

Jazz Backstory

Episode 21 — The Color of Jazz, Part 1

From jazz icon Oscar Peterson:

“Ironically, when you think about it, musicians and performers have done this for years. They’ve gone out on stage and worked with one another. This race with that race. This type of person with that type of person, with no problems. So I guess it means that we’re going to have to turn the world into a world of performers, so that they understand what love is all about.”

[audio interlude: Riff City]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory. We have titled our next two episodes “The Color of Jazz,” an admittedly weighty subject about race relations in jazz and in the environment the musicians worked in.

Jazz did not develop in a vacuum, and musicians were profoundly affected by regional laws and the unwritten codes of society. In Episode 13 we heard black musicians speak of segregated theaters and dance halls, harassment on the road by law enforcement and discrimination in restaurants and hotels. The same artists we now celebrate as cultural heroes were subjected to treatment that now seems incongruous with the artistic status jazz enjoys today.

Music, and jazz in particular, has always been ahead of the societal curve regarding race relations. Our interviewees shared a unified message that once musicians make it to the stage and studio, talent and personality override all other issues. Despite the social ills that plagued America, a sense of spirit and camaraderie flourished between musicians.

You may recall Frank Foster speaking about his “Shiny Stockings” arrangement for Count Basie in a recent episode. As an African-American musician and leader of the Loud Minority Big Band, Frank’s comments on jazz and race are relevant to our topic.

FF: You don’t have to be of any particular racial persuasion to be good at jazz. You know all that stuff about, “this is our music, nobody can play this music but us,” forget it.

Anybody, I mean not anybody individually, you know, I don’t think every person born into this world is a jazz musician, and I don’t agree with somebody’s got something out that says anybody, everybody can improvise. I don’t go with that.

MR: Oh that’s right, there’s a series, “Anybody Can Improvise.”

FF: Yeah. I don't subscribe to that. But it's an individual thing, it's not necessarily — it's not a racial thing. We have such a melting pot here, we're all into each other's culture. Okay, I contend that jazz was born in America as a result of the black experience. Now nobody in the world could ever convince me that that isn't true, okay? But now as I said before, we've got this melting pot where we're all into everybody, each other's culture. We can emulate one another, and we can relate to one another, and talent wasn't just given to whites or blacks or Latinos or Asiatics or whatever. Every racial ethnic group has talent. And all God's children got rhythm, some more than others. Look man, I know some black folks who can't clap on two and four. One-two-three-four. ONE-two-THREE-four. I know some folks who can't do this [claps]. On the other hand I know some white folks, every time will say [claps] and vice versa you know. So we've all got talented people and we've all got some no-talented people. Every ethnic and racial group has somebody blowing a horn that should put it down and forget it and be a plumber or a postman or something. But when I hear somebody who's not black perform on an instrument and that person is good, they are good, regardless of what somebody else black might say — oh he can't play, she can't play, that's it. Man, it hurt me years ago, one of my trumpet players, are you familiar with Lew Soloff? Well this guy just put Lew Soloff in the garbage can, "He can't play, he never could." And Lew Soloff is a monster. Lew Soloff — he can play anything, can play jazz, can play lead trumpet, he can play in a section, you know, he can just do anything that's necessary for a jazz trumpeter to do. Big band, small group, whatever. So when one of us can do it, give us the credit. When one of them can do it, give them the credit. I don't feel threatened by anybody. If you can play and you're white, great, let's play together. If you can't play and you're white—

MR: Go play with someone else.

FF: Yeah. If you can't play and you're black, get out of here.

MR: Go play with that white guy that can't play.

On my list of favorite quotes is Frank's statement "I contend that jazz was born in America as a result of the black experience." It's the verbal equivalent of a perfect riff.

Early jazz bands predictably reflected a segregated society. Black and white bands co-existed while finding gigs in mostly separate circles. After Freddie Keppard, a New Orleans Creole trumpeter passed on the chance at being the first jazz musician to record, a white group,

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, made the first jazz record in 1917. The inherent differences between early black and white bands is a favorite topic for debate amongst jazz scholars and serious fans. Depending on which history book you read, the first mixed band recording was with Jelly Roll Morton's New Orleans Rhythm Kings, in 1923. A mixed band in a recording studio was one thing; a performance in public was another. Black and white musicians might play on the same stage, but not at the same time. Band leader Benny Goodman, dubbed the King of Swing in 1936, with the urging of Helen Dance and John Hammond, included black musicians Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton in a series of jazz concerts. In our present time, our reaction is, so what? Lionel Hampton put it in perspective of 1936 during our 1995 interview.

LH: I was the first black musician to play in a white band. See and Teddy Wilson was playing with Benny, but he used to play when Benny used to take intermission, and no white musicians was on stage, then Teddy would play, by himself see? So I was the first one, legally to break that tradition down. But you know the funny thing about it, there wasn't no black and white playing together no place. Not in pictures, moving pictures, not in baseball, or football, no kind of sports. The Benny Goodman quartet was the first mixed group and it was, you know?

