

The Weary Blues

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light

He did a lazy sway. . . .

He did a lazy sway. . . .

To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.

O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—

“Ain't got nobody in all this world,

Ain't got nobody but ma self.

I's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on the shelf.”

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.

He played a few chords then he sang some more—

“I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied—

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died.”

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

1925

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Harlem

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Source: *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (Random House Inc., 1990)

“Jazz as Communication” by Langston Hughes

INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes, a central poet of the Harlem renaissance, was significantly influenced by the sounds and traditions of the blues and jazz. He presented “Jazz and Communication” at a panel led by Marshall Stearns at the Newport Casino Theater during the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival.

The essay opens on a practical note, as Hughes questions those who feel that jazz can exist only outside of commercial spheres. He points out that all the great blues musicians, by performing, have been “communicating for money,” and that this in no way compromised their craft.

Hughes argues that jazz is everywhere, encompassing the blues and rock and roll. To those who would deny the connections between musical traditions, Hughes states, “Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat.”

Throughout the essay, Hughes cites the singers and musicians who have influenced his writing. He also notes other authors who have been “putting jazz into words,” such as Dorothy Baker, Jean Paul Sartre, and W.C. Handy. Turning to the audience, Hughes states, “Jazz is a heartbeat—its heartbeat is yours. You will tell me about its perspectives when you get ready.”

You can start anywhere—Jazz as Communication—since it’s a circle, and you yourself are the dot in the middle. You, me. For example, I’ll start with the Blues. I’m not a Southerner. I never worked on a levee. I hardly ever saw a cotton field except from the highway. But women behave the same on Park Avenue as they do on a levee: when you’ve got hold of one part of them the other part escapes you. That’s the Blues!

Life is as hard on Broadway as it is in Blues-originating-land. The Brill Building Blues is just as hungry as the Mississippi Levee Blues. One communicates to the other, brother! Somebody is going to rise up and tell me that nothing that comes out of Tin Pan Alley is jazz. I disagree. Commercial, yes. But so was Storeyville, so was Basin Street. What do you think Tony Jackson and Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver and Louis Armstrong were playing for?(1) Peanuts? No,

money, even in Dixieland. They were communicating for money. For fun, too—because they had fun. But the money helped the fun along.

Now; To skip a half century, somebody is going to rise up and tell me Rock and Roll isn't jazz. First, two or three years ago, there were all these songs about too young to know—*but*. . . . The songs are right. You're never too young to know how bad it is to love and not have love come back to you. That's as basic as the Blues. And that's what Rock and Roll is—teenage *Heartbreak Hotel*—the old songs reduced to the lowest common denominator. The music goes way back to Blind Lemon and Leadbelly—Georgia Tom merging into the Gospel Songs—Ma Rainey, and the most primitive of the Blues.(2) It borrows their gut-bucket heartache. It goes back to the jubilees and stepped-up Spirituals—Sister Tharpe—and borrows their I'm-gonna-be-happy-anyhow-in-spite-of-this-world kind of hope. It goes back further and borrows the steady beat of the drums of Congo Square—that going-on beat—and the Marching Bands' loud and blatant *yes!!* Rock and Roll puts them all together and makes a music so basic it's like the meat cleaver the butcher uses—before the cook uses the knife—before you use the sterling silver at the table on the meat that by then has been rolled up into a commercial filet mignon.

A few more years and Rock and Roll will no doubt be washed back half forgotten into the sea of jazz. Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat. And Louis must be getting old if he thinks J. J. and Kai—and even Elvis—didn't come out of the same sea he came out of, too. Some water has chlorine in it and some doesn't. There're all kinds of water. There's salt water and Saratoga water and Vichy water, Quinine water and Pluto water—and Newport rain. And it's all water. Throw it all in the sea, and the sea'll keep on rolling along toward shore and crashing and booming back into itself again. The sun pulls the moon. The moon pulls the sea. They also pull jazz and me. Beyond Kai to Count to Lonnie to Texas Red, beyond June to Sarah to Billy to Bessie to Ma Rainey. And the Most is the It—the all of it.(3)

Jazz seeps into words—spelled out words. Nelson Algren is influenced by jazz. Ralph Ellison is, too. Sartre, too. Jacques Prévert. Most of the best writers today are. Look at the end of the *Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. Me as the public, *my* dot in

the middle—it was fifty years ago, the first time I heard the Blues on Independence Avenue in Kansas City. Then State Street in Chicago. Then Harlem in the twenties with J. P. and J. C. Johnson and Fats and Willie the Lion and Nappy playing piano—with the Blues running all up and down the keyboard through the ragtime and the jazz.(4) House rent party cards. I wrote *The Weary Blues*:

Downing a drowsy syncopated tune etc.

