

BLACK^{AND} BLUE

THE LIFE AND LYRICS OF

ANDY RAZAF

B A R R Y S I N G E R

FOREWORD BY BOBBY SHORT

SCHIRMER BOOKS

An Imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company

NEW YORK

Maxwell Macmillan Canada

TORONTO

Maxwell Macmillan International

NEW YORK OXFORD SINGAPORE SYDNEY

1992

Ten weeks into the run of *Hot Feet* at Connie's Inn, on the evening of June 3, 1929, *Hot Chocolates* received its first public tryout, in the Bronx, at the Windsor Theatre on the corner of Fordham and Knightsbridge Roads. Many members of the cast continued to work a midnight *Hot Feet* show in Harlem after the curtain rang down on *Hot Chocolates*, and many revisions were forced upon the production by performers' complaints that "doubling to the floor show is too arduous." The beefed-up Broadway company now numbered eighty-five "artists," including Russell Wooding's Jubilee Singers, a female chorus of sixteen Chocolate Drops, a male chorus of eight Bon Bon Buddies, and a team of acrobatic dancers, the Six Crackerjacks. The lovely Minto Cato was gone, replaced by Edith Wilson. Gone too was "Snake Hips" Tucker, bound for Europe with the touring *Blackbirds of 1928* company. His absence allowed for the addition to the cast of "Jazzlips" Richardson, a rubber-limbed comedic carnival circuit veteran whose combination of blackface comedy and eccentric acrobatic dancing was a revelation for delighted *Hot Chocolates* audiences.

The final piece in the Immermans' recasting puzzle for *Hot Chocolates* proved to be by far the most fortuitous. In early March, at the instigation of his new manager, the recording director for OKeh

Records, Tommy Rockwell, Louis Armstrong had returned to New York from Chicago for a brief engagement at the Savoy Ballroom, fronting a band led by Luis Russell. The cabaret business was drying up in Chicago, the victim of reformers, and Armstrong was just a bit more disposed to pursue stardom in New York City than he had been on his first go-round with Fletcher Henderson some five years earlier. On the occasion of this return, Armstrong had reasserted his enormous local Harlem popularity at the Savoy and had even recorded with a select all-star ensemble of white jazz musicians in a session for OKeh. (Among the four songs covered was "I Can't Give You Anything but Love.") He then had returned to Chicago, working there as a feature at the Regal Theatre backed by violinist Carroll Dickerson's orchestra, and playing a number of one-nighters around the Midwest, before being summoned back to New York by his manager in May 1929. Fervently convinced that he could break Armstrong successfully with white audiences, Rockwell had managed to book his client into the pit for a new Vincent Youmans musical tentatively titled *Louisiana Lou*, soon to be retitled *Great Day*. His agreement with Youmans even held out the possibility that Armstrong might be afforded an opportunity in the show to sing, as well as play in the pit in tandem with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra.

Still wary of the East, Armstrong spontaneously had opted to bring the entire ten-piece Carroll Dickerson band with him for company on the trip to New York, creaking across the country in a ratty three-car convoy of desperately broken-down jalopies before crawling into the city, broke and exhausted, in late May or early June. Pausing to work a hastily arranged substitute gig for the Duke Ellington band at the Audubon Theatre in the Bronx for a little quick cash, Armstrong then had continued on to Philadelphia, where he at last hooked up with a touring *Great Day* company that was in turmoil.

Apparently, a number of white orchestra players had been hired at the last minute to supplement the Henderson bandsmen in the *Great Day* pit—violinists, mostly. Now a white conductor—brought in to cover Henderson himself, who had never before handled a Broadway pit band—was capriciously firing the Henderson men in twos and threes, avowedly for reasons of artistic misdirection on the part of the production staff and inexperience on the part of the Henderson band, but most likely also because of racism on the part of the newly

hired players and conductor as well. Within the week, Armstrong, too, was gone—either at the hand of management, or on his own, in disgust; the final circumstances are unclear.

Back in New York, the unemployed trumpeter with his unemployed band heatedly was shopped around by an increasingly desperate Tommy Rockwell. Fortunately for all concerned, including the Immermans, a stand-in was needed for Leroy Smith's aggregation at Connie's Inn while the Green Dragon Orchestra worked the Hudson Theatre orchestra pit with *Hot Chocolates*. An arrangement was hastily hammered out. Armstrong would augment the Leroy Smith group on Broadway. His Carroll Dickerson mates would fill in uptown at the Inn. Following the curtain downtown, Armstrong would race uptown and add his trumpet weight to the Dickerson band for the Inn's late shows. In this fashion, prospects for *Hot Chocolates'* downtown success, as well as for Louis Armstrong's professional fortune in New York City, surged mightily during the show's final preparatory week.

