Season 6, Episode 42

Piano

[Theme music]

Welcome to our Jazz Backstory podcast, Season 6, Episode 42. In Episode 41 we heard from two notable trumpet players, Doc Cheatham and Sweets Edison. I described the trumpet as the quintessential jazz instrument but that was mostly to just get us started on Season 6. This episode spotlights the piano and two iconic pianists. The piano is without a doubt the most versatile instrument in Western music. The piano was a vast improvement over the harpsichord, the state-of-the-art keyboard in Europe until 1700, when the Italian craftsman Bartolomeo Cristofori designed the *gravicembalo col piano e forte*. Translation: a harpsichord that played soft and loud. The name was soon simplified and the piano become omnipresent in the music world, from nine foot Steinways at Carnegie Hall to out-of-tune uprights with missing ivories in funky juke joints. Our featured artists in this episode, Marian McPartland and Dave Brubeck, played both types during their careers. As to its versatility, the piano can stand on its own as a solo jazz voice, be the instrument of choice for vocal accompaniment and play a vital role as a rhythmic and chordal contributor in small and large jazz ensembles. After our requisite lick from our Orchestra in a Nutshell, we'll get started.

[audio interlude]

It's an appropriate coincidence that both our featured artists today were born in 1920 and became mutual admirers of each other's talents at the piano. Marian Margaret Turner was born in Windsor, England on March 20, 1920. Like a numerous other British musicians, she immigrated to the U.S. in pursuit of a jazz career, but not before fulfilling her war time duty. During our April 1997 interview she shared her WWII story and described her first encounter with the well known jazz trumpeter Jimmy McPartland.

MM: I'm lucky to be doing what I'm doing and working a lot and being busy.

MR: Can I take you back to when you met Jimmy and, it must have been quite an experience to be a young lady in World War II, you started with the British version of USO, is that right?

MM: Yes.

MR: Was that like, did you have a contract with them, or was it a volunteer thing, or was it a real job?

MM: Oh I think we had a contract, it was a real job. In fact at that time I had the choice of either being drafted into the woman's Army, or going into some kind of entertainment, so

naturally I decided I would do that immediately, I didn't have to think about it at all. So the pay was pretty decent, and we played all over the country. Accommodations and travel were not always the best because you know there was a war on. And we would get — there would be bombs dropping once in a while. But then I switched and went with regular American USO. Somebody said, "Oh you ought to join USO, the pay is better and you'll meet all these wonderful American guys" stuff like that, and I though oooh. So that's what I did. And then we worked, it would be a regular show, like with a comedian or a singer or dancer, they had a guitar player and then I was the piano player played for the whole show. And it was the same kind of thing but on a higher level and we stayed at wonderful hotels. So then it got to be when they were going to have the invasion and after the invasion, they were sounding people who wanted to go over to France and of course I wanted to go and did go with the first group which was about a month after the invasion. And we went over in a boat and we had helmets and combat boots and everything the GIs had except the guns. You know I felt like MacArthur wading ashore onto Omaha Beach and straggling up the beach and we knew how to put up pup tents. But we never had to because somebody always did that for us.

MR: I wonder if there's any pictures of that?

MM: Unfortunately no. If I'd known what I was going to get into — I didn't take pictures. Oh there are some, yeah there are some, but yeah there are some now that I think of it. But I should have kept a diary. And anyway we went through all of these miserably bombed and strafed towns that were just a mass of rubble, and we finally arrived in Belgium in a rest area, and it was called Eupen, and they had a big band and they had all kinds of stuff going on and the area shows would come there to rest, and they had an Officer's Club, and that's where I met Jimmy, one of the people in the USO show — Willy Shaw, was a comedian from Chicago, knew Jimmy, and said, "We can't have this man out there being in combat, we've got to get him into Special Service," so that's what they did. So that's how I met Jimmy, because he then became a member of this little band. But first they had a big party for him, all the band members and people are saying, "Jimmy McPartland's coming, Jimmy McPartland's coming," and I'm going, "who?" I'd heard of Bud Freeman and Sidney Bechet, but I hadn't heard of Jimmy yet. And they had a party in this tent and they were going to have a jam session, and Jimmy always told me afterwards, "Oh I saw you across the tent and I knew you wanted to play and I said to myself 'oh a woman musician, she wants to play and I know she's going to be terrible,' and you were," he said. But I really wasn't terrible I think I just didn't know how to play with a big band at that point, I assume anyway.

