



# Swingin' Through the South

Just Color it

Black

and

White

Mort Zakarin

## COPYRIGHT

SWINGIN' THROUGH THE SOUTH – JUST COLOR IT BLACK AND WHITE

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Inquiries:

Yosi Jeff Zakarin: Telephone +972-54-9256752, email [yzakarin@yahoo.com](mailto:yzakarin@yahoo.com)

Charles Zakarin: Telephone +1-914-4132610, email [czakarin@gmail.com](mailto:czakarin@gmail.com)

## PREFACE

In 1949, I traveled through the segregated south with an African-American jazz band. I was a twenty-four year old, white Jew. We were probably the first mixed “Colored” band to invade the south. Living, playing, traveling, and getting into trouble with the law together – what a time it was. And through it all, I can still see the leader of our band, Swanee, laughing and saying, “*Man, we is one.*”

## A NOTE TO THE READER

This is a book of memories, and memory has its own story to tell. Nevertheless, I've turned this memoir of my six-month trip with a mixed-race jazz band through the segregated south into an historical novel. So while this work can be considered fictional, I hasten to add that all the racial incidents portrayed in the story actually occurred as described.

## OVERTURE

**JUNE 1949**

“Hey, wake up! Come on you guys, wake up and listen.” Swannee Johnson stood up front near the driver of the coach.

I opened my eyes, squinting at the landscape rushing by. Highlighted by a noonday sun that sat overhead in a cloudless blue sky, the bright red and black touring bus traveled steadily south from Philadelphia along US Highway #1. Signs on the bus read, ‘THE SWANNEE JOHNSON SWINGERS’.

“Wake up ... EVERYBODY ... God damn it, wake up,” Swannee bellowed. “I want to see the whites of your eyes.”

He looked around to make sure he had our attention. “Listen, this is important. We’re now in the beautiful segregated South.”

Sweat began to build up under my armpits. My palms were damp as well. *Shit, we’re heading into trouble where they hate colored people as well as Jews. I heard that small southern colleges even had quotas for Jews. Damn, I’m scared already and nothing has happened yet. What will I do when trouble starts? I wonder if we’ll all come out of this alive.*

Swannee went on to tell us that Jimmy, our driver, had been down this road before, and there was a diner about a half hour away. He said it was WHITES ONLY, but they’d sell us food to take out – mostly sandwiches, burgers, dogs, that kind of stuff. He asked everyone to give him a list of what they wanted to eat and drink.

“Hey, Swannee, if we can’t get in the diner, how’re we gonna get the food?” asked James Thomas, the baritone sax-man. James, five feet three inches tall with a shaven head, weighed about one hundred and seventy pounds. He had never been further south than Staten Island.

“Well, one of us is going to take the list to the back door of the diner, where the kitchen is, and the garbage pails. You pay, you wait. You bring the food back here. Okay, now if you’ve got that all straight, which nigger is gonna get the food?”

Jason Jarvis, our piano player, stood, raised his hand, smiled and pointed at me. “How about Zak, the white Jew nigger? Hell, he can even go in the front door!”

That broke everyone up but me. *Oh man, that’s just great. What the fuck did I get myself into? I guess I’m now the official gofer, but shit, what’s more important – playing lead alto sax, writing arrangements, or getting food for this wandering tribe of minstrels? Well, I guess the food wins out by a mile.*

The bus stopped. I took the list and headed for the front door of the diner. The building was old, weather beaten, its paint peeling off clapboard sides. The windows were so dirt-caked, you couldn’t see inside. They probably hadn’t been washed in years. The smell of burnt cooking oil filled the air. Once inside, I figured this had to be the original greasy spoon. In spite of that, the place was crowded with whites in overalls, flannels and scruffy boots. I knew everyone in the smelly joint had watched me leave a bus loaded with colored men. If looks could kill, I’d be dead.

I handed my list to the short order cook who looked at it. “This order is going to take some time.” He placed a cup of coffee in front of me. I eased onto a stool at the counter, took a sip and gazed into space, thinking back to June 1943. I had almost finished basic training at the Army Air Corps base in Greensboro, North Carolina. We had been through a tough day in ninety-degree heat, no card games, no crap games, no talk, all of us dead on our feet and not good for anything except sack time, but that wasn’t possible. Sergeant Kelly had told us there might be an inspection, so it was either pass out on the floor or sit on your footlocker. I walked in from a piss break and collapsed on the floor when Sergeant Kelly, who came through the door, called out:

## ANDANTE

## CHAPTER 1

**JUNE 1943 – ARMY AIR CORPS BASE, GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA**

“Private Zakarin, where the fuck are you?”

“Here Sarge,” I jumped to my feet.

“Captain Harrison wants to see you.”

“Me, Sarge? You sure he wants to see me?”

In an angry voice that had a southern twang, “You are Private Morton Zakarin from the asshole end of the world, Brooklyn, New York, right?”

“Yes Sarge, that’s me. But what does the Captain want? I haven’t done anything wrong, have I?”

“Beats the shit out of me. So get your ass in gear; the Captain said pronto.”

I grabbed my fatigue hat and trotted toward Headquarters. My fatigues were still soaked with sweat and I stunk like the bottom of a garbage bin.

*What an impression I’m going to make. Basic training is almost over and I think I handled it pretty well. Thank goodness I worked out with my high school football team before my induction and was in great physical shape. I’ve never fallen out of a formation or missed a duty call. What could the Captain want me for? This must be some kind of mistake, but I’ll find out soon enough.*

I walked into the headquarters barrack and headed over to Sergeant Major Vaughan’s desk. “Sergeant, I was told the Captain wants to see me.”

“Really, what’s your name, Private?”

“Zakarin, Morton.”

He nodded toward a door. “Go right in. The Captain’s expecting you.”

I knocked, entered and saluted. “You wanted to see me, Sir?”



Harrison looked up and studied me for a moment. "I've been checking your records and they're interesting. Do you know what you'd like your assignment to be?"

"No Sir, when I applied for immediate induction at the draft board, I asked to be assigned to the para-ski troop section, but I was told that the Air Corps had priority, so here I am."

"I gather you're not interested in being a pilot or an officer, right?"

"No Sir, I don't think I could handle that." I had just turned eighteen and figured the army would know what to do with me. I was on my own for the first time in my life, and now the army was really my new mom and pop.

"I see you studied music. You might do well as a radio operator. That was what you were slated for, but before we do that, Captain Gold said he'd like you to audition for the band. How does that sound?"

"That's great, Sir, but I've only been playing the clarinet for about two and a half years, I don't think I'd be good enough."

"Well, we're going to find that out tomorrow. Report to Sergeant Morris at 0900. That will be all."

I saluted and almost danced out the door. *Yeah man, that would be cool. Me, a musician in the Army Air Corps Band!* But, as I headed towards my barrack, I started to come down to earth. The band at Greensboro had two-hundred-and-fifty musicians. I had heard them, and they were great. From the concert band and orchestra to the three different swing bands, Dixieland bands, trios and quartets, these guys were all top professional musicians. I'd seen some of them playing with two or three different groups. It seemed everybody did double duty. I laughed when I saw a violinist carrying a bass drum during retreat. I found out later some of them had played for conductors like Toscanini and band leaders, such as my idol, Benny Goodman. There was no way I could pass an audition. I wasn't good enough.

At 0900 I walked into band headquarters, dressed in my suntans, with my clarinet case under my arm. The sergeant greeted me, and led me to one of the rehearsal rooms.

“Warm up your horn, Zakarin. The Captain will be in shortly.”

“Sergeant Morris, I need a little time. I’ve only had this thing out of its case once in the past eight weeks.”

His smile seemed genuine. “Don’t worry about it kid, you’ll do fine.”

The first couple of notes I played were terrible, so I started to just play long notes slowly and carefully, trying to get my lip in shape. After about ten minutes, I began working on some practice exercises that I had developed. They always helped me get my fingers moving. I began to relax and let the music flow.

I was lost in what I was doing when I heard someone cough. I turned and flipped when I saw Captain Glenn Miller standing in the doorway. When I was sixteen, I went to see him at the New York Paramount. I arrived at ten in the morning, carrying my lunch in a brown paper bag. I sat through the same movie twice and saw his band perform three times. I finally left the Paramount about four that afternoon. And now, I was going to play for him. I couldn’t believe it.

“Hi, I’m Glenn Miller.” He stuck out his hand. “You have a pretty sound on that horn of yours.”

*He appeared taller than I remembered. I had heard he was tough to work for, but he seemed relaxed and easy now.*

*“Th – th – thank you.” My God, what the fuck is he doing here? Glenn Miller, I’m not good enough to carry his trombone case.*

He pulled out a sheet of music for me to play. From that point on, I can’t remember what I played or how I played, except that about a half hour later, he said, “Thank you,” shook my hand again, and left.

*I sat stunned. How did I play? Is he laughing at me? What did I play? Damn, I can’t remember anything. Now what?*

I started to take my horn apart, wiped it down and placed it back in its case. *I must have played like shit. It looks like I'm going to be a radio operator.*

Just as I was about to leave, Sergeant Morris walked in and handed me a note. "Give this to Sergeant Kelly, pack your duffle bag, and report back here. I'll assign you to one of the band barracks. You're now a member of the Army Air Corps band. I might add that the Captain was impressed. He said, 'The kid's green, but he's got talent. Keep him.'"

I was only five foot eight inches in height, but at that moment, I felt as if I were seven feet tall.

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I came out of my reverie, watched the cook who was frying the burgers and dogs, took another sip of coffee, and continued to think back...

## CHAPTER 2

### NOVEMBER 1944 – ARMY AIR CORPS BASE, PRATT, KANSAS

I walked out of the PX with a carton of Chesterfield cigarettes and returned to the band barracks. It was an hour before we had to play retreat. Half the band was sackin' out. The rest were either reading or playing cards.

I headed over to the card game. "Hey guys, I hear they're having a jam session over at Squadron C tonight. Who wants to go?"

"What're you talkin' about, Zak? That's the nigger squadron! You can't go there," one of the guys called out.

"Why the fuck not?" I asked.

"Cause, you New York dumb shit," laughed Clarence, "they is niggers, that's why."

I walked over and mussed his hair. "Look Claire, I don't plan to join their squadron. I just want to swing a little. Hell, man, we're not working the NCO Club or the Officer's Club tonight. I've seen the movie at the camp theater, and I don't even have a pass to that asshole town of Pratt, Kansas. So fuck it, I'm going. The most they can do is kick me out. Anybody want to join me?"

Claire brushed his hair back in place. "Zak, ah always did hear that Jews had horns and were crazy. Well, you got one mutherfuckin' horn, and you're goddamn crazy, too." Clarence, a tall lean trumpet player with flaming red hair, cackled and slapped his thigh.

"Piss on you, you southern cracker. Tell me, Claire, how many Jews do you know?"

"Well old buddy, I truly know only seven Jews and they is all in this here band, but you're the only one from New York. Goin' to a nigger squadron to play coon music, you sure is crazy." He bent over laughing.

I thought about Claire, soft and easy going. *I like him and I'm sure he likes me, but I wish he wouldn't talk the way he does.*

I didn't know many colored people, but those I did were just like anybody else. There was Jim White, who worked as a machinist in my father's auto parts store and Doc Washington, the coach of my high school football team and my Phys. Ed. teacher. There was also Jim Blake, who played bass fiddle in our high school orchestra. We always ate lunch together in the school cafeteria.

I headed over to my bunk, pulled out a music pad from my footlocker and continued to work on an arrangement of BLUE MOON for the thirteen-piece band that Warrant Officer Holtz led.

"Hey Claire, you hillbilly fuck," I called out, "you're gonna love this arrangement I'm writing, because when you get through playing those high notes, they'll call you HOT LIPS. Oh, the pain, the pain."

"God damn, Zak, I truly love you even if you is a Jew boy." Clarence laughed again.

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That evening, I grabbed my clarinet, headed over to Squadron C and entered their Rec hall, a Quonset hut with a bar at the far end of the room. Alongside the bar were some tables, chairs and enough space to dance. At least twenty ladies had bused in the ten miles from town. In the corner, at the opposite end of the room, on a small stage, a light-skinned colored guy sat at a piano. Alongside him stood a bass man, a drummer, a tenor sax-man and a trumpet player. I headed in their direction. All eyes were on me. My palms turned wet. *Shit, I feel like a freak in a side show. Maybe this is a mistake. Oh, what the fuck, I'm here.*

"Hi, I'm Zak. I play with the base band. I was wondering if I could sit in?"

The trumpet player glanced at the other musicians, who shrugged. "Why not, I'm Swan-nee Johnson," he said, and reached to shake my hand. "We're going to take five. That'll give you time to warm up. Wanna beer?"

I shook my head, “No, I’m fine.”

## CHAPTER 3

### APRIL 1949 – NEW YORK CITY

Just back from a road tour with the Bobby Sherwood Band, I threw my luggage onto my bed, laid both my horns down, and started to unpack. Dirty clothes on the floor and clean stuff in a dresser drawer. I picked up the phone and dialed my girlfriend.

“Judy, hi --- it’s me --- I got in about a half hour ago --- Yes --- I missed you too --- Look Hon, it’s three now. I need some shuteye. How about we meet for dinner at about ten --- then I want to head up to Harlem --- Why? --- There’s an open jam session and I’d like to swing a little.

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When Judy and I arrived at Jimmy’s Joint up in Harlem, the place was jumping. Squeezing through the crowd at the bar, we were greeted by the head waiter. “Hey man, I see you got your ax. Would you like to sit in?”

“You bet. That’s why I’m here.”

“Cool, follow me. I have a table for you in the main room.” After seating us, he asked. “What can I get you to drink?”

“A couple of beers will do just fine.”

The waiter returned and placed two beers on the table. “When those cats are done, I’ll holler, okay?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Judy and I clinked bottles. Then she said, “I can’t believe what I just saw.”

“What’s that, Hon?”

“You walk in with your clarinet under your arm, and it’s like the parting of the Red Sea. They made an aisle for us where there was no room to make one.”

“Well, this horn could be my passport to heaven. Who knows?”

“By the way, the waiter said you had your AX with you. I don’t understand. What AX?”

I laughed. “That’s hip talk. Any instrument is either your AX or your HORN.”

I surveyed the room. It was the first time I’d ever been to Jimmy’s. The place was big, with a five-foot wooden wall separating the bar from the main dining area. The wall was low enough so people at the bar could see as well as hear. A raised bandstand sat on the opposite corner of the room. A pianist, bassist, drummer, trumpet player and tenor sax man were jamming. The crowd was primarily black with a sprinkling of whites.

Judy pointed to the bandstand and asked, “Those guys playing – are they any good?”

“Well, the rhythm section works. I imagine this is their steady gig. The trumpet and sax men are probably just sitting in and yes, they’re pretty good. The guy playing trumpet is the better of the two.”

“Explain two things to me.”

“Sure Judy, what?”

“You’ve been on the road for eighteen weeks, playing almost every night. Now, as soon as you get home, the first thing you do is come up here to play. Why?”

“That’s easy. When I’m with the band, we play charts. We play those same charts over and over again, and we play them the same way, over and over again. Sometimes there’s a place to take a solo, to do a little improvising, but that’s it. Here, tonight, I’ll be playing me. I’ll be free as a bird. I can soar as high and as far as my talents will take me, and sometimes even further than that. See the difference?”

“I think I do. Now tell me, do you know any of those guys up on the stand?”

“No.”

“You’ll be playing with the guys in the rhythm section, the piano, bass and drummer, right?”

“Give the lady a silver dollar. Right on the nose.”



“You’re going to get up there and play without music, with three guys you’ve never seen before. How can you do that?”

“We all speak the same language.”

“You mean English?”

“No, Judy, we all speak music.”

“Come on, Zak, how do you do it?”

I smiled, took her hand and said, “Well, we pick a tune, then decide what key we’ll play it in and what kind of tempo. After that it just flows. And, if the night is right, someone will do something, you know, maybe play a phrase – and that phrase will start a spark, and that spark will open the door and we’ll all be free. Then it can be a special night – a really special night.”

She looked puzzled, and then smiled. “I think I see what you mean. It’s like when I’m doing a voice over, or a commercial. Sometimes it just plays itself – like magic.”

All of a sudden, someone grabbed my arm. “Zak. You old son of a bitch, how the fuck are you?”

I turned, stood. “Holy shit, Swannee Johnson, is it really you?”

Swannee grabbed me in a bear hug. “Damn, it’s good to see you.”

I pulled over a chair. “Hey, man, sit and meet Judy Barr. Judy, this sucker is the one and only Swannee Johnson.”

Judy stuck out her hand. “Glad to meet you, Swannee Johnson.”

“Same here, Judy Barr. Can you believe it, I haven’t seen this man since the Army Air Corps base in Kansas, and that was in 1944. My man here was an honorary member of Squadron C.”

“What’s Squadron C?” She asked.

“That’s the colored squadron.” I replied.

Judy brought her drink to her lips, then, startled, she stopped and asked, “Zak, what were you doing in the colored squadron?”

I laughed. “I wasn’t a member of C. All army base bands were white, but I heard they had jam sessions in the C Rec Hall every so often. So I started to hang out and jam with Swannee. After a while, when I wasn’t playing the Officer’s club or the NCO club, I’d stop by even if there wasn’t a session. Swannee and I would down a couple of beers and shoot the breeze about what we were going to do after we got out.”

“Speaking of that, let me buy you a beer. Hey waiter,” I called out, “another round, please.”

Swannee looked as if he’d just come from playing a gig, dressed in a black suit, white shirt, black tie and highly polished black shoes. He laid his trumpet case alongside my clarinet, sat back and asked, “Okay, bring me up to scratch. What’s been happening since your discharge?”

“Swannee, I tell you, it’s been truly amazing. I was home just about a week when someone told me they were having open jam sessions on Sunday afternoons at Kelly’s Stables on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. Hell, I hadn’t even bought civvies yet. Anyway, I headed uptown in my suntans. When I got there, they let me sit in almost immediately. Well, Joe Venuti, the jazz violinist, was there. I guess he liked what he heard, because he offered me a three-week gig on the road with his Dixieland band. I jumped at it, and ended up working with him for three months.”

“That man sure does make that fiddle sing, but what kind of a dude is he?”

“Joe had a twisted sense of humor. He was a nasty practical joker. You’re right, that sucker could really swing, but we never did get along. I kept quitting and every time I did, he seduced me by giving me a raise. Hell, it was the only time in my life I had money in my pocket that didn’t jingle. But three months was as much as I could take.”

“What happened after you left Venuti?”

“I enrolled in the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, and majored in composition and conducting.”

“Damn, Judy, this man is too much.” He grabbed me and kissed me on the cheek. “Zak said he was going to do just that.” Swannee stopped to listen as the trumpet player took a solo. He nodded. The crowd also picked up on it and shouted their approval. The place was really jumpin’. “Hey Zak, go on, what happened with school?”

I looked at Swannee and pointed to the trumpet man. “That cat plays those high notes with a big sound. I’m impressed.” I continued. “The conservatory was great. I really learned a lot, did some classical work with my clarinet and even conducted the school symphony orchestra. Man, I gotta tell you, what a kick that was.”

“Tell me about it.”

“My conducting teacher was an Italian guy. We worked well together. Can you believe this? He started calling me MA-ES-TRO ZAK-A-REL-LI.”

Judy and Swannee started laughing. “Hey man,” Swannee said, “that’s a killer. I love it. So what happened?”

“The school orchestra had been rehearsing Mozart’s 40<sup>th</sup> in G Minor. That was also one of the scores I’d been studying. Anyway, one day in the middle of rehearsal the maestro called out, MA-ES-TRO ZAK-A-REL-LI, put down your clarinet and take my baton.”

I picked up my beer and stood. I was flushed with the excitement of remembering.

“Okay, then what?” Swannee asked.

“I’ll tell you, I was shocked – excited – elated – and scared shitless. Anyway, I got to the podium, picked up the baton, and looked at the score which I almost knew by heart. When I looked down at the orchestra, all I could see were smiles. These were my fellow students and they were ready. I took a deep breath, raised the baton, gave the downbeat and then it happened...”

“Zak, please, you’re killing us. What, what?” Judy asked.

I shivered with delight as I thought about it. “Those first notes hit and cascaded over my body like waves smashing on a beach in a storm. The hair on my arms tingled. I had goose bumps and chills. Perspiration popped out on my forehead. I stopped and started to laugh. At first everyone must have thought I was crazy, but then they understood and joined in, including the maestro. It took three more starts before I could go on.”

Swannee and Judy stared at each other and began to laugh. I sat with a smile on my face as I relived the thrill of what I had done. That moment was like a dream come true. My parents hated the idea of me being a musician, but that was what I had always wanted – just to be a musician. I continued. “School was wonderful, but believe me, I worked my ass off. I finished a three-year course in two. Since then the road’s been my home. As a matter of fact, I just got back from eighteen weeks with the Bobby Sherwood Band.”

“Wait a minute, I’ll be damned.” Swannee clapped his hands together and pointed at me, “You wrote the chart for TALK OF THE TOWN, right?”

I looked up, puzzled.

“I knew it was you. I recognized your style. But you’re better now, much better. Cool! I loved what you did with those ninth and thirteenth chords.”

“I’m amazed that you knew, but wow, I appreciate that. Okay Swannee, tell me what’s up with you?”

Swannee was interrupted by the head waiter who arrived and said, “Excuse me, those two musicians are stepping down. The rhythm section is going to take a fifteen-minute break. Then we’d be happy to have you sit in.”

The trumpet player and the sax-man left the stand and headed for our table. “Hey Swannee, how goes it, my main man?” asked the trumpet player.

“Everything’s cool, Willie. Say hello to my good buddy. Zak, this is Willie Jones. He’s playing trumpet in the band I’ve formed. And this ugly sucker of a tenor man is Jake Thompson. He’s part of our sax section. Guys, meet Zak and his lady, Judy Barr.”

We shook hands all around and pulled over two chairs.

Willie asked, "You a musician?"

"Just stick around and you'll find out. This cat will blow you both away," Swannee said.

"I ain't goin' nowhere. I gotta see a white dude who can cut me," Willie snarled.

I stared in disbelief. *What kind of shit is that? I'm white, but that doesn't mean I can't swing. Who said you have to be colored to be a good jazz man? There are lots of white guys and Jews that swing – Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Stan Getz, Ziggy Elman. Man, I could go on and on.*

Just then, the rhythm section walked back on stage. Swannee reached for his trumpet.

"Come on Zak, let's put on a show." I grabbed my clarinet and followed.

Up on the bandstand, we went into a huddle. Everyone nodded and the piano man started off with a four-bar intro, backed by the drummer and bassist. Swannee and I, playing in unison, did a chorus of HOW HIGH THE MOON. Then each of us improvised a chorus, Swannee first and then me. We followed that by playing four bars each, over and over again, inventing new melodies and phrases each time. We passed these back and forth, almost like two kids playing catch, finally ending with another unison chorus of the original melody.

When we finished, the crowd yelled and stomped for more. I got a real high when I saw Judy standing – first clapping, then hugging herself with pure delight.

The applause and shouts had finally quieted down as Swannee and I left the stage to join Judy. "Wow, you two were great. It was thrilling," she said, brushing away a stray hair that had fallen over her eye. "Do you realize that they kept you up there for over an hour? It was as if you got into each other's heads. You know, like one guy playing two instruments."

"That's a lovely compliment, Judy. Thank you. It really was a ball up there, and Swannee, you keep getting better and better."

"Well, Zak baby, you weren't too shabby either. It sure was a kick. We always did think alike musically." Swannee turned to Judy. "Hey, what happened to Willie and Jake?"

She covered her mouth to hide a smile. "They snuck out after that fast blues number. You scared them half to death."

"Hey, you guys were somethin' else," the head waiter said as he placed three beers on the table. "Come by anytime. The drinks are on the house."

Judy stood. "Excuse me. I'm going to the powder room. Don't go away. I promise I'll be right back."

As she disappeared into the crowd, Swannee said, "Listen man, I've put together this medium-size band. We've got a road tour all laid out, and we'll be leaving in the middle of July. I've been looking for someone to write some new charts for me. How about you?"

"What kind of instrumentation do you have? What do you want, and when?"

"The band consists of three trumpets, including me, one alto, two tenors and a baritone sax. The rhythm section is the usual piano, bass and drums. The bass man can also sing ballads. His range is up to a G above middle C. He goes about an octave and a half. What I need right now are ten ballads, two easy bounce tunes, and one real up-tempo zinger. And, I need them fast."

Judy reappeared and said, "Zak, I think it's time to go. It's been a long day."

"Okay, we'll leave in just a minute. Look Swannee, I promised Sherwood I'd do six arrangements for him. I'm to get a list later this week."

"Then squeeze me in."

I paused, and said, "How can I say no to you? Here's my card. Tell me what tunes you want, then call me in a couple of days. I'll get right on it. I can have one or two scores finished by then. You'll have to get someone to do the copy work, otherwise I'll never get it done."

Swannee quickly wrote out a list and handed it to me. We hugged. "Swannee, where can I reach you?"

“My card, sir. I’ll call you in a few days. Man, tonight was a blast. Judy Barr, nice to have met you. Take care of my boy. He’s good people.”

“I know that. Nice to have met you, too, Swannee Johnson.”

As we walked out, people stopped us, saying how much they enjoyed my playing. When we reached the street, I hailed a cab. “My place?”

“Where else! She said, snuggling close.

## CHAPTER 4

I sat at my desk and dialed Judy's number. "Hi --- It's me --- What do you mean, who? --- I know I haven't called --- Hell, I did nothing but write thirteen arrangements for Swannee's band, and three of those were original compositions. After that, I did six charts for Bobby Sherwood. My head is spinning. I can't feel the tips of my fingers. They're numb --- What's this poor baby stuff? I haven't seen the light of day. I haven't looked at a paper. I've been eating with one hand and writing with the other. --- Honest Judy, I had to get it done --- Why? Well, for one thing, I promised Swannee and before that I promised Bobby. Plus, I made a lot of money. That's part of what I do for a living."

There was a long pause. Finally I took a deep breath. "Look, let's not argue. I'm sorry I didn't call, I really am --- Well, I missed you, too. Now listen, I'm going uptown to hear Swannee's band. Why don't we meet at Nola's studio? After that, we can have dinner and maybe take in a movie --- Great, I'll see you at the studio in about an hour --- And Hon, I really did miss you."

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I checked at the desk, headed for Rehearsal Room Number Three, walked in and found a chair against the wall.

The room was about twenty-by-twenty and sound-proofed. A large window faced Seventh Avenue. The walls were painted a light tan. Pictures of musicians and bands hung everywhere. A pianist sat at a baby grand on the right side of the room, alongside him, the bassist and drummer. To the left of the rhythm section sat the rest of the band, with the four saxes up front and three trumpets behind them.

*The rhythm section swings, especially the piano man. Lead alto stinks. The tenor man I met at Jimmy's Joint the other night, what was his name? Oh, yes, Jake Thompson, he's cool.*



*The other tenor man is slightly out of tune and the baritone sax man hits everything too hard. Hmm, the trumpet guy from the other night --- yeah, Willie Jones, he's also playing slightly out of tune. Shit, why doesn't Swannee do something about it? Man, I don't understand. He's got a good ear. Isn't he listening? Overall, the band stinks. Come on Swannee, do something! They're fucking up my arrangement.*

Judy walked in, all five foot two of her, raven hair, beautiful gray eyes and a cute turned-up nose. She sat next to me and squeezed my arm. She was wearing jeans, a short sleeve shirt and loafers.

