

## Jazz Backstory Podcast

### Episode #8 — A Slice of the Jazz Life Part 2

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory Episode 8, A Second Slice of the Jazz Life, or A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Becoming a Jazz Musician. One of the numerous realities that aspiring jazz players learn is that gigs where you DON'T play jazz often pay better than gigs when you do. Thus the phrase "a gig is a gig." For a musician, a job playing any style of music is preferable to waiting tables, Uber driving, or stocking shelves at WalMart. These non-jazz gigs provide us with this episode's vocabulary words. We call them club dates or casuals depending on what coast you are on. Club dates and casuals can include private parties, ballroom dances, mall openings, and wedding ceremonies, and are frequently played by groups of musicians who have never met before, and we call that a pick-up band. We wrapped up Episode #7 with the statement "jazz musicians rarely lead boring lives." With that in mind let's hear what they have to say, after this non-commercial message.

[Musical Interlude]

Our first three stories, in one way or another, are about weddings. First we'll hear from Woody Herman drummer Ronnie Zito, addressing what occurs when a jazz musician's wedding collides with an important gig. Next up, a second story from Margaret Marian Turner, sharing how she became Marian McPartland in the midst of the WWII European Theater. Lastly, saxophonist and trumpeter Glenn Zotolla shares what can only be described as tune displacement at an inopportune time.

RZ: Yeah well I met my wife and we got married in '65. And that's when I left Woody's band. She's fantastic. I mean she like, saves my life you know. And actually when we got married, I've got to tell you this story if you don't mind, I told Woody I was going to get married. He goes, "You what? You're what?" We're sitting on a counter in a coffee shop. He says, "You're getting married, what? Are you kidding?" I said, "Yeah, we're getting married." I said, "We've set a date" you know. And he says, "Oh, you can't get married on that day," he says, "we have a big gig with Tony Bennett." He says, "You've got to do it, you've got to do it. Tony Bennett is on the concert" you know. And he says, "But I'll

give you a couple of days off before, I'll give you a couple of days off before if we can get this drummer from Texas" or something I don't know. Paul Guerrero was his name, yeah, I remember. And so anyway we get married that day and we had a reception and now I've got to go to the gig. I've got to leave the reception to go to the gig. I still had my jacket on. I think I rented a white jacket. I don't know what it was. And we leave the place and my wife has a gown on yet and we jump in the car and we go to the gig, which was about three, four miles away from the reception where we were. And we walk in and I just run down the aisle and jump behind the drums you know. And then Tony introduces my wife, she is sitting in the back. "Stand up," you know, he made a big deal out of it, that we just, you know.

MM: So the pay was pretty decent, and we played all over the country. Accommodations and travel were not always the best because you know there was a war on. And we would get — there would be bombs dropping once in a while. But then I switched and went with regular American USO. Somebody said, "Oh you ought to join USO, the pay is better and you'll meet all these wonderful American guys" stuff like that, and I thought ooh. So that's what I did. So then it got to be when they were going to have the invasion and after the invasion, they were sounding people who wanted to go over to France and of course I wanted to go and did go with the first group which was about a month after the invasion. And we went over in a boat and we had helmets and combat boots and everything the GIs had except the guns. You know I felt like MacArthur wading ashore onto Omaha Beach and straggling up the beach and we knew how to put up pup tents. Anyway we went through all of these miserably bombed and strafed towns that were just a mass of rubble, and we finally arrived in Belgium in a rest area, and it was called Eupen, and they had a big band and they had all kinds of stuff going on and the various shows would come there to rest. So that's how I met Jimmy, because he then became a member of this little band. But first they had a big party for him, all the band members and people are saying, "Jimmy McPartland's coming, Jimmy McPartland's coming," and I'm going, "Who?" I'd heard of Bud Freeman and Sidney Bechet, but I hadn't heard of Jimmy yet. And they had a party in this tent and they were going to have a jam session, and Jimmy always told me afterwards, "Oh I saw you across the tent and I knew you wanted to play and I said to

myself ‘oh a woman musician, she wants to play and I know she’s going to be terrible,’ and you were,” he says. But I really wasn’t terrible I think I just didn’t know how to play with a big band at that point, I assume anyway.

MR: You guys hit it off pretty quickly?

