

Witch Doctor in a White Tie

*When you stop to think of it, Cab Calloway
is the only man in America who possibly
could have coined those words like "jitterbug"*



by ROBERT W. MARKS

CAB CALLOWAY is Green Hell, air-cooled for comfort, landscaped for style. He is a swing colossus with one foot on Times Square, the other in the upper Nile. He is a witch doctor in a white tie.

Lithe as a spring and debonair, he prances in front of his band like a cross between a college cheer leader and Condé Nast serving vintage champagne.

"Hi-de-hi-de-hi," says he.

"Hi-de-hi-de-hi," says the chorus.

"Ho-de-ho-de-ho," says he.

"Ho-de-ho-de-ho," says the chorus.

Calloway, now inspired, gives his echo its *coup de grace*. "Skinny-we-de-we-de-we-de-do," peals he. It's

like Gertrude Stein on a ten-day drunk. Nothing quite means anything—ever did—ever will mean anything. You are very pleased.

You feel even better after a drink.

Born in Rochester, New York, on Christmas, 1907, Calloway was named Cabell, after his father, a lawyer, who died soon, leaving a large family and no reserves. The family moved to

Mr. Robert Marks, who is no stranger to Coronet readers, has written a History of Music and Musical Instruments of Ancient China—and also several works on wine. This particular article seems to show the effects of both—stirred well together over a hot burner. Almost a Yale graduate, Marks divides his spare time (he's one of the most prolific of magazine feature writers) between photography and flying. He does both very well.

Baltimore and little Cab went to work shining shoes. His older sister Blanche made a start in the show business.

Times were never easy. When the wolf wasn't wailing at the door, he was at least napping in a nearby yard. And many were the Calloway mouthfuls waiting—Bernice, Elmer, John, Camilla.

By and by, Cab promoted himself to the post of newsboy. He claims he sold only Sunday papers. "They were more dignified."

His was a prosaic, non-musical youth. He had a dilettante interest in drums and a churchly interest in hymns. No one found him in the garret, late at night, conducting the Vienna Philharmonic.

At this time, the only floor show he looked forward to was the tragedy-comedy of a court room. So he went to Crane College, in Chicago, to study law, his sister Blanche getting him an expense-paying job in a night club. Soon he was busy burning the midnight oil—but in the wrong lamp. "Night clubbing and school didn't pan out so well, together," says Calloway, "so I figured I'd give up school."

Time passed.

Calloway joined a certain Chicago institution known as "The Sunset Club." There was a floor show. He got a bit part. Maybe a two bit part. George Dewey Washington was on the same bill. So were Adelaide Hall, Walter Richardson and Slick White. Calloway watched them carefully, especially noting their clay feet.

Then one night, his star climbed up a magnitude. Adelaide Hall was sick. Calloway knew her act so well he could handle it blindfolded on a tight rope. He walked on and took over her big number: *The Song of the Wanderer*. He stole the show.

From then on he was official understudy to the whole cast. At a moment's notice he could fill in anything but a tooth.

SUDDENLY the scene shifted. A new orchestra arrived, appropriately called the "Alabamians." It brought with it an up-and-coming master of ceremonies, one Ralph Cooper.

It should be pointed out that this was the time when masters of ceremonies were overrunning the country like hot-dog stands. They combined the special techniques of Svengali, Dale Carnegie and the old-time merchants of snake-oil. They confessed, confided, cajoled and conspired. They were the Indian givers of the spotlight.

But one fateful night there was no Ralph Cooper, and Calloway filled in. He was like a race horse who had been pulling a hack through Central Park. Now he took his bit part in his teeth, opened his nostrils and tore down the track.

The band played as never before. Even the walls were pleased. Then trouble signed a lease.

When Cooper came back, the band had two leaders. The Calloway personality wouldn't shut off. It kept

leading—even from the washroom. The management said the boys had better make up their minds. Cab and no Cooper; Cooper and no Cab.

The boys took Cab. They were billed as “Cab Calloway and his Alabamians.”

Calloway now had ossified his peculiarities into what is politely called “style.” This involved wild spontaneity, a come-what-may enthusiasm, a specialized species of spot inventions. The customers liked it.

It went out on the radio. It wormed into the trade sheets. It traveled by word of mouth. A reputation began to grow. Soon the style-story reached Manhattan, earned a bid from Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom.

