

Charles Fishman Interview with Rusty Hassan: Part 1

Friday, September 1st, at the home of Charles Fishman.

Rusty Hassan: Charles, give us your full name, and your date of birth.

Charles Fishman: Charles Fishman, February 23rd, 1942.

Rusty Hassan: OK, and where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Charles Fishman: Brooklyn, New York ... spent the first 16 years in Brooklyn, and then my parents moved to Westchester County, where I graduated from high school, and then went to NYU.

Rusty Hassan: Where in Westchester County?

Rusty Hassan: Where in Westchester County did your parents move to?

Charles Fishman: Ardsley, New York.

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh, okay, and where'd you go to high school?

Charles Fishman: Ardsley, New York ...

Rusty Hassan: Okay, okay ...

Charles Fishman: First I started at Lafayette High School in Brooklyn, and then we moved in the middle of my junior year.

Rusty Hassan: Okay. What was the music scene like where you were growing up? At first in Brooklyn, and then when you moved?

Charles Fishman: Well, in Brooklyn, I started a band. We had a jazz band at Left Field High School, and from that I extracted a trio. Played different gigs, some sweet 16s, bar mitzvahs and shit like that.

Rusty Hassan: OK, so what instrument were you playing?

Charles Fishman: Piano, sometimes drums ...

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and what made you select the piano?

Charles Fishman: My parents ...

Rusty Hassan: So, which gets us to the question, were either of your parents musicians?

Charles Fishman: No.

Rusty Hassan: And what was the influence that they had on you, in terms of your music?

Charles Fishman: They made me take piano lessons. My father took me to a number of concerts when I was a kid. But then when I was 14, I think, I got introduced to jazz, and just fell in love. I became entrapped.

Rusty Hassan: What was your introduction to jazz?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Rusty Hassan: What was your introduction to jazz?

Charles Fishman: My father came home. He had a ... What was it? A Clark Terry, and I think it was a ... Higginbotham ... No, Jimmy Cleveland, and he brought it home, and we played it, and I liked it.

Speaker 6: This was a record?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: Okay, and how old were you when you started your piano lessons?

Charles Fishman: When I started piano, I was six, six and a half. I started to play jazz when I was 14, 13.

Speaker 6: What made you change? 'Cause you started playing classical, right? And what made you change to want to play jazz?

Charles Fishman: Classical music bored me, personally, at the time. And I saw this jazz, or heard jazz, and then I saw ... I think my dad took me to, yeah, he took me to Birdland, to see Basie.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And that was like an eye opener, and I was hooked ever since.

Speaker 6: How old were you when you went to see Basie?

Charles Fishman: About 13 ...

Speaker 6: 13? Where was Basie performing at the time?

Charles Fishman: Birdland ...

Speaker 6: Oh, Birdland, okay ...

Charles Fishman: The one on Broadway ...

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative), the original ...

Charles Fishman: What?

Speaker 6: The original ...

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: Yeah.

Rusty Hassan: So the group that you formed in high school, were you playing jazz, or were you playing other musical forms during that time?

Charles Fishman: Well, we had a jazz band. So we were playing stock arrangements.

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh.

Charles Fishman: And then, we just got together and started to improvise, and the rest is not yet history.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, so this was, the jazz band was in the high school you were at in Brooklyn?

Charles Fishman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rusty Hassan: And what kind of music did they have at the high school you moved to in Westchester County?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Rusty Hassan: What kind of music? Did they have any band or anything at that other high school, when you transferred, and you parents moved?

Charles Fishman: To Ardsley?

Rusty Hassan: Yes.

Charles Fishman: No, I actually, I started it. I had a great music teacher. And he saw that I had talent, and he let me run with it, and made some suggestions, and I started a trio, and then we went into a quartet. And then I had an ensemble, which I led at the school concert.

Rusty Hassan: Who was this music teacher? Do you remember his name?

Charles Fishman: Joe Greco.

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh.

Charles Fishman: Wonderful teacher ...

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and when did you graduate from high school?

Charles Fishman: 1959, I think.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, is it that around the time, right after you graduated, that you took your first trip to Israel?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Rusty Hassan: What was your experience like, taking that?

Charles Fishman: Oh, it was amazing. I got two eye opening experiences ... one was piano, and the other was going to Israel. It was just an amazing trip.

Rusty Hassan: What were your experiences like? What happened in that trip?

Charles Fishman: Well, it was like a 10 week program, and you went to a kibbutz for two weeks. You traveled around, went to lectures.

Rusty Hassan: Okay. And this was right after your senior year, before you attended college?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Rusty Hassan: And where'd you go to college, when you came back to-

Charles Fishman: NYU-

Rusty Hassan: NYU? What was your major at NYU?

Charles Fishman: Business management ... My father would not let me study music.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Speaker 6: Why was that?

Charles Fishman: What?

Speaker 6: Why was that?

Charles Fishman: He didn't think it was a profession that I could earn a living.

Speaker 6: Okay.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: And he was right.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, what did you do after you graduated from NYU?

