

Jazz Backstory

Episode 12 — Life on the Road Part 1

[Musical Interlude]

Thanks for tuning in to Season 2, and the 12th episode of our Jazz Backstory podcast. I'm thinking back to our first season, and a jazz vocabulary word that keeps coming around. The word is gig. The quest for gigs is what drives Episodes 12 and 13, titled Jazz Life on the Road, the pun is intended. In case you are starting with this episode, I am Monk Rowe, Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College, and a gigging musician.

If we exclude Covid statistics (which I'm happy to do) almost everyone who has a job, GOES to work, the time they go and return, the method of getting there, and what is expected each day, varies from one situation to another. Musicians in particular, need to go where the gigs are. After multiple local appearances, they eventually have to hit the road and get out of town. In town gigs are a luxury, you have to take roads to get there but they hardly qualify as road gigs. Last weekend I played Saturday night in a fine Utica NY hotel. I left home an hour before start time and was home an hour after the music ended. With travel to and from, set up and tear down and a stop for pizza on the return trip, the whole gig took five hours and there was even a ramp to make the load in easier and comped drinks at the bar. I take for granted how uncomplicated most of my gigs are. Some local gigs are more challenging. Bassist and vocalist Nicki Parrott described the logistics of a typical NY City gig , and I quote:

I don't know how many gigs I've done in midtown where you really have to call someone. "I need help." Sometimes I have to take a PA system particularly if they want me to sing and play the whole night. So you've got a PA, an acoustic bass and an amplifier and the gig is upstairs at the Crown Plaza on 42nd Street. How do you do this? Put your hazard lights on, panic, get help, get your stuff inside, make sure someone is watching it, go and try to park. It's a nightmare. You have to be organized, the more organization and the more time you give yourself, the better off you will be. You have to know midtown Manhattan to survive it. it's rough. The hardest part — it's not the playing and singing and smiling on those corporate gigs. All it is, is show up, play, sing and smile, do what the gig requires , you're back into the music. But the other stuff, wow. That's a challenge.

End quote.

This rather long intro brings us to the topic at hand: serious road stories. Our previous episode on swing was timely, as the most challenging travails were experienced by big band road warriors during the Swing Era, as they gigged from one coast to the other.

First up, our friend, guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli whose first road experience occurred with the Vaughn Monroe Orchestra when he was still in his teens. In addition to the band bus anecdote we get to learn what a typical gig entailed in the mid 1940s.

BP: Vaughan Monroe almost gave up the band thinking that he was going to be drafted, but he didn't. So he said let's get the band back together again. And there were a lot — about seven or eight chairs open for anybody. So my trumpet friend called me and says, "Come on, come with the band." So I jumped on a bus and played Binghamton — oh Scranton, Binghamton and Rochester, and went back to school the following Monday.

MR: That's neat.

BP: But the funny thing was my father gave me 15 bucks out of the cash register, and I came back with change.

MR: And you were buying meals and the whole thing?

BP: Well that was the era of the dime tip and the blue plate special you know. You couldn't spend any money. Everything was a buck.

MR: But do you recall thinking of that as really inexpensive?

BP: No I didn't.

MR: Right, because everything was relative.

BP: Fifteen dollars was a lot of money. Three five dollar bills. Anyway I came home with change, and a steady job. So I graduated the week after, and I went on the road with Vaughan, and we played about ten weeks of theaters, just a week at a time — you know, Cleveland, Baltimore, Boston. Places like that. Pittsburgh. And I got a geography lesson at the same time. And it was very thrilling for me.

MR: In the book that I was reading about you there is a short bit about a fire on your bus?

BP: Oh yeah.

MR: How did that come about?

BP: Well you know we had the brakes fixed on the bus. And somehow in hot weather, if you used them too soon they explode — not explode, they expand. And we were in West Virginia and we were going up and down and up again and all of a sudden one of the trumpet players in the back, Sleet, said, “Hey there’s flames coming out of the back.” The bus driver said, “You’re crazy.” “No,” he says. We stopped the bus and sure enough. We were playing cards. We all jumped off the bus in our tee shirts. And the bus burned down in about 15 minutes, right down to just the four wheels you know. And we had a gig that day. So we waited for a Greyhound to come in, jumped on the Greyhound and went to the theater in— oh I can’t think of the name of it, not Wheeling — some little town. And they had no backstage so the band had to go right down the center aisle, the way we looked. No uniforms — the uniforms were gone. Luckily the instruments were saved. Yeah. They went in another truck.

