Jazz Backstory

Episode 24 — Jazz International, Part 2

You know it's wonderful. But it's, you know it's the melting pot that America is that made American music. That's what it is. I mean there's nowhere else, nothing like it. There's nothing like it in the world. You're so lucky, you're so lucky, don't lose it, because it's your great contribution to world culture.

[audio interlude]

Welcome to Episode #24, Jazz International Part 2, the last offering in Season 3 of our Jazz Backstory podcast. British pianist Keith Ingham set us up for a second look at the international scope of American jazz. Our voices today come from aspiring musicians around the globe who were compelled to immigrate to the U.S. to pursue the music they heard on radio and recordings or at live gigs by visiting American artists. Most of them arrived without a gig but proceeded to pay the dues necessary to enter the jazz scene. Before we listen their stories, a vocabulary word up front. Jazz writers often employ the term "jazz ex-pat," short for jazz ex-patriot, which unfortunately sounds like an individual the FBI would have a file on. It simply defines a jazz musician, who leaves their shores for friendlier confines. In our case, a significant number of jazz artists, predominantly African-American, learned that western European countries offered steady gigs, respect for artistry and most significantly, less racism. Some noted jazz musicians prospered for a few years in the new settings, eventually returning home, while others like noted reed player Sidney Bechet settled in Paris, became a cultural hero and never returned.

Saxophonist James Moody found success in Europe in the late 1940s and had eyes to call it home. While in Sweden, he recorded the distinctive, "Moody's Mood for Love," resulting in a modest jazz hit. During our 1998 interview, James spoke about the reason he came back to the states and what still existed when he did.

MR: You considered staying in Europe. But you didn't.

JM: No.

MR: You eventually came back, and why did you decide?

JM: Well I came because the record was a hit, and they kind of convinced me, they said go over there and make some money and then come back. I says okay, that's what I did. Then when I got over here I says it's ridiculous for me to run away from the place where

I'm born, I'm raised, I have every right to be here, more so probably than some other people. So why should I you know, so I stayed.

MR: Did you avoid certain parts of the country when you had your own group?

JM: No I played everywhere. I played Jackson, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, I mean you know yeah. But you know what? I like southerners. And the reason I like the southerners is because a southerner will tell you, I don't want to be bothered with your breezy behind, get the hell out of here. Or either, I love you. And whichever one he says, you can rest assured it's true. But the New Yorker you know, oh, what a wonderful person, oh man, and stab you in the back, see what I mean?

MR: So you never know what to expect.

JM: Yeah. But when you get my age, I'll be 73 next month, you can kind of smell it and feel it, and you can put on a thing and smile and they think they got you, but you know what's going on. And I do. I can smell it a mile away.

James refused to be denied his livelihood in his birthplace and fashioned a stellar career that included years with Dizzy Gillespie and numerous return trips to jazz venues abroad.

French citizen Pierre Boussaguet fed his jazz fever by seeking out recordings and the few individuals who could offer clues to the craft. A mostly self taught bassist, he honed his skills and became a sideman of choice for touring American jazz artists including, Clark Terry, Johnny Griffin, Phil Woods, and Harry "Sweets" Edison. His itinerary was the opposite of James Moody, leaving France for the U.S. and returning to Paris after building his reputation in the States.

MJ: You must have so many memories, working with all those giants of jazz.

PB: Yes of course, and I would say that I was young and old at the same time. What I mean is that when I started at that time, when I started to be really crazy, just crazy banana about jazz, the only thing we had was records. LPs and tapes. That was it. And especially being from the southwest of France there were no jazz schools. So in other words whenever you, each of us, we wanted to get some information I would say that the talent was to have the nose and to know who to call and where to go, take the car and drive to speak to that one person, he's got that record by Duke Ellington, or he knows about that tune. That was a trick. So, and to answer your question, what — to me the jazz school was to be in a café, to be on a train, to be driving, to be on the road for five hours per day, and that's

where you hear all of those stories. Most of them are very funny but you discover the only major big tree of who is who, who played what, who created that, and I got lucky to — I don't know the reason but I got so lucky to be around all these old musicians. And the more, with the years — it's been years — and now when I think of it, I mean I played a few tunes one time with Big Joe Turner.

MJ: Wow. Impressive.

