



Public lynching of black teenager [Henry Smith](#) in [Paris, Texas](#), 1 February 1893 – Unknown author, Public domain, Wikimedia

Is it possible for white America to really understand black's distrust of the legal system, their fears of racial profiling and the police, without understanding how cheap a black life was for so long a time in our nation's history?

— Philip Dray

Giovanni

No one can dub you with dignity. That's yours to claim.

— Odetta

The train through Bulgaria stopped at every village, sometimes sitting for hours on a siding waiting for another train to clear, the cold making my fingers so numb that it was difficult to write to Céline. My toes were so frozen they were going to drop off. Thank God, I'd brought extra cashmere scarves. I took off my shoes and wrapped my feet and legs in woolen bandages. Each time I was about to nod off, the train would lurch forward again waking me up, only to stop again after a few kilometers, to pick up a woman with a baby pig. On the opposite seat, an old woman was suckling a baby from her withered breast. Where her eyes had once been, there were only empty sockets with a membrane as smooth as that of a baby's skin. When you travel in primitive conditions, you have painful experiences. It's fascinating to see how others live.



Tsarevets fortress in Tarnovo, capital of the 12th century Second Bulgarian Empire – Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia

A young girl got on dressed in her Sunday best, her nylon stockings repaired in so many places that her legs looked like a mass of scars. Since there were no seats left, I offered her my place on the wooden bench. For a moment she hesitated, then sat down, her enormous brown eyes glancing at me in awe of a foreigner with cashmere scarves wrapped around his feet. Seeing that I was fascinated with her stockings, she blushed a radiant pink, a rare moment of grace on a bitter winter's journey.

After a locomotive break down and an endless succession of days, we arrived in Istanbul so wiped out that we crashed for twenty-four hours. Mansur Hashim, a Muslim, took me to Hagia Sophia, its immense dome rising from massive pendentives, the ribs in black and gold, ringed by dozens of small windows, splinters of light vanishing into the vastness of the space, a floating immensity suggesting the infinitude of God.



[Hagia Sophia](#), Istanbul – Author, [Andreas Wahra](#), public domain, [German Wikipedia](#)

Afterward we sat in a tavern eating pastries of sesame, butter, honey, and walnuts, drinking raki and listening to a singer amid a crowd of men, the extended chords echoing from a vaulted ceiling, the sweet-scented smoke of hookahs drifting through the room. Mansur finished his raki and sat silently for a while, listening intently to the singer, his voice wailing in a minor key blending with the roar of voices of a hundred men.

“I understand you were born in Italy,” Mansur said, lighting up a pungent Turkish cigarette, “though I wouldn’t guess that from your English. I didn’t know jazz was big in Italy.”

“Papa was an aficionado of American jazz, but we only knew what we heard on a 78 platter. You’re from New Orleans, Mansur. I’ll bet you can tell me stuff I’ve never heard.”

“I can tell you a great deal about New Orleans. Yes sir, I can tell you plenty about the South. When my family moved to New Orleans, I discovered jazz. After emancipation, the Negro had more time to create music. But the paths a white man could take weren’t open to me. I didn’t have the chance to be admitted to the conservatory or take lessons from famous teachers. It was tough just to get my hands on a decent instrument. In most areas of the South, Black Codes had been passed outlawing drumming by black folk. But African-Americans got around the law by using hand-clapping and foot-stomping, African rhythms that slipped by the plantation masters.”



The krar, a five or six-stringed lyre from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Tuned to a pentatonic scale, the krar may be electrically amplified like a guitar – Photograph by Temesgen, Wikimedia

“Yeah, last year in Nigeria, Morocco, and Ethiopia. I played at the Sunset Bar in Addis Ababa with a saxophonist with a quavering vibrato. Gétatchèw Mèkurya blows sounds like Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy, but he’s never heard them. The same ideas arrive independently on two continents. Before he picked up the saxophone and clarinet, Gétatchèw played traditional Ethiopian instruments, kirar, a six-string lyre, and the masenqo, a single-string bowed lute. His vocal quality comes out of his love of the Ethiopian shellelas.”

“Shellelas?”

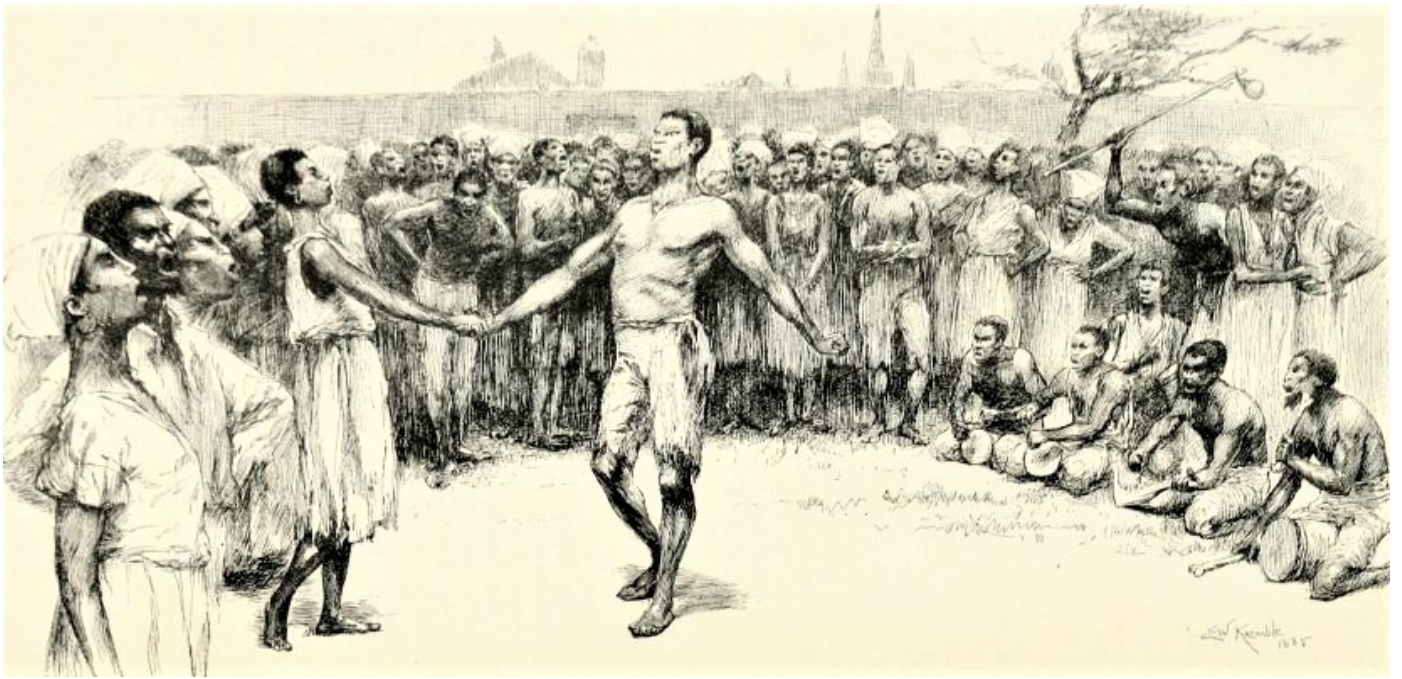
“Shellelas are chanted going into battle by Ethiopian warriors of the Tigre tribe. Gétatchèw was wearing a lion’s mane.” Mansur laughed, “Playing in Arica was really sweet. Those African cats loved our music. We sold out every time. I wish Americans had as much enthusiasm as those cats. I learned a lot about drumming in Africa. Back in the days of slavery, there was one exception to the drumming prohibition — a square in New Orleans, Place Congo where slaves were allowed to dance, sing, and play drums, gourds, jaw bones. and banjos. It was music heavy on rhythm. Due to the Black Codes banning drumming, traditional African drumming was not preserved as it was in Cuba and the Caribbean islands. Poor black folk played in their homes beating on tin cans and empty bottles.”

“Cool,” I laughed, “you cats invented *musique concrète* even before the Europeans.”

“We did a lot of experimentation,” Mansur said, “A lot of it at first was vocal. Gospel spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts, and chants were part of the development of jazz. African American songs were made up of call-and-response music. While the soloist was still singing the chorus would begin and while the chorus was still singing, the lead singer would begin again. A choral response is rhythmical and repetitive like drums and base while the soloist improvises at will. At the time of emancipation, a lot of folks couldn’t read. It was a communal worship of God. The rhythmic repetition put the singer into a transcendental state.”

“Hmm. . . an altered state of consciousness.”

“That’s why it’s called spirituals. A lot of great singers like Diana Washington came out of the gospel tradition. One of my favorite songs of Diana’s is, ‘You’re Nobody Until Somebody Loves You.’ Born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama she was only twenty when she made Billboard’s Harlem Hit Parade. Diana has a voice that’s both salty and sultry, flows like honey satin from R & B to blues to jazz to torch songs. ‘What a Difference a Day Makes’ was number four on the pop chart. Diana has come a long way from the choir at St. Luke’s Baptist Church.”



Dancing in Congo Square, 1886 – Drawing by Edward Winsor Kemble, Wikimedia



Cakewalk poster, 1896, Primrose & West's Big Minstrels – Author, Strobridge Lithographing, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia



Diana Washington, 30 August 1952 – Photograph by James Kriegsmann, Mercury Records, Public domain, Wikimedia

