

Jazz Backstory

Episode 14 — Records & Record Dates, Part 1

[Musical Interlude]

Let's consider for a moment process and product in the arts,. Occasionally we'll read an esoteric bit of writing espousing the idea that the real joy in creating art is in the process. Maybe, but serious and driven artists eventually hope to create a work of art that they can share, display and sell. A product that helps them "make it" in the business.

Welcome to Episode 14 and the 2nd series of Jazz Backstory This is Monk Rowe, director of the Fillius Jazz Archive and this episode deals with the goal of every musician that I've ever known, including myself, the dream of being in a studio, playing into a mic and hearing the final product on a recording. Depending on the era, this could mean being on wax, vinyl, reel to reel, 8 track and cassette tape, CDs, digital sound files or just floating in the cloud. In one sense, the road travails described in our previous two episodes were part of dues paying, leading to the reward of a record.

As we heard in Episodes 1 and 2, records provided not only inspiration, but served as a teaching tool for numerous jazz artists. Pianists Joanne Brackeen and Toshiko Akiyoshi remind us of the role of recordings in the formative years of aspiring musicians. From our 2001 interview with Joanne Brackeen —

MR: I read an interesting little tidbit, that someone said that one of your early influences was Frankie Carle?

JB: Um hmm. Absolutely. Really that was how I learned how to play. I liked his solos. I liked his piano playing. And there was one album, I think it was called "Frankie Carle and his Girlfriends," and so it was like "Diane" and "Charmaine" and "Louise" and I learned these solos note for note when I was eleven. I played them actually. I began performing them.

MR: No kidding?

JB: The whole solos, the whole thing, exactly what you heard on the record, that's what I played. So after doing maybe six months of that, and maybe I did eight or ten of them, I knew how to play the piano.

MR: When you were playing them, I'm trying to figure out how to say this, did you know what you were playing from a harmonic standpoint?

JB: I just heard. I still, that's how I go now, what I do now. People say "What's that" and, "what's that," and I say well it's the music, here it is, this is what it is. And I still don't have a definite definition of everything.

And on the other side of the globe, Toshiko Akiyoshi, in post WWII Japan.

MR: When did it first come up that you might actually come to the States to study?

TA: Well in those days there were a couple of ways to learn new music, and also the language, as I said, of records. I used to copy records one at a time and then fortunately later on I was hired in a band to play in an officer's club and then they taught me, and they had one of those record players, and they had in those days called V-discs, like twelve inches I think. And I could play and I could listen and then I could copy that. It didn't matter if it was a saxophone player, I just copied everything. And that's the way you learn the idiosyncrasies of improvisation. Then later when I went to Tokyo, this was [inaudible] and then it started getting jazz coffee shops, where you can have a cup of coffee and myself for example, stay for about two or three hours and try to learn some tunes. Because that was only where — there was a thousand Tin Pan Alley music or something. There was nothing about the books.

MR: Oh, no fake books.

TA: No, nothing. So you learn that way.

The recording industry came to fruition in the early 1900s, the same era that jazz and blues coalesced into distinctive music styles. From 1910 to 1929 the Victor Victrola system competed with Edison Diamond Disc technology, both producing thick and weighty records, one song per side, spinning on a wind-up turntable, no electricity required. When we started our oral history project, there were still musicians alive that had participated in this early technology. 90-year-old trumpet player Doc Cheatham reminisced about his first recording opportunity during our 1995 interview.

MR: Can you tell us about your first recording date?

DC: With Ma Rainey?

MR: Yeah.

DC: Oh, yes. I was with Albert Wynn's Creole Jazz Band when we made that recording. I knew Ma Rainey because I sat in the Bijou Theater playing shows with the pit band. I wasn't getting paid, I did it because they let me do it. And I just did it to try to learn as much as I could. And Ma Rainey, she came, she was the ugliest blues singer on earth when she got old, but when she was young she was pretty. You see her picture, she was the prettiest, nice looking girl. But she is so ugly, that that's what they call the ugliest blues singer, and they billed her as that.

MR: Oh my God. What was it like, you know, for our students who are used to hearing what they do to make a record these days you know, in the million dollar studios. What was it like at that time to make a record?

DC: Well after, this place where we played and recorded with Ma Rainey was just a room. They didn't have any speakers. We had a big megaphone we put out in front of the band, but no speakers. And everything was done by wax. You know we didn't have all that stuff.

