

Fiction by Wesley Brown

Body and Soul

There was a small group of musicians waiting for Coleman Hawkins when his ship docked in New York City. Coleman had been away in Europe for five years. But with war simmering to a boil, he knew it was time to get himself on the first ship steaming back to the States. The welcoming committee included two of his oldest friends, Benny Carter and Jimmy Harrison. After the glad-handing was out of the way, they started signifying to make him feel at home.

“Hey Bean, you looking as trim as your mustache,” Jimmy said.

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Leave it to Jimmy to draw first blood. Something Coleman was known for when they were in the Fletcher Henderson Band together. Nobody had called him Bean since he left the country. Early on, Coleman gained a reputation for having a mean ‘bean’ of a brain that allowed him to do just about anything he wanted on the tenor saxophone. He kept tight-lipped about how good he was, but the name stuck and he answered to it.

“I guess if you got a lot of trim over there in England,” Jimmy said, “you more than likely gonna stay that way yourself.”

He enjoyed the laughter that followed but didn’t join in. That was always his way. Stay close to the mix of what was going on, but don’t get too familiar with it. Laughter continued bouncing around in everyone’s shoulders. And Coleman remembered Jimmy was also called ‘bean,’ but only the kind that went with the word ‘string.’ He was still all arms and legs, his skinny limbs like rubber, connecting him to the trombone when he played.

“So who’s who and what’s what?” Coleman asked.

Heads swiveled toward one another to see if everyone got his drift.

“It didn’t take you long to get down to business,” Benny Carter said.

“What business might that be?”

“Bean! You’ve gotten even more slipperiness than you were before you left. But you just gonna have to wait ‘cause we don’t wanna spoil the surprise!”

They all piled into Benny Carter’s Cadillac and headed uptown. Benny always impressed Coleman with how he held his own in any musical setting. He wasn’t intimidated by reputations, whether they preceded his or came after, making him someone who could play with the best and never let anyone play him cheap. This made them do their best when they challenged each other on saxophone or clarinet years before in the Henderson Band. Benny still had that barrel chest, easy laughter, and eyes that soaked up anything worth paying attention to.

“So Bean, tell us about all the ‘fine dinner’ you had while you were gone,” one of the other musicians said.

“You got me all wrong. The reason I came back so trim was because I traveled light and ate the same way.”

“Man! You as much of a tightwad about giving up any info on all your overseas chippies as you’ve always been about holding onto your money!”

“I’m sorry fellas, but I follow the old saying that those who tell don’t know.”

“You don’t need to worry none, Bean. We can’t cut in on your time with ladies who’re way over on the other side of the ocean.”

They had that right, since no one cut in on Coleman’s time with women more than he did himself. He was known to play gigs all night and then find jam sessions that lasted late into the morning. This steady diet of playing fed him creatively but starved his first marriage. Coleman’s wife, Gertie, always greeted him with a ready-made breakfast and a sweetness that only wanted to please. To be honest, he had to accept his share of

the responsibility for that. There was more than a little calculation in how meticulous he was about his appearance – from double-breasted Gibraltar-shouldered suits and long spike-collared shirts to the slim trim of his mustache and cut of his nails. He knew the stylishly dressed figure he cut while playing the Glenn Miller Band’s hit ballad “Wishing (Will Make It So)” would have more than a few women rushing up to him afterward, hoping to convince him how anxious they were to please. And he was more than happy to have them try – which was how he first met Gertie. What he hadn’t figured on was how wanting to please got old when the thrill didn’t cut both ways. It would’ve been better for both of them if Gertie had done what she probably really wanted to do – which was to get up in his face about his late hours and demand that he spend more time with her. That’s what Coleman lived for: the opposition he got from other musicians who took each other’s best shots and came away from the fray with the only kind of companionship that made sense to him.

The day after Gertie finally left, Coleman looked around the nearly empty apartment. Whatever home they shared, she’d made and taken it with her. Coleman felt no loss for what was gone and saw nothing of himself in what remained: a bed, a table, and a few chairs. The only thing that mattered stood upright on a stand in a corner, gleaming like it had been washed in a burst of light from the sun. Coleman often wondered if he could ever be with a woman who needed, as much as he did, the opposition that was the same as friendship. Good question.

Coleman continued to take the ribbing that tightened the squeeze of bodies on either side of him. They could have all the fun they wanted, since there were

more pressing matters on his mind, like the surprise Benny said was waiting for him later that evening. The conventional wisdom was that any advances in the music were a young man's game. He looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror. The streamlined mustache that curved upward just short of his nostrils had no traces of gray and still received compliments from women on how it made his mouth fuller and more expressive whether he was playing or talking. Since he was only a few months shy of thirty-five, his hairline had receded a bit, something he would fix by keeping it cut short. Could it be that he might've stayed away too long, and would be unable to keep pace when challenged by these young upstarts who were eager to expose him as a has-been? But being a little anxious didn't mean he was fearful. He'd spent too many years honing his musical chops to believe there was anyone so good that he wouldn't have answers for whatever they had to offer.