MR: How do you play with a big band? I mean, to our piano players who will be watching.

MM: Well I mean now, I don't — at that time I guess I felt in the way you know, you learn how to comp, accompany, and play behind a soloist to give them more confidence or let them know where they are in the tune or something like that you know you don't play all over the piano, which I guess is what I was doing at that time.

MR: You guys hit it off pretty quickly?

MM: Well you know yes we did. And I guess going out every day early, in a weapons carrier to entertain the troops and going — maybe had to perform on a flatbed truck or they'd build a stage out of boards or it would be raining and they'd put a tarpaulin over the piano and stuff like that. It wasn't exactly the greatest. But they just loved it, and then they would wine and dine us and oh, it was something. So you know there we were, so I think it was a case of propinquity — that's a good word — like we were there and so it just followed on that we would get together. And of course I admired Jimmy's playing and he started to tell me that he liked my harmony so one thing led to another.

MR: Real harmony.

MM: Yes.

MR: From a logistical standpoint it must have been interesting seeing what kind of instrument you were going to deal with every day — what kind of piano were they going to find for me?

MM: Well it's funny because I thought it was going to be terrible, in fact one of the prerequisites of the job was that you would learn to play accordion in case there were no pianos. Oh, boy, I've never lived this down. But I never had to actually play the accordion because they had these wonderful little like a G.I. piano which was not quite a full keyboard, like a small upright, painted gray, Army style. And I always got to play on one of those. I never had a problem. And then when we were in Eupen, Jimmy went out to somebody's house, some people that had been branded as traitors, and removed the piano and put it on a truck and brought it over to the theater for me, and this was like, "Oh, you went out and got a piano for me, oh."

MR: What a nice gesture.

MM: So that sort of fixed the deal right there. So we got married over there in Aachen, Germany.

MR: That's wonderful.

Nine foot Steinways and out-of-tune uprights and now we can add the 3/4 sized, gray government issue pianos. There is so much about that story that I love. Marian wading onto the

beach at Normandy, the anticipation of meeting wonderful American guys and Jimmy McPartland's assumption that this woman pianist was going to be terrible, and she was! Marian relocated to the U.S. with Jimmy and in fairly short order established herself as a valued pianist, earning a coveted "steady gig" at the Hickory House in New York City. She and Jimmy eventually divorced but remarried when Jimmy became seriously ill so he could take advantage of her heath insurance. Pretty classy.

Here's Marian playing a medley dedicated to Jimmy, two of his favorite tunes. She seamlessly transitions from "The Blue Bells of Scotland" into "When the Saints Go Marching In."
[audio interlude]

One of Marian's first album reviews came from the noted jazz critic Leonard Feather, who was a British jazz pianist himself. He wrote, "She has three strikes against her: she's English, white, and a woman." This did not dissuade Marian and her star continued to rise. The hip folks who listen regularly to NPR will know Marian's name from Piano Jazz, the popular music and conversation show she hosted from 1979 to 2011. She excelled as an interviewer and played one of two grand pianos during hundreds of spontaneous duets with her equally skilled guests. In the fall of 1988 Marian demonstrated additional class by inviting the aforementioned critic, Leonard Feather, for a Piano Jazz episode. So there Leonard.

MM: I feel really lucky. I never thought I would be a radio person.

MR: When you do the shows, are they fairly spontaneous? Or are you able to sit down beforehand and say, "Let's do these tunes."

MM: Well that much we do, make a sort of list of tunes. But also if need be if the guest wants to change tunes in midstream that's fine. I mean we don't just start and keep going to the end, we stop and start. The producer is very picky and she might stop me because I bumped my foot on the pedal or something.

