

DOORWAYS

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INTRODUCTION

When Jack walked into the bar he felt the familiar slight rush of evening air at his back as the doors swung shut behind him. He had spent this day in 1947 pioneering; capturing the first recorded stereo sounds in Arizona history. As a chronicler of people's music, indeed as a witness to a part of their souls, he always found himself in a state of heightened awareness regarding the sounds surrounding him. And so as a result, the rollicking, twinkling notes emanating from the piano in the corner—music that would merely conjure a dusty saloon in some Western film with actors named Gabby and Hoot in the ears of the only casually involved—stopped Jack in midstride. The authenticity, the *feel* of the tune emanating from the battered old upright in the corner deadened Jack's senses to everything else in the room. He floated past the bar and the three or four patrons seated at it, heading straight for the piano and the aged, bald fellow pounding out a vibrant yet haunting melody that seemed to surface from the forgotten past directly through his fingers and into Jack's heart.

His song over, the stooped figure at the piano sensed Jack's presence and slowly turned in his direction, revealing a royal blue shirt and cream waistcoat beneath his dusty suit jacket. "Recognize that ditty, son?" the old man rasped in a tone indicating he harbored little hope that one as young as Jack would have any connection with the tune or the antiquated style in which the man had played it.

"Well, sir," Jack said thoughtfully, "yes *and* no. Some of it sure sounded like *The Entertainer* to me, but I've never heard it played that way."

The old piano player wheezed a laugh, his mouth opening wide to show surprisingly white, straight teeth and he exclaimed, "Why, we all played that thing in our own way, in our own *voice* if that makes sense to you. It was so popular we all knew it, but ol' Joplin hadn't really captured its full potential when he wrote it down. See, he'd played it for us up there at Turpin's place in St. Louis and, well, Scott really wasn't a great professor, so we took his rag and twisted it around to get the real emotion out of it. Some guys like Chauvin and Patterson would turn it into a real complicated piece like the virtuosos they were, but I like to showcase my chops with other tunes. I play this one in a thoughtful way so the real meaning comes out."

Jack understood exactly what the old-timer meant by this last bit as he was always in search of the emotion and meaning in the music, although the names the piano player dropped so casually meant little to him. What really resonated was the fellow's next observation.

"Every song has a story, young man; every song has a story. The piano player is just the doorway you look through to glimpse it."

FIRST CHORUS

He turned back toward the keys, the stool creaking with the movement, and, laying his weathered hands upon the cracked keys, began to pound out an ebullient waltz, the strong “OOM-pah-pah” of piano player’s left hand lifting Jack’s heart even as he sunk his body into a chair by the piano. The tinkling melody brought Jack back to a time in his early childhood, and he heard, in his mind, the melody the old-timer was playing as a song sung by his Grandfather. He began to murmur the words along with the music: “You hold her hand, and she holds yours; and that’s a very good sign that she’s your tootsie-wootsie *In The Good Old Summertime.*” Jack fairly shouted out the last line, the title of the tune he was hearing, and the piano player turned to him with surprise and delight.

“Hey, young fella, that song is WAY before your time. I learned it only after people kept asking for it; seems it was a big hit in a show in New York, but I’d never been to New York,” he rasped out a chuckle, “Heck, still haven’t got there. No, the way I heard the Summertime song was when Sousa came through town with his marching band—kinda funny that’s how they were known as they’d sit like concert players while they pumped out their marches. Sousa was a cagey old guy and he knew, same as me, same as *all* the popular players of the day, that to stay on top you had to give the people what they wanted to hear. So, his band’d do his marches, then a waltz like the one I just played, then maybe a rag or a polka. Yessir, ol’ Sousa was one classy guy, but he knew how to play for *everybody.*”

Jack was intrigued and asked, “But sir, if the first time you heard the song was by a large marching band, how did you start playing it?”

“Young man...” the piano player began.

“Please, would you call me Jack?”

“Pleased you meet you Jack,” the old man held out a calloused hand and shook Jack’s warmly, though Jack noticed he did not offer his own name, “Back in those days you and your music usually fit into one of two categories. You were either a “by-ear” player or what they called a ‘musicianer.’ I was a “by-ear” player so I was good at playing anything I heard. Sometimes a patron in the bar could simply hum or sing the melody to one of their favorite tunes and I’d play along with them like I already knew it. Got most of it right, too. Oh, sure, there might be a fancy chord in the song somewhere, but most people didn’t care about that. Back then they wanted what they do now; a clear melody to tug at your heartstrings and a firm beat to move your feet!”

Jack grinned at this and asked, “So what was a ‘musicianer,’ someone who could read music?”