Coleman had come a long way since his youthful days in the early 1920s, when he was given top billing as the 'Saxophone Boy,' with Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds. He never mentioned this period of his life because it froze him in a time he wanted no part of. Coleman was even close to the vest about his birth, saying his father was a merchant seaman who met his mother on the Cape Verde Islands, where they married. He was born at sea on a merchant ship heading back to the United States. So there was no record of the actual date or year of his birth. The here and now was all that interested him. On the rare occasions when Coleman dwelled on the past at all, it usually related to music he was thinking about at the moment. He recalled the advice of his mother, Cordelia, whose voice hammered into him the importance of find-

ing something constructive to do that few people, colored or otherwise, could do, and then to do it better than anyone else. She told him, he'd be surprised how many people would flock to be near him once they were aware of how special he was. His father took a second job to pay for a cello and lessons for their only son.

One of the first things Coleman learned about playing the cello was the amount of breath needed to play it. Pressing himself against its wooden body, it surprised him how much he'd taken breathing for granted. As his breath breezed along with the groans plucked and bowed across the strung ribs of the cello's chest, he realized that every breath he took gave his fingers, hands, and arms the strength to bring another sound to life. But nothing prepared Coleman for his first sight of a saxophone in a music store window, glistening like a golden goose whose beak and keys, running down its spine, awaited fingers and a mouth to make it sing. He could only marvel at an instrument in which breathing mouth to mouth was at the heart of making it live. He tried out the various voices of the saxophone and chose the tenor, whose size nestled comfortably in his arms and against his already broad chest, and whose tone was closest to the range of his voice, which had a maturity beyond his twelve years. But the one thing that convinced Coleman that he had to play the saxophone, and made him laugh out loud whenever he thought about it, was the fact that he could blow into the mouth of this long-necked bird of a horn and hear his breath burst out of the other end, which looked like the place where the sun didn't shine!

Coleman tuned in and out of the talk going on in the car and found himself hearing his father's voice, as it sounded when he was a child. William Hawkins

was a man of few words. But when he spoke to Coleman, it usually took the form of a story. One of his favorites was about the legendary outlaw Jesse James, who was shot dead in 1882 by Robert Ford in St. Joseph, Missouri, the city where Coleman was born. According to family lore, Coleman's grandmother had once let James hide out in her home, while he was on the lam from the law. William Hawkins never bought into the stories of James robbing the rich and giving to the poor. Like most of the colored in St. Joe, James came into the world with very little but did more harm than good while he was in it. If he had any saving graces, the one Coleman's father took to heart was James's philosophy of how the world worked. Those who had the best of everything in life made sure that other people paid for it, which is what the rich did. And the only people who paid for everything were those who could least afford to. His father made it clear that this never justified stealing, even from those who were thieves themselves. So Coleman embraced his mother's view that he deserved nothing less than the good life, with all the trimmings worthy of his gift. By 1923, he found, in Fletcher Henderson, a bandleader who was more than willing to pay for his young virtuoso's expensive tastes in clothes, food, liquor, and fancy cars.

In 1936, while performing in Switzerland, Coleman received a letter from his mother that his father had died. A newspaper article, included with her letter, reported that William Hawkins, age sixty, stood on the bank of the Missouri River around noon, lit his pipe, adjusted his glasses, buttoned his coat, and walked calmly into the river. Witnesses who saw him said his body floated on the surface for some minutes before it disappeared. Coleman couldn't

remember feeling much of anything afterward. The fact of his father's death seemed less important than the way he took his life. Aside from walking into the river, he did nothing that was a departure from his daily routine. It wasn't his father's way to draw attention to himself. He went about his business without making a big fuss. And when he decided that the price for living his life was more than he was willing to pay, he calmly got out of a world that didn't allow him to live in it the same way he was leaving it. Coleman learned the lesson of his father's life very well and didn't feel there was any reason to grieve. He'd found his own way of separating himself from the world. But instead of getting out of this life by taking his own, Coleman left his waking life by making another out of his own breath.

Fingers snapped Coleman out of his reverie.

"Damn, Bean," Jimmy said. "You ain't been back an hour and you already off somewhere else."

"String Bean! You got anything better for me to think about until we get to the Savoy?"

"That'd be difficult to do, since you ain't never allowed anyone to get much of a peep inside your head."

"It's all there for anybody to hear when I play."

"Things've changed since you been away. Folks want a lot more from musicians they're paying their hard-earned money to see. You know what cats were saying about you when you left?"