MR: Well I'm always impressed by your ability to match with the people, and when, you know, Joe Williams says, "Well let's do this song," and you say, "What key?" And you do it. I mean this I think is something that not everyone has that can play all those tunes in different keys. Do you have to do all the homework beforehand?

MM: Not for something like that because unless he was going to pick some new tune and put the sheet music in front of me, that would be the worst thing he could do, but you know, I mean I know all his tunes and anything he's likely to do, and he's such a nice person, he wouldn't hit me with anything I didn't know. So as long as I know the tune I can do it in any key. I don't care about that. It's fine.

MR: But sometimes it seems like unexpected things happen. Like Benny Carter played mostly piano with you.

MM: Well I don't know why that was. Because I wanted him to play his horn — I can't remember whether he said he forgot it or left it on the table — I think he wanted to play the piano. At least I got that feeling. But I mean he does play sort of nice arranger's piano but this is a different side of him and of course I love all of his tunes. I did woodshed a few of those tunes so that we could play them.

MR: I like that phrase "arranger's piano" actually. I think I'll probably borrow that. It's a compliment and it's a qualifier too.

MM: Well it's sort of lets you know that it's not an Oscar Peterson piano player. But nevertheless, Benny really played very well. And there's other people you could qualify that way, like Gerry Mulligan. He's another one and he definitely, I know he wanted to play the piano. He said the same thing and he left his horn on the kitchen table.

[audio interlude]

Marian never came out and said it, but I am fairly sure she grew up in a wealthy family. In early 20th century England, certain assumptions were made about the path a young woman with an aristocratic lineage would take.

MR: One last thing I'd like to ask: when your parents found out that you were going to leave school to play in a Vaudeville act, I guess that they were not really in favor of this.

MM: Oh, God. Well I didn't really know I was going to do that. I had gone to this piano player, Billy Mayall, thinking he would give me a few pointers about jazz. And I mean I was so stupid, he wasn't really a jazz player so much as a popular player, but of course he did play good chords and good harmony and everything and rhythms. And I didn't know that he was starting this four-piano group and I guess I impressed him enough that he hired me right then. Of course anyway they were shocked and my father offered me a thousand pounds if I wouldn't go. And I said, "No, I want to go." And of course I did go, and I'm sure that there must have been terrible scenes in the family. I mean I didn't realize until years later how awful that would be to my family. And anyway—

MR: And did they ever have the opportunity to see you doing your thing?

MM: Unfortunately they didn't. One of my — he wasn't really an uncle he was a second cousin who was the Mayor of Windsor — Sir Cyril Dyson — he and his wife came over. They had a convocation of mayors or something like that, and he came to The Hickory House. And he really looked appalled. And after the set he said to me, "Margaret! Does your father know what you are doing?" Like I was playing in a brothel or something.

MR: No kidding.

MM: And I said, “well I’m only playing you know, I’m not—” Of course I was sitting in the center of the bar and they had all these bottles of booze all around the bar, it wasn’t the most elegant bar, but it was a great jazz place. But I always loved that. But no they didn’t see me. But they read a lot of write-ups, and I suppose they might have been proud of me. But I think they were sort of mystified, like why would she want to do that when she could have settled down and got married to a lawyer or a doctor or something like that. Because what I did was not considered “nice” by them, definitely not nice.

Here's a total guess on my part, that Sir Cyril Dyson inspired Marian to include the following song on her “Live at the Hickory House” LP. From that recording, here’s The Marian McPartland Trio playing “The Lady is a Tramp.”

[audio interlude]

In the late ‘70s I taught music at a small rural school system near Utica NY. One day a notice to all teachers appeared in our mailboxes, remember this is pre- email. It read: This Thursday at 10 am, pianist Marian McPartland will entertain students from grades 8-12 in the high school auditorium.” I read this notice while standing in the main office and in a loud, incredulous voice exclaimed “Marian McPartland!” Two office workers responded, “Yeah, we saw that, who’s Marian McPartland?” In retrospect, not a surprise. Most of the staff and faculty had not heard of her but we happened to have jazz-loving principal who hired Marian through a grant opportunity. The concert went well, considering the demographic and in a wise nod to her audience she included “You Are the Sunshine of My Life” a huge pop hit that year. In a bold move for me at that time, I asked her if she would return and be a guest with the jazz ensemble I directed. She graciously accepted, the event was a success and we stayed in touch over the years. In 1999 I composed a series of tunes, inspired my experiences with particular jazz artists. Here is an excerpt from my “Queen’s Waltz,” dedicated to Marian McPartland.