MM: Well you know yes we did. And I guess going out every day early, in the weapons carrier to entertain the troops and going — maybe we had to perform on a flatbed truck or they’d build a stage out of boards or it would be raining and they’d put a tarp falling over the piano and stuff like that. It wasn’t exactly the greatest. But they just loved it, and then they would wine and dine us and oh, it was something. So you know there we were, so I think it was a case of propinquity — that’s a good word — like we were there and so it just followed on that we would get together. And of course I admired Jimmy’s playing and he started to tell me that he liked my harmony and so one thing led to another.

MR: Real harmony.

MM: Yes.

MR: From a logistical standpoint it must have been interesting seeing what kind of instrument you were going to deal with every day — what kind of piano were they going to find for me?

MM: Well it’s funny because I thought it was going to be terrible, in fact one of the prerequisites of the job was that you would learn to play accordion in case there were no pianos. Oh, boy, I’ll never live this down. But I never had to actually play the accordion because they had these wonderful little like a G.I. piano which was not quite a full keyboard, like a small upright, painted gray, Army style. And I always got to play on one of those. I never had a problem. And then when we were in Eupen, Jimmy went out to somebody’s house, some people that had been branded as traitors, and removed the piano and put it on a truck and brought it over to the theater for me, and this was like, “Oh, you went out and got a piano for me, oh.”

MR: What a nice gesture.

MM: Yeah. So that sort of fixed the deal right there. So we got married over there in Aachen, Germany.

MR: Here’s a question, I’ve got to warn you, this hardly ever works.

GZ: Well okay.

MR: But I'm going to ask it anyway. Do you remember your worst gig ever?

GZ: Yeah I do. Instantly. I was playing a wedding in Long Island, and I play, the bride walks in and I'm playing like really affirmative, the bridal march. And I noticed that the bridal party was, the wedding, the groom and the bride were kind of looking at me while I was playing but I'm playing this thing with authority. After I got done the band leader comes over and says, "My God, Glenn, do you realize you played 'Happy Birthday?'" I played [scats]. Yeah.

I played it with such authority they just kept walking.

MR: Wow.

GZ: Yeah wow.

I think Ronnie Zito's bride, Patricia Graw, should be acknowledged as the ultimate good sport for agreeing to share her wedding day with Tony Bennett and Woody Herman. Actually that's not bad company. Marian McPartland was ushered into the American jazz scene by Jimmy, eventually becoming the more recognizable name of the couple. And perhaps you're wondering how a seasoned pro could confuse "Happy Birthday" with "The Wedding March," well keep in mind that Glenn Zottola was not reading music, but playing a long ago memorized tune, and check it out [scats] they both start on the 5th tone of the scale and head up to one, and they are both happy occasion, ceremonial melodies. I can sympathize with Glenn. My own tune displacement occurred on a solo keyboard gig, an 80th birthday party in the recreation room of a local synagogue. As the party warmed up a request was made for "Havah Nagilah." Now I have played "Havah Nagilah" plenty of times [scats] very distinctive. But instead, after confirming that sure I know that tune, I launched into this [scats "Tarentella"] Ouch. If I had kept my wits about me I might have segued into a rather spontaneous melody, coming out like a Tarentella Nagilah, but I clearly did not have my wits about me. But all these years later, it makes for a podcastable anecdote.

[Musical Interlude]

Let's expand on "a gig is a gig." Jazz musicians who are devoted to their art can cite any number of reasons to pass on a club date: "I don't play rock & roll, the club has a lousy piano, I don't dig the vibe in that joint." But for practical reasons, the majority of musicians accept a gig and

pocket the bread, realizing that a singular devotion to an art form may not pay the bills. Our jazz tales continue with pianist Jay McShann and saxophonist Charles Davis, who speak about the pitfalls and particular demands of performing in funky night clubs. We'll also hear from Frank Strazzeri, who describes his unexpected good fortune while filling the piano chair for a rather well known singer.

MR: I bet you had to play on some bad pianos over the years.

