

Jack Slazy, Ma Scrazy

an excerpt from the novel *Malcolm and Jack (and other Famous American Criminals)*

Ted Pelton



1945

Jack walks into a Detroit blues bar.

It's crowded. He doesn't see any other white men.

This is guitar music, not his usual thing. Usually he goes for a tenorman who just blows. But these are crazy sounds he's been hearing down here, down in the Black Bottom, coming back from his job in the ball bearing factory. Wild wailings in the workingman's night of something deep and soulful you can't just pass by.

One time when he got on a boat bound for Europe it went down the coast first and good thing, the bosun was a big queer who wanted to make him, he was absolutely sure of it, so while he'd intended (again) to go to Paris and perhaps search out his long lost Breton ancestors he ended up jumping ship in North Carolina where he looked up and had a drink with Thomas Wolfe's brother, an aging man in the white suit of a Southern gentleman. The next day, looking around that part of the country, at the rolling meadows and white fences of plantations, never having been South, he heard the deep blues singing of a black man walking who knows where. Jack fell in behind him and followed on dusty dirt roads some three or four miles. It was a long trip to be making on foot but the man didn't seem to be in any hurry, and it blew Jack's mind. Jack raced everywhere; everyone in New York raced everywhere; even back in Lowell, where no one had any particular place to get to (and did they have any more to get to in New York?) everybody was always late for somewhere, going someplace else, hustling, even drinking their beers in a hurry. Everyone in the Northeast raced everywhere. But this music itself was slow, not the frenetic speed of be-bop always riding with the tis-ta-ta-tis of the high-hat cymbal but a deep down singing which came as if out of a cave or the hollow of the depths of a human soul, and even when the tempo made it fast the music itself was deep, like a cavern formed in rock by the constant eroding drip of pain year after year. The man's song never seemed to get anywhere; there was no part of it you could call the beginning middle or end, though sometimes it did seem as if a new song had begun, a new tune being sung, but the borders between songs were never quite clear. Nor was he ashamed of being heard. Unselfconsciousness. The meandering of a man free to feel and express himself, without looking to see what others thought about it or him. Had Jack ever felt as free in his life, to simply do as he wanted, when he wanted, without thinking about

how someone else would look at him? The man would sometimes stop singing, but then he'd just continue on again with the same song when he started up again: where he stopped and started actually singing did not correspond to where the songs began and ended; as likely as not the man would stop upon seeing a rabbit scamper off into woods as he approached or to nod to a hand in the field he was passing by. The first hand they passed also nodded to Jack, and Jack back to the hand, worrying at the same time that the singing man in front of him would in this way be apprised of Jack's presence and turn around, but Jack then knew that the man in front of him knew of his presence and still didn't turn around. Never did, all while Jack followed. Nor was it fear or lack of fellow-feeling that prevented him, Jack felt. Jack saw in his mind two pieces of wood drifting downriver lazily.

He tried to make out words. But the words were bent to the purposes of the song and its singing and became more purely music than any attempt at speaking or singing words. The feeling in these utterances came through in the sound of the voice, the pacing, the cries and murmurs. Jack now wasn't thinking only of the man and his song but also, and perhaps more, about what he would say about the man and following him when he got to his notebook or his typewriter; in other words -- and this was now true of everything Jack did -- he did not simply observe and experience walking behind the man listening to his song, but at the same time spun his own tune in his mind in response, a response that frequently entirely obliterated that to which he was listening in favor of the music he was creating within his own mind. Nor was this a process of which Jack was unconscious; he realized, more than once, that he was no longer listening to the man but pretending to listen and instead listening to himself describe how he was listening to the man, selecting phrases for when later he might be able to write it all down. So he began

to think about the act of this pretending, his recreation of what he was experiencing even as he experienced it, and then realized, to his even greater dismay, that now he was no closer to the man singing and the experience of listening, but at a second remove even more distant. "Listen to the man," he said to himself, in just these words, seeing even the quotation marks around them as he reprimanded himself, imagining reprimanding himself and the necessity of gaining entrance to the authentic