MR: I see. I was going to ask you — when you say we played a theater, what exactly does that mean?

BP: Well the bands used to play theaters. Like similar to the Paramount for instance. Now they’d play an opening number and they’d bring out the singer, then they’d bring out a juggler or a comedian. And we’d play a couple more numbers, then they’d put the picture on you. But you’d do that four or five times a day.

MR: Ah. Did they have a screen that came down?

BP: No the band came out of the pit. First they would show the news, a newsreel. And that’s when the band would assemble in the pit. As the newsreel was finishing the pit would come up and you’d see the newsreel and the band, you know, briefly. And they’d go through their act. Sometimes we’d play for a big singer, like some other singer, like Dinah Shore, Frank Sinatra.

MR: Okay. Someone that wasn’t in the band but you would play their charts.

BP: Yeah. And we had an animal act too. It was funny, a funny situation. A juggler.

MR: You learned to do just about everything.

BP: Yeah you had to play that show. But when you do that for ten weeks, it gets a little crazy.

MR: Did you ever have any train wrecks?

BP: Oh yeah. Yeah. Frank Buck was the guy that brought all the animals over from Africa.

MR: Oh my God. I see.

BP: That was a no-no. And once down in Philadelphia when he came out on one skate, there was a cat came up from the pit see? And he saw the cat and he chased the cat right down the center aisle. He didn't care about the act or nothing. Then once during that one tour with this, it was a chimp really, the saxophone players would put candy on a string so as he came out he would scoop it up and eat it. Then when they had the string they pulled it and he wouldn't get it see? He'd miss it. And he jumped on the whole sax section trying to get that candy.

It behooves us to remember that these traveling musicians were young men, and even though a gig is a gig, they were often looking for ways to spice up the day to day, repetitive grind of playing shows.

[Musical Interlude]

The road tales I've heard from these fellows reminds me of a verse from the tune Kansas City, slightly altered here: [sings] I might take a bus/I might take a plane/if we have to take a car/we'll get there just the same. Cars, buses and trains were the usual travel mode and you'll recall saxophonist Lanny Morgan's story of his one nighter with the Maynard Ferguson Band, NY to Chicago and back. Here, Lanny describes a typical car trip in detail.

LM But the driving was terrible. I'd set out like at 8:00 at night from, we used to leave from Junior's or Charlie's Tavern at 52nd and Broadway, to go to Chicago or even Pittsburgh or some place, and it would be snowing so hard you couldn't see somebody standing as close to me as you are, and have to drive all that way, and usually we'd leave late so we could catch the day sheet, which meant you'd check in about six in the morning and you'd grab a few hours sleep, and then you'd leave right after the gig and come back to New York to save money.

MR: You mean you drove to Chicago for a one-nighter?

LM: Oh yeah. Several times. No we did that quite a few times. We played Chicago and places like that.

MR: And probably the thruway system, the roads were a long way from where they are now.

LM: The thruways and the turnpikes were finished, but the interstates were not. And of course even though we got reimbursed for tolls, it took time to stop and go through the toll booths all the time. And when you're on a roll, you know I couldn't drink during that period. I had to stay sober. Because driving through a blizzard with these guys— but you just get on a roll and you want to go. It's kind of hypnotic, and I really shouldn't have done that. But we would try these new interstates and they were a drag because you'd take an interstate for a hundred miles and you'd think oh this is wonderful, and they were brand new roads and so forth. And then it would say "END." End of interstate. There were no decent roads. There were like a lot of two lane highways, back woods gas stations where you were almost afraid to stop sometimes, we had a couple of carloads of kids follow us into a gas station in West Virginia once and they had chains. You know they were going to get us good. Fortunately our car was newer and we got out of there fast. But there was a lot of that really. It was not completely safe to be traveling, even with six guys in the car.

MR: Did you have a mixed — was that a mixed band?

LM: Yes.

MR: Black and white?

LM: Yeah.