“Pretty much, yes, with all of the privileges *and* limitations that came with that attribute. Those guys could read fly-shit on paper,” the old man almost spat out, “but ask ‘em to change keys or play a ditty in a different style and you’d find them lacking. They could read music alright, but they weren’t always able to *make* music as naturally as us “by-ear” players could. ‘Course, there were exceptions; people like my old friend Artie Matthews back in Turpin’s place in St. Louis. He could play hot and by-ear but he also was a real good reader and writer. Why, he helped many a piano-player get their music on the sheet to sell to both the professional and amateur ‘musicianers.’ If you had your music written down for people to buy, that

was where you could make some real money, especially if your song was a hit and if you were working with an honest publisher.”

Jack gave his head a little shake and mused, “It’s a lot different now. Sure sheet music still sells OK, but now radio and records are the ways people get their music spread. I sometimes think of the tragedy of all of that lost music from your time, tunes and styles that were heard just once and then gone forever.”

“Yeah, I know. People like Louis Chauvin and Tony Jackson who were the two best in the Midwest will never be heard by today’s folks they’ve been gone so long. I can tell you about how Chauvin would take difficult tunes and rip through them in octaves in both hands, all while staying as smooth as silk *and* communicating with the crowd *and* deciding which lady he’d have that night. Or how Jackson would leap about while playing and singing his tunes in that high voice of his, carrying on, entertaining and deciding which **man** *he’d* have that night,” the old man doubled over with laughter, “Nobody was supposed to know, of course; if you were discovered to be of that persuasion, so to speak, it could turn out pretty dangerous for you with that crowd. This is one of the reasons Jelly Roll used to advertise his status as a pimp in addition to his fine piano playing. He didn’t want to be thought of as what you might call “light-in-the-loafers” today because he played piano and hung out with Jackson.”

Jack queried, “The ‘Jelly Roll’ you’re referring to was Jelly Roll Morton?!?”

“The same. Another of those guys who could do it all. His reading was fine; he wrote his own tunes and arrangements, but he sure could work a crowd, something those ‘musicianers’ were hopeless at doing with their noses stuck in their notes!”

SECOND CHORUS

The piano player turned back to the keyboard. “Enough of this chat,” he crowed out, “Jack, let me show you what I mean by working the crowd!” He pounded into another waltz with a gusto that made everyone in the bar react. By now, more businesses had shut their doors for the evening and the place was beginning to hop. Every head turned as the old guy thumped out “***Take Me Out to the Ballgame.***” Feet tapped, bodies swayed with the rhythm, and more than a few voices were heard quietly humming the tune or scratching out the lyrics. When it got time for the count-off, each number was louder: “For it’s one, TWO, THREE, strikes you’re out at the old ball game!!”

And that’s when the show really began. Switching into a hotter rag-feel, the old-timer cajoled everyone into singing again full throttle and then had contests between the patrons at tables and the ones drinking at the bar to see who could sing the loudest. By the time he finished, the place was resonating with hollers, cheers, applause and the stamping of boots on the hardwood floor. Jack had never seen anything like it.

The old piano player sank back on the stool, spent after his performance. Between gasps, he said to Jack, “Yessir, still got it. Jack, the old tunes that everyone knows are the best ones! And the only way you can hold someone’s attention in places like these is to get rowdy and *make* everyone pay attention to you. And these

folks here are just drinkin'! The bars and Sporting Houses where I played in the old days had many other activities to...distract folks from your music."

"Sir, what's a Sporting House?" Jack wanted to know.

"Stop calling me Sir, boy! I *work* for a living!" the old musician cackled at his own humor, "A guy passing through from Jolly Old England gave me that line and it still tickles me. No, Jack, if we're gonna continue our visit here, you need to be calling me 'Red' on account of the red hair I used to have."

"My pleasure to meet you, Red," Jack said happily, extending his hand.

Red shook Jack's hand while prevaricating, "You're a man Jack, but I should try and be genteel while describing a Sporting House to you on account of I don't know much about your sensibilities. You see, a Sporting House was a, er...establishment that catered to folks in search of a good time, and I mean a different good time than what we piano players could provide."

Jack exclaimed, "You're talking about a cat-house, aren't you?"

Red brightened and rejoined, "Well, in a way, yes, in that both places we're talking about acted as, shall we say, houses of horizontal refreshment. Modern places offering er...carnival rides for adults really are pretty shabby with not much, well, *ambience* for lack of a better word. In addition to the...well...feminine attractions, the old Sporting Houses boasted fine furnishings, a gleaming bar, great music and entertainment..." Red's voice trailed away as he peered wistfully through the mists of time.

Jack waited for a respectful moment and then interrupted the old man's reverie with a skeptical voice, "And that's where you learned all of this great music, while people were carrying on in such a fashion? Didn't they distract you?"