Charles Fishman: I worked with a Jewish, or a Zionist youth movement, leading clubs. We had a little region. We'd have seminars and different activities.

Rusty Hassan: And where was this? Was this in New York City when you were doing this?

Charles Fishman: Actually, yeah, it was in New York.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative), and you did some graduate school?

Charles Fishman: I didn't go to graduate school.

Rusty Hassan: You didn't go to graduate school. What brought you to Houston, Texas, then, which I saw in one of your interviews?

Charles Fishman: Got a job offer.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, and what was that job offer?

Charles Fishman: It was working with these Jewish kids. It was a Zionist movement. It was all over the country. And they'd have weekly meetings, and then it would have weekend seminars, and different programs and trips, guest speakers.

Rusty Hassan: And how long did you do that?

Charles Fishman: '63 to '66 ...

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: And then, I think I went to Israel.

Rusty Hassan: Yeah.

Charles Fishman: I lived in Israel for two and a half years, opened up a jazz club.

Rusty Hassan: What was the name of this club?

Charles Fishman: Jango-

Rusty Hassan: Jango, okay.

Speaker 6: Tell us about Jango.

Rusty Hassan: Yeah.

Charles Fishman: It was a beautiful building in the middle of Jerusalem. You'd walk in and there'd be three rooms: room, room, and room. And during the week, I just played recorded music. It was sort of like a combination of the Village, like the old Village Gate kind of thing. And I loved it. I just didn't have enough money to keep it going.

Speaker 6: What motivated you to open, of all things, jazz-related ... What motivated you to want to open a club?

Charles Fishman: My love of the music ... I just love the idea of presenting, exposing ... It was very challenging, very stimulating.

Speaker 6: At the time, when you opened that club in Jerusalem, were there other places where people could experience live jazz?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, but not much. There was a little place called Saramelo's in Jerusalem, that you could maybe seat 40 people. But that was about it, at that point.

Rusty Hassan: Who were some of the musicians that you had perform in the club?

Charles Fishman: They were mostly locals, but I managed, like I got Stan Getz to go to Israel.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: And I convinced the Israeli government to give me money to make a documentary on it, which I called "Stan Getz Israel Odyssey". Getz was a musical explorer, and he traveled the country. He played at a Kurdish wedding. I had him just put into different situations. And he enjoyed it.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), did that kind of give you the idea that you could possibly manage jazz musicians, get them on tour and stuff like that?

Charles Fishman: I wasn't thinking about managing. I was thinking about more presenting.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: Sort of just fell into it.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: How long did that last?

Charles Fishman: What? The club ... ?

Speaker 6: The club ...

Charles Fishman: Two and a half years ...

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and what did you do after you closed the club?

Charles Fishman: Came back to the States, and again, went back and worked with this Jewish youth movement.

Speaker 6: What year was that?

Charles Fishman: '74 or so-

Speaker 6: Okay.

Rusty Hassan: So this was in Houston, working with the Jewish youth movement again?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative). You worked with Kaplan Theater in Houston, also?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, the Jewish Community Center ... They're rich.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: And I had a 350 foot, 354 seat theater-

Rusty Hassan: Okay-

Charles Fishman: And I didn't just do jazz. I did classical. I did opera. I was a producer of the theater.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, so who were some of the acts that you brought into that theater? Anybody prominent that you can remember?

Charles Fishman: The Houston Grand Opera had like a Repertory group called the Texas Opera Theater. So we would present four operas there. We'd bring in dance companies, stuff like that, lectures.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: I had Elie Wiesel there. Isaac [Parshevus 00:12:20] ... Excuse me, Bashevis Singer, the Poet Laureate of Israel.

Speaker 6: What was the jazz scene like in Houston at that time?

Charles Fishman: Semi-dead ...

Rusty Hassan: Okay, semi-dead-

Charles Fishman: Barely alive-

Rusty Hassan: Did you bring any jazz artists to the theater while you were producing music there?

Charles Fishman: Mostly locals-

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh, okay, okay. Do you want to pause, while we ... ? Okay. Okay, tell us about the TV production, "The Stars Salute Israel at 30"?

Charles Fishman: When I came back to Washington, a friend of mine, who was like a ... They call him a Shaliach, a messenger ... Israel would send different people to work in Jewish communities, to raise their awareness of Israel. And ... Who's that?

Speaker 7: Mister Charles Fishman, how are you, my dear, dear man? It is my honor to be in your presence.

Speaker 6: Let's pause.

Rusty Hassan: Yeah, okay.

Charles Fishman: Hi.

Speaker 7: How are you, sir?

Charles Fishman: I'm hanging in there.

Rusty Hassan: We'll take a little pause, while we set up the ...

Speaker 6: Part two, Charlie Fishman, an oral history, 2017, September 1st ...

Rusty Hassan: When we took our break, we were starting to talk about the Israeli interest in jazz. Tell us a bit more about that.

Charles Fishman: First time I went to Israel, I think I was 17 or 18, and there was a little pocket of the jazz musicians around, playing small, sort of like twins. But it was a very loyal audience. They'd come out. I think there was a place called Saramelo. And every Wednesday night, they had jazz in there. And it was nice. It was very small, tight-knit community.



Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: Were these fans, or the combination of fans and musicians?

Charles Fishman: Both.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Speaker 6: Was there any radio, jazz radio, at the time in Jerusalem?

Charles Fishman: I think there was one program, but I don't really recall.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative), now this celebration of the 30th anniversary of Israel ... Was it a big TV production? How did you conceive it? What was the-

Charles Fishman: It was like very, very interesting. A friend of mine, who was my leader in this youth movement when I was a kid, he became a Counsel General for the Israeli Embassy. And he called me up one day, and he says, "I'm supposed to be in charge of culture. I don't know shit about culture. Do you want to help out?" I said, "Sure". And Jewish community is very well-known for its ability to generate money. And what did I start to say?

So anyway, he asked me for ideas. Israel's 30th anniversary was coming up. And I threw out a slew of ideas, including bringing Paul Simon to Israel, Roberta Flack to Israel, Joan Baez to Israel. And then I said, "You know what? The United States and Israel have so much in common: democracies, plenary society". I said, "We ought to do a television show, celebrating the commonality of Israel and the United States". And they said, "Go ahead. Do it". And I had no idea what I was doing.

I went to Lalo Schifrin. And Lalo ... Did I get to Lalo? Yeah, I went to Lalo, and asked Lalo if he wanted to perform in Israel. And he just jumped at it. He was Jewish, and everything. And I just put the ball in motion, so to speak. And it just ballooned. The Jewish community has this great ability to generate stars. So, we were able to get Streisand. It was the last 20 minutes of the show, at the Los Angeles Music Center, with the LA Philharmonic, and Zubin Mehta conducting. And that was a big thing. It was the only time, to this day, in television history, that a foreign country has been honored on prime time network TV.

And from there it just ballooned. I got Paul Simon to go. And people just loved the music. The following year I brought Chick-

Speaker 6: This was '79, we're talking about?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, '79, Chick came to Israel. He was on the back end of a tour, solo tour, in Europe, and he just tagged it on. And he came, and he did three solo concerts,

sold out completely. And that just gave me the idea to start a festival. I sort of felt, sort of embarrassing as a country that invented the music, didn't have a jazz festival, so that's what I did.

Rusty Hassan: What brought you to Washington? How'd you end up in Washington D.C.?

Charles Fishman: Job offer-

Rusty Hassan: Okay, again, a job ... What job was this?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Rusty Hassan: What job was this?

Charles Fishman: I became the director of their Israel Commission.

Speaker 6: What year was this?

Charles Fishman: '70 ... got to go back. What was the question again?

Speaker 6: What year was this that you arrived in Washington D.C.?

Charles Fishman: I arrived in '76.

Speaker 6: '76 ... So you went from Houston to D.C.?

Charles Fishman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: And what work did you do here?

Charles Fishman: I was in charge of all things related to Israel.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: Conferences, seminars, celebrations ... I got a bunch of stars to go to Israel to perform. Paul was the first one.

Speaker 6: Paul Simon? Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And I got Roberta Flack ...

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: ... with whom I'm still very close.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: She's [inaudible 00:20:29] Godmother.

Speaker 6: Oh, okay.

Rusty Hassan: Fantastic, so you were already bringing performers over to Israel when you conceived of this television production in '78. Is that right?

Charles Fishman: The television production came first-

Rusty Hassan: Okay-

Charles Fishman: ... except for Stan Getz.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, okay.

Charles Fishman: Took Stan there in 1977.

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh.

Charles Fishman: And he toured the country, playing with an Israeli sort of jazz-rock group, incredible musicians, and he loved it. So I made a documentary on it, which you can find at the Israeli Museum, I mean the Israeli Embassy.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, okay, and the TV production ... You mentioned some of the stars that were part of it, including Barbara Streisand. Who were some of the other ones?

Charles Fishman: Ben Vereen-

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: Barry Manilow, Bernadette Peters, can't remember all of them. They're on a poster in my basement.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, was the Cambridge Foundation related to the [inaudible 00:21:48] job, or was that something-

Charles Fishman: Excuse me?

Rusty Hassan: This foundation that you worked with when you were in D.C. ... I saw somewhere in an interview that you worked with a [Kimmerick 00:21:57] Foundation, that you used to ... Kimmerick Foundation?

Charles Fishman: Kinneret ...

Rusty Hassan: Kinneret, okay, yes.

Charles Fishman: Kinneret is a lake ...

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh.

Charles Fishman: ... in northern Israel.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: Sea of Galilee, basically-

Rusty Hassan: Uh-huh. And what was the purpose of this foundation, that you named after that?

Charles Fishman: Support projects in Israel that other groups were not doing. It was really high profile organizations, then. The Jewish community has a proclivity to raise money.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: But they're all for the hospital, the university, and I wanted to get it down as the neighborhoods, and that's what I did.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, when did you start Charismic Productions?

Charles Fishman: In '78-

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: When I did the 30th anniversary of Israel ...