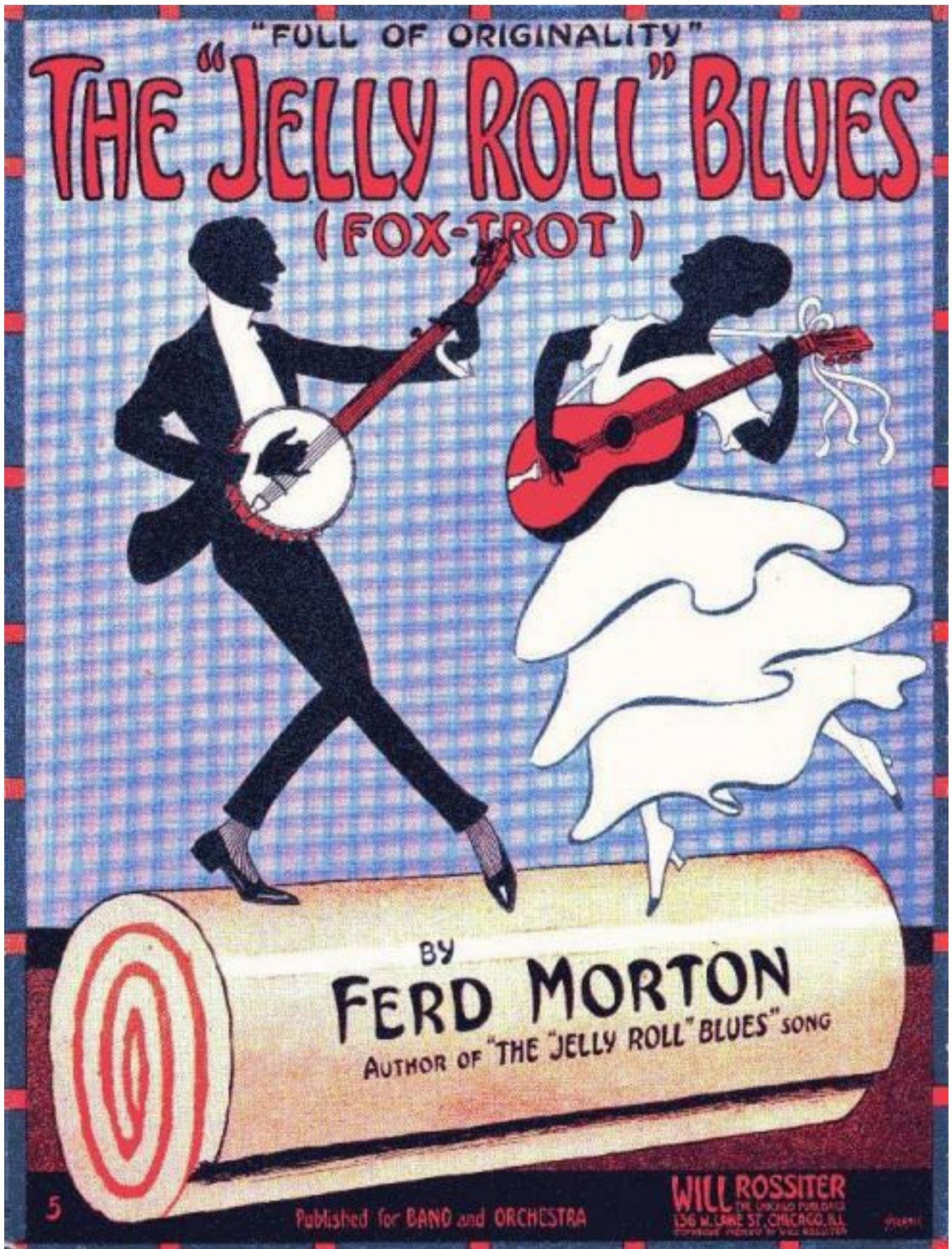


Composer, lyricist, and pianist of ragtime jazz, Eubie Blake – Unknown author and date, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

“After slavery was abolished, “Mansur went on, “Black music took a big leap forward. For the first time musicians could get a musical education. Negro pianists like Jelly Roll Morton and Scott Joplin could get work in minstrel shows and vaudeville, in clubs and brothels playing ragtime. Jazz has been influenced by many sources. In Jelly Roll’s playing and Scott Joplin’s compositions, you hear African-based rhythmic patterns, like tresillo, habanera rhythm, and cinquillo. The Baltimore style of Eubie Blake influenced Stride piano playing where the right hand plays the melody, while the left hand provides the rhythm and baseline.”

“This must have been the time that the blues became popular.”

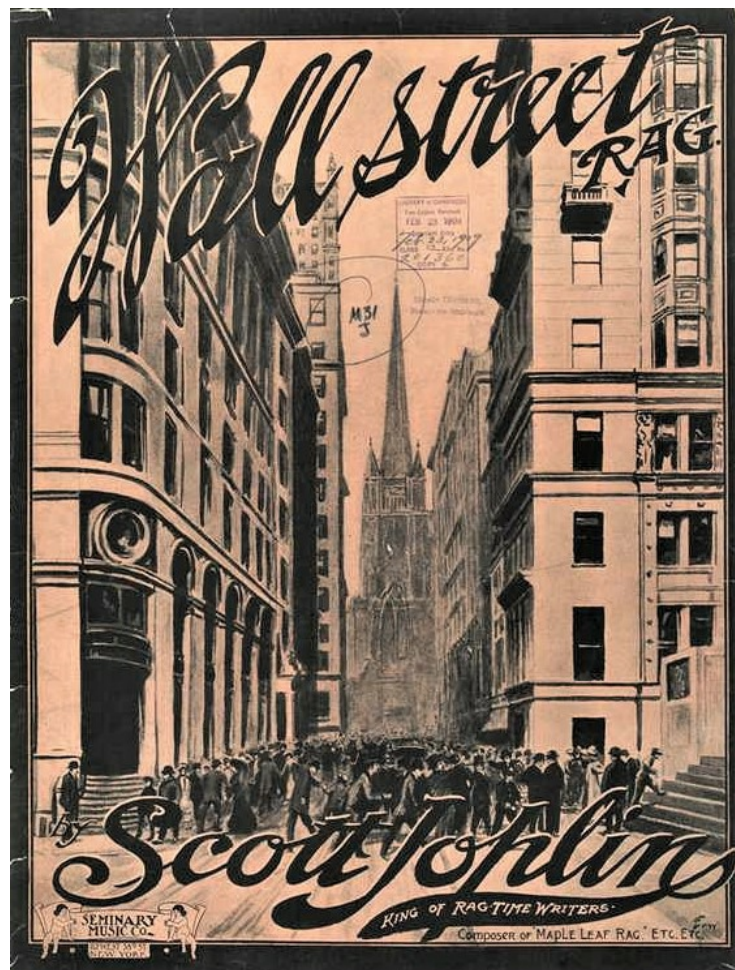
“While traveling through the Mississippi Delta, a cornet player from St. Louis, W. C. Handy became intrigued with a form of blues that had African roots, the Delta blues. Deeply religious, Handy was influenced by church music and the sounds of nature, the murmuring of the creek, the hooting of owls, and singing of the whip-poor-wills. The songs Handy composed, ‘St. Louis Blues’ and ‘Memphis Blues,’ are still jazz standards today. The blues opened up a new approach to harmony which through twelve-bar blues chord progressions, the harmonic complexities are taken to a higher level.”



Sheet music cover: *The Jelly Roll Blues*, by Ferdinand Morton, known as Jelly Roll Morton – Author, Publisher, Will Rossiter, Public domain, Wikimedia



At left, **W. C. Handy**, age 19 – Unknown author, Public domain, Wikimedia. African American composer and song writer. At right, **W. C. Handy**, director of the Alabama Agriculture & Mechanical College Band, **W. C. Handy** at left with moustache, cornet, and conductor's baton – Unknown author, Public domain, Wikimedia. **W. C. Handy** was the first to publish music that transformed the Southern Delta blues into a new blues form that gained wide popularity. Handy wrote *Blues: An Anthology — Complete Words and Music of 53 Great Songs* in 1926 to document the blues as part of the history of the South. Handy's recordings include, *Muscle Shoals Blues - She's a Mean Job*, *St. Louis Blues - Yellow Dog Blues*, *I Walked All the Way from East St. Louis*, *Loveless Love - Way Down South Where the Blues Begin*, and *St. Louis Blues - Beale Street Blues*. 25,000 attended his funeral in 1958 at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church with 150,000 in the streets to pay their respects to the musician to whom many hold as the father of jazz.



Sheet Music cover: *Wall Street Rag* by **Scott Joplin** – Author, **Scott Joplin**, Seminary Music Co. Public domain, Wikimedia



Portrait of Scott Joplin in St. Louis Globe-Democrat newspaper, June 7, 1903 – Unknown author, Library of Congress, Wikimedia



Sheet Music cover – *Nonpareil*, 1907 – Author, Scott Joplin, Stark Music Co, Public domain, Wikimedia



Sheet music cover: *I'm Just Wild About Harry*, from the musical *Shuffle Along*, by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, 1921 – Author, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, Indiana University, Public domain, Wikimedia. In 1921, Eubie collaborated with Noble Sissle on *Shuffle Along*, one of the early Broadway musicals written and directed by African Americans. Eubie's hits include, *Charleston Rag*. *Love Will Find a Way*, *Memories of You*, and *I'm Just Wild About Harry*.



Publicity photo of **T-Bone Walker**, 1910- 1975 – *Origins of Rock and Roll*, Wikimedia. African American, part Cherokee, blues guitarist, singer, songwriter, Aron Thibeau, T-Bone Walker, was an innovator of the jump blues and electric blues. His recordings include, *Everyday I have the Blues*, *Hey Hey Baby*, *West Side Baby*, and *Call It Stormy Monday But Tuesday Is Just as Bad*,

“In Los Angeles, I did a session with T-Bone Walker. He came out of the Dallas blues scene in the 1920's, playing on street corners for dimes with Blind Lemon Jefferson. In the thirties, T-Bone was the first blues player to begin playing the electric guitar. B.B. King told me that the first time he heard T-Bone's record, 'Call It Stormy Monday But Tuesday Is Just as Bad' on the electric guitar, he just had to get one too. B. B. King was knocked out by how T-Bone held his guitar away from his body playing it in a horizontal position. The electric sound that T-Bone developed caught on with a whole generation of blues guitarists. Once T-Bone picked up his electric, the Blues hasn't been the same.”

“Damn, T-Bone made that guitar talk!” I said, snapping my fingers. “His guitar conducted conversations with itself. I dig his riffs. And T-Bone's moves on stage. . . there's as much rhythm in his body as in his guitar. With his burnished voice and phrasing, he brought delicacy to the blues. That was T-Bone's genius — the refinement of his phrasing.”

“During World War Two,” Mansur said, “there was a second great black immigration. Black folk moved in droves to the West Coast to work in factories churning out munitions, planes, and ships to defeat the Nazis. Black men could only work unskilled jobs in the South but in California they could get good pay working in the shipyards and aircraft plants of LA, Oakland, Richmond, and Long Beach. Thousands moved from Oklahoma and Texas. When the people moved, the blues moved with them and that was the beginning of T-Bone Walker’s and Lowell Fulson’s West Coast Blues.”

“I’ve not heard of Lowell Fulson.”

“Born on a Choctaw reservation in Otoka, Oklahoma with Choctaw and Cherokee blood, Fulson was influenced by jazz and jump blues. As a teenager, Fulson was playing Bob Wills style white western swing. Drafted during World War Two, he teamed up with some white Bostonians to play country western and jump blues which made a big hit with both the GIs and people of Guam. After the war, Fulson got a band together in Oakland, California and scored a hit with ‘Three O’Clock Blues.’ Pianist Ray Charles even played in Fulson’s band. You’ve probably heard, ‘Everyday I have the Blues’ and ‘Lonesome Christmas.’”

“Yeah, everybody plays those tunes.”

