

Jazz Backstory

Episode 15 — Records & Record Dates, Part 2

[Musical Interlude]

Just for the record, we have arrived at Episode 15, in series 2 of our Jazz Backstory podcast, and we are taking another spin at Records and Record Dates. In our last episode we spoke about the ultimate goal of virtually every serious musician, that of recording a record, leaving a mark, a product for posterity and perhaps prosperity.

Before the era of self promotion via social media, word of mouth was a common method of landing gigs. In 1964, Trumpeter Charles Tolliver, 22 years of age and just entering the New York jazz scene, had the good fortune of impressing jazz promoter Jim Harrison. Charles shares the tale of that fortuitous encounter.

CT And we're all brand new to this stuff you know, the scene. And so he come up to the band and Jim Harrison said, "Okay, by the way, you know Jackie McLean is, he might be looking for a trumpet player." And he sent me to Jackie and that's how I met Jackie. I told him that Jim Harrison sent me. And Jackie said, "Okay, come see me at this time" and see what's going on. So I went to Jackie's house and he says, "I've got these tunes. Let's go over them." He played them. And he says, "Do you have any tunes?" I said, "Yes I do." He says, "Let me hear them, let me play them." He says, "Okay I'm putting you on my next record date." Now I've told that story many times and every time people said you've got to be kidding. He hadn't heard you yet. I said, "Well he was going on what Jim Harrison said, 'Hey you know there's a new trumpet player in town.'" You know. Boom. And so, and then to get on that, there was a place called Len Oliver's Studio, it was a famous place on 89th and Broadway where most rehearsals went down. And that's what Alfred Lion used for rehearsing bands before taking them to Rudy Van Gelder's. And I arrived for the first day's rehearsal, I did not know who Jackie McLean was having on his record date. I just knew wow, I'm going to be on my first record date. And I get to the studio and Alfred and Frank Wolfe, his beloved partner is there. And I looked at the drums and there's Roy Haynes sitting on the drums so I'm already, oh man. And then you know, in walks Herbie Hancock you know, on the piano. The only new

person, new persons, was me and Cecil McBee. That's his first time out. And Alfred starts his stopwatch, we go through the tunes, and there's this famous hotel, it's still there, the Empire Hotel was the meeting place. That's where every one of those great recordings of Blue Note started. The old Checker Cab would be waiting in front of the hotel with a box full of sandwiches and beer, soda, liquor. We all pile in those Checker Cabs and off to Rudy Van Gelder's across the George Washington Bridge we'd go. And that first recording, I still think that's one of the best recordings of Jackie and all of us on there. So that particular record, not only being my debut record, it's a substantial contribution.

Charles' first recording was on the venerable Blue Note label, pretty cool. Did you catch the bit about Blue Note owner and producer Alfred Lion, at the rehearsal with his stop watch? It took me a moment realize what he would have been doing. LPs were limited to 22 minutes per side, Alfred, being well aware that jazz soloists can get carried away, had to be the one to limit the number of choruses each musician could play. One song per side was not a plus with record sales in mind.

Pianist Herbie Hancock is a true jazz icon and it's fascinating to follow the early career path of this now familiar name. A year before he appeared on the recording with Jackie and Charles, he caught the ear of Latin band leader Mongo Santamaria. Herbie's tune "Watermelon Man" was an immediate hit for the Latin ensemble and band member Marty Sheller got the one solo spot on trumpet. What he played proved so right for the moment that — well let's hear Marty tell it, from our May, 2022 interview.

MS: The story is, there was a record at that time by Barbara — oh son of a gun I can't recall her name —

MR: Barbara George.

MS: That's it. There was a terrific cornet player named Melvin Lastie who played a trumpet solo on that, that ended with [scats]. So when we got in to do the recording of "Watermelon Man" we approached it like a jazz-funk song. So there was a trumpet solo and a tenor solo and a piano solo, and the melody you know. And the producer said, "Wait a minute. For airplay it's got to be like three minutes or so. We've got to shorten it.

So I want you to cut out the sax solo, cut out the piano solo,” he said, “and Marty, don’t play any of those snakes.” Now snakes were what he called jazz lines that moved up and down. He said, “Just play something funky.” And right off the tip of my tongue I said, “Oh you mean something like this” and I played Melvin Lastie’s [scats]. He said, “Yes! That’s it. Play a solo like that.” And that’s how that came about. As a matter of fact, Melvin found out that — I hadn’t met him at that point — but he found out that I had always given him credit whenever anyone asked about that solo because it seems as if that solo became popular. And I always gave him credit. And he’s from New Orleans. When he finally came to New York he came up to the apartment right across from the hall where I was, because his friend Idris Muhammed, the drummer, was living right across the hall and Idris said, “Hey man, Marty Sheller lives right next door.” And Melvin wanted to say hello. So we gave each other a big hug and he told me, he said, “Man I appreciate it that you always gave me credit for that.”

MR: Aww. That makes my heart full, man. That’s terrific. Were you expected — I remember reading that Illinois Jacquet would play some of those solos and then people wanted to hear the solo as recorded.

MS: I hear where you’re going. You’re touching a nerve.

