

Jazz Backstory

Episode 19 — Jotting Down Notes, Part 1

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Episode 19. I'll jump-start this episode with a quote from Monk Rowe, Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Here 'tis: Think of the multitude of movies, television, radio program, and commercials you've seen and heard since childhood. Then imagine every recording you have heard by bands or individual singers backed up by often nameless groups of musicians. All that music was written, arranged and performed by groups of talented artists." End quote.

One of the perks of creating a podcast is the modest joy of quoting yourself, that was indeed yours truly, introducing our focus on studio musicians in Episodes 17 & 18. That spotlight was on the actual performers. Our next two episodes highlight the men and women who generate the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, the composers and arrangers who Jot Down the Notes.

Inspiration for new jazz music can come from an unlimited variety of sources, both momentous, sometimes frivolous. John Coltrane composed "Alabama" as a memorial to the victims of the 1963 Birmingham church bombing. Bob Haggart and Ray Bauduc of the Bob Crosby Orchestra, spontaneously composed the bass and drum duet "Big Noise from Winnetka" in response to a riotous crowd and their demand for "one more song." I can testify, that on occasion, new compositions spring forth for no discernable reason at all. Our first interview excerpt comes from a 2020 session with Stefon Harris. The vibraphonist and band leader speaks about the composing process and the sources of that may proceed it.

MR: If we decided that we wanted to commission a new work from you and your group, is there a process that you engage in to get started?

SH: So if I were commissioned, I couldn't tell you in advance. I'd have to say okay, here's some space and I'm ready to create, I have energy, like I know that there's something that's inside of me. And then I'd have to just step back and be patient. Usually it takes me about two weeks before I get the momentum going. I'll get up in the morning, first thing I'll do is go right to a piano and I'll pluck at a couple of random notes. And if in fifteen minutes I don't really get anything that's cool, I'll just walk away and do something else. It's not there. And then some mornings you go right to the piano and you play a couple of

notes and you say, “Oh my goodness, that’s it.” And then I can spend the next twenty hours trying to find ways to contextualize that beautiful little gem that I found. I didn’t create it, I found it. And then I’m just surrounding it with interesting things trying to utilize my knowledge of harmony to give an emotional springboard to the melody itself.

MR: Yeah. Do you ever find any little gems when you’re driving in your car or taking a walk and then like — oh I’ve got to write this down somehow?

SH: Yeah. It can happen at any moment. And it can happen in any form too. Sometimes it’s a collection of words that come to mind that turn into music. So on this concert, this video, we did a piece called “Let’s Take a Trip to the Sky” which is a piece that I wrote for my wife. I was on tour on one of our major anniversaries and I missed it, and I was thinking about her, and I just started to write down some thoughts about, I’ve been married twenty years now. So I started to write down some thoughts about what is it that we need to do to ensure that our love continues to grow and that it stays strong and just how much I cared about her. And I wrote that down, no instrument around just in a hotel room thinking about life. And then when I got home I put those words on the piano and just started to look at the emotion of every word and look for a chord that captured the feeling of the word. Well that inspiration didn’t come from an instrument or notes at all, it came from my dedication and love for my wife. I think the highest value that drives me is simply that music is one manifestation of empathy but I try to live a life with my family and how I maneuver through the world in general always being led through the values of empathy. But I hope that when people would hear my music that it’s not just about me but you hear the community, you hear how these disparate voices are coming together to create something as incredibly beautiful that they wouldn’t be able to do on their own. And on top of that I think it’s really important that I be of service, right? Just like a chauffeur or a politician or a cook, we all have to provide some service to society. And I think the service that we’re supposed to be providing as artists is we’re supposed to be amplifying the voices of our community. Many parts of our communities don’t have the ability to articulate themselves. We have been studying for many years and are still working on the ability to articulate emotion in sound. So when someone hears my music I hope they hear the sound of the community that we come from, that they hear the beauty that lives in our

community, the pluses, the minuses, the struggle. I hope that there's some documentation about what's happening in our world right now.