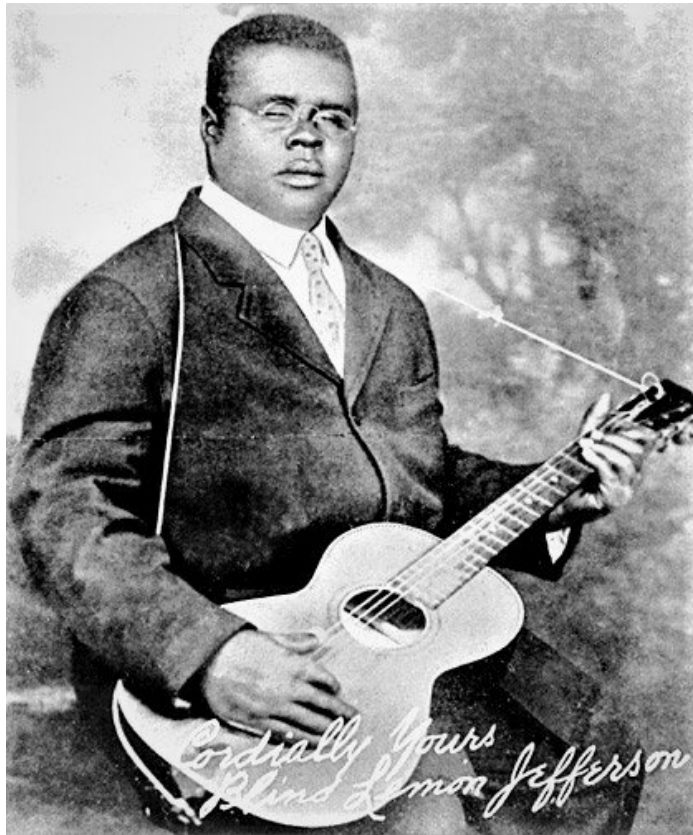
“When B. B. King was a young DJ in Memphis, he spun a lot of Fulson’s platters. To repay B.B., Fulson gave him ‘Three O’Clock Blues’ and it became B.B.’s first hit. Together, Fulson and B.B. created a more sophisticated blues than the urban blues of Chicago. A lot of great musicians came out of Mississippi plantations.”

“B.B.’s from Mississippi?”

“Like blues man Johnny Lee Hooker, B.B. was born in Mississippi on a cotton plantation around Indianola, his daddy a sharecropper. Abandoned by his mama at the age of 4 and raised by his grandma, B.B. slaved in the cotton fields as a kid, sang in the gospel choir in the Baptist Church, got his first guitar at 12 and soon was spinning platters on the radio. When an Indianola motel refused to let B.B and his band stay for the night, he swore he’d never play in that town ever.”

“I’ll bet he kept his word.”

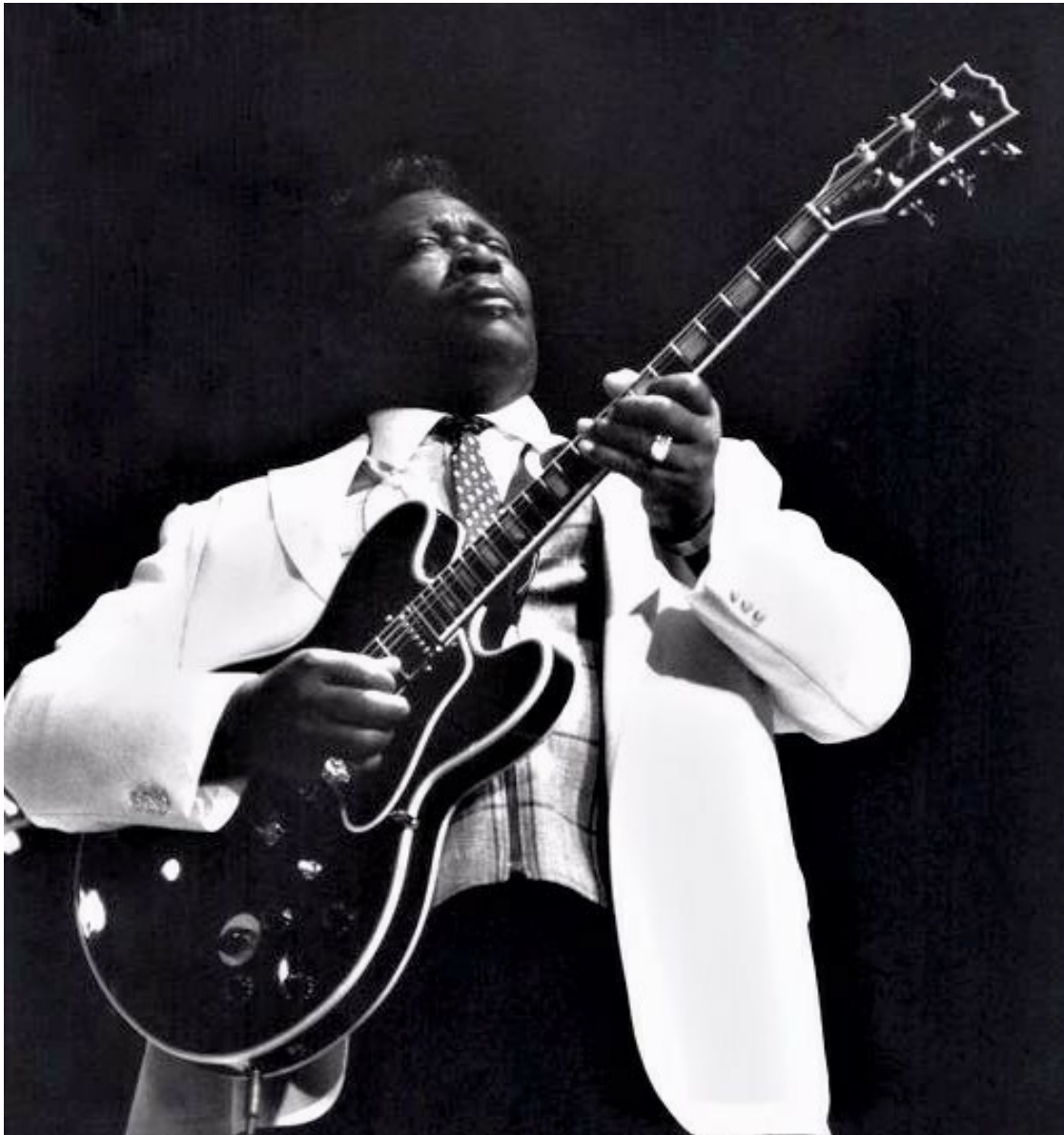
“The only way for a black man to have a good time touring America, is to travel like Duke Ellington in your own train coach, otherwise it is just one slap down after another.



Blind Lemon Jefferson, publicity photograph, late 1920s
– Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia



Lowell Fulson, African American, with Choctaw and Cherokee ancestry, blues guitarist and songwriter in the West Coast blues form – Photograph by [Lionel Decoster](#), Wikimedia. Fulson's recordings include *3 O'Clock Blues*, *Every Day I Have the Blues*, written by [Memphis Slim](#), and *Lonesome Christmas*. Fulson's tunes have been recorded by Otis Redding, Elvis Presley, and Eric Clapton.



B.B. King performing in New York City with his guitar, Lucille – Photograph by Ronzoni, Wikimedia. Born on a cotton plantation in Bena, Mississippi, B. B. King’s style based on string bending and shimmering vibrato influenced many electric blues guitarists. His hits include, “You Know I Love You,” “When My Heart Beats like a Hammer,” “Whole Lotta Love,” “Bad Luck,” “Sweet Little Angel,” and “Every Day I have the Blues.”

“B. B.’s hometown, Indianola, has a long history of Jim Crow. In the first place, Indianola was stolen from the Choctaw Nation for it was built on the site of a Choctaw village on the Indian Bayou in the Delta.”

“You say it was stolen land?”

“After the Indian Removal Act of 1831 was passed, the Choctaws were forced to leave their ancestral lands in Mississippi. The Choctaws had been in the Mississippi Delta for six to eight thousand years. According to oral tradition, they were there when the woolly mammoths still roamed the Delta.



Choctaw Village near the Chefuncte – a river in Louisiana – Painting by Francois Bernard, 1869, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Wikimedia

“The Choctaws regard the burial mound Nanih Waiya, to be the birth-place of the tribe, but under the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the Choctaws were ripped out of their most sacred place and forced to march to Southeastern Oklahoma during the coldest winter on record.”

“Walking to Oklahoma in the dead of winter. That’s a thousand miles!”

“The government sent the U.S. army to escort them out of Mississippi. A great number died before they ever got to Oklahoma. Indianola has a long sad history,” Mansur said, his golden tooth shimmering in the light. “It’s the birthplace of the White Citizen’s Council. In ’54, right after the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown v Board of Education* that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, a plantation manager, the former captain of the University of Mississippi football team and all the white supremacists got together in Indianola to form the White Citizen’s Council. Some say, the Council was formed in Greenwood, Mississippi, but I believe

it was in Indianola, B. B.'s town. The Council had one goal — resist racial integration by whatever means come hell or high water. It's telling that the Mississippi Delta, the region with the worst discrimination against blacks, is where some of the best blues originated. B. B.'s string bending and shimmering vibrato is influencing a generation of electric guitar players, not just blues, but rock and roll too. I give B. B. credit for combining traditional blues, jazz, swing, and mainstream pop into a distinctive sound. Great musicians are innovators.”

“In jazz, Miles is the innovator.”

“One thing I like about Miles, besides modal improvising, is that he's bringing respect to jazz. He doesn't play the Negro whose job is to entertain white people the way Dizzy Gillespie puts on a show. I remember Miles saying, ‘I love Dizzy, but I hate that clowning shit he did for them white folks.’ We younger artists demand concentration from our fans. John Lewis told critic Nat Hentoff, either listen to me on the basis of what I actually create or just forget it. People got to understand, we're not showmen — we're serious musicians on the level of anyone in a Philharmonic Orchestra.”

“Jazz is evolving fast,” I said. “I like the radical sounds that Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, Pharoah Sanders, and John Coltrane are producing. Les told me that Ornette is following up his groundbreaking album, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* with an even more experimental album, *Free Jazz* with Nesuhi Ertegun of Atlantic Records producing.”



Ornette Coleman, Ornette Coleman Quartet,
1971 – Photograph by JP Roche, Wikimedia

“Who is Ornette working with?” Mansur asked.

“He’s got a collective improvisation coming down,” I said, “with two quartets playing on separate channels at the same time. On the left channel, Ornette on alto sax, Don Cherry on pocket trumpet, Scott LaFaro on bass, and Billy Higgins on drums. On the right channel, Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, Charlie Haden on bass, and Ed Blackwell on drums.”

“That should shake ‘em up,” Mansur chuckled. “I like Ornette’s threads, his crazy dinner jackets.”

“John Lewis,” I said, “the pianist of the Modern Jazz Quartet, knew what he was doing when he booked Ornette for the Monterey Jazz Festival and got him a deal with Ertegun at Atlantic. What’s unique about Ornette’s approach,” I said, “is that he allows each musician to participate without changing their personality, tone or way of phrasing. Ornette says any instrument, whether a violin or a French horn, can become the soloist instrument.”

“Yusef Lateef does the same thing,” Mansur said, “using North African instruments.”

“What Ornette is doing is going to affect the whole character of jazz. He calls it *harmolodics*.”

“What’s that?”

