

## Jazz Backstory

### Episode 20 — Jotting Down Notes, Part 2

[audio interlude]

Welcome to Jotting Down Notes part 2, Episode 20 of our Jazz Backstory podcast. In Part 1 we heard from Frank Foster, Bill Holman, Mike Abene, Ray Conniff and Stefon Harris. Their views on composition, inspiration, process and goals for their music varied greatly. One thing they all shared: they were all instrumentalists before becoming composers. This is norm in the jazz world and my unscientific observation is that piano players make up the highest percentage of writers with saxophonists following in second place. A prime example of a saxophonist/writer is Oliver Nelson, whose work ranged from innovative large ensemble compositions to movie scores and music for network television dramas. His son, Oliver Junior, also a sax player and arranger, manages the Oliver Nelson music legacy. He shared anecdotes about his father's talents and the iconic tune and LP, "Stolen Moments."

MR: So let me ask you, back to yourself, musically what's your favorite thing to do?

ON: To play. I like to play more than anything, but my Dad told me something and I never really thought about it, I'm starting to think about it more, he said, "Players come and go, you'll see. You'll see great ones, but if you can write well you can make it." And he found that out. And he was really unique though, Monk, because he could actually play well and he could write well. And see some guys don't have to — Slide Hampton can do the same thing, being able to play and being able to write. So I really need to spend the time. I took some arranging classes in college and I really need to go back, but writing is a craft and it takes as much if not more time to write as it does to practice and play. So to kind of justify that time is — well just when I did the transcriptions for my doctorate it took forever. You know you're dealing with Sibelius and you're going back and forth and trying to make that stuff work and Hubert is [scats] all this stuff. But I do want to get into writing more. I want to.

MR: Yeah. You know what you said about your father being able to play and write equally well, it, I'm thinking of this record and I've been revisiting this. I still hold on to my favorite LPs. And there's a quote from him in the liner notes. He said, "I get tired of all these guys having all the fun on my dates" so he gave himself some solos.

ON: That's right. So he was always thinking. And that's the thing — you know some of us get up and we just start blowing the little licks we've learned, but to really think about what you're doing and Jamey Aebersold pushes that idea of really thinking about what you're going to play and how to structure it. And if you listen to what he did, he was always coming up with a neat idea and he would not let it die before he worked it.

MR: Well go listen — I mean I'm sure you've listened to this a few times. The original recording of "Stolen Moments" his tenor solo on there, he's like, he's composing as he goes, literally.

ON: Oh yeah. He's playing triad pairs.

MR: Yeah. Beautiful. And it's such an interesting contrast. You know you've got Eric Dolphy, who's like —

ON: All over the place.

MR: He's all over the place. And then I mean I just wore it out.

ON: I got a call from Jamey Aebersold once and Jamey said, "Oliver, did your dad write that solo out before he played it?" And I was highly insulted by that. I said, "Of course he didn't. But he had been thinking about it a lot, he had been thinking about what he wanted to do." He said, "Because that's almost a perfect solo." And it is. It starts simple, he builds those ideas, he goes up and then he brings it back down again. It's just a magnificent study piece in the art of jazz improvisation, to me.

MR: How did he conceive of new themes? Did you ever witness —

ON: I actually witnessed a couple of times, especially with the television stuff, he was doing an "Ironside" once and there was a race theme in there. And we're sitting in the pool. He kept a little piece of that and he was thinking about [scats] and he said, you know I've got an idea for this. And he scribbles it out, because he had perfect pitch so he knew exactly what he was writing all the time.

MR: He must have always been thinking about something musical I would guess.

ON: Always. But you know what? The interesting thing about Dad was kind of like me, if you gave him four weeks for a show, he would never start on it four weeks before. He always did his most creative stuff when he was under the gun. Sometimes he would write 16, 17 hours. I'd try to stay up with him, it's four o'clock in the morning and he's finishing up because he never allowed anybody to orchestrate. He did all that stuff himself. So he

would come up with the stuff, write it out, he was very meticulous and very thorough about how he lined his paper, everything. So five o'clock in the morning he's finishing the last score for a scene. We'd drive to Universal Studios, because this was before emails and sending files, drop it off, go back home, take a shower. The copyists have got it by six, and at eight o'clock the musicians are sitting on the soundstage and he's got to conduct all day.

MR: Oh my Lord.

ON: Oh, so it was a really pretty tough schedule. And he learned that you're no better than your producer. If your producer does not like you you're done.

We get a glimpse of the pressure that successful writers operated under and the potential for their work being dismissed on a whim by an all powerful producer. Oliver Nelson worked in the pre composing app and sound file world, writing music with score pad and pencil, ear and intuition.