Mr. Hampton had suffered a stroke affecting his speech, so I feel compelled to repeat a portion of his recollection:

"Teddy Wilson was playing with Benny, but he used to play when Benny used to take intermission, and no white musicians was on stage, then Teddy would play, by himself. There wasn't no black and white playing together no place. Not in moving pictures, not in baseball, or football, no kind of sports. The Benny Goodman Quartet was the first mixed group.

As an aside, I well remember October 18, 1995 in New York City. My interview with Mr. Hampton was preceded by a session with singer Jon Hendricks. Their arrival and departure coincided, two jazz legends in the same hotel room. Jon greeted Lionel with, "Hey Gates, what's up?" Lionel returned the greeting with, "Hey Gates, what's happening?" I was surrounded by hipness.

Jon Hendricks commented on that socially significant moment in 1936 that Lionel Hampton was a part of.

JH: Now, very prevalent. You have people coming out of jazz schools into the jazz scene, without the main thing they need. They have the notes you know. They can play all the

notes [scats] up and down every scale. And they know the names of every chord. But they don't know anything about the culture that made the music possible. They don't know anything about the society from which the music came, of which the music is an expression. They don't know anything about the love and the feeling, collectivism, of love for each other, of consideration for your fellow musicians. That's is the key to the music being played really correctly. They know nothing about that. They know everything from up here. They know the notes on the paper. But the notes on the paper are not the music. The music comes from the heart.

MR: And it's so important because jazz especially was so important in breaking some of the racial problems down.

JH: Absolutely. Benny Goodman is an American social hero. He is a hero in the development of American society. Outside of music, Benny Goodman is a social hero. Because his love for the music was so pure that he just did not understand why he couldn't have Lionel Hampton in his band, and then Charlie Christian and then Teddy Wilson you know. He just didn't understand that. And the bean counters and the accountants and the lawyers, they tried to explain to him, "Benny, you'll lose your show, they will not renew you on the 'Camel Caravan' if you do this." So they gave him all those very hard and fast business reasons. But he refused to understand it. He said, "I like those guys." So he did what people have to march now to achieve. You know? And it's because of the power of the music, a love of the music. I was just talking to Lionel's man over there. And I asked "How's Lionel doing?" He says, "Well he's okay but he got this gig next week coming up at the Blue Note." I said, "That's no problem," I said, "long as the music plays, he's all right, he'll be cool. It's when the music stops that you have to worry."

MR: Yeah. Well you know on one of his last records there it says "For the Love of Music." And that's what it's all about.

JH: Exactly.

[audio interlude]

Speaking of two jazz giants in one room, a memorable session for us occurred later that same year on the Hamilton College campus. Vocalist Joe Williams and trumpet master Clark Terry traded stories about their careers, a sort of, oh that's a good one but check this one out. Clark Terry shared one, relating an incident that could have permanently skewed his view on

race relations. You'll hear Clark use the term "Nigerian," his substitute for the N word that was all too common in the time and place of this story.

CT: Relating a similar incident, I'm traveling in the south, in Meridian, Mississippi, and I was with a carnival act, Reuben and Jerry Carnivals. So we went in the deep south for winter quarters. And while playing this show during the week, they always hired somebody in the city as a hired hand to keep law and order on the midway. And always, invariably, the black show was always at the end of the midway. So this cat comes through, now this was closing night, and we are getting ready to go pack up the crew, pack up all of the equipment and the crew puts things together, we get on the train and we have our own train and we went on to the next place. So I'm waiting for the drummer, Marvin Wright, who was a good buddy of mine, to pack up his drums, and while waiting for the drummer to pack up his drums, he had met a lady during the week, and she was of fair complexion, and you know what the situation down there with the —

JW: Almost white you're mine.

CT: That's right. So I'm standing there with Marvin's lady friend, waiting on Marvin to unpack his stuff because the Mills Blue Rhythm Band was playing in town that night, so we're going to that. Well here comes this little cat, and I'm standing there. He said, "What are you doin' standing out here after the lights is out, Nigerian?" So I said, "Well I'm waiting on the drummer, actually." "You with this here show, boy?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "What'd you say?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "Do you realize what you said?" I said, "Well you're asking me a question, and I answered it," probably, I thought. He said, "Did you realize that you said 'yes' to a white man?" And that's all I remember. I have a blackjack at home right now, to remind me of this — one of those lead things, covered.

JW: He hit you?

CT: Did he hit me. Right here man. Bam. And my head got so big, I don't know what happened after that except what I was told by the train crew. Now this is an example, I could have, that could have motivated me to hate Caucasians the rest of my life, but it didn't.

JW: He could have killed you.

