

THE NIGHT I BECAME A JAZZ MUSICIAN

Bill Kirchner

I became a jazz musician on June 19, 1965. I was eleven years old.

Very few musicians—or anyone else, for that matter—can pinpoint the beginning of their careers with such precision. In my case, though, I can attribute it to one evening at the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival.

A little background: I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, a then-booming, medium-sized industrial city located halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh. (In its heyday, Youngstown was also known as the site of eighty Mafia murders. Front-porch shootings of mobsters, as well as car ignitions wired with dynamite, were frequent occurrences.) With the disappearance of its steel industry in the late 1970s, Youngstown is now a shadow of its onetime self.

I started to play the clarinet at the age of seven. I knew a little bit about jazz, mostly from the *Timex* jazz television specials, and especially from the abundance of jazz then present on TV crime shows. Jazz-oriented composers such as Henry Mancini, Pete Rugolo, John (then Johnny) Williams, and others were kept busy beginning in the late 1950s with such shows as *Peter Gunn*, *Mr. Lucky*, *Johnny Staccato*, *Dan Raven*, *Checkmate*, and others. My very young ears heard the pulsating rhythms and sophisticated harmonies of those scores with boundless interest.

That interest increased even more when I was ten. One night, I heard the Duke Ellington Orchestra play “Satin Doll” on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, then one of America’s biggest purveyors of middle-brow culture. The sound of the Ellington saxophone section and those voicings reverberated in my mind’s ear for weeks thereafter.

So in the summer of 1965, my parents offered to give me an early present for my upcoming twelfth birthday: an evening at the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival, an hour or so’s drive from Youngstown.

This festival, in its second year, was sponsored by Pittsburgh’s Catholic Youth Organization and programmed by George Wein of Newport Jazz Festival fame. It took place at the domed Civic Arena over three nights (June 18-20) and also included an early morning dance with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and a Sunday afternoon piano workshop with Ellington, Earl Hines,

Willie “the Lion” Smith, Billy Taylor, Mary Lou Williams, and Pittsburgher Charles Bell. (The Civic Arena, from 1961 to 2010 a showplace for Pittsburgh’s musical and athletic events, was torn down in 2011-2012.)

My parents and I decided to attend the Saturday night concert, which featured a local warmup group (pianist Walt Harper’s quintet), Earl Hines, Carmen McRae, the Stan Getz Quartet, the John Coltrane Quartet, and the Ellington band. For financial reasons, a bill like this would be inconceivable nowadays. When I tell young students about it, their jaws drop. But in those days, such lineups were not that unusual.

My memories of the evening as an eleven-year-old neophyte are inevitably sketchy. But with the help of a detailed review in *Down Beat* (July 29, 1965, pp. 13-14) by the magazine’s Pittsburgh correspondent Roy Kohler, I’ll attempt to reminisce a bit.

Following an opening set by the Walt Harper Quintet (Harper was a local jazz mainstay for many years), pianist Earl Hines, a Pittsburgh native, performed with bassist Larry Gales and drummer Ben Riley. Gales and Riley gave yeoman service that weekend: in addition to playing the previous evening with their regular employer Thelonious Monk, they also appeared immediately before Monk with George Wein’s Newport All-Stars (featuring cornetist Ruby Braff and tenor saxophonist Bud Freeman) and throughout the Sunday afternoon piano workshop.

Of the eight tunes Hines played, I remember hearing only “Canadian Sunset” and “Satin Doll”—probably because those were the only songs I recognized. Hines was then in the midst of a career renaissance, and this was his first gig in his hometown in fifteen years, so it was probably an important evening for him.

Vocalist Carmen McRae was next, accompanied by pianist Norman Simmons’s trio. I remember only that McRae paid a warm verbal tribute to Monk (who was then a new name to me), followed by a version of the pianist/composer’s “Round Midnight.”

Last on before intermission was tenor saxophonist Stan Getz’s quartet, with vibraphonist Gary Burton, bassist Steve Swallow, and (probably) drummer Roy Haynes. My principal memory of this group is Burton, then a 22-year-old *wunderkind* of his instrument. Burton played a solo version of “My Funny Valentine” that, as Roy Kohler revealed, “had Duke Ellington beaming with praise backstage.”

In 2010 I corresponded with Burton about this evening, and he had some interesting recollections:

It was a memorable night for me as well. Stan and Trane were the reigning kings of the tenor at that time (Sonny [Rollins] had been off the scene for a self-imposed exile), and we ended up in a dressing room next to Trane, who was running fast scales and arpeggios over and over. Stan took out his tenor to warm up and sort of in musical protest, just played a single, passionate, simple melody line and put the horn down. It was a perfect example of the difference between the two musicians.

“What I remember most about the night was my encounter with Duke. After my set with Getz, Duke came up to me and complimented me on my solo vibes piece. He said he always appreciated it when someone found something new to do with an instrument (as was typical of many of his sidemen). He was very gracious and sincere, and that began a casual relationship that lasted for quite a few years. We were both on RCA at the time, and found ourselves at industry functions often, and we also were regularly booked on the same nights at George Wein's festival events. Duke always had generous and charming things to say to me whenever he spotted me in a crowded room, like, ‘Now I know this is a class affair, you're here.’ He was famous for his flattery of anyone and everyone. One of the highlights of my life was when he invited me to come to a recording session of his band at RCA studios. It was the *Far East Suite* project, and I was thrilled by the experience.

George Wein, ever the shrewd programmer, saved the John Coltrane Quartet (with pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison, and drummer Elvin Jones) and the Ellington band for after intermission. Nine days later, Coltrane recorded *Ascension*, his most outré recording, so with the benefit of hindsight, it's not surprising that Coltrane that night took the music right to the edge. As Kohler put it, “Even the most dyed-in-the-wool Coltrane fans seemed confused as to whether the saxophonist was kidding or not.” A number of listeners walked out during the set, and others (including my parents and me) probably would have if not for Ellington being scheduled immediately afterward.

This was my first exposure of any kind to Coltrane. I remember him playing “My Favorite Things” on soprano saxophone (which I then thought was a clarinet), and Jimmy Garrison doing a flamenco-like solo bass interlude. Almost a half-century later, I wonder what my reaction to this music would be today.

Then came Ellington. I don't remember much about his band's performance, except that I was thrilled that they played “Satin Doll.” Also, Billy Strayhorn, who grew up in Pittsburgh, was brought on as guest pianist for

his own “Take the ‘A’ Train.” But according to Kohler, the orchestra was in good form that night, and I have no reason to believe otherwise.

And that was the evening that changed my life forever. After that, my dalliance with Top 40 radio came to a halt. I borrowed Joe Goldberg’s *Jazz Masters of the Fifties* and other jazz books from the library, started listening to whatever jazz I could find on the radio, and bought my first LPs with whatever little spending money I had. In short, I became the jazz nerd of my elementary school, much to the puzzlement and occasional derision of my peers. (A couple of my all-white classmates had problems with jazz books I was reading that had pictures of black people—think the N-word—on the covers.)

Fortunately, my high school experience was far better. I had a hip band director who led and wrote for a “stage band” where I got to play my first improvised solos and write my first arrangements. And it all went from there.

But if not for June 19, 1965, I wonder if things would have advanced as rapidly for me as they did.

NOTE: The only recorded documentation of the 1965 Pittsburgh Jazz Festival is *The Jazz Piano*, an album recorded at the Sunday afternoon piano workshop. It was issued by RCA in the 1960s, and reissued on CD with additional tracks by Mosaic in 2007.

About the Contributor

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