I pecked her on the lips and whispered, "Hi Hon, you look good enough to eat."

Judy blushed, rubbed up against my shoulder and whispered, "Zak, is that one of the things you wrote?"

"Yes."

"It's great, has a nice lilt to it – easy to dance to. What's it called?"

"Flip/Flop. Yeah, I like it. It's catchy."

Judy pointed. "Those instruments that Swannee and the other trumpet players are using – I've never seen them before."

"That was my idea. Those are flugelhorns. They're used mostly in marching bands. I thought it would give the group a unique sound. I've written the scores so that the guys can play their trumpets for the high notes and more brassy parts, or the flugelhorn to give the band a deeper, fuller sound."

"Well, to my uneducated ear, it sure is different and I like it."

The band stopped. Swannee stood and stretched. "All right, let's pack it in. Rehearsal tomorrow starts at one – be on time. We've got a lot to cover." He wiped down his horns, headed toward us, pecked Judy on her cheek and hugged me.

"I just stopped by to say hello and listen. Judy and I are going to dinner. Why don't you join us?"

“Good, I need to talk to you. I’ve got to straighten up here first. I’ll join you in about a half hour.”

“We’re going to Julio’s Steak House. See you later.”

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The waitress cleared the table and asked if we wanted more coffee.

“Yes, please.” I leaned over the table and lit Swannee’s thin cigar.

He sat back, stretched his legs under the table, inhaled and blew out a stream of smoke.

“Zak, your arrangements are great, but something is missing. There’s no spark.”

“Really?” Judy looked surprised. “I thought the band sounded wonderful.”

I put my hand on hers. “No, Judy, Swannee’s right. The band stinks. One of the reasons is your lead alto man. He just can’t cut it, and he’s dragging the whole sax section down with him. I don’t know where you found him, but you’d better dump him and find someone else.”

“Okay, but there’s more, isn’t there?”

“Yes, much more.” I took a deep breath, looked at Swannee, and asked, “Are you sure you want to hear what I have to say?”

“Yes, but with mixed emotions.”

I tried to gauge his reaction. *How do I handle this? He’s my friend. I don’t want to hurt his feelings. Shit, I really don’t want to do this, but it needs to be said.*

“Okay man, here goes. The band is not disciplined and you’re not doing anything about it. I heard two guys who were not in tune and you did nothing about it. The phrasing stunk, and you did nothing about it, and they played loud, then louder and you did nothing about any of it. Swannee, what gives?”

Swannee rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hand. “Damn, I thought leading a band would be easy, but it’s not. I’m too busy playing my horn. I guess I have a sideman’s mentality. What I need is someone like you.” He paused, a half grin emerged. “How about climbing on board? Play lead Alto Sax and manage the band.”

I almost dropped my coffee cup. “What? You’ve got to be joking. A white guy with an all-colored band? Swannee, you’re crazy.”

“Why?”

“All right, smart ass. Tell me your itinerary.”

“Sure. We’re booked for six solid months. We start off in Jersey, then work our way south, through to Georgia, then across to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, back up to Pennsylvania and finally back to New York.”

I stopped to light up a Chesterfield and shook my head. “And you want me to be part of the band? Swannee, you’re out of your fuckin’ mind. We’d all get lynched.”

“Bullshit. Goodman’s got Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton in his band, hasn’t he?”

“Come on, that’s different and you know it. A couple of black guys with a white band, most people can handle that. But, I’m not sure even Goodman would think of going where your band is going. Hell, even here in so-called liberal New York, Billie Holiday had to take the service elevator up to the ballroom when she sang with the Artie Shaw Band at the Waldorf. The South isn’t ready for a white man with an all-colored band. That spells trouble, in capital letters. I don’t need it and neither do you. Look, you must have read that article in the New York Times about that colored guy in Georgia. Those KKK guys just walked in, took his black ass right out of jail and strung the poor bastard up.”

Swannee glanced at his watch, “I don’t care what you say, it still could work, but I’ve got to run. Just think about it. The money’s good, and you can continue to write charts for us as we travel. Zak, I really need you. I’ll give you a jingle. Bye, you two.”

My stomach tightened as I watched Judy turn pale. She just sat there staring into space.

“Judy, are you all right?”

“No, I’m not. I don’t like that look in your eyes. “You’re thinking of going. I can see it. You are, aren’t you?”

All shook up, I took her arm and we walked out of the restaurant. The street was crowded with people heading toward the theatre district. After several attempts, I finally hailed a cab. “123 Bank Street, in the Village.”

The cabby pulled into traffic. “Zak, you haven’t answered me. Are you thinking of making that trip?”

“It would be one hell of an experience.”

“My God, I can’t believe you. Didn’t you just tell Swannee about a colored guy that got yanked out of jail and hung?”

“That guy was black. I’m not.”

Raising her voice, she exclaimed, “That’s great, one white Jew with an all colored band traveling the south. Those KKK guys are crazy. I can picture them saying, “Goddam kikes and niggers, they’re all alike. String up the whole fucking bunch of them.” Her eyes were blazing and her face flushed.

I reached for her hand, but she pulled away. “Easy, Judy, I haven’t said I would take the gig. I’m just thinking about it.”

She clenched her fists as tears ran down her face. “How can you even think about it? This whole thing is crazy. You’re crazy. I must be crazy for caring for a nut like you.

Look Judy, just relax. This isn’t the end of the world. And, I never said I was going.”

She shook her head. “Please take me home.”

“Judy, you’re being silly.”

“Driver, take me to Seventy-First and Second Avenue.”

The cabby checked with me. I nodded. He turned the cab around, headed north, and stopped at the corner of Seventy-First Street and Second Avenue.

Judy jumped out and ran to the front door of her apartment building.

“All right, driver, back to the village – 123 Bank Street.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation,” the Cabby said. “I know it’s none of my business, but she’s right.”

“Yeah? What makes you so smart?”

“Well, I lived in Georgia for a year after I got out of the Army. That was in ’46. Those people don’t like our kind. For a while, I thought my name was SHEENY BASTARD.”

“That would almost be funny, if it weren’t so sad,” I said. “But things are changing every day.”

“Not quick enough. Your girl’s right.” He turned into Bank Street, and said, “We’re here. Hope you didn’t mind my butting in.”

*I guess it’s crazy to even think about going. First Judy, and now the cabby – it really doesn’t make a lot of sense. Yes, damn it, it’s a dumb idea, but, it sure would be interesting to see how it might turn out. Nah, forget it Zak, we could all get killed.*

The smell of oil burning brought me back. I was still sitting on a stool at that diner, watching the mound of fries get bigger and bigger. I shook my head to clear it, but the glaze in my eyes...

## CHAPTER 5

I walked into Nola's Studio, checked at the desk and headed for Room Three. I entered quietly and sat down to listen. Swannee spotted me and when the band finished playing the arrangement they were working on, he said, "All right, let's take a fifteen-minute break."

"Hi, Zak, what brings you uptown?"

"We just finished cutting a record with Bobby's band. We'll be doing the flip side tomorrow. I just stopped by to see how you're making out. I heard your new guy. No good, and the band is still blowing too loud."

"Look, you've got your horns with you. Just sit in for the rest of this rehearsal. Maybe this new cat will see what the band is supposed to sound like."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

With a large grin, he said, "Come on, Zak. Do it for old time's sake."

I sighed. "All right, but while I set up, get me a Coke or something to drink." I bent down to open my instrument case, then stood up again. "Swannee, tell me, how come I get the feeling I'm being hustled?"

He laughed, "I'll get you that Coke."

I assembled my instruments and started to warm up. Their piss break over, the guys drifted back and looked at me curiously. Swannee returned and handed me my drink.

"Hey, everybody, this is my man, Zak. He's the cat who wrote those fine arrangements we've been working on. I've asked him to sit in for the rest of this rehearsal. He'll be running the show, so listen to him. All right, Zak, it's all yours."

I turned the music stand and chair around to face everyone. "Okay, have you all got pencils?" Everyone nodded.

“Good, now the sax section. Just to try things out, let’s do the first eight bars of TENDERLY. We’ll take it from letter {A}, right after the intro. Here we go – one, two, three, four.”

We played four bars. I stopped, shaking my head. “No. No, that’s not the way it’s written. Softly, we want to caress the notes, not hit them over the head. Now let’s try it again, remember, quietly. One, two, three, four.”

After four bars I stopped them again. “Hey guys, that’s better, but I want it even softer. Follow my lead. And you, on the baritone, what’s your name?”

He peered from under a wide brimmed hat. “Me? James Thomas.”

“Listen, James, you’re attacking the notes too hard. Tongue it gently. Very gently, as if you’re caressing your girl’s nipple.”

James grunted. There were a couple of snickers from the band, then silence.

“All right, let’s try it again. Here we go. One, two, three, four.”

This time we got through the first eight bars. “Great. Hey James, your gal would have really liked that.”

There were still more snickers from the band, but James grunted.

“Now we’re cooking. Take your pencils and mark your breath points. Swannee, let’s do the same eight bars with the full band. Remember everyone, softly, I want to be able to hear the piano. By the way, what’s your name?”

“The name is Jason.”

“Great, Jason, I want some pretty, soft runs. You know, make it gooey. Kinda like a tinkling piano in the next apartment. Can do?”

“Can do, will do.”

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“Zak, I can’t believe it. You transformed those guys into a team in a little over an hour. Man, you really know your stuff. Where did you learn all that shit?”

“I began to understand the concept when I started conducting the Symphony Orchestra at the conservatory, especially working with the string section. You need to get them bowing in the same direction, so that the sound is smooth and even. I try to apply that idea to all the instruments.”

“Goddammit, you’ve got to come on board.”

I shook my head. “No way. Shit man, you must have noticed. Not one of your guys said a word to me. Never asked a question! Never even argued! God, I could feel their hate. Didn’t you feel it? What is it? Are they afraid of me? Is it because I’m white?” I started putting my horns away. “All I can say is that this fuckin’ studio was so cold it didn’t need air conditioning.”

“Easy, Zak, these guys would have acted that way no matter who came in and did what you did. You got weeks of work done in an hour. They won’t admit it, but they knew you were right. Nobody, I mean nobody, likes to be told what they’re doing is wrong. Hell, you handled it beautifully. They’ll get over it.”

I finished packing my instruments and looked up. “Hold it, Swannee. This rehearsal was a one-time deal. I never said I was joining up. Look, you and I are buddies, but don’t push me.” I picked up my horns. “Listen man, I gotta split. I’m supposed to be over at Judy’s apartment in fifteen minutes. Take care.”

Heading out the door, I thought, *Swannee knows he can’t handle being a leader. I feel sorry for him, but it’s not my problem. It’s his. He’ll have to work it out by himself. Damn, but it would be interesting and different traveling with a colored band. Shit, no way – I can’t get involved. God, we could all get lynched.*

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Judy opened the door. I stood there with my sax and clarinet in one hand and a bouquet of roses in the other. “Hi.” I handed her the flowers. “Damn, I’ve missed you. Do you know it’s been a week?”

I walked into her apartment. “Thanks Zak, the roses are lovely.” She closed the door and with an edge to her voice, replied, “I’ve missed you too, but it’s been ten days.”

Judy filled a vase with water, put the roses in it and placed it on the dinner table, set for two. “I’m sorry I got so upset. It’s because I’m frightened at the thought of you going on tour with Swannee’s band.”

“Look, Hon, you’re not the only person who’s told me I’d be crazy to make that trip.” I took off my jacket and loosened my tie. “I’m not planning on going, so let’s not start that again. I’ve had a hard day and I sure could use a drink.”

“What would you like?”

“Scotch, a big one – with ice.”

“A double scotch coming up.”

I looked around the large room. “I’ve always admired your apartment, and that clown painting is a perfect fit.”

“Oh, Darling, I remember when you bought it for me. I really do love it. It makes the room sparkle.” She returned with two glasses. We clinked. Judy took a sip and I bolted down half the drink.

“Wow, it really was a rough day, but now it’s time to relax. Did I tell you how much I’ve missed you?”

“Yes, but you can tell me again,” she said, as I picked her up and carried her to her bedroom.

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The candles on the dinner table had burned half way down, when I leaned back and patted my stomach. “The dinner was delicious. I didn’t know you were a gourmet cook.”

“Thank you.” She stood, smiled, grabbed her skirt and curtsied. “Just one of my many talents.”

The doorbell rang.

Judy looked surprised. “It’s 10:30. Who could be calling at this hour?”

It rang again. “Just a second, let me check.” She looked through the peep hole as she swept a lock of hair away. “Zak, it’s Swannee!”

I buttoned my shirt and headed for the door as Judy opened it.

“Hi Swannee, what’s up?” She looked at his face, “Wow, you don’t look so good. Come on in. Is everything all right?”

“Hey man, she’s right. You look like you could use a drink. What’ll it be?”

“I’m sorry I’m interrupting your evening, but I need to talk to you. It’s important. And yes, I could use a stiff drink. Scotch, neat.” He was as tight as the skin on a snare drum.

“I’ll get it and then leave you two alone,” she said as she was about to head for the kitchen.

“No, bring the drink, but stick around. We have no secrets.” I kept staring at Swannee, who stood clenching and unclenching his hands. As he waited, beads of sweat formed on his brow and upper lip.

Judy returned with the drink, sat down and watched Swannee take a long pull on the scotch. He looked down, avoiding eye contact. “After you left the rehearsal, I had a meeting with my bankers.” Swannee drank some more and began to pace. He kept hitting the side of his leg with his free hand. “I don’t mean bankers like in a bank either.”

“Oh my God, are you dealing with gangsters?” Judy whispered with her hand over her mouth.

Swanee ignored Judy's question and continued. "I've spent a lot of their money. You know, for stands, uniforms, flugelhorns and your arrangements, as well as studio rentals and a big deposit on the touring bus we'll be using. This is no ordinary bus. It's a class job, with customized interior and a special paint job. On top of that, I hired two Greyhound bus drivers, who'll also act as band boys.

"I told my backers I was having problems putting the band together. I mean a good band. I now realize that I just don't know enough. Shit, what you did in an hour this afternoon, I haven't been able to do these past four weeks. And now, I've got a problem, a real problem."

"I still don't understand."

He paused. What came out next was painful for him. He licked his lips, started then stopped. Finally he blurted out. "It's really simple. I've always been a sideman who wanted to front a band."

"Hell, Swanee, that's almost everyone's dream."

"Yes, but when I met Tom Harris at a jam session, about six months ago, I bragged to him, saying I could put a band together that would make him and his group a pile of money. He asked me if I had ever led a band, and I lied. I told him I had fronted a band in the Army and before that in Philly."

"Shit, why did you do that?"

"Well, for one thing, I was a little high, and thought I could do it. Damn, it seemed so easy while I was sitting in the brass section, and now I've got a problem."

"Swanee, the truth, how big a problem?"

He rubbed his forehead. "Big trouble, real big trouble. These are rough people I'm dealing with."

I closed my eyes, shook my head, then quietly said, "How much time before you leave?"

"A little over three weeks."

I continued to look at Judy. "I've got a recording session tomorrow. I should be finished by four. Rent the studio from," I paused, still staring at her. "Make it from six o'clock so we'll have time for dinner. We'll need it for at least three hours. Hell, make it four hours. You'd better book the place every day and that includes Saturday and Sunday, for the next three weeks. Also, talk to your people. I won't stand for any shit, or I'll never last six days, let alone six months. Clear?"

He brightened. I had lifted a load off his body. "Yes, very clear and thanks, Zak. You've saved my life again. Well maybe not that, but for sure, a couple of busted knee caps. Judy, I'm sorry I spoiled your evening. Please forgive me." He turned back to me. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The door closed. Judy and I stared at each other. I could see by her expression she was frightened. "You understand Hon, I have to do this, but there's really nothing to worry about. I'll get the band working like a team in no time."

There were tears in her eyes. She laughed nervously and wiped her eyes. "I know a lot of colored folks who have lighter skin than you. Heck, you and Swannee have the same features, except his skin is the color of a walnut shell, but you both have the same oriental slant to your eyes, the same high cheek bones, and he's only a little bit taller. Who knows, maybe you'll pass, but I think you should get a permanent while you're at it. Yes, that's a wonderful idea, get a tight curl perm." Her nerves had taken control of her mouth.

"Now don't get smart. Hey, I'm still hungry. Is there any more food? Or do I have to make love to you on an empty stomach?"

## CHAPTER 6

Swanee and I were sitting in a corner table at Kelly's Irish Pub, a small bar on Second Avenue. I had asked him to meet me there. It was an hour before rehearsal.

"Swanee, the band's in pretty good shape, but these guys hate my guts. I've just about had it with their grumbling about every suggestion I make. While you still have ten days to go, get another alto man. You'd be better off without me."

"Man, I know you'd be better off without them, but damn it, they need you even if they don't know it yet. This band has come a long way, only because you've worked their asses off. I can hear it. They won't admit it, but they can hear it too. We're beginning to sound as smooth and as soft as butter. Those cats out there will cream in their pants when they hear us."

"Come on, Swanee, none of these guys has ever talked to me, except when we argue. I can't live like that for six months."

"Don't worry, trust me. It'll all straighten out. You'll see."

"That's what you said when we started, but damn it, nothing has changed."

"Zak, I promise it will all work out before we leave. I repeat, trust me."

I sighed. "Okay, we'll see."

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I entered Nola's and started to warm up. I watched the guys arrive and set up. *Look at them. No talk, sullen faces. That's not a happy group. Man, I'm not going to take much more of this. I took a deep breath. Oh shit, come on, let's just get started.*

As always, my chair and music stand faced the band. Half of them had cigarettes dangling from their mouths. "All right, let's take it from the bridge of the second chorus. That's letter {G}."

“Man, how many times are we going to do this fuckin’ thing?” asked Willie, the trumpet player.

“Until we do the fuckin’ thing right. And, it would help if you’d get your horn in tune with the rest of us.”

“Are you saying I play out of tune?”

“Willie, I said your trumpet is not in tune with the rest of the band.”

“What would a fuckin’ Jew prick know about being in tune?”

*Here it comes. Let’s let it all hang out. Either it’ll clear the air or I’m walking.*

“Well, this Jew prick knows that a fuckin’ nigger named Willie is playing a horn that’s not in tune with the rest of us.”

“Who’re you calling a nigger?”

I put down my horn and stood. “This fuckin’ Jew is calling you a fuckin’ nigger. Now do you want to tune up, step outside and fight, or quit. I couldn’t give a shit. Just pick one, or Goddammit, shut the fuck up and get in tune.”

Nobody moved. Willie glared at me. The rest of the band never looked up. Finally Swannee walked to the front of the band. “Now listen to me, you suckers. I’ve tried to stay out of this thing. Obviously, I can’t. First, Willie, your fuckin’ horn isn’t in tune with the rest of us. Two, if you don’t straighten up, you can pack and leave. Three, in spite of all your bullshit and I mean every one of you fuckin’ guys, Zak has made you better. And, if you’d really listen, he could make this one of the best sounding bands around. Now I’m saying this to all of you. Straighten up or leave. We’ll just shut down.”

Swannee stood there with his hands on his hips. The room was still. No one looked up. No one moved. Swannee headed back to his seat in the trumpet section and nodded to me.

I motioned to the piano player, “Jason, give me an {A}. Willie tune up.”

I waited as Willie adjusted the valve on his horn. When he finished tuning up, I said, “Okay, let’s take it from letter {G}.”

## CHAPTER 7

A large glass filled with scotch over ice was placed on a handkerchief on top of the piano. The room was filled with shadows from a tiny light. I sat at the piano, slowly playing variations of Gershwin's I GOT RHYTHM chords, over and over – a one, six, two, five chord progression. God, how many tunes used that progression? The most popular was probably Rodgers and Hart's BLUE MOON, but there were hundreds of others. Intermittently, I picked up the glass with my right hand, as my left hand continued working on that same progression.

I heard a knock on the door and turned to see Judy walk in. She wrapped her arms around my neck and nibbled on my ear. "Hi, lover boy, how're you doing?"

I nuzzled against her. "Boy, if ever a man needed loving, it's me."

"Oh dear! If it's that bad, maybe it's time to quit. Swannee's a friend, but you don't owe him anything."

My mood changed, but I continued to play the same chords, louder, and louder. "Damn it, you know I can't do that. In ten days we'll be on the road. I can't leave him now. Look, I need another drink. The scotch is on the table."

Judy picked up my glass and headed for the kitchen. As she passed the phone, it rang. "Hello --- Oh, hi Swannee --- Yes, Zak is right here. Hold on. Zak, it's Swannee."

I walked to Judy, gently kissed her and took the phone. "Hi, what's up? --- A party? --- Where? --- When? --- Tomorrow night at about ten --- Who's going to be there? --- If the whole band's going to be there, are you sure you want me? --- Bring Judy? --- We'll see. Are you sure you want me? --- My being there will kill the party --- Oh shit --- Okay, if you insist --- Yes, I'll see you at rehearsal, tomorrow --- Yeah, okay. See you."

"I hung up the phone. "Did you hear that?"

"Only parts, what's up?"

“I’ve been invited to a party. That is, I’m going to make an appearance at a party and then I’ll get the hell out of there pronto. He wanted me to bring you, but no way. I wouldn’t think of subjecting you to that kind of ordeal. Damn, this is the first time since I’m out of the army that I’ve been miserable. I hate most of those guys and they hate me. I’m really pissed at Swanee for getting me into this mess, but I’m glad you’re here now. I really need a lot of lovin’.”



## CHAPTER 8

The taxi pulled into a circular driveway and stopped. “This is it, but are you sure you want me to drop you off here?” the cabby asked.

“Five-Fifty Garden Circle. Right?”

“Yes, but it’s ten-thirty at night, and this is the colored section of Mount Vernon.”

I smiled. *If this guy knew where I’m heading, he’d probably shit in his pants. Who knows, maybe I will before this trip is over.*

“The area looks quiet, and even in the dark, this garden appears to be well kept. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“You may be right, but I’ll wait. If you go in, I’ll leave.”

I paid the man, walked up the steps and knocked. A colored maid opened the door. “Sir, can I help you?”

“Well, I hear a party going on inside and I’ve been invited. My name is Zak Morton.”

“One moment please.” She closed the door softly.

I turned to the cabby, shrugged and turned back as the door opened.

Swannee stood there, a drink in one hand and a smile that lit his face.

“Hey Zak, come on in. Where’s Judy?”

“She couldn’t make it. She’s working overtime tonight, doing some commercials,” I lied.

Swannee looked at me quizzically, then took my arm. “You’re late, the party’s cooking.”

He led me through the house which was large and from what I could see, beautifully decorated. We entered a spacious back room and headed for the bar. A well dressed, older, portly, colored man was talking to the bartender.

“Zak, I’d like you to meet our host, Mr. Harris. Tom, this is my good buddy, Zak.”

He extended his hand. “Hi, I’ve heard wonderful things about you.”

His voice was deep with almost an English or maybe Bostonian accent. He wore a dark blue pinstriped suit, a white on white shirt, and a dark red tie. I noticed his heavy gold cuff links and the large diamond pinkie ring. The whole picture spoke of big money.

“Thank you for those kind words, Mr. Harris. And thank you for inviting me to your home. It’s lovely.”

“Call me Tom. Now what can I get you to drink? You’ve got some catching up to do.”

“Scotch over ice will do just fine.”

As we stood at the bar I could see that most everyone was paired off. The laughter and happy talk dropped to a whisper. *God, what did I get myself into? Shit, the same sullen faces. This is a big mistake. Damn, Swannee’s a friend, but I don’t need this.*

I picked up my glass. “I seemed to have put a damper on your party. I’ll finish this drink and cut out.”

“Not on your life. Why you haven’t even met my wife and daughter.” He turned and called out, “Emily, Dora, come here and meet our guest.”

I watched as a handsome light-skinned woman, maybe in her mid-forties, approached. With her was a striking young lady with just a touch darker complexion.

“Zak, this is my wife Emily and my daughter Dora.”

“Welcome to our home. We’ve heard so much about you,” Emily said, with a slight drawl.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harris. I’m pleased to meet both you and Dora.”

“We’re very informal here. Please call me Emily.”

Dora smiled. “Come on Zak, let’s get this party going.” She took my hand and led me to the center of the room.

“Hey, Swannee,” she called out, “put a record on the machine. We want to dance.”

The music began, and the lush baritone voice of Bob Eberle started to sing MARIA ELENA, backed by the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra.

She came into my arms. At about five-feet-five inches, she fit comfortably. Her long dark hair framed a pretty face.

“You and your father have what appears to be a Bostonian accent, and your mother has a lovely southern lilt to her speech. Where did that all come from?”

“Boston College, I’m a junior there. My father was born in Boston and my mother comes from Virginia.”

Alone on the dance floor, Dora called, “Hey, this isn’t a solo performance. There’s plenty of room out here for everyone.”

“You’ll have to forgive me, I’m not much of a dancer. I’ve been too busy playing for dancers most of my life to do it well.”

“You’re doing fine, nothing fancy, but good tempo.”

I laughed. “Do you know that this is the first time I’ve had a reason to laugh since I’ve been with this group?”

“So I’ve heard. We’re going to change that this evening, even if I have to smack every one of these guys.”

*My God, I think she probably would.* “No, Dora, I don’t want a force feeding. They’ve got to accept me for me. They have to forget that I’m different.”

“Who’s the worst offender? You know, who’s the ring leader?”

I turned around and noticed four couples had joined us on the dance floor. “It’s difficult to say. We don’t talk, but I think Willie, Jake and Jasper, might be the ring leaders. Jason and James might be on my side, but I think they’re afraid to speak up. And, by the way, Jason is one hell of a pianist.”

“How good are Willie and Jake?”

“Willie’s a good horn man. Jake’s okay, just your average sideman.”

The music stopped. Dora called out, “Swanee, put on a few more ballads. I’m trying to find out if Zak really has two left feet.”

Some of the girls laughed, as did a few of the musicians. The record started and the clear tones of Benny Goodman's clarinet floated into the room as his band played MOONGLOW.

The dance floor had filled when Dora spotted Jason over in the corner talking to one of the girls. "Come on, let's get started," she said as she led me over to them.

"Georgia, you haven't met Zak, and Jason, you two need no introduction, right?"

Jason stuck out his hand. "Right. Good to see you."

I shook his hand, looking him square in the eyes. He didn't blink. "Right, no intro is necessary. Georgia, I'm pleased to meet you."

Dora took Jason's hands in hers and turned them every which way.

Jason looked quizzically at her. "Dora, what are you doing?"

"Well, Zak told me you have great hands. He also said you're one hell of a pianist, but your hands don't look so great to me."

They all laughed. "Did he say that?"

Dora nodded.

"Jason," I interrupted, "if I knew how good you were, I'd have featured you on most of my arrangements. But you can bet the rent money, you'll have more to do on my new stuff. That is, if I'm still here."

"I have to tell you, I really love your charts. You're turning this band into something special. I'm glad you're here, and I truly hope you'll stay." Jason replied.

Dora took my arm. "See you later. Come on Zak," she whispered, "we've got more work to do and I'm just lovin' it."

I smiled and squeezed her hand.