With all of these self-conscious movings of mind on this lazy day, it was no surprise that the beginnings and endings of songs were ungraspable; and while the day and its movement were lazy, and he was now in the lazy South, it takes more than one day to adjust yourself to a new rhythm, so while lazing along imagining himself adjusting to the rhythms of a Southern black man's lazy blues song while travelling nowhere at all, Jack was simultaneously speeding along in his mind in his work and determining how the lazy experience would fit into it and become part of his larger project which in turn was an extension of his ambition to devote his life to writing and be aware of everything around him and record it all or as much as possible and the speed of reactions and vocabulary and insight needed to reach such a massive goal and undertaking and spinning as a result all manner of plots around the man, around himself, around the landscape. The fields were largely empty, except for cattle and occasional horses. But they held thousand-soldier battles, Army officers on mounted charges, death, labor, fields of black men and women with hair tied in rags, a little pickaninny boy walking beside him dressed in only a sack asking for candy, elaborate *Gone With the Wind* plantation houses entertaining men with oiled mustaches calling on pretty Southern belles in satin gowns in huge ballrooms with buffed maple, no, cherry floors, and garden terraces blooming with fragrant magnolias, and then the same houses falling board by board into ruin or set afire by rough men at war

who'd lost everything themselves and now were resolved in hearts rusted by hatred to destroy everything in their path, led by Sherman, who'd already had them rip up rail lines, chop down weather vanes, wreck water wheels, cripple horses, drown livestock, take iron bars to chandeliers, pocket jewelry, fuck whomever they wanted, white or black.

As by the same process, right now, throwing aside a drained pint bottle and entering a Detroit blues bar, Jack finds himself walking down a road in North Carolina.

He comes forward into a crowd, which half-parts before him. Men look at him, some surprised, others laughing, poking each other in the ribs, two or three smiling his way as if to say glad you're here. Each face is almost familiar to him. Then he sees someone he's sure he knows. Not personally, but he's seen him around. In New York, maybe Greenwich Village. A tall, light-skinned man with distinctive red-orange hair, in baggy lavender pants cinched at the ankles and a matching oversized jacket too loud for this workingman's bar where everyone else is in short-sleeves and dungarees. He's loudly regaling a small group, waving arms to make up for words drowned in this veil of sound, making great theatre out of continually checking a pocket watch attached to a long chain that loops eighteen inches down and back from his beltloop to his jacket pocket. The jam breaks and the song goes back into blues verses, deeply intoned but fuzzed nearly out of recognition through the amplifier. Jack edges closer. This group is near the bar, so he's going in that direction anyway.

"Don't you brothers Lindy-hop? What is all this noise? You brothers call this music? Where's the dancing? I hear this guy singing about fucking but I know a lot more of it actually happens when you get them bitches working up their blood with a good Lindy-hop."

A young man, maybe a couple years younger than Jack. Jack keeps trying to catch his eye. The man of course sees Jack -- it's impossible not to in a place like this, where a white man would be crazy to go.

"You brothers would do well to catch my act in Harlem sometime. Now that's music. And in between, you got me dancing licks onstage to make the girls drip honey. Hey, here's one -- what's the difference between your sister and a U-Boat? Give up? Troop ships sometimes escape U-Boats."

Jack bellies to the bar. The bartender comes over. They shout to be heard.

"Hey, man, what's this music called?"

"Nothing but the blues."

Jack isn't sure what he's said, but doesn't want to fight the crushing sound.

"Gimme a bourbon, neat. Hey, wait a second." Jack checks his money supply. "Send that guy over there one from me, too."

"You got it."

The man pours one for Jack in a thin stream from the pointed tip of a labelless bottle, then moves a few feet over and pours another for the man whose voice has no problem being heard above the din. He keeps talking, reaches over for the glass and makes more theatre out of drinking it, holding the glass at arm's length directly overhead, tilting his neck backward, opening his mouth wide and with a quick flip of the wrist upending the glass. The whiskey pellets down on his face, a third of it splashing of his face but two-thirds going right down his throat. "Warms my belly," he says, slapping his stomach which even through the layers of clothing creates a thin smack of muscle on muscle.

Jack leans over and pokes his head through the group. He must be drunk.

"Hey, don't I know you?"

The tall man looks at him off-handedly. "Ever been to the Lobster Pond in New York?"

This isn't it, but Jack doesn't have a better answer. "Yeah, I think so."