CT: But here's what happened, he left me laying in a puddle of mud and the work crew was all Caucasian. They picked me up, took me back to the show trains, and by the time they got back this dude comes back with about 20 people with axes and sledge hammers and chains and saws and picks and shovels and everything. Said, "Where is that Nigerian we left laying down there in that mud?" And the Caucasian said to him, "Oh he was some smart aleck, we just kicked him in the pants and sent him up that way." So they ran up that way looking for me where in reality I was back here in the show train. So that's one hand washing the other. And this is long before I even realized the importance of love and was motivated by love after that, but this was something within me that helped me to balance out decency and right from wrong.

Clark answered the man's question with a simple yes, failing to include "sir," thus earning a blackjack to the side of his head. His surprising rescue most likely saved his life. In the entertainment world, even at the carnival level, it seems that musicians, entertainers and the ever present crew, operate with an extra dose of empathy.

[audio interlude]

A brief jazz vocabulary moment. We have used the term mixed bands, denoting a working band with black and white members. It could mean the Lucky Millinder Band from our Joe Wilder, Episode 13 story, with multiple white musicians or it could mean a band with one member who wasn't supposed to be there as with Billie Holiday and Louie Bellson. And then there's race records, recordings from the early 20th century that were recorded for and marketed to a specific audience, in the case of jazz and blues the audience was African-American. So called race records were also produced for Irish, Italian and other immigrant populations.

Even after the success of the Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Teddy Wilson, Lionel Hampton quartet, life for black musician in a white band could be trying at best. Billie Holiday moved from the Basie Band to the Artie Shaw Orchestra in 1938. The following is a passage from Robert O'Meally's book, *The Many Faces of Billie Holiday*. And I quote:

"Eventually there were troubles on the road, exacerbated by the shocking sight of one gorgeous black women performing with 14 white men. Often Holiday could not get a room in the hotels where the rest of the band stayed nor eat with them in white restaurants. It wasn't long before she said, the roughest days with the Basie band began to

look like a breeze. I got to the point where I hardly ever slept, ate or went to the bathroom without having a major NAACP type production.” End quote.

And it worked both ways. The esteemed Duke Ellington recognized the talents of white drummer Louis Bellson and in 1951 Duke hired him for the drum chair in his jazz orchestra.

From our 1996 interview with Mr. Bellso:

MR: Was there ever any problem in certain parts of the country with any racial subjects coming up?

LB: Well yes, we did have. In 1951 they had the Big Show of 1951, which consisted of Nat King Cole, Sarah Vaughan and Duke Ellington’s band. They were the three big stars. Now besides that they had Peg Leg Bates, Timmy Rodgers, Stump and Stumpy, Patterson and Jackson, all these wonderful acts — tap dancing acts, you know. It took us a week to rehearse that whole show, playing with Nat King Cole and Sarah, Duke, and all these acts. So after we finished rehearsing for a week, Duke finally discovered that hey, we’re getting ready to go down to the deep south you know? And in those days, you had segregated audiences. And we couldn’t, the whites couldn’t play with the blacks at that time you see. And in those days it was “colored,” you didn’t use the word “blacks” see? So now the big problem is, Duke called me in the dressing room and says, “What are we going to do? I can’t find a drummer to take your place, because it would be a week’s rehearsal and the guys that can do it, they’re all busy.” So Duke says, “You mind being a Haitian?” I said, “No, okay, that’s all right” you know. So we got through it okay. It was a little tense, because the situation was still down there, and the audience, because they told Jack Costanzo with Nat King Cole he couldn’t appear because of the racial thing you know. But some spots it was a little rough you know. But we got through it. I think through Ellington’s peaceful ways and the wonderful attitude that the band had you know, kind of rubbed off on everybody. But still it existed. We played a date in Mississippi and there the townspeople were wonderful, they came to the rescue, where we couldn’t stay in certain hotels in so forth. I mean these people came from wealthy families too. They had Strayhorn and Duke and Clark Terry stay in one house, and Carney and Russell Procope and myself in another house, and all on down the line. Beautiful homes and they fed us. So you know, along with the bad there’s some good too you know. And these were situations that we got over, we dealt with it. Sometimes it’s

almost like a slap in the face but you realize what the situation is and you go straight ahead because you've got something to do that's valid and I think when you do that you realize that none of those things should bother the musicality of something. It's the fact that whoever's playing that music doesn't make a difference, let's play it and show where the peace and love is.

From *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*: "Jazz: A music created mainly by Black Americans in the early 20th century through an amalgamation of elements from European, American and African tribal music. It has had a profound effect on international culture, not only through its considerable popularity, but through the role it has played in shaping the many forms of popular music that developed around and out of it.

As Frank Foster eloquently stated, "We've got this melting pot where we're all into each other's culture." That amalgamated melting pot has enabled the creation of multiple genres of distinctive American music, and I contend that in total, they constitute this country's most significant export.

We'll continue this Color of Jazz thread in our next episode and discover that the peace and love that Clark Terry and Louis Bellson mentioned had ups and downs of its own, even in the jazz world.

See you on the flip side.