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Dora never left my side as she worked the room. I was amazed at how she handled the small talk, making sure to find a way so that each musician talked directly to me. It made me think she should go into politics. I was feeling more and more comfortable, realizing that most of the guys were on my side. Damn, why they didn't show that during rehearsals? Were they afraid? It must have been miserable for them as well. I wondered why.

Emily clapped her hands. "All right people, supper is served in the next room. There are tables set for four and one table for six. Find your place cards. When you're settled, Elmo will bring your drinks." She laughed. "I'm sure he knows what you all are having by this time."

We followed everyone into the dining area where tables were placed in a circle. Dora led me to a table opposite the one her parents and Swannee were at. "We sit here."

I watched as people walked around searching for their places. To my surprise, I saw Willie and his girl, Sarah, head in our direction. He didn't look happy. *This has to be Dora's idea*, I thought.

"Zak, have you met Sarah?"

"Not until this minute. Hi Sarah, I guess we're supping together."

Elmo brought drinks to the table and left. Dora picked up her glass and said, "Here's to happy times and a wonderful tour for the band."

After we drank to Dora's toast, I said, "Willie, this is the first time I've seen you without your beret. Man, you've got hair on your head."

Willie snarled, "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Not a thing, except this is the first time I've seen you without your beret."

"What colors are your berets, Willie?" asked Dora.

"I've got them in all colors. Some guys like pork pies, some caps. I like berets."

"I like them too, but you don't see too many men wearing them."

"Maybe that's why I like them, who knows?"

“By the way, I understand that you’re a history buff,” Dora said.

He looked disturbed. Still defensive, he growled, “Is that a problem?”

“Heck no, it’s just that I find it interesting that you and Zak have something in common besides music.”

Willie appeared startled. “You’ve got to be kidding. What could we possibly have in common?”

“I was talking to Sarah the other day and she said that your passion is American history. Right?”

“Yes, but... “

Dora plunged ahead. “Swanee told me the same thing about you, Zak.”

“Yes, but... “

She waved me off. “Willie, tell me, is there a particular time in American history you’re interested in?”

“Yeah, there sure is.”

“And, what would that be?”

“There are two periods that I really dig. First would be the years just before, during and after the Second Seminole War. The second, of course, is the time of the Civil War.”

I laughed.

Scowling, Willie asked, “What’s so damn funny?”

“You’re not going to believe it, but we sure do have something in common. I’ve been reading about those two eras in American history for years. I’ll bet I’ve read almost everything written about those times.”

“Oh,” Willie sipped his drink. “Have you read THE DADE MASSACRE?”

I grinned. “You’re really digging, aren’t you? But yes, I did. I even think I remember the author’s name. Just give me a moment.” I drummed on the table with my fingers. “I got it. Cumberly, wait, no, not Cumberly, it’s Cubberly. Yes, Frederick Cubberly.”

Willie looked startled. "Hey man, cool. Okay, what do you think?"

"Osceola was brilliant. Now, if it were reversed, it would have been considered a wonderfully contrived plan that was executed to perfection."

"Damn straight, you nailed it, man."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Sarah.

Willie scratched his head. "At the beginning of the Second Seminole War, Major Dade and his entire command were wiped out. That is, except for one soldier who survived and reported the battle. History calls the battle a massacre, but as Zak said, Osceola, the Seminole war chief, devised a brilliant plan. When the battle was over, not one Indian was killed. To top it all off, there's a county in Florida that's named after both Osceola and Dade."

"Enough, you guys can talk all you want about history later. Sarah and I are here in the present, so pay some attention to us. And here comes our food."

The meal was served family style. Barbecued ribs and chicken were cut and laid on platters for the taking. Another large serving bowl had black eyed peas and a third, collard greens. On the side, there were plates of fresh cut tomatoes, sliced onions and corn bread.

In between mouthfuls, Willie looked up. "Okay, why did the Union win the war?"

I leaned back from the table, delighted to pick up where we left off. "Hell, they almost didn't. They won because they had more. More men! More weapons! More supplies! More money! If the South had half of what the Union had, they would have won the war easily. The reason is they had Robert E. Lee. Hands down, he was the finest general in that war. We wouldn't have the United States as it is today. The Confederate states would have formed a separate country."

Willie picked up his glass and reached toward me. I picked up mine. Dora and Sarah, seeing us, joined in and we all clinked glasses. "On the nose again, Zak."

Tom Harris had been walking around chatting with everyone. Reaching our table he said, "Zak, I hear that besides writing some real fine arrangements, you play a mean clarinet."

“Tom,” Willie exclaimed, “he’s the swingin’est white cat in town.”

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It was four in the afternoon, the day after the big party at Tom’s home. Swannee knocked and walked in.

Hi, Zak, have you recovered from last night yet?

“Well, I’m still a little groggy, but I’m fine. What’s up?”

“As you know, Ginger and I stayed. I had to speak to Tom. We waited until all the guys had taken off.”

“Yeah, I figured Tom wanted to know how the band was coming along, since he’s plowed a bundle of money into this deal.”

Swannee nodded. “But that was only part of the meeting.”

“All right, I’m listening.”

“Tom’s very concerned. He’d heard about the problems you’re having with the guys in the band.

“No shit.”

“And now he could see that most of the guys weren’t even talking to you.”

“That’s when Dora jumped in and said, ‘Actually, I think things are much better now. I found out that Willie and Zak had the same interest in American history. That opened the door.’”

“Okay, that’s great. But what about the rest of the guys?” Tom asked.

“Dad,” she said. “It was amazing. Zak and I worked the room and found that most of the guys loved how he’s turned the band into something special, but they were afraid to go against Jake and Jasper.”



“When Tom heard this, he asked, ‘Goddammit, why didn’t you get rid of those sons of bitches that were giving you trouble?’

“I explained that the band had really been coming along and I had felt that doing that might screw up the chemistry. I added, ‘Because of what Dora has done, I think we have enough guys on Zak’s side to keep him comfortable.’

Swanee continued, “Then Dora said, ‘It’s really a shame. Your friend seems to be a very nice, warm human being. I wouldn’t mind getting to know him a little better.’”

“I told her, “Easy Dora, you’d have to stand in line. The ladies really go for the guy. I saw it in the army and now here. They all want to mother him, but I’ve also seen his other side. Don’t rile him. He grew up in a rough section of Brooklyn. He can be one tough son of a bitch.’

“No shit, did you really tell them that?” I asked.

“Yep. Then Dora asked, ‘Those women that want to mother him, are they black or white?’”

“It doesn’t matter. You’d think the guy was colorblind.”

After our conversation, I quietly reflected on all that had taken place. *Damn, if we could solve the problem with Jake and Jasper, this would be one hell of a swinging group. Maybe it’ll work out, and then we’ll only have to worry about the KKK.*

## CHAPTER 9

At ten in the morning, it was a typical hot, sultry, New York day. Traffic was light as it passed the band bus parked on Forty-Eighth Street and First Avenue. Judy and I stood off to the side holding hands.

“What did Bobby Sherwood say when you told him you wouldn’t be going with him on his next road trip?” Judy asked.

“He wasn’t happy. Then he said I was crazy, but when I explained the situation, he calmed down. He also said if it didn’t work out, or as soon as the trip was over, to get in touch with David at the agency. He wants me back. As a matter of fact, he wants me to continue writing more arrangements for the band.”

“Oh Zak, that’s wonderful. Listen, have you ever thought of staying put? Maybe just writing and doing club dates around the city?”

“No. Not really. I haven’t developed enough of a reputation. It would mean scuffling, and I’m not sure I want to be in that kind of a situation. You know I grew up poor. And now, for the first time in my life, I’m making good money, more than I ever dreamed possible. I’m not ready to give that up.”

*Poor? Ha, poor is not strong enough a word. I remember when we had to move every six months. We’d get three months free rent, pay a couple of months, then move again. Now that’s really poor.*

We stood, holding on to each other, when we heard Swannee call out, “Okay, everybody, all aboard that’s going aboard. We’ve got our first gig in Trenton tonight. So, Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho, it’s off to work we go.”

I kissed Judy. “Everything will be fine. I’ll write soon. You take care.”

The bus took off. I watched Judy mouth the words, “Please come home safe. I love you.” I was surprised. We had never said anything about love. It was more like, I care for you or

you're fun to be with. I wondered if she really meant it, or was it just the emotion of the moment.

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Jolted out of my reverie, I heard the counterman at the Greasy Spoon Diner shout, "Hey Mister, hey MISTER, here's your food."

I looked up to see three large paper bags sitting on the counter in front of me. I shook my head to clear it. It was hard to believe I was still sitting on a stool in this dump. I paid the bill and headed back to the bus, where I was greeted with whistles and cheers.

## RONDO

## CHAPTER 10

It was past Swannee's no-booze-until-after-midnight rule, almost one in the A.M. I sat at the corner of the bar with a pretty, curly-headed gal wearing an off-the-shoulder red dress. She had latched onto me on our first break and cornered me on every break since, even to the point of waiting outside the men's room. She would have followed me in and held my pecker if I had asked her to. It was a relief to hear Swannee sing out, "Okay everybody, time's up. Leave the ladies alone, and like the song says, Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho, it's back to work we go."

As we walked onto the bandstand, I turned to Swannee and said, "I can't believe this Cindy Lou chick. She keeps telling me all the things she'd like to do to my poor white body. I explained that we were leaving for Baltimore right after we finished up here. So get this, she said, 'ten minutes in the back seat of her car and I won't want to go anywhere.' I told her I had to be on the bus, so then she wanted to know where the band will be staying. She's planning to meet me there."

Swannee laughed. "Man, that's what I like about the road – hot, humid and hungry broads. But it's time to play music. Have you noticed? The crowds are getting bigger and bigger. Some of these cats have been following us from town to town."

"Yes sir, boss man, I surely have noticed," I picked up my sax. "It looks like big money in the bank."

The band assembled. Swannee counted off the tempo to an easy swinging bounce tune I had written. I had jokingly called it KATCH ME IF YOU KAN. It had the joint jumping. The dance floor was jammed, and the guys and gals not dancing were standing in front of the bandstand, clapping hands to our beat. The excitement filtered through to us, sparking an amazing solo by Swannee, who worked his instrument from the highest to the lowest notes. Caught up in the crowd's energy, he played chorus after chorus. When the piece ended, the

roar of approval was ear splitting. We turned to give him the thumbs up sign. The band then went into that wonderful ballad, TENDERLY and slowly it became quiet.

I thought back to when I was playing a charity concert at my old high school in Brooklyn, Thomas Jefferson. That was when I learned that Jack Lawrence, who was also an alumnus, wrote the words to Walter Gross's lovely melody, TENDERLY. I often wondered what other lyrics he had written. I never saw his name on any other sheet music.

The dance floor had been packed. I remember scanning the crowd and thinking it was really no different from the white dance halls I'd worked. People were dressed in their finest, although some of the men had removed their jackets. And like those gigs, a bunch of guys and gals stood in front of the bandstand, not dancing, just digging the music and the musicians.

I started to take a clarinet solo on an old standard, JUST YOU, JUST ME. Uh oh, I thought, as I saw the manager of the ballroom and a white man in a sheriff's uniform head in our direction. The sheriff was big, maybe two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. Despite a belly that hung over his gun belt, he walked with authority, as if accustomed to pushing his way through people. Yes! Not a man to tangle with, that's for sure.

*Damn, only one more hour to go before leaving this town. Everything's been cool so far. Now what?*

The set ended. We started to leave the bandstand when the manager beckoned to Swanee. Spotting me, he waved me over as well.

The big man spoke first. "Ah am Sheriff Driscoll, and ah need to tell you we don't allow no mixed bands to be playing here. Do you hear?"

Swanee looked at Driscoll, smiled and went into his act. "Sheriff, suh, we ain't no mixed band. We is all colored folk, suh."

"Shit you say, what the fuck do you call this man here, standin' next to you?"

Swanee smiled again, putting his arm around my shoulder. “Sheriff, suh, this man, why he’s ma brotha.”

The sheriff looked at Swanee and then at me, and bellowed, “You two follow me.”

We stepped in line, me behind Swanee. The manager of the ballroom and one of his bouncers brought up the rear. I began to panic, my stomach tightened and I started to sweat.

*We’re in trouble, big trouble. Between the sheriff and the bouncer we’re going to get the shit kicked out of us. Oh man, what did I get Swanee into? Or better still, what the fuck did he get me into?*

The sheriff walked over to the patrol car, reached in and pulled out a Billy Club. He had maneuvered us in front of the car with its lights shining in our eyes. He turned and stood, tapping the club into his open palm.

*Damn, here it comes, Billy Club and all. Now what do I do?*

“Nelson,” he said to the club manager, “you know you can’t bring in no mixed bands.”

“Honest, Sheriff, I hire a band. I don’t know who’s in it. You can understand that, can’t you?” Nelson pleaded and wiped his brow.

The sheriff pointed his Billy Club at Swanee and growled, “You Goddamn nigger! You better not be fuckin’ with me, ‘cause if you is, I’ll haul your black ass in jail quick as a flash.”

Swanee raised his hands in front of him, as if he were pushing off.

“No suh, it’s true. He’s ma brotha. I wouldn’t fool with you, no suh. I surely wouldn’t. Ah swear, he’s ma brotha, suh.”

The sheriff turned to me, pointed the club in my face and growled again. “Is that true?” I swallowed hard, but all I could do was nod my head.

“I’m warning you. If’n I find out you’re fuckin’ with me, I’ll be back. You jus’ better get the hell out of my town tonight, you hear?”

Swanee smiled, half bowed and said, “Yas suh, out of town tonight, thank you, suh.”

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Jimmy and George, the two drivers, loaded the stands, music and instruments into the bus cargo area. We had checked out of the rooming house that afternoon. They had stored our luggage at that time. Local chicks hung around, giving out their addresses to the guys boarding the bus. That included the gal who was hot for my body.

We headed west, moving on toward Baltimore. A bottle of scotch was passed around, as everyone tried to relax.

“Man, that fuckin’ sheriff sure put a damper on what was a great week in Delaware,” Jason, our pianist, said. “Zak, that motherfucker sure scared the bejesus out of you. I’ll bet you turned five shades whiter.” Everyone laughed.

I looked at Jason and thought, *the more I’m with him, the more he looks to me like Ossie Davis*. “Jason, you got that damn straight. I was sure I was going to get the shit kicked out of me. Now, give me that bottle.”

James, the baritone sax man, who was only a little taller than his large sax, stood and imitated Swanee. “Yas suh, boss, we is all colored folk. Why Zak, that sucker, he’s ma brotha. God damn Swanee, you’ve got the biggest pair of balls I ever did see.”

Another bottle made the rounds, and everyone started to unwind. The sweet smell of pot filtered through the bus as Timmy, our bass man and only pot head, lit up.

Swanee and Jason moved closer to where I was sitting. “Are you all right?” Swanee asked.

“As good as can be expected. But I gotta tell you, man, you should go on the stage. I can’t believe the shit you handed that sheriff. You’re really too much.”

Swanee was uncharacteristically solemn. “The real question is – do you want to keep going?”



For a change, I was upbeat. “You’ve got to be kidding. I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I can’t wait to see your next act. Hey, I’ve got it. Let’s call ourselves SWANNEE AND HIS JOLLY MINSTRELS, ya suh boss, ya suh.”

“No jokes, Zak, we’ve done almost a month. I’ve paid off some of the locals so everything’s been cool, but the sheriffs in the deep south are sure to be tougher.”

“Hey, I signed up for the duration, didn’t I? That is, unless you want me to leave. If not, shut up and pass the bottle.”

It became quiet as everyone tried to sleep, but I couldn’t. *Swannee’s right, it’s going to get rough. I’m afraid, but I haven’t got the guts to quit. That’s kind of funny. How do Swannee and the rest of the guys feel? On the surface they seem to take it all in stride, but I wonder...*

Sleep eluded me as the bus traveled toward Baltimore. Finally its motion rocked me to sleep.

## CHAPTER 11

“Zak, honey, wake up, it’s almost eight.”

I rolled over and looked at Cindy Lou, who climbed on top of me. “The bus doesn’t leave until eleven this morning. I need some more sleep.”

“But honey baby, that only gives us three hours, and I’ll never see you again. I just love doing your white body. We’ve been together this whole week here in Baltimore and I still get juicy thinking about what we can try next.”

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I dragged my ass onto the bus and fell into my seat.

“Hey Zak, are you gonna make it?” Willie laughed, which also brought shrieks of laughter from the rest of the guys.

“I don’t know. That little nympho left me with just skin and bones. God, what an appetite. She just blew me away. I’m wiped.”

“Blew you away? That’s funny. What the fuck else did she do to you?”

“Indescribable. Simply indescribable! Now, all you guys pick on someone else. I need some sleep or I’m gonna die a very satisfied man! The autopsy should be very interesting.”

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I woke to the smell of coffee. The bus was parked near a diner. Swanee stood looking down at me, then handed me a container.

I reached for it with shaky hands and drank. “Who was the delivery boy this time?”

“Me. I didn’t want to wake up our little white sleeping beauty. That little gal really drained you, didn’t she?”

“No comment. And thanks for the coffee, I really need it. Obviously, I slept through lunch. Is there any food that goes with the coffee?”

“Yeah,” said Swanee, who called out, “Hey Willie, he’s alive! Bring him that plate of hamburgers and fries.”

The food, a trip to the head to clean up, and I was beginning to feel human. Swanee again joined me. “We’ve done five weeks and other than that one sheriff incident in Delaware, the trip has been great. I gotta tell you. Those last two arrangements you did, featuring Jason at the piano, are winners.

“You’re right about Jason. That man’s one hell of a pianist. You watch. He’ll be stepping out on his own one day, and I’ll bet that day will be real soon.”

“I hear you man. He sure is something else. By the way, how’re you and Willie getting on?”

It felt like a loaded question. *Shit, I may as well be honest.* “We’re fine. I can’t say the same for Jake and Jasper. I think they’d like to stomp on me or maybe even worse. I don’t know what’s in their craw, but it sure is sticking them.”

“I’ve been thinking about getting rid of those two.”

“No, don’t do that. Look Swanee, in spite of their feelings toward me, the band is working well. Musically, the chemistry is good. Let’s not do anything, at least not yet.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you about them later. In the meantime, I’ve got some paperwork to do.”

I reflected on Swanee’s suggestion. *Maybe he’s right. The two J’s are tough. I’m getting along fine with everyone else, but they could sway some of the guys to join in against me. Fuck! Have I make a mistake keeping them on?*

## CHAPTER 12

The bus headed south toward Washington. I stared out the window, a melody floating through my head.

“Zak, mind if I join you?” asked Swannee.

“Be my guest, boss man.”

“I’m still thinking about Jake and Jasper.”

“Okay, what about them?”

“Look Zak, their hostility is racial. To them, you’re Whitey, one of the bad guys. If I tell them about us, maybe they’ll understand.”

I shook my head. “No way, man. That’s private stuff, just between you and me, so forget about it. By the way, how long will we be working the Washington area?”

“Three weeks, and the agency is expecting big crowds. Reports on the band have been great and word is getting around. Big crowds mean big money, and Zak, with your percentage deal, you’re going to end up with a bundle from this trip.”

“Hey, isn’t that why I took this job.”

Swannee laughed. “You’re too much, you mother.”

“You know, we have time now. Tell me what happened after you left the Army. We’ve been so busy with this other shit, so give.”

I became conscious of the noise from the motor as we raced down the road.

He pursed his lips. “After my discharge, I went back home to Philly. I did some gigs around town, but for some reason, it just wasn’t the same. I felt like I was treading water. You know, not all that sure that I wanted to stay in the business, so I enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, but I took only two courses.”

“Really, what were they?”

“English and biology.”

“You’re kidding. Why the fuck did you do that?”

Swanee leaned back, looking up at the roof of the bus. “English, because I wanted to. No, it was more than that. I’ve always thought I might teach one day. Biology, because I wanted to see if I could handle something I wasn’t interested in.”

“Teach? You? I can’t believe it. How did you do?”

“Believe it or not, I got an “A” in both courses. At the end of that first term, I moved to the Big Apple and transferred to New York University. I joined Local 802 so that I could work some gigs. Hell, there was no way I could live on the money the government handed out to us veterans, especially not in New York.”

He stared out the window and watched the countryside slide by. The noise from a poker game broke the silence. “Man, can you believe it, we’re coming into Washington. We’ll continue the story of Swanee Johnson some other time.”

“Hey George,” he called out to one of the drivers, “we don’t have a lot of time, but let’s see what we can see of our capital.”

Willie jumped out of his seat. “Great, I’ve never been here before. Hey Zak, have you?”

“Yes, I’ve been here twice, first when I played with Joe Venuti and then again with the Glen Denny band. I had a chance to look around. It was fascinating. There’s a hell of a lot of our country’s history right here in Washington.”

Swanee asked, “Has anybody else been here?” He checked, but no one answered.

“All right, Zak, we don’t have much time, so pick one spot for today.”

“I would say the Lincoln Memorial would be the best place to start. They also have a place to park the bus while we look around.”

“Okay, George, find us the Lincoln Memorial.”

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The bus pulled into a parking place and everyone piled out. Willie joined me. “I’m stickin’ with you, man.”

Walking up the steps, President Lincoln loomed high above us. Willie grabbed my arm and stopped. “My God, he almost looks alive. Oh yeah, Zak, this is the place.” Moving on, he went to the wall and read. The Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863.

“Man, I’ve got goose bumps.” He cleared his throat and with emotion, he read in a stage whisper:

FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO, OUR FATHERS BROUGHT FORTH ON THIS CONTINENT, A NEW NATION, CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY, AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

As he read, one by one, the rest of the band gathered.

I hung off to the side and watched as Jason took off his hat, almost standing at attention. Tears ran down Swannee’s face. It was a very solemn moment for most. Jasper, our drummer, turned and ignored it all.

Softly Willie continued:

THAT WE HERE HIGHLY RESOLVE THAT THESE DEAD SHALL NOT HAVE DIED IN VAIN. THAT THIS NATION, UNDER GOD, SHALL HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM – AND THAT GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE, SHALL NOT PERISH FROM THE EARTH.

“My God, that’s beautiful,” Willie exclaimed.

Jake stood behind Willie. “Man, what a crock of shit.”

“Damn it Jake, what the fuck are you saying?” asked Willie.

“That Lincoln, man, he didn’t give a shit about us colored folks. It’s right over here, read it.”

Willie read a letter to Horace Greely that was inscribed on the wall – August 22, 1862.

MY PARAMOUNT OBJECTIVE IN THIS STRUGGLE IS TO SAVE THE UNION,  
AND IT IS NOT TO SAVE OR DESTROY SLAVERY.

IF I COULD SAVE THE UNION WITHOUT FREEING ANY SLAVE, I WOULD DO  
IT; AND IF I COULD SAVE IT BY FREEING ALL THE SLAVES, I WOULD DO IT;  
AND IF I COULD SAVE IT BY FREEING SOME AND LEAVING OTHERS ALONE, I  
WOULD ALSO DO THAT.

“Now, what do you think of your great Lincoln?” Jake’s question was more of an accusation.

Willie looked at him, “I can’t put myself into Lincoln’s head, but there’s no question in my mind that Lincoln would do anything to preserve the Union. Look Jake, over there, read that inscription – Lincoln on equality.”

We all walked over, and Jake read out loud: Speech – Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1856.

LET US DISCARD ALL THIS QUIBBLING ABOUT THIS MAN OR THE OTHER  
MAN, THIS RACE AND THAT RACE, AND THE OTHER RACE BEING INFERIOR  
AND THEREFORE THEY MUST BE PLACED IN AN INFERIOR POSITION –

LET US DISCARD ALL THESE THINGS AND UNITE AS ONE PEOPLE THOUGH-  
OUT THIS LAND UNTIL WE SHALL ONCE MORE STAND UP DECLARING THAT  
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

Breaking the silence that followed, Swanee said softly, “Okay guys, it’s time to go.  
We’ll be here for three weeks. We’ll have time to see everything.”

As we moved off, I watched the expression on people’s faces. It was like they were thinking, what are these colored guys doing here?

As we headed toward our bus, the crowd moved away leaving us a wide path. *God, even here at the Lincoln Memorial, it’s the same old shit.* Bigotry is everywhere, but I never expected to find it here at the bastion of freedom for the slaves. I thought back to my black high school football coach, Doc Washington. The man had a Doctorate in Economics, but ended

up teaching Phys. Ed. It just didn't make sense. How could we let all that talent go to waste just because of someone's skin color?



## CHAPTER 13

We finished our last gig in the Washington, D.C., area at 2 A.M. For the second time on this trip, we slept on the bus. Jimmy, our driver, pulled into Richmond, Virginia, at about ten that morning. Our boarding house sat in the middle of a rundown section of town. There were junkyard cars sitting off to the side of the road, rusting away. Kids were running around barefoot, playing some kind of kick ball game.

There were no happy campers in this group of tired, stiff and cranky musicians. Swannee rushed into the boarding house and registered the band. The day was hot and steamy, which didn't help our dispositions. Everyone followed Swannee, grabbed a key and headed for some lying-down sack time.

At about three that afternoon I took a towel and headed for the shower down the hall. I found Swannee. He had just finished dressing. "Zak, I was just heading for your room."

"What's up?"

"There's a young white trombonist who lives here, and he's supposed to be something else. Anyway, I'm setting up a session to hear him. I've asked Jason, Timmy, Jasper and Willy to join me. We're through early tonight, some kind of town ordinance. It seems the place shuts down at midnight. So after the hall empties out, we're going to find out if this kid is anything."

"You've got the rhythm section – Jason, Timmy and Jasper. What do you need Willy and me for? I'm still exhausted."

"I want you along with the rest of the guys, to jam with the kid. I'm just going to listen."

"But, Swannee, we don't need a trombone man."

"Shit, you must be tired. Look, if this kid really has talent, shouldn't we try to help him?"

I walked into the shower and growled, "I guess you're right."

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At twelve-fifteen that night, the hall had finally emptied out. The rest of the band had already gone, but still no young trombonist. Swannee and I exchanged looks. “Hey, what’s up? Where’s our little swinger?”

“Beats me, Zak. Let’s wait another fifteen minutes. If he doesn’t show, we’ll pack up and split.”

“Hey, Jason, while we wait let’s swing a little, huh? And the way I feel, let’s do a little blues, in the key of F, but nice and easy. I don’t have the strength for any up-tempo shit.”

“Can do, will do, Zak. Nice and easy sounds good to me.”

Fifteen minutes passed. We were starting to pack our instruments when a little red-headed kid with deep blue eyes walked in with a trombone case under his arm. The case was almost as big as he was. Alongside him stood an older gent, not much taller than the kid. He also had curly red hair and eyes the same color.

“Mr. Johnson,” he huffed and puffed as he barged in, “I’m Thadius Brown and this is my son, Gregory. I’m sorry we’re late, but I had a tire that blew out, and it took some time to get it changed.”

Swannee reached to shake his hand. “Well, you’re here, we’re here, so let’s get started.”

The kid took out his horn. Instead of a slide trombone, his horn had three valves like a trumpet’s. I figured his arms were too short to make full use of a slide. He started to warm up and wow, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Everybody stopped talking to listen. His tone was pure velvet, like Tommy Dorsey’s.

After a bit, he said in a high-pitched voice, “I’m ready, Mr. Johnson.”

“Okay, what would you like to play?” Swannee asked.

“How about, *LADY BE GOOD*, in the key of B flat.”