Stephon Harris impressed me with his — I guess I'll describe it as “noble intentions” with his music. When he spoke about little musical gems that launched new compositions, they were not series of notes that he created, rather, he stated that he found them. As if the phrase was in the air, just waiting for someone with serious intent, someone who deserved to adopt it and give it an emotional springboard.

Ray Conniff was a household name in the 1950s and 60s. His easy listening LPs were played consistently in living rooms across the country and his use of wordless vocals enabled worldwide popularity. Between 1957 and 1968, Mr. Conniff had 28 albums in the American Top 40. Ray's inspiration was a tad more practical than that of Stefon Harris, and his path from jazz arranger/composer to creator of the iconic and profitable Ray Conniff Sound makes for a fascinating tale.

RC: That whole period, and up to where you pointed out when the first album of my own came out, I wrote with a different objective in mind. To me, it was fun and it was a big kick if I wrote a chart as we call them, and I brought it in to the band and they rehearsed it — Jack Jenney or Georgie Auld or Bunny Berigan band or Joe Bushkin in the Bunny Berigan band, or Buddy Rich was in the Bunny Berigan first band I was in. They said, “Hey that was a great arrangement, Ray, I like that thing you did on ‘Little Gate.’” I wrote for the guys. I wrote for Bunny, I wrote for the guys. I wrote for Bob Crosby and the guys in the band. I wrote for Artie Shaw and the guys in the band. I never thought about the people out there that were paying our bills, you know that were paying our salaries, that went to the dances, that listened to us on the air, that bought our records. You know, I didn't care, I never gave them a second thought. I went through a period I call the lean years, and that was gee, I can't pin it down, I know I'd been writing for the Harry James Band, '46 — I remember the first thing I did for Harry I still had my soldier suit on, I wrote a thing called “Easy,” an original. And Harry and I had a parting of the ways because a few years down the road, I was doing an awful lot of writing for Harry, I wrote a lot of originals for him. And I remember I went into, he had a song for me to do and the name of the song was “Ruby.” And he said, “By the way, why don't you write a little bit, kind of a bop treatment on this?” Bop was kind of a new school of music that

was coming along, and I never did dig bop. So I says, “Hey you know, Harry, I just don’t feel that kind of music,” and you know, “maybe it’s time you got another boy.” And his jaw dropped. He looked at me and he couldn’t believe what I was saying. And he said, “Well, okay.” So I left the band. And boy, for two years the phone hardly rang. And finally after sitting waiting for the phone to ring for two years I got so discouraged I thought — I had a wife and a mother I was supporting, and three children, and we were living out in Reseda, and I thought, I’ve got to go get a job. I can’t go on like this. I took a job — they were converting a ten acre, it was a melon field, into a subdivision out in Reseda. And I went out and took a job as a laborer, cleaning up the ditches behind the ditch digger. Where he’d make mistakes on the corner, I’d clean the ditches. And I got to thinking, wow, what happened? Which way did they go, you know. I was making, in 1940, Artie was paying me \$300 a week, you know, which in those days was a lot of money. And here I am out digging ditches, you know, for \$60 a week. But it gave me a lot of time to think. So I thought, what if I started writing for the people that paid the bills, the people that listened, the people that bought the records you know. And I started thinking more along the lines of commercially, and I thought about, you know everything in life in rhythm. Our heartbeat is a rhythm, each day is a rhythm, the sun rises and sets to a rhythm, and the ocean tides go in and out to a rhythm, the cycles of the seasons are a rhythm. And I thought rhythm is very important in our life, and I made the rhythm very predominant. And then I remembered when I first started thinking about the opposite sex. There was a little girl down the street that I had a terrible crush on. I must have been I don’t know, ten, eleven, twelve, something like that. And she was always singing a song, it was [sings], “ooooh, would you like to take a walk — oooooh, do you think it’s going to rain — and something’s gonna come from that” is the name of the song. And to this day, I’ve heard that song once in a while, people will play an old record or a disc jockey. It still moves something. I thought, if I can catch the songs that people fell in love to the first few times, I’ve got a wonderful idea. And that’s what I did. I picked songs, and by arithmetic I went back the number of years, the age group I was trying to hit was 18-35 in the market. So I went back, when were those 18 to 35 year olds hearing, “ooooh would you like to take a walk” with the little girl down the street, or the boy you know, and so by arithmetic I picked songs from the top ten of those years and I did some more research

and found out that the two songs that had sold the most records, had the most sheet music, and playing, the most airplay and it was “Begin the Beguine” and “Stardust.” That was in 1956. And we put the single out. And it became like a turntable hit. It was played day and night by disc jockeys all over the United States.