“A contraction of harmony, movement, and melody. In my composition, I’m trying out some of his ideas. Les told me that Ornette was originally inspired by Charlie Parker’s bebop phrasing but now he’s going beyond. Before Ornette, solos were designed to fit on top of the tune. But Ornette came along and says we don’t have to do it that way. The improvisation can tell its own kind of story. It gives us new kind of freedom. It lets us break out of the maze of harmony, brings jazz back to a kind of collective improvisation — back to the roots of jazz. He says that he doesn’t want his musicians following him. He wants them to follow themselves while at the same time hanging with him.”

“Yeah, and there are the critics who say it’s a crazy cacophony.” Mansur laughed. “I heard that some white musicians were so disturbed by Ornette’s strange way of playing, they beat the shit out of him in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. White swing musicians never have dug the changes we’ve made. White band leader Tommy Dorsey called Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, ‘musical communists.’ One cat said, ‘Of all the cruelties in the world, bebop is the most phenomenal.’ But Thelonious Monk had the last word when he said, ‘The white bandleaders stole swing from us, so we had to invent a music they couldn’t play.’”

“That’s a real good, Mansur,” I laughed. “You’re lucky, coming from a New Orleans. You’re a musician from the fount of jazz.”

“Many of my family are Creole. At the turn of the century, New Orleans was a mixture of French, Negro, Creole, and Indian, a stew of races that loved to play music at weddings, christenings and just about any kind of social gathering including funeral marching bands. My people are fond of funerals. We bereave our loved ones. Instruments used in these bands, brass, and reeds tuned in the European 12-tone scale, and drums became the favored instruments in the early days of jazz. At first it was ensemble playing. The trumpet was popular because it was loud and carried far outdoors. But the ensemble style changed when Louis Armstrong came on the scene.

“Yeah, I love his rendition of the Fats Waller tune, ‘What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue.’”



Fats Waller, 1938 – Photography by Alan Fisher for the New York World-Telegram, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia. American **jazz** pianist, organist, composer, violinist, and singer, Fats Waller’s Harlem stride piano style influenced modern jazz pianists. Fats Waller copyrighted over 400 songs, many written with his collaborator Andy Razaf, including the classics, "Muscle Shoals Blues", "Birmingham Blues", "Ain’t Misbehavin’", "**Honeysuckle Rose**", "Jitterbug Waltz", "What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?" and "I Can’t Give You Anything But Love."

I'm hurt inside, but that don't help my case

Cause I can't hide what is on my face

How will it end? Ain't got a friend

My only sin is in my skin

What did I do to be so black and blue?

What did I do? What did I do?

What did I do? Tell me, what did I do to be so black and blue?

“That’s a fine rendition.”

“Satchmo taught me a lot on the horn,” I said.

“Louis could spot the fakes. ‘If they act too hip, you know they can’t play shit!’”

“Tell me more about jazz in New Orleans.”

“In the first place it was spelled j-a-s-s. A jass house was a brothel in New Orleans. That’s where Louis Armstrong began playing for the public — the bawdy houses of New Orleans.



Louis Armstrong, jazz trumpeter, 1953 - Author, World-Telegram staff photographer, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

**EVERY NIGHT,
8:30 P. M.**

Come Once—
You'll Come
Again

MOONLIGHT CRUISES DE LUXE

ON THE STEAMER SIDNEY

At last you can enjoy the kind of RIVER OUTING you have so often wished for. OUTINGS without noisy crowds or confusion. OUTINGS with real music—a cool breeze and real luxurious ease. OUTINGS that can command without apology excess fare, because they are different.

De Luxe Features

- Excludes All Organizations and Clubs
- Issues No Free Passes or Free Tickets
- Attracts Strictly First-Class Patronage
- Has a Splendid Dance Saloon
- Comfortable Rockers
- Refreshments Served

Provides the SOUTH'S GREATEST 16-PIECE ORCHESTRA

DE LUXE SCHEDULE

NIGHTS

Sunday—20-Mile Moonlight Sail, 8:30 P. M.....	75c
Monday—Starlight Dancing, 8:30 P. M.....	75c
Tuesday—Select Dancing Outing De Luxe, 9:00 P. M.....	\$1.00
Wednesday—Twenty-Mile Sail Dance, 8:30 P. M.....	75c
Thursday—Novelty Night, 8:30 P. M.....	75c
Friday—De Luxe Friday Dancing Parties, 9 P. M.....	\$1.50
Saturday—Popular Dancing, 8:30 P. M.....	75c

AFTERNOONS

Every Day—De Luxe Matinee Dances, 2:30 to 5 P. M.

SPECIAL—For those desiring the fourth deck sight-seeing facilities—
\$1.50

AUTOS PARKED

Advertisement for *Moonlight Cruises De Luxe* on a steamer at New Orleans which featured Fate Marable's band, 1920 – Unknown author, ad published in the *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, public domain, Wikimedia. On the artwork, a white couple dance while a black band provides the music. Fate Marable's band included renowned African American New Orleans jazz musicians of the era, including a youthful Louis Armstrong.



Woodland Plantation on the Mississippi River, West Pointe à la Hache, Louisiana, 1871 – Currier and Ives chromolithograph, U.S. Library of Congress.



Mississippi River [steamboats](#) at New Orleans, 1853 – Painting by Hippolyte Sebron, Tulane University of Louisiana, Public domain, Wikimedia

“Yusef Lateef is down on the word jazz because of its past associations with the whore houses, but the word has stuck. I would agree with Max Roach who said jazz is not just music, it’s a way of life, a way of thinking, a way of being. Max said, ‘We are all blessed with African blood. That’s what makes us different. The Negro in America is jazz. Everything he does — the slang he uses, the way he walks, the way he talks, the inventive way we have of describing things.’ Jazz forms our identity. Our very being is jazz as much as the music we play. Max said, ‘Jazz is not just music. It’s the definition of the African American black.’

“In the bars and brothels,” Mansur went on, “in the Storyville red light district, black musicians were wailing every night. But the African American music hit a wall in New Orleans when the Secretary of the Navy closed Storyville down because of drunken fights between the sailors. The closure put a lot of musicians out of work. But a good thing happened because of the ban. Our music began a migration to the north when a piano and cornet man, Bix Beiderbecke, introduced jazz to white audiences on the Mississippi river steamers going up the river to Memphis and St. Louis.” Mansur smiled, “Bix was a phenomenon, a white man who was as inventive as a black man.”



Bix Beiderbecke at Doyle's Academy of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1924 – Unknown author, Public domain, Wikimedia



The Wolverines with Beiderbecke at Doyle's Academy of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1924 – Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia

“Louis Armstrong played on the New Orleans riverboats.”

“He played the cornet in Fate Marable’s band,” Mansur said as he exhaled, the sweetish aroma of tobacco drifting in a lazy current of air. “That’s where Armstrong met Beiderbecke and Jack Teagarden. Rivers were the arteries of America, a blood stream carrying New Orleans music up the waterways to the North. Armstrong sharpened his music reading skills on the river steamers. But Bix learned totally by ear. Even as a kid he could copy anything he heard one time. Bix was even fired because he read music so poorly.”

“You’re telling me that Beiderbecke couldn’t read music?”

“Yeah, he had to fake it and that was his magic. Sometimes not being able to do the standard thing, allows you to invent something that nobody else has thought of. Bix had different fingering which affected his style, producing sounds that others couldn’t. He had an insouciance in his music, a buoyant mood, and brilliant phrasing. Bix was the Fred Astaire of the horn.”

“But Bix was a hard drinker. He had to leave the Whitman orchestra after a bout of delirium tremens and a nervous breakdown. Towards the end he was just holed up in a ‘Queens’s rooming house composing beautiful piano compositions. At the age of 28, he got sick and died. I mean he was still a kid. What that man

could've done if he'd laid off the booze. Some cats think Bix is a martyr of the war against the establishment, against repression of expression. That may be. But, if you live right, you can accomplish so much more by not dying. Alcohol and drugs have destroyed so many musicians. It wrings my heart.”

“I've been struggling with the demon all year.”

“Well,” Mansur said, “I've been down myself, but my religion helped me defeat it. And you can do it too, brother.”

Mansur finished his raki, thought for a moment then said, “The jazz age of the twenties was a time of great creativity after the war. Around the time of Bix, a great wave of black migration came to North.”

“What caused the migration, a crop failure?”

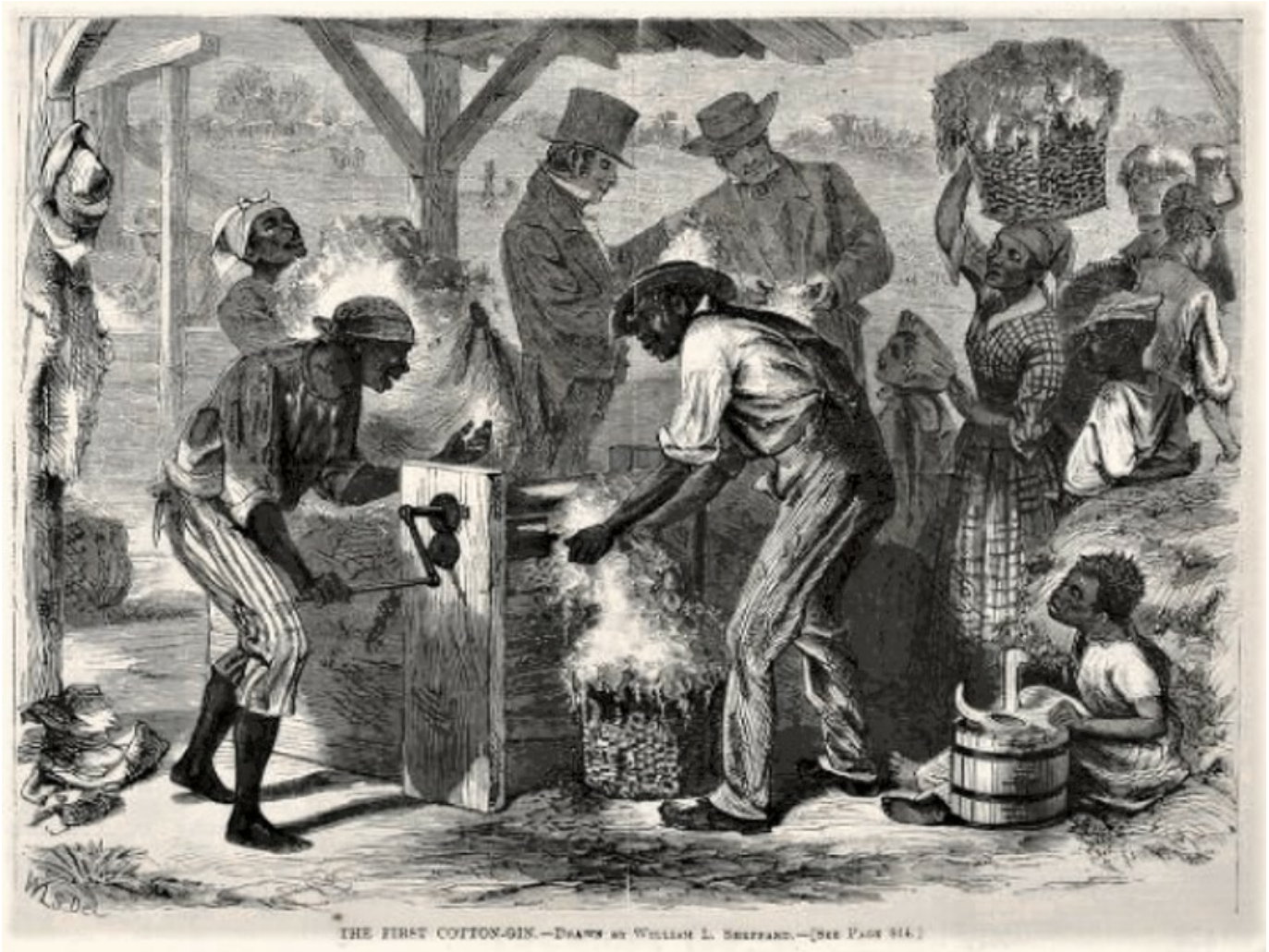
“You might say, it was because of an invention.”

