times it would be a barn or a warehouse, and in the warehouse, depending on what time of the season we went, if it was cotton time, the cotton was still packed up on one side. If they had been harvesting tobacco, tobacco was stacked up on one side. And if it was cold weather, a lot of times there was a barrel, a big oil drum in the center of the floor with a flame burning. People would dance and then go over and warm your hands and go back and dance some more. Most times the stages were not what you see now, they were most times flatbed trucks that had been rolled together and put some bricks under the wheels to keep them from rolling, and that was your stage, that's where you performed. Well most times, as I said, we worked warehouses and barns, and nine times out of ten that didn't have what you call the "second balcony." If we were lucky to play a county hall or an auditorium sometimes, they had a balcony, and in that balcony was called the spectators. These were the whites who bought tickets to come in to hear the music but were not allowed to come on the dance floor. Sometimes it was vice versa. The whites would be down and the

blacks would be up in the balcony and not allowed to come down. But in places such as barns, warehouses, where there was just one level, they would separate the races with a rope, and I say, a clothesline was what it was, an oversized clothesline. And most times someone had taken a huge cardboard and written “colored” which was the definition of our ethnic group at that particular time, and on the other side the card would say “white.” And the white spectators were allowed to dance on that side of the rope, and the black on this side. But what they did not anticipate was that the music generated such a joy, people got to dancing, the ropes would fall down, I seen it happen many times. And people would continue to dance, and just wander in to each other’s space. Nobody would say a thing for a moment, and then it would occur to some official that, uh oh, the rope is down and they’re dancing in the same space, and we can’t have that. And then somebody would run up on the stage and say, “Stop the music” you know and they’d just stop the music and go back and put the rope in place, and you had to go back on your given side.

Ruth Brown persevered and her talents were recognized with induction into the Rock & Roll and Rhythm and Blues Halls of Fame and as a recipient of a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. In her later years, Ruth’s versatility enabled her to be a welcome presence at jazz parties across the country.

It’s revealing to learn that even the most iconic jazz artists paid hard time dues. The name Dave Brubeck is familiar to all jazz enthusiasts and although I should have known better, I was amazed to hear Mrs. Iola Brubeck describe their early career struggles during our July 2011 interview. She emphasized the absolute need for passion and commitment in an artist’s life.

IB: Yes, the early years can be very, very difficult and this is the period when I think the chaff and the wheat are separated, that some people just say it’s too much to pay and I’ll go do something else. I’ll sell real estate, it’s a lot easier. And others hang on. And I think if you’re really serious about being a musician or an artist or a writer or a doctor, you have to have the desire to stay with it, no matter what knocks you get. And it takes a great commitment. And sometimes the price is pretty high.

MR: What price was that for you two back then? Did you ever have a discussion late at night when the kids were in bed? Maybe you had your sons by then. You know, this is too hard. One of us has to get a day job.

IB: Yes.

MR: Did you ever have that conversation?

IB: Well I have a very funny story about that. In San Francisco, this was before there was a trio or a quartet, and Dave was just doing casuals when he could find them. And it was very difficult to pay the rent and put food on the table and we had a conversation where Dave was laughing about in San Francisco at that time, all of the garbage men who came around sang Italian opera. They were all Italians. And Dave said, "They're the happiest people in San Francisco. I'm going to call them for a job." Well it never quite came to that but he did sell sandwiches, going up and down in an elevator in an office building. There were a lot of odd jobs that he did to put food on the table in those days, but it never occurred to either of us he would do anything but be a musician.

MR: Does it make you appreciate the eventual success that much more?

IB: Oh I think so. I think we look back on the times, those early days in San Francisco and we have lots of laughs because it was a formative part of our lives and our closest friendships were made during that period when everybody was struggling.

MR: It must have been very difficult when Dave hurt his back.

IB: Yeah that was a very tough time. That was very, very serious. And it did not only have an impact on our lives at that time, but it had an impact on actually the way he played the piano. Because the injury was such that there were some things that he used to do that he could no longer do. So he had to adjust, and do what he could do. And fortunately I think is that Dave never prided himself so much on technique as on ideas, and so you found other ways to express those ideas. And then of course the addition of Paul [Desmond] to what had basically been a trio came about because of that injury and when we came back to San Francisco from Hawaii he knew that he could not stay in a club and work all those hours, it would just be impossible with the back injury. And so to add Paul, who had been sitting in and enjoying it and wanting to play, then the burden was divided so that Paul could carry some of the load. But in those days, that back injury was really, really very bad. He would have the lights go out at the end of a set so people couldn't see him and he'd have to pull himself up on the piano because he couldn't just get up. And this was at the Black Hawk. And then go into the back room, where all the liquor was stacked, and that was the dressing room, and actually just lie down on the floor until it was time for the next set. So it was very, very tough. I think it was a big challenge. With the addition of Paul, was the beginning of actual touring outside of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland, Salt Lake, that was kind of what they did. And those were tough days too because the pay wasn't that great. Four guys in a station wagon, along with the instruments and, again, it had to be a great commitment on everybody's part. See the *Time* magazine cover was 1954. And one would assume this was sort of, you know, at the

> height. And actually it wasn't. I mean the pay was still low and the touring was still tough. It was a period where you began to see a brighter future but it wasn't a big payoff.

We are used to the idea that an artist's personal life affects the development of their unique style. Iola suggests that Dave Brubeck's diving accident at age 31 played a role in his blocked chords style of improvisation and his endless search for musical innovation. One never knows, do one?

I hope you enjoyed this jazz anecdote sampler. I have just now decided that the last episode in Season 5 will be a second grab bag of stories that need to be heard. Our next episode, number 34, will focus on the timely topic of women in jazz. Thanks go out to my tech expert Michael Ko, our transcriptionist and content editor Romy Britell, Doug Higgins from Hamilton's Tech Services and the members of our house band, Tom McGrath, Sean Peters, John Hutson and yours truly. All contributed to making this content podcastable. I just improvised that word, you're free to use it. See you on the flip side.

[Audio interlude]