Coleman didn't press Jimmy to answer his own question. Why should he care one way or the other what anyone said about him?

"The word on the street is that you wouldn't give a damn or a dime to see the Statue of Liberty doing the 'Lindy' on the Brooklyn Bridge at high noon!"

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He had to give it to Jimmy. That wasn't bad. And by the time they reached the Savoy, everyone's throat, including his, was sore from coughing up a load of laughter. It was several hours before the ballroom opened to the public, but musicians from several bands had already gathered. There were a few double takes and mouths opening in surprise before outbursts of "Hawk!" and "Bean!" echoed everywhere, followed by a round or two of needling to see if the years away had made it any easier to get underneath his skin. As the group around Coleman drifted away, he spotted a chunky, fat-cheeked man with a trumpet under his arm, giving him a grin that stretched out to a whole upper row of teeth. A smile creased Coleman's cheeks but didn't go any further than that. It was Rex Stewart, a trumpet player who'd been in the Henderson Band. The last time he'd seen Stewart, there wasn't even peach fuzz on his face. Coleman remembered him as someone who had difficulty figuring out the keys that many of the band's arrangements were written in. Sight-reading was second nature to Coleman. Thinking back on it, he wondered if he should've been more understanding of what Stewart was going through. But he was only twenty-one at the time, not much older than Stewart, and found ways of messing with band members, especially those who weren't able to keep up with him musically. Stewart was one who fell into that category. Coleman had gone into the dressing room early before a gig and rubbed some itching powder into the collar of the shirt Stewart was going to wear. During a high point of the night, when heat was rising up off of dancers on the floor, Stewart stood up to take his solo. The itching powder mingled with his sweat, and it was all he could do to keep his jerking head from flying off the

handle of his neck. He was too old for that kind of foolishness now. But it was still funny as hell.

"What are you smiling about?" Stewart asked, no longer grinning.

"Just thinking about all the laughs we used to have in Fletch's Band."

"You mean the laughs you had!"

Stewart was no longer that kid who gripped his trumpet so tightly that he strangled the notes in his throat before he could get them out. He lifted his trumpet slowly to his mouth and gently pressed it against his lips. The sound came out in short bursts at the tempo of a high-stepping march. It was strangely familiar. It took a few seconds before Coleman recognized Stewart's slow-motion version of reveille. He dipped his shoulders from side to side, strutting in time with his trumpet jabs snapping Coleman's head back. Stewart was serving notice that he was fully awake; and if Coleman put a deaf ear on this wake-up call, he had better be a praying man because that was the only way he would get any mercy. Coleman was impressed by the brashness Stewart added to his trumpet. And he liked the way Stewart called him out, not with a lot of blow-hard and bare knuckles, but with a gloved fist, just loud enough for him to feel the punch. But he wasn't worried. Stepping over to Stewart, Coleman heard his voice crackle with laughter as he slapped him on the back.

"You think what I did was funny?" Stewart asked, unsure of how to take Coleman's good cheer.

"No, Rex. If I did, I'd have slapped my knee and not your back."

Benny Carter had arranged to take Coleman to a number of nightspots, so musicians around town could welcome him back. When they arrived at the Famous Door, a midtown Manhattan club where the Count Basie Band was appear-

ing, guests that included Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Jimmy Lunceford took up several tables. Hands reached out to touch Coleman. Words jumped out at him from every direction but were cut to shreds by slashing sounds from the Basie Band. He was never at ease in large gatherings unless he was playing. And as far as small talk, forget it! Coleman ordered a double scotch. Benny leaned over and whispered that his money was no good for the rest of the night. He downed the scotch, ordered another, and waited for the liquor-coated comfort to take hold. By the second double, Coleman was cut off from everything except the Basie Band, with his ears tuned into the two tenor players: Leon 'Chu' Berry (who'd taken the other tenor chair left empty when Coleman's old adversary, Herschel Evans, died earlier that year) and Lester Young. Basie opened up with an old standby, "Jive at Five," playing a stingy five-note intro followed by the trombonist, Dickie Wells, setting a medium tempo, with mouth rumblings of someone shivering from a chill. The big-as-a-tub Chu Berry took a leap into the cold, gripping the saxophone in a choke hold. He was husky-throated and shouted into his horn until it did what it was told. Before Young took his solo, Coleman watched this large, soft-bodied man cradle his saxophone in his arms like a sleeping child. Standing up, he held the sax in his trademark fashion, cocked to the right as someone would while playing a flute. Those sad-sack, heavy-lidded eyes looked out beyond the bandstand; and then the sound, like slippers, soft-pedaled around Berry's rough edges with an easy-does-it, no-sweat attitude, sliding over the beat like a skater on ice.