“An invention. . . ?”

“African slaves were brought to the United States mainly to pick cotton. Cotton was the king of the crops. Hundreds of thousands of workers were needed to harvest it.



J. J. Smith's Plantation, Beaufort, South Carolina – Timothy O'Sullivan, Getty Center, public domain, Wikimedia



The First Cotton Gin, an engraving depicting a roller gin, which preceded Eli Whitney's invention – Drawing by William L. Sheppard. Illustration in *Harper's Weekly*, December 18, 1869, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

“For years they’d been trying to invent a picker that worked. To make one that could be cheaply massed produced took a long time. It wasn’t until 1944, on a plantation outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi, the International Harvester Company tested the first successful mass-produced mechanical cotton picker. In one day, 8 mechanical pickers could pick sixty-two bales of cotton. Even at slave wages, picking a bale by hand cost the owner \$40. Picking a bale of cotton by a mechanical picker cost only five dollars. That was a revolution. A mechanical picker could do the work of fifty field hands. For eighty years after the end of slavery, sharecropping was the dominant economic system in the South. Since segregation prevented them from working outside the cotton fields, blacks were locked into the yoke of the sharecropper system.”

“Yvonne told me sharecroppers had to borrow from the owner to pay for his seed and supplies. Then the owner jacked up his prices and the sharecropper slid deeper and deeper into debt, putting the sharecropper in hock for life, chained to the soil, as powerless as when he was a slave.”



Planting sweet potatoes, James Hopkinson's Plantation, 1862. African American men and women hoe the earth and cut piles of sweet potatoes for planting – New York Historical Society, Library of Congress, Wikimedia



Farm Security Administration sharecropper photo of Mrs. Handley and some of her children in Walker County, Alabama – Unknown author, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, U.S. National Archives, Wikimedia

“Right on,” Mansur said. “Slavery had been perpetuated. Then the machines came along and took the jobs of the workers. It was a depression for the blacks. They had no jobs and nothing to eat. In 1940, the vast majority of blacks lived in the South. With the machines taking over the jobs of millions of field hands, blacks had to look for work in the factories of the North. The second reason for the migration was to escape the threat of extra-judicial killings of blacks by the white majority. From the time the Tuskegee Institute began documenting lynchings in the 1870s until the present, it has been roughly figured that there have been four or five thousand racial terrorist lynchings.”

“Terrorist?”

“That’s exactly what it was — terrorism. If you stepped out of line, if you didn’t say yes sir, to a white man, the threat of death was imminent. And mind you, lynchings were big gatherings, crowds of white folk celebrating the deed. It was entertainment. When you look at the photos, the grins on their faces says it all.”



Postcard of the June 15, 1920 Duluth, Minnesota lynching. A third victim lies on the ground. Postcards of lynchings were popular souvenirs – Unknown author, public domain, Wikimedia

“Surely there was a law against lynching?”

“After a firestorm of lynching burned across America when the troops returned from the war, the Republicans in the House of Representatives passed an anti-lynching law in 1922. But the southern white Democrats filibustered the bill in the Senate, and it went down in defeat in 1923.”

“Incredible, how could a man oppose a law that would outlaw lynching? And these Southern senators were Christians?”

“That’s right,” Mansur said with a bitter laugh, “Christians who sanctioned intimidation and violence. It’s another reason I converted to Islam. Right before an election, a killing put fear in the hearts of anyone considering going to the polls to vote. Have you heard Billie Holiday’s, *Strange Fruit*?”

“Yeah, Billie’s iconic song,”

Mansur began singing softly in his husky voice.

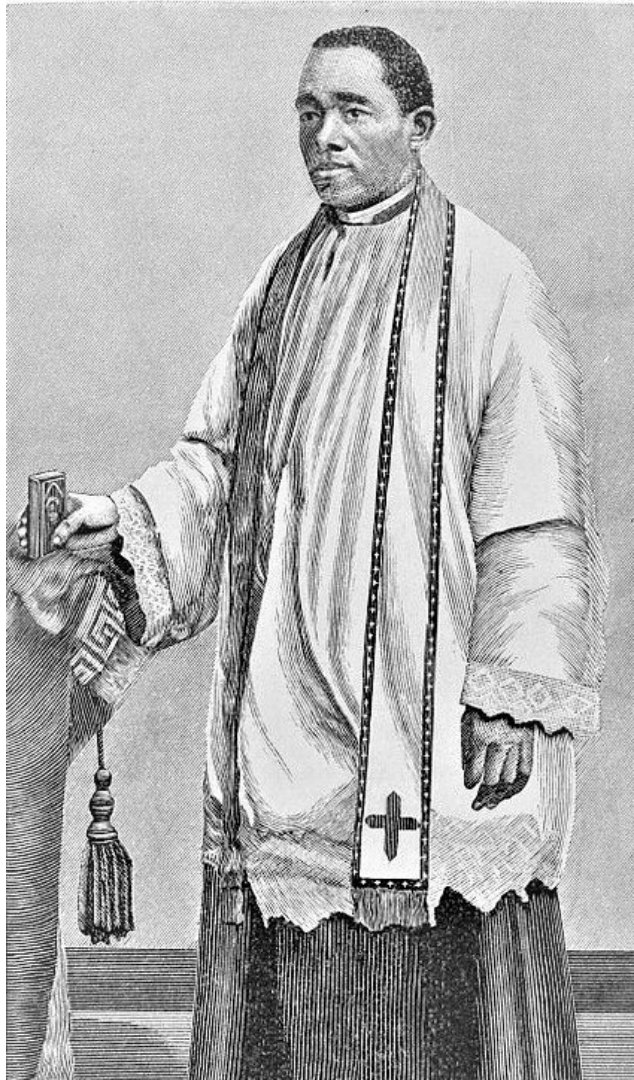
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

“That’s a haunting rendition, Mansur. You could do a Chet Baker and record that on an album.”

Mansur chuckled. “Thanks for the compliment, but after Billie’s done such a fine job, I wouldn’t even try. What’s interesting is that the lines weren’t written by an African-American but a Russian Jew in the Bronx, Abel Meeropol.”

“When you think about it,” I said, “Jews faced the same violence in Russia as the black man has in America.”

“The fear of lynching was a fundamental fact of life in the South. A black man didn’t dare speak to an unknown white woman. Lynching was how whites enforced an apartheid society. The only way to escape was through migration. The blacks immigrating to the North were from the counties with the most lynching. So north we came — five million us, taking jobs on the Pennsylvania railroad and in the stockyards and meat packing plants of Chicago. It was the greatest migration in American history, greater than the Italians, Irish, Poles, and Jews. Knowing you like the accordion, I’ll tell you about Father Augustus Tolton, a great accordionist who was one of those who came to Chicago at the end of the 19th century. Born a slave not



Father Augustus Tolton, first African-American Catholic priest – Photograph by William Simmons, New York Public Library, Wikimedia

far from Hannibal, Missouri, Father Tolton was the first black man to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest.

“When the Civil War began his papa went north to join the Union Army and his wife got her kids across the Mississippi into the free state of Illinois where the family worked in a tobacco company making cigars. An Irish priest, Father Peter McGirr, an immigrant from County Tyrone in Ireland, took an interest in the young boy letting him attend the parochial school during the winter months when the tobacco factory was closed. Even though the parishioners objected to a black kid going to school with their white kids, Father McGirr didn’t back down and supported Tolton’s passion to become a Catholic priest. When Tolton was rejected by every Catholic seminary in America, it didn’t stop Father McGirr who managed to get his young protégé into St. Francis College in Rome where he studied Latin and Greek and became fluent in Italian and French. Ordained

as a priest in Rome in 1886, Tolton had been studying African culture thinking that since he was black, he'd be assigned to Africa. To his great surprise, the Church sent him back to serve in Quincy, Illinois where he ran into opposition from the German Catholics and Protestants and was reassigned to Chicago where he became one of the creators of the first Negro national parish of St. Monica's Catholic Church at 36th and Dearborn on the South Side of Chicago. Tolton quickly became legendary for his moving sermons, his beautiful singing voice and not least, his talent for playing the accordion. For southern blacks who came looking for work on the railroads and in the meat packing plants, Chicago was a grim place, and Tolton toiled day and night to make life easier for his parishioners. Although I am a Muslim, I have deep respect for Father Augustus Tolton's spirituality which shined a bright light in the ghettos of Chicago.



Union Stock Yards, Chicago, Illinois, 1941 – Photograph by John Vachon, Farm Security Administration, U.S. Archives, Wikimedia

“Although Chicago was blighted by poverty and gangsters, it was a happening place when it came to black music. When King Oliver asked Louie Armstrong to come up and join his Creole Jazz Band in Chicago, he took the town by storm with his fiery style, then moved on to New York to play in Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra, the top African American dance band in the country. Armstrong's swing style was so potent that he ended up transforming Henderson's orchestra into the first jazz big band.