Red laughed, "Jack, everyone in those establishments was distracting, but never for the same reasons. In most cases it really wasn't *learning* the music; you already had that in you. Sure, you might not know a particular tune yet, but songs are easy to pick up. What you were really *learning* back then was how to keep a crowd, keep your job, and keep alive. People wanted hits of the day, and just like today, the hits came in all flavors of music. Here's one that a Tin-Pan Alley guy wrote in NYC, which spread across the country like wildfire. I never did see the sheet for it, but back then I couldn't've read it anyhow."

He swivelled back to the keys, ripped off a march-like introduction and launched into an intoxicating piece that had a series of repetitive three-note melodies. The piano rocked with the rhythm and Red worked more into what Jack decided had to be a rag.

Red completed the piece to enthusiastic applause, hooting, hollering and, "*most* importantly," Red gleefully exclaimed, a fifth of bourbon that arrived at his left elbow. Red took a large swig from the bottle and, wiping his lips daintily with a rather grimy handkerchief he produced from his pocket, wheezed "Yessir, Jack, rewards for a man's work still come in all shapes and sizes!"

Jack waited for a moment while Red savored another sample of the spirit and conjectured, "Red, that sounded like a rag that my Dad used to play on his banjo in between my Mom's vocal features."

Red nodded approvingly, "I could tell you have music in your blood, son! That tune is the ***Black and White Rag*** and is good proof that even non-performers

could come up with a winner. I remember the feller's name was George Botsford. Just of them day-jobbers on the Alley who got lucky, had a hit and kept writin' 'em! Snobs used to say guys like that, you know—with all that musical training, were selling out when they lowered themselves to write popular music." Red started to laugh so hard, he hacked and coughed for a few seconds, stopping long enough to sample a bit more bourbon. Once he had recovered, he chuckled "Hell, I've been trying to sell out for years; only trouble is no one's buyin'!"

THIRD CHORUS

Jack was thoroughly enjoying his encounter with a piece of living history, and ventured, "Red, could we go back to the way you play *The Entertainer* once more, please? I arrived in the middle of it and it had such a slow, soulful---well---mournful quality about it that I'd love to hear you play the whole thing!"

Red glowered a bit, "Boy, are you asking me to play a *request*? You should know that I never repeat tunes of an evening, and that thing is already overplayed!"

Taken aback, Jack stammered, "Gee, I didn't mean to be forward, sir, I...I should have guessed that an artist like yourself would have his own things he..."

"Aahhh, forget it, kid! I was actually only pulling your leg. Some guys get all bristly when a customer makes a request...I even knew one fella who would snarl 'Never heard of it in my life,' and then, about 10 minutes later, ease gently into it to see if the guy who asked for it was still listening. I'm NOT kidding about not liking to repeat tunes, however. I got waayy too big a repertoire for that, you bet! But, seein' as you called me an 'artist' and I ain't gettin' paid here anyhow and seein' as I just mosied in and decided to plunk myself down here, sure I'll play that tune again. If they don't like it, they can move on. What're they gonna do, fire me?"

"Red," Jack started, "I really don't mind if you'd rather..."

"Jack, my young man," Red drew himself up and stuck his chin out, "there are no bad songs, only bad interpretations of momentarily abused *good* songs. And if I do say so myself, my version of this rag is hands-down different from any other that I've ever heard, as you yourself mentioned when we met! So here goes..."

Red turned back to the piano and sat there for a time doing nothing but staring at the keys. Jack noted that this time Red was not diving into the tune and attacking it with the almost maniacal glee with which he had performed the previous selections. Then Red started rolling rich, fat chords across the notes, and slowly brought an echo of the melody to Scott Joplin's old rag into those tremolos. Slowly, the piece unfolded, with each hand taking turns caressing the melody and twisting it about. The place, which had been rocking when Jack first came in, had by now tuned in more closely to the music the old-timer had been creating and Jack felt and then heard a hush slowly descend over the crowd.

Red made the volume and texture ebb and flow for the next five minutes, wringing every possible depth of emotion from the rag Jack had requested. Finally, as a wry musical joke, Red let the piece whisper away with a gentle sounding of the notes of the introduction he had skipped over at the beginning of the piece. This time, the reception was more subdued but had a warmer feel to it. As the respectful applause died down, Red looked around a little uncomfortably, saying to Jack out of

the corner of his mouth, “I hate it when this happens to me, when something goes so well, I don’t know what the hell to do next!!”