JM: Oh, we've had some awful pianos. I know I used to — sometimes we'd get pianos and the piano would be so bad I'd get drunk. Yeah I'd get in front of that mess you know, and say, "Well now we ain't going to have no piano tonight." I says, "Brown, there ain't going to be no piano tonight, you'll have to sing with the horns." And some of the pianos you know you'd have to tune, like we used to tune up with A. Sometimes you might be tuning up with C above A. Or maybe F below A you know. Now that's how far they were out of tune some of them. And a lot of times if the band was playing in A flat I'd probably be playing in B flat or B natural. That made us have to go get drunk on that night. I had my excuse already made out. I'd get in front of that mess, cut out and go back to the hotel about 11:00.

MR: Did you ever do much rhythm & blues playing in your career?

CD: Yeah well Clarence Henry was rhythm & blues. Clarence Henry. I played with quite a few rhythm & blues during the course of my career coming up.

MR: Did you ever feel you had to really do that honking tenor sax thing?

CD: Well that was a part of growing up. There was a lot of honking. John Coltrane had to honk. A lot of people had to honk. That was a tradition — honking and walking the bar. Sometimes you were forced to do it. Sometimes you were forced to do it at gun point. That's in Chicago sometimes, people put a gun on you because they knew the solos so you couldn't fool them.

MR: They knew the solos?

CD: The audience knew the solos. They paid that much attention to the records. They'd get the records, everybody knew the solos. So I know this happened to quite a few different people.

MR: That they wanted to hear what was —

CD: They wanted to hear what was on the record. If you didn't know it then you had to go home and learn it you know. You couldn't fool 'em. People wanted to hear "Flyin' Home," they wanted to hear the solo. They didn't want you — if you couldn't play it then you'd get off of that.

MR: That's some kind of pressure.

CD: Yeah.

MR: They don't teach that in school.

CD: No, no, no, no, they don't teach you that. And if they want you to walk the bar, they wanted you to walk the bar. You couldn't say that wasn't in your contract. It's time to walk the bar, it's time to walk the bar. That's another thing, people wanted to see a show you know. When it was show time then you had to go out and put on a show, you couldn't sit around and be that cool that you couldn't put on a show saying that's not my thing. So if it's show time you get up and put on a show.

MR: You want to get paid, you better do it.

CD: Yeah. You may do it and don't get paid. Guys put on a show laying on his back and playing the saxophone behind his back, anything to get through that scene. That was the tradition during that time.

MR: You were on the Hawaii special? And the first live world satellite broadcast.

FS: Yeah.

MR: Wow.

FS: He was a groovy guy. He was a nice guy. Every time — he and I sort of hit it off. I mean he was such a big star, that just being a musician playing with him, like myself coming in from the outside, you have to know the situation other than his immediate guys that had worked with him for years and knew him good. But a guy like me coming in adding on, didn't know him at all and I'd just make the rehearsals without him. You play the music and the conductor and so forth, and you play the music so you don't really get to know the guy until he goes on stage and he sings and you just play the music that you rehearsed, right? So I still didn't know him. So one night he had a party at the hotel and so I go to the party, I go with all the musicians and their friends or wives that were invited to go. So we all go to this huge suite up atop, we were in Oklahoma somewhere.

And so all these people, of course it's a huge star, they're all gravitating towards him, everybody wants to meet him and what have you. So he's way in the other room and I was with this trumpet player and we were like against the wall over here. Sort of feeling left out, both of us. And so we're just looking around. And he's meeting people. Every time he turns around "hello" and he's meeting this person and then he meets this person and he goes over to another group of people. So I says "John, let's get out of here." I said, "I think he's going to come over here man," I said, "What are we going to say to him?" So lo and behold, he does come over. And I'm standing there, all of a sudden he's got his hand around, and he's a big guy, and he's looking at me and I says oh man, what am I going to say with this guy? So my wife had told me that he was into karate. I says, "Hey Elvis," I says, "I hear you're into karate." He loved that. That was his bag. That was his groove. He says, "Oh really?" He says, "Let me show you some things man." He says, "You wait here, Frank." So he leaves and everybody's following him to his bedroom, and there was about three bedrooms up there in this huge suite. So I go out on the veranda, out in the, we're on the top floor of the hotel, and on the outside of things, like you're outside. So I went out and had a drink you know. All of a sudden I hear everybody saying, "Hey Frank, Frank, Elvis is looking for you." I said this has got to be putting me on. So anyway I come in and he's all dressed up in a karate outfit. He spends the whole night talking to me about karate. And little by little everybody split. Because he found his groove. He found someone that would listen to him about his thing. And I think he took a liking to me. I know I did, I liked him, he was a groovy guy. I thought he was a groovy guy. A real down home guy. He wasn't like a lot of stars that I worked with. I worked with Les Brown, with Bob Hope, I worked with a lot of stars, and you don't, you very seldom get in contact with them. But Elvis wasn't that kind of guy. And the next morning I look under my door, and there's an envelope, and there was 300 bucks in there, just to talk to him. And another time I talked to him again, another 300. And another time I talked to him, another 300. Every time I talked to the guy he gave me 300 bucks, plus the way we lived, and we were getting good bread every single day, I was making good money because we were doing one-nighters, and staying at the best hotels, and our own plane, our own chefs, our own pilots, our own stewardesses, everything. It was unbelievable. It really was. It was like, for a musician, being on the road, it was the best