"Aw, you'd know it if you'd been there. I'm the Master of Ceremonies and everybody knows me, Detroit Red."

The others smile at Jack. They're rubes. One is fancied up a little with a larger than usual feather in his hat.

"What do I owe for the drink, Daddy-O?" says Red to Jack. He pulls his arm out from behind his back and twirls a large gold coin in the air between his fingers. Jack can't tell what it is -- it's slightly bigger than a dollar. Red grins wide and, the men parting away from Jack slightly, he allows his hand to glide across the air, the coin flipping around like a moth, light winking off its spinning edges. "Do you think this is enough?" Red's eyes watch the play of the coin in his hand, past Jack's face and up over his head, whereupon Malcolm closes his hand in a backward fist then opens it for all to see. The coin has disappeared. "Aw, man," he says to Jack in mock anger, "You weren't fast enough!"

The twirling coin flutters to Jack's stomach -- where it meets the bourbon and a sudden anxiousness about where he's wandered to in his night-long ramble when he should be at work -- and boils up into his head. Suddenly he can't breathe. He's cold from sweat but at the same time finds the closeness of bodies suffocating him in dense, muggy fog in which he feels himself turning over and over. He has to puke. He falls slightly against the bar, manages to turn around, makes his way out the door.

"Blew that man's conk right off the stem," says Red.

They don't meet again for another year, until just after the end of the war.

*

*

Most of Malcolm's family lived in and around Lansing. His mother no longer lived there. She was in Kalamazoo.

First there'd been Wilbert, a good, quiet, responsible boy. Then came Hilda, who always helped her momma with the cooking, the wash, the tidying up and the babies. Then the three rambunctious ones -- Philbert, Malcolm and Reginald. Philbert was good at boxing and Malcolm was the one he practiced on, but that made Malcolm quick-witted. Reggie used to tag along with Philbert and Malcolm like a hungry little puppy dog. Finally came the little ones -- Yvonne and Wesley and Robert. So much government issue food the kids thought Not to Be Sold was a brand name and considered fried ketchup bread a delicacy. So little luck in that family, rabbits could rub their own feet and get away.

As things got to be too much for Momma, the sour-grease-cooking smell became a visible yellow tar on the walls and windowsills, and dust and animal hair matted there. Kids with same size feet fought for warm shoes once the snow came. Ice zig-zagged on the insides of windows in the morning. Wilbert never came home except to sleep and pour some water over his head before going out to his other job. "Such a good boy, I'm sorry, Wilbert," Momma would say to herself when the clouds broke in her mind and the world was clear for a moment. Then the wind would shift back the other way. "Social workers came in, pushed me over and stole the coal for the stove and broke its door, so that any heavy walking might spill hot coals and torch the whole place. Social workers got me with this child here, cause I ain't been with no man since my Earlie died. Social

workers saw Earlie kill that rabbit with his bare hands and throw it at my feet and roused the klan to meet him at the railroad tracks. Social workers secretly mix pork into the food they give us so I end up having to throw half of it out. Social workers put sugar in the engine of that old car which was just brand new yesterday afternoon when the sun shone and the crickets buzzed and they got too loud and we ended up with the sheriff out here banging on the door. Now every day is cold and cloudy and I don't have a husband anymore to keep me warm at night. That's what social workers do."

Finally, social workers detonated a bomb under the house that sent everything and everyone flying off every which way.

Philbert was even more alarmed when Malcolm came back in dark gabardine than when he used to come back in purple and yellow with a hubcap-sized hat on his head that had to be tied to his collar by a string in the back for fear it would blow away. Malcolm told Mrs. Swerlin, his old foster ma, that he was now in international finance. The only hipster part left in him were fingernails neatly manicured and coated with transparent polish so that they shined like his teeth. He kept an emery board in his pocket to keep them free of nicotine stains.

Time was, Philbert would have punched Malcolm out, the way he kept fucking up and covering his trail in shit. Now he told him to quit smoking cigarettes and eating pork.

"Pork? You wearing the same monkey collar as Momma's old preacher?"

"Hadn't thought of that. Maybe Momma knew something after all. But no, brother, I've found the black man's natural religion, the one that the white man's lies have kept us from for 600 years."