FOURTH CHORUS

Before Jack could reply, Red swiveled around on the stool once again to face the keys and launched into a breakneck version of ***Chinatown, My Chinatown*** that left both player and listener breathless. Instead of bringing the tune to a climactic ending, however, Red moved into a less well-known piece that Jack didn’t recognize, although he heard the same exotic flavor in it that he’d noted in the first tune. From there, Red barged into a song Jack knew well, and he found himself laughing when the bar-fliers started to sing the words, with the requisite insertions:

I’m ***The Sheik of Araby*** (*without no pants on*)
Your love belongs to me (*without no pants on*)
At night, when you’re asleep (*without no pants on*)
Into your tent I’ll creep (*without no pants on*)
The stars that shine above (*without no pants on*)
Will light our way to love (*without no pants on*)
You’ll rule this world with me (*without no pants on*)
I’m the Sheik of Araby (*without no pants on*)

Even as the denizens of the bar were congratulating each other on both their memories for the words and their vocal prowess, Red moved to yet another locale with the song ***Hindustan***. The notes were flying now and he was dripping with sweat but he would not let up. He crashed through that song into another tune that Jack knew he had heard before even if he could not recall the name. Red brought the volume and intensity down for what sounded like Jack as an interlude—indeed Red was imitating the undulation of a camel in the desert at this point, both with the notes he was playing and the way he was swaying up and down on the stool in time with the music. He slashed into a hot version of ***San***, a tune Jack remembered his Dad playing. Red concluded with a song that sounded extended to Jack; it stayed on the same harmonies longer than Jack anticipated and elongated the expected phrases that cascaded one after another.

Finally, over 7 minutes later, Red banged out a crashing ending which brought the crowd to its feet. He was panting and Jack was a bit worried for him, but after Red had gulped down another tot of liquor he looked revived. “Whew,” Jack breathed out, “I guess that’s what you follow ***The Entertainer*** with!”

Red nodded and gasped “Yeah, but now what?!?”

Jack wanted to distract Red from the piano for just a little time so the old guy could fully recover from his most recent pianistic efforts, so he confessed, “I didn’t catch all of the tunes in your medley...”

“Wow,” Red sat back and placed his elbows on the keys, creating a discordant jangle of noise. “I’ve never had that high-falutin’ word used for my music! ‘Medley,’” he rolled the word around in his mouth. “Now you might think ‘cause I’m not a great reader that I don’t know any of those uppity music terms, but I do, Jack, I do.” He raised himself up off the keys, sat straight and intoned in a mock-professorial

manner, "A medley is a string of songs one after another." Red paused and winked before adding, "But not necessarily in that order!"

Jack guffawed at Red's caveat and said "Red, you are a real surprise. That is a truly funny twist!"

Red blushed a little and murmured, "Oh, I can't take credit for that one. A guy I used to play with, a fantastic banjo player named Eric Eddyson—we used to call him 'Fast Eric'--- came up with the medley quip years ago. I miss Eric. He played fine guitar too. A better man I've never met. I'm sure I'll meet up with him again down the line!"

"So you didn't just play solo?"

"Oh, no, Jack. The most fun was when you got to play with other folks. Banjos, other pianos, trumpets, clarinets; any instrument that could give the poor piano player a break was welcome, as long as they were *good* players...! Why, I learned many of the songs I just got through pounding out in my '*medley*' while sharing the gig with horn players. You mentioned you didn't catch a couple of them. Lessee now, I started with *Chinatown*..."

"Yes, that one I knew, but what was the next one?"

"Aw, that old thing was a tune I picked up years ago when I heard it on a gramophone recording by Paul Whiteman and his band. *Japanese Sandman* is what that one's called. I think the chords move along very nicely. Then, everyone here knew *The Sheik* and it seemed natural to follow that with *Hindustan*, which was a really easy one to learn, Jack, because almost the whole thing is based on the chords of "Bill Bailey." I've been playing that one for almost 30 years! Then for some reason, I went into a song I hadn't thought of in more than 10 called "Jungletown" or, I guess, the whole name is *Down in Jungletown* but we players just referred to it as "Jungletown" and everyone knew what we meant. Yessir, if you called that song with a bunch of players that hadn't jammed together before, they'd all know what tune you were calling. Everyone played that one back in the day."

As Red paused in his list to avail himself of another brace of liquid fortification, Jack remarked, "Red, you just said 'for some reason I went into a song.' Wasn't this medley arranged by you some time ago and then used as a set piece?"

"Heavens, no, young man!" Red cried, his voice getting louder. "In my line of work, of "professerin'" so to speak, you always needed the element of *surprise*. If folks knew what was comin' they'd stop payin' attention, stop buying you drinks, stop slipping you side-money, stop..."

"Side money?" Jack couldn't help interrupting the old man's rant.

"Yeah, side money. Tips. Calling that money "tips" demeaned us however. We looked at it as money picked up "on the side." Sometimes, the side money you got for a night when the crowd was with you made your measly pay mean nothin'! Many of my piano-playing compatriots and I would have had to go on to shinin' shoes or washing cars if it weren't for folks with deep pockets and deep appreciation for the unique entertainment we were providing. Come to think of it, many pianists did have other lines of work to augment their musical pursuits. Why, Jelly Roll himself spent some time as a pool shark and also a pimp, although, as I said, I think he did the latter so's folks wouldn't spread the word that he liked men in the same way as did his *close* friend Tony Jackson. It didn't make me no never

mind who guys liked to hang around with afterhours but a lot of people got pretty uncomfortable with that sort of thing and it could affect your rep or at least your jobs. Of course, Tony was so good that his “interests” never stopped him working.”

