

Jazz Backstory

Episode 22 — The Color of Jazz, Part 2

Here's a quote from Miles Davis: "I have always wanted just the best players in my group and I don't care about whether they're black, white, blue, red or yellow. As long as they can play what I want that's it.

[audio interlude: Riff City]

Welcome to our Jazz Backstory podcast and the Color of Jazz Part 2. My name is Monk Rowe and I'm pleased to share more interview excerpts from the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. In our previous episode we heard from Louis Bellson, Clark Terry, Jon Hendricks and Lionel Hampton, who offered anecdotes about the role of jazz in fostering positive race relations. I had made this statement during that episode Despite the social ills that plagued America, a sense of spirit and camaraderie flourished between musicians. I stand by it but recognize that certain decades presented situations that challenged the spirit of oneness on the bandstand. To begin this episode, it would be useful to gather a sense of what music, jazz in particular, could mean to African Americans, growing up in certain eras and locations.

Cecil McBee was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1935 and has become one of the most respected bassists in jazz. Cecil grew up with four siblings in a single parent household and shared a story of that experience.

CM: I think my music began when, not that I realized that this could be my responsibility, that is, to take pressure off Mom, given my own individual needs. I built myself a shoeshine box, right? She gave me a couple of bucks and I bought some polish. I made a little piece of cotton material and a brush and I built this thing, right? You could put your foot on top of it and I would shine your shoes. So right to the right of our house were the railroad tracks. Right? A system of about eight tracks that, you know, provided, you know, travel between the west coast and the east coast. On the other side of that was the other side of town. And I built, I took that box, not knowing what the deal was, walked across those tracks and went into that area and started shining shoes. Right? And apparently I did a good job because I'd get 15 to 20 cents, sometimes a quarter. And quite frankly, if I made over a couple of hours, let's say about three or four hours of work, I would take that money back and give it to my mom. See? And a gentleman took a liking to me. And I

ended up working for him at his fruit stand. And he sold tomatoes. His name was Jim Hill. He sold tomatoes so my job was when the trucks would bring in the tomatoes I would sort the tomatoes out, we called it “culled” the tomatoes. But one day, I’m about maybe ten and a half now. One day I’m in the back, facing a truck that had brought in a lot of produce, various assortments of produce now. And suddenly — I found myself in the bottom of a barrel. Somebody picked me up and threw me head first in a garbage barrel. Cursing me. I didn’t know what those words were, but I have a scar on my leg now for that. It was the first event of me suffering some effect that said that said why in the hell are you here. And Jim stood in the way and told the guy, “Look, leave him alone.” So the guy walked away you know. So I got out of the barrel and dusted myself off. And so that was the beginning of life for me because I’ll tell you even at that early age I felt that it really occurred to me that I could hurt somebody if they ever did that to me again. So with Jim I became very good friends with his son, you know, and I worked there for about four or five years until I think I was 13 or 14 then I went elsewhere. So that’s what I did until I discovered my bass.

MR: Were you anxious to get out of town so to speak?

CM: Yes. Yes. After that incident and, excuse me, referencing your initial effect of your question, given my neighborhood there was just something about it that was uncomfortable for me. I had no idea what it was but romantically there was something else out there that would provide comfort as an individual that really by now needed to express themselves somehow. I didn’t know what that was but I felt that I needed to be able to speak and express myself, necessary to continue to evolve. So I began thinking of, as a matter of fact a couple of times I walked down to those old tracks, this was the Santa Fe Railroad. I walked down to the tracks. Thank God there was no trains coming, I was standing in the middle of the tracks and looked down at all the way to the end of that conclusion of the track, the two tracks where they’d meet at a point. And I said one day I’m going to go that way. Yeah. When I got to New York, as I mentioned before, you know I was ready to play. I had no idea at the level that I was but the fact that I was feeling, I was experiencing a quality of self worth through my expression you know. That was the greatest thing for me. It wasn’t about who I was playing with or what I was playing, it was that I was now exemplifying those moments in my earlier period where I

lived we call it “up on the hill” where I needed to feel something to do something. Now I’m experiencing the reality of that.

MR: Right. You found the end of the railroad track so to speak.

CM: Yeah. I found the groove.

Cecil’s discovery of the bass enabled his escape down those railroad tracks. His description of the trash barrel and his protective employer reminds me of the Clark Terry story from our previous episode. Keyboardist Doug Carn witnessed the magnetic power of black music when he played for a YMCA dance in Pensacola FL, early 1960s.

