

3 CHORUS



Eight o'clock P.M. all over the world. Good-time time. Up steps, over wires into an arena of combat. Enemy is the blues on high ground, stubbornly refusing to be laid low by grown-ups engaged in (mere) child's play. Playing the blues. All over the world feet shuffle in the direction of battle—Doom, Doom, Baummm-Baummm, Dooom. "A" is struck to accompany the clattering of trap set and the clapping of hands that have waited for the arrival of musicians now adjusting slides and burning cork on metal. Tuning instruments to make tonight's engagement a more even match. The blues are not to be played with.

SOME HAVE COME TONIGHT to savor the sweet taste of victory, some to observe coldly, still others have already decided that the pitiless eyes of defeat will stare these musicians into an embarrassing silence. Whatever the perspectives, they assure victory by their presence. *They* have become, even if unwittingly, *us* in the process of turning the blues back, with style and accuracy.

We have no need for hysteria or the comfort of a mass-media brain-washing that would have us declare that the many men stamped out under the large blue feet of Goliath—blue with the blood of would-be heroes whose lives were extinguished so quickly the air had no time to turn it red—were the same as one young David, wise before his years and armed with the ability to swing an idea toward the heavens. Grown-ups engaged in (mere) child's play. We are assembled to take part in a display of skill and









a trial of tuneful arms. This could be any point on the long and distinguished time line of the human search for a lasting and profound happiness. But this is the end of the twentieth century. All of us will settle for two and one-half to three hours of jazz music. It is eight o'clock P.M. all over the world and the engagement has just begun.

Out on the hardwood slowly raising, to grasp a microphone, the hand that moments before had checked a zipper potentially left unzipped. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for coming out this evening. We hope you enjoy yourselves. Because we are here to swing." I start every concert with these words, then introduce the band.

"Enjoy yourselves," thinks T Bone. "This is three weeks of my party money invested in these tickets. These boys better be swinging, and Adrienne better dig it—and me, too. I been trying for five years to get her out on a date. She sure is looking good, though. Damn."

Now I'm calling the first tune with a little story that I will say is the song's meaning. It's not true, but sounds good. People laugh. I've contemplated this tune all afternoon. We plunge into the silent concentration of group improvisation. A concentration that has taken years to develop.

"Are we in tune? Yes. In balance? No, I'm playing too loud. Relax. Solo. Listen to everyone. Develop themes. Why is Veal playing that damn D-natural? He's trying to throw me. No, he is being creative. Don't be afraid, just catch it the next time around. Interact with Herlin. Listen. Develop to climax. Relax and solo. Here comes Wes. Come on now, let's swing. Veal and Herlin are working tonight. Yes, that's it. Take the song out."

We are snatched from the silence of listening and reacting into the sound of applause. *"Did they like that song? Who hasn't soloed? What to play next? Okay, a groove song for those who like the Spanish tinge. Thank you very much, and now . . ."*

Adrienne says, "I like the way they look, just playing. It looks dignified, makes me feel proud." T Bone breathes a sigh of relief. "But that song was too fast." He puts his arm around her. "That's all right, baby, they gonna play something slow. They better."

Mrs. Martin, she's unimpressed. She remembers Duke Ellington's band. Rex Stewart was her favorite. She remembers when bebop came in,



too. She never did like Dizzy or Parker. That song sounded too much like them.

Groovin' in the key of E. People on the bandstand forgetting cues and missing ensemble passages, but still the groove feels good. Red and hot. Me and Cone phrasing together with plunger mutes like two choirboys drawing something nasty on a back pew. *"Is Cone going to play short or long? What about the long note? How long? Yeah, okay, now half-speed. Yes. Now gradually slower. Good."*

Wycliffe plays perfectly, making small adjustments to the improvised phrasings with which I test his reflexes. As he shoots me a quick glance, we smile in recognition of what he has done, and . . .

"My solo," Wycliffe thinks. *"Slide the trombone. Listen to Eric. Play with the rhythm Veal has introduced. Converse with him for a minute. End gracefully. Don't blast on the horn. The hell with it. Yes. Blast one good one. Feel guilty."*

"Man, don't feel guilty," I tell him. "We both have to learn to control these brass instruments."