FIFTH CHORUS

“I love hearing you tell me some of the back story of this music and the people who made it, including yourself, Red,” Jack told him, “but I don’t want to lose the name of the last song that I did not recognize in your medley of songs from far-off places.”

“Oh yeah,” Red paused, “Where were we...er, from Jungletown, I took us to the desert with *San*—another hit for Whiteman and also for his doomed cornet player, Bix Beiderbecke—and then finished with a terrific Walter Donaldson song with one of the funniest titles I ever heard.” He paused, obviously waiting for Jack to ask about the name.

“Well,” Jack blurted, “Red, what was it?”

“It was called *My Little Bimbo Down on the Bamboo Isle* and it was real naughty for its day. It had hilarious lyrics like “She had a shape like a ukulele” and “All she wore was a great big friendly smile.”

Jack grinned. “Must’ve got the hightbrows all in a tizzy!”

Red laughed. “It sure did, boy. Music considered “popular” has always had its naysayers among the upper crust. Not that any of those folks would come to listen to we popular pianists, or,” he winked at Jack, “at least *admit* to coming in and checkin’ us out. People back then, even the common folks, had a wide taste for music though. You heard more of it around. This is before the days of most people being able to afford a Victrola or some way to have music in their own home, other than the music they themselves made. You say you’re recordin’ people?”

“That’s what I do, Red,” Jack replied, “and all sorts of music just as you say.”

“Back in the early days when records were first comin’ out, musicians were pretty down on the whole thing. Remember that a musician who recorded hardly ever received anything other than a flat fee...10, 20, the big guys were gettin’ 50 dollars, maybe...and ev’ryone was worried that once someone had your music on record, they wouldn’t have to come listen to you playing live. Now, if a record went *big*, well that was a whole diff’rent story but that didn’t happen too often.”

“I think live music will always be with us, no matter how many people can listen to music in their own living rooms,” Jack opined.

“From your lips, Jack,” Red intoned, pointing upwards, “from your lips. But now, where was I? Oh yeah, the pianist back in my salad days had to play it all and each of us enjoyed surprisin’ the folks with a classical-type piece that they’d know and then ‘ham’ it up a bit, put some pep into it, ‘rag’ it, if you’d like. Here’s what I mean...” Red swiveled back to the keys and started a quasi-classical overture to what turned out to be one of Chopin’s Nocturnes. At first, he played it straight and, to Jack’s ears, quite well. About a minute into it, however, Red lit into a transition and turned it into a hot, up-tempo barnburner, never losing the melody but with plenty of syncopation in both hands, with octaves and arpeggios in the right and thundering bass notes and chords in the left. He returned to the cadenza as written

by Chopin and then burst into a surprise ending that left both pianist and listener breathless.

“Whoo-ee, Jack,” Red gasped, “That sure was a lot easier to do when I was younger! I remember that Jelly’s classical show piece was a version of an aria from La Traviata by that guy, um...the Italian one...”

“Giuseppe Verdi?” Jack offered.

“Just the fella! Although some joker who knew the language translated his name for us in English: Joe Green!” Red slapped his knee and chortled merrily. “Kinda takes old Verdi down a peg!” He recovered, took another gulp of bourbon and continued, “Yeah, we all had at least one piece from the classical book to call our own. Donald Lambert, or ‘The Lamb’ as we call him, would romp along on Grieg’s ‘Anitra’s Dance’ for hours on end and the Lion was influenced by all of them French Impressionist guys in almost all of his tunes.”

Jack asked, “Red, who do you mean by ‘The Lion’?”

“One of the real old guys from New York, name of Willie Smith. Many different stories about how he got the nickname ‘The Lion’ but the main thing is that when he attacked that piano he sure made it roar!”

Jack mused, “With names like ‘The Lion’ and ‘The Lamb’ how is it you were satisfied with ‘Red’? Wouldn’t you have liked to be known as some distinctive animal?”

“Naw,” said Red, “really the name was secondary to the music. If you couldn’t play, you could call yourself God and you wouldn’t keep the gig. ‘Red’ suits me fine...and so does this bourbon!” He swigged some more down and turned back to the piano.

“Hey, Red,” someone at the other end of the room called out, “What tune was that last one you barreled through?”

Red stood up, turned around towards the room and drew himself up to his full height. “That, Gentlemen,” he intoned, “Was Chopin’s Nocturne in Eb, Opus 2, which I play as *Chopin’s Nocturnal Stride*. I can tell, however, that these highbrow emanations from my fingers are leaving you mystified, so here’s a little somethin’ more in keeping with your tastes.”

