Jazz Backstory

Episode 13 — Life on the Road Part 2

[Musical Interlude]

I was tempted to substitute our regular theme with “On the Road Again,” but Willie Nelson’s people and my people couldn’t arrive at an agreement. That’s okay, I prefer our tune and our Orchestra in A Nutshell. This is Monk Rowe and we are taking this 13th episode of Jazz Backstory on the road again, a few more tales of cars and buses full of swinging musicians.

Before we get to our road travails, let’s take a slight detour. While gathering these particular excerpts from our 450 interviews in the Fillius Jazz Archive collection, I was reminded of how vibrant the American jazz scene was during the first half of the 20th century. Swing bands in particular, ranging in size from 15-20 musicians, offered employment to thousands of players. Mostly young, and mostly men, they were eager to take part in what seemed to be an adventurous and hip way to work and live. It begs the question, socially and economically, what made this scene possible then? One answer is dancing. Before it became a respected art form, jazz developed as a form of entertainment. Engaging with an audience was a measure of success, and dancing was a key to that engagement. Starting in the 1920s, the so-called Jazz Age, dance halls and ballrooms were common in every town and city across the country. Happily, DJs were not yet part of the scene, swing bands were part of the draw. The groups played dances and theaters, even the top bands in the business had a concert book and a dance book. A concert hall engagement would often be followed the next night by a dance gig at an Elks Club or VFW. Social dancing was so popular that it attracted entrepreneurs, who devised a way to join random couples together on the dance floor, for a modest fee. Veteran trumpeter Bobby Johnson recalled playing for these jitney or taxi dances.

BJ: Jitney dances. Oh, well a jitney dance was like a lot of people came in at a low price, you know what I mean? We used to have, there were certain nights that they would have like fifteen, twenty cents, and you could hear Benny Carter, you could hear Fletcher Henderson, for twenty-five, they were called jitney dances. And in New York, up and down Broadway they had these jitney places, that the girls would come in and, oh now it comes back to me. They used to have tickets, and you would give the girl maybe a quarter to dance with her so many times. There

wasn't anything wrong about it, that was just paying to have someone to dance with. You know what I mean? As a matter of fact they made a movie about it, about people coming in with their tickets, and I heard that there's one still left on Broadway even now somewhere. You go in, you give your ticket, and you dance. They call it jitney dances.

The quarters and dimes would be split between the girls and the venue. Band leaders were instructed to keep the tunes short, the more tunes, the more dances, the more quarters and dimes. Dancing and jazz eventually parted company, but that's a story for a future episode.

[Musical Interlude]

Our road stories from the previous episode dealt mostly with creature comforts, or lack thereof. Cold buses, funky hotels and bad food were part of the life and most of the participants stated "I'm glad I did it when I was young." As a warning, the following stories prove that things can always get worse. From Episode 12, here is a quote from Carmen Leggio about the road life: Carmen said, "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." End quote

Imagine having a job that occupied only 4 to 6 hours of each 24. You may love this job, but you are not home, home alternates between a shared motel room or a bus seat. Iphones and ipads, walkmans, and other diversions are yet to be invented. When Carmen Leggio speaks of guys trying to forget about it, he references a dark side of the jazz life that has received an undue amount of attention, but did take its toll. I believe one story from drummer Sonny Igoe will cover this topic at this point in our Jazz Backstory.

SI: You ready for another story? We were on one nighters with Woody Herman's band and when I joined Woody Herman's band in 1950 we were on the bus and this dear friend of mine, marvelous trumpet player — I won't mention his name — could play anything on the trumpet, played high screeching, beautiful soft ballads, fast bebop, any style, Dixieland, swing, bebop, anything. He was just marvelous. World class. And he was a junkie. And when they would run out of junk they'd drink whiskey like it was coming out

of a water faucet, to try to help get over it. Well finally we were in an un-air conditioned bus, we were down in Kentucky or South Carolina, someplace, I don't know, Georgia, in that kind of country. All rural, all hot. And we each had a double seat because there was a lot of seats on the bus and only 15 guys or whatever. So right across from me is this guy who is a dear friend of mine. And I'm finally falling asleep and I said, "Go to sleep, go to sleep." I almost said his name but I don't want to say his name. So anyway I'm falling asleep, I go [sniffs]. I smell burning flesh, okay? And I look over and here's this guy, he had a cigarette with his hand — he was unconscious practically. He has a cigarette like here and it had burned down between his two fingers and was burning his flesh and smoking. It was actually smoking. So I go like this across the aisle, knock it off, naturally wake him up. And he started in on me like — I can't mention the words he used and how dumb I was and what's the idea and blah-blah-blah. And I tried to explain to him. The next day he saw it, it didn't bother him at all. He played like it never happened. He played like it never happened. But that's how, unfortunately, some of those guys ruined their lives with that stuff. I was glad I was a square. It was good enough for me.