Benny poked Coleman in the ribs, and other musicians around the table eyeballed him to check his composure. This

must've been the surprise he was promised. The baiting began just as the band entered the stretch run to end the tune.

"What do you think, Bean?" someone asked.

"About what?"

"About what you just heard."

"You can't beat the Basie Band!"

"What about Chu and Prez? Can you beat them?"

"I just try to play up to my own standard."

"Will that be enough when you go up against Lester like you did at the Cherry Blossom Club in 1933?"

That was always brought up. The night in Kansas City when he took on Ben Webster, Herschel Evans, and a newcomer named Lester Young. He'd gone to the Cherry Blossom to see if Young was everything people said he was. And he was. All that scuttlebutt about his quitting when his wailing on tenor couldn't get Young to spit the bit was never worth the breath it would've taken to give his version of what went down. Coleman believed his playing gave the best account of what he'd done. And since the numbers of people continued to grow who claimed they were there in that closet-sized club the night of the jam session, the less said about it the better.

Coleman tried to ignore the taunts, but it was impossible to block out the voices, bending his ears with shouts. He wanted to kick back and take it easy after such a long day. But as he glanced around, no one in the club was having any of that. No one except Lester Young, whose teabag-lidded eyes lifted to catch Coleman looking his way. And before Young blinked, something in his eyes told Coleman that he wasn't that hot to trot to give the audience what it wanted either. Coleman reached under the table for his saxophone case, got up, and squeezed

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his way up to the bandstand. By the time Coleman joined Young, a hush snuffed out any other sound. Lester spoke to Coleman just above a whisper.

“Looks like we got a lotta edge-of-the-seaters out tonight looking to see a cruise where somebody gets bruised.”

“Looks that way,” Coleman said.

“You down for that?”

“The question is whether we’re up for it.”

“Where’s your head at on that?”

“Same place yours is,” Coleman said.

Cracks of restlessness were heard in the silence that held the audience captive.

“What you cats gonna do – ” a man shouted, “dribble or shoot!”

“We might just pass,” Lester said, shooting his arms forward like a two-handed toss of a basketball.

There was a smattering of laughter, but the uneasiness remained.

“Bean! You got the time?” Lester asked.

“Thanks, Prez. I appreciate that. Everybody else in this joint just wants to tell me what time it is without asking.”

“Maybe ‘cause they don’t know.”

“Could be.”

“So you wanna take it from letter A on ‘Jive at Five’?”

Coleman nodded and roared out of his horn as fast as breath and fingers could carry him, with Lester no more than half a leap behind. The audience was up in arms with yells and whistles. But before they had a chance to get a hold of the speedy groove, Coleman let out a high-pitched whinny, raising his saxophone up like a thoroughbred being reined in until it slowed to loping along. Lester followed Coleman into something sounding like “Home on the Range,” where the buffalo roamed and deer and antelope played without butting heads, and where there were no dis-

couraging words or showdowns that left the skies cloudy all day. When Coleman and Lester were done, people began filing out of the club, not knowing quite where they were, using their hands to guide them, like someone walking in the dark. Only the musicians seemed not to be confused by what they’d heard. Some shook their heads with smirks on their mouths.

Coleman caught sight of Lester near the door of the club and went over to him.

“I guess we’ll get to do what everybody’s waiting for another time,” he said.

“Yeah, as long as we both got the time,” Lester said, giving a two-finger salute against the wide brim of his flat crown top hat, and then turning on his toes and sliding out the door with the same ease that he played.

Coleman ordered another double scotch, returned to his table, and found Jimmy Harrison in a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

“Bean! You and Prez gotta be the most contrary Negroes I’ve ever seen!”

“Why you say that?”

“You just can’t give folks a good time the way they want you to.”

“I give them myself. That should be a good enough time for anybody.”

“What would it have cost to give them the show they wanted to see?”

“I can’t speak for Prez. But it would’ve cost me my need to do what everyone didn’t expect.”

“Yeah, like the time we were playing baseball in Fletch’s Band, and you showed up wearing a Panama hat, a tuxedo, and patent leather shoes. And when you took the field to play short-stop you had on a first baseman’s mitt!”

“I had to protect two of my most important jewels,” Coleman said, holding out his hands.

“What were you protecting up on the bandstand?”

“The element of surprise.”

The club continued to thin out, and Coleman was surprised when Louis Armstrong came over to greet him.

“It’s solid having you back on the scene, Bean.”

“Good to be back, Pops!”

“You’re still one clever son of a gun.”

“How so?”

“What you and Prez pulled tonight will make the bread you get for the real showdown smell even better.”

“Well, you must be doing something right because you’re looking as prosperous as ever.”

“I got no need to be kicking.”

