Riffs & Choruses

A New Jazz Anthology

Edited by Andrew Clark
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110 Lawrence Ferlinghetti Sometime during eternity (1958)


Sometime during eternity some guys show up and one of them who shows up real late is a kind of carpenter from some square-type place like Galilee and he starts wailing and claiming he is hip to who made heaven and earth and that the cat who really laid it on us is his Dad

And moreover he adds It’s all writ down on some scroll-type parchments which some henchmen leave lying around the Dead Sea somewheres a long time ago and which you won’t even find for a coupla thousand years or so, or at least for nineteen hundred and fortyseven to be exact and even then nobody really believes them or me for that matter

You’re hot they tell him And they cool him They stretch him on the Tree to cool And everybody after that is always making models of this Tree with Him hung up and always crooning His name and calling Him to come down

111 Cab Calloway The New Cab Calloway’s Hepster’s Dictionary: Language of Jive (1944)


A

A HUMMER (n.): exceptionally good. Ex., ‘Man, that boy is a hummer.’

AIN’T COMING ON THAT TAB (v.): won’t accept the proposition. Usually abbr. to ‘I ain’t coming.’

ALLIGATOR (n.): jitterbug.

APPLE (n.): the big town, the main stem, Harlem.

ARMSTROMGS (n.): musical notes in the upper register, high trumpet notes.

B

BARBECUE (n.): the girl friend, a beauty.

BARRELHOUSE (adj.): free and easy.

BATTLE (n.): a very homely girl, a crone.

BEAT (adj.): (1) tired, exhausted. Ex., ‘You look beat’ or ‘I feel beat.’ (2) lacking anything. Ex., ‘I am beat for my cash’; ‘I am beat to my socks’ (lacking everything).

BEAT IT OUT (v.): play it hot, emphasize the rhythm.

BEAT UP (adj.): sad, uncomplimentary, tired.

BEAT UP THE CHOPS (or the guns) (v.): to talk, converse, be loquacious.

BEEF (v.): to say, to state. Ex., ‘He beefed to me that, etc.’

BIBLE (n.): the gospel truth. Ex., ‘It’s the bible’

BLACK (n.): night.

BLACK AND TAN (n.): dark and light colored folks. Not colored and white folks as erroneously assumed.

BLEW THEIR WIGS (adj.): excited with enthusiasm, gone crazy.

BLIP (n.): something very good. Ex., ‘That’s a blip’; ‘She’s a blip.’
BLOW THE TOP (v.): to be overcome with emotion (delight). Ex., ‘You’ll blow your top when you hear this one.’

BOOGIE-WOOGIE (n.): harmony with accented bass.

BOUT (v.): to give. Ex., ‘Boot me that glove.’

BREAK IT UP (v.): to win applause, to stop the show.

BREE (n.): girl.

BRIGHT (n.): day.

BRIGHTNIN’ (n.): daybreak.

BRING DOWN: (1) (n.): something depressing. Ex., ‘That’s a bring down.’ (2) (v.): Ex., ‘That brings me down.’

BUDDY GHEE (n.): fellow.

BUST YOUR CONK (v.): apply yourself diligently, break your neck.

C

CANCARY (n.): girl vocalist.

CAPPED (v.): outdone, surpassed.

CAT (n.): musician in swing band.

CHICK (n.): girl.

CHIME (n.): hour. Ex., ‘I got in at six chimes.’

CLAMBAKE (n.): ad lib session, every man for himself, a jam session not in the groove.

CHIRP (n.): female singer.

COGS (n.): sun glasses.

COLLAR (v.): to get, to obtain, to comprehend. Ex., ‘I gotta collar me some food’; ‘Do you collar this jive?’

COME AGAIN (v.): try it over, do better than you are doing. I don’t understand you.

COMP’ON LIKE GANGBUSTERS (or like test pilot) (v.): plays, sings, or dances in a terrific manner, par excellence in any department. Sometimes abbr. to ‘That singer really comes on!’

COP (v.): to get, to obtain (see collar; knock)

CORNY (adj.): old-fashioned, stale.

CREEPS OUT LIKE THE SHADOW (v.): ‘comes on,’ but in smooth, suave, sophisticated manner.

CRUMB CRUSHERS (n.): teeth.

CUBBY (n.): room, flat, home.

CUPS (n.): sleep. Ex., ‘I gotta catch some cups.’

CUT OUT (v.): to leave, to depart. Ex., ‘It’s time to cut out;’ ‘I cut out from the joint in the early bright.’

CUT RATE (n.): a low, cheap person. Ex., ‘Don’t play me cut rate, Jack!’