SIXTH CHORUS

Red then sat back at the piano, gave Jack a wink and began to thump out a rhythmic bass line in his left hand. He lifted his right hand way above his head and wiggled his fingers as his left hand continued the constant rhythm. Then he dramatically brought his right hand down to the keyboard and echoed the ongoing rhythm, which by now was becoming hypnotic. The melody Red began continued that rhythm and finally broke into a series of held, ascending chords. These came to an abrupt stop, and the suspense of the silence, broken at the last second by a few twinkling notes high up on the piano, had silenced the entire room. When the rhythm came blasting back in, the crowd let out a huge holler of appreciation and Red really started rocking back and forth.

Jack looked around the bar and saw that people had joined in on the rhythm, some banging their beer mugs up and down on the bar, other more energetic folks

jumping out of their seats or off their stools and gyrating about to the music. Red really had them going and looked as if he could keep up this beat all night! Three more times he suspended the rhythm, lengthening the silence just a little more, stretching it further each time while never losing the underlying, constant, though momentarily silent, pulse.

Red returned to the second theme and played it three more times, changing keys with each repeat and building to a deafening ending that resulted in the largest response from the crowd yet! Everyone was cheering, hollering and, from the sound of the breaking glass, throwing their drinks into the air. Red slumped back breathlessly with a weary, yet satisfied, smile. "Gets 'em ev'ry time," he breathed, mostly to himself. "You can't beat ***The Yellow Dog Blues!***"

Jack was astounded by the effect the music had on the customers in the bar, but he then reminded himself that he was planning on devoting his entire career to capturing the power, the emotion of music recorded live, in the *moment*. No pre-planning; simply a fearless dip into the musical soup to see what come out of it on your spoon. "Red," he asked once the pianist had caught his wind, "I would like to record you playing this music. Would that be interesting to you?"

Red glanced sideways at Jack. "My music is no good recorded. It would lose all of its...*vitality*. After all, I change it up every time I play a tune, even if it's one I play every night." He turned away and groped for his bottle; obviously uncomfortable with the turn Jack's conversation with him had just taken.

Jack knew better than to push the issue with him: he had a feeling that Red had been approached previously about recording his music and might have either had a bad experience during the recording or, even more likely, with the recompense he received after he had completed recording. Jack thought it might be best to continue to get to know Red better and gently cursed himself for bringing up recording so soon into their encounter. Red was looking down at his hands, half-turned away from Jack, and Jack felt sorry for sending Red into a slump.

Thinking quickly, he asked "Red, you really change a tune *every* time you play it, even the ones you have played since as long as you can remember?"

Red looked around and said, rather sullenly Jack thought, "Kid, that's what we entertainers **do**. It's no fun for the listener or the player if things always stay the same. That's for the musicians; the ones who play by the notes. I try to tell a new story no matter how old the song."

Jack narrowed his eyes at Red in a conspiratorial manner. "I know you have a lot of songs in your song-bag, Red. Show me what you would do with one of my favorite old songs, ***Waiting for the Robert E. Lee.***"

"That old thing?" Red exclaimed, "It really is amazing how people can't shake that song. It's got a great melody and a terrific beat but so do a lot of other tunes." He shook his head in amazement, muttering quietly, "Even kids like this one remember that old warhorse." He raised his eyes at Jack and said, "The great thing about that song is that it was written by two Tin Pan Alley guys who never went south of Staten Island." Red paused for a swig and continued, "If you ever stop to think of the lyrics 'Way Down on the Levee in Ol' Alabamy' you know right away they were full of it! Why, the only levee in Alabama is in Cherokee County and ITS on a lake! No riverboat'd be found there, not in a million years, heh, heh, heh..."

Red paused and assumed a serious look for a moment and then squinted at Jack. "Just remember, son, when you're an entertainer, you *entertain*. Oh sure, it's OK to sprinkle a bit of your knowledge here and there, but spouting facts in a story takes a far back seat to being able to move the folks listenin' to you. Move the folks and you'll always have the job. Make it exciting, sexy, funny, sad, whatever, and you'll have 'em all night!"

SEVENTH CHORUS

He turned back to the piano and said over his shoulder, "Jack, each time I do this ol' Robert E. Lee saw it gets a huge response. Check out how I use the left hand to imitate the crash of the paddlewheel!"

Jack marveled at how Red started the song rolling and never let up. He noticed two things about Red's version. It *did* sound how he imagined a paddle-wheeler steamboat would sound, although he had never seen one in Arizona. The second thing Jack observed is that once again the place went wild from the time Red switched the thundering melody to the left hand until his virtuosic finale.