Razaf himself, in later years, recalled an afternoon during *Hot Chocolates'* pre-Broadway trial when he was accosted at Connie's Inn by the show's menacing financial angel, Dutch Schultz. Razaf hardly knew Schultz personally, but he certainly knew of him, the "Dutchman's" reputation as a short-tempered, murderous mobster was legendary. Born Arthur Flegenheimer in the Bronx, Schultz was one of a generation of Jewish gangsters spawned in immigrant New York during the most recent wave of immigration. Parlaying a hard head for business with an even harsher appetite for brutality, Schultz had come a long way in a very short time within the New York underworld, earning hundreds of thousands of dollars by the age of 30 from his bootlegging operation, while expanding his influence into the Harlem "policy" rackets, along with a goodly amount of labor racketeering among city unions that represented waiters and window washers.

Schultz, this particular afternoon, complimented Razaf on his work with the show thus far, but added his pointed opinion that *Hot Chocolates* still lacked something, and Schultz knew what it was. A funny number, he informed Razaf, something with a little "colored girl" singing how tough it is being "colored." Razaf grinningly pointed out that he couldn't possibly write a song like that. Schultz responded in characteristic raging fashion by pinning Razaf to the

nearest wall with a gun. You'll write it, he more or less rasped, or you'll never write anything again.

This afternoon encounter with Schultz surely left Razaf shaken. It also left him determined to write Schultz's song *his* way. Razaf first explained the situation to his partner Waller, though it is not at all clear whether Razaf actually outlined for Waller the threat that he was laboring under and the full dimension of his intended lyric response to Schultz's "request." The full song did come very quickly, though, Schultz's instructions having been quite explicit. Waller's opinion of Razaf's lyric may be measured in the perfection of the music that he supplied to frame Razaf's rather audacious words—a hauntingly mournful blues-derived melody fleshed out to thirty-two bars in a manner similar to "Squeeze Me." The number was hurriedly staged "straight" by Leonard Harper as a solo for Edith Wilson. Everything would be as Schultz had specified.

Andy Razaf and Fats Waller's "Black and Blue"—full title "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?"—was slipped into a *Hot Chocolates* tryout just before the show's June 20 Broadway opening, spotted in the second act after "In a Telegraph Office," a Jimmie Baskette-Eddie Green comedy routine. As Razaf later remembered it, he actually had the misfortune to find himself at the back of the house with Dutch Schultz as the curtain rose for the first time on the Dutchman's number to reveal a stage awash in white—white walls, draperies, and carpet, and, at stage center, an enormous bed made up in white satin. Swathed in a white negligee, swaddled deep in white bedclothes, the jet-black Edith Wilson nestled on that bed and began to sing Andy Razaf's newly "commissioned" lyric, the first lines of which drew a "titter" from the audience, as Razaf later recalled: "Out in the street,/Shufflin' feet,/Couples passin' two by two./While here am I,/Left high and dry,/Black, and 'cause I'm black I'm blue."

Razaf had decided to evade the basic intent of Dutch Schultz's premise by presenting the song, at least outwardly, as a piece about intraracial prejudice between lighter- and darker-skinned blacks, a fact of African-American life that Razaf despised in any event and was no doubt glad to skewer in passing. Thus the ensuing lines: "Browns and yellors/All have fellers,/Gentlemen prefer them light./Wish I could fade./Can't make the grade,/Nothin' but dark days in sight," drew more laughter from the audience, according to Razaf, who also distinctly recollected a smiling Dutch Schultz looking over

to catch his eye at this point as Edith Wilson embarked on the song's chorus with the refrain: "Cold empty bed,/Springs hard as lead,/Pains in my head,/Feel like old Ned,/What did I do to be so black and blue?/No joys for me./No company,/Even the mouse/Ran from my house/All my life through, I've been so black and blue."

Even these lines, Razaf later recalled, induced loud laughter in the audience, with Dutch Schultz really looking very pleased as Edith Wilson, on stage, plaintively reached the song's bridge with a bold, blunt announcement of stunning frankness: "I'm white inside, it don't help my case./Cause I can't hide what is on my face."