MR: Did you ever have any trouble? Well you said down in the—

LM: Well we didn't have any trouble, we just had to, we couldn't stay at the same hotels. I remember Richmond, Virginia, Jackie Byard and Rufus Jones were on the band, and we had to take them to a colored hotel, and then we came back to ours. And of course they could eat there at their own hotel, but when we were traveling down south, you had to go into like a diner and bring them something to go. And Chet Feretti, who was the lead trumpet player when I first joined the band, an Italian and a dark-skinned Italian, and I was like a southern California beach boy at that time, where even in New York I found the beach right away and got a tan as much as I could. They wouldn't serve us in a restaurant in I think it was either Delaware or Maryland, down the coast from New York, because they said we were too dark. And I had my license, and I said, "Wait a minute," I said, "look here, it says Caucasian." And he said, "I don't care what it says," he said,

“you ain’t gettin’ no food here.” And it was a drag, because we were getting food for the rest of the guys in the car too see? So we just had to keep going until we found some more hospitable people.

Lanny Morgan introduces the subject of race and the jazz life which we will explore in subsequent episodes. Like Bucky, Lanny found work in the recording studios after the big bands faded, but being a California beach boy, he chose the LA studio scene.

Tenor sax player, Carmen Leggio fits the definition of a journeyman in the music world. He was a member of the sax section in bands lead by Gene Krupa, Woody Herman, Thad Jones and like Lanny Morgan, the Maynard Ferguson Orchestra. Carmen describes the challenge of fulfilling a basic human need during tours on the road.

CL: Terrible. You really never ate right, you always had to look for — I never ate right on the road. I only ate right when I was with Gene Krupa for three years. For three years we did locations, and the money was very good with Gene. Then I lived much better. But when you’re on one-nighters on the bus like with Woody Herman, or in cars with Maynard Ferguson and so on, I’ll tell you, when I was with Maynard, the payroll was 120 a week, okay? 1959. 120 a week. And then if you only did two nights you got paid pro rata. So you had to eat on that, you had to pay for your hotel, so you literally were not in good shape with that kind of thing, with the road. It killed a lot of people, it hurt a lot of people. You eat on the run, it was hamburgers or a couple of eggs, anything that could be affordable to you you know. But you can never really take care of yourself that good. And that’s why guys used to get out of hand a little bit you know, just to forget about it. It was not — one-nighters, in a big band is not an easy life. Thad Jones, when I played with Thad Jones and Mel it was much better. They paid okay, had a good bus, and it was better. But when I was with Woody in 1964, we had a bus that had no heat in it and we’re going up through Detroit and Canada and so on, and the money — a lot of times we would ask for an advance on our pay and you couldn’t get that because the money wasn’t coming in properly and so on, so you were starving. A lot of times you were really hungry all the time. It was a hard life, a very hard life.

It's jazz vocabulary time. We heard the term LOCATION gigs and ONE NIGHTERS and they mean just what they sound like. A band leader lands a gig in one place, a LOCATION, a hotel or club, for a week, maybe two. The band members get to stay in one place, sleep late, do their laundry, maybe a bit of sightseeing with their spouses if it's not too pricey. The one nighter: play the gig, pack up and return to your regular seat on the bus, and hope that the driver slept while you were playing.

Clarinetist Kenny Davern had a unique way with words and his description of the day to day routine on the road with Ralph Flanagan explains why he never joined another big band.

KD: We did sixty one-nighters in ninety days. We made the most amount of money any band had ever made on the road, I think it was — whatever it was, I don't want to quote any figure I'm not sure of. And all the guys would come up to me and said, "Oooh, wow, you're the big time." "Big time my ass" I said. Horrible. It was awful out there. You know, shaving on the bandstand before the gig. I mean it just wasn't—

MR: Tell me more. Why it was awful?