DC: I’ll tell you once we played at the YMCA downtown you know, so we was the first black band quote unquote to play at the white YMCA. And I think this was ’61 you know. And so — maybe ’62. So we played at the white YMCA so I’m playing white records you know, and the main thing was the Beatles, because the Beatles were the hot new thing you know. And some of the Beatles things I really liked you know. But by the time of Sgt. Peppers — you could say I was a Beatles fan but I liked some of the stuff they was doing. But the kids didn’t dance to any of it except when we played “Twist & Shout” and I was thinking that that was an Isley Brothers song you know — who was a black group — so they danced to that. So during the break we went in a little room they had for us with Coca Colas and fruit and sandwiches and stuff. So the director and a couple of the students came back there and the director said, “Doug, your band is very good and professional and it sounds real good, but do you think when you go back you could play some of your people’s music?” So the girl said, “James Brown.” And the boy said, “Otis Redding.” You know. And they started calling all these black group names. So I figured out what it was they wanted you know. So the director says, “Look, Doug, I could lose my job you know — I’m going out on a limb bringing a black group here and y’all are playing the God damn Beatles? Now you go back out there and play some of your music, your stuff, like you know you’re supposed to do.” So we went out there and did [sings] You know you make me want to shout/shout. Oh they loved that you know.

Jazz in the 60s and 70s increasingly reflected the turbulent times and the relationship between black and white musicians and their audience could become contentious. Part of it was a justifiable sense of ownership and a desire to make socially relevant music. Drummer Max Roach expressed it in this manner:

“I will never again play anything that does not have social significance. We American jazz musicians of African descent have proved beyond all doubt that we are master musicians of our instruments. Now what we have to do is employ our skill to tell the dramatic story of our people and what we’ve been through.” End quote

Jazz historians dub a certain portion of the music created during these decades as “free jazz,” which provides us with this episode’s vocabulary word. We might well ask, free of what? All music is built on certain expectations including rhythm, harmony, song form and established instrumental sounds. The free players experimented with loosening or abandoning these parameters, enabling more freedom in their improvisations. The results often sounded foreign, aggressive or angry to the ears of swing and bop fans. I have always been curious how and why this style developed. Bassist Henry Grimes and drummer Rashied Ali were young men during this time, immersed in the new “outside the box” music.

MR: The free jazz that was happening in the sixties in New York, did it come together —_did you guys used to sit and talk about music and say well if we played this way this could happen, or did it mostly just happen on the bandstand?

RA: No we didn’t, I didn’t, we didn’t ever really talk about it. We just did it. It was like, I mean for me, and the guys I was hanging out with, you know we didn’t sit down and say now we’re going to play in or we’re going to play out or we going to tie, and play without bars, you know. It was just something that we did. Something that we heard and something that we listened to. That kind of thing. It happened spontaneously.

HG: We did a lot of things but it was never talking. It was now let’s play this.

RA: You know it was just something that we all wanted to do, man, because we all knew what bebop was. You know, because we listened to it. We listened to it forever. And, it’s just evolution to change. You know, I mean just the days and the times that we live in was different from the way it was when Bird was living, or the way it was when Satchmo was living. It was a different time. And our music reflected what was happening at that time. You know, that’s what I think. And so it was time to play something different because everybody was in a different frame of mind.

MR: Can you be specific about that?

RA: Well, say Rosa Parks, you know, got on the bus one day and decided that she wasn’t going to sit in the back of the bus because she was too tired. All right? And say like a

bunch of service guys was on the train and we were all from New York and Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and we got on the train going down south to join a unit in the south. And on the way down south we get off at the train station and we get off because everybody wants something to eat, they're hungry and they walk to the door and they see a sign that says "colored that way, whites only." You'd see signs like that, you know? And they'd just go inside where the white place was and start taking stuff off the shelves and invading stuff and everybody gets detained or gets in trouble or whatever. That kind of a thing was going on. Right? So the music reflected that. You know? It reflected the hard times. That's why maybe they would say like we were playing angry music or whatever they might say it was, but it really wasn't. It was just reflecting the time of day it was. We were not the same people as those people who lived in that bebop time. We lived in a different age. Everything changes over time. People live differently. And the music reflects the way you live. That's what I think it was.

Even the established artists who continued to play bop or mainstream jazz found that presenting their music could come with consequences. The late pianist Mike Longo was the sole white player in Dizzy Gillespie's band from 1966 through 1973. Here is excerpt from his recent book, *The Rhythm of Unity*, co-authored with Dorothy Longo and Joscelyn Duffy. I'll employ Clark Terry's substitution for the N word in this reading.

"Through racial division and enmity in America, the basic laws of physics in jazz seemed to have gotten lost. To a certain faction of blacks, I was seen as an ofay. A faction of whites called me Nigerian lover. In a Pittsburgh ghetto we were scheduled to play a street concert. As our limo drove us up to the stage I could see people in the crowd glaring at me. Onstage I found myself and the piano surrounded by four FBI agents and four Black Panthers all guarding me. I looked over at Dizzy and James Moody who both seemed visibly concerned for my safety. In that moment something in me said "Boy if you've ever played the blues, you better play them now.

[audio interlude]

Ownership of an art form is a topic well beyond my pay grade. One thing we can say, supported by the progression of jazz through recordings is that the major innovators in this music were African-American. Even the celebrated saxophonist Phil Woods recognized his role in the jazz canon.

MR: Well you had said in one of your liner notes from a recent CD that there's only a handful of players that changed jazz history.

PW: Essentially I think that's true.