Current writers have embraced the technology of programs like Finale and Sibelius so it was a bit of a surprise when I visited Eastman School of Music composer Dave Rivello. His music room included a huge drafting table, much like the work station of an architect, covered with yellow score pad paper. He spoke about composing and the role of the computer and addressed the issue of handing over your musical intent to an improvising soloist. Here's Dave Rivello from our 2012 session:

MR: Well thanks for taking some time today. And as the camera is kind of catching, you can see sketches all over the room. And I'm really glad to see real paper, to be honest with you, in this day and age.

DR: Yeah, it's part of the process for me and so the computer has its things and in many ways it's made life easier as a composer and arranger, but for me, I still am — I have to work on paper. And so I write all my scores longhand, I do all my sketching and my full scores longhand, and then put it into the computer to make parts for the musicians. And I'm still in the quest of the best pencils that I can find and the paper you see, the King brand, this is all King brand manuscript paper. And it was used by Bob Brookmeyer, my hero, and Gil Evans, and Al Cohn, and everybody on the east coast at least, all use King brand paper. King was the king sort of.

MR: King was the king. What does the putting of pencil on paper do for you that the computer doesn't?

DR: A couple of things, and Stravinsky said it much better than I could but, the tactile sense of the hand and touching the paper and so the mind's ear is connected with the arm and the pencil and making the motion. And in the computer there is the mouse, but you're not really making a mark on the paper. And so for me that's a commitment to that note or that voicing or it is saying that I believe in this. And there's a certain strength in that that if I'm gambling and I'm combining notes that you wouldn't think should go together but I believe in those and I make that mark on the paper, there's a thing about that. And that is not — it doesn't happen the same way on the computer.

MR: Now you obviously would have been writing in the days before you could hear it back. And there's something about that moment, you know, when you're in front of the band and you've just written this thing, and you think it's going to work, but hearing it for that first time is like nothing else, right?

DR: It is like nothing else in the world. That's exactly right. And I don't really, even though the technology exists I don't really depend on the computer to play back for me, I still trust my own sense and I still get that feeling. So I might use the computer to play back to check something, but as far as putting in the entire piece and hearing it play back and, "Oh I did good, yay" and then take it to the band, no, it's still that experience for me, that bringing it to the band and hearing it for the first time live with them playing the notes that I put on the paper and it's still that experience, and nothing touches that in the entire world is that experience — the first hearing of something that you created.

MR: How much of what you write can you hear in your head?

DR: I've been writing music since I was in junior high school, not that anybody should ever hear those attempts at that point, but it's been a lot of years. So it's a two part answer I guess. I can hear a lot of things in my head. And if I were to write something very straightforward then I can hear all of that in my head as I'm creating it. But for me, I'm interested in stretching what I know and what I can do. And so I'm gambling more than I'm not gambling, especially if I'm writing for my own ensemble. So I can still hear that but I don't always know if it's going to work. But you know I spent fifteen years with the legendary Bob Brookmeyer, and he didn't always know. And I'm good friends with

Maria Schneider, and she doesn't always know. And these are people that have been writing music for, Bob especially, for longer than I have been. Bill Holman too, we're friends also. And he sometimes is like, "I'm not sure if it's going to work or not." So part of that never goes away, which is a good thing I think because it means you're trying to expand yourself instead of, you know, if you're just writing straightforward things and banging them out, you should be able to hear those and know that, okay, I can mail it off and forget about it, but I'm not one of those guys.

MR: Something must have inspired you when you were in junior high school — some chart or some writer? Can you recall?

DR: Yeah I remember it like it was yesterday. Actually it was my grandfather, who had a big band on the road in the 1940s. And he lived to be 92, just recently, and he was probably the most amazing man I'll ever know in my life. At 90 years old he wrote his autobiography, and then he was teaching it to people in their 60s and 70s. His book is called *How to Have a Great Life at Any Age*. And I remember distinctly his birthday was on July 4<sup>th</sup> and it was a backyard party at my parent's house for his birthday. And I asked him something about a particular song that I had heard. And he took a paper plate and he flipped it upside down and he drew five lines for the staff and a treble clef and he wrote out the first few measures just out of his head. And I think, trying to look back, that must have been the moment when I realized wow, I want to be able to do that someday.

MR: When you write a chart, to me I always run into this bit about okay, I've done an intro, done the melody, whether or not it has a bridge, and then you get to that point, what am I going to do now? And I think Maria Schneider, she said this to me and I think it came from Bob Brookmeyer. He said, "Wait as long as you can before giving in to a soloist."

DR: Yeah.

MR: Does that sound like something he would say?

DR: That's a Brookmeyer thing for sure. Yeah. When nothing else can happen, that's when the first solo should happen. So you should do everything you can until then. Yeah, that's from Brookmeyer for sure.

MR: So what are those things that you should be trying to do before you go there?