"Damn, bruh! It's hard."

"I know. I been struggling with it longer than you."

Eric has been soloing: *"I wish they would shut the fuck up while I'm playing. Hmm, okay, Veal. They were talking about the music, it's cool. E sure is a hard-ass key."*

We are taking the song out. Homey grooves through the vamp playing things we have never heard before. We all smile. Much of the time when playing we only hear melodies, rhythms, harmonies, and textures. But we also think these thoughts trying to make potential chaos coherent, moment to moment. That's a jazz band. Continuous musical adjustment to solve problems that have never existed.

Professor Fernandez has brought his high school band to tonight's concert. They comment on various technical aspects of what they have heard. Nathan is their best trumpeter, first chair all-state. He has all of Marsalis's recordings. The students look at him as particularly difficult passages are played. "What about that, Nathan? Can you do that?" Nathan says nothing, because he has stayed up many a night listening to these

same men swinging on CDs. He has read every word of Crouch's liner notes and studied every picture as if it were part of a recurring dream. Now here they are and better than on the records. He has nothing to say. He will miss nothing tonight, especially by answering dumb questions from the uninitiated.

Now it's time to play a slow sweet one. Me and Eric. "This next tune is a Hoagy Carmichael composition entitled 'Stardust.'" As I lift the horn, out of the corner of my eye I spot Adrienne and T Bone. "*Damn! She is fine. He's kind of eorny looking, but I hope this ballad helps him out. 'Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely nights . . .'*"

Slowing pushing myself out into an audience of strangers become coconspirators in an intrigue of intimacy. Telling of broken, mended, and rejuvenated hearts, a confluence of romantic experiences. Going beyond thought so as to play all of myself. Notes cascade off walls. "*Hope Eric hears this tempo. Where's the pulse? Yass! Let's stay on this vibe. Put your arm around her, T Bone.*" Play pure melody, no runs. And so it goes. Attempting to spread generous helpings of a tone honed through years of attempting. Trying to play many ways at once, like making love to a woman you will never please. Horn raised at a forty-five-degree angle, pointed like a cannon to blow flowers to the many who have come to be serenaded.

"That's what we paid to hear," shouts someone as the final clarion note rings. "That's what we came here for." Once again make consonant the dissonance of that final tone. Nathan hangs his head. His fellow students think he is jealous or ashamed to have thought himself to be, on occasion, a great trumpeter. "What about that, Nathan? Huh?" His head hangs lower to hide the tears that cling to his eyes. Tears of joy at the recognition of someone unafraid to say it's alright to let people know you love them, the music, and the horn. He thinks of how hard he will practice upon returning home.

"Were you trying to put your hand on my breast?" Adrienne asks T Bone.

"Nah, baby, I was just moving with a note he played and my hand slipped. Say, I noticed you start rubbing my leg when that tone started bending." She flips her eyes at him, she turns up the corners of her mouth. Then they both know.



“Yes,” thinks Mrs. Martin, “his tone is good. But I’m sorry, Shorty Baker’s tone was much prettier. Though I have to say Marsalis is cuter.”

Jazz music is always in the process of becoming itself. So is a gig. We are into the engagement now. The early jitters are gone. The blues is in trouble tonight. It’s time to vaccinate ourselves and our audience with a nice, hot, slow blues. In D. Me on the microphone: “Time for some blues.” Various replies: “Okay, yeah, well alright.” Veal deep in the pocket for three choruses by himself. Soon to be joined by Eric tinkling up high. Homey in the center of a good ol’ country-ass blues. No thinking. This is past thought. Reflexes trained to respond by countless hours of on-bandstand experiences, of stylizing off-bandstand interactions.

Warm Daddy pouring soul through his horn, locked in mortal combat with the blues. “*You better watch yourself!*” “*There it is!*” “*Say that!*” “*Have mercy!*” “*You mean that!*” That’s us. Standing to the side or in the shadows, but participating in every phrase. He plays also to impress us. We encourage each other, we listen and anticipate with such purity that we imagine ourselves to be . . .