Speaker 6: What motivated you to establish Charismic Productions?

Charles Fishman: I wanted to develop programs that reached down to the people, not the high profile, Barbara Streisand kind of thing.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And I found that there were a lot of artists who really were infatuated with the concept of Israel.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And I thought that, If I could create a foundation, an organization that would cater to down to the grassroots, it would be very valuable.

Speaker 6: What's behind the name, Charismic?

Charles Fishman: Charismatic didn't sound good.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, so, okay.

Speaker 6: So you made up Charismic?

Rusty Hassan: Yes, yes-

Speaker 6: Okay.

Charles Fishman: When I did the 30th anniversary-

Speaker 6: Right-

Charles Fishman: We had maybe \$200,000, that we got from the [inaudible 00:24:30], 'cause we did it as an ABC special.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: So we wound up, earning about 200 grand, had to do something with it. And I didn't wan to do the usual stuff of giving to a hospital or something, so I came up with the idea of doing something that [inaudible 00:24:48] the neighborhoods.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And that's how it started.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rusty Hassan: How'd you meet Dizzy Gillespie?

Speaker 6: And what year was that?

Charles Fishman: '72-

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: Dizzy was on one of George Wein's spectacular tours, like Monk on piano, and Blakey on drums, Rufus Reed on bass. And one of those stops on the international tour was Israel. And of course I wanted to meet Dizzy Gillespie. So I went to the theater and waited outside until he came out.

Speaker 6: This is in Jerusalem?

Charles Fishman: What?

Speaker 6: This is in Jerusalem?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And he played at ... First they played at the convention center, and then it was so many people who wanted him to go to these ... brought them back for another concert in a little movie theater. So I introduced myself to Dizzy. I had already established my jazz club. I invited him to come to the club, which he didn't. But that was the first time I met Dizzy. And when I started to do these various programs in Israel ... I came up with the idea of Lalo conducting the Israel Philharmonic with Dizzy. And when I called Lalo, I got his phone number from a friend of mine, who was Van Morrison's musical director.

And I called Lalo and asked him, I told him I was representing the state of Israel on a cultural basis, so to speak, and asked him if he was interested in conducting the Philharmonic. And he just jumped at it. So that's how we started it, and of course, I wanted Dizzy. And Lalo invited me to his house, and from the house we called Dizzy. And I got on the phone with Dizz, and introduced myself, and then we made an appointment to meet in New York. This was in January. I don't remember what year.

... which we did. He slipped me around New York. He had to pay taxes on some property he owned in France. He and who else owned property? It was a partnership he had. And then he slipped me around looking for a fountain pen, a cheap, mont blank, fountain pen. And I just was with him for about two, three hours, walking around. It was rainy. It was miserable out. But he agreed to come to Israel. And that's the first time I worked with him, was '85.

Speaker 6: So you met him in Israel. And then you connected with him in New York.

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: And he agreed to come back.

Charles Fishman: What?

Speaker 6: He agreed to come back to Israel.

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: And-

Charles Fishman: Dizzy was a Bahai.

Speaker 6: Right.

Charles Fishman: So, Israel was very special to the Bahai.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: So he would go there on his own even, no publicity or anything. And I just sort of caught him at the right time, the right place.

Speaker 6: And what were the circumstances for his returning?

Charles Fishman: What?

Speaker 6: What were the circumstances behind his return to Israel?

Charles Fishman: Concert-

Speaker 6: Okay, what was the venue that he played?

Charles Fishman: He played at the major halls, the Mann Auditorium, Jerusalem Convention Center, the Hypha Theater.

Rusty Hassan: And this was a tour that you arranged for Dizzy?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, and so how did that evolve into a relationship where you became his manager in setting up gigs for him-

Charles Fishman: I was just so enamored and awed by the fact that I was around Dizzy Gillespie. I said, "I gotta think of everything I can do to be around him more". So I kept on coming up with ideas, and he liked them, and he agreed to come. And that started the relationship. And I made sure he was really well treated, and he loved Israel. Hypha is the center of the Bahai faith. So he would go there, and whenever I brought him to Israel, I would always have a car and a driver, take him up to Hypha, to go to the temple there. They have a beautiful temple, gorgeous gardens.

And I just made sure that he got to ... Excuse me ... got to go there whenever he came to Israel. It wasn't just the promoter [inaudible 00:30:21] a performer. It was ... I took a very deep, personal interest. After all he was fucking Dizzy Gillespie.

Rusty Hassan: Right.

Charles Fishman: I still have to, sometimes, pinch myself.

Rusty Hassan: Absolutely-

Charles Fishman: And say, "Shit, I worked with Dizzy Gillespie".

Rusty Hassan: So, how did that, bringing him to Israel evolve into taking him all around the world, setting up the tours and-

Charles Fishman: Dizzy really liked me. He respected the fact that I respected him.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And I just kept coming to him with ideas, 'cause I knew I wanted to hang out with Dizzy as much as possible. And some of them hit.

Speaker 6: And did you ever, at any point, formalize your working relationship?

Charles Fishman: Nope.