"Back up forty-five feet else your spiel gonna dig my heel, bro. The God rap goes back in the pocket of your slack. I'm skinned for that noise."

"Will you stop acting the fool for one minute? This is serious. Hilda and I are driving out later in the week to see her, and I think it would be good if you came."

"All she care, I could be the Yellow Kid and you could be Old Black Sam the Sham, she wouldn't collar us from some floor mechanics. Sides, I got places to go, people to see, legit. Got my spotters peeled for gone talent."

"Running a game?"

"Naw, ease up. Shoe talent, to lay down sand and make it jump. Do me right, I ain't down for that shit. This is strictly uptown. I'm slinging a show back in the Apple, at some strong digs. If it works out, I'll be able to sell out to Hollywood by next year, two years tops, and then I'll have the life of Jack the Bear, no more of the slave. Gotta find me some real fresh Susie-Qs, keep costs low to start, see if they're in New York already they've already been discovered and command the big bucks. But Detroit, you see, that's an untapped market. Plenty of talent there just waiting for someone to hook them up."

That's about when the old Philbert would have punched him out. The gangster threads and the line of shit would have pushed him past where he could listen anymore. But he'd learned patience and self-discipline, as well as how to speak the language of liberation.

"I'm not telling you this to disapprove, but to help save your life, brother. There are many lies in the world, but there's one big lie, and revealing that lie means finding out who you are and who your people are, like I found out who I am. You think you are free, going here and there, but you are in the shackles of the race of white devils. Only you can

deliver yourself from bondage, and you can do it only by following the Honorable Elijah Muhammad."

"I've been gone longer than I thought! You've turned into one of those crazy religious niggers!"

Philbert felt chemicals rush across his back, filling up the muscles in his arms. While not budging an inch, his body seemed to swell larger. His voice, while backed by anger, was cold and restrained:

"I am not a nigger."

Malcolm, who'd whistled "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" with guns pointed at him, found this impressive enough to shut his face.

Philbert had always been good at boxing and Malcolm was the one he'd practiced on. But that made Malcolm quick-witted.

All Philbert and Hilda and Aunts Ella and Sassie could wish for was that Malcolm get slapped in jail before someone got tired of his mouth, his trickeration and his lies and shot him. And that he wouldn't take Reggie down with him.

His mother didn't care one way or the other. She was in Kalamazoo.

She, Louise, played checkers sometimes and often crocheted, listening to Jack Benny or Amos and Andy in the community room. Or she'd sit and stare at a blank white wall, pharmaceuticals running laps through her blood. She had been a pretty woman in her time, had what they called high yellow coloring, and her bearing was upright and regal. Her voice carried the musical cadences of her native Grenada. Her light skin contrasted with long, silky black hair, and as a child she'd been nicknamed Pocohontas. She liked the name, because it told of another princess who'd lost everything to the hands of robbers, save her dignity. She was educated, and tried to pass some of that on to the

children, the desire to learn, to find out about the world. She read to the oldest ones when they were quite small, and all of them had done well in school at one time or another, which shows you they had the potential.

Now a dream kept recurring for her. It was strange, it referred to no one she knew personally, yet kept coming back, again and again, perhaps because it bound up many things she knew in one shorthand image or composite world. Or maybe as it was a message from some vast beyond, an attempt on behalf of some great intelligence beyond the clouds to tell her something. At times, as she came in and out of consciousness, moored to nothing except the confinements of physical space and thus able herself to drift away, she entered the world of her creation to such an extent that it became as real as anything in her life. The clouds and fog would burn off to find her on a large island plantation, like where she'd grown up but also different. The master was an old, grey-haired white man in a wheelchair, who would be rolled out on the large portico each morning to get his air. He'd been a very kindly old man, cheerful enough to call everyone over to him each Friday afternoon to sing him songs as the sun went down. Her old aunts had even told her of a time when the old man had been hearty and hale and worked the fields side by side with his hired hands. He paid them, which made him an exception, and made all his workers the envy of laborers for miles around. Or so she'd been told, anyway. The Friday singalongs had happened when she was a girl and pleased her to no end -- she had a fine, deep voice, even as a child, which blended with the others in gospel chorus so sweetly that in short order she'd been allowed to solo, with the rest of the singers backing her. But after a time, the old man was too weak even for this, and all they saw of him was when he was wheeled onto the broad portico. This glimpse was distant -- by this time they'd already be out in the fields. Once verdant and lush, the crops were