MR: Yeah.

MS: Mongo said the same thing. He said, “Marty, that solo, you’ve got to play that solo.” I said, “Mongo, you mean you want me to play this every time we play ‘Watermelon Man’ I’ve got to play the same solo?” He said, “Yes, it’s very popular. You’ve got to do it.” Boy that’s — what’s the — can’t think of the right term, but that got me nuts. You know I did that every time we played it I had to play that solo. And it got a good reaction too, so I understood why he wanted that, but you know how it is from the point of view of somebody who’s into improvising, the idea of playing a solo exactly the same way rubbed me the wrong way. But that’s the way it was.

[Musical Interlude]

I guess we should add the term “snakes” to our vocabulary list, I must admit that it’s a new one to me. The producer on “Watermelon Man” said “no snakes” you know, solo lines that moved *up and down*. Maybe he wanted a solo that stayed on one note. But listen to the Mongo

Santamaria version of “Watermelon Man,” you’ll hear that his instincts were correct, especially with record sales in mind. Let’s include modal here as well. A mode is a type of scale, combined with a chord. Modal jazz tunes often hung out for multiple measures on one chord, sometimes forever, like a vamp, radically different from the constantly changing chord patterns of swing and especially bebop.

Record sales do have an effect on every genre of popular music, jazz is no exception. In the latter part of the 20th century, musicians who lived the jazz life found that the music was changing to satisfy the market. In a slight bit of generalization, three characteristics typified this new style, the use of electronic instruments, especially synthesizers, simplified harmonic patterns and an avoidance of swing. Remember our discussion about swing and straight 8ths? The straight ones won out.

Veteran swing trumpeter Warren Vache offered his opinion on this new musical reality.

WV: My problem with electronic instruments is that they have one color and that’s the color you’re stuck with. The player really has very little aside from flipping switches and adjusting sliders, there’s nothing you can do physically, touching the instrument, to make the sound different. I mean a synthesizer is going to make Dave McKenna sound like everybody else that touches a synthesizer. Whereas you put him at a piano it can only be Dave McKenna. So there’s a little more richness for me in Dave’s personality. If you’re talking about different harmonic situations, one of the things about the music I play generally, and have a great love for, is that it’s pretty standard harmonies. It’s not necessarily modal. It’s two fives and melodies. There are different sorts of harmonic, the modal school, I’ve played with that. Modal is different, you don’t get that in chromatic harmony, it is different. But I don’t find the same subtlety within the framework that I do in chromatic music. I have yet to hear a modal piece of music that had the same sort of richness of color as a Brahms symphony, or for that matter a nice Clifford Brown solo. It pulls me in many directions. I had some trouble with my back and I went to a chiropractor one time. I’m lying on this table while he’s got these electrodes stimulating a muscle or something, charging me too much money. And he’s got a radio station on, and it’s this New Age stuff. And I spent a half an hour lying on that table listening to the lydian mode in F. It must have been about fifteen selections, and they were all in the God

damn lydian mode in F. By the time he got back I said, “Are you trying to relax my muscles or give me a lobotomy?” Change the station. I mean I don’t understand it’s like just blah — this thing that says okay I’m calm, I’m relaxed, I’m hip. Now can I feel something? That’s exactly what happens, you know. I’d much rather listen to Louis Armstrong playing ski dat de dat.

We heard from saxophonist James Moody in our previous episode. Forty years after his masterpiece “Moody’s Mood for Love,” James found the recording situation somewhat confining. I was taken aback that he was not as enamored about his latest recording as I was.

MR: I wanted to talk for a moment about one of your recent albums, “Moody Plays Mancini,” which is — your soprano sound came off just gorgeous on that record.

JM: Oh, well thank you.

MR: How did this album come about?

JM: Well the company wanted a concept. And that’s the thing nowadays, concepts.

MR: Right.

JM: So we came up with the concept. Frank Sinatra before this. And then after this, Mancini, so that was the concept. But that’s how that came about.

MR: Does that bother you at all? That you need to do a concept?

JM: Yes it does, I have to be truthful, yes it does. Because you see what I think is that, and it’s been like this for a long time, the artist or the musician should make the records, and the record companies should sell them. But it’s the other way around. They want to make the records and then they want you to sell them. I mean that’s the impression I get. And here’s my saying, and I know my wife, this is — blessed are those that run around in circles, for they shall be called big wheels. Because if you notice, like the people that don’t really know are always telling people like what to do.

MR: Have you had more luck with one label than the other throughout your career? Has there been times when you’ve said I have to get off this particular label?

JM: Well I’ve had better luck. I have to say, yeah, with some labels better than others. But you know what I would love to do? I would love to be able to go into the studio with the musicians that I want, and the engineer should be there, and I’d just do what I wanted to

do, the way I wanted to do it, and that would be it. Rather than somebody stopping me — hold it, take one more take. I'd like to just be able to do that.

Vocalist Alicia Olatuja, one of our youngest interviewees, is equally comfortable singing the lead in an opera or leading her own jazz quartet. During our 2018 interview, she addressed the issue of record companies and artistic freedom.