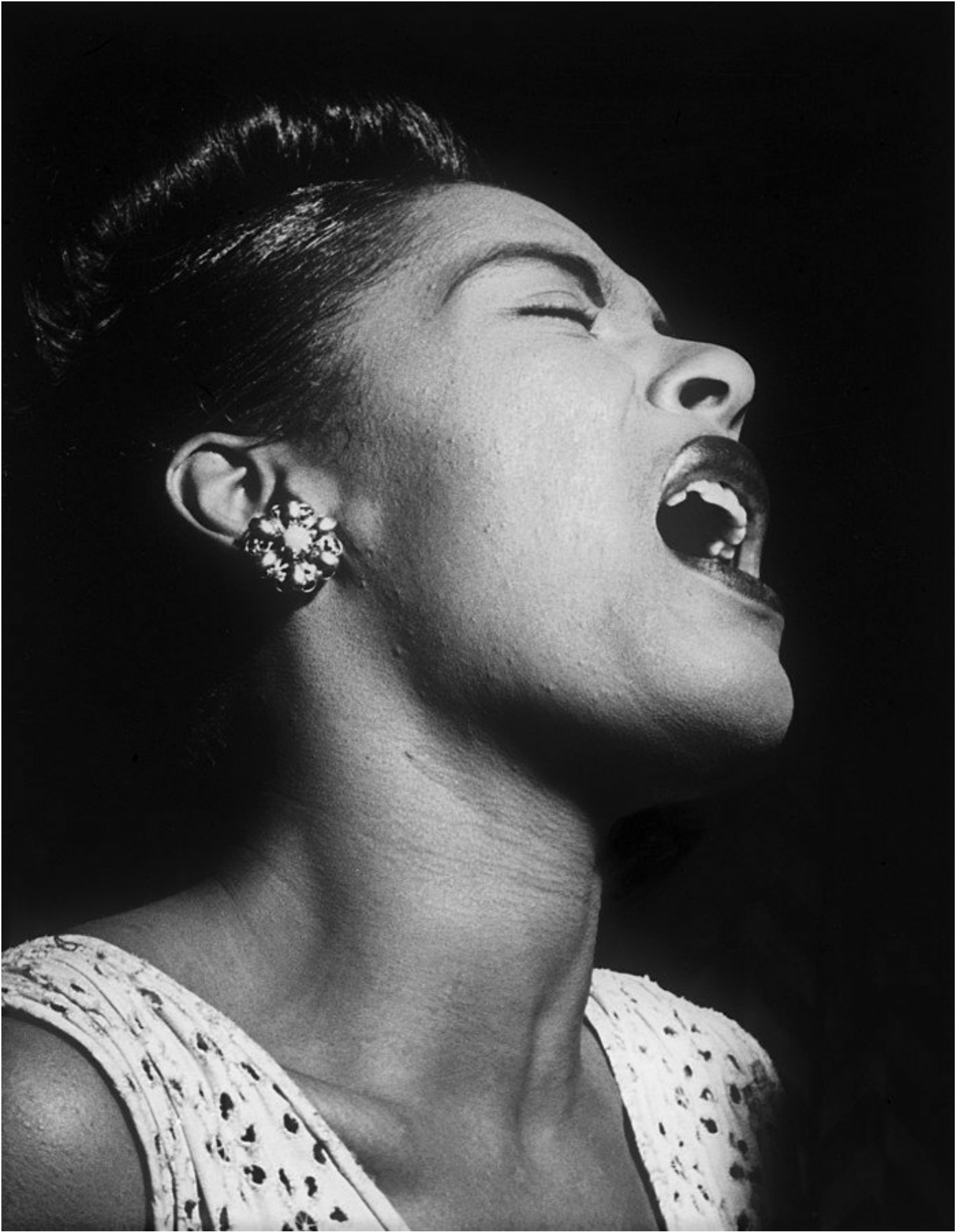


James Fletcher Hamilton Henderson, Jr., American pianist, bandleader, arranger, and composer – Unknown author, Wikimedia. Henderson and Duke Ellington are the most seminal arrangers and bandleaders in early jazz history.

“During this time, Armstrong cut a lot of records as a sideman, playing with Sidney Bechet and ‘Empress of the Blues,’ Bessie Smith. Like Joséphine Baker, Bessie began singing and dancing on the street in front of a saloon in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She was real good with Coleman Hawkins and had a strong influence on Billie Holiday.



Bessie Smith, *Empress of the Blues*, the most influential blues singer of the 1920s and 1930s, 3 February 1936 – Photography by Carl Van Vetchen, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia



Billy Holiday at the [Downbeat Jazz Club](#), New York, February 1947 – Photograph by William P. Gottlieb, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia



Ella Fitzgerald with [Dizzy Gillespie](#), [Ray Brown](#), [Milt Jackson](#), and [Timme Rosenkrantz](#) at the Downbeat, New York City, 1947 – Photograph by William P. Gottlieb, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

The Empress of the Blues’ first single, ‘Downhearted Blues,’ with Clarence Williams on piano, sold two million copies. What a tragedy for Bessie to die when she was at the peak of her powers.”

“How did Bessie die?”

“An auto accident somewhere between Tennessee and Mississippi. It took forever to get her to the hospital. She died of shock. After surviving the depression of the 30’s, Bessie was making a comeback when she died. Bessie set the trend for black female singers — Billie Holiday, Betty Carter, and Ella Fitzgerald. You’d dig Armstrong’s horn on Bessie’s, ‘Sobbin Hearted Blues.’”

“I’ve never had the chance to hear Armstrong and Bessie. Could I try one of those Turkish cigarettes, Mansur? The fragrance is real fine.”

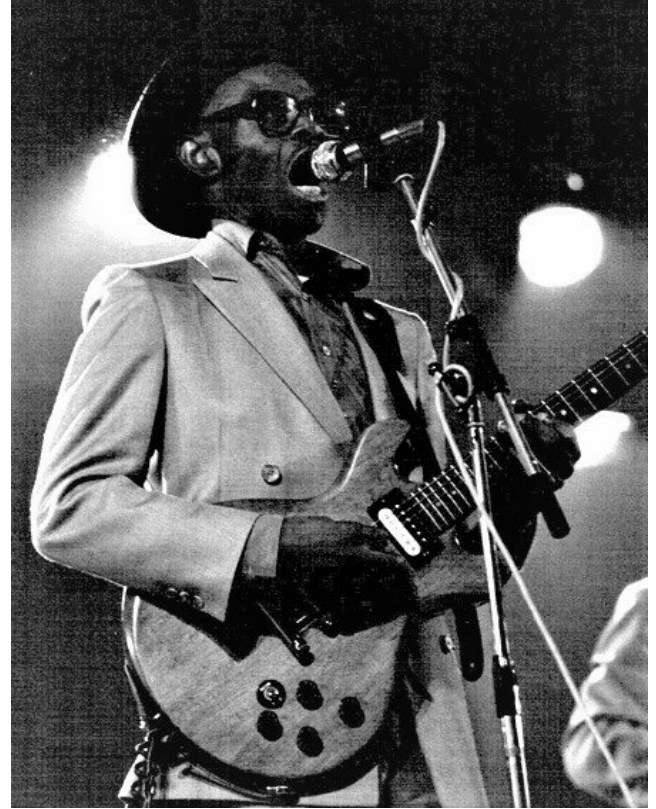
I lit up one of his hand rolled masterpieces, inhaling the strong, fragrant tobacco.

“I got ‘Potato Head Blues’ on tape,” Mansur said. “We’ll borrow Denis’ reel to reel tomorrow and give it a spin. Armstrong made jazz history with his rhythmic innovations and scat singing at the Sunset Café and the Savoy Ballroom during the late twenties. In Chicago, he teamed up with pianist Earl Hines to record the ‘West End Blues,’ a tune composed by Joe “King” Oliver, one of the great recordings of jazz history.

“The Chicago blues has produced some greats, like Muddy Waters who’s called the ‘Father of the Chicago Blues.’ In the 1930s, Ruby Lee Gatewood’s Tavern, ‘The Gates’ was the spot you’d hear the Chicago sound. Out of the South Side of that great city, came Muddy and J. B. Hutto and Bo Diddley who’re making a strong impact on white rock and roll.”



Muddy Waters at Ontario Place, Toronto – Photograph by Jean-luc Ourlin, Wikimedia



Guitarist J.B. Hutto in Bagnaux, France – Photograph by Lionel Decoster, Wikimedia

“Not only did Armstrong play with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, but Sidney Bechet did too. When Bechet was invited to play an engagement in London, the conductor for the *Ballets Russe*, heard Bechet’s improvisations and proclaimed the Creole to be a great artist. When he joined Joséphine Baker and the Revue Nègre, Bechet introduced American jazz to France at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The French have worshipped Bechet ever since. The existentialists call him, *le dieu*.

“When Louis Armstrong began singing, his interpretation of popular songs like, ‘I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,’ ‘Body and Soul,’ and ‘Star Dust,’ transformed the way singers sang during the 30s and 40s. Through improvisation, shortening, and stretching of phrases using appoggiaturas, dissonant grace notes and slurs, Armstrong created spellbinding moods. I call it ‘method singing,’ similar to Konstantin Stanislavsky’s and Lee Strasberg’s ‘method acting’ which permits artists to express their deepest feelings.



Cover of the album *Bing & Satchmo* by Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong – MGM Records, Fair use, Wikimedia

“When Bing Crosby first heard Armstrong’s performance at the Sunset Café in Chicago, he was astounded by the way he could make you laugh and in the next minute move you to tears. After hearing Armstrong’s recording of ‘Heebie Jeebies,’ Crosby began picking up on scat singing, beginning a long friendship between Bing and Louis. Not only did they record *Bing & Satchmo*, Bing and Louie appeared together in the movies, *Pennies from Heaven*, *Here Comes the Groom*, and *High Society*. From the time they met, pop music became infused with the rhythm and tonality of jazz and blues. The man who influenced American music so deeply, I’ve heard, came from a mother who had to prostitute herself to survive.”

Mansur rolled another Turkish joint and said, “While the Volstead Act of 1919 succeeded in making alcohol illegal, it also inspired speakeasies and gin mills to spring up like weeds in a manure patch.”

I laughed and said, “Will Rogers believed the country should pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting anyone from getting an education. Will said, ‘If the anti-education amendment worked as well as Prohibition then Americans would be the smartest race on earth’”

“That’s sweet.” Mansur laughed his silky laugh and lit up, slowly exhaling smoke through his nostrils. “Will Rogers also said, ‘Never slap a man if he’s chewing tobacco.’”



Will Rogers before 1900 – Unknown author, Public domain, Wikimedia. Rogers entered show business as a trick roper in *Texas Jack's Wild West Circus* in South Africa. At the Madison Square Garden in 1905, when a steer broke out of the arena into the viewing stands creating a panic, Rogers roped the steer and hit the front pages, which led to a performing contract in vaudeville, appearing on stage in his cowboy outfit, whirling his rope, and making jokes about what he'd read in the newspaper. Rogers traveled around the world three times, made 71 films, and wrote more than 4,000 syndicated newspaper columns. Angered by the federal government's failure to feed the people during the Great Depression, Rogers toured across the country raising money for the Red Cross. The Will Rogers Memorial Museum is in Claremore, Oklahoma, and Rogers' California home, stables, and polo fields have been conserved at the Will Rogers State Historic Park in Pacific Palisades, California.



Will Rogers, one of the most popular entertainers, motion picture actors, and social commentators in the 1920s and 1930s, appearing with the Speaker of the House, Nicholas Longworth, 1925 – Everett Historical, Shutterstock



Will Rogers and aviator Wiley Post before their fatal crash exploring Alaska. Known as *Oklahoma's favorite Son*, Will Rogers was a Cherokee citizen born in Oologah, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, 1897. Everett Historical, Shutterstock



Will Rogers standing on the wing of aviation pioneer Wiley Post's seaplane shortly before their fatal crash – Photograph by Leonhard Seppala, U.S. Library of Congress, public domain, Wikimedia. Will Rogers and Wiley Post died on 15 August 1935 when their seaplane crashed in northern Alaska.



