Season 6, Episode 41

Trumpets

[Theme music]
Welcome to our Jazz Backstory podcast and the launch of Season 6. For our new listeners, a quick bit of backstory to this Jazz Backstory. My name is Monk Rowe and I am the director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. For thirty years I have had a dream gig, conducting video interviews with jazz artists from across the country and abroad, with the goal of preserving their stories and memories. To date, we have conducted 500+ sessions with musicians both famous and unsung. These videos may be viewed on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel, complete with closed captions. This podcast features audio excerpts of memorable moments from these sessions, organized by topics that presented themselves during the conversations. Seasons 1-5 focused on improvisation, race relations, life on the road and much more. Season 6 marks a bit of direction change, a modulation, as a jazz composer might employ. We'll feature stories from players of specific instruments, two individuals per episode. This change of course presented an issue. From our 500 sessions, where to begin? A highly unscientific study on my part resulted in the conclusion that the visual most employed in jazz posters, paintings and sculptures, jazz holiday cards and the like, is the trumpet. It was the major voice in early jazz and it feels like the appropriate starting point. I believe Louis Armstrong and Wynton Marsalis would both agree. Let's get to it, after this brief bit of bumper music.
[audio interlude]

First up, Adolphus Cheatham, better known as Doc Cheatham. Doc Cheatham was born in Nashville, Tennessee on June 15, 1905 and died in Washington DC on June 2, 1997. His family encouraged him to pursue a career as a pharmacist. His pursuit of that goal was short lived but the nickname he earned at the Meharry Medical College lasted a lifetime. Doc led the young man with a horn life with brief residencies in Nashville, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. His first recordings with blues pioneer Ma Rainey and bandleader Sam Wooding involved a technology that gave rise to the phrase "put it on wax." Here is Doc Cheatham from our July 1995 interview. If you have trouble understanding Mr. Cheatham's ninety year old voice you can read along with the included transcript.

MR: Can you tell us about your first recording date?
DC: With Ma Rainey?

MR: Yeah.

DC: Oh, yes. I was with Albert Wynn's Creole Jazz Band when we made that recording. I knew Ma Rainey because I sat in the Bijou Theater playing shows with the pit band. I wasn't getting paid, I did it because they let me do it. And I just did it to try to learn as much as I could. And Ma Rainey, she came, she was the ugliest blues singer on earth when she got old, but when she was young she was pretty. You see her picture, she was the prettiest, nice looking girl. But she is so ugly, that that's what they call the ugliest blues singer, and they billed her as that.

MR: Oh my God.

DC: And she taught Bessie Smith. She was Bessie Smith's teacher. And in Chicago she used Albert Wynn's Creole Jazz Band and I was in the band. So that's how I recorded with her. She was very nice, a very, very, very nice woman. And we played all of her songs, and that was it. That was about '26. And in the 30s, someone gave me an album of it.

MR: What was it like, you know, for our students who are used to hearing what they do to make a record these days you know, in the million dollar studios. What was it like at that time to make a record?

DC: Well after, this place where we played and recorded with Ma Rainey was just a room. They didn't have any speakers. We had a big megaphone we put out in front of the band, but no speakers. And everything was done by wax. You know we didn't have all that stuff.

MR: No fixing mistakes, right?

DC: No, no, no. And my next recording I did in Spain, in Barcelona, with Sam Wooding's band. Sam Wooding. You never heard of him?

MR: Sam Wooding?

DC: Sam Wooding.

MR: I've seen the name.

DC: Sam Wooding was a band in New York and he turned down the Cotton Club, to rather go to Europe with his band than to play in the Cotton Club. That's how Duke got in there. It wasn't but Sam Wooding. So Sam took the band to Europe in 1927, the latter part of '27. And I joined Sam Wooding and went to Europe with that band. And we, that's the second recording I ever made was with Sam Wooding in Barcelona. And you can get that now, it's now on CDs. It was a great, great band. The band was so great that no other band in Europe could compare with it. Now they were there in 1923. They were all through Russia and all down in Argentina with that band. I joined the band the first part of '28. And we just went over there and we played all the big casinos and hotels, because they