KD: Well first, maybe you're driving through Keokuk, Iowa, on the way to Ames. Or maybe it was Ames on the way to Keokuk. Anyway, the most you might see was a Stewart Drive Inn, a root beer and hot dogs. You know you'd have that and an ice cream. Back in the car, some more traveling. You get to this place, you're in your jeans and sort of like a man dressed in hell. Well it was hot. The cars didn't even have air conditioners in 1953. Some did but ours never did. And you'd get there at maybe five, six o'clock and you're right at the gig, at the ballroom. And there's the ballroom. The ballroom is like on Highway 483 midway between, you know, Chicago and Detroit. And to shave you had to plug in, there was one outlet by the bandstand. You'd plug that in, each guy would take a turn with his electric shaver shaving. Next. And then there was like one sink in back of the bandstand with cold water only and a naked light bulb hanging down, and a cracked piece of a mirror. And that's where you washed up. And you put on a shirt. Nylon shirts had just come out. Short sleeve nylon shirts. And it was the summertime. Because you needed something you could wash out right away and hang up and dry and cotton shirts just weren't it then. I mean you could do that but it wasn't really practical. And so you

know these shirts were hot, I'm telling you, you closed up that collar and you put on a black bow tie, which you had to make yourself in those days. And then you put a wool jacket on over you, and your tuxedo pants. You were roasting. And you did four sets, four hour sets, and then you packed up the horn and folded up the book and put it on the pile and packed up your horns and they put them on the truck and you got in the car and you rode, let's say maybe 350 more miles, and you got to the gig maybe — you'd go through the towns at that time, obeying the speed limit because they were all speed traps, and if you'd go one mile over they grabbed you and you had to pay off. So all the drivers were aware of this. And a lot of times you almost got killed speeding on — on a three lane, the middle lane was for passing in either direction going through. Well I mean you're zooming along and all of a sudden you hear, "Hold on to your hats, fellas," and you look up and you see two 8-wheelers, one on each side of you, one going this way and the other one going that way, and you're in the center of the two of these guys. Very frightening. And a lot of guys got killed in those kind of precarious road driving things at the end. And then you get into the town where you're going to go, you know you left at about 11:30, 12 let's say. Maybe about 6:30, 7 o'clock in the morning you've rolled into the other great town which boasted of a Milner hotel at \$3.75 or \$2.75 a night, I forget which, and you couldn't check in you see. So you'd have to put your luggage, the bell captain would take your luggage. And these were very cheap hotels. And then you'd walk around town. You'd have breakfast in one of those Dew Drop Inn places, maybe visit the local music store to see what kind of instruments they have, because good horns were still relatively easy to find, premium horns. Of course none of us had any money, but if we needed it we would borrow or whatever. And then when you checked in maybe at 11, 12 or 1, you may have gotten a haircut, whatever. Anything to kill some time. And you slept 'till about five o'clock, and that's when you know you had your wake-up call, you got dressed, you shaved and showered and you went down to the local buffet, well cafeteria style.

MR: Right.

KD: And you had spaghetti or whatever, depending on what part of the world you're in. And then you went to the gig and that night you were able to stay over but you left nine o'clock the next day because again, you had 350 miles to go. So you know you do that—

MR: Day after day.

KD: Yeah. It was really quite hard. But you know as a kid you don't care about that. I think I made I think I made — pay was \$125 a week, and I cleared \$117.50. I could save money, believe it or not, in 1953.

MR: Because the rooms and the meals weren't that expensive.

KD: Right. Every other night it was \$2.75 or maybe \$3.00.

MR: Well that experience may have put some perspective on things for you.

KD: I expected much more. From then on I just got very — like I said when I came home I said — oh boy they all said, you know, starry eyed, and thought I'd be stage struck. “How was it?” “It was the *** worst” I said. Plain and simple. It was the *** worst

Kenny knew what he wanted and what he wouldn't tolerate. After this road travail, he avoided the touring bands and eked out a living as a soloist and leader of small combos.

Air travel was rare for big bands in these days, too expensive and ground transportation at the end of the trip would still be necessary. Gigs at military bases were one of the exceptions and bassist Jimmy Lewis experienced his first plane trip as a member of the Count Basie Orchestra. It proved interesting.

MR: I was glancing at your notes and you had a story about flying with Basie? It sounded kind of interesting.

