Jazz Backstory

Episode 11 — Swing

> So I left with the Count Basie Band, which I loved. I mean let me tell you, that was another great day for me to be able to join a band like Count Basie, because I was going to get a chance as a writer to sit where swing had really started. And remember that there was the original rhythm section, which they called the "All American Rhythm Section," with Walter Page, Jo Jones, Count, and Freddie Green. So for me that was going to be another education deal. Because I'm going to sit here now as a writer, I can just observe really what's going on. And what's going on with this swing.

[Backstory Theme Music Interlude]

Welcome to Episode 11 of Jazz Backstory. This is Monk Rowe and our opening words came from the arranger, band leader and trumpeter Gerald Wilson. Some fifty years had passed between his gig with the Count Basie band and this 1999 interview, but Gerald's delight in joining Basie was still evident, and he provided a perfect set up for our topic today: "What's going on with this swing?"

Swing and swinging can be used as nouns, adjectives and verbs. Grammar aside, it's a feeling and a key component of jazz since day one. Much like improvisation, swing is challenging to define, even the highly respected *Grove Dictionary of Jazz* begins their entry with a disclaimer, stating, "SWING: a quality attributed to a jazz performance. Although basic to the perception and performance of jazz, swing has resisted concise definition or description. End quote. With the help of our interviewees and some choice riffs, we may get closer to what's going on with this swing, but some mystery, happily, will remain.

Let's roll back in time. Starting in mid 1930s, and for some ten years, swing was the thing, jazz based music at its most popular level, it even earned a designation — the Swing Era, big bands crisscrossed the nation, each band with its own fan club, the leaders became household names, Basie, Goodman, Ellington, Dorsey, Lunceford and Hampton. If Jimmy Lunceford's lead trumpet player left for Count Basie's band, it made the front page of *DownBeat* magazine. This was popular music for young people and it dominated the air waves and record sales.

Music scholars, dancers and listening fans would agree that the swing feel, the groove, is mostly generated from its signature rhythm. The name Basie has already been mentioned three times in this episode, and during our 2003 interview, jazz historian Phil Schaap shed some light on why the Basie name is synonymous with swing.

MR: For you what was it about the Basie sound that made it distinctive?

PS: Well that it's an orchestra that is able to incorporate, without everyone being a genius, the rhythmic revolution of the 1930s. But I don't think I could have told you that in 1956. I mean in other words that the innovation, the suppleness of the beat that is elasticising and making more fluid the energy of swinging jazz rhythms.

MR: Is that the rhythmic revolution?

PS: That's what I'm calling the rhythmic revolution of the thirties. There's an innovation of genius. Roy Eldridge, Billie Holiday, Charlie Christian, Benny Carter, Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson, Lester Young if I haven't said him of course, and a few others. But the transference of it to others and the coherence of it as an ensemble display where the parts are combinable and examinable separately, I hear that merger in the Basie band first, other than an individual display. Billie Holiday displayed it on her lonesome, but the Basie band displayed it as an aggregation.

"The suppleness of the beat that is elasticising and making more fluid the energy of swinging jazz rhythm." Wow, Phil, that's pure poetry and deserves a musical follow up. Let's call on our Orchestra in a Nutshell to play two contrasting riffs. Check it out:

[Musical Interlude #1]

[Musical Interlude #2]

Most of us will feel the first one as swinging, jazzy, as if we're at a table in a formerly smokey night club. The second one, quite different, sounds like reggae or ska, and conjures up rum & coke, dancing on a beach. There is a underlying musical difference between these contrasting styles, a key ingredient in the 1930s rhythmic revolution. Saxophonist Jerry Dodgion in a rather off the cuff manner, highlighted this stylistic difference while speaking about studio work.

JD: Then when I did stay in New York, the work that I started to do mainly through — I knew Jerome Richardson from San Francisco and we had played together in Gerald

Wilson's band there. And so when I came to New York he encouraged me to come and everything and he helped me a great deal. And on my first recording date when I was here he called me because he was contracting for Quincy Jones. So my very first record date was with Quincy Jones and Dinah Washington. That was, like it was wonderful. So somebody said, "How do you like New York so far?" On my first date it was good. Wonderful.

MR: That's wonderful.

JD: But that's — In those days the pop music was still jazz oriented more so. Then later on it became more rock & roll, even eighth note oriented. So it changes, it's changing all the time.