DR: What I think about is continuing to develop whatever material is going on before I turn it over to a soloist. Because the problem that Bob has addressed in print and lectures and

everything is that you turn it over to the soloist and they play what they've been working on in the practice room and it has nothing to do with what has happened up to that point. So I try to guide that a little bit and I also try, with my own band at least, where I have control over the members of the band, to make sure that they understand that you're part of my piece. You know Brookmeyer said it best when he said "A soloist is a compositional continuance." Those are his words, not mine. But I'll take them, and I use them.

[audio interlude]

In the last episode we traced the path of an newly conceived musical idea to its premier performance. Let's review that path: composer to arranger to orchestrator to copyist to performer. You might toss in publisher and conductor and the fact that all these tasks may be done by one person. Perhaps the least recognized skill is that of the music copyist. Lisa Parrott is a talented Australian jazz musician who relocated to the U.S. to pursue her passion for the music. She speaks about working as a copyist, that last link in the chain.

LP: I've learned so much. I have hundreds of composers' music on my computer. I've learnt so much from copying music it's not funny. I did start doing it [air quotes] professionally — well let me back up. Me and Nicki took exams every year, there's a system in Australia, part of the classical music system, Australian Music Examination Board, so you could take like classical piano, classical whatever exams, but you also, every year we would take musicianship exams and a theory exam. They were separate. So in other words like how to beautifully write music as a young kid, and they graded levels. And so those lessons have paid off for me big time because you know — so in the mid-90s I had a transcribing job of all of Booker Little's stuff for a publisher that he'd never ended up getting the rights for it but that was really wonderful, just — I transcribed all of that by ear from a cassette tape and wrote it all out by hand. I think it was '98 is when I started on computers and that was doing big band charts for somebody, and I would go to their place. I didn't have a computer, I didn't have to turn on a computer, I never had to re-boot computer, I didn't know anything about a computer but I could write a big band chart. So it was on QBase and when I started sort of in 2002 I bought the program Sibelius. I was playing with Diva, Diva Jazz Orchestra. I joined them in — ooh when did I join Diva?

MR: 1998.

LP: Oh thank you.

MR: You're welcome.

LP: And they used to have a guy who was in his 90s still copying, hand copying. And there were a ton of mistakes so every rehearsal we would spend a lot of time correcting mistakes. And I had very quick ears, it would drive me insane that — hearing the mistakes and sometimes we'd have to keep going. I'm like, "But the second trombone has an F natural." You know. So I went up and said, hey, give me a shot, let me, you know, copy one of Tommy Newsom's big band charts here, and I guarantee we will not have to correct any notes in the rehearsal. That's how it started.

MR: What did you get from Tommy Newsom? A hand-written —

LP: Hand-written big score, and I ended up doing a ton of stuff for Tommy. And he, I learnt the ethics of copying from Tommy. He told me some great stories. After the very first one I'm like, "So Tommy, I don't know whether to ask you, sometimes I know there's a missing flat but I know it's all in unison, do you want me to ask you about that or what's the ethics here? What should I do here? And in answer he said, "When Duke Ellington was trying out a new copyist he would put two mistakes in the chart and expect the copyist to correct them and not ask him about it." And Tommy said, "I want — you've got to make me look good." I was like, "Got it."

The role of helping someone else sound good is a recurring thread in jazz. The copyist makes the arranger sound good, the pianist makes the singer sound good, the orchestrator makes the composer sound good and the rhythm section makes the whole band sound good. Trombonist and conch shell virtuoso Steve Turre embraces a similar role with his music he wants to make the audience feel good.

ST: What gives me joy is making people happy, make them feel better. You know I was talking about playing with Hugh Masekela, I forgot to tell you why I brought that up. He told me, he said when he was a kid he used to, in high school he used to cut school and go play with the older guys at rehearsals and stuff. And they let him play, they saw a talented young man you can come on and play. But he was a kid so he was cutting up and being silly and stuff. And after a while they said, "Okay, calm down man, you've got to focus here man, you know?" "You know we can have fun but you have a responsibility

too.” Of course he’s a kid, and you know how kids feel about the word “responsibility.” So he told me, he said, I said, “Well this is fun.” He said, “Yeah that’s cool but in our culture the musician is like a doctor. You’re supposed to make people feel good.” And you know that really went boing, that really rung a bell with me. So you know I always kind of felt that way but I didn’t realize it, you know when he said that it was oh, yeah. You know that’s one of the reasons, you know, that you do things. And a musician is another kind of healer you know, it’s not like giving you medicine or something like a pill, spiritual food. And also what I love about music, and especially jazz music, is it brings all people together from different cultures and races and what-have-you. It brings everybody together. And that’s what’s happening. All this divisiveness, yilch.