MR: Without me stroking your ego or anything, where do you think you fit in there?

PW: Oh I'm a practitioner. I never changed jazz history. I am a bearer of the flame. I like to keep the bebop flame alive in that sense, but I don't just play bebop. I could conceivably play that dream set I was talking about playing, a Piazzolla and I kind of like to consider myself a complete musician, since I'm classically trained. But as far as playing any new way, I mean if I could have changed the course of western music I would have done so years ago.

As we head to the last few bars of this episode, I am pleased to offer relevant opinion from Vincent Pelote, Senior Archivist at the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies. From our 2017 interview:

MR: Are there any jazz myths that bug you.

VP: Yeah. I'll tell you one right away – that the black musicians are better than the white musicians. And I'm sorry man but you cannot tell me that Bunny Berigan ain't bad. Bunny Berigan is bad. All right? But Benny Goodman could play. Artie Shaw can play. All these cats — Pee Wee Russell can play. I'm sorry. You can't tell me black musicians are superior when you've got cats like that. And that goes true for today. I mean to me the whole, now I'm one of those who do feel that jazz is a black music. I mean I've heard that controversy also, that it's not. But no, I think it is, based primarily on the fact that, you know if you look at its main movers and shakers, they all seem to be African American and, you know, there are wonderful players, there are groups that can play the music, and that's wonderful. It's no different than black musicians playing Bach or Mozart. I mean that's why not? I mean they can do it, sure. But they're not trying to claim the music. I never heard a black person say, you know, Bach was black or Mozart was black. Maybe somebody has but I never heard it. So yeah, that's a myth I really wish would just die I mean and never come back up again. Because it's nonsense. Really.

Like most complex topics, there are no easy answers or absolutes. In today's jazz world, the racial issues have mostly worked themselves out and it rarely becomes topic of conversation with younger players.

Don't forget to check out the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel where you view these interviews in their entirety. My continued thanks to my tech experts here at Hamilton, to Romy Britell and to the Orchestra in a Nutshell that provides our bumper music.

Now when I need the perfect wrap up quote I know Jon Hendricks can provide it. Here's Jon the humanist, speaking about his father and his own view of the human race.. I'll see you on the flip side.

JH: Oh he was something. I saw him stand up to a sheriff down south with a gun on his hip during the days when there were people being lynched every day. And he physically pulled the sheriff up out of his chair.

MR: For an insult?

JH: No he had pushed us off of two wooden planks into the mud because this guy wanted he and his wife to pass. And so my brother and I stood on one of the planks to let them by. He said, "Get off this sidewalk." you know, "get all the way off." And I said, "Why? There's room for you to pass." He says, "Oh you're one of those smart niggers huh?" I was visiting then from Toledo down in Kentucky. So he went and got the sheriff. And the sheriff pushed us into the mud. So we went home and told our father, and he took us down to the sheriff's office and said, "Sheriff, I want to talk to you." And he says, "Yeah, Reverend, just a minute," and he kept writing you know. My father stood there about five minutes and he said, "Sheriff I want to talk to you." He said, "I heard you Reverend," he says, "just wait a minute." So my father picked him up. My father was a big man, and stood him up. And the sheriff was startled. And we're waiting for him to reach for his gun or something, and he says, "All right, what is it Reverend?" And my father says, "Don't ever put your hands on my children." And the sheriff says, "All right, all right Reverend." It was unbelievable. I couldn't understand that. How could he do that? But he did it, and it went smooth, and nothing happened. My father had an aura and an authority about him that people immediately respected. When he died, by that time I had married an Irish girl. When he died I took my wife to the funeral. And when I drove into town the town was buzzing, because it was in Kentucky. And they stopped me a couple of times and says, "Whatchall doin' here boy?" And they're looking at my wife. And I says, "I'm Jon Hendricks, I'm here for my father's funeral, Reverend Hendricks." And they said, "Oh Reverend Hendricks, okay." And I went to the funeral. It was incredible. And at the

funeral, half the town was there, and fully half of the people in the church were white people. That's how respected my father was. And I remember sitting with him one night and there was a local white preacher who used to come over in the evenings and sit and talk to my father. They would be sitting in these rocking chairs on the porch. And one night the preacher says, "Reverend I just wanted to discuss something with you." And my father says, "What was that?" He said, "Well I just can't help it," he said, "I just feel that my people are better than your people." And the rocking kept on, and I'm waiting. And my father said, "Well Reverend," he said, "do you believe in God?" And so the white preacher said, "Well you know I do." And my father said, "Well then what's your problem?" And the rocking kept on. And not another word was spoken. And I said whooooo. He got right to the heart of the matter. Because that's the key. We still talk about a problem. There is no problem. There is no racial problem if you acknowledge God. Because if you acknowledge God then you are looking at another child of God. So what are you talking about? If you're going to separate from that other child of God because of this mythical term you have here, you are acting in an ungodly way. So when people ask me about race, I say, "What time does it start?"

[audio interlude Harlem Lullaby]