Armstrong didn’t linger, and Coleman felt no desire to say more. Aside from his unmistakable gravel throat, Armstrong was laid-back without any of his usual fun-loving joshing around. Truth be told, Coleman never cared much for Armstrong. His first impression when the New Orleans wonder joined the Henderson Band in the early 1920s was that this thick tongued–talking young man, wearing clodhoppers with long Johns showing at the ankles below his high-water pants, didn’t square with the trumpet phenom he’d heard so much about. During his time with Mamie Smith, Coleman went through a period of looking country and smelling funky before he was set straight on how to present himself properly. He wasn’t proud of it, but as a younger man he fancied himself as somewhat of a peacock. So how could he take this Armstrong fella seriously? But his head, like everyone else’s in the band, was spun around when he heard him trumpet a story as old as Adam and Eve, but swinging with the sweetness and stink of a new century. Coleman remembered the night Armstrong played ten choruses of

“Shanghai Shuffle” at Roseland Ballroom in New York City. He worked the crowd up into such a frenzy that several men carried him out into the street on their shoulders like a conquering hero.

Armstrong was that one-of-a-kind performer, who burst the seams keeping an audience cooling their heels and roused them with sky-high trumpet howls that stormed the heavens and sang with grunts from deep down in the belly of the earth. There were few who could command the stage even without an instrument in hand. That night at Roseland proved to Coleman that he wasn’t one of them. But Armstrong’s performance made him see his own strength in the undivided attention he gave to the saxophone, playing not to the audience but for himself. Like Armstrong, Coleman was not a big man. But with a chest like a pot-bellied stove, he could blow thick slices of sound that slapped together, making his own size and everything around him seem larger.

Coleman watched Armstrong leave the club. And he had to admit his fondest memory of him came when he opened his mouth, not for a hot trumpet solo or vocal, but to give Fletcher Henderson his notice. Armstrong was a bit tipsy after a night celebrating his decision to return to Chicago and form his own band. He was saying good-bye to everyone and approached Henderson to thank him for all his help. As Armstrong spoke, his stomach heaved, and he threw up all over the bandleader’s suit. Coleman couldn’t stop laughing, especially when the unflappable Henderson thanked Armstrong, as though expressing gratitude for what Satchmo had just done to him. It wouldn’t have surprised Coleman if Armstrong had never forgotten the incident and who laughed the loudest and the longest.

Coleman rented an apartment on Central Park West and began playing gigs on 52nd Street and going to after-hours jam sessions in Harlem. There was great anticipation among musicians and devoted followers of the music for the eventual showdown between Coleman and Lester Young. But the main event was delayed by would-be contenders who Coleman believed were supposed to keep him so busy carving them up during the nightly cutting contests that he wouldn't be ready when the real test came. They would often arrive, sit quietly, and try to unnerve him by never touching their instruments. At other times they hid their horns inside their coats, then pulled them out and began playing in the hope of catching him off guard.

Coleman enjoyed all the attention but wasn't surprised by it. He'd recently gone to see the movie *Stagecoach* and was quite taken by an early scene where a stagecoach, traveling through Indian territory, was stopped in its tracks by a gunshot. Through a camera trick, the man who fired the shot was zoomed out of the distance into a close-up that took up most of the space on the screen. The cowboy holding a rifle and a saddle was played by John Wayne. And the camera singled him out as someone to be reckoned with. A jolt rushed through Coleman that he usually felt after downing a double shot of scotch. He knew something about being front and center, and he'd be damned if he was going to give that up!

One night Coleman appeared as a featured guest soloist at the Famous Door with the Lionel Hampton Band. Waiting to take his solo on the opening tune, he shuffled his feet and bobbed his head like a bronco rider about to be let out of the chute. He'd been thinking about what Chu Berry and Lester Young played that first night of his return. Coleman

stepped into the spotlight and blew a path that stretched out beyond what he'd heard. He took a bit of Berry's rough-edged sputter and Young's slippery glide, mixing them into a ride that had the bumps of rusty roads and the dizziness of flying floors. He nodded his appreciation for the applause from the audience. They'd obviously enjoyed the ride. But it was different when he performed at ballrooms. This was something Coleman noticed in Europe, where he played many more club and concert dates than dances. When folks hit the dance floor during his years with the Henderson Band, it wasn't so much playing for them as it was with them. It would begin with the band leading the charge that kicked the dancers into gear, as they scuffled to match their steps to the tempo. But that could change in an instant, when the dancers hit a stride that turned the band into bystanders, taking their cues from the swinging stuff being played by the flash of feet. On the best nights at the Savoy or Roseland, the band and dancers would take turns huffing and puffing and blowing each other down.