MR: No fixing mistakes, right?

DC: No, no, no. And my next recording I did in Spain, in Barcelona, with Sam Wooding's band. Sam Wooding. The band was so great that no other band in Europe could compare with it. Now they were there in 1923. They were all through Russia and all down in Argentina with that band. I joined the band the first part of '28. And we just went over there and we played all the big casinos and hotels, because they had a very big name, and we recorded up in Barcelona. It was hot as it is now. And the wax kept melting. And they put ice cubes on the wax to keep it from melting. But they came out wonderful.

I am struck by the progress of technology as I listen myself in this session. Doc Cheatham spoke of melting wax issues and I spoke about the then current million dollar recording studios, now commonly replaced by a computer in a musician's bedroom.

Doc Cheatham idolized Louis Armstrong, whose 1920s recordings with King Oliver were recorded in a such a manner. Bassist and author Bill Crow described their first recording session

in his book *Jazz Anecdotes*, and I quote. “The King Oliver Creole Jazz Band was about to make music history, but when they grouped around the big horn there were problems. The two trumpets drowned out the rest of the band, King Oliver and Louis Armstrong had to be moved back while Johnny Dodds clarinet was pointed directly into the horn. Baby Dodds’ bass drum made the stylus skip on the wax and he was limited to a snare and woodblocks. When Oliver and Armstrong played in their normal side by side position it became evident that Oliver could not be heard. Armstrong was moved even further away from the band. Pianist Lil Armstrong said that he was fifteen feet away for the whole session.” End quote. We should consider it fortunate that this process, as primitive as it sounds, was able to capture the most significant musician in jazz history in his formative years. Fellow trumpeter Jack Palmer, who roomed with Frank Sinatra during their time with the Harry James Orchestra, shares his memory of his first recording date and includes an interesting anecdote about the New York City musician’s union.

JP: Well let’s see. I went into New York so I transferred in so you had to — when you transferred in, I’ll make this real short — you’re not allowed to work a steady job for the first three months. Otherwise everybody’d come to New York you know what I mean? But they made it difficult. After three months then you could accept a steady job, with permission. And after that three months was over, now came time to get your union card, and you had to have a hundred dollars to pay for the union card. So then I became a member. It seemed like as soon as I got my card, George Wettling, the drummer, he heard me somewhere, I can’t think right where, but he says come down to such and such a studio. I went there and it was Red Norvo and Mildred Bailey. And I sat in and first thing you know, I didn’t know it was being recorded. We were making a record. This was the first record date I ever had. And I didn’t know, I never was acquainted with that stuff. And I said gee, I’m making a record. And I remember the tune, because I had a sixteen bar solo in the front, in a Harmon mute, called “I Used to be Colorblind.” That was the name of it. And then we played “Just You Just Me,” which was a standard, and I had the opening, after the introduction I had the opening sixteen bars there, and then eight bars in the last chorus in the middle, the release. And all of a sudden I’m recording jazz, which I never had except on home stuff, home recording.

MR: What was, the recording at that time, probably consisted of one microphone or something?

JP: Yeah. I had to leave my chair, because I played in a Harmon mute with the stem pulled out, and I had to walk — so they left me eight bars out of the brass section to give me time to walk to the microphone, you know what I mean? And so I played into the mic and then I had to walk back and I had eight bars open and then take the mute out and join the section, you know.

The idea of walking back and forth in the middle of a studio recording is now rather laughable. Recording technology developed quickly though. The new innovations allowed for more productive sessions with a better sounding product, and the market for jazz and blues skyrocketed. John Best was a featured trumpet player in the Glenn Miller Orchestra and other prominent big bands. He describes a typical late 1930s recording session.

MR: When you'd go to do a recording session with Glenn or even Artie Shaw, how much time did you usually have in the studio to do a side?

JB: Well a normal session was three hours. After that it's overtime. Ten dollars an hour.

MR: And how many tunes would you usually get done in three hours?

JB: As many as they could. I think there was eventually a limit on that, but there's been changes made. But you could do like two or three million-selling records and get ten dollars, your part.

MR: Oh, because you didn't get any residual or any of that kind of thing.

JB: No. They do today, but it's a little late for me.

A three hour studio booking was standard during this period and many jazz records were completed in one or two of these brief sessions. From the other end of the spectrum, I was reminded of a fact from the world of Rock & Roll, quoted here from a particular band's website and I quote

Guns N' Roses' sixth studio album, "Chinese Democracy," was released in 2008 after a decade of work, at an estimated \$14 million in production costs. End quote. Perhaps they should have played into a megaphone, direct to wax, it might have gone quicker.