Rusty Hassan: Oh, okay-

Charles Fishman: Which was a shame because when he died, I got nothing.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rusty Hassan: What were some of the countries that you toured with him, beyond, besides Israel? Where else did you go?

Charles Fishman: Well we did Africa. We did Morocco. We did Egypt. We did Nigeria, Senegal, and Namibia. We were all over. We were in South America.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). What would be a real highlight in terms of one of those countries that you-

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Rusty Hassan: What would be a real highlight, a great memory, that you had with one of those countries that you toured with Dizzy?

Charles Fishman: Performing in Jerusalem.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: What was special about performing in Jerusalem?

Charles Fishman: It was Jerusalem.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, all right.

Speaker 6: Where did he perform in Jerusalem?



Charles Fishman: There's a ... Now it's a developed area. But there was a valley beneath the walls of the old city of Jerusalem, which ... I think this was called the Sultan's Pool because in the 15th, 16th centuries, they used to water their horses in this valley. It was just beautiful. It was just this open space beneath the walls of the old city of Jerusalem with the lights on and everything. And it was really, very emotional to perform there.

PAUSE...

Rusty Hassan: Yeah, okay. We were talking about Dizzy Gillespie before the break, and with him, you were instrumental and started the United Nations Orchestra. Tell us about that.

Charles Fishman: Well after, for his 70th birthday ...

Speaker 6: What year are we talking about?

Charles Fishman: '87 ... I just knew I needed to work with Dizzy, be around Dizzy. He had so much to offer, but at that point, he was 70, whatever, 73. He was lazy, and he deserved to be lazy. He created two revolutions of the 20th century, music which no other artist did. And I just wanted to put him in situations that would challenge him. Like when he would come to the Alley, as an example-

Speaker 6: Blues Alley?

Charles Fishman: Dizzy-

Speaker 6: Blues Alley-

Charles Fishman: Blues Alley.

Speaker 6: Yeah.

Charles Fishman: It was the usual Dizzy Gillespie show. He'd get up, open up with [Burt Schwartz 00:34:19] works, or actually, it was Gillespie [00:34:22] and Burt Schwartz, then 'round midnight, was stock flare. And I just felt he had so much more to give us, and we had so much to learn from him, that I created the United Nation Orchestra. Nobody said no to Dizzy, except Max. I asked Max, for Dizzy's 70th birthday, to perform, and he wanted \$15,000. I was paying the top musicians: Benny Carter, Ike Jones, \$1,500. And so, I told him he could stay home.

Years later, we were at the Iridium, and Max came in, and he called me over, and he apologized to me. The interesting thing was, how much awe and respect the musicians had for Dizzy. I remember when we went ... We did these two concerts in Paris. One was a tribute to Bird, and I can't remember who the other

one was, but all the musicians would gather together around the piano. We're talking about the crème de la crème. And they'd work out a program. Then they'd call me and say, "Charlie, could you bring Dizzy over and see if everything's okay with it?" 'Cause everybody wanted his approval.

So, that's what I did. And I figured if I could expose him to musicians who would challenge him ... Like Moody would challenge him. And Lalo would challenge him. [inaudible 00:36:13] [Danilo 00:36:13], 'cause I wanted to bring younger people, and they challenged him, 'cause they were hungry, and Dizzy was lazy. So, it just worked out because they stimulated him, [inaudible 00:36:27] stimulated them.

Rusty Hassan: How'd you determine who, say a musician from overseas, a young musician from Cuba or from South America ... How would they be recruited into the United Nations Orchestra?

Charles Fishman: First of all, it was called the United Nation, not Nations because Dizzy said the world was ... He was a Bahai. So, the world is one. We are all its citizens, yata yata yata. And so it was pretty easy. You get a phone call from Dizzy Gillespie's manager, saying, "Dizzy would like to know if you would like to perform with him". It was probably one of the most stupid questions, or stupid statements you could make. Everybody wanted to perform with him. And he was so generous with his time and everything.

I remember we were playing at the San Diego Zoo in 1988. And we were waiting to perform. We had a couple of hours in between. And there was Dizzy sitting in a trailer, teaching Giovanni different rhythms. It was just a very beautiful thing to see.

Speaker 6: This is Giovanni Hidalgo we're talking about?

Charles Fishman: Mm-hmm (affirmative). See and I always felt that you had to bring in some kids, 'cause they'd be really hungry, and they'd love the opportunity obviously to work with Dizzy. So the first one I hired was Giovanni. And then the next year I hired Danilo, and the following year, I hired David.

Speaker 6: David Sanchez-

Charles Fishman: And at the same time we got Steve Turre, and the usual suspects, so to speak.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: How long did the United Nation Orchestra, how long a period was that in existence?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Speaker 6: How long of a period was the United Nation Orchestra in existence?

Charles Fishman: 'Bout two years.

Speaker 6: Two years?

Charles Fishman: Three years ...

Speaker 6: And during the course of those two or three years, how many tours did you do?

Charles Fishman: Not that many. It was very expensive, 'cause I wanted to pay the musicians fairly. And we were a big group. We had 24 people. Then one year we did it with Dizzy and Miriam Makela, which was the least satisfying, musically, but the most fun in the world.

