

The Day The Music Died

We ended the last set with *Satin Doll*, as usual. I kept one eye on my drums and the other on Scat. His bass line was not holding that Friday night, and I had to play a little louder to cover. Scat called in sick the next morning, and Millie phoned around and found a fill-in.

Saturday night was not our best night. You can't just drop in a sub and expect everything to be copasetic. After all, Scat was part of The Down & Easy Jazz Quartet from the beginning. He knew the group; he was the group. He knew our tendencies, our weaknesses, what made us smile in the middle of a song. So, we muddled through that Saturday night and looked forward to Sunday.

On Sundays, we played in the afternoon. It used to be the only time we were out on the patio, but now, due to the virus, all performances were on the patio. Poor acoustics, poor lighting, bugs flying all around your head, no one liked playing on the patio. Our horn, Little Man, hated playing on the patio. "It ain't right. It's sacrilegious" he said. "It's like going to listen to the preacher in a grocery store. The preacher he needs a church - pews and pulpits, smells and bells. Jazz got no business in a patio under the sunlight. Sunlight takes the soul out of Jazz. Jazz needs the darkness of a smoke-filled room."

"Little Man, what are you talking about? They're ain't been no smoke-filled rooms for how long now?" said Millie. "You should be thankful we got the gig. So, quit your bellyaching."

Scat didn't come around Sunday, no word, just didn't come around. It was too late to find a sub, so we went with three, and it showed. The manager said no one

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noticed, but people say things like that all the time. We're a quartet, not a trio. After the last set, after Satin Doll, word came down that Scat was in the hospital. So, that's where we went.

He was in a special area for virus patients, and they wouldn't let us in. But they did give us a test, seeing how we were with him just 48 hours ago. They said we would get the results in 3 to 5 days. They asked us about masks -- do we wear them while performing. We said yes. Hell no. We don't wear masks. The customers don't wear masks. Besides, we're family. We're The Down & Easy Jazz Quartet, playing for your pleasure since 1979. The customer, he's got to see your smile. What kind of tips do you think we 'd be getting with those damn masks on?

Friday, the results came. I tested positive. Ain't that a kick in the head. My knees got a little loose, so I sat down on the kitchen chair by the window. From there you can see across to the back of the Elegansé beautician shop and the tenement apartments above. There was a woman in the yard getting her hair cut. It looked too short to me. Tisha on the third floor was in the window doing her homework. Tisha's mother was sentenced last week. I don't know how that kid's going to make it.

So, this is how it is, I thought to myself. I'm dying and I'm thinking about a stranger's haircut and worrying about young Tisha. How's that possible? Maybe I'm not dying. Maybe, the test is wrong. I feel alright, 'alright' being relative for a man of my years. I got my appetite. Nothing's hurting that don't usually hurt. They must be wrong. I went to work

Millie was there before me. "You get your test back?"

"Yeah." I answered. "You get yours?"

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“Yeah.” She answered and waited with eyebrows raised.

“I'm good. I said.

“Yeah, me too.” she said.

“That’s good. You and I, Millie, we’re fighters, we come from the same place. You make it out of our hood alive, ain’t nothing can beat you. Have you heard from, Little Man?”

“I gave notice.” she said.

“He’s running late, it could be the bus again. They keep getting worse and worse.”

“I gave notice.” She repeated.

“Gave notice? Whatcha mean, ‘gave notice.”

“We close tonight. Tonight is the last performance for The Down & Easy Jazz Quartet.”

“What? The last performance? Millie, what the hell are you saying? You can’t do that. Forty years, forty years, Millie. You cannot do this.”

“Little Man is in the hospital.”

“He’ll get better, just like Scat will get better.”

“I got word just before I left the house. Scat is dying. Tonight, it’s just you and I, Bud.”

At the top, Millie announced the news to the audience, and no one said a word - like they didn’t care. We did the best we could, and occasionally Millie would play sax instead of keyboard to keep it interesting. When we got to the last song, I was having a hard time holding myself together and so was Millie. And then I heard a snuffle. I looked into the audience and at first could only see the front row. There were two women

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holding tissues to their faces. As my eyes became accustomed to the lights, I could see more tissues and the lights highlighted the moist eyes of men around the room.

Afterward, everyone wanted to buy us a drink, but it wasn't a time to celebrate and we had somewhere to go.

We went to the hospital, and stood below the window of Little Man's room. I had brought my snare and Millie had her sax. We played Satin Doll, hugged and went our ways.

That was a week ago. Now, I'm waiting, waiting for a sign, a symptom. I haven't contacted Millie. I'm afraid to ask my only friend if she'll be around. The drum is not a solo instrument. I'm a drummer, and drummers can't be alone.