gig you could possibly get. I can't think of anything that could have been any better than that.

Hmm Three C notes just to listen, that's like psychotherapy bread. Some gigs come with perks I guess.

You may recall Eddie Locke's anecdote from Episode #3, when Roy Eldridge shocked him out of his uninspired drumming with a fiercely delivered "I'm Here!" Here's a delicious slice of the jazz life from cornetist Warren Vache, describing his own encounter with the always competitive Roy Eldridge. Then trombonist Benny Powell will follow with a story of two jazz giants who were decidedly non-competitive, the very epitome of jazz class.

WV: Where else could a nineteen year old C student from New Jersey sit alongside Vic Dickinson and take a master class for four years?

MR: That's the great, that's the probably the most effective way of learning is absorbing that on the spot.

WV: Oh, yeah, I mean there was Vic to work with and I'd wait until about eleven o'clock because it took Roy just about that long to warm up, and then I'd walk into Ryan's and buy a beer, and Roy had the most competitive, wonderful nature of anyone I'd ever met. Any other trumpet player was a call to arms. So he'd look down the bar and see the competition in there. And the roof would go off the joint. And I mean I'd get to watch — not only do you get to listen to Roy play — playing is one thing — you get to watch the way guys lead the band, the way they interact with the people, the way they run the room, because that's essentially what you're doing. You know, you can't, I never did think that you could stand up on the stage with your eyes closed and really fully communicate with people. In that situation, Roy was absolutely magnificent. He just had everybody engaged and kept them that way, and entertained the hell out of them.

MR: He couldn't resist a challenge I guess.

WV: Well I mean he used to make that, but that was, there's another thing that I'd like to address. I mean Roy was always, always up for a challenge, always would put you in the situation of a challenge. And somehow, when he beat you, you never felt put down, it was an honor. A quick story is one night I think we got done at Condon's early. It might



have been about one o'clock in the morning, and I was across the street getting into my car to go home. And I see Roy coming out of Ryan's, running across the street. He says, "Where you going?" I said, "Well they let us out early, I'm going to go home." He says, "Oh man, you've got to come help me on the last set." All right, Roy Eldridge is asking me to come help? Sure I'll be there. I must have had a neon sign on my forehead that said "sucker." I walked into the club, he bought me a drink, we went up to play the last set, Roy calls a tune, we play the first chorus, and he points at me to take the first solo. So I played a couple of choruses. And he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Came to get me, huh?" He picked the trumpet up in his left hand, played five choruses, no note under high C, his right hand in the jacket pocket swinging it back and forth on two and four. Shot me, dug the hole, put me in the box, put the box in the ground, stomped on the dirt, and looked at me and smiled. Now I walked out of there feeling absolutely wonderful. I'd had a lesson, you know, I mean I couldn't get mad at this guy are you kidding? It was a magnificent thing to me.

BP: My first impression is how blessed I am to have been a part of that because as I hear it I think about Freddie Green, I think about Marshall Royal, that was just the two things that jumped out at me right away, since Marshall Royal played lead alto and it was so solid, then you could hear Freddie Green in the back. I don't really remember as much from this date as I do from the one we did with Duke Ellington.

MR: Oh, both bands?