But the Savoy was not yet ready for African innovations. Calloway was a pew ahead of himself. “I was,” he says, “one tremendous flop.”

Then chance played an encore: Connie’s *Hot Chocolates* was on rehearsal. Calloway was offered a part singing *Ain’t Misbehavin’*. Slowly success climbed back in the saddle.

This was in 1929. Duke Ellington, who had been playing at the Cotton Club, had a Hollywood offer. Herman Stark, the emporium’s impresario, was scouting for a new band. He thought Calloway was enough of a personality to be box office; he was willing to back Calloway, buy men

—even to manufacture materials.

The Alabamians now forgotten, Calloway advanced a state. He became “Cab Calloway and his Missourians.” He was giving himself forty-eight chances to succeed.

He opened at the Cotton Club, canting a song called *The St. James Infirmary*. His orchestra was now major league timber. It had Carnegie Hall tone, radio appeal, patented antics. The coast-to-coast networks soon enmeshed it, and *The St. James Infirmary* became a national clinic. Calloway was now ready to be tapped for “The Hot Record Society.”



WITH BOTH a creative and unseen audience to work with, Calloway’s technique improved. He became a past master at “scat.” He would start with orthodox lyrics, end with heterodox hokum.

One night he was stuck. Try as he might, he couldn’t pick up his lyric. He put the “scat” out.

“Hi-de-ho,” howled Calloway. “Ho-de-ho-de-ho . . . skinny-we-de-we-de-we-do . . .”

The house tittered. He tried it again. When he wound up, the applause roared down like a subway express.

“I figured I had something there,” says Calloway. “And so I held on to it—tried it in my other numbers.” It worked like Voodoo magic.

It became his vocal coat of arms.

The St. James Infirmary ran its day, and time came for another feature. So Cab, with Irving Mills, his manager, wrote *Minnie the Moocher*. It took like a vaccination.

The radio, the movies, the gramophone; airship, mule-back and packet-boat; college boys, chorus girls and coolies—all spread the sad saga of Minnie “who laid her head on the *yensheegow* and stabbed herself with the *sueypow*.”

Hi-de-ho became a classical moronism—and Minnie took her place in the Pantheon of American folklore.

A CYCLE OF “hi-de-ho” songs followed: *Smokey Joe*, *Kicking the Gong Around*, *Reefer Man*, *The Scat Song*, *Wah-Dee-Dah*, *Lady with the Fan*. Calloway drifted into composing and philology. Right and left he tossed off songs and words. Soon there was *jitterbug*.

Calloway had acquired an eccentric trombonist. For no tangible reason, he named him Father. Father was corking with the trombone. But “he had the shakes.” So, to steady his nerves, he took one little nip after another. “He was such a bug on the bottle,” says Calloway, “I called him a *jitterbug*—lapper-up of *jitter-sauce*.”

Calloway wrote a song around him called *The Jitterbug Shuffle*. Then showmanship got to work in a geometrical ratio. A professor came into the picture. With learned voice he announced that a *jitterbug* was, in every

syllable, a *palsaddictisomoniadipsomaniac*.

It was a good word, redundant as the dictionary.

What could be more publicity-bent than a Jitterbug Club with this as a password. Calloway built himself a jitterbughouse in the air, campaigned for members. All that was required of a neophyte was an unstuttered mouthing of this non-streamlined hybrid.

He began to coin words like a mint. He became a professor emeritus of *Jive*—the patois of Harlem. He became co-author of a *Jive* dictionary. Among the many other expressions coined or made coin by Calloway are *Yeah, man*; *Jiving around*; *That sends me*; *Beat it out, boys*; *Aw, you're muggin'*; *It's ready, so help me!*

The Calloway *Jive* even infects his band. All the players have special Jive handles. Taken collectively, they sound like the cast of an Elizabethan comedy: *Foots*, *Flat*, *Bunky*, *Doc*, *Son*, *Slop*, *Faker*, *Deedlo*, *Cash*, *Fruit* and *Place*.

Foots is a saxophone player whose pedals suggested one of Calloway's lyrics about “a gal so tall—she sleeps in the kitchen with her *foots* in the hall.” *Cash* is the drummer. His only notes are banknotes.

“That reminds me,” said Calloway to Ned Williams, his press agent and jiving partner, “I've got a new word for the dictionary: *grease-pad*.”