“Warm Daddy!” Nathan shocks himself by standing and shouting this most basic of responses to Wes Anderson’s alto and the playing of some blues. Most basic because it could also take place in the famed house of Tokyo’s Kabuki theater, where the most recent Danjuro in a centuries-long line of actors bearing that name is acclaimed with fervor at the elegant execution of an expressive maneuver. “Danjuro!”

Here comes Pine Cone with the trombone. Pure D jazz blues, Cone style. Each instrument will whip the butt of the blues from another perspective. T Bone knows this: “Play it low. Get down low where the blues lives. This boy can play some blues, I know that.” He is comfortable now, hopeful that his date with Adrienne will go past eleven P.M. She loves the blues, too! “Did you hear how he played that plunger, baby? Look, now, that’s some bad-ass shit you just heard. Excuse my language, but that’s the only way to say it. Shit! How you think I got my nickname? I know about the trombone.”

The Deacon plays two sensual choruses on the low, low clarinet. “*Leave something for me, Deke,*” I say, “*leave me something.*” Now, trumpet

held high, I am trying to swing, am swinging. Me, Veal, Homey, and Eric develop ideas and play, play with the blues, together, each negotiating concord from his own perspective.

Mrs. Martin claps on two and four, and her wig slips slightly left of center. She is happy. "I like that drummer. But he ain't no Sam Woodyard. Marsalis, well, he need to stick to playing classical music. Any one random chorus of any trumpeter of my day contains more soul than everything he has ever played. Even this tune I'm clappin' on."

I hit a high one and hold it. Lips swollen, cut by teeth, head bursting, heart straining; it must be held longer. Past the point of pain. This note is for Nathan. He respects the desire to make something good, great. Mr. Fernandez's band claps and hollers for that note. Nathan, he says nothing. Only runs his tongue along his lips and thinks, "That must hurt even him." He is more than right. It hurts, but it feels good. Better than the hurt because we are grown men engaged in (mere) child's play. Romping without fear. Playing the blues. The jazz blues.

My solo is over. Now all four horns come forward and the entire band girds for one final assault. When on death ground, play. On the edge of their seats, those who have come tonight realize that we are about to witness once again the unequivocal defeat of bad times.

"Not too many fast notes."

"Let me play high and fast."

"Slap the bass."

"Damn, the horns are dragging, let me bolster them up with some rolls."

"What is Wynton going to play here?"

"Let's play this riff."

"Okay, Cone, here's my response."

"He's answering Cone, let me harmonize it." The Deacon shouts up high on the clarinet.

"I'll just lay out."

That's us talking to each other, a continuous negotiation designed to use the full power, intelligence, and feeling of the band. Every instrument comments on the limitations of the other instruments, but together we fire

unlimited commentary at the blues. Like the litany of witnesses called to testify against the guilty in a court of law. To indict him with himself. *"Ain't that a bitch?"* We step forward together to convict the blues with the blues. But we are jazz musicians, so we proceed not just as witnesses but also as lawyers trained in precedent and the intricacies of indictment. Guilty as charged. No loophole or plea bargain, justice will be served this evening.

"Let's build it up."

"Don't let the intensity down."

"Not too loud."

"Leave room for Wes."

"Yes, yes, yass." Deep in the groove with all cylinders open, we take the song out to a crescendo of applause.

"Now that's jazz, goddammit, that is jazz music!" T Bone springs from his seat, sneaking a look at Adrienne's own rising posterior.