Shuffle Along was running then—the Sissle and Blake tunes. A little later *Runnin' Wild* and the Charleston and Fletcher and Duke and Cab. Jimmie Lunceford, Chick Webb, and Ella. Tiny Parham in Chicago. And at the end of the Depression times, what I heard at Minton's. A young music—coming out of young people. Billy—the male and female of them—both the Eckstein and the Holiday—and Dizzy and Tad and the Monk.(5) Some of it came out in poems of mine in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* later. Jazz again putting itself into words.

But I wasn't the only one putting jazz into words. Better poets of the heart of jazz beat me to it. W. C. Handy a long time before. Benton Overstreet. Mule Bradford. Then Buddy DeSilva on the pop level. Ira Gershwin. By and by Dorothy Baker in the novel—to name only the most obvious—the ones with labels. I mean the ones you can spell out easy with a-b-c's—the word mongers—outside the music. But always the ones of the music were the best—Charlie Christian, for example, Bix, Louis, Joe Sullivan, Count.(6)

Now, to wind it all up, with you in the middle—jazz is only what you yourself get out of it. Louis's famous quote—or misquote probably—"Lady, if you have to ask what it is, you'll never know." Well, I wouldn't be so positive. The lady just might know—without being able to let loose the cry—to follow through—to light up before the fuse blows out. To me jazz is a montage of a dream deferred. A great big dream—yet to come—and always *yet*—to become ultimately and finally true. Maybe in the next seminar—for Saturday—Nat Hentoff and Billy Strayhorn and Tony Scott and the others on that panel will tell us about it—when they take up "The Future of Jazz." The Bird was looking for that future like mad. The Newborns, Chico, Dave, Gulda, Milt, Charlie Mingus.(7) That future is what you call pregnant. Potential papas and mamas of tomorrow's jazz are all

known. But THE papa and THE mama—maybe both—are anonymous. But the child will communicate. Jazz is a heartbeat—its heartbeat is yours. You will tell me about its perspectives when you get ready.

1956

NOTES

(1) Tony Jackson (1876-1921), American ragtime pianist and blues singer; Ferdinand Joseph “Jelly Roll” Morton (1885-1941) began playing piano in New Orleans’ Storyville at the age of seventeen and was regarded by many as the first great jazz composer; Joseph “King” Oliver (1885-1938), popular ragtime performer with roots in New Orleans.

(2) Blind Lemon Jefferson (1897-1929), early American pioneer of the blues; Thomas “Georgia Tom” Dorsey (1899-1993), African American blues singer, gospel songwriter, and pianist.

(3) James Louis “J. J.” Johnson (1924-), an American trombonist and composer, and Kai Winding (1922-1983), a Danish American trombonist, formed the popular group Jay and Kai in 1954; Lonnie Johnson (1889-1970), American guitarist and jazz singer.

(4) Jacques Prévert (1900-1977), French poet; James Price “J. P.” Johnson (1894-1955), American ragtime and blues pianist and composer; J. C. Johnson (1896-1981), jazz pianist and songwriter; Willie Hilton Napoleon “Nappy” Lamare (1907-1988), American guitarist, banjoist, composer, and singer.

(5) Chick Webb (1909-1939), American drummer and bandleader; Hartzell Strathdene “Tiny” Parham (1900-1943), Canadian American pianist, organist, and bandleader; John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie (1917-1993), American trumpeter and bandleader; Thelonius Monk (1917-1982), American jazz pianist and composer.

(6) W. Benton Overstreet, American songwriter; Perry “Mule” Bradford (1893-1970), American pianist, songwriter, singer, and producer; Buddy DeSilva, American songwriter; Dorothy Baker (1907-1968), jazz writer best known for *Young Man with a Horn*, a novel about the life of Leon “Bix” Deiderbecke; Charlie Christian (1916-1942), American guitarist; Joe Sullivan (1906-1971), American pianist and composer.

(7) Nathan Irving “Nat” Hentoff (1925-), American writer and jazz historian; Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967), American composer, arranger, and pianist; Tony Scott (1921-), American

clarinetist and saxophonist; Charlie “Bird” Parker (1920-1955), American alto saxophonist and one of the most influential soloists in jazz; Friedrich Gulda (1930-), Austrian pianist, flutist, baritone saxophonist, singer, and composer; Charles Mingus (1922-1979), American double bass player, pianist, composer, and bandleader.

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