“You’re on. I’ve asked Willy on trumpet and Zak on clarinet, to join you. Why don’t you set the tempo. Do one chorus in unison, and then you take over.”

We finished the chorus and the kid took off. When I closed my eyes, I would have thought I was listening to Jack Teagarden, wonderfully mean and dirty, real gut bucket style. I looked at Willy and Swannee. From their expressions I knew that they heard what I heard. *My God, this kid's a baby. How can he sound so great?*

I decided to test the kid and motioned to Jason to change the key from B flat up one tone to C. Gregory didn't miss a beat. He went with the flow. After that, we traded four bars each, Willy, me and the kid. When we finished, all I could say was, "Holy shit, what have we here?"

The boy had raised my energy level, but it came right down when I saw this guy with a badge, the sheriff, who at that moment looked to be nine feet tall, heading in our direction. He was followed by his deputy and the manager of the hall.

*Oh God, here we go again.*

I began to get that nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. The sheriff was really not nine feet tall, but he did have the broadest shoulders I'd ever seen. He put his hands on his hips. "People, you is all under arrest."

In shock, Gregory was trying not to cry. His father, who stood off to the side, was moving nervously back and forth.

Swannee went into his dumb colored shuffle that he had used before with other southern sheriffs. "Sheriff, suh, what for is you arresting us?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"I is Swannee Johnson, the leader of this here band what just finished playing here, suh."

"Listen, Nigger, there's a town ordinance that says no playing music after twelve, so get your things together. I'm taking you all downtown. And as for you three white guys, I don't know what the fuck you is doing here, but get lost or else I'll stick you in the jug as well."

I turned as Swannee mouthed, call Tom Harris. I nodded, took a deep breath, packed my clarinet and left, followed by the kid and his father.

I reached Tom in New York, who said he'd have a lawyer friend take care of the problem. "Not to worry, they'll be out by morning. It should just cost a couple a hundred."

I sat back in my room, with a bottle of scotch in my hand, hoping the booze would cure my nerves, and remembering the last time Swannee was in jail --- at the Army Air Corps base in Pratt, Kansas, 1944.

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"Hey, Zak," Clarence called out, "Mr. Holtz wants to see you in his office. There's an MP there. What the fuck did you do now?"

"Beats the shit out of me! I've been a good boy, not like you, Claire, you crazy red-neck. Damn, you were so drunk last night that you threw up all over the day room. I walked in there about an hour ago, and the place still stinks." I put my arm around his shoulder. "Listen, Claire, you're not shitting me? Are you sure Holtz wants to see me?"

"Yep."

I walked into Warrant Officer Holtz's office and saluted. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Holtz?"

"Sergeant Davis of the Military Police says the Provost Marshall, Captain Jones, wants to see you, and on the double. What's up, Zak?"

"Beats me, sir. I don't have a clue as to why he'd want to see me."

I climbed into the Jeep and we headed for the Military Police office. Davis ushered me into the Captain's room. I had often seen the Captain and his wife at the Officer's Club where we played most every Friday and Saturday night. He seemed like an all right guy. I decided to be careful, and play it straight. I saluted. "Corporal Zakarin reporting as ordered, Sir."

"Where were you last night, Corporal?"

"Sir, I don't understand."

“Where were you last night? That’s a simple question. I’d like a simple answer.”

“I was out with a friend, sir.”

“Do I have to pull teeth? Does your friend have a name?”

I figured the Captain knew more than he let on. “Yes sir. Swannee Johnson.”

“From Squadron C? That colored boy, he’s your friend?”

I hesitated. “Yes sir, Swannee is my friend. He’s also a fine jazz trumpet player. I jam a lot with him at the Squadron C Rec Hall, sir.”

“Is that where you were last night?”

“No sir.”

“Well, Corporal, God damn it, where the fuck *were* you?”

“Swannee and I were visiting two ladies.”

“I’m getting tired of this shit. Do these two ladies have names?”

I was becoming uncomfortable. “Yes sir, Mary Lou Thompson and Betty Jo Wilson.”

“Are these ladies, as you call them, white or colored, Corporal?”

“They’re colored, sir.”

“And what were you doing with these two so-called colored ladies, Corporal?” He raised his voice, although it was not quite a shout. “And, I’d better get a straight answer! Do you hear me?”

“Yes sir.” I paused again, then blurted out, “We were fucking their brains out, sir.”

The Captain covered his mouth, but I saw the smile he tried to hide. “And Corporal, was Private Johnson with you all the time?”

“No sir.”

The Captain leaned forward. “Oh, where was he and how long was he gone?”

“I was in Mary Ann’s room and Swannee was in Betty Jo’s room. I couldn’t see him, but I sure could hear him, and sir, he had to be in there at least an hour, sir.”

This time the Captain didn't hold back. He laughed and pounded his desk with the flat of his hand and said, "Thank you, Corporal, that'll be all."

"Sir, can I please ask you what this is all about?"

"Check with your friend, Private Johnson. He'll be released from the stockade in five minutes. That will be all, Corporal."

I waited and finally saw Swanee heading in my direction. He grabbed and hugged me tight. "God damn, Zak, thanks! I really owe you."

We headed toward the Squadron C Rec Hall, "What the fuck was that all about? I still don't know what's going on."

"Shit, I thought you knew. What happened was, I was in the rec hall practicing when these two big MP's came in. The one named Davis says, 'Private Johnson, you're under arrest.' At first, I thought he was kidding. One look at his face, I knew he wasn't, so I asked, what for? He said I'd been accused of raping a white lady. Zak, I tell you I've never been so scared in my life. They took me to the stockade and put me in this cell. After about an hour, they brought in some lady who I'd never seen before and she started screaming, 'That's him, that's him!' About an hour after that, Captain Jones came in and talked to me, asked me where I was last night. By that time I was sweating like crazy. Man, was I scared! I told him where we were last night. He left. The next thing I knew, I was released, thanks to you. I was so nervous I must have pissed four times in the past hour – and once, almost in my pants."

He grabbed my arm. "Come on, I'm buying. If the Rec Hall is closed, we'll open the fuckin' place and maybe even close it."

As we walked, I wondered, *did they believe me because I'm white?*

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I shook my head and came back to the present. *This time it should be easier. According to Tom Harris, everything will be straightened out by morning.*

I stretched and looked at my bottle of scotch. It was half empty. *Shit, I'm drinking too much. I'd better cool it.* Suddenly I realized that Gregory and his father had taken took off like two scared rabbits. They left no address, no phone number. I wondered if we'd ever see them again. I stripped, and finally hit the sack.

## CHAPTER 14

*Dear Judy,*

*I really must apologize for not writing sooner, but life on this trip has been quite hectic. We've been traveling for over a month, and I'll have to say, it's been interesting. On our first night in Trenton, the band didn't start out playing up to its ability, but as the evening went on, we improved. By the end of the evening, we were close to being good. We played that same club Saturday and Sunday, and each time the band sounded better and better.*

*On Monday evening, we did a private party at the Trent Hotel. It felt strange looking down at the dance floor at a sea of black. Funny, but there's always an occasional white face in the crowd.*

*Traveling through New Jersey and Pennsylvania was a breeze. We ran into some trouble with a sheriff in Delaware, and one in Richmond, Virginia. Since then things have been cool.*

*Our trip through the rest of Virginia and North Carolina, doing one-niters, has been rough. A lot of sleeping on the bus takes a toll on your body. Our next stop is Columbia, South Carolina. After that it's Charleston. Once we get there, we'll stay put for a few days.*

*The band is finally beginning to click on all cylinders, and although we're not a completely happy family, I'm comfortable with most of the guys and they with me.*

*Swannee has asked me to write two more arrangements and I also have to do two for the Sherwood band, so I'll be pressed for time, but I'll touch base again as soon as I can.*

*I miss you.*



*Zak*

## CHAPTER 15

We walked into the Dance Palace, in Columbia, South Carolina. I surveyed the joint, and thought that we must be moving up in the world. It was one of the classiest spots we'd worked during our trip.

The stands, chairs, and music were set up by our drivers, Jimmy and George. Everybody started to warm up their instruments. What a noisy mess. It always amazed me that each musician had his own way of getting ready. Confusion reigned supreme. As I warmed up my horns, first the clarinet and then the sax, I looked around the room. A bar, off in a corner, was painted white with silver sparkles. Tables, covered in white linen, ran the length of the room along both walls. The chairs, with black leather backs and seats, really stood out. A large chandelier hung over the center of the dance floor with spotlights hitting it from four different angles. The dance floor was polished to a brilliant shine.

With ten minutes to spare before the doors opened, we were ready to play. I headed for the bathroom and bumped into a giant of a man I assumed was one of the bouncers. "Hi, this is quite a place. I've never been to Columbia before. What's the big attraction?"

"University of South Carolina."

"Thanks," I moved on.

The band, dressed in gray cardigans with black pants, shirts and ties, was ready. Finally, the doors opened and the crowd rushed in. We started to play our theme song, C JAM BLUES. Swannee had talked to me about writing an original theme, but somehow we never got to it.

We were half-way through the night – the band was swinging and the crowd was loving every moment of it. We had finished playing that wonderful ballad, LAURA, that was written for the movie of the same name.

I had seen the film at the Air Corps base when I was stationed in Dalhart, Texas. I loved that haunting melody and had written to David Raksin, the composer, asking if I could use it as a theme song for the band I was planning to form after I got out of the Army. I received a reply from his secretary saying that Jerry Wald, the clarinet-playing Artie Shaw look-alike, had already bid for it.

I watched as that same giant bouncer rushed up to Swannee. I heard him whisper, “Hey man, get rid of the white dude. My boss just got a call from one of his spies. The sheriff’s on his way.”

I looked at this big guy. “Where can I go?”

“The bathroom, into one of the stalls. I’ll call you when the coast is clear.”

“Okay, I turned to our baritone sax man. “James, you take my horn and play lead.”

“Good idea,” Swannee called out. “James, use Zak’s stand and put your stand and music behind the trumpet section, out of sight. Zak, get lost.”

“I’m on my way.” I dashed towards the bathroom, wiped the nervous sweat off my face, headed for a stall, and locked myself in. It was a long time before the pounding in my head stopped. I could hear the band. James was a fine baritone sax man, but he sure couldn’t cut it as lead alto. He was butchering my arrangement of TEA FOR TWO. That finally ended, and Swannee called for FLIP/FLOP, the original bounce tune I had written, but that was even worse. It wasn’t working, but they kept trying. I then realized that Swannee had given up and turned the show into a jam session. It was the rhythm section, along with Swannee, Willie and Jake taking solos. Not the way to work a dance, but that was better than James screwing up any more arrangements. The little cubicle was hot, and I slowly started to strip, first the jacket, and then my tie, so I could unbutton my shirt down to my waist. Along with the heat, the smell of urine was becoming overpowering. On top of that, I got a whiff of the sweet pungent smell of pot.

*God, this is awful, I don’t know how long I can handle this. There must be a way out.*

As I sat there, my memory took me back to Brooklyn. I was sixteen ...

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My family lived in a railroad flat. At the far end was my parent's bedroom. Then, in a line, the parlor, followed by a bedroom where I slept with my two brothers. Continuing along the same line, was a dining room, a kitchen, and off to the side, a bathroom.

I had bought my first clarinet. I called it Black Beauty, dark black wood and shining silver fingering. Man, how I loved that horn. Most evenings at ten, my parents were in their room asleep. That's when I got up and reached for my clarinet that was hidden under my bed.

"Morty, where are you going?" my older brother whispered.

"I'm going to the bathroom to practice."

"God, if you wake mom or dad, they'll throw that clarinet of yours – and you – out the window. You know they don't want you involved with music."

"It's okay, Irv. I'll play very softly. Heck, even you won't hear me, but I need to practice. I'm going to try out for the high school band. I've only been playing the clarinet for six months and I have so much to learn."

I locked the door of the bathroom, climbed into the tub and pulled the shower curtains around me. Somehow or other the curtains muffled not only the sound, but also the instrument tone. I almost got the feeling that I was playing an oboe. But I didn't worry about that, since it was technique I was working on.

When I finally looked at my watch, it was midnight. I wiped the clarinet down, put it into its case and I remember thinking: *As soon as I'm old enough, I'm going to find a way to be on my own. Then I'm going to change my name. Damn, I hate being called Morty. I'm going to be known as Zak Morton. Yes, that's it, it's going to be --- ZAK MORTON, his CLARINET and his ORCHESTRA.* I smiled --- *boy doesn't that sound great* --- and snuck back to bed.

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Suddenly, someone was pounding on the stall door. I stood up and started to shake. Then I heard Swannee laughingly sing, "Come out, come out where ever you are. That mean old sheriff is gone."

Slowly, my heart stopped pounding. I opened the door, buttoned my shirt and grabbed my jacket. I was frightened, but ready to go back to work.

## CHAPTER 16

I stared out the window as I watched the sun-drenched land roll by. An open book lay on my lap, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

*I need to write to Judy again. Strange, I think of her so rarely.*

The bus headed towards Montgomery, Alabama and I felt tight as a drum. *Things have gone smoothly since that incident in Columbia. The guys have been great – including Jake. But Jasper, although he's now almost civil, is still a hard case. I don't know what turned Jake around, but who cares? We're playing to big crowds and every night seems to be party time.* I picked up my book, then laid it aside again.

*Damn, my nerves are shot. Every time I see a white face come into these clubs I panic, thinking that it's a 'here we go again' sheriff. Who would believe that the white guys are my enemies?*

I picked up the book again and slammed it back down.

*The band is cooking, and those last two arrangements I did featuring Willie on trumpet and Jake on tenor sax really work.* I felt my arrangements were getting better and better. I wondered if I could make it in New York, simply writing as Judy suggested. I took a deep breath. *Who knows, but for sure I'd better cool the drinking. My nerves are shot. I've gotta relax.*

I was startled when Jake settled his long lean body down onto the seat next to me. He had become friendly, but this was the first time he joined me.

“What's the book about?”

I wasn't exactly sure he really wanted to know, but I answered.

“The Florida wars between the Seminole Indians and the United States. It's called, ‘The Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War,’ by a guy named John Sprague.

“Man, you and Willie really dig that shit, don't you?”

"I guess we do. Don't you have any other interests besides music?"

Jake reached for the book, holding it like he was weighing it. "No, not really. I sometimes think I'd like to write arrangements. You know, like you do, but I could never find the time to study. I've been scuffling all my life."

"We've got time. Tell me about it."

"Man, do you really want to know all that shit?"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't."

Jake pushed his captain's cap to the back of his head. He was a light-skinned handsome dude – tall, about six foot one or two inches, on the slim side, with a Clark Gable mustache. "Well, to start with, I never knew my father. He cut out, left my mother when I was born. I was raised by my mother and grandmother, but it was the same for a lot of kids in my neighborhood. I was born in Harlem and lived there all my life."

"Why do you suppose that is? You know, I mean about your father taking off."

Jake shrugged, "I guess it was the times. Those years were hard for white folks, harder for us coloreds."

*That must be true, but now's my chance to really get to know the guy, I thought.*

"That's tough. Do you know anything about your father? Did your mother ever talk about him?"

"Nope, not one word. When I asked, she'd just walk away, crying. So I stopped asking."

"Good God, I thought I had it rough. When I was a kid, it seemed we moved every six months."

"Really! How come?" Jake asked.

"We always struggled. My father was in business, then out of business. A job here, then no job. We'd move into an apartment, get the first three months rent-free. After that, he'd pay a month, then maybe another month. Then he'd find another apartment and work the

same deal again. It went on like that for a very long time, but how the heck did your family live?"

"My mother and grandmother did day work for some rich folks in the Bronx." Jake paused, took off his cap, wiped his brow and looked out the window. "Man, this is beautiful country! Everything is green. Would you believe, I never saw grass until I was ten years old?"

"You're kidding."

"It's the truth. My mother took me to the Bronx Zoo. Man, I really dug that. There were all these animals, and the park around the zoo had green grass. Shit, Harlem's a concrete jungle. I thought I'd never escape."

"Look." He pointed. "Cows, horses, God, I like this! Everything's so clean and fresh looking. If it wasn't the segregated South, I'd move here."

"Yeah, the countryside is pretty, but getting back to music, I have to tell you, you're playing great. You know, the first time I heard you, I wasn't impressed, but you're swinging better and better."

"Thanks, Zak. I feel that, but you never can be sure. You know what I mean, but it makes me feel good, you know, that someone else thinks I'm swinging."

We were quiet for a moment. Suddenly I smelled the pungent odor of pot. Someone called out, "Hey Timmy, cut that shit out. I'm getting high and I don't need to."

"It's amazing. In some of the other bands I've played with, God, half the guys were pot heads."

Jake nodded, "You're right. This is a pretty straight group of booze and broad chasers."

We both laughed. Wanting to learn more about Jake, I went back to my questions. "When did you start playing the sax?"

"I guess I was about ten. There was this pawn shop a couple of blocks from where we lived. I'd pass it on my way to school. They had this great looking tenor sax hanging in the



window. God, it was so beautiful, all gold and shiny. I think that's one of the reasons I kept going to school. That, plus my momma. She was tough. 'You're not gonna be a bum,' she'd say. 'All the people I works for, they make their kids go to school. That's why they has money, 'cause they is smart from schoolin'.'"

"Hell, most of my friends quit school. Once they did that, it was no time before they were in trouble with the law."

Jake stared at me for a long moment, a worried look on his face. "I've been meaning to tell you, I'm sorry for the way I acted when you first came on board. You've made us all better. I'm glad you're here."

We sat there saying nothing for what seemed an eternity. I felt warm all over.

I breathed deeply. *Now if only Jasper would feel the same it would be great.*

"I couldn't figure out why there was so much anger coming from you, Willie and Jasper. What had I done? What was wrong?"

"I think it started at Jimmy's Joint. Swannee said you'd cut us to pieces and Goddammit, you did." He clapped his hands and laughed. "You surely did. I couldn't believe a white guy could swing like you did. It wasn't fair, you white guys had everything, but us folks, all we had was our music."

*Here we go again, damn it. Jazz and swing are not only for colored musicians. Shit, they don't own it, but I'm not going to start an argument.*

Jake continued, "And man, there you were, swinging better than me or Willie. Hell, even better than Swannee. Then, when the band was in rehearsal, we played like shit and Swannee couldn't fix it, or didn't know how. You came in and turned it all around, great arrangements, and great ideas on how to play them. You gave us direction and discipline. Fuck, you were Mister Perfect with a capital P."

"I'm still busting chops at rehearsal. Why have you all changed?"

“Never mind all that. We all know you could be in big trouble, traveling with us. Everybody says that you and Swanee have the biggest pair of balls in the world.”

“I’ll tell you, Jake, maybe Swanee does. As for me, I still haven’t gotten over any of those problems with the law, including my bathroom stop in Columbia.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. You may be scared, but you’re still here.”

I thought about that for a long time, and felt good about what Jake had said. *Now if only Jasper would come around, this trip would really work. That is, except for the white sheriffs.*

“Let’s get back to you. Tell me, how did you get your horn and who taught you?”

“Shining shoes, a nickel a shine when I could get it, two or three cents when I couldn’t. My first horn cost me eighteen dollars, and I studied with this Italian guy named Giorgio, who owned the local music store. He sold instruments, records, sheet music and gave lessons on any instrument. I paid him fifteen cents a lesson.”

“You did better than I did. I remember working in a fruit and vegetable store six days a week, from seven in the morning to six at night. I did that all summer long and earned six dollars a week. That’s how I bought my first clarinet. It cost me twenty-five dollars and I paid a quarter for a lesson.

“I may not be colored, but I am Jewish. Some people think one is as bad as the other. It was tough growing up poor and for a while I had trouble in the army. I kicked the shit out of a few, and got my ass handed to me a couple of times, but it stopped after they knew I would fight. Were you in the army?”

“No, couldn’t pass the physical. I’ve got a busted ear drum, flat feet and a heart murmur.” He shook his head and smiled. “Otherwise, I’m in great shape. But I hear you had a pretty cushy deal, being in the band.”

“Jake, it was pure luck.”

“Pure luck my ass. Tell me, how did you work out a deal like that?”

“Believe me, PURE LUCK. Listen, this is what happened. Glenn Miller was on the base, working on setting up a special band that would entertain the troops in Europe. He listened to me play and somehow, I passed the audition and was put into the band in Greensboro.”

“No shit?”

“Jake, no shit. And I gotta tell you, that was the best thing that could have happened to me. I knew diddly about music. But these great musicians treated me like I was their kid brother. They worked my ass off. Practice. Practice. Practice. I played with the symphony orchestra, the concert band, the marching band, and one of the big dance bands. I was lucky enough to do some trio and quartet work, too. The whole nine yards, I did it all. I was stationed in Greensboro for eight months. Before they shipped me out, Joe Steinholtz, a violinist who had been a member of the New York Symphony Orchestra, and one of my many Big Brothers, said, ‘Zak, you came in here like a little jewel, but with dirt all over you. We cleaned away the dirt, but you’ve still got a lot of polishing to do before that jewel will really sparkle. So remember, practice and study, practice and study, practice and study.’ He hugged me and I was off to an Air Corp Base band in Texas.

I pressed my forehead against the window. “Hey, look at that, Montgomery, Alabama. We’re here.”

## CHAPTER 17

It was a Monday evening. We had a free night. Willie and I headed for a chicken and ribs joint in the colored section of Montgomery.

“Willie, how come Jake is talking to me now? How come all of a sudden I’m Mister Nice Guy? How come?”

“Why don’t you leave it now that everything is cool.”

“What a crock of shit. That’s what Swannee said when I asked him. And, that’s what Jake said when I asked him. Come on, Goddammit, give.”

“Zak, you’re putting me on the spot.” He took off his beret and wiped his face, “Okay, I guess you’re entitled to an answer after all the garbage you took. That includes what I handed you. So, okay – remember the day you got your tight perm? Swannee called us all together just before we took off for Charleston. ‘I’ve called this meeting,’ he said, ‘because what I have to say is important. As you can see, Zak isn’t here. I asked him to do something for me because I don’t want him to know we had this talk. If he knew, he would disapprove.’”

“Swannee stood looking at us. We were all pretty relaxed. You know, feeling real good about ourselves. Heck, why not, since everywhere we played, it was like we had been invited to a giant party and we were the guests of honor. Then Swannee said, ‘We’re heading into real enemy territory. Our next stop is Charleston, South Carolina, and I expect trouble. So far, I’ve been able to pay off most of the local sheriffs to look the other way. I know I won’t be able to continue to do that. Therefore, I want this band and I mean this whole band, to become a team.’”

“Jake stood up. ‘The problem is the white guy, right?’

“‘Yes, and by the way, his name is Zak,’ Swannee answered angrily.”

“Well then, get rid of him. We don’t need him. Shit, I didn’t want him here in the first place. I know some of you guys have been taken in by him, but he’s no different than all the rest of those white mother fuckers.”

“Hold on Jake,’ Jason pointed. ‘You’re wrong about this cat. He’s good people.’”

“Bullshit, you like him because he wrote those two arrangements that featured you. He bought you, man, that’s what he did. He bought you.”

“Jason stood and headed for Jake, but Swanee jumped in. ‘That’s enough, you two. Now hear me, and hear me good. Number one, Zak stays as long as he wants. Number two, this band would be shit without him. Number three, he’s the real leader of this band. He winds the spring on this clock and we tick. I couldn’t turn you guys into the band that you’ve become, but Zak could. I begged him to be part of this. That’s why he’s here. But I brought you all here to tell you a story, a true story.’”

Willie continued, “I tell you Zak, you could have heard a pin drop. Anyway, Swanee took a deep breath. ‘I met Zak in the army, Pratt, Kansas, the asshole end of the world. He just walked into the C Squadron Rec Hall one day when we were having a session and asked if he could sit in. I’ve spent a lot of time with this man. We’ve even gone out with some of the same chicks... Damn, that’s not the story, but this is... Swanee paused, looked around the room, and then he told us:”

“I was accused of rape by a white woman and they threw me in the stockade. After all, who would they believe? A white woman, or a colored guy? The night I was supposed to have raped this white gal, Zak and I were with two colored broads, fucking ourselves silly. It was Zak’s testimony that got me off. When I was released, Zak was there to meet me. We were heading over to the C Rec Hall to celebrate, when this sergeant came up to us and called Zak a ‘nigger lover’. Zak never said a word. He just hauled off and hit the prick in the nose and broke it. The guy took off, bleeding like a stuck pig and turned him in. Zak went from a corporal to a private, plus he was confined to quarters for two weeks. I might add that there

were some Rebs in the base band that he was attached to. Well, they didn't take too kindly to his actions either. I gotta tell you, he's good people. I love this man like a brother."

"Swanee, are you shitting us?" Jake refused to believe it."

"No way man, it's the truth, the whole truth. I wanted to tell you all this when we were in Washington, but Zak asked me not to. He said it was private stuff."

"Anyway, that's the whole story. I tell you, Swanee was right to tell everyone about you and him. We need to be a team. We may be in for all kinds of trouble these next few months. We've got to be like one. We've got to stick together."

I sat back and thought about what I did for Swanee. *What did I do? Shit, all I did was tell the truth. That was nothing special, but I guess Swanee had to tell everyone about it. Jake is now on my side. But what do I have to do to get Jasper to relax?*

"Man, I wondered why Swanee insisted I get this perm."

Willie laughed. "Shit man, you look good with all those curly locks. Hey, tell me, what happened when you went to that beauty parlor. It was a beauty parlor, right?"

"Matilda."

"Who?"

"Matilda, she was the owner of the shop."

"White or colored?"

"Colored."

"Okay man, I gotta hear this. What happened?"

"When I walked in, there must have been four or five customers and two beauticians besides Matilda. As I opened the door, all the chatter stopped."

"Can ah hep you, sir?"

"Yes, I'd like to get a tight perm."

"You wants a what?"

"A tight perm."

“She turned to her help and her customers, who kept staring at me. ‘This white boy wants a tight perm,’ she cackled.”

“I watched as everyone laughed, clapping their hands and stamping on the floor.”

“‘Excuse me sir, we don’t do tight perms here. We mostly straighten hair.’”

“‘You can do what I ask, can’t you?’”

“Matilda scratched her head. ‘Yas sir, I can, but is you sure you wants me to do dat?’”

“I took out a bottle of scotch from a brown bag, and placed it near the cash register. ‘I want a tight perm and then it’s party time.’”

“Matilda clapped her hands. ‘White boy, I’m gonna do you myself, and I don’t even want to know why. Shit, then we’ll all get drunk.’”

## CHAPTER 18

I walked into the small restaurant in the colored section near the boarding house on the outskirts of Montgomery and spied Swannee having breakfast with Willie.

“Good morning or I guess it’s good afternoon. What got you guys up so early? It’s only noon.”

“We is good, clean livin’ colored folk. We don’t party till four in the morning like you white trash do.” Swannee pulled up a chair for me.

“No shit? What time did you good little colored boys pack it in last night?”

Willie took a mouth full of bacon. “Us good little colored boys left at three.” He slapped me on the back and roared.

After the waitress took my breakfast order, Willie asked, “We’ve got a free day. What are your plans?”

“I’ve got some letter writing to do,” Swannee replied. “And, I also have to call the agency in New York. After that I’m going to kick back and relax. I need to give my body a rest. These southern broads are going to kill us all. What are you going to do?” Swannee asked me.