It's time for a few choice vocabulary terms pertinent to our subject. Picture an LP made of wax. A stylus imprinted the vibrations of the band into the wax and a high tech process moved the grooves onto a metal master disc. Wax became synonymous with recording. An excerpt from the August 1942 edition of DownBeat magazine reads, "Ross Russell has been appointed west coast recording supervisor for Ash Records, his first assignment is waxing ragtime numbers by pianist Johnny Wittwer." End quote For financial reasons, the engineers and producers hoped to wax a recording in as few takes as possible. A take was an attempt at playing the tune well enough to move onto the next cut. Each individual record needed two tunes, and A side song and for the flip side. John Best had described the three hour Glenn Miller session where they achieved as many one take recordings as possible. He also hinted at the ongoing, contentious relationship between bands and record companies as he netted \$10 for a session that might yield multiple hits. Lastly, the term record still functions as the description of an audio product, even if it only exists in someone's cloud. I have yet to hear an enthusiastic musician proclaim, "yeh, my band is making an mp3. After all, a digital file doesn't have a flip side.

[Musical Interlude]

Jazz recordings run the gamut from well rehearsed bands blessed with many hours of studio time to impromptu sessions where the producer hopes to catch lightning in a bottle. James Moody was one of the most respected saxophonists in jazz and established his reputation in a serendipitous studio moment. Recording as a guest with a European combo, James requested the tune "I'm in the Mood for Love" a song he normally played on tenor sax. His distinctive treatment, which only hints at the melody, spawned numerous critics to praise his inspiring harmonic inventiveness. During our 1998 interview, James described the situation that led to this now iconic recording, renamed "Moody's Mood for Love" with vocalese lyrics by Eddie Jefferson.

MR: So up until that point, even when you recorded "Moody's Mood for Love," it was all coming from your ear.

JM: All by ear. "Moody's Mood for Love," the same thing. What I did was, I was playing tenor, so Lars Gullen, who was a very fantastic baritone jazz player in Sweden — good musicians in Sweden boy, wonderful — he had this beat up looking silver alto sitting by him at the record date. I asked him do you mind if I look at it? He said no. In the old days it was different. You played other people's horns. You know you would never do that now. So anyway, they says you have one more cut to do, what would you like to do? I

said how about “I’m in the Mood for Love?” Okay? And they said okay. So Gus Aphantia — this is the truth — the arranger, he went into the john and jotted down the harmonies, and then came back out and put them up on the thing, and we did it in one take. “Mood for Love.” Now here’s why it sounded like it sounded. When they hit the chord — boom — [scats]. I’m trying to find the notes, because it’s alto now, not tenor. And people said oh you must have been inspired. I said yeah, I’m inspired to try and find the notes, that’s what I was inspired.

As critic and author Whitney Balliet wrote, jazz is the sound of surprise. James Moody may have been surprised to discover he was in a new key, but his ear and intuition saved him — a one take wonder.

There is an inside jazz musician’s joke about being surprised that there are two 7 o’clocks in one day. Jazz cats are night owls, which makes the circumstances of this Joe Williams and the Thad Jones Mel Lewis Orchestra recording session unique. Saxophonists Jerry Dodgion and Jerome Richardson, part of the orchestra, vividly recall the date and the surprise that it actually worked well.

J.D: Getting back to this disc, I remember this so well because in order to get the band and Joe together the scheduling was ridiculous. It started at eight in the morning on a couple of the days and one was at seven in the morning. Now this is, for the band that’s unusual. Dates usually start at ten. So eight’s okay, but seven, unheard of. But Joe Williams, during that week was working at the Half Note, and I went down to hear him. I mean they finished at the Half Note at quarter to four in the morning. Then he was singing every night ‘til a quarter of four, and then he would make this, start coming in for one of these records at seven o’clock. So there was no sleep for him. I mean and he just did great. And if you hear this record you’d have no idea that he was up all night to do this. I mean that’s just unbelievable.

MR: I was going to think if he had just gotten out of bed for that you wouldn’t be able to hear his voice, ‘cause it’d be so low.