Meaning: restaurant. Illustration:

“After I've finished this slave on the Great White Way I will final to a

Village of Darkness, stretch my frame in a grease-pad and exercise my crumbcrushers 'cause my midsection is very beat."

Freely translated, this means: "When I've wound up my Broadway stint I'll beat it to Harlem, drop into a dive and pick up some slop; I'm pooped."

AS A MASTER of ceremonies, Calloway is systematically urbane. Only once in his career did his concentrated Grover Whalenism come a cropper.

Irving Berlin had just married Ellen Mackay; and her father was annoyed about it. One night Berlin came up to the Cotton Club with Oscar Levant and Levant's wife. Dan Healy, at that time, was the official master of ceremonies. For some reason he hadn't turned up, and Calloway took over.

The management, noticing Berlin's party, sent word to Calloway. As M. C., he should make some sort of gesture—introduce Berlin.

Boldly, Calloway approached the mike—which was tied in to a national hook-up. "Ladies and gentlemen," said he, "we have with us tonight a famous composer and his wife. It gives me great pleasure to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Irving Berlin . . ."

There was great stir. Mrs. Berlin—Mrs. Ellen Mackay Berlin—was never seen in night clubs—not then. The management was embarrassed. Keep her out of the picture.

Word was passed to Calloway.

Apologetically he went back to the mike. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced to the national network, "I made a slight mistake. The lady with Mr. Berlin was not his wife."

CONSERVATIVE in his tastes, Cab Calloway's only extravagance is fine cars. His latest addition, a custom-built Lincoln, turned out too long for his garage. Two feet were scooped out of the wall to get it in.

Addicted to every known sport, his luck is phenomenal. He never loses. Whenever he finds his band at a crap game, he says nothing. He doesn't have to break it up. His is a fatal G-man technique: he joins the game.

His one deep admiration is for Duke Ellington. Ellington's picture hangs in the bar of his house—the only professional symbol in the menage. A radio-phonograph system, remotely controlled from every room, turns Ellington on and off at will.

One night Ellington dropped in during the early show at the Cotton Club. Calloway stepped out front.

"I'm glad to be here with my buddy, Duke," he said. "Duke and I've got a date to take out for Harlem and enjoy ourselves. We wish you ladies and gentlemen would get your hats and coats and go home. We're going to close up the club . . ."

Calloway has built himself a private springboard for high jiving. He has a permanent audience. He has at his baton's end, men whose musicianship is so fine, as he puts it, "it's

just like taking a drink of water."

He sells himself no illusions. He heils to the old doctrine of work; tears himself limb from limb at every performance. He will work as hard for a lone scrubwoman as for a houseful of standing Ladies Clara Vere de Vere.

At thirty-one, he is altering his style, building an entertainment wall to lean against long after his hi-de-hi is low. He keeps an eye peeled for personality-fatigue. Today he gives the customers more music, less Callo-way; more show, less show-off.

With both feet on the pulse of the public, "he is ready," as they say in jive—ready to conquer what's left of a rapidly-shaking, shagging world.

He'll do it, too!

—*Suggestions for further reading:*

FATHER OF THE BLUES: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by W. C. Handy

The Macmillan Company, New York

YOUNG MAN WITH A HORN

by Dorothy Baker

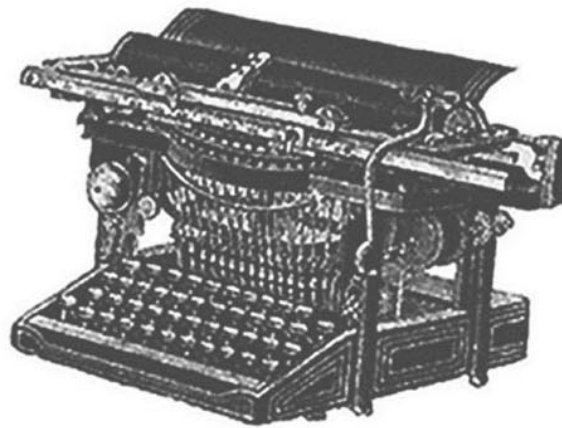
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston

JAZZMEN

by Frederic C. Ramsey, Jr.

and Charles Edward Smith

Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., New York



OldMagazineArticles.com