D

DICITY (adj.): high-class, snitty, smart.

DIG (v.): (1) meet. Ex., ‘I’ll plant you now and dig you later.’ (2) look, see. Ex., ‘Dig the chick on your left duke.’ (3) comprehend, understand. Ex., ‘Do you dig this jive?’

DIM (n.): evening.

DIME NOTE (n.): ten-dollar bill.

DOGHOUSE (n.): bass fiddle.

DOMI (n.): ordinary place to live in. Ex., ‘I live in a righteous domi.’

DOSS (n.): sleep. Ex., ‘I’m a little beat for my dosy.’

DOWN WITH IT (adj.): through with it.

DRAPE (n.): suit of clothes, dress costume.

DREAMERS (n.): bed covers, blankets.

DRY-GOODS (n.): same as drape.

DUKE (n.): hand, mitt.

DUTCHESS (n.): girl.

E

EARLY BLACK (n.): evening.

EARLY BRIGHT (n.): morning.

EVIL (adj.): in ill humor. In a nasty temper.

F

FALL OUT (v.): to be overcome with emotion. Ex., ‘The cats fell out when he took that solo.

FEWS AND TWO (n.): money or cash in small quantity.

FINAL (v.): to leave, to go home. Ex., ‘I finaled to my pad’ (went to bed); ‘We copped a final’ (went home).

FINE DINNER (n.): a good-looking girl.

FOCUS (v.): to look, to see.

FOXY (v.): shrewd.

FRAME (n.): the body.

FRAGTHT ISSUE (n.): a very sad message, a deplorable state of affairs.

FREEBY (n.): no charge, gratis. Ex., ‘The meal was a freeby.’

FRISKING THE WHISKERS (v.): what the cats do when they are warming up for a swing session.

FROLIC PAD (n.): place of entertainment, theater, nightclub.

FROMPY (adj.): a fompy queen is a battle or faust.

FRONT (n.): a suit of clothes.

FRUITING (v.): fickle, fooling around with no particular object.

FRY (v.): to go to get hair straightened.

G

GABRIELS (n.): trumpet players.

GAMMIN’ (adj.): showing off, flirtatious.

GASSEY (n., adj.): sensational. Ex., ‘When it comes to dancing, she’s a gasser.’

GATE (n.): a male person (a salutation), abbr. for ‘gate-mouth.’

GET IN THERE (an exclamation): go to work, get busy, make it hot, give all you’ve got.

GIMME SOME SKIN (v.): shake hands.

GLIMS (n.): the eyes.

GOT YOUR BOOTS ON: you know what it is all about, you are a heck cat, you are wise.

GOT YOUR GLASSES ON: you are ritzy or snooty, you fail to recognize your friends, you are up-stage.

GRAVY (n.): profits.

GREASE (v.): to eat.

GROOY (adj.): fine. Ex., ‘I feel groo,’

GROUND GRIPPERS (n.): new shoes.

GROWL (n.): vibrant notes from a trumpet.

GUT BUCKET (adj.): low-down music.

GUZZLIN’ FOAM (v.): drinking beer.

H

HARD (adj.): fine, good. Ex., ‘That’s a hard tie you’re wearing.’

HARD SPIEL (n.): interesting line of talk.

HAVE A BALL (v.): to enjoy yourself, stage a celebration. Ex., ‘I had myself a ball last night.’

HEP CAT (n.): a guy who knows all the answers, understands jive.

HIDE-BEATER (n.): a drummer (see skin-beater).

HINCTY (adj.): conceited, snooty.

HIP (adj.): wise, sophisticated, anyone with boots on. Ex., ‘She’s a hip chick.’

HOME-COOKING (n.): something very nice (see fine dinner).

HOT (adj.): musically torrid; before swing, tunes were hot or bands were hot.

HYPE (n., v.): build up for a loan, wooting a girl, persuasive talk.

I

ICKY (n.): one who is not hip, a stupid person, can’t collar the jive.

IGG (v.): to ignore someone. Ex., ‘Don’t igg me!’

IN THE GROOVE (adj.): perfect, no deviation, down the alley.

J

JACK (n.): name for all male friends (see gate, pops).

JAM: (1) (n.): improvised swing music. Ex., ‘That’s swell jam.’ (2) (v.): to play such music. Ex., ‘That cat surely can jam.’

JEFF (n.): a pest, a bore, an icky.

JELLY (n.): anything free, on the house.

JITTERBUG (n.): a swing fan.

JIVE (n.): Harlemese speech.

JOINT IS JUMPING: the place is lively, the club is leaping with fun.

JUMPED IN PORT (v.): arrived in town.