I do love quotable musicians. In this episode alone we have these pearls of wisdom, and I quote: If your producer does not like you you’re done; a solo is compositional continuance; you’ve got to make me look good; and all this divisiveness, yilch” And we’re not done yet, Band leader and celebrated composer Maria Schneider, one of our go to interviewees, offers her own future quotes in the context of enlightening her composition students.

MS: I try to just show them how I dance around and try to figure my way into music, and then I go through technical things. Modal things. And sometimes I sit down and I show them the modes, and that if you take all the modes that come from the white keys on the piano, that is the mode, meaning if you pick as ground zero one of the notes, like if you take the white keys and you go from C to C and you have C on the bottom, and then you move up from there, that, you have a different proportion of whole steps and half steps then if you put an A on the bottom. And that proportion of whole steps and half steps in relationship to that bottom note changes the feeling of that, from sad to bright, or bright to dark, or happy or however you want to talk about it. And the association with that is pretty universal. I think everybody would say that F to F on the white keys, Lydian, is the brightest. And if you move up a fifth from that and you go C to C, you have the major scale. That’s still pretty bright. It’s not quite as bright as Lydian. And if you go up a fifth from that, you get to something called Mixolydian. It has one note that’s a little bit darker. It’s still happy because it’s got that major third. And so slowly the things get darker and darker. So if you can find beauty, chances are there is organization behind that. And then when you discover with that organization is you can continue organizing



to try to create more beauty. I always feel like the thing that makes each person unique is that you are you, nobody on earth can imitate you, nobody can be more you than you are. So that your job is to become you to the deepest degree that you can, and that's where your beauty and that's where your mastery is, in developing yourself. I think so often in jazz it's really easy to look at other people and say oh he's a master, I have to try to be like that, I have to follow him. No, you have to find the depth of yourself and be disciplined and develop yourself to the same degree that those people were disciplined and developed themselves. And that's the thing that nobody can imitate. And that's where your strength, and that's where your gift is. That's what people want to see, is feel the uniqueness of each other. That's where you really communicate something fresh with somebody. It's hard to do that. And I love music but I think what I love about music is it's a valve for other things. I love life, and I want more time to live. And to me music is, one of the problems with musicians is I think they get so caught up in making records and going to the next project that very often the person's first record is the most powerful. Because that record represents years of just working on your own and doing other things in life, and then suddenly you become so busy doing your music you aren't paying attention so much to the other things in your life because they aren't as important as the music. But what feeds the music? Music is fed by a deep and rich life. So I think it's really important to have other things in your life that you can do with equal, you know, love.

MR: Wow.

Wow is right. How do you follow that? Well here's an idea, not as profound perhaps, but let's take a listen to the process of creating a big band arrangement from scratch, from initial idea to a finished product. My mind tends to wander during my daily dog walks and one morning, a brief, swinging lick made itself known in my head. It went sort of like [sings lick]. No key, that was all I had. We cut the walk short so I could get to a piano and jot down the notes. With some tweaking, alterations, and repeats the lick turned into a riff, and the riff turned into a melody. The result is our podcast theme song, Here's a reminder from Season 1 and the tweaked version for the Season 2

[audio interlude]

Same tune, different instrumentation and tempo. Coincidentally, at that time, I had a self-imposed commission to write a new chart for an annual event at my alma mater.. This new tune, now three phrases, set in the 12 bar blues form had possibilities to fill the bill, but lacked enough musical content to justify a full jazz band treatment. It needed a bridge, a contrasting B section. Like hundreds of other jazz composers I made the expedient choice and borrowed George Gershwin's bridge from his "I Got Rhythm." In time-honored jazz tradition I kept the chords, tossed George's melody, and wrote a bop-like tune to contrast with what I already had. Here's the 8 bar bridge.

[audio interlude]

Now I've got an A and B melody, let's arrange it as an A-A-B-A and we have an actual jazz composition.

Now the actual work begins,. For a jazz ensemble we have to stretch out the tune, assign specific music to sixteen musicians and create a variety of textures while maintaining a cohesive structure. I took Bob Brookmeyer's advice about soloists to the extreme, deciding to write a chart without improvised solos, a first for me. Instead, I took the riffs to the extreme, how many of them could I compose and employ. In this chart you're going to hear nine different riffs, competing for space in two different sections, a bit like a semi-deranged New Orleans jazz band. For added listening, Jason, my tech wizard has employed some cross fading, moving back and forth between the computer generated audio and the actual big band recording. See if you can hear the difference. Here is the debut of Riff City, performed by the SUNY Fredonia Alumni Jazz Band.

[audio interlude "Riff City"]

And the crowd goes wild. Thanks for listening.

In our next two episodes we'll focus on the weighty subject of jazz and race. See you on the flip side.