Nothing like mind numbing manual labor to make you reexamine your priorities. Mr. Conniff was absolutely correct about initially writing for the guys in the band, for the praise and for that first thrill of hearing the notes you jotted down come to life.

[audio interlude]

Music composition and arranging occur because of a meaningful listening experience, followed by a question, as in, I wonder if I could do that. And so you do.

Mike Abene shares a rather odd impetus for his pursuit of jotting down the notes and addresses the ever present issue of charging a fee for your service.

MR: As a piano player, did you ever have to deal with lousy pianos?

MA: God, that’s why I prefer writing. You just answered — and you just solved the riddle of my life. People say don’t you miss playing. Yeah I miss playing. But I really love writing because, the first reason being that you know you guys can play your own horns, like the drummer plays his drums, the bass player, but then you’re stuck with some of these pianos, they’re just hideous. And to this day that’s still kind of an occupational hazard for piano players too. But that’s why, and the other thing is sometimes you play and you play a great solo, right? So the next night you go back and nobody even has any idea about how well you might have played the night before. It’s up in the air someplace. At least if it’s writing you write something, a good band, it’s there to remind you if it’s really good, and unfortunately if it’s really bad too.

MR: How do you determine — obviously it would change over the years — but what you get paid for your writing?

MA: Well that’s funny. With Maynard’s band — well let me just go back a step for a second. With Maynard’s band, you didn’t get paid. You copied, you wrote, and you didn’t really care because you figured you have a band that was playing your music. You got paid if it was recorded. And then the company paid something like a hundred bucks or something like that. So it wasn’t a thrilling amount of money but the fact is you were getting your music played all the time. So at that point in time that’s fine. Then you start realizing, as

you start working for other bands in other situations that there's a price. You try — each arranger, from a Local, from a musician's point of view I believe — now my wife is good at this because she's really the manager of all this stuff. There is no such thing as an arranger's scale. There is an orchestration scale, and it's two different things. Over the years you establish a price for yourself basically. And there's no — a lot of times an arranger starting out, he says well how should I charge? I said well you know what you do? Go to your Local — if you're in New York go to Local 802, get what the orchestrator's scale is. Figure out that scale, what it is so at least when you bargain with somebody you have some idea, you know you don't just pull a number out of the hat. It's a budgetary thing. So you decide, oh it's not worth it. I don't want to do it. Or you say well it's a very important scene, it's a wonderful orchestra, a wonderful band and there's other far reaching things. So I mean I really feel that goes on to this day. Like I've done stuff for Liza Minelli over the years. So of course you're talking a whole other thing. Then when I did stuff for Mel Lewis for the Vanguard, now you know there's quite a difference. But certainly when Mel talked to me about it, sure man, love to do some stuff for the band. We didn't even talk about money. I mean now you're talking about something else now.

MR: Yeah, you're thinking about the people in that band playing your music for one thing.

MA: Yeah. Come on, there's no comparison. So for somebody to refuse that on the basis of well he's not paying me X amount, the guy's in the wrong business.

MR: Is it easier for you to write when you have less choices to make, instrumentation wise, or when you have this huge possibility of a big band and an orchestra?

MA: It's a very good question. It's variable. It all depends. Some pieces fall into place a little easier. It's hard. Sometimes I've had more trouble figuring out what to do with a band than I do with a full orchestra. Or vice versa. There's no set thing for me on it. And I'm generally working on two or three pieces at one time. So like if I run into a road block on one I stop and start working on this. And sometimes something will ring a bell working on this piece for this piece. And I get nervous when I'm only working on one piece at a time.