The Drunkard's Progress – From the First Glass to the Grave, lithograph by Nathaniel Currier in support of the temperance movement – U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia



New York City Deputy Police Commissioner John A. Leach watching agents pour liquor into the sewer during the Prohibition – Unknown author, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia

Mansur laughed again and snapped his fingers, “After Prohibition, people drank more than before Prohibition. Bootleggers began operating in every county across America. Payoffs to the police and corruption made Prohibition a joke, making Mafiosi like Al Capone, millionaires. Due to segregation, Negro businessmen had the chance to form their own speakeasies, living high on the hog just like the white capitalists. Prohibition created a lot of work for jazz musicians playing in the underground clubs. They called them ‘blind tigers.’ There must have been 10,000 illegal speakeasy clubs in New York City alone.

“Many Protestants saw jazz as an evil force,” Mansur said with a glint in his eye. “The automobile mogul, Henry Ford published *The International Jew*, claiming that Jews had created a monopoly over popular music. He said the Jews had invented ragtime and jazz with the intention to replace romance with eroticism and filth. Anglo-Saxon values were being destroyed by Jews who were in control of American music.

“Did you know that Himmler, the commander of the SS, was inspired by Ford technological innovations and his anti-Semitism. The Germans modeled the Volkswagen, the People’s Car, on Ford’s Model A. It was not only the Nazis, but many Americans who believed jazz was immoral. A white intellectual said, ‘Jazz is not music at all, just an irritation of the nerves, a sensual teasing of the physical passions.’ Jazz was an aphrodisiac, demonic, Satanic, animalistic jungle music. That was the white man’s fear — our sensuality.”

“Didn’t zydeco, come from New Orleans too?”



Creole musicians playing zydeco music, accordion and a washboard near Opelousas, New Iberia, Louisiana, 1938 – Photography by Russell Lee, U.S. Library of Congress, Wikimedia



Boozoo Chavis performing in Plaisance, Louisiana – Photograph by David Simpson, licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution](#).

“Yeah, with zydeco, the Creoles from Louisiana with French ancestry have blended rhythm and blues with African music from Côte d'Ivoire.”

“I dig Boozoo Chavis’ ‘Paper in My Shoe. Boozoo has a good thing going with the accordion. It is surprising how many different cultures have used the accordion. I’m composing a tune for trumpet, violin, guitar, drums, and accordion.”

Mansur put out his cigarette, finished his raki and laughed, “All you need now brother, is a washboard to finish the ensemble. Let’s go down to the waterfront. I want to see the Sea of Marmara. I read in the hotel brochure, that *mamaros* means marble in Greek. The Greeks have mined marble on the islands of Marmara since the Hellenic era of Greece.”

In a fine drizzle we walked down to the sea, a sharp chill in the air, the dense fog dissolving into the dark water leaving no horizon only a void of smoky grey, the occasional plaintive cry of a ship’s horn arising through the ghostly void. Another’s ship’s horn replied and then another, ghostly moans of the lost souls of Gallipoli.



Yusef Lateef performing at the Detroit Jazz Festival – Photograph by Charles Andersen, Wikimedia

Mansur began talking about the night in Detroit when he'd sat in with Yusef Abdul Lateef. After their session, they'd stayed up all night talking about the Ahmadiyya movement in Islam.

"I was just a young cat trying to find his direction. Listening to Yusef changed my life. Yusef told me that all music is a source of inspiration. You can get your ideas anywhere, in any culture. Yusef was an important innovator. In 1949 he played with Dizzy Gillespie's big band and became one of the prime movers of the 50's jazz scene in Detroit. Yusef converted to Islam in 1948, changing his slave name, William Evans, to Yusef Abdul Lateef. After his conversion, he began spending hours in the Detroit Public Library listening to music from Asian cultures. He was one of the first jazz musicians to popularize the flute and to experiment with woodwind instruments from around the world. More than any other musician he's encouraged jazz men to pick up instruments from other cultures in Africa, the Middle East, India, Israel, Persia, and the Philippines.

Yusef put out an album in 1957, *Prayer to the East*, that had a great influence on me. It woke me up to the world of music. Yusef was the first to introduce the oboe and bassoon into jazz. He experimented with many Asian instruments, the bamboo flute, shofar, arghule, and koto. He was a mentor for us younger cats, like drummer Elvin Jones and a major influence on Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane who followed Yusef's sounds from the Far East. Due to Yusef's influence I've done a lot of work on African drums.

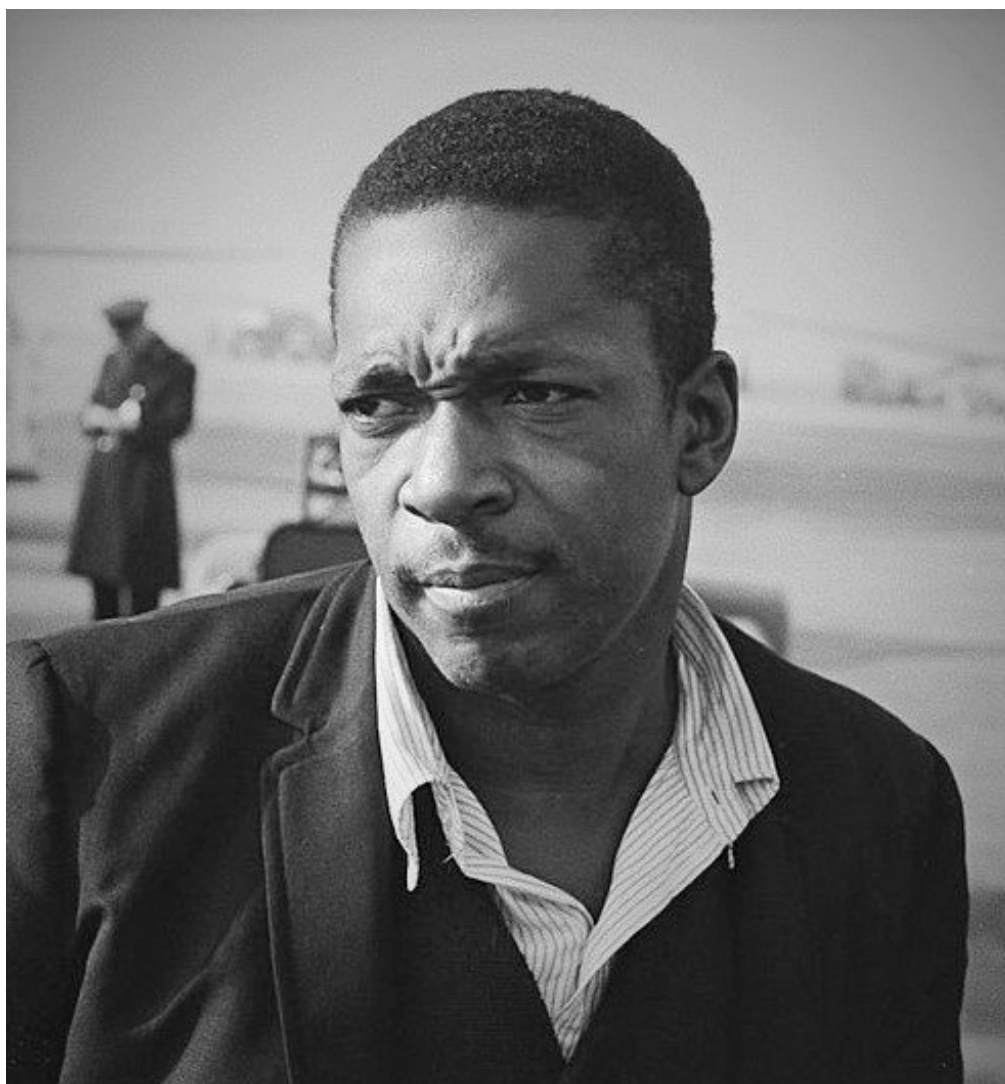
“But as great an influence he's had on my music, Yusef had an even more profound influence on my life. Before I met Yusef, I was deep into gambling. A lot of Christians fall into gambling, especially those who don't have too much. To make a killing on the wheel of fortune is the dream of people stuck in poverty. I was addicted, ran up a lot of debt — big time debt to some underworld types, betting on everything under the sun — baseball, basketball, football, horses. I had it bad. But after Yusef got me going to the mosque, I found the strength to stop. I've not bet on a thing since.” Mansur chuckled, “I even gave up cards. I owe a big debt to Yusef Lateef. He's a prophet for peace. He taught me that the Ahmadiyya Muslims don't believe in racial strife. All races should love one another.”



Fazl-Mosque, the first mosque in London, world headquarters of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community – Photograph by [Ceddyfresse](#), Wikimedia

“What are Yusef’s views on God?” “There’s one God and one race. And that race is mankind. While Sunnis and Shi’as have prescribed the death penalty for denying the truth of Islam, Ahmadiyyas believe that neither in the Quran or in the words of Muhammad, is there a punishment for apostasy. One has the right to believe or disbelieve. The Ahmadiis believe that God sent the prophet Ahmad to end religious wars and to condemn bloodshed. When I played with Coltrane at the Jazz Workshop in North Beach, he told me that studying eastern religions, reading the Bhagavad Gita, Krishnamurti, and the Quran helped him kick his heroin habit. That’s when he composed *A Love Supreme*.”

“Like Yusef, Train was moved by Ahmadiyya Islam. He told me the same thing as Yusef. Ahmad honors the teachings of all religious founders, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu and Jesus.



John Coltrane – Photograph by Hugo van Gelderen, Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Nederlands, Wikimedia

“There’s a deep connection with Islam and black Americans. One third of the Africans brought to American as slaves were Muslim.”

“I hadn’t thought of them as Muslims.”

“Most American’s don’t know it either, but Muslim names are found in reports of runaway slaves and the rosters of soldiers in the Revolutionary War.”