JL: Yeah, you know we had some Army camps to do. So we had to ride in the Army planes, you know the ones with two tails you know, and that big thing in the middle. So we got, one day we got on this thing going to one of the camps, and it was noisy, this thing was so noisy you couldn't hear. Now Billy Eckstine and all those guys were used to riding. But me, I was scared to death. We all had on parachutes. Basie had on a parachute over by the door you know. So we were going to Texas, Corpus Christi, Texas. So the plane took off, but before we got there, something happened just before we got ready to land. They couldn't get the landing gear down. So the guy kept punching it in back, there was some long pole they couldn't get it down. So the man said, “We're going to have to circle around and go further, and come back around again.” So they went around, and started

back to see if we could land, and still couldn't get it open. So one of the guys, the one who was right by the back door here, pulled that big door open. Now we were flying. So I said, "What's this — what are you doing?" The guy said, "Well see, we're trying to get a little more air in the plane." I said, "Air in the plane!" I said, "man, we don't need no more air." So he said, "Well, I'll tell you, we're having a problem with the landing gear." And he said, "You might have to bail out." And Basie looked at me. He said "What do you mean bail out?" And so he asked the pilot, he said, "Look, are you going to bail out too?" The pilot said, "No, I've got to stay with the plane." He said, "Well I'm going to stay with you," he said, "I'm going on with you." "Because," he said, "if I jump out and I pull this string and the 'chute don't open up," he said, "man, I can't fly — I don't have no wings." Well everybody was laughing. And so Billy teased me, he said, "Man" he said, "we're going to crash." — oh baby, I don't know what to do. And I'm running back and forth. It's funny, you know I'd never been in a plane before anyway. So finally we land. Everybody set there about 15 minutes before they got out of the plane. It was quiet — boy you could hear a mouse — quiet you know. So everybody started getting out one by one, taking off the parachute, taking their instruments and go outside. We got outside, and we had to play under some trees. We get out there, and set up under these trees out there, in the hot summertime. Oh, man, it looked like a big field. And people, as far as you could see. As soon as we started playing, all these little chrysalis come out of the tree and started falling on the bandstand. And it's falling in the bell of the horn, and the guy'd dump it out and keep playing. I got me some string, tying it all around my pants legs you know, in case they would crawl up my leg. And so when we finished the job, now we've got to take this same plane and go to California. So me and Wendell Cully, we walked out to the plane and looked in, and we see all these parachutes on the seats, and Cully said, "You know they look like dead people, man." He said, "We can't take this thing, can we?" I said, "No." So I said well let's go tell Basie we don't think we're going to go on this. So we went and told Basie and he said, "I don't blame you, but," he said, "I've got to stay with the band and so you go ahead and see if you can get a train out, and meet us in California." So we did. We got a train. We got to California three days later. And I think we missed one gig. But we got to the gig and we played and everything. So we

asked Basie, “How was the trip?” He said, “Man that was the worst trip I ever had,” he said. “Good thing you didn’t come, because somebody would have died.”

Anyone want to go on the road?

The British author Chris Sheridan penned the nearly 1400 page book, *Count Basie-A Bio Discography*, which includes the bands itinerary from October 31, 1936 to April 26 1984, the day that Count Basie died. A look at their schedule in 1942 reveals an estimated total of 340 gigs, a mix of location jobs and one nighters. Despite his exhaustive research, Mr. Sheridan had to occasionally resort to this type of entry “June 1st -30th, untraceable one-nighters and theater tours. For days and nights on end, the Basie bus, penned “The Blue Goose,” sans air conditioning and a bathroom, was a second home. A life not for the faint of heart.

So why did they do it? What was the reward that justified this life on the road? We heard tenor player Billy Mitchell refer to it as “a calling,” and Jerry Dodgion declared “It’s why I’m alive.” They do it for that winning night on the bandstand where everything is in sync. The ensemble is playing as one, the rhythm section is in the pocket, the soloists are playing above their own individual abilities, and the audience becomes a participant in the joy. The musicians celebrate—even if briefly—getting paid to do something special that only a chosen few can do. For a while they can set aside the tedium and trials that brought them to that moment, and revel in a feeling that can’t be truly articulated.

You can visit the *Fillius Jazz Archive* YouTube channel to view the full interviews. Purchase our book “*Jazz Tales from Jazz Legends*,” from Amazon.com Well stay on the road for our next episode and hear anecdotes from Ruth Brown, Al Grey, Joe Wilder, Sonny Igoe and Mona Hinton. See you on the flip side.