MR: Oh really?

Now we call that multi-tasking, business as usual for those busiest writers and arrangers. On the west coast no one was busier than Bill Holman. Bill wrote charts for Basie, Kenton, Buddy Rich and Maynard Ferguson, contributed music to the talk shows of Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin, Dick Cavett and the Tonight Show and somehow found time to lead and arrange music for his own band, the Bill Holman Big Band. He seemed to intuitively know that charts for singers required a musical device that musicians often forget is available to them.

MR: I wanted to ask about the first time — you had quite a list of singers here that you arranged for also. And when was your first experience doing a chart for a singer?

BH: It must have been around the middle 50s for Peggy Lee. I believe in starting at the top you know.

MR: I guess so.

BH: And I was really scared because I had kind of a crush on her since 1942.

MR: Oh that's nice.

BH: But she's a great singer, so I really took it easy writing the charts. I didn't put a whole lot in there, you know, afraid to get in their way. She told me later after a couple of years, she said, "The thing I really like about your charts is all the stuff you leave out." So I guessed right on that one.

MR: There's a lesson there. Rests are good.

BH: Yeah.

MR: Did you do much writing for the studios as far as the film music and—

BH: I did some in the '50s when they were using a lot of jazz scores, and especially a lot of T.V. shows. I worked with Leith Stevens on a couple of things, who was a very good Hollywood picture film composer. I've never gone into actually composing for movies. I did a couple of grade C movies in the '50s.

MR: Grade C huh?

BH: Yeah.

MR: Did you ever see them?

BH: Yes. One of them made T.V. and it comes out occasionally as a rerun.

MR: Can you tell me what it is?

BH: It was called "Swamp Women."

MR: "Swamp Women" with score by Bill Holman. Yeah?

BH: Yeah. Terrible music.

[audio interlude]

Time for a few vocabulary words. We have already used the term “chart,” jazz slang for an arrangement, as in did you finish that chart? The score created for the chart is that heavy duty, over large paper where all the parts are written. The copyist, who writes out the individual parts from that score, and the copyist may or may not be the composer or arranger, often the last step in this whole process. The orchestrator, a behind the scenes cat who is expert at taking piano scores or small group charts and expanding them to larger ensembles, perfectly matching instruments to themes. Ever hear of Irwin Kostal or Sid Ramin? Neither had I until reading the fine print on the original sound track to West Side Story. They’re the orchestrators who made Bernstein’s music come alive.

I would have to check for sure, but I think every episode of our Jazz Backstory podcast has mentioned Count Basie in some context. Composing or arranging for Basie was a goal for every jazz writer and Frank Foster not only played tenor sax for the Count but excelled at arranging charts that filled every Basie requirement. His chart “Shiny Stockings” is a must play for any jazz ensemble. Frank describes what pleased and displeased the Count.

MR: How about the first time you brought an arrangement to Basie?

FF: The first arrangement I brought to the Basie band was one I brought from Korea with me that I had played with a band in Korea. It was an original cha-cha-cha.

MR: No kidding.

FF: And the band needed a couple of Latin flavored songs for the dancers that they were playing. And they only had one mambo. So this was a mambo, not a cha-cha-cha.

MR: You wrote a mambo?

FF: Yeah. This was an original sort of thing based on a mambo groove, and it was very simple. And I brought it in to the band and we played it. And Basie encouraged me to continue writing. And the results of that encouragement were “Blues Backstage,” and “Blues in Hoss’ Flat,” and eventually “Shiny Stockings.” But it’s not all peaches and cream or roses as it were. If you could count the arrangements that were rejected as stacked up against those that were accepted, the stacks would be pretty even.

MR: No kidding.

FF: Right.

MR: So you'd take it into a rehearsal and did it take him a long time to decide?

FF: No. It never took him a long time. If the arrangement played down the first time and nobody had to decipher it as though it were hieroglyphics, and it swung, it was in. Generally if it took too long and people had to labor over phrases and how does this go and what does this mean, and if it sounded like too much dissonance, or too many "pregnant nineteenthths" as Basie used to say—

MR: Did he say that?