MR: Can I just back up? You just said "even note oriented."

JD: Even eighth note.

MR: Yes. See I never heard anybody quite describe — we know how swing eighth notes go and how rock & roll eighth notes go, but no one ever exactly said the music became even note oriented. That's very interesting to me.

JD: Well some drummers, if you talk to some drummers, they might tell you that. Because that's a basic thing. It's an even eighth note as opposed to the twelve eight, smooth flowing.

In addition to the fascinating anecdote about his entry into New York studio scene, Jerry Dodgion identified a major difference between swing and almost every other style of music, including classical, rock, funk and Latin styles — the swing eighth notes vs. straight eighth notes.

With that in mind, here is a first for our Jazz Backstory podcast, a bit of music theory, now don't tune out, it's not in my nature to get too technical. Let me move over to Studio B.

Truth be told, moving to Studio B involves swiveling my chair to face the keyboard. Most music we hear and play is based on 4. 4 beats in a measure, one quarter of the measure is one beat, and it's designated as a quarter note 1-2-3-4. If we split the quarter equally in two, each one gets a half a beat, now we have 8 notes per measure, 8 times a half equals 4. Simple math. Typically we vocalize eighth notes with the beat number followed by "and" 1 & 2& 3& 4&. There is a

curious power in these eighth notes. For centuries they have been played as they should be, 1/2 of the beat, then the other, both equal, as in "Hall of Mountain King" 1& 2& 3& 4, 1& 2 3& 4 The way they're written on the page, the look of them, reinforces the, "equalness" if that's even a word. Musicians call them straight eighth notes, or EVEN as Jerry Dodgion did. Somewhere in the early twentieth century, self taught musicians, especially in the southern U.S. started playing the first eighth longer than the second. But not (3/4 + 1/4 deal) that's a march as in [Glory Glory]. Jerry described the swing long/short as a 12/8 flowing feel. Back to the math, each quarter now getting three parts, , a triplet on each beat [scats]. Now connect the first two of each triplet, tie them together [scats] , snap on 2 & 4 and it swings! [Plays into to "In the Mood"] Now we could switch the feels with our two examples but it sounds like some sort of musical comedy skit as in "Hall of the Mountain Swing." Or I'm In a Straight Mood " [plays]. You get the idea. Jerry Dodgion made note of the move in 50s popular music from a jazz orientation to rock & roll. Swing eighths to straight eighths. Frank Sinatra to Chuck Berry. Swing players had to make the transition to the straight feel when required and it was difficult for some, but rewarding from a gig standpoint. Guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli described the required switch in studio work by stating: "We had all jazz people, the drummers were all from the big bands, and once they got the that straight eighth note feel they were in." end quote. The arrangers listened and heard it, tried to write those triplets as triplets, and finally figured out this is way too tedious. They just stuck with the eighth notes and wrote "swing" at the top of the paper if they wanted them swung. Swing and straight Same language, different dialect. It's a fascinating, complicated part of American music history. It's also the end of the theory lesson.

On occasion, a particular song and recording can be rejuvenated by changing that dialect. This change usually hinges on the drummer and we'll turn to an anecdote from our 2003 interview with Bernard Purdie, perhaps the most recorded drummer in the history of popular music.

MR: So you're talking about transitioning the music really from more of a swing thing into straight eighth notes.

BP: Yeah.

MR: Can you — this might be a hard question — but can you remember any particular sessions, particular songs where this kind of thing happened?

BP: Sure. Mickey and Sylvia.

MR: Oh with “Love is Strange.”

BP: “Love is Strange.” See their first record, the first one that they did in the early fifties was mostly all swing. But it was re-recorded in ’60, ’61. I re-recorded it and brought it with a different sound. Almost straight. But if you hear the record that’s been played all these years, in the last forty years, it’s been their record of the straight time. Not the one that was the shuffle, but more of the straight time. Strings and all. The sound that they had with her moaning and doing two or three different sounds, having the background singers just follow her and not do things on their own. It made all the difference in the world. And that’s the one that’s been played for over forty years, that particular record.

You may recall Nat Adderley and his childhood music memory from Season 1, Episode 2. I am a huge Nat and Cannonball fan and some years ago I composed and recorded a tune, modeled after Sack O’ Woe, an Adderley Quintet recording, that used both straight and swing grooves. The tune is called “One for Nat,” recorded here by the SUNY Fredonia Alumni Jazz Ensemble. You’ll a groove triptych, starting with a funky straight, followed by swing, and back to the funk. Here’s “One for Nat” (Adderley that is).