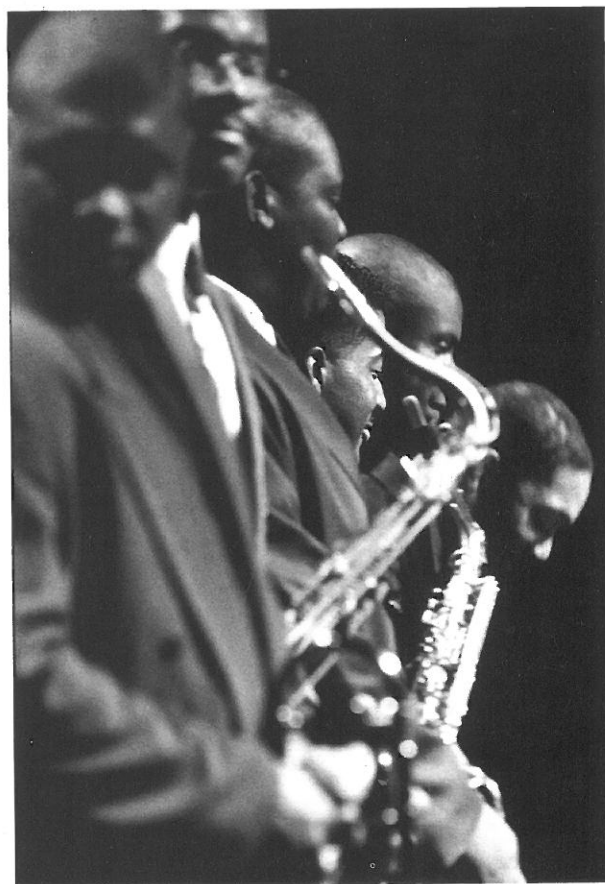
"You see how hard they were workin'. That's what I like. I hate a man who's lazy," Adrienne hints at him.

"Who you talkin' about, baby?"

"My uncle."

We take our audience through the many movements inspired by and implied in the entire history of jazz. Complexity of up-tempo counterpoints and virtuoso passages, emotional ebb and flow of extended pieces, sensuousness of slow songs, dance-beat motion of grooves, and the timeless joy of New Orleans music. This is the end of the twentieth, but we play jazz, real jazz, for the public.

Mr. Fernandez's students are restless now. Two and one-half hours of swing is enough for many of them. They are ready to go home and watch some TV. Not Nathan, though, he clings to every phrase, ever deeper into the groove of each swinging moment. Time has revealed the truth to his fellow students. Long after their superficial involvement has ended, long after the last echo of "Huh, Nathan?" Nathan is still swinging—harder. They are tired.



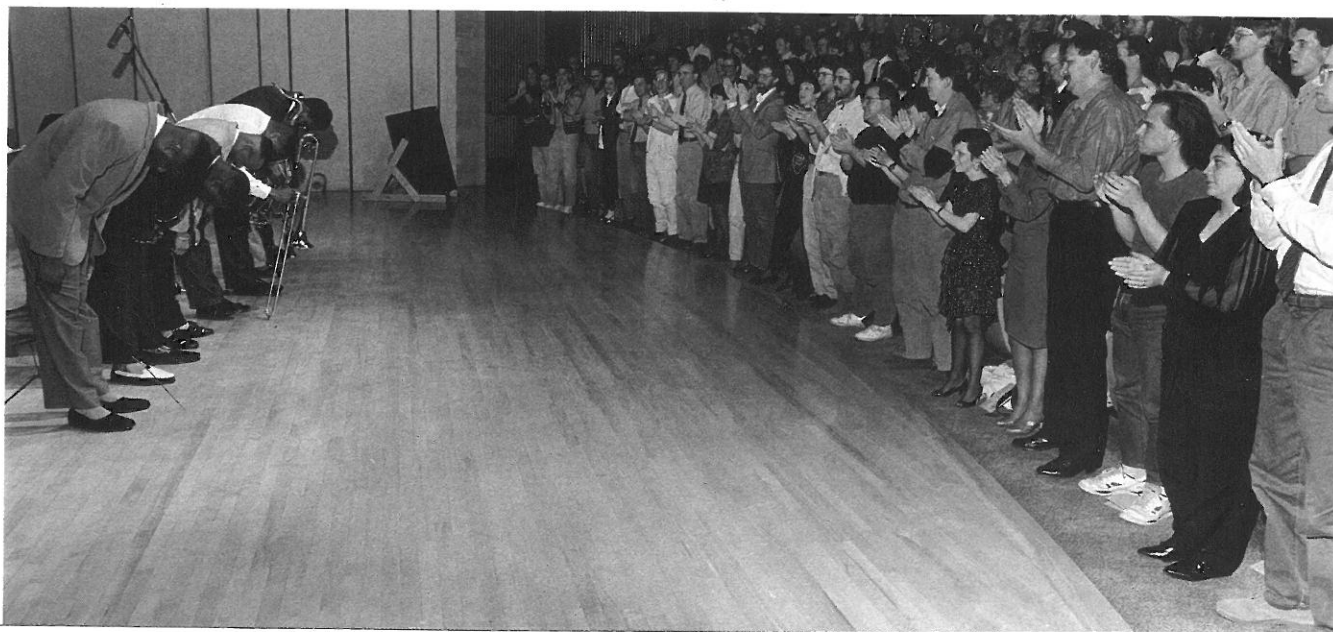
Yes, our musical conversations will soon end, on a stage that has resembled in the last two hours an altar, field of battle, library, court of law, late-night bedroom, playground, and so many streets of a modern metropolis. We will once again have participated in an exorcism of the blues by playing the blues, the jazz blues.