Red swiveled around and leaned back, putting his elbows on the keys once again. He was sweating and out of breath but grinning like a child. "Hoo, boy," he exclaimed, "it's time to do a medium one. Here's a tune that the Dixieland Bands round the country still like to do." He turned back and pounded out *Fidgety Feet*, a tune Jack recognized as he had the 78 disc by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. When Red completed his version, complete with key change and band ending, Jack told him: "Red, I've never heard band tunes played on the piano like that! Wow!"

Red replied, "Oh, Jack, that's nothin'. Especially the old band pieces. Why all of those old tunes back in the nineteen-teens were nothing more than ragtime played by a band, so it just seems right that since the bands stole ragtime from the professors, we should steal their tunes and do our own thing to them, too."

Jack interjected, "The bands playing this stuff didn't call it ragtime, they called it jazz, Red. Even a young guy like me knows that."

"Yes," Red countered, "but those are just words, Jack. Labels. They don't mean nothin' in the long run. The rhythms, the chords and the roadmap of the early jazz tunes came right out of the world of ragtime. Man, back in those days life was fat for the piano player. He was the superstar! He could do anything. Still can, if you'll be so kind as to notice me." Red stood and executed a mock-solemn bow, earning a couple of half-hearted claps and hoots from a couple of inebriated patrons at the bar. "Yes indeed, my boy, even today, the piano is the best instrument for the working musician. You got the whole orchestra at your fingertips! Guitar players can do pretty well too, but they always have to leave some subtleties out."

Jack noted, "Red, not a whole lot of what you have been doing is what I would call subtle."

"Oh yeah?" Red challenged. "I know subtle stuff that's way too high class for this room, buddy!" He looked piqued at Jack for a moment and Jack feared his gentle jibe had upset his new friend, but Red's face softened into a grin after a few seconds and he quietly said, "Allow me to illustrate."

EIGHTH CHORUS

He turned back to the piano and began a piece in the high register that had a melancholy quality although it still had plenty of rhythm. While it began in a more sophisticated style than Red had exhibited in the past few tunes, it soon began to get hot again, and by the time the old piano player was coming towards the end, the piano was rocking and did not stop until Red completed the coda.

There was no response from the crowd, as nobody in the bar knew the tune Red had just finished, but Jack told him he thought it was really catchy. "Should be," Red chortled, "it was written by none other than George Gershwin!"

"Red, I know a fair amount of Gershwin and I've never heard that piece. What was it?"

"Why, it's ol' George's only rag. He called it *Rialto Ripples*. While the original tune is very ripple-y, I like to put a bit more muscle into it, but you notice the folks here couldn't care less if they tried. I gotta say, Jack, I usually only use about 10 percent of my repertoire when I'm playing for people. Ev'ryone wants to hear the same tunes over and over. Why that song is an early masterpiece by one of our country's most talented composers! Five years later he'd be the first guy to blend jazz and classical music together in his Rhapsody in Blue tune!"

"Hey, can you play that?" Jack requested excitedly.

"I ain't getting' paid enough!!" Red snarled. "Ain't getting' paid at all, come to think, except for booze and that's not enough to tackle somethin' so...so..." Red trailed off and sat still. After a couple of seconds, he muttered, "And, that's one I don't really do. Too long to really learn when you don't read so good. Ah well, most of the folks here wouldn't want that anyway. **This** is the tune that'll get 'em going again!"

Red began to play fast and furious, and from the first notes *Tiger Rag* had the crowd hopping, stamping their feet, clapping their hands and shouting, "Hold that Tiger!!" when the famous chorus came around. The stamping of feet and pounding of fists was so loud it threatened to drown out Red's playing. His fingers were a blur and his left hand pumping out the stride bass was almost holographically transparent it was moving so fast. The piano shook as he crashed into the ending and the tumult was deafening with glasses being broken and Jack even thought he'd heard a gunshot! He'd heard stories of an Old and Wild West but was a bit concerned that he now appeared to be experiencing a remnant of it.

As Red caught his breath, Jack wondered if it might not be time for him to leave the old piano player, not just for his own safety but because Red looked as if he was all in, done and out. But he was captivated by both the music and the musician and wondered if he might change the tone so as to stay just a bit longer.

NINTH CHORUS

"Red, I've heard you play some really exciting stuff; music that I'll remember for a long, long time. I was wondering if you play anything that you wrote. Maybe a pretty, slow piece?"

Red considered Jack's question for a moment. "Well, Jack, from time to time I do fool around with makin' up my own tunes. I have a blues that I play almost ev'ry night as the evening winds down. I change it a lot each time I play it, but the chords and the roadmap stay the same."

Jack inquired, "Do you mean you keep the harmonic progression and the structure of your blues constant but change some of the details of the piece?"

Red squinted at him for a second. "Well, I guess I do if you insist on usin' that college brat language," he responded with a lop-sided smile. "Sure makes me sound like I know what I'm doin', don't it?"