JD: Yeah. So to take a nap would be ridiculous. But you know there is something about when everything is going right and it’s for a really good — you just pull up everything you

have to do it. You know and it just happens. Sometimes when you're a little exhausted you don't have time to get nervous, you just save all the energy for what it's really meant for and it works that way sometimes.

MR: Very interesting.

JD: But just try to do it on purpose and see what happens.

MR: Tell me about this particular, do you remember this particular recording with Joe Williams?

JR: Jerry told you all about that.

MR: Yeah. But I want to hear how you weathered it.

JR: We all weathered it about the same way.

MR: He said it was very early—

JR: Well we'd just got finished working the Vanguard. There we were at two o'clock in the morning and everybody's drinking until four or something, you know, half drunk. And Joe was evil, because the record date was going to be at eight o'clock in the morning, and everybody was evil. Oh, we didn't want to be there at all. And especially him. And because of it, I think because of it and we were tired and everything, because of it, that record came out fantastic. We played and it was like we didn't care. We just — and of course we cared — but we were tired. And sometimes things happen like that, when you're so tired you just, you can't, you're not on edge, you're not worried about playing the wrong notes, you're not, you're just sitting there playing and maybe enjoying it then. And of course we generally enjoy our work anyway. And so it turned out to be a fantastic record, and that's what happens.

I have mentioned the important role Joe Williams played in the Fillius Jazz Archive oral history program. Not only did he lend his name and reputation to the effort, he interviewed a number of jazz legends himself. If you are into classic vinyl keep your eyes open for Joe Williams and the Thad Jones Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, on the Solid State label. You'll feel like you're sitting in the middle of the band.

All bands, no matter the musical genre, have engaged in the pursuit of a record deal, often without really understanding what it meant. After all the demos have been sent out and the no-thank-you response letters read, vanity recording becomes an option, the band itself or a well to do fan foots the bill for the studio time, the manufacturing and the song licensing. The boxes of 45s, LPs or CDs then travel with the group in hopes of selling their precious product on the gig. One member's basement was often the final destination of the bulk of the records. In the late 70s I was a member of a funk band that followed this path, a 45 rpm record was produced, I was the main composer of the two songs. Many discs were given away, some were sold and the few remaining found the aforementioned basement. Over 40 years later I received an email inquiry about this recording from an independent label, one man operation in Germany. Proving that there are uber fans for absolutely everything, this fellow gathered music from unsigned 1970s American funk bands, releasing their music on 45s, LPs and CDs, marketing the product internationally. He asked for permission to license the two tunes and include them in his next compilation. After considering waiting for a better offer, I signed on the dotted line. Our late 70s band, and my tunes are now resurrected and I suppose we can proclaim "we got a record deal!" That's the biz.

[Musical Interlude]

Bassist Christian McBride has become a respected performer, composer, producer and spokesperson in today's jazz scene. As a young musician he displayed a refreshing bit of wisdom and humility when offered his first recording opportunity.

MR: When you came to get a chance to do your own record and you sit down and you say now this is important, what's going to go on this? So you kind of balanced your own originals with some classic standards?

CM: Yeah. Well you know I purposely tried to wait as long as I possibly — I tried to pick the time where I said okay well the time is right now. Because I actually had a chance to do my first record maybe six years ago when this quote unquote young lions craze started to happen with Roy Hargrove and Antonio Hart and all of us came on the scene together. And as you well know, record companies started making it a hot commodity. So they were just handing out record contracts just because guys were under 21. And I didn't want to be a part of that because I had already had a chance to be around really serious

musicians like Wynton and Branford and Bobby Watson. And I see the effort and the sweat and the grit that they put into making their music and I just know going to the studio and making a quick record, a quick, sad record, wouldn't be good for the legacy of the music. So I said well I just want to be able to play with as many different people as I can and get more experience so when it comes time for me to make my record I'll have some, I'll know what I'm doing to some extent.

I think my time spent on wax during this episode demands that we end with music created in that fashion. Here is a bit of an Edison Diamond Disc record, circa 1912. The performers are the Green Brothers Novelty Band, the tune, popular at the time, is a foxtrot entitled "Whispering," And a bit of deep trivia, "Whispering" was transformed 35 years later by Dizzy Gillespie into a new tune for the beboppers, Groovin' High. Here we go, played on my Edison Diamond Disc player.

So this is a delicate operation. First we've got to crank 'er. Start the turntable. Drop the diamond disc.

Oh yeah — see you on the flipside.

[Musical Interlude — Diamond Disc recording]