[Musical Interlude “One for Nat”]

If you were on the dance floor with this music, either your feet would adjust to the groove change, or you would fall down, which is why we don’t play this tune at dances.

Of our 450 interviews, my session with Steve Allen was one of the most intense. He fits the definition of a polymath and his slightly sarcastic sense of humor made for a challenging hour of conversation. He pointed out that swing is not about rhythm alone, but also has its own signature instrumental and vocal sound. Here’s Mr. Allen from our 1999 interview:

MR: The last thing I want to do is wrap up here, but I’m going to let you know of the time. It’s about five of eleven. I don’t know where you have to be.

SA: It’s okay, I can stay until about eight after eleven.

MR: Eight after, okay. Can you define for me when you hear something that’s really swinging, why? Why does one thing swing and the next thing doesn’t?

SA: The dominant factor is rhythm I think. Well people would think of that right out of the barn, but that isn't all there is to it. There are certain ways of voicing instruments, if you're talking now let's say about a big band, 14, 15, 16 pieces, there are certain kinds of harmonies sometimes, now it's so common we don't even notice it or comment on it, but sometime in the late 30s you began to hear more chords. Even if it's a simple chord, a C chord let's say, where they added the sixth note of the scale instead of the tonic. [scats]. Let's see C-E-G, to those three notes they added the A which is the sixth note in the group. And why that sounds hipper, or cooler as they would say today, it's not easy to explain in purely scientific terms, but that's the way it is. That had probably happened first, even before it happened with instruments it happened with voices. We all remember the term "Barber Shop Quartet" [sings] down by the ol' mill stream. That's nice stuff, but the harmonies are as simple as possible. Only the necessary notes are there. There's no enrichment or adornment. But then about 1937ish or so a group called The Merrimacks, if you can find any of their old recording, play them sometime with this comment, you'll see what I'm talking about. They were the first people to add the sixth and to add other harmonic enrichments — where they got them I don't know, you'll have to dig them out of the grave and ask them I guess. But you can hear it in their old recordings. Then from The Merrimacks, that opened the window of opportunity, I'm very big with clichés today, and you had groups like the Pied Pipers, the Mello-Larks, Mel Torme had a great group, the Meltones I think they were called, in which the harmonies were more typical of what was also happening at that time in voicing the reed sections, the saxophone sections, of orchestras. When they only had four notes, they could still put in the sixth and some enrichments, but when they added a fifth saxophone, which now all the big bands had had for years, somehow that enlarged the harmonic possibilities and we associated that kind of harmonic hipness, with big band with jazz, with swing. Parenthetically isn't it marvelous that young people now love that music? I sometimes feel like saying, "Hey, where were you a year ago, I tried to tell you it was great." But you had to wait for some guy to have a hit record with it. Okay.

You heard Steve say "young people now love that music" and I am reminded that at the time of this interview, there was a swing music revival going on. Bands like The Squirrel Nut Zippers

and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy were swinging like mad, making the charts and playing major venues with swing dancing in the aisles. It was pretty hip, while it lasted.

In this episode, I have repeatedly drawn a distinction between uneven and even eighth notes, swing and straight, jazz versus rock and funk. Drummer Ed Shaughnessy, most known for his years with the Tonight Show Orchestra, has a different take on swing, where and when it's happening and when it's not.

MR: Here's a hard question for you. Sometimes music is hard to put into words.

ES: What's the secret of life?

MR: Well that's easy compared to this. I looked in the Webster dictionary this morning, under "Swing." It says "jazz music, especially from 1935 to 45, characterized by a strong driving rhythm and improvised counterpoint." Are you able, in talking to students or anybody in fact, to put what swing is into words?

