Jazz Backstory

Episode 17 — East Coast Studios

Welcome to Season 3, Episode 17 of our Jazz Backstory podcast. I am Monk Rowe, the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College and your podcast host. For first time listeners, a bit of review. Our podcast features the voices and anecdotes of jazz artists, both famous and unsung, sharing their experiences and knowledge about the jazz life. These voices are excerpted from the 450 video interviews that have been conducted for the Fillius Jazz Archive since 1995. I encourage you to check out Seasons 1 & 2 of our podcasts and visit the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel where you can view the complete video sessions. And a tip of the hat to our house band, The Orchestra in a Nutshell, and their original podcast theme, "Riff City" Let's get to it.

We ended Season 2 with anecdotes from musicians, producers and engineers, all speaking on the topic of creating jazz recordings. Episodes 17 and 18 extends the story of capturing music on tape, but this time we address a different end product. When we started this oral history project in 1995, most of the musicians we met with had started their careers in the heyday of the swing era, the roughly ten year period from 1935 to 1945. Like all musical fads and styles, big band swing ran its course, a victim of economics, WW II travel restrictions and an increasing focus on individual vocalists. The plentiful sideman jobs for musicians still in their prime mostly disappeared, leaving them with the looming question of what to do next. For many, it was time to find what their parents had strongly suggested in the first place, a real job, a nine to fiver. For those who refused to give up the life, the calling as Billy Mitchell described it, there fortunately was an option. Think for a moment of the multitude of movies, television and radio programs you've seen and heard since childhood, and include the commercials, the news, and the weather reports. Then imagine every recording you have heard by individual singers backed up by nameless bands and orchestras. Music plays an integral role in all of these, and that music was written, arranged, and performed by groups of musicians, which brings us to our Episode 17 topic, In the Studios part 1

Let's start on the East coast and listen to pianist Dick Hyman, who found New York City recording studios to be the perfect home for his diverse skills.

Well now you're getting into the studio scene in New York, which I was lucky enough to get into in the 1950s and stayed with, well, into the 1980s. There were several hundred, as I estimate, it couldn't have been more than maybe two hundred people who did most of the recording work in New York and by recording I mean not only the commercials for dozens of producers around town, but the phonograph records, which were all ad hoc kind of orchestras — Andre Konstelantz, Percy Faith, those were typical of the upper end of things you might say. And the rock 'n rollers, which you might say was the lower end, we worked for them too. And then there were the film people because films — a small number comparatively — of films were scored in New York and composers would pick up a band to do that. But when I say pick up a band, this is not just saying any old guy off the street could come in and do this, it was very specialized work and all of these people, of whom I'm proud to say I was one, could really do any number of jobs that were called on.

MR: So if you were listening to Andre Konstelantz, and then you listened to Percy Faith —

DH: It was liable to be the same orchestra. Yes. And well the rock & roll groups also were liable to have the same people, it was a slightly different cast, but I learned that the more things one could do, the more gigs you'd be called on, so I could change hats, all of us could really, and start being funky and play for Atlantic Records in the evening, and do Konstelantz in the morning and somebody else in-between.

MR: I went back and was reading your first interview actually and you mentioned some of the people you played with — Ruth Brown and the Coasters and the Drifters. And you made a comment about their version of "White Christmas."

DH: Oh yeah. That was a session we did "White Christmas" — was that the Drifters or the Coasters?

MR: I think it was the Drifters you said.

DH: Yeah, I believe you're right. The session included Jerry Wexler, who is a good friend of mine in Florida, he's long retired, he points out that that session with the Drifters produced four hits. Not only "White Christmas" but "The Bells of St. Mary," and two others which I can't name. In those days you know, it was customary to do four numbers in a session. Now people take a month to do something and they track it and they change it and they mess around with it. Well the union contract specified four numbers in three

hours. And many people did just that, even in pop records, or maybe you'd go into a half hour or an hour overtime, but four tunes was the norm. At any rate there was always something going on and I loved it.

MR: You had said the — "We said to each other at that time in twenty years" — this was 1955 or so — "in twenty years people will say to each other 'listen darling, they're playing our song.' You know that's exactly what happened. All that funny music that we laughed at became classic rock."

DH: That's true. That's absolutely true. We've all lived to see that. When I see now the musicology that's spent on early rock & roll and the nostalgia and the way it's permeated everything we do I just marvel at it. In those days we didn't really respect it much. We just did it.

MR: I don't know if you ever sit and listen to the Oldies station —

DH: I do.

MR: Are you likely to hear yourself?

DH: Very much.

MR: And do you remember —

DH: Yeah, I can remember some.

MR: Can you tell me a couple of spots that I might hear?