[audio interlude]

I am well aware of the good fortune that I have experienced, interviewing some 500 jazz musicians over thirty years of the Fillius Jazz Archive project. I do my best not to brag about it. I will admit that when annoyed by jazz name droppers, I have used this one, “Well I have been in Dave Brubeck’s house…twice.” Thanks to a connection from a Hamilton College alum who happened to be a neighbor of the Brubecks, I visited their house twice for sessions with Mr. Brubeck, then his wife Iola. I was instructed beforehand to not ask him once again about “Take Five” and did my best to bring up topics that would hopefully be new and undocumented. Like Marian McPartland, Dave’s piano playing did not please all jazz critics, the most repeated criticism was that he didn’t swing. Early in his career, Dave responded to his detractors by

stating emphatically, “Any jackass can swing.” So there, jazz critics. Mr. Brubeck was 81 years old at the time of our interview and sharp as a tack. When the cameras rolled, I started the session with this: “My name is Monk Rowe and I’m very privileged to be speaking with Dave Brubeck today in his home in Wilton, Connecticut. Thank you for taking time out from your day with me. “His reply, “Good title, “Time Out”, which is of course the name of his breakthrough 1959 LP entitled “Time Out.” He was modest regarding his formal education and music theory knowledge.

DB: I have not got the capability to study like other guys. It has to be by osmosis or just some other way. And there’s plenty of my friends that work that way that have turned out great music that don’t read well and haven’t studied a lot but write so beautifully. And there might be something to acknowledge that if a person doesn’t have the usual skills, don’t count him out. He might have something else going on that is/are unusual because they aren’t the usual. And in my experience some of my favorite musicians didn’t have reading skills or orchestrating skills, had to pick it up in their own way and have contributed maybe more than anybody else. So there’s something — I’ll tell you Ellington wasn’t the greatest reader, did you know that?

MR: I had heard that.

DB: Yeah. Neither was Louis Armstrong. And Garner, who is one of my favorites, was — he didn’t know about reading, didn’t need to know and didn’t care. So how did he develop you know. He was perfection. And Art Tatum — there’s never been anybody yet with his ability, and yet he was a person that didn’t read, he just heard and produced and wrote — not wrote, he played. And he had command of the harmonic and rhythmic ideas more than anybody I’ve ever known. And there’s people like George Shearing that, it’s amazing, he’s learned through rote and through Braille and combined everything. That’s one of the most amazing guys I know is Shearing. The way he refuses to be in any way defeated. He’s more organized than most people I’ve ever known.

Like a select few iconic jazz artists, Dave Brubeck was known for exceling as an instrumentalist, a band leader and a composer. Always experimenting, he branched out to compose for orchestras and choral groups. One vocal selection from his “Christmas Cantata” now is included in the hymnals of hip churches. It was inspired in a peculiar location.

[audio interlude]

MR: Regarding your choral work, if you could pick a section of a particular piece that you felt really came together as far as the way the text was set and the orchestration and the whole thing that resounded the best for you, is there a moment, a favorite of yours?

DB: There's moments in almost all of the pieces. And for instance we're going to do the "Christmas Cantata" at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. I think this will be the fifteenth year. Once we did eleven years in a row, and then there was a new minister and new choral director and we skipped a few years but we were there last year and this year. And that has a happy ending that when I finished the Cantata I was in the back of a Volkswagen bus where I had a card table. My wife was driving. We were going up to see our youngest son who was in a music camp in Vermont. And I said to Iola, "I've finished." And she's driving along. She said, "No you haven't. You haven't finished." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because look, we've left out the most important thing about Christmas." And I said, "Well what is that?" And she said, "God's love made visible." And I said, "Well that just doesn't fit. I can't hear any way to set that." So she said, "Well fine, see what you can do because we've got to end the piece with that." So pretty quick I said, "Iola! It's perfect in five." "God's love made visible/He is invincible." So we were — this was summer. And we were offered a ski cabin to stay in near this music camp called Kinhaven. My son, the youngest son went there year after year, he loved it. And so when we got to there it was an A-framed ski chalet, kind of small but three stories. Up on the top floor was a piano, which I was glad to have, but all the Christmas decorations from the year before were all up there, all over this room. So I got into the Christmas spirit and finished that in the middle of summer up there.