Mrs. Martin has particularly enjoyed the selections that most remind her of her youth. "Well, at least they are trying to play, they do play a wide range of music. But not as good as in my day. A five-course meal of mediocre food is just as bad as a one. That's what I say," if only to herself.

T Bone's arm rests comfortably on Adrienne's shoulder, and even though she is unfamiliar with a lot of this music, she likes T Bone's involvement in it. He is different from the other men she knows.

This is me: "Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. We hope that you have enjoyed yourselves. Take care, and have a very good night. Bye-bye." The rhythm section keeps swinging, as the horns leave the stage playing. Todd and I keep on playing, speaking to each other in the language of jazz. Now the whole band comes offstage, Veal, Homey, and Eric singing and clapping, having left bass, drums, and piano behind. Our audience rises to its feet in recognition of the resounding victory they have enjoyed. We continue the music backstage, grown men deeply engaged in child's play. Like astronauts floating in space.

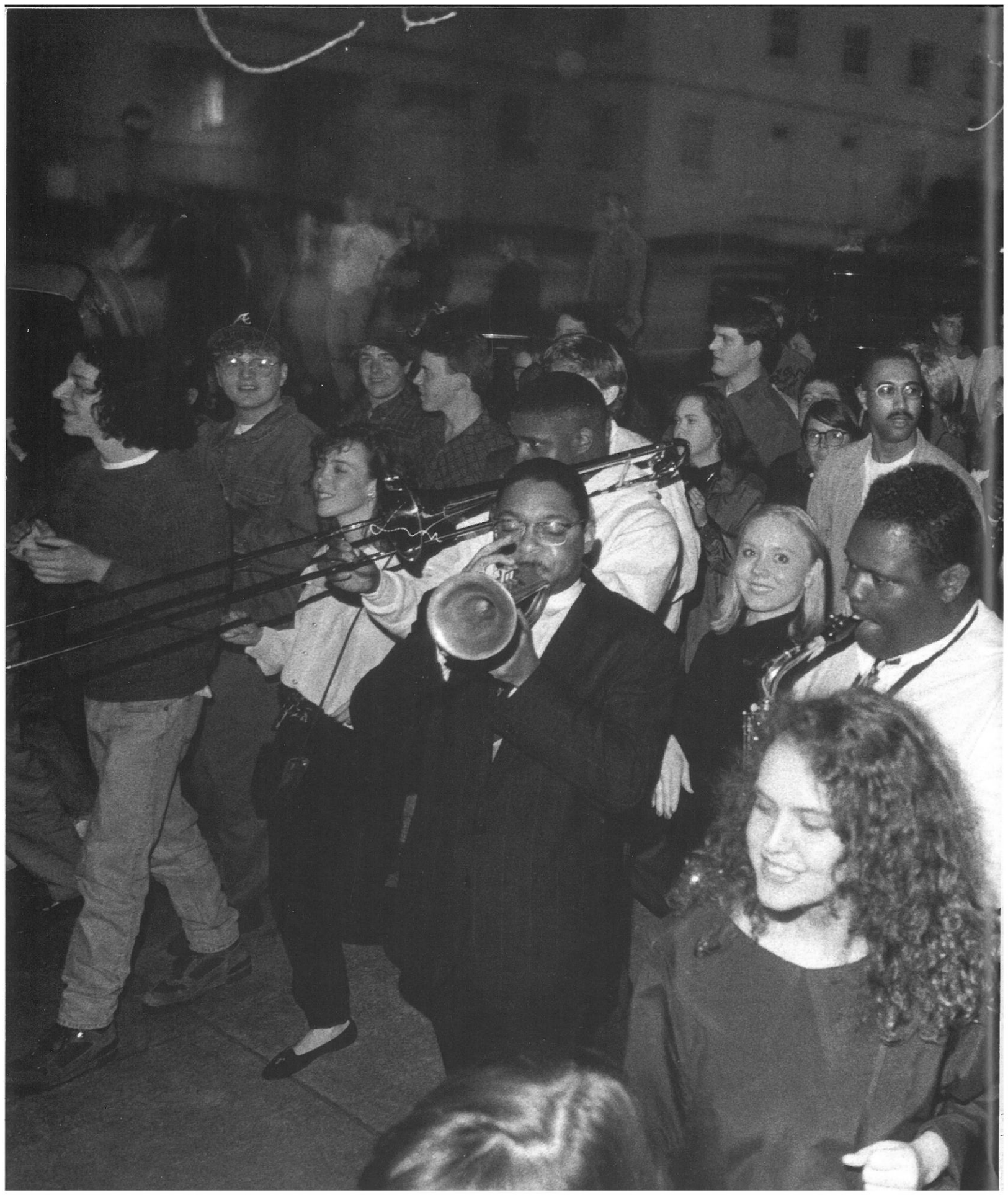
"Let's go bow." Out we go once again, over wires into an arena of com-



