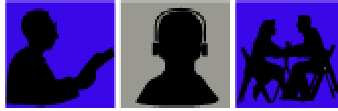


ARRIVISTE PRESS



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Playing For Change

By Paul Allen

Damn, it's so cold playing out here on these streets. And for what? No one gives me a second thought even if it is the 'Holiday Season,' but there's sure as hell no sign of festive spirit coming my way. It's all just traveling straight into those bright shop windows, with their wreaths and red ribbons and fairy tale scenes. Not so much as a glance for a poor saxophone player, who's fingers are damned near freezing to the keys as he lays down that soulful jazz, like they pay twenty, thirty bucks to hear in some Midtown rip off joint. All they'd have to do is stop and gimme thirty seconds of their time to hear me blow the greatest, like it was Bird and Byrd and Dizzy and Dexter and Grover and the great Mr. Coltrane all rolled into one, firing out those crazy spiraling licks and hot shrill whistling solos into the clear cold blue.

But they just keep on walking on, coz here ain't the place they got their ears open. Here is the place where they're hustling by them bright warm windows all set out to captivate the millions of passing eyes. And that's the only sense that's working right now. The ears might be for the night time, but the eyes rule the day. All those sounds of hooting horns, and fire sirens wailing to get through the choke of cars, and construction workers on the ground shouting to their buddies two stories up, all that stuff just blurs into the hum of the background, so you get so used to it you don't even notice the noise no more so what hope does a lonesome sax player have? What chance has he got of touching those eardrums and reaching their souls enough that in the middle of their frenetic lives—when they've got to get back to work before the boss starts yelling, or get to that meeting on time, or buy all those gifts on their list—that they're gonna stop to hear, to really listen to the cool rising and falling waves of sound that is Jazz?

But still I keep trying. Man, you have no idea how hard. I'm there all the long, cold day, standing in the shadows of the department stores down Fifth, playing for you, playing for my kid, playing for me and some kind of future.

From the morning rush to work, through the lunchtime scramble when you've got ten minutes, half an hour, maybe an hour to do all that stuff that's about you and your life. And in all that time, all that goddamned time, with all those faces and all those feet tap tap tapping by down the broad sidewalks that are packed so solid they burst their banks and spill out on to the streets, people dodging the traffic as it lunges a few hundred yards down to the next interchange, pausing at the red, then lunging again to the prayer chant of horns and roaring engines sent up to the god of motion, in all that time there's just a few heads that turn against the tide, drawn by the sound of air blown through a brass bore and wafting up out of the horn in Cs and Es and G minors, and it pulls them out of their tunnel vision for a few seconds, long enough for the waves to hit something in their brains that says 'hey this is nice man, that cat can blow.'

Sometimes the odd one'll like it enough they think they ought to give something in return. So a hand delves deep into the recesses of a pocket or a bag and

comes out with a quarter or two, spinning through the air between us into the black lined case at my feet, or if I'm lucky it might even be a Washington-faced bill fluttering from an outstretched hand. And that feels good, but it doesn't last long coz it's not much more than enough to warm my hands and belly with coffee or maybe even some soup before school gets out and I have to go meet my son coz I promised I'd take him to see the windows in Macy's like I'd been meaning to only I'd never got to do it coz I was always hard pushed chasing a buck. But now this is my last chance, else my ex screamed she won't let me see him again coz I let him down too much so I got to take a couple of hours out this afternoon to take Ray to the store and buy him some candy and get him back to his Mom's even though I need to make that money worse than ever else I won't be able to pay Sam the Money Man who hangs out down the club where Big Joe says I can finally have a shot playing up there on the stage with some band of his that's short of a horn for the night even though he won't pay me but I got this feeling that if I can just make it inside where the people listen standing up there under the gaze of my heroes looking out from their black and white photographs and blowing my sound then it could really be my break.