MR: That's a great story.

DB: Yeah. See that's how things happen. You don't plan them. And a lot of times you don't plan and it just happens.

Here is a bit of "God's Love Made Visible," in 5/4 time if you're keeping track. Pretend it's December 25th.

[audio interlude]

The Brubecks were active supporters of civil rights, equality, and democracy. I interviewed Iola Brubeck ten years after Dave and was struck by her calm and peaceful demeanor. I chanced the question, "What, if anything, makes you angry?" Her reply was "Intolerance. I am intolerant of intolerance." The Brubecks' humanity traveled with them wherever they went in the world, including the Soviet Union.

DB: You see I've been through so many things where I've had to back off because freedom is so important that the people in the audience are going to be in trouble. And twice I had to cancel Russia because our ambassador said, "Dave, if you come the secret police are going to take everybody's name at the door and they'll lose all their privileges, and some of them are going to come anyway. They want to hear jazz and they want to hear you so

badly." But I canceled. Then when the Russians canceled the Olympics we canceled another tour. When the Russian plane was shot down with the Korean I think, remember that?

MR: Right.

DB: We canceled again. Or they canceled us. But then when there started to be cultural exchanges, Gorbachev and Reagan were starting to be friendly, then we're going to move again, like Eisenhower and some of the other presidents to cultural exchange, and Russians were given a list of who they could choose to come, and we suggested, the Reagans suggested who could come. And the Russians wanted me and Nancy Reagan wanted me to go. So we went with Air Force One, because four Air Force Ones flew. Four different planes. There were so many — press people in one plane and musicians in my bunch in another plane with a lot of other people. It was a real experience. But believe me, that room where we played was full of dissidents that Gorbachev had just let out of jail. You remember, if I got the name right, Sokolov had just been released? And Iola was sitting next to his wife who was I think a poet or a philosopher. And there were generals that had thrown these guys in jail, and they're all sitting in this big room, some at the same tables and our top diplomats were there and it was kind of a tense thing. And then it was time for us to play. That whole room came together.

Mr. Brubeck was tearing up as that story came to its conclusion. Some interviewers might revel in that development, as in "All right, I made him cry on camera." My reaction was a moment of panic. What could I possibly say next? This would be an appropriate moment to remind our podcast listeners to visit the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel where you can see what I said next by watching the complete video interview with Dave Brubeck then move on to Marian McPartland and 500 other jazz artists. End of commercial! When our interview ended, Mr. Brubeck went to his piano and played and vocalized a current work in progress. The Afghanistan conflict had just begun and he had excerpted mournful text from the Bible and set it to equally dark music. He was mildly perturbed that his wife Iola said it was too sad to share. And what did I think? I resisted saying, "well it's no 'Blue Rondo a la Turk.'" Honestly, I can't recall how I dealt with that moment. Additional excerpts from my session with Dave appear in our Jazz Backstory episodes, 23 Jazz International and Ep. 29, Military Music.as well as a twenty minute video tribute created for his centennial. Episode 43 will focus on two saxophonists. I play the saxophone, but I won't be one of the two.

I encourage all our listeners to subscribe to the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel and to drop me a line at mrowe at hamilton dot edu if you have comments or suggestions about our podcast. We'll

take this episode out with a highly relevant composition and performance. From the CD Just Friends, Piano Duets with Marian McPartland, here are Dave and Marian jamming together on a Brubeck composition named for his duet partner. This is “Marian McPartland,” composed by Dave Brubeck. I’ll see you on the flip side.

[audio interlude]