had a very big name, and we recorded up in Barcelona. It was hot as it is now. And the wax kept melting. And they put ice cubes on the wax to keep it from melting. But they came out wonderful. You should hear that CD. Because Sam Wooding's band in 1923 was not the same as '28. One side is the first band, on the other side is the newer band. You just can't believe the difference. Because he had some great arrangers when we went modern. And on one side was like Mickey Mouse music, cartoon music. On the other side was very modern, like today's modern. You should hear that thing. And I stayed in Europe three years and I recorded with Sam Wooding in Paris. And I wrote one of the arrangements. I studied that too but it was too much for me, too much headaches on the eyes to write it. I think I only made one arrangement in my life, and that was in Paris for Sam Wooding. And that's on there.

MR: No kidding, that's good it got recorded.

DC: Yes it is.

They had to put ice on the wax. I love it. From that Barcelona session, let's listen to Sam Wooding and the Chocolate Dandies playing "Krazy Kat," (both with K's) "Krazy Kat" with a young Doc Cheatham in the trumpet section.

[audio interlude]

Pretty cool, pop music in 1929. No one recording in the 1920s would have perceived this technology as primitive, it simply was the state of the art at that time. To a young musician early in his career, touring Europe and hearing himself on wax was surely magical. Doc became a full time, lifelong musician, the term journeyman applies as he moved from one group to the next, excelling at roles in big bands, Latin dance ensembles and small jazz groups, including one led by clarinetist Benny Goodman. Doc figured out how to deal with Benny's well known irascible demeanor.

DC: … before that I was with Benny Goodman. I played two years with him. We went to Las Vegas and other places. He played with symphonies sometimes and played jazz after that with his sextet. And he was very good to me. He fired everybody in the band at one time but myself. Because you know people don't understand the man's a genius, and he expected his men to play as well as he played. He expected that. And if you can't satisfy him, you have to leave that's all there is to it. And he had a hard time finding anybody like him. And he chose me and that's because his brother recommended me and I made an audition with him, he and Hank Jones had a place and I just played and he played. And he liked what I played. I didn't know everything he knew. I couldn't know all about it.

But he was very easy on me, because I was an easy-going guy, you know. So he was nice to me and one day we were in Las Vegas and he and I was standing out in front of the band and he had a habit of starting out on one tune. And he would switch to another tune without telling anyone. He did that all the time. He'd pick up and start playing "Body and Soul" and after a chorus, "I Surrender Dear" and not tell anyone. And that's hard and it's not right. But that's the way he is — he was. So one day we were standing out front and I says, "Benny I don't know." He said, "Listen. Just watch my eye. Just look at my eye. My eye will tell you when I'm going to change to another tune." I said, "Okay, I said, but" I said, "I can't see out of this eye." So he fell out laughing. We had a lot of fun together. I'm the only one that stayed in that band with his group. Because I know him. Right away I knew how to treat him. Don't try to be a big shot around him, you know. That's all you had to do, just let him have his, it's his job. And let him have it. So he kept me. And I guess I worried him because I didn't, I kept my mouth shut. Because in Las Vegas he got me, there was a lot of segregation, I couldn't go in the hotel, but he went across from this big casino, and there was a woman there that had a nice house. And he took me over there and stood for me, and she said why sure, and she gave me a room. And I sat on the porch, because I love porches, I sat out on the porch. And Benny came out from, he was staying at this hotel, this big casino rather. He came out with his golf things and he crossed the street and he saw me sitting and he came all the way back on the porch and says, "Doc?" I said, "What." "Does anything ever worry you?" I said, "No, Benny, I don't think so," I said "but there's only one thing that will worry me is if you don't give me my check at the end of the week." He fell out laughing.

Here is an excerpt of Doc Cheatham with Benny Goodman, live at the 1996 Belgium Jazz Festival, debuting a tune with a catchy title.

[audio interlude]

Nice tune, "The Monk Swings". I wonder if they named it after me, hoping that fifty years later I would include it my podcast. If you're curious about Benny Goodman check out our Jazz Backstory Ep. 27 for some puzzling and hilarious stories, straight from the musicians who experienced them. For most full time musicians, the actual playing of gigs does not take all their time nor does it pay all their bills. To make a few extra dollars, Doc took a try at teaching trumpet lessons. Like his enrollment in pharmacy school, the venture was brief.

