

A Change in Plan

by David James

Times were tough back then. Just a few jobs. This was in the late thirties. It's the story of how Albert hooked up with Iris. Their unlikely meeting took place when they met out on the Highway 61 right-of-way just outside of Natchez, Mississippi, each trying to hitch another ride or two on down to New Orleans where they might find work. Albert just got out of an old Plymouth, lugging a saxophone in a scuffed up, old leather case and, seeing her, he walked over to shake her hand. As they exchanged bonafides she told him she was Iris and liked to sing and hoped she could catch on as a warbler in one of the French Quarter clubs. Albert introduced himself, smiled, and said he was surprised she'd be out hitchhiking (back then gals just didn't do that). Ladies mostly hung around in their hometowns waiting for suitors to change their maiden names. Iris said prospects for that were slim in her town, Yazoo City, besides it made her weary thinking some guy would lord over her and govern the rest of her life.

After about five hours in the sun with no cars stopping to offer them a ride they pulled back from the road where under a Spanish mossed, shade tree. Albert took out his sax and he and Iris jumped on a song: "Stormy Weather". Albert said, "Ya know, if somebody closed their eyes, they might think they was listening to Ethel Waters at The Cotton Club in Harlem because your treatment is that good." Iris said that singing inside his sax melody made it easy. And right there they knew that they were a team.

It was getting late and sensing that getting a ride to New Orleans was unlikely, they picked up their stuff and trudged the coupla miles into Natchez with a plan that was respectable back then because of the hard times. They would find and sleep that night in an empty, side-tracked boxcar which they did and then the next morning, they walked on over to the train station platform and started work: Busking. Offering up their music to passengers coming and going. That afternoon Albert said to judge by the quarters and occasional

dollar bill dropped in Iris's pill box hat lying there in front of them they made a good choice. Iris said, "Well, it ain't exactly heaven, but if we could pick up enough playing, maybe we could take the train to New Orleans." Albert nodded and smiled.