With these words, Andy Razaf's "Black and Blue" lyric resolutely fractured the repressed traditions of black entertainment expression in this country forever. The audience certainly seems to have sensed it, suddenly, awkwardly, growing silent, as Razaf later recalled, while the Dutchman, Razaf also noted—forcing himself to glance over toward Schultz—the Dutchman no longer was smiling.

Wilson really "sold" the song's final chorus-and-a-half, according to Razaf's almost grateful later recollection, overpowering the mounting tension in the theater with a wailing, forthright delivery of the lyricist's most emphatically discomfiting lines: "I'm so forlorn,/Life's just a thorn,/My heart is torn,/Why was I born?/What did I do to be so black and blue?/Just 'cause you're black, folks think you lack,/They laugh at you and scorn you too,/What did I do to be so black and blue?" Wilson then pounded out the song's final chorus mercilessly:

*When you are near,
They laugh and sneer,
Set you aside
And you're denied,
What did I do to be so black and blue?*

*How sad I am, each day I feel worse,
My mark of Ham seems to be a curse.*

*How will it end?
Aint' got a friend.
My only sin is in my skin.
What did I do to be so black and blue?*

In old age, Andy Razaf always insisted that on the night "Black and Blue" first was sung by Edith Wilson in the presence of Dutch Schultz, the lyricist's fate rested with the audience alone. Their

reaction, Razaf maintained, ultimately constituted a life or death verdict, because Dutch Schultz never would have murdered him for writing a hit song—a function, Razaf was convinced, of Schultz's peculiar gangster code.

In the tomblike hush that momentarily greeted Edith Wilson's debut rendition of "Black and Blue," Razaf always later claimed he confronted his own demise, wondering if Schultz would actually finish him off that night, on the spot. It took a moment, Razaf later remarked, to absorb the fact that the audience suddenly was standing and applauding Edith Wilson, calling her back to reprise the strange number she'd just sung so forcefully. Schultz, however, was apparently quicker in acknowledging the ovation. Razaf recalled sensing the Dutchman behind him for an instant. There was a hard slap on the lyricist's back. And Dutch Schultz was gone.

Over the years, many have cited "Black and Blue" as America's first "racial protest song." Certainly Razaf's lyric stripped bare essences of racial discontent that had very rarely if ever been addressed by any African American musically until Razaf wrote them down in 1929.

There have always been those also who have dismissed "Black and Blue" for somehow being apologetic, even self-loathing in spirit. The charge is unfair for many reasons, but particularly in that it completely ignores the prevailing, dehumanizing racial environment in this nation in 1929, and especially within the mainstream New York entertainment community. Certainly Razaf's intention for "Black and Blue" could not have been clearer—despite those few who narrowly cite its opening verse to insist that the song is solely a plaint for dark-skinned blacks. Nor could Razaf's execution have been more deft, as he craftily littered the opening verse with humorous, minstrel-like images early in the first chorus—"feel like old Ned," "even the mouse ran from my house"—drawing his listeners in before landing his most telling lines. The courage, moreover, that it took to express those intentions on the stage of a Broadway-bound "colored" musical revue in 1929, particularly under the jaundiced eye of Dutch Schultz, simply cannot be overstated.

"Black and Blue" is a magnificent achievement of consummate lyric-writing craft, of cunning, of cleverness, of musical empathy on Thomas Waller's part, and of profound, adamant pride and conviction on the part of Andy Razaf. That the song also wound up

something of a hit in its own time owes a great deal to the riveting interpretation given "Black and Blue" by Louis Armstrong when he courageously recorded it on July 22 for OKeh's "White" label rather than its "Race" label series, as well as Edith Wilson's highly theatrical rendition, both onstage and on her own November 1929 recording for Brunswick. The combination of these four talents—Razaf, Waller, Armstrong, and Wilson—on one pioneering popular song to this day remains inspirational.

"At first I was afraid," wrote Ralph Ellison some twenty years after, in his novel *Invisible Man*, recalling nights spent listening to Louis Armstrong's recording of "Black and Blue." "This familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable . . . I sat on the chair's edge in a soaking sweat . . . It was exhausting—as though I had held my breath continuously for an hour under the terrifying serenity that comes from days of intense hunger . . . I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being—even though I could not answer 'yes' to their promptings.