We can choose to be sympathetic to these personal addictions or not, citing them as a personal choice.

Lanny Morgan mentioned another dark side of travel that can't be ignored. For black bands on the road or black members of mixed bands, basic personal choices were limited, making their day to day that much more difficult. In 2018, *The Green Book* won three Academy Awards for its portrayal of an accomplished African American musician performing and traveling in the south. In the following excerpts we'll here variations on the subject of that movie, this time from Fillius Jazz Archive interviewees.

In episode 7 we heard bassist Milt Hinton's story of being drafted into the Cab Calloway band. In 1995, his wife Mona spoke about their travels between 1936 and 1950 with Cab's band.

MH: Well, unfortunately, due to the climate of our society, you know that we had, the blacks and the whites were segregated. And it made it very difficult, especially when we were

traveling in the south. Because frequently we would run into Glenn Miller's band or Tommy Dorsey's band, or some of the well known white bands. They were staying in nice hotels. And unfortunately the black musician would have to stay on the other side of the tracks, usually in someone's home, or in a hotel that was not very good. And as I say unfortunately, frequently the owners of the hotels, they would take advantage I mean of the black musicians. They knew that we could not stay in places, and we'd run into places with rats and with the roaches and with the bed bugs and whatnot. So under those circumstances it was not good. Frequently we would go in towns and I would have to go out in the black community and try to help find rooms for the musicians in Calloway's band, and sometimes it was very, very, the places where we had to eat were just intolerable. And as I say, we made it. We were fortunate that we never had to travel in cars like most of the other musicians in those days. They had to pile in automobiles. But Calloway was first class all the way. He was always first class. And coming back we would have a bus and we used to keep the same driver, the same bus, and work our way back down through the south and back to New York. And it's kinda funny that we had this one bus driver for quite a long time, and instead of sleeping when he was supposed to be sleeping while the band was playing, he would be partying. So it was my job, I had to sit up in the seat right behind him and keep him awake until daybreak, and then Mr. Wright, who was the road manager, then he'd come and he would sit up there, sit up there with him and then I could go take a nap. But it was fun. It was really fun as I say, and I was always the only female traveling with the band all the time. So I was the den mother.

Mona mentions that Cab Calloway, like Duke Ellington, solved part of the issue by reserving their own Pullman rail car, which then acted as a bus and a hotel. Joe Wilder, with the same positive attitude that Mona Hinton displayed, relates a head scratching story from his stint with The Lucky Millinder Band.

MR: You had told me about an incident with one of the bands you were with in the south, I think it was South Carolina?

JW: Oh, Lucky Millinder, yeah.

MR: Yes. And it was the first time you'd been down there with an integrated band?

JW: Yeah. We were in South Carolina. And Lucky Millinder, Lucky was a very nice fellow. He was not a musician, but he had a lot of natural talent for selecting the right kinds of tunes and tempos and things of that nature. But we had — I think six of the members of the band were white. And we arrived early in South Carolina at this hall where we were going to play, and suddenly up drove the sheriff with his deputy in the police car, and he said, "Who's in charge here?" And so Lucky said, "I am." He said, "Well I'm just here to tell you there's not going to be any mixed bands playing down here in Charleston." And Lucky looked at this guy, and Lucky — you know the reason I think they called him Lucky, he would take a chance on anything — he looked this guy dead in the eye and said, "This is not a mixed band." And some of the guys were blonde with blue eyes you know, there was no way in the world anybody would have mistaken any of these guys for being black you know. And so he went to each guy. I think if he had said, "Are you black?" he might have gotten a different answer. But he went to each of these guys and asked, he said, "Are you colored?" And each of the guys, going along with what Lucky had said, would say yes. And so he would shake his head. And finally the last of the guys he asked was Porky Cohen, who was our first trombone player. And he had a slight lisp. And when he asked him, now Porky is responding more emphatically than the other guys, and he said, "why thertainly" with this lisp. And at this point we had all been starting to chew on our tongues and everything, trying not to break up because it was so ludicrous. And when he did this you could see the ground tremble, we were trying not to let the sheriff see it. But anyway he turned to the deputy and he said, "Well I guess if they all say they're colored, there ain't nothing we can do about it, is there, Jeff?" And so he said, "No sheriff." And they got in the car and drove off. And we played that dance that night. It was very funny. And it might, as I mentioned to you, it might have been the first time that an integrated band played there. It's very possible that that was the first time.

No matter how many accolades and awards an artist may earn during a career, the humiliation experienced during their early years in the business can stick with them. Ruth Brown could sing anything from jazz to gospel and earned the title Queen of R&B. She was inducted into the Rock & Roll, and Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame and was honored with a Tony and Grammy

Lifetime Achievement Award. Despite all that, she still felt no forgiveness for the assumptions made by Mississippi state police.