The exchange of air at clubs in Europe and that night at the Famous Door was much quieter. And Coleman had become attuned to what he was getting from the people who came to sit and listen. He could tell, from the slightest rise and fall of their shoulders and chests, who was with him, breath for breath, and who inhaled what he'd blown and then exhaled it back at him when he took another breath. Coleman took it all in: the bobbing heads, the fingers drumming on tabletops, the patter of feet on the floor, the mouthing of words and sounds that were not, and the eyeballing, some of it reckless.

After any set, Coleman was never eager to step out of the time and tempo of

the music and back into what he left behind. Well-wishers, wanting to talk, crowded around him. There was desperation in the way many reached out to him, their eyes pleading for some other piece of himself, in a word or a touch, that was more lasting than what he'd played. His mother hadn't warned him about this part of having a gift that people wanted to be near. Coleman couldn't help but be sympathetic. He needed what they wanted from him even more than they did. But he could only offer it while playing. Afterward, he needed to protect it and himself. So he let them buy him as many rounds of drinks as they wanted.

The much-anticipated shoot-out between Coleman and Lester Young was delayed because the Basie Band was on the road and wouldn't be back until sometime in September. In the meantime, Coleman contented himself with swatting away the unsatisfying challenges from pretenders, big and small alike, buzzing around him like flies. He became bored by the predictable outcome of these encounters but perked up when an offer came to feature him on a recording of several tunes and backed up by an eight-piece band. On the afternoon of the recording session at the Radio City building, he walked past a newsstand with the headlines on all the papers warning of a possible German invasion of Poland. The date also caught his eye, September 2. Coleman wasn't one to keep close tabs on the news of the day. But this date reminded him of the following day in September ten years earlier, when the stock market crashed. Normally, this would have meant very little, except that it convinced him he'd been right to keep his money close at hand rather than in the money-changing hands of a bank.

The other musicians were in the studio when Coleman walked in and a few started to snicker.

"Bean? Was it running out of ladies that got you here on time?" one of them asked.

"Don't you worry about it. Just remember, it's more important to play in time than to be on time."

"You hear that? Bean listens to a different beat from the rest of us."

One of the men in the sound booth called out over a loudspeaker.

"If we don't start soon, we won't have enough time to lay down the tracks of all these tunes."

The band settled in, and the first tune was recorded without much difficulty. The second, "Fine Dinner," was written by Coleman and was one of his favorites. The trumpet and alto saxophone opening gave voice to the tastes that were in their mouths, as they bounced on top of the bass player's finger-plucking that carried them along breezily. The horns took the tempo up a notch and sounded out a "wow!" as if they'd spotted a woman who wasn't satisfied to be served up like dessert on the sidewalk, but stayed on the go, just out of reach, and let it be known that her swivel hips were for her to show and a precious few to know. The brass and reeds hollered for Coleman to size her up. His solo gave her a juicy big buildup, filled with pulp and seeds. But he begged off getting underneath her crust, as if to say, he only handed out those goodies when he had a 'fine dinner' all to himself.

The band took a break before doing "She's Funny That Way," and Coleman talked to the singer, Thelma Carpenter. His eyes lingered on her a while. She couldn't have been more than eighteen, but she seemed eager enough.

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“So! You’re what’s up and coming?”

“I don’t know how up and coming I am. But I am a singer.”

“Being a singer is more than carrying a tune. You have to want the song to carry you. If you can do that, then you can treat it like someone you have a thing for but don’t really know. But the more they get next to you, you just can’t get enough of their smell.”

“Mr. Coleman, I don’t mean to be disrespectful but . . .”

“Just hear me out . . . So you start living in every corner of that song to find all of its hiding places, and let it do the same to you. And when your nose is wide open and you’re about to bust from holding in all that sweet sweat, nothing can stop you from letting out all that joy and trembling.”

She was perspiring and didn’t like it.

“Mr. Coleman? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about being a singer!”

The band cleared the way for her to enter “She’s Funny That Way.” Coleman’s advice kick-started his hope that her sweat would offer up a secret, which would surprise them both. He coaxed her under, over, around, and through the lyrics and heard some Lady Day in her voice. But what young singer didn’t. She had a ways to go, though, before her tongue put enough mischief in her mouth to make her voice ‘funny’ in the way the song needed it to be.

The band prepared to play the last tune of the session, when the recording engineer called out to Coleman.

“Why don’t you do ‘Body and Soul’ to finish up?”

“I had something else in mind.”

“We can do that another time. I heard you do ‘Body and Soul’ in a club once, and I think it’d be good to have a recording of it.”

Coleman shrugged in agreement.

“Give me an intro to start off,” he said to the piano player.

He laid down a light drizzle of notes. Coleman took a breath and spewed out something gruff, from deep in his chest. For some reason, he still didn’t want to play this tune about the two halves of one person that were often at war, just like the world was about to be. Coleman felt the weight of his legs holding him down. And the steady beat of walking feet from the bass and the drummer’s whispering brushes against the snare weren’t enough to take the floor out from under him.