So now I've done my parental duty but I got less money and less time. Finally I'm back on the street though, blowing hard for the people on their way home. Maybe coz it's the end of the day their ears are opening up at last to the sound, and there's more rummaging in pockets and bags, and more quarters and bills landing in my case. If I can only get a bit more there'll be enough to save Sam from laying his heavies on me, and then I'll be blowing home and dry in that warm smoky room, with the notes bouncing off the ceiling and off the glass in them photos, and making those old cats smile to know here's a man that's got it in his soul just the way they did.

But now the sun is long gone and the cold wind comes rushing down the avenues like Manhattan is one big saxophone and it's gonna blow its crazy tune up to that audience of stars in the sky. The people left on the streets are hurrying by, heads down, collars up, hands buried in pockets, but staying there and not feeling for change no more. The hours pass by and though my notes are still bouncing off the buildings opposite it takes me a long time to make those last few bucks I'm gonna need to show up at the club and keep my fingers in one piece long enough to play. At last though I've got enough for Sam and his mean boys and the subway ride and maybe even enough for a shot of something warm when I get there, so I pack up my case and pull my hat down further over my ears and hurry into the subway station out of the wind and through the barriers and onto the uptown train holding my case tight and thinking bout that stage and my sax glinting in the low light and those faces that scurried past me today without a glance now leaning back, eyes closed, drifting away on the sweet sound of cool and digging it, yeah, digging me, and thinking 'why have I not heard him before, he is surely The Man.'

And then I'm inside in the warm. I take off my gloves and my fingers tingle with pinpricks as the blood starts circulating back into the ends, mixing with the tingle of anticipation that's been building up in my chest and stomach all day. There's a four-piece on stage, the trumpet leaning back, bouncing his riff off of the ceiling. He's got technique but no soul, the sweet essence of true jazz. He should try playing on the streets; that'd give him emotion, something to really blow for.

I scout the room and see Big Joe by the bar, watching me as I walk over.

"Where the hell you been?" he asks, checking his watch. "Your slot was two hours ago."

"Hey, I'm sorry man, but it wasn't my fault. I couldn't help it, I needed to make some dough first, for Sam, y'know."

“I don’t wanna hear it,” he cuts in. “Your problems ain’t my problem, y’know what I’m saying? Hell, I knew you was a loser first time I set eyes on you.”

“Come on,” I beg him, “lemme play something, even if it’s just me up there. I can make enough sound without a band. I do it all day. Please Big Joe, you’ve gotta let me on. Just give me a chance, that’s all I’m asking. I promise, you won’t regret it.”

“Are you crazy? A horn needs a band, just like my band needed a horn. That was your chance, and you blew it. How the hell d’ya think you’re gonna make it if you can’t be relied on to show up on time? Now, either buy a drink or get the hell out of my club.”

Next morning and I’m back on the streets freezing my ass off for chump change again, trying to scrape enough together for Sam’s next installment, and maybe even get ahead a little, perhaps enough to get something nice for Ray for Christmas. The morning crowds scuttle past in cocooned separateness, too preoccupied to see the rest of the world passing by, just feeling them occasionally when they happen to touch. I stand like a rock in a river, immobile against the currents, pounded by the flow but so little changed by it.

I’m just thinking about taking a break to go refuel the body’s ol’ heating system with a cup of coffee when a man stops in front of me. Four others stand with him. He smiles. “That’s the guy,” he tells them. “Play us something, man,” he says to me, “and make it fly.”

So I do. I blow with all the air in my lungs and all the music in my soul. And they are sure the hell digging it, smiling and nodding their heads to the notes spiraling up into the sky. Where they’re gathered, a couple of other people stop to listen. Soon there’s a small semi-circle grouped round my case, ears open, listening like it was the first time.

“I heard you here yesterday,” says the leader. “You sure are The Man. I told you he was good,” he says to the other guys standing there with him, who smile and nod like they can see he’s been telling the truth alright. And now he stands listening, all ears, with that grin spreading across his face like I’ve warmed something in his heart, and his foot tapping my beat. When I’m done he drops a \$10 bill into my case then walks off, leaving me with a wink of appreciation and a semi-circle of listeners waiting for my next tune.

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