RB: Most times we toured in buses, station wagons. And they when you got so-called to the top of the ladder which eventually happened in my case, there were those stars who did have the Cadillacs and whatnot, but you took it on your own, you chanced it, to go through the deep south with that kind of a vehicle. And I got arrested a couple of times. They locked the car up a couple of times, and they want to know how you could afford that even though — I had an experience and when my book comes out it will speak of an occasion in which we were going to Gulfport, Mississippi — Charles Brown, Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams and myself. And the police stopped us and said that we were doing like 30 miles per hour in a 25 mile zone, something like that. And made us all get out of our cars and of course these were all nice cars, a couple of Chryslers and things remind me right. Anyway what we eventually had to do was when we pulled out all the instruments, to prove that they weren't stolen, we had to do a concert on the side of the road which was probably the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to me. And I was the only one standing there not doing anything. And my pianist named Lee Anderson, who now is still alive in Seattle. I saw him a couple of years ago and we remembered that all of the musicians had taken out their instruments and were playing, you know, on the side of the road. And this tall policeman says to Lee Anderson, "Well what are you playing?" And he said, "I play piano." And he said, "Well why are you not playing?" No piano, you know? And in those days, we weren't carrying electric pianos like they do now, they carry the keyboards and whatnot, you know. And so the officer said, "Well you got five seconds to start playing something."

MW: Oh, that's sad.

RB: The funniest thing happened. Intuitiveness. When it's about survival you think of something. I'll never forget the band was playing and he leaned over the hood of the car and started playing on the hood of the car. And the police officers accepted that. He proved that he knew how to move his hands at least. And then last but not least, they looked at me and I would be standing there very arrogant in those days. I didn't fear death, you understand? And they said, "And who are you?" And I was very vain and I

said, “I’m the person who pays all of these musicians” you know. I ended up singing on the side of the road. You know, he brandished his pistol and put his hand on it, and said, “Well let me hear you sing something.” And so there we were, all seven of us, standing on the side of the road as the cars were going by and going around or slowing down, doing this performance.

MW: How did you when you traveled from town to town, how did you deal with the hotels or lack of hotels?

RB: There were none most times. Lack of hotels is what it was. What you had to do was, you always left in time to get into the city where you were going to work and get there early enough to go down on what we call the “main drag.” You know you’d get in town and not know just where to go, and when you’d ask instructions usually they would say to you, “Find the railroad track, and once you find the railroad track, cross over.” But you would get into that neighborhood and inquire of somebody, most times, who had a house and some extra rooms. There were a lot of what you call “tourist homes” you know what I’m saying? And you’d go and get a room there. And I can remember many times and I’ve gone in and people have like doubled their children up and took the children, the room the children were sleeping in to give to me and my assistant or something, and members of the band. Usually if there was a restaurant, upstairs somewhere they would have some room, and that’s where we would stay. I mean we did not have the opportunity to visit the Holiday Inns, believe me. That was not possible.

Many African American jazz musicians in the 50s and 60s emigrated to Europe where they enjoyed respect for their artistry. Saxophonist James Moody spent productive years in France as a young man and on his return, led a touring group, backing up vocalist Brook Benton, of “A Rainy Night in Georgia” fame.

JM: because I wasn’t going to come back, I was living in France then, in Paris. I wasn’t going to come back because I never will forget I used to write things to my mother and I used to say things like, I shouldn’t have said it but that’s the way you know I felt, because in those days, like if you say an ofay cat, that meant a Caucasian person. Ofay. So I’d put “U.S.A. Land of the Ofay.” And my mother would say, oh, they’ll put you in jail for that.