FF: Yeah he said, "son, when you write an arrangement, don't put too many pregnant nineteenthths in there." So I knew what he meant by "pregnant nineteenthths." And if was too busy, too overloaded, every time it got rejected. Which brings me to the story of "Shiny Stockings." We were playing a place in Philadelphia called Pep's Bar. And we'd just arrived in town that morning and we had to rehearse that day because it was customary to rehearse on the opening day of each nightclub engagement. But we had arrived late and checked in late at the hotel, a long trip from somewhere. Everybody is tired, ill tempered, hungry, and no one felt like rehearsing. You know we'd rather have done anything than rehearse. But we had to rehearse that day. And I brought "Shiny Stockings" in. And the first rehearsal of "Shiny Stockings," it just sounded like a 43 car pile-up on the New York Thruway. Everybody ran into everybody. I said oh my, he'll never play this song, and I put so much into it. Well Mr. Basie must have heard something, because with that horrible rehearsal, he must have understood how tired everyone was and how unwilling we were to rehearse and that was the result of our attitudes. He must have heard something because we played it and played it and played it and I guess you could say the rest is history.

MR: I guess so.

FF: But many other songs that sounded like that in rehearsal never got played. And we had an expression, if we were rehearsing something and it wasn't going well, either because it was too busy or the harmonies weren't right or it sounded amateurish, we had an expression, "Pasadena," which meant pass it in. And after we worked on that chart for about ten, fifteen minutes, Marshall Royal, who was the straw boss, he'd say "Pasadena." And I guess this was sort of code terminology so that if the arranger was somebody

outside the band, he wouldn't know what we were talking about, but you'd see all this music converging on one spot, and it was being passed in.

MR: But you knew. Do you think you had an advantage writing for the band you were playing in?

FF: Yes. Definitely. The arrangers who were in the band, namely Thad Jones, Frank Wess and myself, Ernie Wilkins while he was still there, and Eric, the late Eric Dixon, definitely had an advantage being in the band. We knew the personalities we were surrounded by, and we knew each other's strong points and we knew how to write for each other's strong points, and to de-emphasize weak points, of which there were very few. I mean everybody in that band was a section person, if not a great soloist. Everybody in there was a seasoned section player. And we just had a great advantage over outside arrangers. Some of the successful writers for the band were Benny Carter and Quincy Jones and Billy Byers. Those were three masters, all of whom contributed some very significant music to the band. Others weren't so fortunate.

MR: Well I guess it was partly a left handed compliment to say I was rejected by Count Basie.

FF: I'll tell you, Basie, he would always make it up, because years after, this must have been in the early 60s now, "Shiny Stockings" was introduced to the book in 1955, Basie pulled me over in the corner and he said, "Kid, you know you wrote that 'Shiny Stockings?'" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You really put one down that time, boy."

MR: It was five years later, huh?

FF: Yeah, right.

MR: He was a man of few words most of the time?

FF: Definitely. But every word meant something.

MR: Just like his playing, right?

FF: Right, exactly. Like his playing. He used to say it's best to know what to leave out than to put too much in. And then he'd say, he'd have a saying like "It's the little things that mean so much," and what he meant by that was very few notes but making a definite statement rather than just taking the ink pen and throwing it at the paper, splattering ink all over and trying to get somebody to play that.

Do yourself a favor and seek out "Shiny Stockings" played by the Count Basie Orchestra. It defines big band swing and has the most awesome shout chorus. There's a new vocabulary

word. A shout chorus: all the instruments playing the same rhythm thickly harmonized and swinging like crazy.

Our next episode will feature anecdotes from more jazz writers including Oliver Nelson Jr., Maria Schneider, and Dave Rivello. We'll go out with a chart of mine, one that started with a two chord rhythmic figure at the piano, it went like this [plays a few measures] and to borrow from Stefon Harris, some twenty hours later it had become something worth splattering ink for. It's entitled "Bahia," here played by the SUNY Fredonia Alumni Jazz Ensemble.

See you on the flip side.