PB: Stride piano player. I mean when I look at pictures in the book I say, yeah, I know this guy. I remember Dickie Thompson, a guitarist, and so on.

MJ: What was your first jazz record that you listened when you were young?

PB: Well in my small town I was maybe 15 or 16 years old, 15 I guess, no 14. And there was a new shop that opened nearby my parents' house. And it was a very small shop and they started to sell, what you call it, equipment. Sound equipment. And just a few records. And I remember there may be three boxes of LPs. And I saw something saying jazz there. They had classical, rock or pop, and jazz. So I didn't know — at that time I didn't know anything about it. Some friends told me you should investigate it, because I used to play accordion for dancing parties. And I didn't even move to the bass. And I remember that — I looked at the covers and they were beautiful. I love LPs because of the size of it.

MJ: Sure.

PB: And I saw, it was a black and white picture and it was filled up with the face of one guy. That guy was Harry "Sweets" Edison.

[audio interlude]

Jazz recordings often provided impressionable young musicians with their first jazz experience, one that some can still recall. These recordings were a prized commodity in every European country, including Scotland. Baritone saxophonist and self described country bumpkin Joe Temperley was among the many aspiring musicians who could not resist the call of jazz and the ultimate destination of New York City.

MR: Well growing up in Scotland, right, your home town was what?

JT: Cowdenbealth.

MR: I wasn't going to try to pronounce that.

JT: Cowdenbealth is about maybe 20 miles northeast of Edinburgh. It's in Fife actually. It's over the other side of the Forth Bridge. And it's in the Kingdom of Fife. And that's the

only County in Scotland that's actually called a Kingdom. So I grew up there, but I left there when I was like 17 or 18, 17 maybe.

MR: What kind of music did you hear as a child?

JT: Well the only kind of music that I vividly remember is dance bands on the radio. You know bands like Henry Hall and Geraldo and those kind of bands. And then when I got a bit older, when I got to be around 14 or 15, I started playing the saxophone when I was 14. And when I was about — first there was no music schools or anything like that so I just had a few lessons locally and then I just had to get on with it myself more or less. I'm still doing that. And the first introduction to jazz actually I had was Cab Calloway's band. It was a saxophone record. On one side was two baris playing "Ghost of a Chance," on the other side was "Willow Weep for Me" with Hilton Jefferson.

MR: At what point in your early years as a saxophonist did you make a conscious decision that you were going to make a living as a musician?

JT: No it just sort of grew on me I guess you know. When I first started off in Scotland, I went to work in a nightclub in Glasgow. And that was a traumatic experience for me, even though I was only moving 50 miles from my home town, my accent for instance was completely different from a Glasgow accent. I was a real country bumpkin.

MR: What kind of tunes were you playing in this club in — was it Edinburgh you said?

JT: In Glasgow, yeah. I don't know. Things like "My Blue Heaven" and "Blue Skies" and you know those kind of standards.

MR: Was there a sense that this music was coming out of America and that we wanted to get our hands on it? That records of it were something to search out for you guys?

JT: Oh yes. It was very important. That was very important to search out records. Because they were very scarce and you didn't see many 78s in those days. So when a new record came, a new record would be maybe Benny Goodman's "Sing Sing Sing" and everybody would have to get a copy of "Sing Sing Sing." You'd have to order it, it would have to come from London or somewhere, you know, it was a whole big operation. Nowadays you have everything on hand. The whole history of jazz is right there before you.

MR: Well when was the first trip to the United States?

JT: The first trip was with Humphrey's band in 1959. We came with the Newport Jazz Tour and it consisted of about six or seven different groups. There was Humphrey and there

was another English group that was co-led by Alan Ganley and Ronnie Ross, and then there was American groups like George Shearing with a brass section. He had just made a record with a brass section. And there was George Shearing and Cannonball Adderley and Nat with their group, and also Thelonious Monk, which was a big eye opener for me, to actually be on a tour with the Thelonious Monk Quartet and be able to see Thelonious Monk working every night and hear Charlie Rouse's approach to playing and Thelonious playing the piano. That was really a big eye opener for me. And coming to New York City of course, I spent a lot of time going down to the Five Spot and at that time, Benny Golson was working at the Five Spot with Curtis Fuller and I used to go there a lot. And of course being on tour with Cannonball Adderley and being on tour with Thelonious Monk, when it actually came time to leave New York I just said to the drummer in the band, I said this place is just something that I must come back to. I have to come back to New York. And I did. Six years later I came back to New York. And if I'd known what I was getting into I probably wouldn't have done it. But I came back, and I didn't really know anybody, I didn't have a job, but six months later I started working with Woody Herman's band through Jake Hanna and Nat Pierce got me on Woody Herman's band and I just sort of went from there.