BP: Yes. It was called Battle Royal. I think I was like a kid in a candy store because I think where I was seated, I was sort of like I was in eyeshot of both Basie and Duke Ellington, and I kept pinching myself, I said you're not here, you're going to wake up any minute. And these guys were such statesmen themselves, because someone remarked the other night at Lincoln Center on the Duke Ellington thing, about that same date. I think it ended up with Basie playing solo on "Take the A Train," and Duke playing a solo on "One O'Clock Jump." But those guys were such statesmen, they'd say, "Well Mr. Basie, this number just demands your presence." "But no, Maestro, I wouldn't dare." Oh man those guys were cool. Oh man. And I was a little kid, you know, and I'm looking at these guys. And I don't believe it. But also I remember one of the biggest sensual thrills I've ever

gotten, on the end there's both of these bands playing these huge chords, I think that arrangement was by Jimmy Jones who used to be accompanist for Sarah Vaughan. I think he had a hand in that. But man at the end there's some power chords in Sonny Payne's solo. The drum is playing through all of that. Oh man, if you were in the room, sometimes try it yourself. Go to somewhere in a pretty enclosed room, and turn up the sound. Oh man. I mean it will just do all sorts of thing to yourself. It will rearrange your cells.

Now there is an entry for a musicians bucket list, having your cells rearranged by the Count Basie and Duke Ellington Orchestras.

Let's wrap up with a "seemed like a funny idea at the time story" from the celebrated trombonist Bill Watrous. The setting, a rather bizarre late 1970s television show that combined questionable talent with a large circular metal disc.

MR: Okay. Here's a hard question. Can you think, in all the T.V. shows or whatever, some of the most ridiculous things you've seen happen on stage or in the band or—

BW: Well I was involved in a lot of them I'll tell you. There was a show on T.V. years ago called "The Gong Show." Remember? With Chuck Barris? Well I at that time was fooling around with digeridoo sounds on my instrument. And I could literally sort of talk syllables and words. And I got so that I could recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and I was playing, right? I can't do it anymore for some reason. But I was doing something for Milton DeLugg, who was the leader, and I did it and he fell down laughing. He said you've got to come and do that for Chuckie. So I go over to NBC and here's all of these bald headed people in diapers and strange old ladies in tutus, and the strangest, most amazing freaks you ever saw, and I went and did this thing for Chuck Barris. Well Chuck spit out his orange that he was eating. He said, "You've got to do this." So they rented me a California State Highway Patrolman uniform, and they gave me a name, Frederick Plumducker. Officer Freddie Plumducker, honest to God, and they put me on this show. And what happened was at rehearsal, Joe Howard, the trombone player on the show didn't know me when I came out, and he got laughing so hard that I couldn't do my bit. And finally after rehearsal I went over to Joe and I said, "Joe, it's me, Watrous. Watrous." Geez, I thought it was you. I says, "Whatever you do, don't do that on the

show, if you can take a tranquilizer or something, do it, because I want to get through this thing.” So I went out there and the show is done in scenic downtown Burbank, and it’s the home of all of the right wing extremist groups. And they took offense. Because they put an American flag on either side of me when I went on in my highway patrol uniform and started this thing. And they started hooting and hollering and of course J.P. Morgan got up and gonged me and got me off of there, mercifully. And I luckily got out. They were, “Hey you don’t like this country, go back to Russia you commie pig.” I mean they’re yelling at me and I’m on the stage, right? So I took my wife was with me and I said, “honey, let’s get out of here before this show gets out, because if these people see me, I’m dead meat.” We just got out of there with our skin.

[Musical Interlude]

Bill Watrous did survive the ordeal and went on to play on numerous recordings, including the one you're hearing in the background.

This is the last episode in season #1 of our Jazz Backstory podcast and it's time to use the phrase that musicians are fond of, “We're going to take short break, we'll be right back.” Sincere thanks go out to the tech team at Hamilton College, to student Jason Lever for assembling the audio puzzles I send, to Romy Britell for interview transcriptions and sage advice, to James Winner and his tenor sax in Episode 5 and to bassist Sean Peters and the Orchestra in a Nutshell. We will be back soon for Season 2 with tales of life on the road, studio stories, discussions of jazz and race and marvelous life moments from jazz cats. We'll see you on the flip side.

[Musical Interlude]