“Could we do another take, Coleman?” the engineer asked afterward. “The sound levels were a little bit off.”

“We’ll have to do it another time. I’m done for the night.”

Coleman left the studio by himself, since all the other musicians wanted to listen to what they’d recorded. He walked down the hall toward the elevator and passed an open door to another studio. Pausing to glance inside, he saw a raw-boned, slick-haired man kneeling down over an opened long narrow suitcase. He reached inside and pulled out a wooden dummy dressed in a tuxedo. The man impressed Coleman with his stylish double-breasted suit and stick-pinned collared shirt behind a checkered tie. He lifted the dummy into a sitting position and, very carefully, straightened the white bow tie, attached a monocle over the right eye, snapped open a top hat, and placed it on the head. This had to be that guy on the radio, Edgar Bergen, and his smart-mouthed sidekick, Charlie McCarthy. Coleman started listening to the show shortly after he returned to the States. At first, he couldn’t understand how a ventriloquist act could work on the radio. But he got such a kick out of Charlie McCarthy’s wisecracks that it didn’t matter how good

Bergen really was at making his voice sound like it was coming out of the dummy's mouth.

"May I help you, sir?"

Coleman was a bit startled when Bergen spoke to him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you. I just finished a recording session down the hall, and I was on my way to the elevator. You're Edgar Bergen, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"I enjoy listening to your show."

"Thank you."

Bergen looked at Coleman's instrument case.

"What do you play?"

"Tenor saxophone."

"I guess you could say we both live our lives out of what's in these cases."

"You'll get no argument from me on that."

"Of course, Charlie has told our listeners that I've got the whole country fooled because I move my lips when he talks."

Coleman raised his instrument case.

"I move my lips too when I make this talk. But I guess the important thing is what Charlie McCarthy and my saxophone are saying when our lips are moving."

"I appreciate you saying that. What is your name, sir?"

"Coleman Hawkins."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise."

"I have a feeling Charlie would like to meet you too."

He pulled over a chair, sat down, and put Charlie on his lap. His mouth opened and a squeaky voice, unlike Bergen's, came out.

"I thought he'd never let me talk. Bergen sometimes forgets that without me he's a body without a soul."

Coleman shot a stare at Bergen.

"Don't look at him, Mr. Coleman. This is me talking!"

Bergen's lips didn't move, and Charlie's voice seemed to be coming right out of his own mouth. Coleman directed his eyes slowly back to Charlie.

"Why are you so surprised? I only tell the listeners that Edgar's lips move, so he'll get some of the credit for my sharp mind and quick wit. But when we're not in front of an audience, we don't have to fake it."

Coleman looked at Bergen again, hoping he would explain.

"Charlie has a very vivid imagination," he said, moving his lips for the first time since Charlie began to speak.

"Of course I do!" Charlie shot back. "I'm no dummy!"

"So if Mr. Bergen doesn't do the thinking for you, how'd you get to be so smart?" Coleman asked.

"Only God could explain it."

"And only a double scotch could make me believe it," Coleman said.

"Bergen! I think W. C. Fields left some of his strong medicine in a drawer, the last time he was on the show. Would you pour us a drink?"

With his free hand, Bergen pulled open a drawer and took out a flask and a shot glass. He poured in two fingers worth and handed it to Coleman.

"Hey Bergen! What about me?"

"Nothing for you, Charlie," Bergen said.

Coleman downed his scotch and shook his head.

"Are you all right, Mr. Hawkins? Why don't you have a seat?" Charlie said.

Coleman settled into a chair, not sure of what he was seeing or hearing. Then Bergen stood up, holding Charlie from behind with one hand.

"So, Mr. Coleman, as a musician, are you paid exuberantly?" Charlie asked.

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Soul*

The scotch kicked in, and Coleman, feeling a little giddy, gave his complete attention to Charlie.

“As a matter of fact, Charlie, I play exuberantly, but the pay is never exorbitant.”

“You hear that Bergen! Mr. Hawkins is quick on the draw, even when he’s sitting down.”

“Yes, he is, Charlie,” Bergen said.

“Mr. Hawkins. Would you be interested in a job as my mouthpiece?” Charlie asked.

“I use one, but I don’t want to be one.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Charlie said. “Because I don’t want to be one either. But I wonder if you’re as good on your feet as you are sitting down?”