Speaker 6: Why was it the least satisfying musically?

Charles Fishman: Miriam had a really difficult time adapting to jazz. Dizzy, in the middle of a song, he'd walk out on stage and start playing. And that threw her off, 'cause she was very set, so to speak. So, it was difficult musically, because it took her about months to acclimate to Dizzy. But when it did, it was just magical.

Speaker 6: Now was this with the tour with Miriam Makela, was that also with United Nation Orchestra?

Charles Fishman: No, it was with, I think we had seven people. We had the Dizzy Standard Quintet, and then a couple of other people. I don't remember exactly, but-

Speaker 6: So this came after the United Nation Orchestra?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, came in 1991.

Speaker 6: Now the United Nation Orchestra that we experienced here in D.C. at the Congressional Black Caucus [inaudible 00:40:24] ... How did that particular performance come together here in D.C.?

Charles Fishman: Conyers-

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: Conyers and Dizzy had a very special relationship.

Rusty Hassan: This is Congressman John Conyers-

Charles Fishman: Yeah. And they wanted to have Dizzy perform at the Caucus, and I said, "If you wanna perform, you had to perform with the big band, with the United Nation Orchestra". Because the whole idea of the United Nation Orchestra was this

"We are all one world. We are all its citizens". And John was very welcoming. I gave him maybe \$500, or \$300 per musician. 'Cause nobody ever said no, except for Max, to Dizzy. It was just such an honor to work with him, and he was so easy to work with.

Speaker 6: Now you said, this is the same thing you referenced that ... You said Max Roach is the only one who ever said no to Dizzy. What happened there?

Charles Fishman: I called Max. This is when I was working on his 70th birthday. And I was calling all these incredible musicians. And I talked to Max's manager. And Max wanted \$15,000 to do the performance, and I told him he could stay home. Then years later, he apologized to me.

Speaker 6: So I guess that also begs the question, and maybe you were around then, but how did that duo recording with Dizzy and Max made, 'cause I think that was made after that time, was it not?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, it was in Paris.

Speaker 6: Right, how did that come together?

Charles Fishman: The Parisians ... The French have this incredibly adventurous spirit, and that particular year, they decided to do two special concerts. One was a tribute to bee-bop and Byrd, and the other was Dizzy and Max. And it was just Dizzy and Max on the stage together, nobody else. It was an amazing concert. They just went out ... 'Cause I kept pressuring them, "Guys, what are you gonna play? What are you gonna play? What are you gonna play?" Benny Carter, Hank Jones, very organized, and then there was Dizzy. But they had so much love and respect for him. He could get away with murder.

Rusty Hassan: Tell us about Dizzy's working group, the musicians who were a part of it, whatever quintet or whatever he had traveled with. Who were some of the musicians that were working with him for year?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry. Say that again.

Rusty Hassan: The working band ... Who were some of the musicians in the working band?

Charles Fishman: Oh, it was Ed Cherry, John Lee, Ignacio Berroa ... For a little while, it was Sam Rivers. And then, Sam, when I took Dizzy to Africa, I could only take a certain number of people. And it was a no-brainer for me. You gotta take Moody. Moody and Dizzy together were magical. And Sam was very insulted. And when we come back from ... Hold on a second.

PAUSE....

Speaker 6: You were talking about Sam Rivers.

Charles Fishman: Oh, so the first gig we had when we came back from Africa, was in Blues Alley. And Sam didn't show up. So, Dizzy essentially fired him, and then, I wanted Dizzy to hire Gary Bartz, 'cause Gary really would've challenged him. And instead, Ron, I'm sure you know-

Rusty Hassan: Ron Holloway-

Charles Fishman: Yeah, Ron, whenever Sonny or Dizzy were in town playing at the Alley, he would come and sit in. So Dizzy's first response was "Hire Ron". That's how Ron got into the group. Personally, musically, he didn't fit, but Dizzy was the boss.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Speaker 6: Back to Sam Rivers for a moment ... I know that for some of us, it was a bit surprising to find Sam Rivers playing with Dizzy Gillespie, 'cause Sam Rivers was always identified with the so-called avant-garde.

Charles Fishman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: So how did that come about? All about the money, huh?

Charles Fishman: Oh, yeah. You got \$500 a concert or \$600 a concert, and you get 30 concerts, that's a nice chunk of change. So Sam was doing it for the money.

Rusty Hassan: With that Charismic Productions, while you were working with Dizzy, were there other musicians that you were managing, or putting into concert situations?

Charles Fishman: Say that again.

Rusty Hassan: Were there other musicians besides Dizzy, that you were working with?

Charles Fishman: Oh, yeah.

Rusty Hassan: Who were some of those?

Charles Fishman: David, Danilo, Steve Turre, Sly, Paquito-

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: We called it The Family.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Speaker 6: And this was under the Charismic Productions umbrella?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: So, Charismic Productions, you started that as a means or a vehicle to present performances, right?