bat now worn and smoldering from the heat of tonight's engagement. Glowing in the warmth of goodwill extended by all those who came to turn the blues back, heads down, we are glad to see only shoes in a display of thanks and humility that reminds us of the Japanese custom—the greater the man, the lower the bow. So we bow lower as if it will elevate us in the eyes of those who have participated this evening. We are Americans.

Back out, offstage, cold and dark. The playing is over. And like those schoolkids squeezing the last second out of recess, we are together, musicians and audience, in wanting to savor more. The applause grows louder. We walk onto the stage, swinging a New Orleans parade march. But this is Topeka, or San Francisco, or Peoria, or Raleigh. Then the unusual happens. "Should we go?" I ask Todd. "Why not," the Deacon replies. Out into the cold night air we plunge like a big, many-headed caterpillar. Warmth of the sound challenging the chill. Our audience ecstatic in the recreation of a ritual as old as water, the procession. No longer do we see red exit signs from the stage. Only streetlights and car lights and the gleaming eyes of those glad to be reunited with their oldest self.









Everybody loves a parade. Mr. Fernandez's band is out there stepping. They know something about marching. Nathan has his horn out, joining the band. He even knows the tune, "The Second Line." T Bone blows a whistle from Adrienne's keychain, delivering a lecture, between toots, on the history and meaning of the New Orleans jazz parade. "Ouch! You're stepping on my feet"—that's Adrienne. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry, I just got carried away." She gazes at him.

Even Mrs. Martin is outside stepping with dignity, happy to be moving to the jazz blues. "They should have known that the dance hall is the

place for jazz. Or a parade. Look at how much fun people are having. I sure wish Chester was alive to see this. He wouldn't believe this. He thought jazz died with him. They not as good as Chester and them was. But at least they are playing jazz—real jazz.”