DH: Yeah. Johnny Mathis, there's one — there's a famous Mathis record that begins with a piano figure. "Chances Are."

MR: "Chances Are." Yes. That's you?

DH: That's one. Yeah. And then there's another one that I whistled on for Johnny Mathis. [whistles]

MR: [humms].

DH: That's right. And there's another Bob Allen song.

MR: "Wonderful Wonderful."

DH: Right.

MR: That's you whistling is that right?

DH: That was one of my — well you know I had made my own — I have to admit — hit record of "Moritat," which then became known as "Theme from the Three Penny Opera" and then finally became known as "Mack the Knife" in 1955 for MGM as the Dick

Hyman Trio which actually had four people in it I think. And I whistled on that as well as playing an instrument called the harpsichord piano. So it became known around town that I was willing and I was capable of whistling, willing to undertake it and capable of doing it without running out of breath. So I found myself being called to be a whistler on dates and I promptly joined AFTRA, that is the singers union, because their scale was higher than the musician's union, and on a good day I might collect both scales on a single session. So I'm the whistler on that and I'm the whistler on something with Marian Marlowe for Archie Bleier's company Cadence, something called "The Man and the Raincoat," one of those spooky third-man theme type recordings.

MR: Was it a lip whistle or was it a teeth whistle?

DH: No, no, no. The teeth whistling we left to Bob Haggart.

MR: Of course.

For the jazz trivialists out there, bassist Bob Haggart did a teeth whistle on the novelty tune "Big Noise from Winnetka." Something like [whistles]. It sounds a lot better with his acoustic bass. Dick Hyman, a fairly modest man, indicates the diverse set of skills required for this studio gig. As long as they were flexible and dependable, big band musicians fit the bill. They already were capable sight readers and well versed in multiple music styles. While they may have missed the recognition and adulation connected to a big band gig, they did not miss the band bus and welcomed the relatively steady bread. Don't forget, for professional musicians, a gig is a gig. Numerous jazz players redefined themselves as versatile musicians, seeking out jazz gigs while making use of their talents during the day.

Guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli was among the first call New York studio cats and like Dick Hyman, excelled at playing the correct part for whatever was required.

MR: So if you were to listen, to sit and listen to the oldies radio station — oldies meaning '50s and '60s music — you're likely to hear yourself now and then, right?

BP: Oh yeah. Oh "Stand By Me" I made and I never realized until they sent me a check because they used the record in a movie, and somehow my son said, "Did you make this record." I said, "I don't remember this." Because we did it three times a day. We were at all the major companies, 10-1 in the morning, 2-5, 7-10 at night, and sometimes a midnight session.

MR: Amazing.

BP: Yup.

MR: There was a core of people that were — what do they call it — first call?

BP: Yeah.

MR: Like Milt Hinton?

BP: Milt was there all the time. Milt and George Duvivier. I mean we had all jazz people. I mean the drummers were all from that, from the big bands, all from the big bands. And then once they got that eighth note feel, they were in, they were in.

MR: Now you played with Dion and the Belmonts.

BP: Yeah we did a lot of that stuff for them.

MR: Yeah. At the time did you ever have a sense of, well that song we did today, I think that is probably going to catch on?

BP: No. Well once in a while I would say well there's a hit record you know. And sure enough it would be a hit. But with Dion, I never knew that. The first six records we made with him were like million sellers. "The Wanderer" and "Teenager in Love."

MR: You never quite know what's going to catch the public's ear.

BP: No. You never know. Yeah. But in those days a hit record was a glorious thing to have, for an artist to find some — Patty Page had a thing called "Doggie in the Window."

MR: "How Much is that Doggie in the Window."

BP: Yeah, we made it in the last five minutes of a three hour session. So how do you know? I think Doc Severinsen was playing trumpet on it.

MR: I mean I can just picture you going home and saying hey man, guess what we did today.

BP: Yeah, and "Itzy Bitzy Bikini."

MR: Were you on that?

BP: Yeah.

MR: "Itzy Bitzy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini." Oh my God. That was Brian Hyland, wasn't it?

BP: Yeah that's right. That's right. And another thing, I made, here's a funny story. I made Ray Charles' "Georgia on my Mind." So we do the arrangement. Smash hit. Big, big hit. Thirty years later I'm doing the Dick Cavett Show. And Ray Charles is going to sing this tune. And the conductor comes up to me and I'm with Bobby Rosengarden's band. And

the guy said to me, “Don’t play the guitar on this record, because it was a certain kind of guitar playing on there” so he was afraid I didn’t know. So I laid out.

MR: That’s priceless.

BP: Do you believe that?

MR: I can’t believe that.

BP: That actually happened.