And where it went was gigs with Woody Herman, Buddy Rich, Thad Jones & Mel Lewis, Duke Ellington and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Not bad for a Scottish country bumpkin.

Between this episode and last we have heard from jazz players from Japan, France and now Scotland. Now if I cast my memory back to Music History 101, there were a few Italian musicians of note including Vivaldi, Puccini, Pavarotti, Paganini and Rovatti. Ada Rovatti would be the outlier here, not a classical composer or performer but a fine jazz saxophonist and composer, transplanted from Pavis, Italy to East Hampton, United States. During our 2022 interview I asked Ms. Rovatti what type of comments she would receive when playing gigs in her home country.

AR: Yeah. That was like that, yeah. And well, and you know as a female going back to the previous, they would say you sound like a man. So that was another compliment I would get in Italy. You sound like a man, and you sound like an American. So the first one never sat well with me I have to say. You know?

MR: I see.

AR: But yeah we always looked up to — jazz is a music that was born here so we found that America could have authenticity. And we would just kind of like try to copy. But I think this day, at this point it's global music. Because if you close your eyes you wouldn't think it is like some musician from New Orleans and maybe it's a little younger from Taiwan. You know? And sometimes we just don't — we arrive at the level that you know there are great musicians everywhere and if it was a blindfold test a lot of people wouldn't know who is their ethnicity, where they're from, and their gender.

MR: And it's interesting and a bit ironic that jazz was thought of as an art form first in Europe, not here. People did scholarly writing about it and all that kind of thing.

AR: Yeah it was more appreciated. Also it has to do also with racism here in this country and in Europe. Just the way also I remember I grew up I was always kind of interested about when a musician would come and tour in Italy it was like a black musician it was like kind of cool. It was like there was not — you add something even more exotic and more interesting you know. So I think that they didn't have to deal with the racism that there was here. And it just really is an art form. I think that's when Europe got it right right away. It was an art form. Here it took a little longer to be fully appreciated.

Yes, that exotic factor, extra points for coming from somewhere else. Pianist Rossano Sportiello grew up just down the road from Ada Rovatti and described the respect he shared with his bandmates, for jazz and the established artists that played it.

RS: You see when I was in Milan, we felt, I mean myself and some of my colleagues in Milan, we felt that the way some American musicians played jazz was really special. And somehow we felt that that was the right way. In other words in some of these American musicians there was that kind of authenticity in the music, of course, it is the music of their own country you know. And so every time we knew that there was a famous American jazz players that would tour Italy and come to Milan or close by Milan we would go hear him. So we went to hear Tommy Flanagan in Milan. We went to hear Kenny Barron once near Modena. I went once all the way to Switzerland in Bern, almost 400 km from my own town to hear again the Tommy Flanagan Trio, and then Barry Harris came you know, almost every year. Still going there to Italy. So every time we heard one of these musicians playing we heard that there was something way superior. And so what happened was that when we would play gigs, with my Milanase colleagues,

and one of us would play very well, the most beautiful compliment that we could tell each other was, "Tonight you sounded like an American." You know? So this has got nothing to do with the politics. It's just the fact. Because we felt that the jazz of Coleman Hawkins, the American tradition, was the tradition to follow, the authentic tradition. And I don't want to offend no one. Because today, now twenty years went by and of course the music spread even more and there are some young musicians from all over the world that they play fantastic you know. But back then, twenty years ago, that's what we felt. We had this great admiration for the great American players. And we wanted to sound like them.