DC: I taught once, the beginners, and I got to the place where I said the heck, let them handle it, let them do it. I can't do it. A woman brought her son down to 48th Street where I had a studio with another fellow. And she brought her son and came and introduced him and

she brought her son and on her way, she bought a trumpet on 48th Street for him, because he wanted to play trumpet. They came up there and the first thing she says to me, “This is my son, I have a horn, now how long will it take him to play his horn?” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “how long will it take you to teach him to play?” I said, “Lady, he may never learn to play that horn. How on earth can you ask me a question like that?” She said, “well I bought a book for him to look at that maybe you can teach him with.” And she opened the book and you know what she had? Dizzy Gillespie’s book. She hadn’t opened the case yet. I said, “Lady, I’m sorry, you go down the street and you may see somebody there that can help you out. I can’t do it.”

Doc Cheatham lived a long and fruitful life and continued to play gigs until two days before his death on June 2nd, 1997, shortly before his 92nd birthday. In 1998 he received a posthumous Grammy Award for Best Improvised Jazz Solo. He lived long enough to see his grandson, Theo Coker take his first steps towards a career as a jazz trumpet player. Doc must have taken note of the quote by his musical hero, Louis Armstrong who stated,
“I just want to say that music has no age, you are in the business as long as you are still breathing” Like his contemporaries, Milt Hinton and Lionel Hampton, Doc started to sing an occasional tune late in his career. None of these veterans possessed a powerful singing voice but the wisdom of their years came through loud and strong.
[audio interlude]
Even though it was thirty plus years ago, I vividly recall our pre interview phone conversation. Like most phone calls, I first asked how he was doing, Doc’s response: “I’ve never had a schedule like this, ever before, people calling me every day, and I don’t understand it because it’s new. It’s a new thing to me. All the other trumpet players must be sick.”
[audio interlude]

Before we reveal our next trumpet guest, let’s take a listen to a sample of his work.
[audio interlude]

Hmm. Can an improvised solo be perfect? I think it’s possible, especially when played by Harry “Sweets” Edison. That was two impeccable blues choruses, worthy of study and transcription. Did you catch his eleven A flats in a row and the “Willow Weep for Me quote”? Masterful. Harry Edison was born in Columbus Ohio on October 10, 1915. Like Doc Cheatham, he earned a nickname along the way. According to jazz lore, saxophonist Lester “Prez” Young bestowed the “Sweets” moniker on Harry, acknowledging his ear-friendly trumpet tone. Music and dance went

hand in hand during Edison's formative years as was the idea that creating your own personal sound was not only a goal but a requirement for a serious jazz artist. I interviewed Sweets Edison in Los Angeles on September 3rd, 1995.

SE: Being young as I was, I was having a ball. I loved it you know. But as you get older it takes its toll. And after the big bands sort of diminished because dance halls diminished, small bands began to thrive. You know like the John Kirby band. He's the one—the Nat King Cole Trio — we had small bands. Because you played in clubs and it was like a concert instead of a dance. Like at Savoy Ballroom, they had dances you know. They danced all night. Nobody wanted to sit and listen because they wanted to feel that fire that the band had, you know the impulse from the musicians to the dancers. You know that feeling that they had together, it would make you want to dance you know? But now it's altogether different. You play a concert when you're playing. Like tonight, everybody was listening.

MR: How do you feel about that? How did that effect the music? Do you think it was a —

