

THE BIRTH OF THE BLUES

by Robert Crisman

The blues were born on the ghost train that rolled through the Delta and gave Memphis breath back in 1902.

It's low moaning sound brought young black men running, dogs hot in pursuit, toward glory that danced in a moonlight that winked and brought them aboard. The train was a shadow of steel and black heat that slowed at the crossroads to pick up the dead.

Inside, the cars burned, a fierce yellow fire. Whores sat by the windows, white faces composed; the screams had finally died in their throats, and they sat there and sipped tea from China. Nighttime passed through them like smoke.

Ivory the gambler played dice with their eyes.

There were those who'd been born on the train, and whispers in towns said that these were the spawn of the devils that came through the cars in the guise of red dogs.

All the newborns were sightless.

Some of the sightless grew wings...

Winged Bechet blew tenor, unheard of in 1902, yet heralding maybe the passage of angels through cities-to-be that would wail by dark rivers in wartime.

His horn under lights, tears and sweat wrung from lands at the far ends of Earth, beyond God...

It's notes pierced the azure, brought sun and the rain and the memory of promises made and forgotten in Babylon's shadow as skies edged toward night and Zion fell under the water.

Bechet made the dead dance, sent the sightless to windows to dissect black visions, gave winged ones hawk's eyes and talons that itched, and cradled the newborns in rhythm and fired their hearts' blood's desire.

Desire is the womb of the blues...