Because I had had it, like with the racism that went on. I mean it was— remember I told you about the Brook Benton Revue? I'm going to tell them about the donut, honey. We were on the tour, and I forget just where we were, but I had a hundred dollar bill. So I went into the donut shop to get some donuts. They said they didn't have any change. So I went across the street to an automobile company, where they sell automobiles, asked for change, they didn't have it there. So I said oh the heck with it. I got back on the bus. So when I got on the bus, in a minute, Brook Benton called me and says, "Hey, Moody." I said, "What?" He says, "This state trooper wants to see you." So I thought he was joking, a state trooper. I looked out, sure enough there's a state trooper down there. So I get off, and the state trooper looks at me, and he says, "What's your name?" I told him I says, "James Moody." He says, "What do you do?" I said, "Well see, my name's on the bus there," I said "I'm with the band here." And Brook says, "Maybe —" he says "get the hell out of here, get over here, I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to him." So he says, "How much money do you have?" I says, "I don't know, maybe four or five hundred dollars." So he says, "Let me see it." So I reached in one pocket and pulled out my traveler's checks. And in another pocket I had cash, but something told me don't do it. So I gave him the traveler's checks, about seven, eight hundred bucks in traveler's checks, because I had to pay the band and stuff. And so he looks at the traveler's checks, he looks at me and he says, "Too much money." So what am I supposed to say to the guy? Too much money? I mean I didn't say anything. He looked again, "Too much money." I said, "Well," I says, "I'm the leader here," and I said, "and I have to pay the musicians. I haven't paid them all." He says, "Too much money." You know. So he put it down and he looked at me again. "Too much," he must have said this about fifteen or twenty times, then he called for another car, and another car came with a lieutenant, and they talked, and then a captain came and they talked. After this crap went on about a half hour, forty-five minutes, they came over again and did it again. "Too much money — too much money." And then I mean he just gave me the traveler's checks back and he left. Now you know what happened? When I went in to the automobile store, evidently they said there's a Negro over here with a hundred dollar bill, he probably stole it. So the cops came, and that's how that came about.

Lastly , trombonist Al Grey relates a similar story but includes a bit of positive foreshadowing regarding jazz and society.

MW Share with us just a moment what it was like traveling from city to city at that time. Give us a year, some of the years of your travel, like let's say '47 or '55 or whatever, and tell us what it was like for traveling musicians at that time.

AG: It was very bad because we could not eat right because we couldn't go into restaurants and have a meal, we'd have to go around the back. And we couldn't go into none of the hotels, we'd have to try to find a room at maybe a school teacher's home that had a nice decent home, or a doctor's home, or a lawyer's home, because they were the ones that might have a place, an extra room. So we would get off the bus and scour around that town to see where we could get a room and that's the way it was. And you did nothing but one nighters, see? But then Benny Carter, we did many engagements for the Army which we signed away our lives to ride on the C-27 planes, and but then things began, we could see where things began to get better.

MW: About what year was this, when you felt things began to get better?

AG: This is coming into like 1948. And see then, every now and then up north you could stay in a white hotel. See but it wasn't still that much, although I have to put in a little thing here. We had a trombone player that played with Lionel Hampton, and he was Japanese, Paul Higaki, and it was worse for him. So it made us feel that we can go on and make it, see, because like his parents was prisoners down in Denver in the prison camp after the war, and Lionel Hampton took him on and he could play trombone really well. And then leaving all of this, going to Lionel, then going to Lucky Millinder, I went with Dizzy Gillespie. And we still had those bad times. And we had really rough times with Lucky Millinder because we played in the south mostly. See this was the days where we used to play tobacco warehouses and things. And this is where the blacks would have to sit up in the balcony and we would play to the whites. And I remember we finally got to San Antonio, Texas one time, and the people, they had the chairs to separate the back to back, the blacks was over here and the whites was over here. But the whites didn't — seem like they liked they'd like to meet so they just started moving the chairs and so they started mingling and this is where we could see changes being made.

MW: So the music made the difference.

AG: Yeah. I would dare so very strongly about that.

Al Grey sets us up for another future episode, the role of music, jazz in particular, in breaking down segregation and social ills. We'll lighten up a bit with a short excerpt from trombonist Eddie Bert. Perhaps his road time with Stan Kenton and Benny Goodman created an internal odometer in his mind

MR What's in the near future for you? I know you're doing Bobby Short.

EB Yeah well it's just day to day. I do what I can. A lot of rehearsal bands and things to keep chops. But that's what you have to do, and then do a lot of traveling. You know last Friday I worked in Morristown, New Jersey and that's like 100 miles each way. And what was it yesterday, no day before yesterday I worked in Lambertville, which is outside of New Hope. That was 150 miles each way. And then I make some rehearsal bands, I do a rehearsal in Emerson, New Jersey, that's 65 miles each way. That's no pay. That's a rehearsal. Then I rehearse with another band in Berlin, Connecticut, and that's 45 miles each way.

MR: Looks like you've got your mileage down anyway.

EB: Oh yeah.

There are a few happy ending road stories. You may recall jazz pianist Frank Strazzeri and his good fortune on an unexpected gig. I'll read a bit of the rest of his story. Frank said, Every time I talked to Elvis after the gigs he gave me $300, plus the way we lived, we were getting good bread every day, staying at the best hotels, our own plane, our own chefs, our own pilots, our own stewardesses. It was unbelievable. 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 better than that.

It's not lost on me, that the best possible road gig a jazz musician could ever have was playing for a rock star. That's the biz. As time and musical tastes changed, the large swing bands faded out, jazz returned to small combos and an army of accomplished musicians began looking for the next gig. The best of them found it in the recording studios, the subject of our next two podcast episodes. See you on the flip side.