Grown-ups engaged in (mere) child's play. Up one block and down another, horns held high, sound of percussion and brass once used to strike fear in the enemy now signaling the joy of the blues' ass well whipped. Cymbals and clarinet like the procession of musicians through the streets on a Chinese holiday. We are that, too. We are Americans. We play the blues. Grooving around a long block, trumpet cutting through the night like a fog light at an airport, people jumping and smiling, two policemen watching, knowing some city ordinance is being broken, but not caring. Herlin Riley, master of the New Orleans drum cadence, plays a washboard in the street as if it is a full set of drums and cymbals onstage. Warm Daddy riffs with the steady beat of windshield wipers turning back the rain. Veal on Cone's trombone tailgates like a slippery pig between unseasoned arms. The Deacon blows hot wind up high through the clarinet like air howling through a slightly opened car window, fast notes cascading. Cone's tuba roars like small units of perfectly timed thunder or the steps of Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians. Nathan does the best he can.

We parade back into the hall. This could be any point on the long and distinguished time line of the oh-so-human search for a lasting and profound happiness. But this is the end of the twentieth century. We settle for the temporary feeling of profound happiness. Two and one-half to three hours of jazz music. Enemy was the blues laid low in public by grown-ups engaged in (mere) child's play. We are jazzmen. Playing the blues still, the jazz blues. Eight o'clock P.M. All over the world. Forever.

T BONE IS EXCITED. He is sure that Adrienne has enjoyed herself, and now perhaps they will return to her apartment and engage in the world's favorite activity. They pull up at 315 Hillside Avenue. Get out of the car. Walk to the door. She kisses his cheek, tells him good night, and then, the door closes. He walks slowly to his car, turns back every now and then to no avail, gets in and drives away. Pops in a tape of Sonny Stitt playing “I Can't

Get Started with You.” Says to himself, “Three weeks of my party money. Damn. She sure is fine.” Listens to some more Stitt. “Yeah, Sonny, I know. Yep. At least I got a date. Oh yeah, I will be calling back tomorrow.” He too is a jazzman, he plays the blues in his mind.

Mrs. Martin goes home on the bus. She has been saving for months to attend tonight’s skirmish. She lives in the Hill housing projects with two granddaughters and a grandson. Her daughter is there, too. Her no-good son-in-law, however, is nowhere to be found. She opens the door only to see her grandchildren, ages eight, eleven, and twelve, sitting in front of the television, watching women in drawers assume semipornographic poses while men with hands on genitalia chant rhymed doggerel to an incessant beat. Young sensibilities slowly destroyed by the alpha-wave onslaught of ignorance efficiently delivered to the learning centers of the brain. For the monetary gain of others, whom they would never meet. Others that don’t even like them.

“Hey, Grandma, how was that show you saw?”

“Great. Those young men are the greatest musicians I ever heard. Even better than Duke Ellington and Count Basie. You should have heard their trombonist. And the way they dressed. And Marsalis, well, not only is he handsome, he plays that classical music, too. You all should come with me next time, if Grandma can get the money. Lawd, and did they play some blues. They even had your old grandma out in the street marchin’, honey. And you know when I come home from work, I’m too tired to be doin’ any marchin’.”

She goes on, but they are not listening. Minds go on frying in visual projections of the purest ignorance and worst intentions. They do not respect the woman who sustains their lives. They are the uninitiated. Mere children, victims of grown-up play. Mrs. Martin makes them turn off the television and go to bed. She is tired. She goes into her bedroom and describes the concert to the only person interested. Chester. He smiles to her from a photograph taken long ago. She must rise early in the morning to cook breakfast, send the kids to school, and then go to work. She is tired. Enemy is the blues on high ground.

Mr. Fernandez is about to come backstage with his band to take photos and talk music. These pictures will end up on one of the bulletin boards in the band room, perhaps beneath some anecdote to inspire practicing.

The band members are elated because Nathan has had a chance to play with his idols. We are sweaty and tired, but we feel good. We have played three hours of hot, sweet, soulful jazz music with intelligence and skill. Participated in a ritual, as old as man and woman, made new in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century. We know that this is the end of the twentieth century, and we are still jazzmen. It is our birthright. Grown-ups proudly engaged in (mere) child's play. Playing the blues. The jazz blues. We will bask in the temporary feeling of a profound happiness. The blues, however badly beaten, will return. So will we.