Charles Fishman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: How did it evolve into kind of a management [inaudible 00:46:42]?

Charles Fishman: Musicians needed management, and I was organized, and I could get them gigs. Again, the fulcrum of Dizzy Gillespie had a major impact in the business. As I said, nobody said no to Dizzy.

Rusty Hassan: So how was it juggling getting towards with these other musicians while working with Dizzy and traveling with him and doing the arrangements for David or Danilo, or Perez, or whoever?

Charles Fishman: I tagged it on. For example, Dizzy had a concert, here in Washington at the, one of the museums. So instead of doing the Quintet, I took David, Danilo, Steve Turre, Claudio Roditi, and put them into a Septet, and that was a concert. Because again, with Dizzy, when you have the leverage, so to speak, of Dizzy Gillespie, you can get a lot done, which I did.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). What made you think that Washington D.C. could have a successful jazz festival?

Charles Fishman: Well it was really weird, going around the world with Dizzy. You could go to Montreal. You could go to Nice. And then you go into small towns and villages, and there was jazz. And I sort of looked around and said, "This is fucked up". I said, "We invented the music, and we don't even have a jazz festival in the Capital of the country that invented the music". So that's how I started the festival.

Rusty Hassan: And what was involved in doing that in terms of the logistics of dealing with venues and city officials? What was all involved with all of that?

Charles Fishman: Two words: Dizzy Gillespie.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: You'd get a lot done using Dizzy's name, and fortunately, had the opportunity to use Dizzy, "use" Dizzy.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And Dizzy was just ... He never had a manager. When Joe Glazer died, he stopped having a manager, and Lorraine was "his manager". And Lorraine's job was simply to sign contracts and collect money.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: And she really wasn't interested in anything else, other than keeping him outta the damn house. "He's slobbering up the house". So if Dizzy was home for more than three days, she would call me and say, "Can you get this slob outta my house?"

Speaker 6: And this is Lorraine Gillespie?

Charles Fishman: Yeah, Lorraine Gillespie. Lorraine was a very puzzling woman. My theory, 'cause she used to travel with him all the time. If you look at the old photos, on all of his tours, Lorraine was always there. Then it suddenly stopped. And I think that it's because of the affair he had that resulted in Jeannie Rison. 'Cause after that year, she never toured with him again. She wouldn't even come to the Kennedy Center honors. And I wrote her a two page letter about "You're responsible for Dizzy Gillespie. And he's getting this honor with the President of the United States and Katherine Hepburn and all these other people. And there's only one person that should be by Dizzy's side. And you should be there". Dizzy got so pissed at me, 'cause he didn't want me to bother her, that he didn't talk to me for two days.

Rusty Hassan: Oh, two days-

Speaker 6: So for the festival, Dizzy Gillespie was the door opener?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Speaker 6: For the festival, when you had the idea of developing this festival, Dizzy Gillespie was the door opener?

Charles Fishman: Yup.

Rusty Hassan: Backtrack a bit, [inaudible 00:51:01], the Kennedy Center Honors ... What year was that, and who was the President when he was honored at the-

Charles Fishman: Bush-

Rusty Hassan: Okay-

Speaker 6: Bush one-

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: We had two lunches and a dinner under Bush's Administration. The funny thing is, when we went to the Honors, Saturday night, they always have this special

dinner hosted by the Secretary of State. And each artist would sit at a different table. Everybody wanted to sit with Dizzy. It was all the South Africans that were there, 'cause Mandela had just been released from prison a couple of months before that. So Mandela was the centerpiece of everything, but when he went to the dinner, all the South Africans wanted to do was to meet Dizzy Gillespie. They called him "Your Dizzyship".

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative). We need to take another break. So we might as well do it now.

Speaker 6: We're at the planning stage of the festival here in D.C.. Talk about what went into the planning and building that first festival.

Charles Fishman: First one?

Speaker 6: Yes.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Charles Fishman: How'd I do that? I decided that, as I said, it was ridiculous that the Capital of the United States of America, which invented the music, didn't have a jazz festival. So, a guy named Bob Peck, who was the president of the Greater Washington Board of Trade ... And we went to the same synagogue, both mourning the losses of our parents, our respective parents. And one day after services, I went up to Bob and I said, "This is ridiculous. D.C. doesn't have a jazz festival". And he set it all up. He got me meetings with the Washington Post, with WJOA, some other folks. And I patched it together. The Heifetz Foundation was very instrumental. They're the only ones who gave us cash, outright cash. And by hook or by crook, or actually, and by crook, we were able to do it.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 6: Why was the Heifetz Foundation so open to the idea?

Charles Fishman: Well Heifetz is probably the primary donor in the Arts, in D.C.. You can see their hand print all over the place. Whatever it might be: dance, music, theater, et cetera. So I got a meeting with the president of Heifetz, and he liked the idea, and they gave me \$30,000.

Rusty Hassan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Were city officials helpful in terms of getting the festival underway?

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Rusty Hassan: Were D.C., Washington D.C. city officials like the Mayor or the City Council members helpful in any way?