SE: Oh, it had its toll on jazz because there are no more big bands, there are I think only the Count Basie Band and the Duke Ellington Band, but it's not like the leader was there, like if you cut the head of a snake off, the tail dies, and the head of the snake was like the band leader, like Count Basie. Regardless what he played when he was there, you miss seeing him. He had an aura about him that everybody loved. Everybody loved Count Basie. Everybody loved Duke Ellington. The big bands were so popular in those days, until, and they, most of the musicians in those days demanded respect because they were an artist. And they were all individualists. Everybody had a sound of their own. They could be identified on the record like if Billie Holiday would sing on the record you'd know it's nobody but Billie Holiday. She's the only one sounded like that. If Louis Armstrong, he can hit one note on a record, and you know it's Louis Armstrong. Nobody sounded like Lester Young. Like Coleman Hawkins. Like Bunny Berigan. Like Benny Goodman, Chu Berry, Dizzy Gillespie. They all had a sound that they could be recognized. And that was our ambition in my day to not be an imitator, but an originator, you know. And as they used to say they'd rather be the world's worst originator than the world's greatest imitator. Because there's nobody like the man that first sounded like that. You can never capture his feeling. So we all wanted to be individualists. I made many, many records with Billie Holiday and it was always a joy just to be in her company because she was just absolutely — I met her when she was about 19 years old. And what a voluptuous, beautiful girl she was. She was absolutely just gorgeous. And she had a sound that when you hear her on a record, you know that's Billie Holiday. And

that's what we strived for in those days. Nowadays it seems like musicians have their idols and they don't venture any place else but what their idol is playing. Like Charlie Parker. All alto players sound like Charlie Parker. All the tenor players nowadays sound like John Coltrane. All the trumpet players either sound like Miles or Dizzy. So there's no originality nowadays with the musicians. I think Wynton Marsalis, he's trying to get him a sound of his own like he can be recognized. But he's a Miles Davis disciple. And Jon Faddis is a Dizzy Gillespie disciple. He plays exactly like Dizzy played when Dizzy was young, you know? So I — like Supersax. They don't play anything original, they've taken Charlie Parker's solos off the records and they put them to harmony. There is nothing original about that.

MR: I guess it's a tribute of a sort.

SE: It is a tribute, sure.

MR: Well, you know finding that original sound I guess is not that easy.

SE: Well we did it.

MR: You sure did.

SE: Not that my sound is to be, you know, I don't know anybody that sounds like me, and I don't blame them, you know.

"Nobody sounds like me and I don't blame them". Modest! Count Basie looms large in the careers of numerous jazz artists including saxophonist Lester Young, drummer Jo Jones, vocalist Joe Williams and Harry "Sweets" Edison." Young musicians nowadays, (or more likely their parents), expect to pay dearly for that bachelors and masters degree in jazz. Sweets Edison's jazz education began at age 19 when he joined the Basie Band. For all he learned, he was only half joking in stating that he should have been paying Basie that princely sum of nine dollars a night.

SE: And had it not been for Count Basie, I wouldn't be here with you, because nobody would have never heard about me. He gave me a chance and I had so much fun I don't know why he kept me with the band because I was having a ball. You know every night was fun to me. Just absolutely — sitting next to Lester Young — gee whiz, what a thrill you know. Jo Jones. Walter Page. Freddie Green, Buck Clayton, sitting next to him — you know it wasn't but three trumpets, Buck Clayton, Ed Lewis and myself; there was two trombones, and four saxophones. And four rhythm section. So I should have paid him to be in the band because I was having so much fun.

MR: Amazing education.

SE: Oh, my goodness. You couldn't pay for that kind of education. And then too, in New York at that time, you worked from nine to four. And they had many joints that you could go to after four, that you could go and play.

MR: You worked from nine to four?

SE: Nine to four in the morning. And then we'd go to a restaurant or someplace and get something to eat, and then they had places where trumpet players would go. All the trumpet players, we'd all end up there. As we used to call it we'd "cut each other" all night long. I stayed in there until one or two o'clock in the afternoon you know? But what a place to be to learn your instrument. Dizzy and all of us used to do that every morning. Charlie Shavers. We'd go someplace every morning, and play. And that is like a laboratory to someone who's trying to find a cure for a disease. He's in his laboratory. He's working. That is the laboratory, the after-hours joints was a laboratory for musicians, because we could go there and just play and find yourself. Because when I first heard Dizzy he was playing exactly like Roy Eldridge. Exactly like him. But going to the joints every night, and playing and playing, you forget about your idol, and you want to play how you feel. You play your ideas.

MR: Your sound, sure.

SE: They don't have that anymore for musicians.