K

KICK (n.): a pocket. Ex., ‘I’ve got five buck in my kick.’

KILL ME (v.): show me a good time, send me.

KILLER-DILLER (n.): a great thrill.

KNOCK (v.): give. Ex., ‘Knock me a kiss.’

KOPASETIC (adj.): absolutely okay, the tops.

L

LAMP (v.): to see, to look at.

LAND O’DARKNESS (n.): Harlem.
LANE (n.): a male, usually a nonprofessional.
LATCH ON (v.): grab, take hold, get wise to.
LAW SOME IRON (v.): to tap dance. Ex., Jack, you really laid some iron that last show?
LAW YOUR RACKET (v.): to jive, to sell an idea, to promote a proposition.
LEAD SHEET (n.): a toptopcoat.
LEFT RAISE (n.): left side. Ex., 'Dig the chick on your left.'
LICKING THE CHOPS (v.): see frisking the whiskers.
LICKS (n.): hot musical phrases.
LILY WHITES (n.): bed sheets.
LINES (n.): cost, price, money. Ex., 'What is the line on this drape (how much does this suit cost)?' 'Have you got the line in the mouse' (do you have the cash in your pocket?) (Also, in replying, all figures are doubled. Ex., 'This drape is line forty' (this suit costs twenty dollars.).
LOCK UP (v.): to acquire something exclusively. Ex., 'He's got that chick locked up,' 'I'm gonna lock up that deal.'

M
MAIN KICK (n.): the stage.
MAIN ON THE HITCH (n.): husband.
MAIN QUEEN (n.): favorite girl friend, sweetheart.
MAN IN GRAY (n.): the postman.
MASH ME A FIN (command): Give me $5.
MELLOW (adj.): all right, fine. Ex., 'That's mellow, Jack.'
MELTED OUT (adj.): broke.
MESS (n.): something good. Ex., 'That last drink was a mess.'
METER (n.): quarter, twenty-five cents.
MEZZ (n.): anything supreme, genuine. Ex., 'This is really the mezz.'
MITT POUNDING (n.): applause.
MOO JUICE (n.): milk.
MOUSE (n.): pocket. Ex., 'I've got a meter in the mouse.'
MUGGIN' (v.): making 'em laugh, putting on the jive. 'Muggin' lightly,' light staccato swing; 'muggin' heavy,' heavy staccato swing.
MURDER (n.): something excellent or terrific. Ex., 'That's solid murder, gate!'
N
NEIGHBO. POPS: Nothing doing, pal.
NICKEL NOTE (n.): five-dollar bill.
NICKLETTE (n.): automatic phonograph, music box.
NIX OUT (v.): to eliminate, get rid of. Ex., 'I nixed that chick out last week'; 'I nixed my garments' (undressed).
NOD (n.): sleep. Ex., 'I think I'll cop a nod.'
O
OFAY (n.): white person.
OFF THE COB (adj.): corny, out of date.
OFF-TIME JIVE (n.): a sorry excuse, saying the wrong thing.
ORCHESTRATION (n.): an overcoat.
OUT OF THE WORLD (adj.): perfect rendition. Ex., 'That sax chorus was out of the world.'
OW!' an exclamation with varied meaning. When a beautiful chick passes by, it's 'Ow!' and when someone pulls an awful pun, it also is 'Ow!'