Charles Fishman: Well, Williams was a hands-off Governor, so to speak. He delegated. They had these two groups: Stan Jackson as Deputy Mayor of Economic Development, and Robert Bob was City Administrator.

Rusty Hassan: Sure.

Charles Fishman: And somebody arranged a meeting for me with Bob's assistant, Dana [Brisson 00:55:03]. And I went in and I talked about it, and she said, "Have you spoken to so-and-so, about this?" I said, "No". She said, "Wait here". And five, 10 minutes later, this guy comes in, and sits down, and I talk to him. And they gave me [inaudible 00:55:26]. They gave me money, 100 grand. That's how really we got it off the ground.

Rusty Hassan: Okay, so Washington D.C. itself was very helpful. Was it Robert Bob or did the Mayor come in personally [inaudible 00:55:39]?

Charles Fishman: The Mayor was not directly engaged.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Charles Fishman: It was Robert and Stan Jackson.

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Speaker 6: So how did you deal with the infrastructure of the festival, in terms of people to work with you, in terms of the Board, and those kind of things?

Charles Fishman: Well, the Board was a very inactive Board. It was mostly names, and the names weren't that big. I just ran it through. I said, "This is what I'm gonna do". And they left me alone. And I did it. So once you do it, you're filling yourself with enough credibility.

Speaker 6: How long did it take you to get your 501-C3 tax exempt status?

Charles Fishman: Well, when we started the festival, this guy, Bob Peck, put us under the umbrella of the Greater Washington Board of Trade. And so it took us about a year after that, to get a 501-C3.

Speaker 6: What year are we talking about?

Charles Fishman: Jesus ... When did I start the festival? But the year I started the festival, it was the year after that.

Speaker 6: 13 years ago-

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Speaker 6: 13 years ago.

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Rusty Hassan: Tell us about that, that first festival in terms of your lining up artists and deciding on venues, how that worked out.

Charles Fishman: In terms of venues, it was pretty apparent. You needed the Kennedy Center. You needed the Smithsonian. You needed certain things. In terms of the artists, playing in the nation's Capital in a jazz festival, and especially the first one or the second one, had some panache, so to speak.

Rusty Hassan: And who were some of the artists that played the first festival?

Charles Fishman: Good question ... That was 14 years ago. Seven ... I don't remember. It was the usual suspects: Paquito, Dizzy, Sly-

Rusty Hassan: Okay.

Speaker 6: Now originally the festival was called the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival. Talk about your thinking behind calling it that.

Charles Fishman: Well to me it was logical. Duke Ellington was Duke Ellington. This was his city. So I said it was just logical to name it "Duke Ellington Jazz Festival". The problem with that was that Duke's name did not draw any money, which really surprised me. So, I just decided to ... Oh, and the other thing was that in calling it the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival, it could be anywhere. So, I determined that you needed to have a physical location for the festival, and the nation's Capital, to me, was most logical. First of all, we didn't have a jazz festival.

Speaker 6: How did you go about building relationships with different venues that you eventually presented the festival at?

Charles Fishman: Listen, the venues always wanna have interesting, challenging, entertaining programs. So if you can provide them with that, you're in. So you go to, for example, even the Kennedy Center, and I'm not talking about the concert hall. I'm talking about the smaller places. And you come up with the idea to have a James Moody, a Mill Jackson, a Max Roach, or whatever. Of course, they're interested. And as long as you can pay for it, you're cool.

Speaker 6: Well, I ask that because, you talking about major institutions, here, world renowned institutions. You mentioned the Kennedy Center, the Smithsonian, all those museums and what not. Every Tom, Dick and Harry who walks in off the street with an idea, doesn't mean you get a proper hearing, much less have an opportunity to collaborate with those institutions. What was it about what you were offering that they were accepting of?

Charles Fishman: Well, I was determined, number one. This was gonna happen. And again, having the ability to use Dizzy's name, Moody's name, Bags' name, gave it a lot of credibility. And then, I had built up a track record over the years that gave me a lot of credibility. And I sort of fed off of that to do what I do. It just sort of came ... In a sense, it came that naturally.

Speaker 6: Well, backtracking a little bit, you had done at least one production at Carnegie Hall, right?

Charles Fishman: Where?

Speaker 6: At Carnegie Hall in New York?

Charles Fishman: Yeah.

Speaker 6: What was that about?

Charles Fishman: Dizzy's 70th birthday-

Speaker 6: Okay, so you did Dizzy's 70th birthday at Carnegie Hall. So, I suppose, obviously, having had that track record, was a door opener as well, to a place like the Kennedy Center.

Charles Fishman: Yup.

Speaker 6: And who were you working with at the Kennedy Center at the time?

Charles Fishman: Kevin Struthers-

Speaker 6: Okay.

Charles Fishman: Kevin's been there 23 fucking years.

Rusty Hassan: Wow, that's a long time. Did you have any interaction with Billy Taylor?  
[inaudible 01:02:00]

Charles Fishman: I'm sorry?

Rusty Hassan: Was there any interaction with Billy Taylor, who was the Artistic Director of the Jazz Program?