MR: No. That's right and it maybe shows up in what you were saying before that people get to a certain level and they aren't able to find—

SE: Oh that's right. And they don't have any more big bands because in a big band when you travel together for three hundred one-nighters, you feel close to each other. It's a family. And we were closer to each other than we were our own, because we were with each other all the time. And there's no more respect for each other like it was when we came up. Like it is, it's not sad now, but it's—when I first started with Count Basie we were making nine dollars a night. And now, you know, they make nine hundred a night. You know, they haven't paid their dues yet but they want money. But I think all the older musicians that are making money, they sure in hell deserve it. Because they have paid their dues.

Current trumpet players realize the necessity of being skilled in every performance facet of their instrument. Their best chance in making a living is to be able to fill a chair in a jazz ensemble or symphony orchestra, to lead a combo or nail their part on the first pass at a studio date. In the big band era, the trumpet section had defined roles. The first chair trumpet player not only led the trumpet section but in tandem with the drummer, the whole band. Sweets, an accomplished

improviser, would have occupied the jazz chair, where an identifiable sound was a basic requirement. Fortuitously, he also learned how to play behind singers. Eventually, this skill placed him in rare company.

MR: How many years did you spend with the Basie band?

SE: Well from ‘38 until 1950, then I went back and I got a studio job here at ABC, with Mitchell Ayres on the Hollywood Palace, and then I started playing with Frank Sinatra. I did everything with him and Nelson Riddle for about 13 years. I recorded a lot with Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald. I’ve been blessed all my life. It seems like that I don’t know why I’ve been called to do records that like anybody could have done it you know.

MR: Yeah, but like you stated, you had your sound. You must have developed a sound that people recognized and that when Frank Sinatra did a date, he knew who he wanted to hear behind him, as did Nelson Riddle.

SE: Well it was funny how that happened. Because the first date I did with Frank Sinatra, I was in the brass section and I started playing little things behind him in the mute. And then later on they didn’t give me any music, they just set me on a stool and put the earphones on, and said just play whenever you get ready. So that was quite an honor. I did that for about 13 years with him.

If you are a fan of the classic Sinatra recordings then you have heard the distinctive sound of Sweets Edison’s trumpet, usually with what we call a Harmon mute. Subtle, swinging, an always in the sweet spot. Here are quotes from two musical icons about those 13 years of Sinatra/Sweets collaborations.

From Miles Davis: “Music is about style. The way you play behind a singer is like the way Harry ‘Sweets’ Edison did with Frank. When Frank stopped singing, then Harry played. A little before and a little afterwards, but never over him. You never play over a singer. You play between.”

From Ella Fitzgerald: “Nobody else even approaches the trumpet like he does: never too much and always plenty. He’s the greatest trumpet player to play along with singers. He knows exactly how to play with you, how to answer you about what you just sang. ‘Sweets’ is impeccable and incomparable.”

And an anecdote from arranger Nelson Riddle: “Harry Edison showed up at a Sinatra date with a policeman on each arm. He’d run several red lights, and the cops nailed him. When they asked,

'What's with all the speed, Mr. Edison?' he said, 'I'm on my way to a Frank Sinatra recording date.' 'Sure you are, the cops replied. So Harry said, 'All right, come with me, and I'll show you.' And the three of them marched into the recording session, and there was Frank and everyone else. So they released him, laughed, and walked away!"

In May of 1996, Hamilton College, home of the Fillius Jazz Archive, acknowledged Mr. Edison's contribution to jazz with an honorary degree. On July 27, 1999 I happened to be in attendance at the Blue Note in New York City to hear the Count Basie Orchestra. A half an hour before showtime the news quickly spread that Harry "Sweets" Edison had passed away. While the band personnel had changed, the respect for him had not. Many stories and tributes were shared that night.

I hope you enjoyed this spotlight on these two jazz trumpet icons. I encourage you to visit the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel, that's Fillius, F-I-L-L-I-U-S. You can view the full video interviews with Doc and Sweets plus 500 more sessions. We are inching towards 7000 subscribers, help us get there. Episode 42 will focus on two celebrated jazz pianists. We'll go out with a delicious bit of that Sweets Edison's Harmon muted trumpet. See you on the flip side. [audio interlude]