“I’m going to find a movie house. I want to see that new flick ALL THE KING’S MEN. Do either of you want to join me?”

“Yeah man, I’m for that,” Willie replied. “I read an article in the paper the other day. They say it’s gonna win an Oscar for sure.”

“Hey Swannee, sure you don’t want to join us?”

“No thanks, Zak, you kiddies run along and have fun. I’m beat.”

“By the way, I asked Terry to do some copy work for me. I gave him the chart I did on HONEYSUCKLE ROSE. Wait till you see it. You and Willie are going to have a ball on this one.”



“Sounds good to me,” Swannee replied. “Terry can sure use the extra money. I know he sends almost half his salary back home to momma.”

“Hell, why didn’t you tell me this before? I could have been feeding him stuff all during this trip.”

“Because, my man, he asked me not to say anything to anybody. So keep it cool.”

Willie stretched and fixed his beret. “If we’re headin’ for town, let’s move.”

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Back from the movie house, I started to work on a melody rattling around in my head, when I heard a knock. It was Terry at the door. He looked embarrassed as he entered with a pile of music sheets under his arm and set them down on my bed. “You asked me to do some copy work and I don’t know how.”

Surprised, I said, “No big deal, here, let me show you. Why don’t we start with the second tenor part, yours. When someone writes a score, they write all the parts in the concert key. Now what you have to do is transpose your part from the concert key to your horn, which is a B-flat instrument, right?”

Terry fidgeted. “What’s transpose?”

I was startled. “What?”

Terry looked down at his hands, then up at me. His eyes kept blinking. “Wha – what’s transposing?”

At first I thought he was kidding, but I looked at his face and knew better. Terry was about to panic. I wasn’t sure why.

“Easy man. Here, have a seat. Now tell me, do you know anything about music theory? You know, harmony, chords, that kind of stuff?”

He looked miserable, and shook his head.

“What do you know?”

“When I see a note on the sheet, I can play that note. I can jam a little bit, but that’s not my bag. I have a good ear and I play in tune. That’s all I really know.”

“Man, oh man, I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You play a good solid horn. Who taught you? And why didn’t they teach you some theory?”

“That’s the point. I never did take but three lessons. The rest I taught myself.”

“That’s unbelievable! But okay, let’s take it one step at a time. When you tune up, what note do you play?”

“When you say to Jason, give me an A, Jason hits an A on the piano, but I have to play a B on my horn to play the same note.”

“How did you know to do that?”

“I just heard it. If I played an A on my horn, it wouldn’t work.”

I smiled. “Man, what you did is called transposing. Your B on the tenor sax is equivalent to the A Jason played on the piano. Now, look at the score and find your part. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Since you played a B when you tuned up to concert A, what note would you write if you saw a D for example?”

“E?”

“Right on, man, one whole tone higher. Always one whole tone higher. Now that goes for all the B flat instruments, like the trumpet, flugelhorn, tenor sax and clarinet.”

“I can do that. Now what about the alto sax?”

“That’s a little tricky. The alto is an E-flat instrument, so let’s leave it for now. The piano, bass and drums are copied just as they’re written. Why don’t you just work on those parts and by the time you’ve done with them and you’re comfortable, we’ll get to the alto.”

Terry picked up the music and headed for the door. “Thanks man, I really appreciate the info. See you later. I’ve got some stuff to transpose.” His smile went from ear to ear.

## CHAPTER 19

We had played a gig in a little town called Elmore, just north of Montgomery. Hot, and sweaty, but finally the night's work was done. Swannee and I climbed on the bus to head back to our rooming house. Only Timmy, the bass man and Terry, the second tenor sax man, were on board. The rest of the guys stayed in town to party. At some point during the tour, Timmy had started to carry a Bible. He and Terry hung out together, almost like Mutt and Jeff. Timmy was lean and tall, with a full head of black kinky hair and a touch of gray at the temples, and Terry, short and stout with a shaven head. Swannee had dryly commented that Timmy's Bible-toting hadn't stopped him from smoking pot.

The trip to our rooming house was an hour from the gig. The four of us passed a bottle of scotch around and finally killed it.

Holding the Bible, Timmy asked, "Do you believe in God?"

Startled, I sat quietly feeling the motion of the bus. "I'm not sure, but I know I'm against religion in general."

"Religion is good," he countered. "It gives people direction. You're good people. Why don't you believe?"

"The way I see it, too many people have been killed in the name of religion. Take the Crusades, for example, or the Spanish Inquisition. And how about Hitler killing over six million of my people just because they were Jewish. And we must not forget the troubles in Ireland. As for God – if there is one, and I'm not sure there is, he sure is fucking up. Why did he allow all that to happen? And, would a God have allowed slavery? I don't know the answers and I'm too tired to get into a long discussion about it, but if you like, Timmy, we can do it another time. Okay?"

Timmy lit up a joint and took a deep drag, "Okay, we'll talk later." He and Terry headed back to their usual seats near the middle of the rig.

I couldn't get the subject out of my mind. Even though I was against religion, I was proud of what my people had contributed to the world.

I looked at Swannee. "I can't figure Timmy out. He sure is a strange one."

"That's the truth. But that cat plays a great bass, and he does fine on the vocals."

*The man's the rock that keeps our rhythm section solid, but he sure is odd. A pot smoking, Bible totin' character, but he's soft and easy to live with. I could take a dozen guys like him.*

"Hey, I've been meaning to ask, what's up with this open time?"

Swannee took a drink and passed a new bottle. It was bourbon, a little harsh for my taste, but I drank it anyway. "We've had five cancellations, all around Baton Rouge, Louisiana."

"Why?"

"It's 'NO MIXED BANDS'! The agency is fighting it, but it appears to be a done deal. Hell, the clubs that canceled even forfeited heavy down payment money."

"Look, Swannee, maybe I should quit. I'm causing all kinds of problems. You don't need that."

"No way, man. This band doesn't work without you, and the way the guys feel about you now, I think, if you quit, I'm sure a lot of them would pack it in as well."

I reflected on Swannee's statement. *Could it be true? True or not, I felt a flush of pride until I thought about Jasper. Yes, we mustn't forget Jasper. For sure, he'd be happy to see me leave.*

Swannee continued. "We've been working practically non-stop. A week off would do us all some good. I haven't spoken to anyone yet, but I assume most of the guys will hang out in New Orleans. They'll be paid for the week anyway. I'll know for certain in the next day or so. If it does happen, I plan to fly back to Philly and visit with my folks. What about you?"

"New York. It'll give me a chance to see Judy and check my options for after the tour. She'd like me to stay in town, write and do one-niters in and around the city."

"Do you really want that?"

"I'm not sure. I like being a traveling man, but I wonder if road shows like ours are going to continue."

"Beats me. All I can tell you is, with or without the week in Baton Rouge, this tour has been a huge money maker. We're both going to end up with a bundle."

I took the bottle. "I'll drink to that." The bourbon still went down hard.

*I've got to go easy on the booze. I'm drinking more on this tour than I ever did before. But even with all the shit, I love what I'm doing, playing music every night. Man, it's a dream come true, in spite of all those white sheriffs out there. My nerves are shot and I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. We've been lucky so far, but I keep thinking that it won't last and we might not all make it back to New York in one piece."*

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*October 31, 1949*

Dear Judy,

It's been almost three months and all's well.

The band keeps getting better, the crowds bigger. Best of all, most of the problems with the guys in the band have disappeared. As Swannee keeps saying when he speaks southern, 'WE IS ONE'. Well, that is, except for Jasper, who's still a hard case.

We'll be leaving Montgomery, Alabama, in about an hour. While we were here, Willie and I visited the home of the original capitol of the Confederacy. I'm amazed at Willie's knowledge of the Civil War.

*Two nights ago we played a gig at Tuskegee College. We were given a tour of the school and had dinner in the teachers' dining room. I found it strange that so few of our guys knew about the place. Some hadn't even heard of Booker T. Washington, the founder, or*

George Washington Carver, who headed the Agricultural Department. Willie suggested that Swannee make a special effort to visit as many black colleges as possible.

Our next stop will be Birmingham. In all this time, we've only had a few incidents, but they ended up okay.

I recently spoke to David at Sherwood's agency. He said that Bobby wants me to do two more arrangements.

Oh yes, I've had this melody floating in my head for some time now, and it finally came out. I've written a Christmas song and Swannee has asked me to make an arrangement of it for the band. Timmy will do the vocal.

Yesterday, Willie and I went to the Montgomery Movie Theatre. We saw ALL THE KINGS MEN. After we bought our tickets, guess what happened. I sat in the 'Whites Only' section and Willie was shipped upstairs to the highest balcony for 'Colored Only'. I didn't want to go, but Willie insisted. What a drag!

The movie house itself was magnificent, almost like Radio City Music Hall in New York. The picture was simply wonderful. Brodrick Crawford, the lead, plays a Huey Long type character and he steals the show. I remember seeing him in a bunch of B movies, always a small part and always the heavy. How they picked him for this role I'll never understand. But it sure was the right move. Mercedes McCambridge has to win an Oscar as the best supporting actress. I've never seen her before, but what a job she does. I guess she must be a stage actress. That lady has the most interesting, strange voice. This movie is a must see.

Swannee told me there may be a change in our itinerary. That would mean an open week. There's a problem with mixed bands in the Baton Rouge area. If it's true, I'll catch a flight to New York so we can spend some time together. I'll call and let you know.

*I can't wait to see you!*

*Zak*

## CHAPTER 20

We were in a small town called Homewood, just south of Birmingham. “Okay guys, take ten.” Swanee then rushed off the bandstand and headed straight for two light-skinned beauties.

Almost everyone else went to the bar. Swanee’s law, no liquor until midnight, was in effect, so it was Cokes or water. As we settled in, the parade of ladies, the usual groupies, hustled over. It was the same everywhere.

“Hey, Zak, is this the way it is with white bands?” Jake asked.

I smiled. “That’s what I like about the road. Of course, sometimes it really gets so tough, you have to fight them off.”

“I’m hip, but do you try?”

“Are you kidding?”

As we mingled, a familiar call came from Swanee. “Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho, it’s back to work we go.”

The chicks groaned as we started to head for the bandstand. Some of the ladies rubbed up against us as we passed. Others offered the same promise with their eyes.

I often wondered what turned these gals into groupies? It was the same when I traveled with an all-white band. Young girls with angelic faces, who looked as pure as the driven snow, turned into man-hungry animals. What would their parents think? Were they love starved? Was I a trophy? Would they tell their friends, wow, I slept with one of those cool musicians? I shook my head in total confusion.

I reached the bandstand and Swanee pulled me aside. “Zak, I need to talk to you on the next break, so don’t scoot off.”

Like most of the joints, the room was a long rectangle, almost a barn-like structure, with tables along the sides and back. Red, blue and green colored balloons and streamers hung



from the beams that crossed the building. The hall was dimly lit, with spotlights that focused on the dance floor from the four corners. Two big fans at the back of the stage kept us comfortably cool. The usual silver sequined bar twinkled at the far end of the room. The light oak dance floor, smooth and polished to a bright finish by endless buffing, was the best part. Amazingly, the acoustics were great.

We looked sharp in our black silk cardigan jackets, white on white shirts, thin gray knit ties and gray slacks.

Our black music stands had silver lettering that read: THE SWANNEE JOHNSON SWINGERS. Swannee always chuckled at the double entendre.

We created excitement everywhere we played and this hall was no exception. The energy generated by the dancers enveloped us, and as the evening progressed, we played better and better. It was a high that neither drugs nor booze could produce. Like a ping-pong game, those emotions bounced back and forth between the band and the crowd. At each break they'd whistle, stomp and shout for more. How lucky I felt doing this and getting paid for it, too.

Swannee grabbed my arm as we walked off the stand. "Listen man, I've got these two chicks. I tried to make it a ménage a trois, but it was no go. The younger one has eyes for you. It seems they live together and want us to join them for a late snack. They're more sophisticated than most of the broads we've run across on this trip. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Carol, the younger of the two, was wearing a green silk high-necked oriental dress with a slit down the side. Her soft brown skin glowed. She was stacked. That gal had a figure that would be the envy of any chick. "I was hoping to meet you," she cooed, "but you were surrounded by so many girls, I thought it would be useless."

Leading her toward the bar, I smiled. "Thanks, I'm flattered, but puzzled. You have a different accent. I can't figure it out. You're not from here, are you?"

"I was born here, but I've been living in Chicago for the past three years. I'm in my senior year at the University of Chicago."

"That's great. The University of Chicago is one of the top schools in the country, but what are you doing down here?"

"Visiting family," she paused. "You know, I've seen you before."

"Hey bartender, a beer for the lady and a Coke for me." I handed her the drink and asked, "Now Carol, where could we have met? I'd surely remember you."

She accepted the beer. "I didn't say we met. I said I'd seen you before."

Intrigued by the total package, I asked, "Okay, where?"

"You were playing with the Glen Denny Orchestra at the State Theatre in Chicago. I noticed you because you conducted the band for the other acts on the bill. I often wondered about that. Couldn't Denny do it?"

"My God, I can't believe it. That had to be at least a year ago."

"Eleven months to be exact. Now tell me, why didn't he conduct the show?"

"Glen's a hell of a musician, but he can't read a score."

"He sure looks good up there and the girls really dig him. Okay, next question. Tell me, what are you doing with a colored band?"

I started to explain, but out of the corner of my eye I spotted trouble.

"Oh shit, here comes the sheriff. I don't like the looks of this, and that son of a bitch is going to ask me that very same question."

Swanee walked in my direction, arms waving as he talked to the sheriff who was followed by another officer carrying a Billy Club. Behind them was the manager of the dance hall and one of his bouncers. The sheriff ignored Swanee, who continued to talk, as they made a beeline toward me. Tension gripped my stomach as they came closer. The palms of my hands were wet.

"Look Carol, you'd better get lost. This could become ugly."

“No, I’ll be okay. Turn your back to them and snuggle up to me. Maybe I can help. I’ll watch them. You look at me.”

She peered over my shoulder, and whispered, “They’re coming closer, kiss me on the neck or ear or something. Pretend we’re lovers.”

As we embraced, I could hear Swannee, “Sheriff, suh, you is mistaken. We is an all colored band.”

He called out. “Hey, Zachary, come here. Leave that pretty little gal alone.”

I turned and headed in their direction. Carol entwined her fingers in mine and walked with me. Swannee came to the other side and put his arm around my shoulder, “Sheriff, suh, this here is mah brotha. Zachary and me, we got the same momma.”

The sheriff’s deputy, with a sneer on his face, started hitting his open palm with the club.

“Who the fuck are you shittin’, Nigger?” the sheriff asked.

“It’s the truth, suh. We got the same momma, we surely do.”

The sheriff stuck his nose in Swannee’s face, and snarled, “Same father?”

“No suh, jus’ the same momma.”

The sheriff turned to Carol. “You know this man?”

“Mm, hmm. I surely do. We met in Chicago. Zachary here, he was playing with the Duke Ellington band. You know, that colored band. Sheriff, he is one of us. He surely is.”

I looked at Carol. *My God, how can she be so cool? She’s like Swannee, but how do they ever get used to this shit?* My mouth turned dry, sweat leaked under my arms. I thought I’d pee in my pants.

The sheriff stood with his hands on his hips looking at me, then back to Swannee. An imposing figure, he scared the shit out of me. “What do you think?” he asked his deputy.

The deputy just shrugged, “Beats me, Sheriff, who knows what these people do. Same mother, different father, they’re all fuckin’ crazy.”

“Excuse me, Sheriff, suh. All we has is jess one more hour to play and then we is gone. The people is waitin’. Can we go, Suh?” Swannee asked.

The sheriff stuck his finger in Swannee’s face. “Listen, I think you’re fuckin’ with me, Nigger, and if’n I find out that you are, I’ll be back and I’m gonna haul your black ass off to jail.”

He turned and stomped away, followed by his deputy, the manager and his bouncer.

I rushed to the bar. “Double Scotch, straight.”

I had the shakes so bad, I must have missed more notes in that last hour than I ever did in my life.

Carol and her friend, Mary, waited as we packed our horns. George and Jimmy, the drivers, took our instruments and loaded them along with the music and stands, into the cargo area of the bus.

“George,” Swannee called out, “When you guys are finished, take off. We’ll meet you at the boarding house tomorrow at about ten. That should give me and Zak enough time to pack our clothes and move on.”

Carol led me to a big, black, 1939 Buick. No sooner had we crawled into the back seat, she reached for me. Mary drove off with Swannee up front.

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We lay in each other’s arms. A dim light revealed a glow of perspiration on our naked bodies. “Carol, you were wonderful,” I said, as I stroked her body.

“Well, if the first time was wonderful, let’s try and top that. Then we can eat,” she said as she mounted me.

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Carol and I lay stretched out on the bed. “Lady, you’re too much. You wiped me out. I need to regain my strength. What’s on the menu, and who’s the cook, you or Mary?”

“Momma. Why she makes the best chili you ever did taste, and we’ve got plenty of beer on ice. So we’ll just let her cook.”

“Momma?”

“Uh, huh. Mary’s my momma.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “No shit?”

“No shit.”

I jumped out of bed, bare-ass naked, opened the door to the room where Swannee and Mary were, and shouted, “MOTHER FUCKER,” then closed the door.

## CHAPTER 21

The tranquility enjoyed by the band came to an abrupt end one night in a small burg outside of Birmingham, Alabama. We had just finished playing my new arrangement of HONEYSUCKLE ROSE, featuring a musical trumpet fight between Swannee and Willie. It was one of those special nights when they were both swingin' like crazy. Their playing became a game of 'Can You Top This'. The crowd picked up on it and went wild at the conclusion. The rest of the band nodded its approval as well.

We followed up with that lovely ballad, BLUE MOON, with our bass fiddle man, Timmy, on the vocal. Billy Jo Brown, our third trumpet man, suddenly put his horn down, walked off the stand and rushed to the bar. I turned to look at Swannee who shrugged as we continued. We finished the tune and Swannee said, "Zak, take over while I check this out."

"Timmy," I called out, "let's do STARDUST, right from the verse. Jake, you, Willie and me, we'll back the vocal. Jason, give me a four bar intro and make it lush."

Jason smiled, "Can do, will do."

We continued to perform, but everyone paid more attention to what was going on at the bar than on the bandstand. The problem was, all we could see was a lot of arm waving. We finished STARDUST and jumped into I CAN'T GET STARTED WITH YOU. More arm waving. It tickled me, because I thought only Jews and Italians talked with their hands, or so the story goes. Through it all, we played on. Timmy went back to his bass fiddle as Jake took a couple of choruses of BODY AND SOUL, doing a slight imitation of Coleman Hawkins' rendition. After that, I called a break.

What could have caused Billy Jo to walk off the bandstand? He was the youngest guy in the band, about my height, but thin, with an angel's face. Quiet, he'd never been a problem. A one drink guy – that was, until tonight. But he sure loved the ladies, who in turn loved to mother him.

The whole band started toward the bar, but Swannee waved us off. Not knowing what to do, we stopped in the middle of the dance floor, and the ladies descended on us like flies heading for a sweet, gooey pie. It was the first time we were more interested in what was happening elsewhere.

Finally, Swannee, with Billy Jo in tow, headed back to the bandstand. “Hi Ho, Hi Ho, okay everybody, it’s back to work we go.”

Not a word was said about the incident at that time, but we could see that Billy Jo continued to ignore Swannee’s no drink rule as he kept sopping up booze at each break.

The evening ended and some of the guys stayed to party. Swannee, Willie, Jake, Jason, Billy Jo and I took the bus back to our boarding house. Billy Jo, high as a kite, staggered to a seat in the back, while the rest of us huddled up front.

Willie removed his beret and asked, “Okay, Swannee, what’s up?”

“You’re not going to believe what I tell you, but here goes. It seems that poor little Billy Jo is unhappy. He’s being ignored. He’s complaining that you and I get all the trumpet solos and he feels left out, almost like a little unwanted child.”

Rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands, Willie remarked, “But Swannee, Billy Jo’s no jazz man. He plays a pretty horn, but swing? No way.”

We all sat, staring into space, searching for an answer. Finally Jake suggested, “How about having Zak write an arrangement that features Billy Jo? You know, a pretty ballad, maybe even write out a complete solo. In that way he won’t have to improvise. Willie’s right. Billy Jo does blow a sweet horn.”

“Like Jason might say, can do, will do. But, is that going to make him a happy camper?”

“Beats me, but it’s worth a try. He really is a nice kid, so get on it as soon as possible. I’m going to go back there and talk to him. I’ve got to straighten this out before it goes too far. Swannee headed for the back of the bus.

## CHAPTER 22

The rolling hills of Alabama flashed by. The countryside was in full bloom. Dense greenery with a rainbow of red, yellow and purple wild flowers covered the land. The only blight on the landscape were some run down shacks and rusty, beat-up cars. The bus moved steadily south on Highway 59.

*We do two nights in Tuscaloosa, one night in Meridian and one in Hattiesburg. After that, it's New Orleans for three weeks. Last year I played the Roosevelt Hotel there with Sherwood's Band. I wonder what kind of joints I'll work this time.*

"Is Baton Rouge still out, Swanee?"

"All except one night."

"Damn, not in the middle of the week I hope."

"Fuck no. If it were, I'd cancel. It's at the end of the week."

The clicking dice in the back of the bus broke the silence that followed. "Zak, I've got to talk to you about something. It's very important."

"Oh?" I turned to study Swanee. All of a sudden he seemed fidgety and nervous, and that worried me. Everything had been running smoothly, but I could see something was very wrong. He had never acted like this before. "What's up?"

He started to speak, stopped and started again. Finally he cleared his throat. "I've told some little white lies in my life, but only twice have I told a lie that affected people. The first one got me into the frying pan with Tom Harris. That was when I said I had led a band before this one."

"Goddammit, Swanee, you're making me uncomfortable. Spit it out."

He struggled, but slowly continued. "The second one was the lie I told you, to help me get out of that frying pan. I needed you to make this band work. I sure couldn't do it. That night at Judy's apartment, I said I was in big trouble with my backers. It wasn't true."



I breathed a sigh of relief. “Man you had me worried. Relax, I’ve surmised for a long time that Tom Harris wasn’t like you described.”

He was puzzled. “Then why are you here?”

“Because you and I, we’re buddies. No, we’re more than that. I feel closer to you than anyone in my family, and, I guess, because I *want* to be here. I love what this band has become, both musically and racially. I’ve been scared. Hell, every time I see a white face, I panic. That’s almost funny. I guess if I told that to anyone else they’d think I was crazy. But in spite of that I’m still here. And, I plan to finish this fuckin’ tour no matter what.”

He squeezed my arm, then rubbed away a tear. “Man, you are my brother.”

A lump stuck in my throat. I had never felt like this before. This guy was truly like a brother. I took a deep breath and fought back tears. Like Swannee said, “man we is one.”

More noise from the crap game plus the whining of the racing motor filled the quiet for a long time.

We sat silently. Finally he asked, “Have you ever played any of these towns?”

“No, not very many of them, but I have worked the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, and the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. Those were two great gigs, but that’s about it.”

He sighed. “Man, it would be nice to play in those kinds of rooms.”

“I’m hip, but it’s coming. One day it will happen. I’m sure of it.”

Someone was on a roll, as the noise from the crap game filled the bus.

“You never finished telling me what happened when you got to New York.”

“Hmm, where was I -- oh yes -- coming from Philly I expected it to be an easy transition, but New York’s a very intimidating place. I wasn’t sure I was good enough. And, I wasn’t sure the music business was for me.”

“What? You gotta be kidding. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. That’s not the Swannee Johnson I know.”

“It’s true. Anyway, I played some gigs around the city. During that time, I enrolled at New York University. I majored in English with a minor in Psychology. Actually, I only need two more courses for my degree.”

“Are you going to finish?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure when.” Swannee paused. “By the way, how’re you doing with the arrangement for Billy Jo?”

“It’s coming, it’s coming. Billy Jo asks me that same question at least twice a day, not that he’s anxious. Ha, Ha.”

Swannee also laughed. “What tune are you using?”

“The Duke Ellington tune, MOOD INDIGO.”

“Hey man, great, a perfect choice. He’ll love it.”

We were interrupted by Jason who called out. “Hey, Swannee, when are we gonna stop for lunch?” I’m starved.

Swannee walked down the aisle towards George, our driver. “I’ll find out, but you can afford to miss a few meals.” Swannee teased his big friend. “You’re beginning to spread out all over the place.

Most of us were tired of greasy hamburgers, hot dogs and French fries, but not Jason. He continued to order dogs and fries each time.

After a short conference with the driver, Swannee called out, “Okay, George says there’s a place down the road about ten minutes away. Since you asked, Jason, you take the orders and Zak can get the food. That’s the job we really pay him for. Right?”

Whistles, applause and catcalls followed. I stood and with a sweeping cavalier gesture, bowed and grinned.

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It was almost three in the afternoon. Sitting in my shorts, with a steaming cup of coffee on the table, I wrote:

*Dear Judy,*

*Just a quick note. I'm flying up to New York from New Orleans in a few weeks. I'll call as soon as I know exactly when I'm coming.*

*A funny (?) thing happened this morning. We pulled into Hattiesburg, and arrived at the boarding house where we had reservations. At the entrance was the usual sign 'Colored Only'. We've seen that before, but this time when I started to register, the owner looked at me and said, "Sir, the sign says 'Colored Only' and it means 'Colored Only.'" The guys were hysterical. I thought they'd all bust a gut.*

*Swannee tried to offer the man more money, but it was no good. It went back and forth. Swannee said he'd pull the whole band out. The owner just kept shaking his head. Well, finally, the owner called a cab that took me to a 'Whites Only' Hotel. That's where I am now.*

*Can you beat that? These things do get dumber and dumber – whites only, colored only. I'll never understand it, not ever.*

*By the way, Swannee told me he needs only two more courses to earn his sheepskin. Would you believe, he's got a 4.0 average? Hell, that's almost impossible. That sucker is really something else.*

*Anyway, I'll be seeing you soon. I miss you.*

*Zak*

I stuffed the letter into an envelope, then quietly sat drinking my coffee. *Do I really miss her? When I'm with her it's great, but while I'm on the road I hardly think of her. It's like the lyrics of that song from Finian's Rainbow:*

*Oh my heart is beating wildly  
And it's all because you're here  
When I'm not near the girl I love  
I love the girl I'm near.*

*Shit, that song was written about me. Is it that I just live for the moment?*

For a long time I tried to figure out what makes me tick. Finally I reached for the coffee cup. No good. It was cold. I shook my head. *I give up. Maybe a good psychiatrist could figure me out. Oh well.* I stood, stretched and headed for the shower. *Yes, by God, maybe the owner of that rooming house did me a favor. The shower's in my room, not down the hall.*

## CHAPTER 23

I tumbled out of bed, stretched, and checked my watch.

*Wow, it's twelve-thirty! Swannee said we'd have to leave Hattiesburg by two. I'd better hurry.*

I stepped into the shower and felt my body slowly come alive. The guys always laughed about my taking a shower before bed, and then in the morning I'd shower again. They never understood that I needed the morning shower just to get the juices flowing.

Dressed in a pair of cream-colored slacks, tan loafers and a brown and tan checkered sport shirt, I had breakfast at the local diner and headed for the taxi stand. I looked at my watch again. *One-thirty, no sweat. I'll be at the boarding house in fifteen minutes.*

The cab driver gave me a strange look when I told him where I wanted to go. He shook his head and took off. When he dropped me at the boarding house, he glared and spun rubber as he left.