[audio interlude]

Arturo Sandoval is one of the premier trumpet players in the world and defected from Cuba in 1977 in search of freedom and a jazz career unrestricted by politics and ideologies. While acknowledging the fulfillment of those goals, he shared his disappointment with the lack of support for jazz in the very country where it developed. Here is an excerpt from our June 2023 interview:

AS: I strongly believe that we have a serious problem, especially in the U.S. with the appreciation and promoting, defending, protecting the immense legacy that we got in our culture about jazz. We don't feel like that kind of appreciation in general terms. I'm talking about the radio stations, the television, the media in general. We don't have a little bit of support. I'm going to tell you something. I'm living in the U.S. for 34 years and I consider it a crime that I never saw one minute of jazz on television. I'll repeat that. I consider that a crime because if you go to Scandinavia or Japan or anywhere, even in Europe, all over Europe, on Saturday night, to put an example, on Saturday night at 9 P.M. you're going to have a good chance to watch on the main network two hours of any of those jazz festivals around the world. I never saw that in the U.S. and I repeat, that's a crime because it's our mission, it's our obligation to preserve that immense legacy that jazz music means to the American culture. And I'm going to add something. I strongly believe that jazz music is the most important contribution from the U.S. to the art to the world. Some people, no, most of the people don't get it. And that's something unacceptable. It's something horrible, horrible. Because I always think about what they think — Louis Armstrong and Dizzy, and all those people — they are looking from the sky and they said, "Guys, what the heck are you doing with what we left you? Are you protecting this? Are you defending that? Are you promoting? Are you proud of that? Are you?" They have that question and they ask that question to us every day.

While jazz currently thrives in academic settings and is highlighted during summer music festivals, Arturo points out that it barely registers on America's media outlets or in our culture, as a unique and globally respected art form.

Have I mentioned how quotable jazz musicians are? I'm sure I have, considering that it's the basis of this podcast. Here's one more, this time from a British jazz ex-pat, pianist Keith Ingham, who introduced this episode.

MR: Are there any counterparts of American musicians who've gone over to England and learned as much about your music as you have about —

KI: Well there's not much I can say, what do you mean, the British music? I mean we never had anything as wonderful as jazz. You see, I think it comes from a melting pot society where you've got all these different strains coming together. That's the whole point. You had Italians here, so you have these wonderful lyric qualities; you have Afro-Americans as they're called now, but you have that rhythmic thing they do they brought that looseness and that sense of swing; you had the Germans here so you have the correctness of intonation and things like that. You have that whole melting pot. And they all brought their music. You have the Russians with all that minor key, soul stuff. You know I mean it's wonderful. Gershwin is Russian but also very Jewish and that kind of sad, soulful feeling that's in his music is, I think more Jewish than Russian or American. I mean "Porgy and Bess" could almost be a Jewish opera rather than a black opera and some of that stuff. But it's wonderful. But it's the melting pot that America is that made American music. That's what it is. There's nowhere else, nothing like it. There's nothing like it in the world. You're so lucky, you're so lucky, don't lose it, because it's your great contribution to world culture. I mean it's your Beethoven, your Haydn, your Schubert, your Debussy, your Ravel your Elgar, your Henry Purcell or whatever you want to call. Your Rachmaninoffs, your Stravinskys it's all there. It's Duke Ellington, it's Fats Waller, it's Henry "Red" Allen, it's Bix, it's Eddie Lang, it's Joe Venuti, it's up there. And God bless it.

MR: Oh, God, we've got to get you on Letterman. (fade on my sentence here)

There you have it, confirmation that music, and jazz in particular, is America's most significant export. You can quote me on that.

This brings us to the end of Season 3 of Jazz Backstory and to that vital part of all gigs, the break, which we are now going to take. Kudos to my Orchestra in a Nutshell mates, John Hutson, Tom McGrath and Sean Peters, and to Jason Lever, Michael Ko, Doug Higgins and Romy Britell and for their technology and content chops. Ah! One more jazz vocabulary term — chops — referring to the skill on your chosen instrument, specifically the combination of your physical and mental faculties. As in, "That cat has awesome chops."

You can view the full video interviews with these musicians on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel, that is Fillius F I L L I U S. A tip of the hat to Milt Fillius Jr., Hamilton College Class of '44 and to his dear friend, vocalist Joe Williams, who combined their passion and foresight in 1995 to launch this jazz oral history project.

This is Monk Rowe, I'll see you on the flip side.

[Fade: "Pulse"]