[audio interlude]

Imagine showing up for work, not knowing what the job was. For busy studio players, this occurred two and three times every day. They might play music for a laundry detergent commercial, followed by a session of military marches and end the day playing behind a vocalist, a teenage heart throb. Trumpeter Joe Wilder, who was denied a career in classical music, became one of the first African American musicians to break the color barrier in the New York City studios and radio orchestras. Here’s a passage from Joe’s biography *Softly with Feeling* written by his dear friend Ed Berger. And I quote:

> “There was so much variety in the kind of music we played that it was like spending several years in a conservatory. You would work six or eight hours a day, you got a good salary and you could survive just by doing that. You would look forward to it, like a challenge and you began to feel this is where I wanted to be everyday. It was a joy.” End quote.

Mr. Wilder himself was a joy, the consummate professional, a man who demanded respect by respecting others and leading by example.

It’s jazz vocabulary time and one is a replay from episode 11, the straight 8th notes. As Bucky said, once a big band drummer got the straight 8ths, he was in. The new style of rock & roll required it. Now the studio scene brings us a few new terms, like the contractor. Every session with multiple musicians involved a contractor, a person who knew all the best players and booked them for these lucrative gigs. And then there’s “one take.” Studio time is expensive and musicians who could read and record successfully on the first try, one take, rose to the top of the list. A soloist who nailed a difficult part the first time might be called a one-take wonder. These solos were often overdubbed, a process using headphones and multi-track tape, adding a part to music previously recorded. While this technology is not new, it was an adjustment for some swing era musicians. On Phoebe Snow’s first record, swing icon Teddy Wilson was invited

to play on a tune. He arrived at the studio, sat at the piano, was handed headphones and said, "What's this, where's the band?"

Speaking of one take, here's a lick our Orchestra in a Nutshell nailed on the first try. [audio interlude]

This wealth of well-paying work was enticing and occasionally busy studio players gambled with the logistics of making multiple sessions in a day, basically attempting to be two places at once. Trombonist Alan Raph shares an anecdote in this regard as well as a bizarre studio moment. Alan was also the recipient of some sage advice regarding the daily life of a studio musician.

MR: You found your way into the studio scene in New York?

AR: Yeah. I always had that in the back of my mind that I wanted to do studio work. And Mulligan, well the Elgart band was a good entree into that, and Mulligan was a very good entree into that. I started doing — through another connection I started doing a lot of the rock & roll dates. And I got fairly busy doing those things. I was doing a Broadway show and I was playing Mulligan at Birdland and I was also doing dates during the day. And I started doing some jazz dates. Keeping one contact while you make another, and then honoring the commitments. If you overbook, and you do this all the time, you book something that's right on the tail of something else and then you have the problem of trying to get out of the first thing a little bit early or come to the second thing a little bit late. And there's generally a way. I remember once breaking — my daughter at the time, my 43-year-old, had a little plastic cow and I broke its foot off and put iodine on it. In the middle of a rehearsal I reached in and said, "oh man, I just broke my tooth." I managed to get out of rehearsal. I left the trombone on the chair, just to make it look really good, and I went out, took my other trombone and went and did a brass quintet date Uptown. Every now and then I'd have to do something like that but not too often.

MR: You mentioned doing rock & roll dates.

AR: Many.

MR: Did you even know the name of the bands that you were playing for sometimes?

AR: No.

MR: So you just came in, like a horn section, and they'd put the music in front of you, and you'd put the headphones on—

AR: Yeah. I had no idea.

MR: Really?

AR: I did stuff for Blood, Sweat & Tears, I did stuff for Bob Dylan. But this I remember well. We were at Stay Phillips. And we were recording Frankie Valli with the Four Seasons. Well it wasn't even Frankie Valli in those days, it was just simply The Four Seasons. And we were sitting as a band, they had an isolation booth for the singer and they had a control booth for the producer and all. And we were doing a Christmas album. And it came to the tune "O Holy Night," which starts on the third beat. So it goes [scats] "O Holy Night" and it comes in like that. Well Eddie and I were the only two trombones. We are sitting side by side looking straight into the booth, and Frankie Valli was doing a solo on this. And he could not get this. [scats] "O Holy Night" no, no, no, Frank they're telling him from the booth you know. "You have to start a little bit later." Okay. [scats] "No Frank, you have to start earlier." And by this time he's getting into a panic. You know the eyes are starting to get wide. It must have gone on for it seemed like a long time, it was probably about ten minutes or so. And on recording time, where time is money, you know ten minutes of wasting time like that you start getting nervous. So finally he just wasn't getting it so the producer said, "Wait I have an idea." He sent two guys into the booth with Frankie and we did the take with them holding his mouth like this, both sides of him, and Frank was there with the eyes popping. [scats] they released his mouth, he sang the tune, we did a take. I'll never forget that. I have the record at home. When I started doing really good studio work and I was doing dates with Bernie Glow and Mel Davis, who were the top two trumpet players in New York City for many years, I felt well I've arrived, you know I'm doing things with these guys and I'm able to kind of hold my own with them you know? Mel told me something one day that spun me completely around. And I'm so happy he did. After a certain point when I realized I could play the trombone, and there was nothing out there that was going to scare me too much music-wise, I started developing an attitude of well this is all beneath me you know? And we were doing a date, Mel and Bernie and I were doing a thing for RCA Camden. I think it was a rip off of the Herb Alpert style. It was called "Living Brass" and it was the Herb Alpert tunes done with studio brass so that people could buy the record for two dollars instead of four dollars and they'd get the same music. In fact they'd probably hear it