As I approached, I saw everyone milling around in clusters. "Hey, what's up?"

"Open your eyes and look at the tires," Jake said.

"Holy shit, how the fuck did that happen?"

Jake shook his fist at the sky. "Some son of a bitch cut every one and we only have two spares."

"Now what do we do? And where's Swannee?"

"Our fearless leader has been on the phone for over a half hour trying to get someone to replace them. It better happen soon, or we'll miss our gig tonight." replied Jake.

"Has anyone called the sheriff?" I asked.

Jake nodded. "Three times, and that sucker still hasn't shown up."

"What about the tire people? They're looking at a big money job. Ten big truck tires, that's gotta cost a bundle. Why aren't they here?"

“Damn, you ask a lot of questions and I don’t have a fuckin’ clue. Wait, here comes Swannee.”

Everyone turned in his direction, anxiously.

He clasped his hands together and raised them. “I couldn’t get anyone to come so I called Greyhound. They must have really put the screws to this one tire shop, ‘cause I just got a call from them, saying they’re on their way. Those bastards, that was the first shop I called, and they said they couldn’t help me. All kinds of excuses. You know – we don’t carry that size tire, short-handed – and all the rest of that shit. One call from Greyhound and they’ll be here in five minutes.” He paused and looked up. “I take that back, here they come. Those motherfuckers. I’ve got to remember to call Greyhound if we ever have any kind of trouble. They’re like the cavalry coming to the rescue.”

Everyone watched four burly men, one white and three colored, pile out of a tire service truck. Jacks flew, the compressor worked, removing old tires and installing new ones. Two hours later we were on the road.

We all tried to relax, but I got that nervous feeling again and thought, *what the fuck is waiting for us in the next town or the town after that?*

## CHAPTER 24

We had been in New Orleans playing gigs in and outside the city for three weeks. It was the first time since we'd left New York that we had jammed with people other than our own group and we more than held our own. The racial mixture in the city also made moving around much easier. As Willie fondly said: "Man, New Orleans, I love it. It's one hell of a town."

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I landed at LaGuardia Airport. A cold blustery wind swirled dirt and debris all around like leaves on a fall day. I quickly caught a cab, surprised that the airport was not busy at two in the afternoon. I figured I should be at my pad in an hour.

"That's it, Cabby, 123 Bank Street." I opened the door to my apartment. *Boy, it's nice to be home, even for just a short time.* I dropped my bag and headed for the fridge. It was stocked as usual. With a Pabst Blue Ribbon in my hand, I went to my desk and saw a note written in large block letters:

ZAK, HAVE A NICE STAY – ROBIN

Robin, an old friend, used my apartment when I was on the road. That helped keep my expenses down. She always kept the place as neat as a pin and made sure food and drink were waiting for me.

I picked up the stack of notes and the pile of mail, weighing them in each hand, and leafed through the mail. As I did, the door opened. It was Robin.

"Hi." I stood to give her a hug. "I saw your note. What are you doing here?"

"I forgot my jacket. Zak, you look great. How's the tour going? Obviously you're still alive."

"The gig is going well, some problems, but it's too long a story for now. Robin, you look wonderful, prettier than ever. How're your folks?"

"The folks are well and they're glad you're here so that I can visit with them. They certainly wouldn't like it if we lived here together, but since they know that I leave as soon as you come back, they're finally getting used to the idea that we share this apartment. This has really worked out great for both of us. I wish I had time to chat but I've got to run. I have to be at rehearsal in an hour. Have a nice stay."

"Still at the Copa Club?"

"Yes, I'm now the lead dancer. Gotta go, bye."

Going back to my mail, I saw a pink envelope with Judy's handwriting. I opened it.

*Dear Zak,*

*I've tried to write this letter too many times to count. So here it is straight out. You've been away so long. Didn't know how to reach you. I wanted to tell you this directly, but the best I can do is mail this letter to 123 Bank Street.*

*I've met a man. We've fallen in love, and plan to marry. I'm sorry it had to be this way.*

*I wish you a safe trip with Swannee's band and great success in the future.*

*Judy*

I reread the letter. *My God, I wonder if this is how the girls I've known felt when I stopped calling. Holy shit, I can't believe it. I got a Dear John letter, and I'm not even in the Army. That's almost funny, but I really can't blame her. She's a great gal, but we had no long term*



*plans. Now what should I do? Should I call and congratulate her? No. Not now anyway. I first have to get my head straight.*

I took a slug of my beer. I felt like a balloon that had lost all its air. Finally, I went back to my mail, tossing the junk into a wastebasket and slowly opening the rest. There was a check from Sherwood's office, along with a note, thanking me for my last two arrangements and asking me to write three more charts. The list included Rogers and Hart's SMALL HOTEL, Irving Berlin's PUTTIN ON THE RITZ, plus he wanted me to write an original easy bounce tune. He also mentioned again that he hoped I'd re-join the band after my tour with Swanee was over. I felt better.

I opened the next letter.

*Dear Mr. Morton:*

*Heard the dance arrangement of 'Clair de Lune' that you did for Glen Denny's band. We've tried to reach you by phone. The young lady that answered said you were on the road.*

*On your return, please contact my office at MCA - Bill Hollander is my man there. He has a list of tunes I'm interested in and he'll work out the financial arrangements with you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Barry Blue*

Wow, maybe Judy was right. Are my days on the road over? I was beginning to feel better.

*Well, I'll be...*

*Dear Zak,*

*The Music Conservatory will be performing an all-Mozart concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. As part of the program, we plan to do his Clarinet Concerto in A Major.*

*We would be pleased if you, as an alumnus, would join us as the featured clarinetist.*

*The date of the concert is March 15th, next year.*

*Hoping to hear from you shortly, I remain,*

*very truly yours,*

*Dr. Jules Baker*

*Let's see, March 15, next year --- I'm gonna do it. Man, I've got to start practicing. Wow, the A major! I wouldn't miss this for all the tea in China, or whatever.*

I finished the rest of the mail and my beer.

After a relaxing shower and a shave, I scrambled a couple of eggs and gradually adjusted to the startling developments of the afternoon. I walked to my desk, picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hi Judy, it's me, Zak..."

## CHAPTER 25

I rode the elevator up to the offices of MCA, the most prestigious agency in the world, all glass, chrome and glitter. I stopped at the entrance. *Damn, what am I doing here?* Shaking my head, I turned back and punched the down button. The elevator door opened, *Chicken*. I spun around and entered.

Beautifully dressed women and men moved about quickly in a business-like manner. I remembered a phrase used when one mentioned MCA. "They think Yiddish, and dress British." Well, the conservative dressing part really fit, except for the receptionist, who could pass for a blonde movie starlet.

She confirmed that Mr. Bolton would see me. Another starlet type, this one a redhead, guided me to his office.

David Bolton had the MCA image down pat: good looking, tall and well dressed. "Zak, good to see you, but what are you doing in New York? I thought you were still down south with that colored band."

"We had an unexpected break. I'll be heading back to New Orleans at the end of the week. I got your note, and plan to start work on the arrangements for Sherwood on the flight back to New Orleans. You should have all three in ten days to two weeks."

David examined his watch. "That's great. I'm sorry Zak, but I'm a little pressed for time. Tell me, what's on your mind?"

I sensed that I was getting the brush-off. It was going to be wham, bam, and goodbye, but I pressed forward. "I'm getting more calls for my arrangements from other bands, as well as Bobby's. I'm not sure I'm charging enough for my work. I think I need an agent to represent me."

"That's interesting," he whispered in a confidential manner. "You know, I shouldn't say this, but since you left Bobby, the band hasn't been the same. Hmm, let me think. I'm not

sure we've ever represented an arranger, and I'm jammed with work. Wait, just a second. Yes, I know just the person who can handle something like this." He picked up the phone. "Get me Ellie Weiss." He tapped his fingers on the desk.

David's office walls were covered with pictures of Bobby Sherwood and the band, along with other well-known groups and famous singers. I fingered a good-luck silver dollar I always carried as I went to the window. Edgy and filled with doubt, I examined the New York skyline. As he spoke I turned to listen.

"Ellie, hi, David Bolton here --- Yes, I'm fine --- Are you free? --- Good --- Come to my office, I'd like you to meet someone --- Great --- Two minutes, super." He hung up. "Ellie is a new young agent. She's very eager, very sharp, and very hungry. She'll be perfect for you."

*Hmm, the SOB is really giving me the brush. He's dumping me off on someone with no experience. This is a mistake.* I continued to finger my silver dollar.

After a brief knock on the door, it opened. "Hi, David."

"Ellie, come on in. I'd like you to meet Zak Morton. Zak, this is Ellie Weiss."

As we shook hands, I looked into the deepest blue eyes I'd ever seen. She stood about five-feet-five inches, had a lovely figure, and an even prettier face, with a Prince Valiant style haircut. *Wow, this gal's a beauty.*

David interrupted my reverie. "Ellie, Zak is an arranger and a fine musician. He needs a sharp agent. You two will be perfect for each other."

Her smile excited me. "Wonderful, Zak. Come join me in my office. We can talk there. Thanks David."

Ellie crooked her finger and led me to a corner room, half the size of Bolton's. She pointed to a seat. "Tell me about yourself."

"There's not much to tell. I'm a musician. I play clarinet and alto saxophone. I graduated from the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music where I majored in composition and conducting.

Of late, I've been doing a fair amount of big-band arrangements. Right now, I'm playing with an all-colored band. We've been traveling through the south. I'll be heading back to New Orleans on Sunday to continue the tour that will end shortly after January 1<sup>st</sup>."

Ellie chuckled. "So you're the nut everyone's been talking about."

My back stiffened. I growled. "Number one, I didn't know I was a nut. Number two, who the fuck's talking about me? Number three, I guess I made a mistake coming here, so I'd better leave."

"Whoa, Zak, easy. I'm sorry it came out wrong. Everyone is really in awe of what you're doing, and I agree. My question is, why?"

I examined her face, trying to figure whether she was serious or just spouting bullshit.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have a friend, Swannee Johnson. He was in trouble, needed my help, so I was and am there for him. It's that simple."

"I can't argue with that kind of logic. But look, I know you think Bolton pushed you off on me because he felt you weren't important enough for him to bother with," She ran her hand through her hair. "And you're right, that's exactly what he did."

"Fine, then I might as well leave. I don't want to waste his time or yours."

"You're not letting me finish. I can tell you this. If Bolton took you on, you'd be lost. The man's got a full deck and you'd end up at the bottom of the pile. Actually, he did you and me a favor."

"I still think I'm wasting my time, but I'll bite. How did he do you and me a favor?"

"I'm the new kid on the block. I'm sitting with just three accounts, which gives me the time and energy to promote a Zak Morton. I need you, Bolton doesn't."

*Interesting, she's beginning to make sense.*

She looked at her watch. "Hey, it's almost one. Come on, let me buy you lunch and we can talk."

We sat in the back room of one of those small restaurants on Third Avenue that New Yorkers like to frequent. I noticed the sign – seating capacity 40 – and wondered how people running a place this small could make a living.

We finished our second cup of coffee, and Ellie switched from small talk to business. “Okay, you write an arrangement, you’re paid a flat rate. If the tune is recorded, do you get paid extra?”

“No.”

Ellie wrinkled her brow. “What makes a record popular?”

“I never thought much about it, but that’s good question. It has to be a combination of the band that makes the recording, the tune and how it’s presented.”

“Presented, that means the arranger... You have a big stake in making the package work.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Let me get this straight. When a tune is performed at a club or a dance hall or is recorded and played on the radio, the song writer gets a piece of the action, right?”

“Yes, but what are you getting at?”

“The tune is important, but it’s the band and the arrangement that make it popular, right?”

“Yes, but ...”

“The songwriter gets paid. The band leader gets a piece. Why shouldn’t the arranger get his share?”

I scratched my head. “Beats me.”

She stood, walked towards the back of the room, then returned to her chair. “Well, we have an interesting situation here, don’t we?”

I loved the way she moved, light and easy on her feet, like a dancer... no, more like a cat.

“The question is, do any arrangers get a piece of the action?”

“I’m going to find out. Now tell me, who have you been writing for?”

“Well, besides the Johnson band, I’ve written mostly for Bobby Sherwood and Glen Denny, but I’ve just been contacted by the Barry Blue band. They want me to write arrangements for two ballads and one original medium bounce.”

“Have you written many original arrangements?”

“Yes, quite a few.”

“Have you copyrighted any of them?”

I shifted in my chair. “No.”

“Well, I suggest you get them copyrighted, and either join ASCAP or BMI. They’ll look out for your interests.”

“We’ve got to talk more about all this, but I have a meeting in half an hour, and I want to check out a few things. Are you free this evening?”

I was. She asked if I would join her for dinner so we could talk more about my future. We agreed to meet at Julio’s Restaurant.

## CHAPTER 26

I leaned against the bar, sipping my Scotch and thought about the last time I had been to Julio's. Judy and I had dined here before we went to Harlem for that jam session and met Swannee – and that seemed like a lifetime ago. The clock over the bar read seven-thirty. “Hi, I hope I haven't kept you waiting.” Ellie said as she approached.

“No, I just got here.” I smiled at the pretty picture Ellie made. As I watched her walk, I thought, yes, definitely like a cat. “No, I just got here. What are you drinking?”

“Henry,” She called to the bartender, “a scotch over ice, s'il vous plait.”

“Coming up, Miss Weiss.”

“You come here often?”

“Yes, but only on business. Our company runs an open tab. That makes it comfortable when I entertain a client. At the end of dinner, or whatever, we just leave. You know, no fumbling for the check, especially since I'm a woman.”

Her drink came. “Happy days,” she toasted, as we clinked glasses.

“Henry,” she called, “tell Martin I'm starved, but I'd like a corner table even if we have to wait a bit.”

Ellie looked sharp and relaxed in black slacks, a white turtleneck sweater and a black leather jacket. I kept staring into those deep blue eyes. *Man, what a dish. Brains and beauty all wrapped up in a five-foot-five inch package of loveliness.*

Sitting on the barstool next to me, she spun around. “Zak, tell me more about yourself. I don't mean the music part. I want to know where you're from. I want to know all about you.”

“Well, there's not much to tell. I was born and dragged up in Brooklyn. After graduating high school, I spent the war years in the Army Air Corps as a musician. They had my body



for three years from 1943-1946. Almost immediately after my discharge, I joined Joe Venuti's Dixieland band and spent three months on the road with his group. Aside from playing an instrument, I had always wanted to study composition and conducting. So I enrolled at the Conservatory and completed their three-year course in two."

"You must be a glutton for punishment. Three years' work in two, wow!"

"The army had taken away three years from me. Time was precious. I had to get it done. Anyway, during that time and after, I played with lots of different bands. There you have it in a nutshell. Oh yes, I've just been invited by Dr. Baker, the head of the Conservatory, to perform the Mozart A Major Clarinet Concerto at the Brooklyn Academy of Music."

"Really? Playing with the great jazz violinist, Venuti, and doing the A Major. Same guy, same horn, I'm impressed. When is that going to happen?"

"Fortunately not till next year, March 15. That should give me enough time to practice. I haven't done any work in the classical field for quite a while."

I waved to the bartender for a refill.

"Henry, you can put a head on my drink as well."

We watched the bartender do his thing.

Then she asked, "Married? Girl friend? You haven't given me any personal details."

"No to both those questions. Okay, now it's your turn, Ellie. Tell me about yourself."

"Well, I'm from Cleveland, Ohio, but really a suburb of that city, a place called Shaker Heights. I was born there. I hate to add, with a silver spoon in my mouth. My mother still teaches English literature at a local Community College and my father owns two major car dealerships in town. I'm a kid who was a member of the country club set. You know – lessons with the swimming pro, the tennis pro and after that, lessons with the golf pro."

"Being a sports nut, I'm impressed. How good are you?"

"I was on the Columbia University tennis team, but I was only good enough for doubles. As a golfer, I have an eleven handicap."

“Wonderful. Being a city guy, I never played those sports. In Brooklyn it was punch ball and stick ball. They’re city games and we played them in the streets.”

Ellie ran a finger across my hand. “I love sports,” she cooed with a strange look in her eyes. “Besides everything else, I’m a big fan of the Cleveland Indians’ baseball team, and the Cleveland Browns’ football team.”

“It’s the Brooklyn Dodgers in baseball and the New York Giants in football for me. But tell me, how and when did you get to New York?”

“I applied to the Columbia school of journalism, was accepted, and majored in English. My original plan was to be a writer, but I got excited about the entertainment field and joined a small firm after graduation. From there, I was hired away by MCA. So here I am, with three accounts and a dream of going big time. I don’t know if you’re my key to that dream, but I work hard at what I do. I’ve made major strides for my three other clients.”

“Your table is ready, Miss Weiss.”

“Thank you, Martin. Zak, shall we go?”

“Henry, freshen their drinks and have them sent to their table. This way please,” Martin said and led the way.

We followed him to a quiet corner that I never knew existed. The opening lyrics of the song COCKTAILS FOR TWO popped into my head. ‘In some secluded rendezvous...’ I came out of my reverie when I heard Martin say, “Would you like to see the menu now or shall I have Gino wait a while?”

“After a while is good, Martin, thank you.”

“Do you always get service like this?” I asked.

She snorted, “If you knew the size of the bill MCA gets each month from this place, you’d better be getting sensational service.”

All through dinner she talked about the business and how she just loved it. The challenge, the excitement it generated. I half-listened, wondering instead what she’d be like in bed, with

all her energy. I hadn't quite mentally undressed her when she said, "I spoke to Bobby Sherwood this afternoon, and I was also able to reach Swannee Johnson at the home of his parents, in Philadelphia."

"You did what?"

"I spoke to Bobby Sherwood and Swannee Johnson this afternoon."

"Why, for heaven sakes?"

"If I'm going to represent you, I want to know all about you. Your character, your work habits. I want to know what makes Zak tick."

I was floored. *Am I going to be doing business with the FBI? The next thing she'll do is check to see how often I take a crap. I didn't like the idea of her prying into my life.* "And pray tell, what did you find out?"

"Well, you drink a little too much, but never get drunk. You don't do dope of any kind. You chase the women or maybe they chase you, but when they do, you don't run too fast. Other than that, no bad marks."

I leaned back in my chair. "Who gave you that crock of bullshit?"

She ignored my question. "The two most important pieces of information were, you don't do drugs of any kind and your work ethic is A-PLUS."

"Now that you've got all that information, where does it get us?"

She studied me. "I guess it's time. Let's get down to business. Have you ever worked with a singer?"

"Of course, I've written many arrangements for singers. What kind of question is that? I'm not following you."

"I don't mean a singer with a band that does one chorus and then sits down while the band plays on."

"Then the answer is no."

“Could you work with a team to help write an act for a singer? Ballads, bounce tunes, parodies, stuff like that?”

“I’ve never done it, but I’m sure I can. Not lyrics, though. I’ve only written one lyric in my life and that was to a Christmas song I recently composed. That went pretty well, but boy, I really don’t need that kind of struggle.”

“Let me tell you what the agency has in mind.”

I leaned back, “You had better, because I’m totally confused.”

“Here it is. The agency just took on a new girl singer. The people who are in the know feel she’ll be a winner, so they’re going all out. We’re building an act for her. We have a writer to tell her what to say, a coach to tell her when to say it and how, a dance instructor to teach her how to do a routine or two, a lyricist to write a parody or two or three for her to sing, and finally, we need an arranger/composer to handle the music. They’re also thinking that maybe as part of the act, they’ll add four chorus boys as back-up singers and dancers.”

“My God, I can’t believe this whole thing. This is going to cost the agency a bundle. This singer must be something else or she’s banging somebody high up in the firm.”

“I don’t know about the banging part, but yes, it is going to cost a bundle. And we also need someone capable of writing original music for the parodies and any other incidental music. Can you handle it?”

I mulled over Ellie’s proposal. “I’ve never done this type of work before, but I know I can do it, no question about it. Now, what kind of money are we talking about?”

Ellie sipped a newly arrived drink. Holding my hand, she asked, “How does five thousand grab you?”

I almost dropped my drink. “Five thousand, that’s dollars, not rubles, right?”

Ellie nodded, obviously pleased she’d hit the mark.

“If I understand what you’re asking of me, hell, I can get that done in no time, so make the deal.”

“I already have.”

## CHAPTER 27

We walked out of Julio's, wrapping our coats tightly around us, as November's cold air hit us. I didn't want the evening to end, and I sensed Ellie felt the same way.

"I'd love to hear you play."

"If you'd really like to listen to some jazz tonight, we can easily fix that. I have my horns at my apartment down in the Village. Let's catch a cab, pick up my clarinet and head over to Nick's. I'm sure they'll let me sit in for a set or two."

"Wonderful, I'd love it."

We caught the first yellow cab that came by and settled in as the driver headed south. I had been thinking about what Ellie had said over dinner.

"Number one, how did you know I could handle your deal? And, number two, how did you know I'd accept?"

I was surprised when she took my hand. "I told you, I checked you out. Both Sherwood and Swannee Johnson said you could do the job. As far as you accepting the deal, I knew you couldn't turn down the challenge." She sat with a smug little smile that made me laugh.

"Swannee. How did you trace him down? I know his family lives in Philly, but that's all I know."

"It was easy. I gave his name to one of our secretaries. In a half hour she had it done but don't ask me how. Swannee, that's such an odd name. Where did he get it? What's his real name?"

"That is his real name. Where it came from, beats me. Maybe he was born near the Swannee River. Or, probably his mother liked the song, WAY DOWN UPON THE SWANNEE RIVER or that old Al Jolson tune, SWANNEE, HOW I LOVES YUH, HOW I LOVES YUH. Who knows?"

Ellie laughed and snuggled closer.

Horns honked as the taxi slowed down. “We’re here,” the cabby called out.

“Great, don’t turn off the meter. I’ll be right back. And don’t leave with this lovely lady.”

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Although Nick’s was busy, the manager, Tom Thompson, an old friend, found us a table off to the side. After he took our order for a couple of drinks, I said, “I brought my horn. I’d like to sit in for a set.” Tom agreed to speak with Dick White who led a six-piece Dixie-style band. Moments later, Tom stood next to White, as he mouthed, “Okay, next set.” I waved and mouthed back, “Thank you.”

When the band took a break, Dick White came to our table and introduced himself. “Zak, why don’t you warm up your horn? We go on in ten minutes.”

“Great. I haven’t played Dixie Jazz since I left Venuti. This is going to be a kick.”

And what a blast it was. We did: JA-DA, RUNNIN’ WILD, CLARINET MARMALADE, WANG WANG BLUES and finally DARKTOWN STRUTTERS BALL.

As we left Ellie said, “Zak, you really can play that thing. Have you ever thought of fronting a big band?”

“Yes, but the last time I thought about it was when I was sixteen. I’m not interested in fighting with all the different personalities. I have enough of that right now. No, I like what I’m doing, playing and writing and I must say, I’m excited about writing music for a night club act, very excited.”

We stood on the street outside of Nick’s. People were rushing by. A cold wind sent debris floating in all directions. I began to shiver. “Where to next?” I asked.

“Home, I guess.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

I hailed a cab, “123 Bank Street.”

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We lay quietly next to each other, her thigh touching mine. *Amazing lady*, I thought, *bright as a penny, sharp as a tack, pretty as a picture, and a tiger in bed. To add to all those clichés, man what a lovely package.* I leaned over and placed my hand on her arm. The contrast was amazing – the darkness of my hand against her white skin. It was just the opposite of what I’d been experiencing lately.

“Are you good?” I asked.

Ellie turned to me. “Better than good, how about you?”

“You were absolutely wonderful and on top of that, I find you’re a natural blonde. Amazing, you’re simply amazing.” I leaned over and kissed her.

\*\*\*\*\*

When I awoke, the clock near my bed said eight. *What am I doing up so early?* Ellie was still asleep, curled in a fetal position, her long straight hair covering her face. I started to reach for her, but stopped. I crawled out of bed and headed for the bathroom. After a quick shower, I dressed. She was still asleep, breathing softly.

I put up coffee, poured two glasses of tomato juice, drank one and set the other down on the kitchen table. I heard her moving around. “Good morning,” I called out. “Coffee is almost ready. How do you like your eggs?”

She padded into the kitchen in bare feet, wearing only her black leather jacket. She picked up the juice and drank. “Good morning yourself, and I like my eggs over light, but hold them till I’m out of the shower and dressed. She pecked me on the cheek and left.



I poured her a second cup of coffee. “When can I meet this singer of yours? I’ll be heading back to New Orleans in a few days and I’d like to see and hear what she can do. You know, her style, limitations, that kind of stuff.”

“How about this afternoon? Have lunch with me, and I’ll set up an appointment with her for, let’s say, 2:00 PM. We have a music room at our office. I’ll have a piano player there, as well as a list of tunes we’ll need arrangements for. Are you free for dinner tonight and every night while you’re here?”

“That’s the best offer I’ve had all day, yesterday and lots of tomorrows. How could I ever say no to such a lovely lady?”

## CHAPTER 28

Leaving Ellie and New York made the idea of going back to the tour a drag. I was excited about the new experience of writing stuff for a show-type singer. It was a change from what I'd been doing and I was looking forward to the challenge. The trip to New York had really paid off.

Swanee and I were back in New Orleans. Tom Harris, Emily and Dora had also flown down from the City. The band was together again for the first time since the break. New Orleans was hot and steamy. Tom had arranged for a private room in a restaurant in the French Quarter. The waiter quickly served drinks.

Soft rugs and heavy drapes softened the sound of tinkling glasses, talk and laughter. The tables, covered with fine white linen, were arranged in a circle, with fifteen chairs set around the outer perimeter. Place cards were at each setting.

Jason played the baby grand piano softly. Dora and I stood to his right. She had a glass of champagne in one hand and was hanging onto me with the other. Jason had just finished playing THESE FOOLISH THINGS.

"That was beautiful. Your improvisations are so smooth and easy. How did you get so good?"

He turned to me. "My teacher once said, there's two ways to get to Carnegie Hall -- practice or pay." He laughed, played a run, and launched into BLUE MOON.

Dora and I mingled around the room greeting everyone, that is, except Jasper, who was still avoiding me.

A waiter came over to Tom, whispered and left. "Ladies and Gentlemen," Tom called out, "dinner will be served shortly. Please find your places."

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Tom stood and tapped his glass with a spoon. “Gentlemen, I want to congratulate you for the fine job you’re doing. The agency tells me you’re breaking records everywhere you play. And, most important, it seems you have become one happy family. I’m more proud of that than anything else. And finally, I understand that you have comported yourselves in a style that’s a credit to you all... well, anyway, *most* of the time.”

Laughter broke out from the fun-loving bunch of broad chasers.

“I’m here because of the problem we’re about to face when we leave New Orleans. The five cancellations in and around the Baton Rouge area were caused by the KU-KLUX-KLAN. You know, NO MIXED BANDS.” He shook his head sadly. “Zak has offered to leave, but both Swannee and I rejected that idea. And, from what Swannee has indicated, if Zak left, many of you would probably do the same.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

“I’m proud and pleased by your actions. We still have one open date in the Baton Rouge area. The manager of the Palace Dance Hall is willing to fight for your right to perform. I must be truthful. It could be dangerous, but since we are a democracy....”