Jack returned, "Red, for sure you know what you're doing. I can't remember the last time I heard someone play the piano with such energy and such *feel*."

"Aw, you're makin' me blush, son. I just do what comes natural and hope folks like it. I think I'll stay for a while here. The crowd likes my music, the booze flows nice and smoothly and it seems like you just might want to hear some more from me.

"So now I'll play my blues. Since I'm usually pullin' up stakes ev'ry week or so—sometimes each night until I find a good fit—I call this tune the ***Movin' On Blues***. Sometimes movin' on makes me sad and quite often makes me real glad! The rendition is sorta a mirror as to how I'm feelin' about my life at that moment. So let's see what we get."

Turning once again to the piano, Red began to caress the keys as Jack had not yet heard him do that evening. He made that piano sing of travel, longing, excitement, adventure and heartbreak. Jack could catch the form of the piece, but Red kept slipping in new ideas and passing harmonies to such extent that the piece was constantly shifting and remaining true to its title. The place grew more and more still until finally the only sound in the bar was the melancholy sound of the piano filling the listener's ears and their souls.

When Red whispered his piece to a finish, the silence held for another several seconds and then the chatter and clinking glasses recommenced, although Jack noticed that it was much quieter than before. No one had applauded, which would have ruined the mood.

"Red, that was beautiful. It was actually magic. I loved it!"

"Well, Jack, I'm glad it touched you. Too bad if you want to hear it again, though. It's diff'rent every time."

"Then, if you agree, I'd really would like to record your playing," Jack had hoped that by now Red was feeling comfortable enough with him to seriously consider his request. He was shocked by Red's response.

"Record ME? Me, Jack? What on *earth* for? I'm just a travelin' piano thumper. I don't have anything to offer that will be lasting. Besides, if I record my music then other people can hear it and maybe steal it, you know?"

"Like you did when you were young and just starting out, Red?" Jack countered, inwardly holding his breath and surprising himself with his effrontery.

Red looked at Jack, opening and closing his mouth repeatedly as he struggled for a response to silence this young sprat. Finally, he let out a whoosh of air and started to chuckle softly. "Now *that*, young man, is a very rude thing to say to your elder...and right on the mark. We'd all steal from each other! We'd like to say it was

some kind of flattery, but really it was just plain ol' theft. Theft and learning. 'Course you wanted your sound to at some point become recognizeable on its own; taking what you'd stole from the other players and changin' it enough that anyone hearing you *even* without seein' you would exclaim 'Why. That's ol' Red; I'd know him anywhere. Means we're gonna have a good night!'"

Jack said gently, "Red, if you'd allow me to record you, more people would hear that unique sound of yours and know it was ol' Red they were listening to. I'd sure like to do that. And, yeah, other pianists would hear it and those that could would steal stuff from you but that would just get your sound heard even more. Besides, if they steal some licks or tunes from you, don't you have more in your ammo bag or is that all you have?"

Red bristled. "Of course that's not 'all I have'! We ain't even scratched the surface yet of what I know and what I can do!" He jumped off the stool and exclaimed, "Yeah Jack, I would like to try recordin' some of my music! Let's do it and show 'em that Red has got some real stuff goin'!"

Jack stood and shook his hand. "That's great to hear, Red. Believe me, I'll make sure you retain all your rights to anything you record. I'll make sure no one cheats you."

"I know that, son," Red responded solemnly. "I can tell how much you love music. And for you to spend so much time listenin' to an old geezer like me play and spout off his mouth, you got somethin' special goin' for you, boy. If you really think that some of my music is worth capturin', well I guess we can give it a shot."

"Old-timer," began a man standing above them, "you deserve more than a shot!" He placed another fifth of bourbon in front of Red's delighted face and sauntered back to his seat.

"Thanks buddy," Red called out. "Well, Jack, I'm gonna do some more playin'. What time should we meet to tomorrow and where?"

Jack gave Red the address and they agreed they would meet at 10 am the next day.

TAG

It was 11:30 before Red arrived at the studio where Jack was working. Although Jack was somewhat discomfited by Red's tardiness, he had been able to edit yesterday's work while waiting for him so he welcomed Red warmly and brought him into the studio.

Red sat at the piano and noodled a little. "So what do I do?" He asked Jack.

"Play anything you'd like. I'll just say 'rolling' when I have the reel going and you do anything you want. Then we'll see what we get."

"OK...hey, Jack, set up a mic for me to talk into as well, alright?"

"Sure. Are you going to sing?"

"No, no...nothing like that! You want it to sound good, don't you?"

Jack set up the mic, went into his recording room, mouthed 'rolling' at Red and Red began talking. Jack captured his spoken routine and musical examples and they decided to call the recording *Chopsticks*. They recorded many more of the songs Red had played the previous night and during the course of the day they

solidified their friendship. Jack knew he'd be hearing much more of Red in his future.