played better. And there was something that we were playing that was just terrible. And I remember looking at Mel saying [growls] isn't this ridiculous, look at this garbage, you know. Mel, during the break, he walks over and he puts his arm around my shoulder and he says, "Alan," he says, "we're here to sell it not to buy it." And wow did that ever change me — that changed me right there on the spot. I thought my God yes. We are here to sell it, not to buy it. Here I'm sitting there like I'm buying it. And that just turned me completely around. You know? When you learn something you learn it immediately, like a ton of bricks. And that was a ton of bricks at that time.

Alan Raph was fortunate that he received that advice and heeded it. Some players were worn down by the daily routine, as challenging and diverse as it might be. This was especially true with the pit orchestra gigs, the hit musicals that spent years on Broadway, the same tunes every night. Years ago I sat in the pit during a touring production of "Cats" and was amused to see the electric keyboardist play his part, push a couple of buttons, pick up his magazine and read until his next cue., never turning a page of music or looking at the conductor. I am assuming cell phones are banned in the pits today.

Jazz instrumentalists and arrangers might start their day with a light weight jingle session then hail a cab to a second studio and enter the pop and rock world where they would overdub "sweetening", like frosting on a cake. Manny Albam, a highly respected jazz arranger, had a dose of reality when he worked in both of these settings.

MR: We didn't talk about the jingle scene.

MA: I'll give you a clue as to the — I did Coca Cola, I did Chevrolet, I did a whole bunch of things. And this is a clue as to how people think in the advertising business, or try to think. We were doing a project for I think it was cosmetics. It was a female product of one kind or another. And they called me in and we started talking about a month before the recording session about what would be nice. I said, "Well I'd love to use a string quartet and a harp and maybe an unamplified guitar, a classical guitar and a bass, no drums, maybe a percussionist, maybe vibes and some little bells or whatever." And the guys says, "Great, great, boy that sounds beautiful" it sounds like, whatever. And we talked more and more and I go in and see the cuts that they're making in the film and then they would call me up and say well they changed something and come on and look at it, and you had to take very detailed you know things about what was going on so you

could fit the music. And finally we get to the studio, the guy walks in and he looks in through the glass into the studio and he says, “What’s that violin doing there? I hate violins.” So his associate says, “We’ve been talking about a string quartet for a month.” So he says, “Well I thought a string quartet was four guitar players.”

MR: You seem to have certainly survived the rock & roll onslaught. Did it change your work at all when rock & roll became the popular music?

MA: Well what happened to me a couple of times, there used to be a group in Canada called the Guess Who. And there was another one called the Lloyds of London. They would come down to New York and cut a basic track and then I would go in and add strings and horns and whatever. And that began to become like a joke. They’d go in, first the bass player would come in and play his line. And then the guitar player came in and says, “Wait a minute I can’t play with that thing, you’ve got G natural and it’s the wrong – I can’t do that.” So the bass player would have to make another track. And then the piano player came in and they’d change — so to get one thing down sometimes took three or four days. Finally they got two tracks down and I took them home and I would write the “sweetening” is what they’d call it — strings and horns and all that. And we’d call the session and the string players came in and sat down and they played the things through once and we recorded them the second time and they left and then the horn players came in. And these guys were, “Holy Jesus, you mean you did the whole thing in 20 minutes? I can’t believe it.” I said, “Well they’re musicians. They read music.

Well they’re musicians. They read music. Gee, I can’t really tell how Manny Albam felt about the Guess Who. So tonight, when you watch your favorite show, tune into the music and remember no matter how striking or inconsequential it is, there are multiple people behind it, or nowadays, perhaps one synthesizer. We’ll get to that phenomenon.

In our next episode we’ll hear from the west coast contingent, the L.A. guns for hire, musically speaking. See you on the flip side.