Snickers came from some. “I repeat, we are a democracy, maybe still not perfect, but a democracy nevertheless. We’ll take a vote on whether or not we play that gig, in spite of threats by the KKK, or move on to Natchez.

“Dora will pass out cards with two words on them. YES or NO. Circle the one you choose, but don’t sign your name. She’ll come around again, with a bowl. Just drop your card in it. This vote must be one hundred percent YES, or it’s no go.”

The muscles in my stomach started to tighten up. *Shit, I don’t like this, but I can’t be the one to say no. However, it sure looks like trouble is just down the road.*

Dora distributed the cards. Moments later, she circled again as everyone, including the two drivers, put them in a bowl. She handed the bowl to her father.

Tom pulled out the cards and read – “yes, yes.” He did that eleven times. Holding the last card in his hand, he paused. Finally, turning it over, Tom said, “QUESTION MARK!”

“Excuse me, Tom,” I stood. “That’s mine, and I’m not sure I shouldn’t have circled NO. I’m worried. If something should happen to any one of these guys, how could I live with myself? It’s wrong to subject you all to this danger. I must again offer to quit the tour.”

“Zak,” Tom replied, “I appreciate your feelings, but I for one, will be damned if I’ll let a bunch of miserable bastards break up this group. We’ve come this far. It’s important that we finish the job we started out to do and I think we’re all in agreement. Am I right?”

Everyone applauded, then quietly sat with smiles of pride, showing their determination to finish the tour.

Tom tapped on his glass again. “I want you to know, you’re not going alone. Emily, Dora and I will be on the bus from Baton Rouge through to Memphis. That means we’ll be traveling with you for the entire month of December. The three of us will be heading back to New York on January 2nd.”

Jason raised his hand. “Sir, are you sure you want the ladies to be subjected to this kind of thing?”

“I appreciate that,” Tom added, “but it wasn’t my idea. I’ve never been south of New York so I don’t know what to expect. But my wife Emily, who was born in Virginia, insisted that they go. These two ladies are tough. Don’t sell them short.”

He nodded to the waiter. “Ladies and Gentlemen, dinner is served.”

## SCHERZO

## CHAPTER 29

The morning was overcast and humid, with a threat of rain in the air. The single-lane highway, practically empty, followed the contour of the Mississippi River through flat lands, with sugarcane and cattle ranches reaching out to the horizon.

We traveled north from New Orleans, toward Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana. The mood in the bus turned from laughter to quiet reflection and fear.

Suddenly a light flashed. A Louisiana State Police car flagged the bus to the side of the road and stopped in front.

Dora sat next to me holding my hand. I could feel her tension. She was frightened, and with good reason.

“This is all wrong. Someone’s going to get hurt and it’ll be my fault, and shit, here it comes.”

Tom Harris called out, “All right, everyone, stay calm and stay where you are. I’ll handle this. Jimmy, open up. I’ll get out.”

The state trooper captain, about six-feet-six inches tall, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, stepped out of his vehicle and headed toward Tom.

I walked to the bus door to listen. They shook hands and greeted each other. I heard Tom say “Good afternoon, officer, is anything wrong?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Tom Harris, the manager of the Swanee Johnson Band.”

It was interesting, the difference in Tom’s and the officer’s speech patterns – Tom, with his slight Bostonian twang and the captain’s deep southern drawl. Like Timmy and Terry, they reminded me of those old comic strip characters, Mutt and Jeff. The Captain must have been at least a foot taller than Tom. I shook my head. *With all this shit going on, why did I think about that?*

"Mr. Harris, Ah'm here to try and avoid trouble."

"I don't understand. What kind of trouble?"

"Ah have been told there's a white man playing with your colored band, and the people around here, why they jess don't cotton to that kind of thing."

"Excuse me, officer... I'm sorry, sir, what is your name?"

"I'm Captain James Morgan."

"Captain Morgan, is there a law against having a mixed band?"

"No suh, not a written law, but as ah said, ah'm jess tryin' to avoid trouble."

"Will there be trouble?" asked Tom.

"Damn straight there'll be trouble, and it's waiting jess up ahead."

Tom spread his arms. "Who'll cause the trouble? We won't. We just want to play our music and move on. We'll be in town for only four or five hours."

"Your problem, Mr. Harris, is the *KKK*. They're jess down the road waitin' for you people."

"Captain Morgan, can't you and your men stop them?"

Morgan laughed sarcastically. "I know it's not funny, Mr. Harris, but I truly believe that half my men are *KKK* members. And, ah'm sure some of them are part of the group that's up front waitin' for you people right now."

I thought, *Goddammit, drive over there, get their names and fire the sons of bitches.*

"Look, Captain," Tom continued, "we're not looking to start a war, but we do have a commitment to play the Palace Dance Hall tonight. That's in the heart of the black community. The dance is for colored folks only. It's five o'clock now. We start playing at eight and finish up at about twelve. We can be out of your town by twelve-thirty and no harm will be done."

"Mr. Harris, ah don't think you understand what's waitin' for you. Tell you what, jess get in my car and let me show you."

Tom shrugged and smiled. "Okay, but first let me speak to my people, so they won't worry."

Tom bumped into me as he climbed back into the bus. "Look, I'm going to take a short ride with Captain Morgan. There's nothing to worry about. I'll be back soon, just relax."

*How can he look so calm? How can we relax? Is this where the other shoe drops?*

They drove off, and everyone started to talk all at once. "Calm down," Swannee said. "No use getting riled up before we know anything."

I stepped off the bus, nervously lighting a cigarette and started to pace. I felt tight as a guitar string.

One by one, everyone joined me. Emily walked away from the group. She stood wringing her hands and looked as if she were about to cry.

I headed toward her, when I heard Jasper say, "White mother fuckers, they're all the same. Can't trust any of them."

Conversation stopped. You could hear a fly flap its wings. A car raced down the road, slowed, then picked up speed as it saw all the colored faces.

Jasper had been against me being with the band from the beginning, never warming to me like Willie or Jake. His actions always indicated, 'Okay you're here, but I don't have to like it.'

He stood a half a head taller than me, with a shaved scalp and muscular arms.

I walked toward him. "Jasper, does that include me?"

"You're white, aren't you?"

I stuck my face in his. "I surely am and you're surely colored. So what? Does that make me bad or you bad?"

"You're Whitey. You don't belong, so why don't you get lost."

"Listen, you miserable son of a bitch – you're right. I don't belong. I don't need you. I don't need this trip. What I should really do is beat the shit out of you, pack and leave."



Sweat poured down my face. My nerves were raw. I'd had as much as I could take of his bullshit.

"Go fuck yourself, Whitey." He balled his hands into fists and stepped toward me.

I hit him as hard as I could, square on the nose. The shock ran through my fist, up my arm and to my shoulder. He collapsed. His nose was twisted and broken. Blood spurted all over his shirt and jacket. Some landed on me.

Dora ran up the stairs onto the bus, grabbed two towels and rushed back to Jasper. I turned and stalked away as the State Trooper's car rolled to a stop in front of the bus.

## CHAPTER 30

Tom Harris and the State Trooper climbed out of the captain's car. Jasper was now sitting up, but seeing blood, Tom rushed forward. "What the hell happened here?"

Emily grabbed his arm. "Nothing much. Jasper tripped and fell, but he's okay."

"Well, he sure doesn't look okay."

Captain Morgan stepped in. "Let me take a look. I've had plenty of experience with things like this." He kneeled down, then grabbed Jasper's nose and pulled. Jasper yelped in pain.

"Do you have any ice on this rig?"

"Yes we do, Captain," Dora still held the blood soaked towels.

"Good, get him on board. The nose is back in place, so fill a towel full of ice and apply it to his nose. That will bring the swelling down. As a matter of fact, I want everyone on board. We've gotta talk."

We climbed into our usual seats, while Dora brought a towel full of ice for Jasper, then joined me.

The Captain stood up front with Tom. He cleared his throat. "Let me start by saying ah couldn't give a diddly shit if you play here. But, ah tell you for sure, if you do, blood will flow. And ah jess don't want that to happen in my section."

"Mr. Harris explained about the vote you took last night. Ah surely appreciate your feelings. Ah'm not here to pass judgment. Ah'm jess here to make sure you and your property stay safe. If you insist on performing in Baton Rouge tonight, some of you might not survive. Ah jess don't have enough people to protect you. You see, as ah explained to your manager, some of my men might be the ones who'll be doin' the shootin'."

Tom broke in. "He's right, so I've agreed that the Captain will lead us out of town through as many side roads as he can, in order to avoid trouble if at all possible."

“Now, listen,” Captain Morgan continued, “ah want you to pull down all the window shades and sit on the floor. Stay as far away from the windows as you can. The middle aisle would be the smartest place. The shades will give you some protection. Cover yourselves as best you can. These people are on both sides of the road. You’ll be drivin’ through a gauntlet. Mr. Harris, suh, who’s your best driver?”

Tom checked with Swanee for the answer. “Jimmy and George are both fine. Jimmy’s at the wheel now.”

The Captain turned to Jimmy. “Listen, son, they’re goin’ to throw eggs, rocks and all kinds of stuff at you, so keep your eyes peeled. Be prepared for anythin’.”

Jimmy, wide-eyed, nodded.

“Follow me as close as you possibly can. In that way you won’t get hit as much. Ah’m pretty sure they won’t try to hit me.” He laughed.

“We’ll be movin’ fast until we get to the side roads. We’re gonna try to circle around them. Remember, everyone down, now!”

We all scrambled toward the middle aisle. Some covered themselves with blankets. I crouched on my knees with Dora in front of me. In that position I could see out the front window.

Jimmy followed, tight on Morgan’s tail, as the captain took side roads. Finally the captain made a left turn, taking us back to the highway.

I had hoped we’d avoid the trouble makers, but then I heard Jimmy shout, “Oh shit, it didn’t work. There they is! Lord protect us!”

I spied them, white sheets and all, waiting on both sides of the road. I got off my knees and sat, holding onto Dora who shivered with fright. Timmy, the bass man held his Bible, praying. Others sat with their eyes closed. Jasper’s eyes burned with fire. We waited, fearfully.

Dora shivered with fright as I held her in my arms. *Shit, it's all my fault.* Over and over again, I asked myself – how did I ever let Swannee talk me into this deal?

A cascade of eggs and stones banged against the bus. Dora screamed. It was the beginning of a barrage. A shot rang out. Showers of glass spewed into the bus. I squeezed her tightly. More stones and eggs hit the bus, making drum like sounds as they hit metal. Baseball bats pounded the bus. Each time, someone cursed or yelled. Another window shattered.

Finally, quiet. We were clear. Jimmy slowed down, weaving in and out of side roads again, as he continued to follow Captain Morgan.

Tom tried to comfort Emily who was sobbing deeply. Timmy's prayers were shouts to the Lord. Terry sat alongside him, rocking back and forth in prayer. Curses, mixed with cries of terror, could be heard everywhere. I leaned back, trying to relax my muscles. My jaws hurt from the tension.

After a while, Morgan led us back onto the main highway. Jimmy called out, "Damn, there be another group!" The bus picked up speed. More rocks, eggs, a gun shot and then another and another. Over thirty hooded men were standing on both sides of the road, attacking the bus.

Emily screamed. "Oh my God!"

Finally, quiet reigned, except for the whine of the motor as we raced down the road.

Suddenly, Jimmy slowed. Back up on my knees, I could see a pick-up truck parked sideways, right in the middle of the road. At the last minute, Captain Morgan swerved around the truck. Jimmy followed. He drove down a small embankment. The bus screeched to a halt as it hit a bump. It felt like we might tip over. We were thrown against the seats, but Jimmy shifted into low gear, righted the bus, and lurched onto the road.

I kept holding my breath, mimicking each move Jimmy made. My jaw was clenched, and my arms hurt almost as if I were the one doing the driving.

Back on the highway, we hurtled down the road – right into a third group of hooded men. A barrage of stones and eggs crashed against the bus. Two more gun shots rang out, breaking more windows, and finally, we were clear.

The State Police Car slowed down and stopped. Jimmy pulled up right behind it. Captain Morgan got out of his vehicle and headed to the bus. Jimmy opened the door.

“It’s all clear now. Is everyone okay?” Morgan asked as he entered the vehicle.

Emily stood, blood running down her face. Then James slowly got to his feet, a trickle of blood running down from the top of his head. The captain jumped out, ran to his car, and came back with a first aid kit.

A piece of glass had cut Emily just below the eye. Captain Morgan looked, “Mrs. Harris, you’re lucky. It’s just a superficial wound, but if it were an inch higher...” Captain Morgan sat her down, cleaned the wound, put pressure on it and finally, bandaged it. Then, going to James, the Captain pulled a long piece of glass from his scalp, cleaned and bandaged his head. Looking around the bus, the officer called out, “Anyone else need help?”

Everyone got up except Timmy. He lay sprawled out on the floor, face down. Morgan rushed to him, pushing people aside. The Captain kneeled down, and slowly brushed away glass. He carefully turned Timmy over onto his back. Blood was trickling from his nose. A large welt stood out on his forehead, and a cut ran down his cheek, seeping blood. After feeling for his pulse, Morgan said. “I need a towel and water to clean him up. He’s probably okay, but it would be a good idea to stop at a hospital and have him checked out. From the looks of that welt, he was hit by a rock and cut his face as he fell.”

Dora ran to the bus bathroom and returned with a damp cloth. Timmy opened his eyes, sat up, moaned and grabbed his head.

“Mr. Harris,” the Captain continued, as he helped Timmy to his feet, “Ah wouldn’t bother cleaning up this mess. Jess move on. You should be safe from here on. Ah’m sorry you people were put through this. Truly ah am. I’ll contact the manager of the Palace Dance Hall and tell him what happened. You best move on to wherever you were goin’ after tonight.”

I thought, *man, this guy probably saved all our lives*, as Jasper mumbled, “White mother fucker.”

## CHAPTER 31

On the way north, everyone was quiet. We were all shaken by the experience of riding through hell.

At a truck stop near Natchez, Tom left the bus to call Greyhound's New York office. Everyone but Jimmy and George got out to see what kind of shape our rig was in. They were busy cleaning the inside. Broken glass and rocks were all over the place. As I stepped out, I heard Jimmy say, "Man, I was so scared, I about pissed in my pants."

"Don't worry, you weren't alone," replied George. "We were all scared out of our wits. You surely did a great job. I'm glad I wasn't behind the wheel."

As I looked around, I could see fear written on all their faces. I must have looked like that also. *Damn, will it get worse than this? If it does, I'm not sure I can handle it.*

A crowd of people at the truck stop joined us as we walked around the vehicle looking at the damage. The bus looked like it had been through a war. On the driver's side, there were three broken windows and a bullet hole about three feet back of where Jimmy's head had been. There were five broken windows and two bullet holes on the other side, one having missed the rear tire by inches. Both headlights were smashed and one taillight was out. Raw egg droppings and dents, like pock marks, covered both sides of the bus.

Still shaken, Dora shivered, saying she was cold, although the temperature must have been close to ninety. She ran back into the bus and came out wearing a sweater. "It's hard to believe," she said, "Momma, James and Timmy were the only ones hurt."

"We gotta thank that state trooper," Swannee replied. "If he hadn't been up front, they would have gone after Jimmy and we'd all have been in deep shit."

*Yeah, but how come some of the State Police belong to the KKK? Aren't they supposed to uphold the law, not add to the problem?*

Tom returned. “Some good news, Greyhound has a service depot in Memphis. They’ll meet us in Natchez with a new bus and pick up this one. The downside is – we won’t get this baby back until we reach Memphis. That’s three weeks without the comfort of this rig, but luckily, they said their insurance will cover the cost. Before we take off, Swannee, Zak, we need to talk.”

The three of us stepped away from the rest of the group. “Emily told me what happened while I was off with Captain Morgan. Zak, I’d like to apologize to you for the remarks Jasper made. They were clearly uncalled for.”

“I don’t want an apology from you, Tom. Frankly, I don’t even want one from Jasper, ‘cause if he did apologize, he wouldn’t mean it.”

“But Zak,” Swannee started to speak.

I raised my hand to stop him. “Listen, I lost my temper. We’ve all been under a lot of tension, but I’m not sorry I hit the son of a bitch. As a matter of fact, I feel quite good about it. Look, the tour is almost over. It’s too late to replace him, and I’m not going anywhere. That is, except on the bus to our next stop.”

Tom patted me on the back. “Okay then, let’s get moving.” We headed back to our wreck and drove to a local depot to pick up a regular coach for the ride to Natchez.



## CHAPTER 32

We were in our loaner coach heading toward Memphis. A crap game was going on at the back of the bus. Tom was on a roll and the noise was increasing with every throw of the dice. Swannee and I were talking. “Damn, I don’t know what to do about Dora.”

Swannee nodded. “I’ve noticed. She really has eyes for you. So what’s the problem?”

“Man, I don’t need any more women problems.”

“Are you okay about Judy?”

“Look, it was a shock. I called and we met. She really loves this guy. It has to be okay. Hell, I’m a traveling bum, and she needs someone who’s always there.”

We sat in silence for a while, listening to the sounds coming from the crap game. “I guess Tom is taking everyone to the cleaners again.”

“He sure has the Midas touch.”

Swannee hadn’t answered my question. “Okay, I repeat, what do I do about Dora?”

“Use your own judgment, but whatever happens, she’ll be on her way back to Boston on January 2, and you’ll go on with your life.”

“What about Tom and Emily?”

“Okay, what about them?”

“What is this shit? Man, you’re beginning to sound Jewish. So stop it. Don’t keep answering my questions with a question.”

“Yeah,” Swannee chuckled, “I guess I have. But listen, they’re not blind. They see what’s going on. Hell, the whole band does. Dora’s a big girl. She knows what she wants and at this moment, it’s you. Maybe the idea of ballin’ a white stud has turned her on. That’s happened before on this trip.”

I grimaced. “Don’t remind me. I don’t need another Cindy Lou.”

“Whatever it is, just relax and go with the flow.”

*Go with the flow? How do I do that with Emily and Tom here? What do I say to them?*

*Hey Mr. and Mrs. Harris, I've got news for you, I'm fucking your daughter. Swannee would probably say, "If Dora doesn't care, why should I?" That's easier said than done, but she sure is a tempting dish. Forget it Zak, you don't need that kind of a problem.* My reverie was interrupted when I heard Swannee say, "Tell me about Memphis."

"Tell you about Memphis? Shit, I still haven't gotten over Baton Rouge. I don't understand it. Everyone else seems to have forgotten what we went through, but I'm still shaking."

"No man, none of us will ever get over that trip. I guess most of us hide it under the surface. Now tell me about Memphis."

"Memphis? Oh yeah, that's one great town. I've been there twice, once with Venuti and once with the Sherwood band. You'll love it. I played the Peabody. Man, what a fantastic hotel. You gotta see it. They have this big fountain in the lobby, right near the bar."

"So what's so strange about that?"

"Well, at ten in the morning, one of the bellhops lays out a red carpet that stretches from the elevator to the fountain. Then, out come six ducks. They walk across the rug and get into the fountain pool. At noon and at five in the afternoon, one of the bellhops lays out the carpet again. They put on a record, and as the music starts, the ducks climb out of the fountain and walk along the carpet to the elevator. The guy in charge takes them to the roof where they have their meals. It's quite a sight. What kills me is that this staid, posh hotel would pull a shtick like that, but for sure, that bar makes a bloody fortune."

Swannee scratched his head, "I won't be allowed to see it, will I?"

"Shit, I really don't know, never thought about it. I'm sorry man."

I looked out the window, watching horses scampering around in a field with a small girl chasing them with a stick. She looked happy. I wished I was happy. "Hey Swannee, has Jasper said anything to you about our fight?"

“What fight, it was a one punch knockdown. No, he’s been very quiet, but everyone’s impressed with the way you handled the situation.” He laughed, “I don’t think anybody’s gonna want to take you on. You know man, I just realized, that’s exactly what you did to that sergeant when you got me out of the stockade in Kansas.”

Looking out the window, trying to hide a smile, I thought, *yeah that’s me, one punch Morton*. “Hey look, we’re just about there, and I hope our bus will be waiting for us.

There it was. Everyone started to applaud.

As we piled out of the bus, I told Swanee I was going to grab some shut eye as soon as we checked in and asked him to have someone wake me around six. It was two o’clock in the afternoon. I had been working late on some new arrangements for that chick singer in New York, and I was beat down to my socks.

When we had all disembarked, I called out, “Hey you guys, if you want to check out the town, Beale Street’s the place. They have some great jazz joints there. See you all later.”

I walked up to my room in the boarding house. Fly paper hung from the ceiling. The walls were painted in a dull cream color. There was one picture of a horse that hung on one wall. The room was clean but bare, except for a bed, mirror and a closet. A small table had a pitcher of water, two glasses and some skimpy towels. The bathroom was down the hall.

I dropped my bag, stripped and collapsed into bed. I was asleep immediately.

## CHAPTER 33

During our first gig in Memphis, about halfway through the evening, Billy Jo stepped to the front of the band, raised his trumpet and played – all by himself – a four bar written introduction from my arrangement of Duke Ellington's MOOD INDIGO. Then, playing lead, he took the band through the first chorus. I joined him on clarinet for the next chorus, in which we did a written-out improvisation with only the rhythm section backing us up. The sax section took over and performed the sixteen bar release with me on lead clarinet, getting an almost Glenn Miller sound. Billy Jo then led the band with his trumpet for the last sixteen bars. He followed that up by swinging through an eight bar cadenza by himself, to finish the arrangement. The crowd loved it, but better than that, the whole band stood and joined in the applause.

We broke all records in Memphis, and then headed east. Cold weather had caused the leaves to lose their color and the ground was filled with those that had fallen. Our feet made crunching sounds as we walked.

The agency had planned gigs in Brownsville, Jackson and Dickson on our way to Nashville. At each gig, we were to play opposite a local band. On the bus ride to our first job in Brownsville, Swanee stood up front near our driver. "Guys, for the next three nights we'll be in a 'Battle of the Bands'. I've been told they swing real good. It's going to be a game of 'Can You Top This,' and I haven't got a clue as to what we can expect, so we'd better look good and be sharp. We're in a war and I don't plan on coming out second best!"

Everyone started talking at once, laughing and slapping each other on the back. Jason called out, "Great, we'll blow them all away. We're the boss band – that's for sure."

No question about it, we were ready. But we had been so isolated, I hoped there was nothing new or revolutionary happening in the world of music while we had been touring. I re-

membered when I was playing with the Air Corps base band in Dalhart, Texas. We were isolated there as well. I was furloughed in June of 1944. Soon after I arrived in New York City, I visited the jazz clubs on Fifty-Second Street. My musical senses were jolted. Be-bop had arrived on the scene. Hearing Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker for the first time scared me half to death. I kept hearing the same I GOT RHYTHM chords, but with a difference. The one chord was a major seventh with a ninth added. The six chord added a seventh, a thirteenth and a flatted ninth. The two chord had a diminished seventh. The five chord was a seventh with a flatted ninth plus a thirteenth. The progression was the same, but it opened up a whole new world. I listened in amazement. I panicked, and wondered if the music business had passed me by while I was traveling through the south. Hell, I was still playing a hybrid Dixieland/swing clarinet. Be-bop was a whole new ballgame and I wasn't sure I could make the transition.

The Woody Herman band really blew me away. Listening to it was like going back to school. Besides having an amazing group of young, talented musicians that included Zoot Sims and Stan Getz on tenors as well as Serge Chaloff on baritone sax, their arrangements were unbelievable. For a large band – five saxes, four trumpets, four trombones, a three-man rhythm section, and Woody doing the vocals and playing clarinet, they really swung.

When we arrived in Brownsville, I was surprised to see the hall set up so that each band was at the opposite end of a long rectangular ballroom. The Jimmy Bartlett band started off and I breathed a sigh of relief. They played poorly written arrangements and there was no blend or balance between the sax section and the brass section. The rhythm section was the best part of that band, but they couldn't hold a candle to Jason, Timmy and that thorn in my side, Jasper.

Swanee re-arranged our music, playing tunes similar to what they had played. If they played three ballads and two bounce tunes, we did the same. It was like hearing the difference between a high school band and a professional group, and the crowd picked up on it.

We were head and shoulders better. After the gig, we never mingled. The guys in the Bartlett band just 'folded their tents,' took off with their tails between their legs and never looked back.

The second night was pretty much the same, but the third night, playing against the Lewis Brown band, was different. They were the weakest of the three bands, very simple stock arrangements, with no blend between the sections. The Brown band played loud, then louder. They led off, but every time we played, their guys stood in front of us, laughing, waving their arms and doing anything they could to cause a commotion. The kids who usually stood in front of the bandstand, digging us, were pushed away.

I could see their anger – watching these smart-ass New York musicians and the white mother fucker playing with them. The verbal abuse we received was unbelievable.

The manager of the hall tried to stop them, but they kept at it. Finally, midway through the evening, Swanee cornered Lewis and asked him to stop, but all he got was a 'fuck you' answer. Swanee then said if it didn't stop he'd beat the shit out of him. That quieted everything down until our last set. We were playing our theme song, C JAM BLUES, to end the evening, when Brown threw a firecracker that exploded at my feet. I panicked, jumped out of my seat and stumbled back, knocking over my chair, almost cutting my lip on my mouthpiece reed. My first thought was that it was a gun shot. Before I could do anything, Jake and Terry were off the bandstand, throwing punches at Brown. In turn, the guys in the Brown band jumped them. It didn't take long before everyone was swinging away, but not musically. I landed on some guy's back, hitting him as hard as I could. The manager and his three bouncers almost had us separated, when suddenly I heard music. It was Jason, who had not joined the fight. He was at the piano, playing TIPTOE THROUGH THE TULIPS. As I threw my final punch, the fight was over. The only one who was really hurt was Brown, their leader. Swanee had done a number on him. This was truly a battle of the bands.

I sat on the floor, listening, as Jason continued to play the same song but in different tempos and styles. First as a waltz, then as a rumba, and finally, as a classical piece. By that time, every one of our guys had joined me on the floor laughing. As I sat there, I tried to figure out what had really happened during these past three nights. I realized that when we played, almost everyone was on the floor dancing. When the other bands performed – and at times they played fairly well – hardly anyone danced.

On the way to Nashville, Swanee, Jason, Willie and I sat together. The rest of the guys were involved in a crap game in the back of the bus.

Jason, who I felt was the brightest guy in the band and the most talented, remarked, “I know we were a better band all around, but how come the dance floor is always packed when we play?”

Willie nodded his head. “I was wondering the same thing.”

“I figure it’s got to be a couple of things,” Swanee said. “Number one, we play our ballads slower than most bands. That gives the kids a chance to feel their bodies as they press close to each other. Number two, our bounce tunes are never too fast, so even someone with two left feet, like Zak, has a chance to look and feel comfortable doing the lindy-hop.”

Swanee had hit it on the head, and I had to keep those thoughts in mind when I wrote my arrangements.

The music that Gillespie, Parker, and the Herman band played were for the jazz enthusiast – for listening, not dancing.

Then it was on through Nashville. In a small burg somewhere between Murfreesboro and Chattanooga, a nasty welcome awaited us. After checking into our boarding house, Swanee received a message to meet with the manager of the dance hall.

Swanee and Tom Harris headed out to see what was happening. On their return, Tom gathered us together. “Last night, the KKK burned down the Swinging Palace Dance Hall, but somehow the dance floor survived. I might add that they left a burning cross.”