Coleman glared at both Bergen and Charlie, who gave him back the look of seasoned cardsharks, refusing to show their hand until he played his. They’d gotten his juices flowing, and he welcomed the sweat soaking his underarms, just as it did right before he went toe-to-toe with a worthy challenger in a club or after-hours joint. He’d been waiting to feel like this since returning from Europe. And it was hard to believe that a ventriloquist playing second banana to his wooden buddy would’ve made mischief in their voices that he’d been hoping to hear from other musicians. Coleman opened his saxophone case, pulled out his horn, and stood up. He tightened the mouthpiece, put the strap attached to the sax around his neck, and nestled the lower body of his horn against his stomach. Standing shut-eyed and not giving a thought to what he would play, Coleman heard a rumble rising up from his belly to his throat, which came out in a growl that he recognized as the first few bars of “Body and Soul.” He flashed on what Charlie McCarthy said about Edgar Bergen not being much more than a soulless body without him. Coleman

wondered whether it was said deliberately to see how far he’d go to prove that whatever Bergen did to throw his voice into Charlie’s was nothing compared to what he made come out of a saxophone. But he quickly lost interest in that and began tasting his tenor for the labor of his life from mind to mouth. And with each breath, he sucked into his gums and between his teeth a world tumbling into deep trouble. He was hot with fever; and his fingers burned against the keys, making the skin feel like it was melting into the metal of his horn. Coleman opened his eyes, sweat streaming down his face. Bergen and Charlie were a blur, blending into each other, bone to wood. He played the final notes, letting out a sigh that quivered like the flame on a candlewick before it went out.

“I don’t think anybody could’ve explained how I tick any better than that. Don’t you think so, Bergen?”

“Absolutely!”

“But I have to ask you something, Mr. Hawkins,” Charlie said. “Since it was you who explained everything about me, did having that drink help you believe what you played any more than if God had done it?”

A fistful of laughter punched its way out of Coleman’s mouth. And he almost choked, stopping another one coming right behind the first. Coleman nodded. Charlie’s comeback was worthy of anything Lester Young could’ve hit him with. He tried to sidetrack the question by playing a nursery rhyme about Little Bo Peep watching her sheep and falling asleep.

“It’s a little early for me to be turning in, Mr. Hawkins,” Charlie said. “Bergen and I still have a show to do.”

Bergen glanced quickly at his watch.

“You’re right, Charlie. Mr. Hawkins, I’m sorry but we’re due in the studio for

tonight's show in five minutes. I know I speak for Charlie . . ."

"Don't even think such a thought, Bergen."

"Charlie, I was only going to say how much we enjoyed our lively conversation with Mr. Hawkins."

"Oh! I'll go along with that. Mr. Hawkins, you have definitely kept me on my toes. W. C. Fields won't know what hit him when he runs into me again."

"I have a W. C. Fields that I'll be tangling with soon. But after going a few rounds with you, I'll be ready for him."

Bergen extended his hand to Coleman.

"It's been a pleasure, Mr. Hawkins."

"The same goes for me," Coleman said, shaking his hand. He then took hold of Charlie's hand and shook it.

"You take care of yourself, Charlie."

"You too, Mr. Hawkins. And when we come back to New York to do another show, maybe you could show me a few things on your saxophone."

"I'd be happy to."

"You know, Charlie," Bergen said. "It's wonderful that Mr. Hawkins has agreed to give you some pointers on playing the saxophone. But I think you should do something for him in return."

"Well, let me see. Oh! I know what! I can show you something even Bergen doesn't know I can do."

"What's that?" Coleman asked.

"When we come back to New York, I'll meet you without Bergen tagging along."

Coleman shot a glance at Bergen, wondering where this was going.

"There you go again, Mr. Hawkins," Charlie said, "looking at him, instead of listening to me. You don't believe I can get along on my own without Bergen, do you?"

"What I believe, Charlie, is that Mr. Bergen would have more trouble getting along without you."

"What makes you say that?" Bergen asked.

"Because like you and Charlie, THIS is what I am wherever I go," Coleman said, lifting his saxophone lengthwise like a baptized child.

"Hey fellas, I got a news flash for you," Charlie said. "You may be joined to us at the heart, but not at the hip."

A smile wormed into Bergen's mouth. Coleman could tell that he was having a great time listening to Charlie give him a lot of grief. This was probably how he prepared for the knockdown, drag-out, sharp-tongued fisticuffs between Charlie and W. C. Fields. It reminded Coleman of his own struggles with the saxophone when he tried to play things he'd only heard in his head. Without these tugs of war between himself and his horn, he would've never built up a full head of ideas and the stamina to take on all comers during those wee-hour jam sessions. While Coleman waited on the elevator, he watched Bergen carrying Charlie down the hall to the radio studio. Charlie's head turned to Bergen, and he spoke loud enough for Coleman to hear.

"You know Bergen, those last few words we just had with Mr. Hawkins make me wonder if I might be better off doing my act as a solo."

Body and Soul