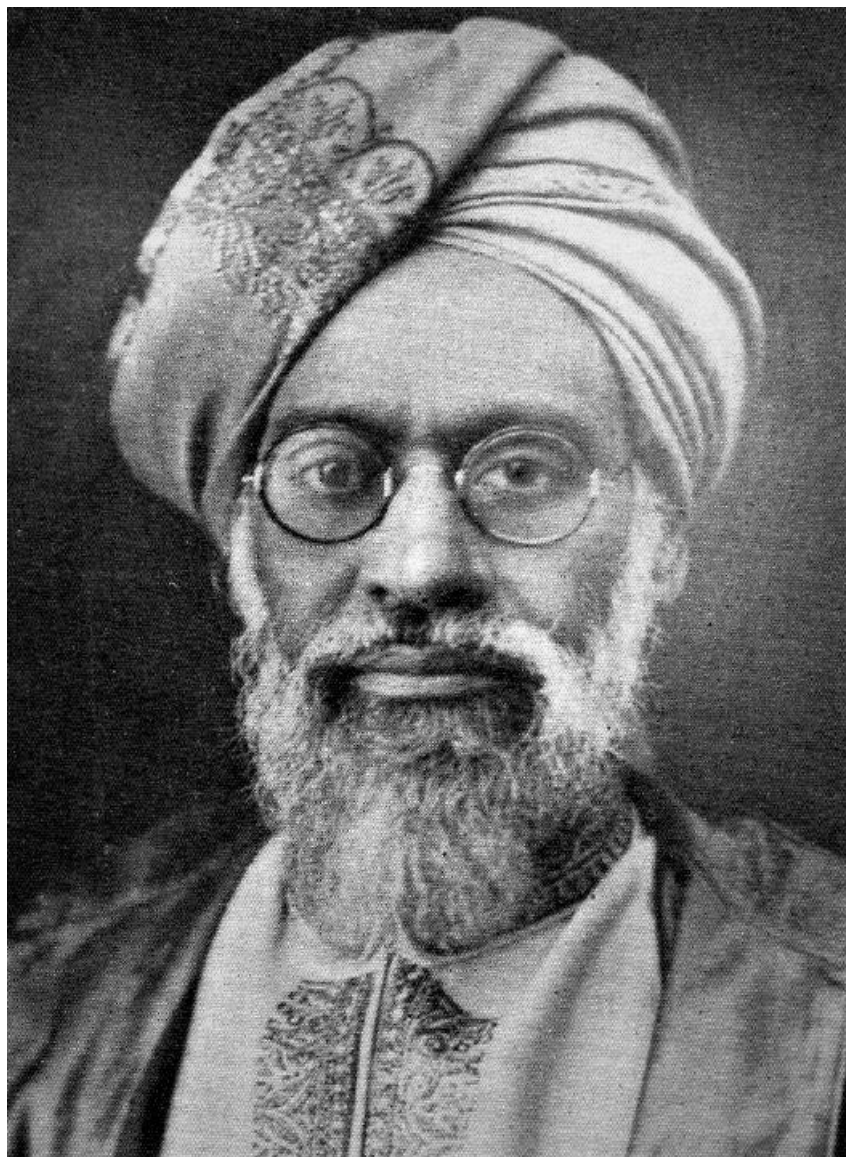
“What happened to all the Muslims?”

“The plantation owners suppressed Islam. Put it down brutally. Only Christianity was tolerated. Religion was a prime weapon of control. Despite the prohibition, many African religious beliefs and rituals soaked through into black American culture. African voodoo made its accommodation with Roman Catholicism in Haiti. I believe that our African ancestors blended their beliefs into *Black Christianity* which is a very different thing than *White Christianity*.

“How did your religion come to America.”

“It was at the beginning of the twenties. Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq brought Ahmadiyya to America. A philologist and graduate of the University of London, Sadiq had several doctorates, spoke Arabic and Hebrew and five other languages. He came to teach in America at a time when soldiers were coming home from the war and racism flamed up all over America — lynching and cross burning across the continent. Indians and Punjab immigrants like Sadiq faced the same hatred as the blacks. Due to their turbans, they were called ragheads. Sadiq faced great hardship in winning people’s hearts to Islam, but his writings appeared in the *New York Times* and he published the *Moslem Sunrise* to counter the false images of Islam spewing out from the American yellow press. I call Sadiq the great communicator of Islam. He captures the essence of what it means to be an Ahmadi. Unlike the separatism of the Black Muslim movement, Sadiq preaches integration between all racial groups, not just black Americans. His followers strongly support the Civil Rights movement. Ahmadiyya Islam is fighting for a more just world.

“Mohammed revealed to the people of Mecca in 610, a new faith — Islam, which means submission to God. Islam shares the same prophets as Christianity and Judaism. Arabs and Jews are Semitic people who’ve lived alongside one another for centuries and share some of the same ancestors. Ahmad recognized Jesus. He believed that Jesus was born of Mary, an immaculate conception without sexual intercourse — a profound prophet, but not the son of God.”



Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, the first missionary of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in the United States, 1921 – Author, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Public domain, Wikimedia

“I’ve heard there’s bad blood between Sunni and Shia Islam.”

“Shia derives from *shi’atu Ali*, meaning ‘partisans of Ali Ibn Abi Talid, Muhammad’s cousin, a descendant of Abraham and the husband of Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah. Tradition says that at birth, the first-person Ali saw was Muhammad who took him in his arms. All the Shia orders trace their lineage through Ali to Muhammad. Sufis believe that Ali received from Muhammad the saintly power that makes possible the spiritual journey to God. Sunni scholars don’t recognize Ali as an imam, but the Shia believe Ali was chosen by God to be the successor of Muhammad.”

“An imam leads the prayers in a mosque. Shias believe that the leader of Islam should be a descendant of Muhammad, but the Sunni, followers of the *Sunna*, or ‘way of Muhammed,’ are opposed to a leader’s succession based on Muhammed’s bloodline. Sunni believe that the leader should be chosen by the faithful. The bitter division between Shia and Sunni began in the late 7th century when the soldiers of the Umayyad caliph killed Ali’s son and followers in Karbala, Iraq.



City gate of Sergiopolis, now Rusafa, Syria – Author, Zeledi, Wikimedia. In the eighth century, the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik built several palaces in Sergiopolis. When the Turks and Mongols invaded, the city was abandoned during the 13th century. During the Syrian Civil War, it was occupied by ISIS.

“The Sunni were dominant in the first nine centuries of Islam until the Safvid dynasty in 16th century Persia made Shia Islam the state religion, which began a struggle with the Ottoman Empire, center of the Sunni caliphate. Because the ethnic Arab empires treated non-Arabs as second-class citizens, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians who converted to Islam, chose to be Shia in the early days of Islam. During the era of conflict between the Safvids and Ottomans in the 16th century, the division of Islam’s sects became fixed, with Shia dominant in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, while the Sunni are dominant in forty countries ranging from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East. Shia Islam is not monolithic — the Zaydi Shia

in Yemen, Ismaili Shia in South Asia, and the Alawis sect in Syria. Both Shia and Sunni oppose Ahmadi and Sufi Islam. Sunni and Shia Islam call Ahmad an apostate.”

“An apostate?”

“False prophet. Both the Sunni and Shia believe Ahmad is a false prophet. While the Ahmadis hold Ahmad as the second coming of Christ, they say that all prophets who follow Muhammad are subordinate to the great prophet. But violent Muslim leaders preach that the Ahmadis are false Muslims who are blaspheming the holy prophet and should be killed. Some clerics have said that anyone who kills an Ahmadi will earn their place in heaven. Many Ahmadis have been assassinated by extremist Muslims. Ahmad was a man of peace,”

Mansur raised his hand for emphasis. “Ahmad believed that *jihad* by the sword has no place in Islam. The philosophy of Ahmad has helped me confront my anger. Yusef says that religion is ultimately about people wanting to live humble, moral lives in a community that fosters tolerance and friendship with all religions. The Islam that I practice does just that. Unlike Sunni and Shia Islam, Ahmadi Islam strongly believes in the education and empowerment of women. I believe that the purpose of a man’s life is to lift up those who are persecuted and abused.”

Mansur lit a Turkish cigarette, inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly through his nostrils, a blue ribbon of smoke floating through the chilly night air. He put his hand on my shoulder, “I don’t know if you believe in God, but I agree with James Baldwin who said, ‘If the concept of God has any use, it is to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God can't do that, it's time we got rid of him.’ A couple of years ago, I read Baldwin’s novel, *Giovanni’s Room*. Just like the character in his book, I was engaged to a woman. We had planned a wedding in September, but I couldn’t sleep at night worrying about a future. Lord, how I dreaded it. I feared I couldn’t carry it off the rest of my life. I knew I was gay by the time I was eleven, although it was a year or two years later before I fully realized what it meant. After reading Baldwin’s book I came to the realization I couldn’t keep it hidden any longer. I couldn’t fake it. After doing a lot of praying, I got my courage up and came out. I told her I was gay. I told her as gently as I could that I couldn’t marry her. After I broke her heart, she cried for a long time. I held that wonderful woman in my arms. She said she’d felt my hesitation and wondered why. I came clean with that girl and now we’re both better off. We’ll always be friends. It was the hardest thing I’ve done in my life.

“Once you come out there’s no going back. Gio, it is hard to be black and gay in America. I have two strikes against me. Growing up in America, I’ve come to think that the greatest fear of men in America is that they could be homosexual. American men can’t show affection for each other the way women can. They can’t kiss another man on the cheek the way the French do. It’s because of a deep-seated fear of homosexuality that the culture has beaten into men’s head. Men fear that they aren’t masculine enough. They’re not tough enough. They cover it with swagger and braggadocio. And a lot of gay men echo the straight world. Both gay and straight have a need to play to the super masculine ideal. When the straights are not in mixed company they talk differently about women. It’s that masculine pride that makes men lie about how many women they’ve laid. Playing the male stereotype is a mental corset that binds a man for life.

Mansur paused for a moment, his dark eyes pursuing a ghost from the past. Mansur smiled then went on reflectively, “I’m proud to be able to stand up and say I’m gay. Musicians respect me for that even if the world does not. My grandfather died in slavery. He told my father that he and his wife had been sold to a minister from South Carolina. His father begged a couple of planters who were buying other slaves that day, to buy them together. They turned him down. When the cart took her away in shackles, he ran beside the cart holding her hand until he couldn’t keep up no more. My father never forgot his father running alongside the cart, holding her hand, crying out, struggling to keep up until he fell in the dust on the road. He never saw his father again. Slave holders tore families apart, brother from sister and mother from child. A slave lived in dread of the day when his family would be ripped apart. It was a heartless thing. A kind of murder. It happened every day. It was a common thing.

“When I was in college for two years,” Mansur went on, “I read everything I could get my hands on by W.E.B Dubois. One thing he said, I memorized from *The Souls of Black Folk*. Dubois said, ‘How does it feel to be a problem? One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.’ That’s how I feel, Gio, one soul torn in two.

“Some things don't change,” Mansur said. “Back in '52, I played in Los Angeles for three years. The cops are Southerners. They mess with you. If you're black, they'd just as soon as shoot you as look at you. Drummer Philly Joe Jones said he didn’t harbor hatred, but policemen are public servants. They’re supposed to be protecting citizens, but in Los Angeles, it’s just the opposite. I think that’s why the greatest comedians have been Negroes and Jews because we’ve been persecuted. We must laugh in order to not kill somebody. Philly

Joe Jones calls the LA cops, SS men — Storm Troopers. When I was young, I just wanted to break their skulls, but now, I protest through my music. Rumi, a Sufi mystic of the 13th century said, ‘If you’re angered by every criticism, how will you ever polish your mirror?’ Everything you've got shut up inside of you. . . you gotta let it out. And every time I play, that's what I'm doing. I'm getting it all out.”