“Hey, does that mean we move on?” asked Jake.

“That all depends on us,” Tom said. “They’ve cleared the dance floor and considering the mess, it’s in pretty good shape. The manager said they’d rig a small stage and bring in a piano. Theirs was destroyed in the fire. He planned to put cars and trucks all around the place with their lights on. Also, if we agree to play, he’ll bring in guards with shotguns, prepared to protect us.” He continued, “So you see, it really is up to us. Do we play or do we turn tail and run?”

I stood to the side, staying out of the picture, and hoping we’d turn tail and run. *Who needs this kind of shit? I’m not excited about being in another war, especially where guys are using shotguns.*

“Tom,” I called out. “These guards, are they colored or white?”

“Colored,” he answered in a way that indicated, hey, what’s the difference.

*I can’t believe what I’m hearing. We’re going to have the Civil War all over again, and I’m going to be in the middle of it.*

The guys talked among themselves. As they did, I could see, hear and feel their anger. Tom, who seemed to be more relaxed than anyone, and that included Swanee, finally spoke. “Okay, what’s it going to be? All those in favor of staying and playing, raise your hand.”

I couldn’t believe what I saw. These were not the happy, broad chasing guys any more. This was now a bunch of tough kids from Harlem and they were not going to take any shit, KKK or no KKK. There was no hesitation; eleven hands went up. Tom turned to me. I swallowed hard before raising my hand to make it unanimous.

“Good,” Tom sighed loudly. “I’ll go back to the hall and let them know we’re coming. You guys better pack, grab some grub, and change. We leave for the job in an hour and a half and we won’t be coming back here. We’ll sleep on the bus tonight.”

I looked at Tom, as if seeing him perhaps for the first time. *Cool, calculating, unafraid. Damn, what makes him tick? I have to talk to him. I have to find out.*



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As we drove close to the dance hall, I could smell the stench of burnt lumber. Jimmy pulled the bus behind what should have been the wall at the back of the bandstand. I stepped off the bus and checked out what had been the Swinging Palace Dance Hall. My stomach tightened into a knot. This was like the attack on our bus. I was scared shitless. Every time I took a deep breath, I choked from the stench. *How the fuck are we going to play if we can't breathe?*

It was another warm, humid night with hardly any breeze. I watched as twenty-five men with brooms, mops and pails of water worked feverishly to clear the area, raising clouds of black dust. I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket to cover my nose and mouth. The burnt cross remained like a symbol, standing near the road that led to what had been the Swinging Palace Dance Hall.

We stopped. Anger was written over everyone's face. Their curses and fist shaking moved me beyond anything they might have said.

Our drivers started to unload the music stands and set up the stage. At eight sharp, we cranked up our theme song, C JAM BLUES.

Slowly, couples squeezed between the cars and trucks. They stopped, looked around, then gingerly – or was it fearfully – stepped onto the dance floor and started to dance. At first, one couple at a time, then suddenly the place was jammed with dancers. And, they were dressed to the nines, in their finest, in contrast to the surroundings.

As we played, I saw a sky filled with stars and a full moon that hung like a painting, but lovely setting or not, I was still scared to death.

The manager had placed lighted candles near each of our stands, creating an eerie feeling as we played. It brought back memories of a scene from an old movie, in which a symphony orchestra played by candlelight. I wished I could remember the name.

Halfway through the evening, the manager passed out a pint of bourbon to each of us. We turned to Swanee who just shrugged. "No rules tonight. This is a night we'll remember. And maybe tell our children about it. That is, if we live through it."

The bourbon didn't help. We kept looking around for the Klan in white robes to come storming out. I continued to wait for that other shoe to drop with guns going off and rebel yells, but nothing happened. At one A.M. that morning, our bus headed down the road toward Chattanooga.

Tom pulled out three quarts of Scotch. We passed it from man to man. Our night of playing under the stars was over, but not forgotten. These problems were beginning to take their toll. This was not laughing, happy drinking. This was serious, calm-your-nerves drinking, and that was not fun.

We continued doing one-niters through the state, ending up in Chattanooga, where we played three nights in and around the town. Not since our first week had the band played so poorly. There was no spark, no laughter, no joking around. Friends were snapping at each other. We were all tight as the skin on a snare drum. Hell, we even ignored the groupies. Then we were off again, heading to Knoxville, our last stop in Tennessee.

Christmas cheer was everywhere. The streets and homes were lit up with red, green and blue lights. Holly hung all around, on trees, over street signs. With a light snow falling, the city was a pretty sight. Maybe it was the look of the city, or the holiday season. Everyone began to feel more comfortable, but not completely at ease. In spite of the fact that it was Christmas Eve, we played to a full house at the Capitol Club.

After the gig, I grabbed a cab in search of our Christmas Eve meal. I smiled at the realization that I had become the official gofer. It had become an automatic thing. An hour later, I

reached our boarding house with four bags of hot, steaming food. It seemed that, no matter where we were, no matter what day it was, no matter what time it was, I could always find a Chinese restaurant that was open. Not to be outdone, Swanee scrounged up two cases of beer.

The timing was perfect. I grabbed Tom and pulled him to a corner. We each had a cardboard box of food and chopsticks. “We’ve been together through some rough times, but I know nothing about you. How about giving me a history lesson on the life and times of Tom Harris?”

“Well, there’s not much to tell.”

“Bullshit. Come on, give.”

“Okay, okay. I guess I do have a history. I was born and brought up in Boston. My mother was a public school teacher. My father had a small construction business. It started out as a Mister Fix-it handy man operation. Before he died he’d built the business to the point that he had ten men working for him.

I stood eating and smiled. *I love his Bostonian accent.* I listened as he went on.

“I went to Boston University, and graduated as an accountant. After graduation, I had trouble finding a decent job.”

“Was that because you were colored?” I asked.

“I graduated with a three point eight average. Why else?”

“Wow, no shit?”

He nodded, “No shit.”

“Obviously, something worked. What happened? How and when?”

“I bought an old jalopy and decided to try New York. Well, I got as far as New Rochelle. Like that old song said, ‘It’s only forty-five minutes from Broadway.’” He grinned and continued. “I pulled into this old beat-up gas station, and the heap died.

“This colored guy came out of the shop, all dirty and greasy. I explained to him what was up. He took one look at the car, made a small adjustment and the motor started. “Wait in my office,” he said, “I need to do a few more things to this wreck, but I’ll get it purring.”

I walked into his office, if you’d call it that. There was a desk and two chairs. Papers, bills, legal stuff all over the place. It was a mess. I checked through some of the junk while I waited, and man, it was worse than a mess.

He walked back in about a half hour later. His name was Bill Walker. “Your car is fixed.” He grabbed a billing pad, wrote down some numbers and handed it to me.

I looked. He replaced points and condenser and reset the timing – \$35.00 dollars. I reached into my pocket and as I did, I asked. “Bill, who handles your bookkeeping?”

“No one, I kinda do it when I get a chance.”

“Who handles your accounting work?”

“Some guy, he comes by once a year and files that shit for me. I pay him too much, and I think I pay the government too much as well. Why do you ask?”

“Well, that started the whole thing. I took care of his books, which led to others like him. These guys were being screwed by everyone. I finally worked out a deal with Bill. I’d find an old, beat-up station. We’d buy it. I had to borrow the money from my mother at the beginning. We cleaned it up, then worked a deal with Getty Oil Company to furnish us with gas and oil products. We did no repair work. It was gas and go, and that’s what we called it.”

“And that’s it? Can’t be.”

“Well yes, basically that’s it. Bill and I now have fifty Gas and Go Stations. He oversees the running of the stations, hiring and supervising the managers, always making sure the stations are kept neat and clean. We also sell soda, candy and stuff like that. I run our office, and it handles all the paper work. I have five bookkeepers who make sure our program works.”

“How did you meet Emily?”

“She was a dancer at the Cotton Club, in New York City. That’s the place that had an all-colored revue. As a matter of fact, Duke Ellington was the band leader at that time. Anyway, a friend of mine introduced us. It was love at first sight. I can tell you she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. So now you’ve got the whole story.”

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It was Christmas day, and a slight dusting of snow lay on the ground. Tom had arranged for a private party at a small restaurant in the colored section of town. The room, like the restaurant, was rustic. A small spinet sat alongside the bar. As usual, Jason played, but this time it was Christmas music. He finished Jingle Bells and called Timmy. Together they did a rendition of my Christmas song, A LOVELY TIME OF YEAR.

Winter is coming,  
cold winds are blowing  
Christmas will soon be  
upon us again,  
Such happy days.  
Isn’t this a lovely time of year.

Church bells are ringing,  
children are singing,  
songs about Christmas  
and reindeer and things  
like Rudolph’s nose.  
This is such a lovely time of year.

Santa’s on his way now.  
Sleigh bells sing their happy song.  
Soon we’ll find our gifts under the tree,  
for you and me.

Snow covered mountains,  
ski trails around them,  
eggnog and holly,  
and laughter and dreams,  
and happy things.  
This is such a lovely time of year.

When they finished, I said, “Thanks guys, you really made my song come alive.”

A Christmas tree stood in the corner of the room. Boxes of gifts lay underneath.

Tom, Emily and Dora, along with the two drivers and the entire band, were drinking and enjoying the holiday spirit. The tour was almost over and except for a few minor problems, things had gone smoothly since the night of the fire.

That changed nothing for me. I would have liked to sit in a corner and quietly get loaded. I was not a happy camper. As the song said, ‘The Thrill Is Gone.’ I kept wishing the tour was over. I had never felt like that before, because I had always been a happy road musician.

The tables, as usual, were set in a circle, with place cards at each setting.

Tom tapped his glass. “Ladies and Gentlemen, please be seated. Damn, I’m beginning to sound more and more like a Mr. Interlocutor in a minstrel show.”

When everyone settled down, he continued. “Men, your journey through the south is almost over. In just three weeks, you’ll be back in New York.”

The guys all started to clap and stomp their feet. Tom waited and went on.

“This tour has been a success, financially, musically and spiritually. Yes, I’m proud to say, you’ve done what no other band has ever attempted. A mixed race band that worked and played together in perfect harmony through the segregated south.

“I know it didn’t start out that way, and maybe that was good. Swannee once told me that Zak was colorblind, but the rest of you weren’t.”

I thought, *Tom you haven’t got the slightest idea how tough it was working with these guys at the beginning. In perfect harmony? Ha, it was more like the band was completely out of tune.* I listened as Tom went on.

“I’m pleased to say, I can see that’s no longer true. When I asked Swannee some time ago, how things were going, he jokingly answered, ‘Man, we is one.’ All I can say to that is, Amen.”

*Amen, except for Jasper, that’s the right word. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.*

Tom sipped from the water glass in front of him. “So, I want to propose a toast to the Swannee Johnson Swingers,” he paused, “and from what I’ve seen and heard, you guys sure are that. So, to each and every one of you, Emily, Dora and I wish you all a Merry Christmas.”

Dora and Emily went to the Christmas tree, took twelve small boxes and handed them out.

Tom, still standing, said, “Since this band is a one and only, I’ve purchased identical pinkie rings for each of you. They’re all sterling silver with black onyx and white mother-of-pearl stones. I chose them because I feel they are symbolic. We kind of guessed at the finger sizes, so if they don’t fit, I’ve made an arrangement with a local jeweler to resize them. So now, won’t you please open your gifts.”

I put the ring on. It fit perfectly. Some were able to trade with others. Finally, only Jasper, the drummer, and Jimmy, the baritone sax man, needed to see the jeweler. Everyone seemed to have gone Christmas shopping, and we spent the next hour exchanging and opening gifts.

Finally, I excused myself. It should have been a happy time, but I felt down. I put on my jacket and walked in the snow. What was it? We had worked so hard – we’d been through so much. It was almost over. We had climbed the mountain, but try as I might, I couldn’t shake this feeling. The tour was coming to an end. All the shit – dodging sheriffs, and living with the likes of Jasper – had finally got to me. I returned to the restaurant and headed for the phone booth. I dialed. The phone rang at the other end.

“Hi Ellie, it’s me, Zak.”

## FINALE



## CHAPTER 34

The tour was almost over, and it appeared as if we'd arrive in New York without damage to any of us, except for Jasper's broken nose.

Living in New York, I never thought much about the segregation of people, where and how they lived.

My family's apartments were always in a mixed neighborhood of Jews and Italians. Elementary school was always all white. When I entered high school I finally met colored kids my own age. Before that, the only colored person I knew was Jim White, the machinist at my father's auto parts store.

Obviously there was segregation, but mostly because of where one lived, but in the South, the separation was spelled out with 'Whites only' hotels, drinking fountains, movie houses, etc. I experienced it first hand and it wasn't pretty.

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The band had left the stand. It was our last break before the New Year's celebration would start. Swannee had outfitted us in black silk cardigans, black shirts and pants, plus silver neckties. It was a festive night at the Crystal Ballroom in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A large circular chandelier turned as pencil spots hit it from all corners of the room, making it sparkle. The crowd was mostly dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns.

I had joined Tom and Emily at their table. She asked, "What are your plans after the tour is finished?"

"Well, Sherwood wants me to rejoin his band. Dr. Baker, head of the Conservatory, has asked me to do the Mozart A Major Clarinet Concerto at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on the 15th of March. And, my agent has connected me with a new young singer. I'm writing music for her nightclub act and the money is not to be believed."

Tom started to apologize, but I waved him off. “Please Tom, you’ve paid me what I asked for. I’ve no complaints.”

“I’m so pleased for you,” Emily said. “I must write down the date of your concert. Tom and I will certainly want to be there.”

“I’m hoping everyone will be there. I’ll have tickets for all of you when the time comes.”

Tom picked up his glass of champagne. “A toast to you, Zak, it sure looks like good things will be happening to you in 1950. Emily and I are pleased and excited for you. You’ve earned it.”

Swanee’s familiar call rang through the hall. “Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho, it’s back to work we go.”

We headed for the stage, coming from all parts of the room. Dora came down the aisle wearing an off-the-shoulder white gown that made every man do a double-take. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me hard. “Happy New Year, Zak. I’ve wanted to do more than that to you all through this trip. But who knows, somewhere down the road we’ll find each other alone and then watch out.” She touched my cheek and headed toward her parents’ table. I turned to watch her hips swing. She peeked over her shoulder and smiled. I sighed and continued toward the bandstand.

## CHAPTER 35

It was over. The last gig in Harrisburg was done. The band would leave for New York in the morning.

On the bus ride back to our motel, I called out, "Listen, tomorrow morning we'll be passing right through Gettysburg. I know we're all anxious to get home, but I'd like to stop and spend a few hours looking over the site."

"Why?" asked Jake.

I was surprised. It appeared that none of them were interested in such an important part of our history, so I explained, "Gettysburg was the turning point of the Civil War. It was the first time General Robert E. Lee ever lost a battle. The war went on for two more years, but it was the beginning of the downfall of the Confederacy and the end of slavery, so how about it?"

"But Zak, if you've seen it before, why bother?" asked Jake as he spread his arms.

"That's the point. I've never been there. I've only read about it, and I've pictured it in my mind's eye. Damn, we're so close. It would be a shame not to stop."

Willie shouted, "Yeah man, that's cool. Hey everybody, let's do it, okay?"

No one spoke. Swannee finally stood with a broad smile. "I want to see which nigger is going to say no?"

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It was cold, with snow on the ground, as we trudged up Little Round Top. We were all dressed for the weather, with mufflers wrapped around our necks and parts of our faces. I had bought a stocking cap that I pulled down over my ears. When we reached the top, the wind picked up, causing the snow to swirl. We walked around the battlefield as Willie and I explained to the guys how the battle had gone during the first two days.

At this point I said, “This is where Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and his 20th Maine Regiment was stationed, out here on the flank. The rest of General Meade’s Union Army was spread out to our right. Chamberlain had been given specific orders: “Don’t leave. Don’t let them flank you. The 20th Maine may die here, but it must not give ground.”

I looked down the hill and pointed to the big boulders that sat in the valley. “The Rebs went around to the left and headed up here, toward where we’re standing now. Everyone crowded around listening.

“It was the 15th Alabama regiment, led by Colonel William Oates, who was under the command of General Longstreet. The fighting was intense, but the Rebs kept coming. Chamberlain’s troops ran out of ammunition, and that’s when Chamberlain did an amazing thing. He called to his men to fix bayonets and with him leading the charge, they attacked down the slope right into the teeth of the Confederate charge. That surprise move stopped the 15th Alabama in their tracks and sent those Rebs back in total disarray, helping win the day.”

“Hey Zak, are you shittin’ us?” asked Jake. “That’s like in the movies. Those things don’t happen in real life.” The rest of the guys nodded and talked amongst themselves.

“God damn, Jake, that’s exactly what happened,” Willie exclaimed.

That stopped all conversation. They waited.

“Jake, you’re right,” I continued, “it’s almost like a movie, but it’s true. The amazing part about this was that Chamberlain was not regular army. He had first studied for the ministry and then became a college professor. By the end of the war, he had risen to the rank of General. After the war, he was elected Governor of Maine four times.”

Terry shook his head and said, “Well, fuck man, if that’s what happened, I’d better start reading about this shit. That’s good stuff.”

Everyone started to laugh, and as we walked back down Little Round Top, Willie shook his head. “It wasn’t really good stuff, man. That three-day battle took the lives of twenty-three thousand Union Troops and twenty-eight thousand Rebs.”

They continued down the road in silence.

## CHAPTER 36

The bus crept slowly along Broadway. It was five in the evening. The street lights were on, the roads jammed. All the card and crap games were done. Everyone was checking out the BIG APPLE. Finally, Jimmy pulled into a Mobil Station on the corner of 125th Street and Broadway.

It was quiet as we all piled out. Jimmy and George handed out luggage and instruments. One by one, the guys hugged and left – that is, except for Jasper, who seemed to ignore everyone. He took his drum set, hailed a cab and was off.

Phone numbers and addresses had been exchanged during the last leg of the trip. Doing another tour together had been discussed, but we all knew that this trip was a one-time thing. This band would never be the same.

“Hey Swannee, I’m gonna call Ellie, then grab a cab and head on home.”

We hugged, “Keep in touch.” I said.

“You too, man.”

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I reached for my keys as I took the elevator to the third floor, thinking, *I’m home. I made it through.* The door opened and Ellie said, “Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.”

She stood there bare-ass naked. All she wore was high heel shoes and a smile.

I looked at her as I held instruments in one hand and luggage in the other.

Ellie grabbed my tie and pulled me into the apartment. She closed the door, threw her arms around my neck and kissed me hard.

I dropped my bags and kissed her back.

## CHAPTER 37

I was sitting at the piano, working on a new arrangement for the Glen Denny band, when the doorbell rang. “It’s open,” I shouted.

The door opened. Swannee peeked in.

“Swannee, come on in. What’s happening, man?” I rose, crossed the room and we hugged.

“I’m taking the band out on tour again. We leave in three weeks, on the twentieth of March, just after your concert.”

“Great, how are the guys?”

“Everything is cool, but it’s not going to be the same. Jason, Jasper and Timmy formed a trio. They got an agent. Shit, you know that. You hooked them up with Ellie Weiss.”

I nodded, “I didn’t mean to pull them away from you, but we talked about that before. Jason is just too good.” *I would have loved it if Jason had dumped Jasper. But what can I say, except that I’m happy for Jason and Timmy.*

“I understand, but that’s fine, Zak. I’m glad you were able to get them started with a top agency. Anyway, I’ve got a new rhythm section. Not quite as good, but much better than average. The guy I got to replace you is also pretty good, but shit man, he’s not you.”

I smiled.

“Hell, this trip just won’t be the same. Man, an all-colored band, that’s no fun. So tell me, how are things working out?”

“Good. I’m writing a lot. Ellie has hooked me up with a bunch of new young singers. It’s going well. Hey, want a beer?”

“No, I came by just to say hello, but it’s time. I gotta go. I’ll see you at the concert on the fifteenth. I know you’ll knock ’em dead.”

We hugged again and he was gone. And all of a sudden I felt down. *Would I miss the road? It would be different this time, no Jasper to worry about. Just a happy group, but we'd still have problems with the white sheriffs. Can one experience the same feelings twice? If I had known what was coming, would I be more frightened? Was it all worth it? Am I better person because of the trip? The bonding was wonderful. I loved those guys, Swannee, Willie, Jason and even Jake at the end.*

I sighed, turned off my memory and went back to work.



CHAPTER 38

**THE BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC**

**PROUDLY PRESENTS**

**AN ALL MOZART CONCERT**

**FEATURING**

**GUEST CLARINETIST**

**ZAK MORTON**

**PLAYING**

**MOZART'S A MAJOR CLARINET CONCERTO**

**ALSO INCLUDED IN THE PROGRAM**

**MOZART'S 40<sup>th</sup> IN G MINOR**

**EINE KLEINE NACHT MUSIK**

Ellie and I peered out from behind the curtain at the full house. “There’s Tom and Emily – and Dora’s here, too. She must have flown down from Boston. And look, the whole band is here, that is, except for Jasper. My God, even Jimmy and George, our two drivers, are here.”

“Well I’ll be damned, there’s Judy Barr and that must be her husband.”

Ellie took my hands, “Are you nervous?”

“Yes, but that’s good. I’ll settle down after I play the first note.”

*The dream has come true and how I love it. It’s music for my soul and nobody can take this feeling away from me.*

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I played the final notes and watched as the crowd whistled and applauded. The orchestra stood, the string sections tapping their stands with their bows. The rest of the orchestra applauded. Dr. Baker, who had conducted the performance, hugged me, then arm in arm we walked off the stage. The response from the audience continued and Dr. Baker said, "Go, take another bow, you deserve it."

Backstage, Dr. Baker took me by the shoulders. "Zak, I'm proud of you. That was a wonderful performance. But excuse me now, I must change my shirt and wash before I start the second half of the program. We'll toast your performance with champagne, after the concert. I'll see you later."

I walked into my dressing room. It was filled with flowers. I loosened my bow tie and sat. *My God, it's over, but did I do the andante passages too slowly? Shit, it's over, relax. Anyway I loved it. No matter what anyone says, this is my night.*

My tuxedo jacket and shirt were soaked. I took them off, went to the sink and splashed myself all over with cold water.

Ellie walked in. "Zak, you were wonderful." She took my face in her hands and kissed me.

"Thank you, Ellie, but I think I played the andante passages too slowly. I don't know, I'm not sure, but look at me. Now that it's over, I'm starting to shake like a leaf in a wind storm."

"What you need is a drink. What can I get you?"

"Plenty of scotch over ice. While you're doing that, I'd better get out of this tux and get into something comfortable."

She poured my drink. "As far as your playing the andante passages too slowly. If you did, who would notice? It was beautiful. It was flawless."

The concert was over. My dressing room was loaded with well-wishers. I was hugged and patted on the back by the Swannee Johnson Swingers, all flashing their sterling silver rings.

The usher, who was attending the door, came and whispered.

“Judy Barr?” I nodded. “By all means, let her in.”

Judy came in with a tall, handsome man. I went to her and kissed her on both cheeks, European style. “Judy, I’m so glad you came. This must be your husband.”

“Yes, Zak, this is George.”

We shook hands. “You’re a lucky man, George. Judy’s a lovely lady and a good friend. Ellie, I’d like you to meet Judy and her husband George.”

“Hi, Judy, it’s nice to meet you. Hello, George, I hope you liked the concert.”

Judy answered, “It was wonderful. We just had to come back to congratulate you. Best of luck, always, Zak.”

I kissed her on both cheeks again, shook George’s hand and they left.

The crowd slowly filed out, leaving Tom, Emily and Dora. Jason and Swannee were over in a corner talking to Ellie, who was now the agent for Jason’s trio.

Tom turned to me. “Swannee’s leaving for another trip in five days. Will you miss life on the road?”

I sipped my drink. “Right at this moment, no. But Tom, I tell you, I’m glad I made that tour. There were times when I was scared to death, but we stuck to it. Everyone said I was crazy to chance it. They must have said the same thing to Columbus and Lindbergh as well. We were the first and nobody can take that away from us.”

## CHAPTER 39

It was March 20. I caught a cab and we drove uptown. The Swannee Johnson Swingers' bus was parked on 48th Street and 1st Avenue.

There they were, the whole band, all milling around, some with chicks hanging on their arms.

I had been to a few rehearsals, so I'd met all the new guys. Swannee spotted me and smiled. "I knew you'd be here to see us off. Thanks, man."

"Well, I had to see my brotha before he left town," I mimicked. "But I can tell you, I'm here with mixed emotions."

He put his arm around my shoulder. "I hear you, brother. No trip will ever be the same."

As we talked, Willie, Jake, Terry and James rushed over. We hugged.

Finally Swannee sang out, "All aboard that's going aboard, so hear me, Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho, it's off to work we go."

I watched the bus turn north toward the George Washington Bridge. I hailed a cab going south to the Village and sat there with tears in my eyes.

## MUSICIAN'S LANGUAGE GLOSSARY

A BALL – Having fun / enjoyment

AX – Instrument / could be any musical instrument

BAND BOYS – The people that set up the bandstand, lay out the music for each musician before the job starts, and pack everything up at the end of the evening.

BE-BOP – A style of jazz that started in the mid 1940's

BOUNCE TUNE – A little up-tempo, easy to dance to

BRING ME UP TO SCRATCH – Tell me what you've been doing up to this time.

BROADS – Girls

BLOW YOU AWAY – Play better than you / you'll like what you hear.

BLUES NUMBER – 12 bar blues - build a melody within the chord structure - no set melody necessary - just improvise within the chord structure

CATS – Men

CHARTS – Arrangements

CHICKS – Girls

CHORUS – A complete song / usually 32 bars - to play a solo, improvise on a 32 bar song.

CHOPS – Musical technique

COPY WORK – To write out the individual parts that each musician will play. This information is taken from the arrangement.

CUT – To play better than someone else

DUDE – Person

HE GOES ABOUT AN OCTAVE AND A HALF – Voice range

FLIP SIDE – The least important side of a record (old 78 records - one song on each side)

GIG – Job

I'M WIPED – Exhausted

INTRO – Introduction to a song / usually four bars / quite often improvised.

IT'S A BLAST– A wonderful time

IT WAS A KICK – Exciting

JAM / JAMMING – Improvising

KNOCKED MY SOCKS OFF – Excited / thrilled

MAN – Friend / someone you like

MY BOY – Someone you care for

MY MAIN MAN – Important person

NINTH AND THIRTEENTH CORDS – Advanced chord structure

OPEN JAM SESSION – Anyone can play / sit in

PAD – Apartment / home

PARTY IS COOKING – Very lively

PLAYING FOURS – Two or more musicians play alternate improvising four bars each.

PUT ON A SHOW – Play great

RHYTHM SECTION – Bass, drums, piano, sometimes guitar as well.

RHYTHM SECTION WORKS – Plays well

SCORE – Arrangement / chart

SCUFFLING – Struggling

SESSION – Jam session

SHORT OF BREAD – Short of money

SIDEMAN – Musician with a band

SIT IN – Spontaneously join a group and play

SOMETHING ELSE – Great

STEADY GIG – Steady job

SWING – Music that flows – a constant easy rhythm

UNISON – Two or more musicians playing the same notes together

UP TEMPO – Fast tempo

UP TEMPO ZINGER – Fast / flag waver / loud / exciting

WORKED MY ASS OFF – Worked hard