"Please," concluded Ellison, "a definition: 'A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.'"

Connie's Hot Chocolates, "A New Tanskin Revel," opened at the Hudson Theatre on a warm Thursday evening, June 20, 1929. Broadway's critical establishment was only moderately impressed. While the *Herald Tribune* headlined *Hot Chocolates* the following morning as the "Best Negro Revue Since *Blackbirds*," other reviewers carped about the humor ("childish prattle"), the score ("Woefully lacking in tunes"), and even the volume levels ("the music is just noise arranged for voice and instrument and played and sung noisily"). "If the rest of *Hot Chocolates* lived up to its dancing," opined the *Evening Telegram*, "it would be the show of shows. [But] some of it is plain ordinary torso-tossing from the downtown burlesque shows." "The show can boast of the liveliest ensemble to be seen on Broadway," added Stephen Rathbun of the *Sun*, concluding however with perhaps the key to *Hot Chocolates* appeal, that it "was presented with the ease, informality, and lack of artificiality of a first-class night club entertainment."

"Ain't Misbehavin'" was singled out by a majority of critics as *Hot Chocolates*' one potential hit tune, but only an unbylined *New York Times* writer seemed to have caught the song in its entr'acte incarnation. "A synthetic but entirely pleasant jazz ballad called 'Ain't Misbehavin'" stands out," he wrote, "and its rendition be-

LAND RENT FREE
Until 14th March, 1896.
TWENTY YEARS
LEASES,
Twice Renewable
AT TENANT'S OPTION.

(And with right of contract with the Malagasy Government at expiry of last renewal.)

Rents,

1st and 2nd Years, namely 15th March 1894 to 14th March 1896, Rent Free.
3rd Year, 25 Cents per Acre
4th " " 37½ " " "
5th " " 50 " " "
6th " " 84 " " "
7th " " 84 " " "
8th " " One Dollar " " "
9th " " " " "
10th " " \$1.25 " " "
11th Year, to expiry of term of Twenty Years, and also of renewals—if availed of, One Dollar 50 Cents per Acre, Per Annum.

The Honble. John L. Waller, ex-United States Consul in Madagascar, having been granted by the Malagasy Government a large area of land situated in the District of Fort Dauphin, South-East Madagascar, has authorized us to lease it in blocks of large or small acreage on the above terms to persons possessed of sufficient capital to enter upon its agricultural development.

The Land is advantageously situated near the Port of Fort Dauphin, at which the English Mail Steamers (Castle Mail Packets Company, Limited), between Mauritius and South Africa, are willing to call should sufficient inducement offer, and this is particularly desirable—being practically in touch with the Mauritius, South African, and Natal markets, Mauritius and Natal being distant but some five days steam from Fort Dauphin.

Small Farmers will reap especial advantage from this direct steam communication; Mauritius being a ready market for Poultry, Sheep, Figs, Cattle, Eggs, and also the vegetable and fruit products which are the main-stay of small holdings.

Tamatave, also, will be a certain market for such products. And a trade in same could probably be opened up with Natal, if not with Cape Town and other South African Ports.

To Immediate Applicants for Farms, limited Timber rights for farm purposes will be granted.

Immediate Applicants for Farms, no matter how small the holding desired, will have the right to selection in priority of application in their class of holding, should their application be entertained.

Timber And Rubber of great com-

John Waller pursued potential tenants for his "Wallerland" development largely through newspaper advertisements, both in Madagascar and in the United States. This ad (running the length of the lefthand column) appeared in Madagascar's English language newspaper, the *Madagascar News*. Courtesy Razaf Estate.



John Louis Waller in the uniform of his Kansas Voluntary Infantry company prior to its tour of duty in Cuba, c. 1898. Courtesy Razaf Estate.



The full cast of *Tan Manhattan*. Eubie Blake is kneeling, seventh from right. Unfortunately, Andy Razaf is absent from this picture. *Courtesy Razaf Estate.*

tween the acts by an unnamed member of the orchestra was a highlight of the premiere." Only one critic as well, writing for *Variety*, took note in his review of the song "Black and Blue." "Miss Wilson scored with 'Black and Blue,'" this critic noted simply, then added perhaps the critical understatement of the season: "... quite a lyric."



Andy Razaf and Alicia Wilson Razaf on their wedding day, February 14, 1963, with Razaf's uncle, John Waller, Jr. *Courtesy Razaf Estate.*