having trouble. Vegetables and cotton hardly grew at all, and got ravaged by weevils, while weeds grew overnight to your waist. The soil parched open in cracks, aching for rain. None came. The fogs descending seemed deprived of moisture, or at least of enough to sustain life. The overseer, who now had no one looking over his own shoulder, blamed the workers for the poor yield. But it wasn't their fault -- the land itself seemed to be turning barren. When she was close enough to the main house to see the old man's face when he was brought out in the morning, his jaw had gone slack and a line of drool fell onto his shirt. He had shrunken within his own clothes, which now appeared several sizes too big for him. "Eyes front!" snapped the overseer, who tolerated no looking away from the work and used any excuse to blame them for the plantation's new troubles. He was a knotty-muscled, fireplug of a man, whose face was marred by a large, red birthmark, which ran from the left side of his forehead and spread diagonally across one eye to surround half his mouth. Over time, the birthmark seemed to grow larger and more hideous, sprouting ugly, crooked hairs, and every time she saw him she was reminded of the pirate ships and limbs replaced by sharp metal hooks she'd heard stories about. The money paid them by the new man, a young one who needed to get outdoors more, such was the pallor of his skin, was now taxed to supplement equipment purchases, so they received only half of what they had in the past. Meanwhile, the prices of cloth and small items of necessity had risen steadily and the meals they were provided grew smaller and smaller. Oatmeal that had once clung to a spoon turned upside down now ran off before you could get it to your mouth. They got no better meat than was being given to the dogs.

"Master must not be being told what's really going on," someone would say at night from his bedclothes in a dark room where twenty slept on straw ticks and tried not to sneeze, for one sneeze would get everyone going.

"Master's dead. He can still get his eyes open, but he can't speak a lick."

"No, he ain't. He always told us he'd take care of us as long as he was alive."

"That's what I'm saying. We ain't be being taken care of because he's dead."

Her mind moved to the old patriarch's bedroom. His bed was a four-poster with a billowy cotton canopy and veils on each side to keep out mosquitoes. Daily, new freshly picked flowers were set in a vase atop an expansive mahogany table, inlaid with pinstripe swirls of yellow oak. Around this table were beautiful straight-backed chairs of the same mahogany frames, with plump cushions on the back and seats covered by shiny red velvet that had never been sat on. One hundred gold tacks pinned the material into each chair at tiny, perfect intervals, the material tucked perfectly even at the rounded joints. They were the most beautiful things Louise had ever seen, and she never thought of them without her eyes starting to tear a little. But the tears never forced her to stop thinking about the chairs either. Their beauty made her sad, but also comforted her and even elevated her spirit. She didn't know where or when in her life she had actually seen these beautiful chairs.

The man himself had shrunken in size, but his weight had settled into the chair, and getting him out of it was an effort that required three men, brutally muscular all, who approached the task so gingerly they seemed to believe that if they pulled directly on either of his arms his body would pull apart like rotten fruit. They got him upright, then another came forward, fell to his knees, and as the others slipped the suspenders off the man's shoulders, pulled the man's trousers open and slipped both these and his

undergarment down to his knees. The man's genitals appeared, three shriveled walnuts. The attendants lowered the man to a sitting position in their arms and carried him to his bed, two maids in black cotton with white aprons pulling aside the veils, another from the opposite side turning back the sheets. They sat him at the edge. A piece of shiny, coated canvas lay atop the mattress pad and after one on the maids sprinkled talc over it, the men arranged themselves on opposite sides and shifted him onto it. Throughout all of this, the man's expression never changed. His eyes were the faded blue of the confederate army, glistened over with fluid. His hair only spoke of what he once had been. A white thatch, finer than his hair had been in his youth, it still had enough stiffness for a few strands to stick up. This the maid covered with a tasseled nightcap.

Louise came to. She blinked her eyes. Around her were the other people in the home, all gowned in hospital white, most older than her, a few younger, slumped in easy chairs or standing, walking around in isolated circles. The voice of the president warbled from the radio.