AO: Well I think the world of music is big, and I think there's room for all of it. I don't think it's really the musicians or the artists that are making it marginalized, I think it's the music industry that's telling people what they want to hear. And I think also the music industry isn't about music. Not pop music, and not a lot, just the music industry in general — most industries and businesses are just about money anyway. So it's our responsibility as the artist to push as much through that. And now we have the ability to do that because we can put a studio in our house and we can go on Kickstarter and raise money, we can get our friends together and record an album. We don't need the machines everybody else needed. But I think music becoming more technological is just a part of the evolution of technology and art. You see that in all forms of art. You see it in movement. You see it in paintings, you see it in installations. Technology has a way of painting all parts of our society. The issue is when the musicians who don't want to do that aren't offered the same opportunities. And I think that's where we have to rally together and start those underground movements, where a lot of great musicians started anyway, back in the day. They were underground. They didn't have like YouTube and FaceBook to just blow up overnight. Nobody was really was really blowing up overnight back in the day. And I also think the live music experience can never be duplicated unless you're there. People still want to feel like they're looking at and communicating and connecting with a human. So I think we will never be able to get away from that. But I think we as artists, we have to just stick to that. We could do a couple stuff here and there. There's room for it all. But don't let go of what you know is real music, and respect your art form enough to spend time on it to make it right. To sharpen it.

[Musical Interlude]

Time to state the obvious. You can't release a song on a recording without a title. Surprisingly, titles can be difficult, especially for songs without lyrics, no singing. The amazingly prolific

composer Steve Allen spoke about swing in Episode 11. Here he address the subject of song titles in his trademark fashion.

MR: If you sit and write a tune that's really meant to be an instrumental, such as the thing you did with Benny Goodman or something like that, is it sometimes a little chore to think of a title to put on it?

SA: That also is a marvelous question, that's what you do for a living, you ask marvelous questions. I jump back to, I don't know about 40 years ago, I once got intrigued by that question just abstractly, and I wrote to about 20 band leaders, including Benny. This was long before I'd met him. He had some instrumentals, one was called "Benji's Bauble," and another one with the name of one of his daughters. Now I didn't know that those were named after two of children until he wrote back and said Dear Steve, in answer to your question, Benji is one of my sons — his own name, Benny, Benjamin — and I forgot what the other one had to do with. But anyway he'd used the name of his two children. But I was noticing, or what I had originally noticed I should say, was that there was really no meaning, nor could there be any meaning to a pure melody. You can't say a note means a word or a thought, or if you do you're talking nonsense. So anyway, to get back to your earlier question, all of the ways there are to write songs I work in. Sometimes I just start with a title. One of my hit songs, in fact just last night I was listening to three different recordings of it doing some organization work, it's called "Pretend You Don't See Her My Heart." It was a big hit by Jerry Vale and it's been sung by Vic Damone and a lot of good singers. It's a very Italian waltz, purposely written in the Italian vein. It was originally written in fact, no it was recorded as an instrumental but it was always in the Italian groove. In other cases, in most cases in fact I have a melody first which has no meaning whatever, although it does have a mood. There is such a thing as really sad melodies. There are other things which are soaringly romantic melodies, at least to American ears or western European ears. What an Eskimo would think of if he heard "Rhapsody in Blue" well we'll have to ask him. I don't know.

Bela Fleck is an extraordinary banjo player, composer and artistic explorer. I was surprised to learn how titles fit into his creative timeline.

MR: Do you have trouble thinking of titles sometimes?

BF: Yeah. I'm really picky about titles, and usually the crunch is when it's time for the record to come out, that's when the titles have to get settled. So I keep a list of titles now in my computer and I'll look through them. And often I don't find anything that fits the song. I want it to really fit. And again, why it fits the song, I can't tell you, but when it's the right one it clicks in and I go, oh, that feels right.

MR: Now "Sunset Road" is I think one of your really — it sticks in your head. And there's something really evocative about that song, it reminds me of a song like "Harlem Nocturne" or something that I don't know why that makes me think of someplace. But does it strike you that way?

BF: Yeah. I mean I was really happy with it. It popped out. I was recording an album called "Solo Banjo Works" back whenever it was, before the Flecktones. And I was testing the microphones and I just was improvising a little bit and that melody came out and I just kept playing it over and over again. And then finally I came up with a bridge. And then the title came from a signpost. We were driving on the bus and I was sitting in the front early in the morning. We were driving through someplace in South Carolina, and I was looking for titles for that first — I might have still be in New Grass Revival possibly, the band before the Flecktones. Because we had made the Flecktone record and I was on tour looking for titles. And I saw that sign go by, "Sunset Road." That one's done.

That one's done, and so is this one. I highly recommend listening to Mongo Santamaria's version of "Watermelon Man," a real ear worm. You can then replace it with another, Bela's "Sunset Road." Tune in next week, our last episode of Season 2 focuses on the person who shares in the success or failure of a recording, the record producer. We'll hear from Orrin Keepnews, George Avakian, Joel Dorn and Jean Bach. You can find Jazz Backstory at Hamilton.edu and on major podcast providers. Finally, on the subject of recordings, we'll go out with one of mine, a tune called "Standard Time." See you on the flip side.