

Seagrove, Gordon, Chicago Sunday Tribune, July 11, 1915.

Blues is Jazz and Jazz Is Blues

She leaned across the table while the waiter slunk away and in a pleading voice said something to the Worm. The Worm was her husband. You may have guessed this before. Anyway what she said was this:

“Ortus,” she murmured, looking into his tired eyes, “if you don’t fox trot with me shortly, I shall bring suit for divorce. Our life cannot go on this way.”

“Don’t I give you clothes – all you want?” the Worm returned [sic]. “Huh? Don’t I now? Don’t I love –you –“

”Stop!” she cried, deathly white. “You don’t understand me. Clothes – bah –! Coverings for the skin! –Love – a mockery! You do not realize that I have a shoul – that I have two feet – that I want fox trotting.”

“You know I can’t dance. Why last wee –“

”Enough!” she cried imperiously drawing a veil over her snow white shoulders which always appear in scenes like this. “You may consult my attorney tomorrow. You have failed me in the fox trot – I cannot go on –“

She stopped. The music had started. Suddenly from above the thread of the melody itself came, a harmonious, yet discordant wailing, an eerie mezzo that moaned and groaned and sighed and electrified, a haunting counter strain that oozed from the saxophone.

The Worm stopped. His eyes shone with a wonderful light – the light that lies in the eyes of a man who has had two around the corner. His mouth moved convulsively. The years fell away from his shoulders leaving only his frock coat.

The Worm had turned – turned to fox trotting. And the “blues” had done it. The “jazz” had put pep into the legs that had scrambled too long for the 5:15.

What mattered to him now the sly smiles of contempt that his friends had uncorked when he essayed the foxy trot a month before: what mattered it whose shins he kicked?

That was what “blue” music had done for him.

That is what “blue” music is doing for everybody – taking away what its name implies, the blues. In a few months it has become the predominant motif in cabaret offerings; its wailing syncopation i heard in every gin mill where dancing holds sway.

Its effect is galvanic. Cripples take up their beds and one-step; taxi drivers willing suffer sore feet because of it; string halt become St. Vitus’ dance in its grip.

Maybe you, poor sol, in your metropolitan ignorance,, do not gather just what the “blues” are. Worry not; neither does the average person that plays them, and it was only after weks [sic] of toiling that the true definition was obtained.

The first sortie after the definition was made in a song publisher’s arena, where beautiful actresses try their voices and the manager’s nerves.

“Halt,” cried the seeker after the definition, “fixing a dark haired piano player with a relentless eye. “What are the blues?”

The young man recoiled and shuddered. “I don’t know,” he said. “All I can do is play ‘em. A kind of a wail you might call it. Still I couldn’t tell you positively. But, say! I can take any piece in the world and put the blues into it. But as for a definition – don’t ask me.”

At the next place a young woman was keeping “Der Wacht Am Rhein” and “Tipperary Mary” apart when the interrogator entered.

“What are the blues?” he asked gently. “Jazz!” The young woman’s voice rose high to drown the piano.

A tall young man with nimble fingers rose from the piano and came over. “That’s me,” he said. And then he unraveled the mystery of “the blues.”

“A blue note is a sour note,” he explained. “It’s a discord – a harmonic discord. The blues are never written into music, but are interpolated by the piano player or other players. They aren’t new. They are just reborn into popularity. They started in the south half a century ago and are the interpolations of darkies originally. The trade name for them is “jazz.”

“There’s a craze for them now. People find them excellent for dancing. Piano players are taking lessons to learn how to play them.”

Thereupon “Jazz” Marion sat down and shoed the bluest streak of blues ever heard beneath the blue. Or, if you like this better: “Blue” Marion sat down and jazzed the jazziest streak of jazz ever.

Saxophone players since the advent of the “jazz blues” have taken to wearing “jazz collars,” neat décolleté things that give the throat and windpipe full play, so that the notes that issue from the tubas may not suffer for want of blues – those wonderful blues.

Try it some time – for that tired feeling – the blues.

There are two drawings, the first of an African-American saxophonist with “Wooo-ooo-ooo! emanating from the bell, captioned “A BLUE NOTE IS A SOUR NOTE.” The second shows “The Worm” and his wife at the table. He cups his ear. “THE YEARS FELL AWAY FROM HIS SHOULDERS.”

The article is in the first column of the last page of the eight-page entertainment section (Section VIII) of the Chicago Sunday Tribune for July 11, 1915.