ES: I finally think I can do it. I struggled with it for a long time. But I really think I can do it. The thing is before I do it I want to say to you how often swing is used as a noun representing the type of music. Right? They'll say the swing bands of the 30s and 40s, right? And they played swing. Okay? We're going to deal with it as — really how would you describe it if I'm going to go about swing as a feeling? Would we say it's still a noun but it's— I mean if I say "it swings" that's like an adjective, isn't it? Okay. Well I just want to make this clear to anybody who watches this tape. Because what I find the problem is sometimes is that youngsters, and even oldsters, they mix up the terms "to swing" and lock it in exclusively to jazz music. Now I think bluegrass music swings like hell. It swings. Now what is that swinging I'm talking about? Without drums, right? It's infectious. The main thing I think that swing means, for me, is that it's an infectious beat that makes you want to move, whether it's to dance or to sit and tap your foot or to tap your hands, but it makes you want to move in a sense, and in a response to it. It brings something out in you. It gets into you. You know? Maybe it makes you happy. But mostly it makes you want to get with it. Infectious is the best word I can use. That's why I don't like the fact that someone, who is very hard-headed about anything other than jazz, like if I say to them sometimes, well you know some of James Brown's funk rhythms would swing you out into bad health. "Well I don't like rock & roll." I say look

man [scats] — I say if you could hear that and you can't move yourself, you are dead, they should embalm you see? But that's a form of swing, do you know what I'm saying? If you hear a bunch of Africans playing [scats] and they're playing that twelve-eight stuff like the Watusi people do, and even if you don't see them dancing, if you hear that it's infectious. It gets you going too. So to me, any music, like bluegrass, or jazz, or funk music or Watusi music, if it's infectious and communicates to you rhythmically, and gets a visceral thing going. That's what I think swing is about. And I don't think it's an exclusive property of jazz. I really don't. However, some people will play jazz and it doesn't swing. That's the part that I think people should understand. To be swinging is a certain feeling. You can have jazz people playing but it ain't swinging too good see. So I think — I'm not going to say the mistake — but I think the error sometimes is to feel that if you're playing jazz it's necessarily swinging. No it's not necessarily swinging. You know? It might be a little cerebral, a little abstract, and you don't feel very much of that visceral communication. It might be very good, it might be very technical, but it isn't kind of getting to you. That's the absence of swing. That doesn't mean other things can't be there. Improvisation can be there. Imagination can be there. You know? And feeling can be there. But I've heard for instance a bass and a drummer, both of whom were very good well known, and they don't play good together. They are not compatible. It never settles into a good, unified pulse. So it isn't swinging too good. See?

MR: It's so curious the way—

ES: That's a good definition, don't you think?

MR: I like it, I love the word infectious.

ES: I'm not saying because it's mine, but I mean infectious is really what swing is about. Hey, yes. [snaps fingers] When I see audience, and I'm playing and I see some of that, it doesn't have to be everybody, if I see just a smattering of that, I think we're getting it across. And if I see nobody moving, I don't think we're getting it across.

As an acknowledgement to Ed's words of wisdom let's see if our house band has any James Brown inspired funk.

[Musical Interlude]

Anybody moving out there? I think Ed Shaughnessy is on to something, it's certainly infectious.

Music teachers quickly discover the need to vocalize rhythms and grooves for their students. Near the end of my time in high school I had the good fortune to play in an all county jazz band, led by the soon-to-be-famous Chuck Mangione. He provided my first experience with a conductor that effectively vocalized swing and funk, the two differing dialects. In my memory I can still hear him, even his count off was distinctive, sort of like [Vocalize count off]. He had that swing eighth notes thing, and then the funk. [scats]. You get the idea. I don't know if they teach this in music school these days, but they certainly should.

So I hope we have shed some light on this swing thing, such a key ingredient in the jazz story. Now this is a generalization, but historically, jazz from its early 20th century beginnings to 1950 or so was swing-based, thereafter the performers and composers became influenced by even note music, Latin, rock & roll, R&B, and funk. If I could gather our podcast subscribers together in a classroom they would hear two recordings to help make this clear. For the swing, The Count Basie Orchestra playing Frank Foster's masterpiece "Shiny Stockings" and for the opposite side of swing "Birdland" by Weather Report. They are both iconic in their own way, and as Ed Shaughnessy stated, they are both snappable, clappable and foot pattable, in other words, infectious.

Jazz Backstory is available at Hamilton.edu and from your favorite podcast provider. You can view the full video interviews with the musicians in this episode, and 400 plus more on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. My thanks to Jason Lever for assembling these multiple excerpts into a coherent podcast, to Doug Higgins, our Digital Scholarship Technologist at Hamilton College, to Romy Britell for interview transcriptions and content consultation, and of course to Milt Fillius Jr. Hamilton class of '44 for his vision and passion that led to this jazz oral history project. Our next two episodes focus on "going where the gigs are" jazz life on the road. See you on the flip side.