

Inflicting Blues

A mist had blown in off the East river earlier in the evening and left the streets with a dull shine that reflected the weak glow of the street lights. A newspaper blew down the sidewalk, cast off by someone who didn't want any more facts in his life. An eddy caught the paper and it floated into an alley where through a basement window, the back of someone's head was silhouetted by the blinking glow of a red neon light.

Lamar stared at the sign that blinked "exit" and sucked on his reed just like he had always done. He was standing in the backstage hallway, but the comings and goings of the various entertainers didn't bother him. It was the same as it had always been: waiting, waiting, waiting. Exit. He reminded himself that he only had to play two sets to get the hundred he owed. Surely Shorty would front him again once he paid what he owed. All he needed was a twenty dollar balloon, enough for two fixes. That would make it right. Exit. That would make everything all right tonight.

One of the dancers, Daphne, came by and offered him a drag off the reefer she was smoking, but he smiled and nodded her off. Not interested. Not now.

The Shanta Dance Tap Review finished and passed on by, and Lamar felt a brief connection looking at the girl's rear end. He always liked rear ends, and the girls on the tap review had some of the best in Harlem. He wondered why he didn't have a girl at the present time but before he had a chance to reflect on it, the magician that was on next came shuffling by, pockets loaded. Lamar viewed him with disdain, only briefly acknowledging his presence in the hallway by taking his reed out of his mouth to spit. Lamar hoped the magician ate shit and fast. He hated people who made a living off

not telling the truth. Lamar knew that there was always some truth, somewhere, but never enough to go around.

The magician finally finished to a chorus of boos. Ain't nobody that likes a liar in this part of town, Lamar thought. Life was too real. In Lamar's mind it was a guy's own goddamn fault because if he truly was a magician, everybody knew he sure wouldn't be fucking around in Harlem. He'd be up in Manhattan.

Finally, it was time to play. Lamar opened his case and fitted his reed into his mouthpiece. Lamar realized he was the only saxophone. They must think I'm pretty good, he thought as he finished his drink and made his way up on stage.

When Earl Brown called Lamar a week ago to ask him to play the gig, he said it would be all blues, nothing fancy, just straight blues. Lamar took the gig because he was in a blues frame of mind most of the time. To him, blues were truth. The bebop gig he played at The Cotton Club on Wednesday nearly drove him insane with all of the scattered energy it took to keep up with that craziness. Blues were smooth, something that could be eased into. Once in, you could just sit back and cruise.

They cruised through the first set, taking their time, laying down a cushion of sound that the audience could lay down on, slowly rocking gently back and forth.

Lamar loved it, blowing long and slow. He could feel the truth of his notes drifting out over the audience, taking the tension out of their shoulders, massaging their necks with a breathy touch. During their break Earl smiled at him. Lamar had never known Earl to smile at anyone.

When they took the stage for their second set, Lamar saw that there were a lot of new faces in the audience, talking loud and laughing. The room's smooth, cool buzz was gone and voices bounced abrasively off the walls. One man came up to Earl and said a whole bunch of them had just come from up town and they wanted to dance. Earl looked at Lamar.

"Shit, you can dance to blues," Lamar told him.

Earl started calling up popular dance tunes. Lamar played them, but the delicacy and style of the first set was gone. His horn

didn't sing now, it honked. Earl gave him a few dirty looks during songs but he didn't care. As they played, Lamar watched the dancers. They whirled and twirled like they didn't have a care in the world. Shit, Lamar thought, these people don't want truth, all they want is pretty lies.

The last song of the set was an up-tempo blues tune called "Go on Red, Stop on Green." Lamar didn't think of the song as real blues, it was too "easy." He knew that with the tempo, people could hear the song and not have to listen to what it was saying. He thought Earl called it up just as a token offering. The last solo was Lamar's.

He watched the sweat pour off the dancers. They were bopping like it was the time of their lives. He waited for his solo.

When the time came Lamar went up to the mike. He took a long breath and started off noncommittally, like he was just testing the water before jumping in. He blew a note here, a few notes there. The pressure was building in the band behind him. The tempo sped up slightly. The snare drum and cymbals sounded a little louder.

He started to connect the notes into phrases, pausing in between to leave space. Then he started connecting the phrases. The audience could feel it and the dancer's gestures got wilder.

Going into the last repeat, Lamar strung together a long series of eighth notes. He started grabbing breaths with his nose while pushing notes out with his mouth so he didn't have to stop for air. The notes circled higher and higher and reached a peak then dropped down to the lowest range of his horn, where he started climbing again, this time faster with sixteenth notes, getting louder as he climbed, circling a pitch of the scale but always moving on, higher, building, the band in back of him accelerating, gathering momentum like a huge steel ball rolling down a steep hill.

The audience broke into a frenzy, barely able to control the actions of their bodies, flinging themselves wildly, faster and faster as Lamar climbed, switching to thirty-second notes, blowing them out until he thought his lungs would burst. Then going beyond, out of his body, into his horn where he felt the air from his lungs blasting past him, moist and hot, making the walls of the brass tunnel vibrate with the sound and power of an earthquake. Faster and faster, hotter

and hotter, higher and higher, until finally peaking one note away from the very top, one step away from the summit; he lost his grip and went sailing out of the horn, flying through the air over the dancers, then bouncing off the back wall and slamming fast back into himself.

The band was sustaining one chord at maximum volume, standing with the audience on the very edge of the cliff, waiting for the one note that would answer the question and send them flying off into space. The dancers screamed in ecstasy and anticipation, adding power to the chord. Lamar leaned back and took a deep breath and looked out over the dancer's heads at something no one else could see, then turned and walked off the stage. The band held the chord and the audience screamed even louder, begging him to give them that one last note they so desperately needed.

In the hall, Lamar could hear the roar as he put his sax back in its case. The red neon sign blinked over the door to the alley. "Go on red, stop on green," he said as he pushed through the door.