P
PAD (v.): bed.
PECKING (n.): a dance introduced at the Cotton Club in 1937.
PEOLA (n.): a light person, almost white.
PIGEON (n.): a young girl.
POPS (n.): salutation for all males (see gate; Jack).
POUNDERS (n.): policemen.
Q
QUEEN (n.): a beautiful girl.
R
RANK (v.): to lower.
READY (adj.): 100 per cent in every way. Ex., 'That fried chicken was ready.'
RIDE (v.): to swing, to keep perfect tempo in playing or singing.
RIFF (n.): hot lick, musical phrase.
RIGHTeous (adj.): splendid, okay. Ex., 'That was a righteous queen I dug you with last black.'
ROCK ME (v.): send me, kill me, move me with rhythm.
RUFF (n.): quarter, twenty-five cents.
RUG CRUFFER (n.): a very good dancer, an active jitterbug.
S
SAD (adj.): very bad. Ex., 'That was the saddest meal I ever collared.'
SADDER THAN A MAP (adj.): terrible. Ex., 'That man is sadder than a map.'
SALTY (adj.): angry, ill-tempered.
SAM GOT YOU: you've been drafted into the army.
SEND (v.): to arouse the emotions (joyful). Ex., 'That sends me!'
SET OF SEVEN BRIGHTS (n.): one week.
SHARP (adj.): neat, smart, tricky. Ex., 'That hat is sharp as a tack.'
SIGNIFY (v.): to declare yourself, to brag, to boast.
SKIN-BEATER (n.): drummer (see hide-beater).
SKINS (n.): drums.
SKY PIECE (n.): hat.
SLAVE (v.): to work, whether arduous labor or not.
SLIDE YOUR JIB (v.): to talk freely.
SNATCHER (n.): detective.
SO HELP ME: it's the truth, that's a fact.
SOLID (adj.): great, swell, okay.
SOUNDED OFF (v.): began a program or conversation.
SPOUTIN' (v.): talking too much.
SQUARE (n.): an unhep person (see icky; Jeff).
STACHE (v.): to file, to hide away, to secrete.
STAND ONE UP (v.): to play one cheap, to assume one is a cut-rate.
TO BE STASHED (v.): to stand or remain.
SUSIE-Q (n.): a dance introduced at the Cotton Club in 1936.
T
TAKE IT SLOW (v.): be careful.
TAKE OFF (v.): play a solo.
THE MAN (n.): the law.
THREADS (n.): suit, dress or costume (see drape; dry-goods).
TICK (n.): minute, moment. Ex., 'I'll dig you in a few ticks.' Also, ticks are doubled in accounting time, just as money is doubled in giving 'line.' Ex., 'I finaled to the pad this early bright at tick twenty' (I got to bed this morning at ten o'clock).
TIMBER (n.): toothpick.
TO DRIBBLE (v.): to stutter. Ex., 'He talked in dribbles.'
TOGGED TO THE BRICKS: dressed to kill, from head to toe.
TOO MUCH (adj.): term of highest praise. Ex., 'You are too much!'
TRICKERATION (n.): struttin' your stuff, muggin' light and politely.
TRILLY (v.): to leave, to depart. Ex., 'Well, I guess I'll trilly.'
TRUCK (v.): to go somewhere. Ex., 'I think I'll truck on down to the ginmill (ban).'
TRUCKING (n.): a dance introduced at the Cotton Club in 1933.
TWISTER TO THE SLAMMER (n.): the key to the door.
TWO CENTS (n.): two dollars.
U
UNHEP (adj.): not wise to the jive, saiv of an icky, a Jeff, a square.
V
VINE (n.): a suit of clothes.
V-8 (n.): a chick who spurns company, is independent, is not amenable.
W
WHAT'S YOUR STORY? What do you want? What have you got to say for yourself? How are tricks? What excuse can you offer? Ex., 'I don't know what his story is.'
WHIPPED UP (adj.): worn out, exhausted, beat for your everything.
WREN (n.): a chick, a queen.
WRONG RIFF: the wrong thing said or...
JAZZ AND LANGUAGE

don't. Ex. 'You're coming up on the wrong riff.'

Y

YARDDOG (n.): uncouth, badly attired, unattractive male or female.

YEAH, MAN: an exclamation of assent.

Z

ZOOT (adj.): overexaggerated as applied to clothes.

ZOOT SUIT (n.): overexaggerated clothes.

112 Dan Burley Advanced reading in jive – Sam D. Home’s soliloquy (1944)


A Square ain't nothing but a Lane, and a Lane ain't nothing but a Rum, and a Rum ain't nothing but a Perfect Lamb; and a Perfect Lamb comes on like the Goodwill Hour – and tips away, Jackson, like the Widder Brown. If I was bootied, truly bootied, I'd lay a solid beg on my righteous scribe, and knock a scoff on the zoom on Turkey Day. In fact, I'd cop a trot to her frantic dommy, lay a mellow ring on the heavy buzz, give her Poppa Stoppa the groovy bend; and then lay my trill into the scoff-pad, hitch one of those most anxious lillywhites around my stretcher; cop a mellow squall and start forking. But my thinkpad is a drag, when it comes to a triple-quick-click; and that's why I'm out here eating fishheads and scrambling for the gills, instead of being a round-tripper, good for a double-deuce of bags every play.

Every time I shoot for the side-pocket, I scratch, I hunch the pinball layout, Jack, and it's an unhitched tilt. I'm a true Rum: A Perfect Lamb that ain't been clipped. Instead of my groundpads being spread under my bantam's heavy oak, scarfing down some solid scarf, I'm out here with Mister Hawkins, wringing and twisting, ducking and dodging, and skulking close to the buildings: jumping to knock a stool in the greasy spoon and slice my chops on a bowl of beef and shiny beans with the deuce of demons I knocked on that last beg on the stem. Lawd! Who shall it be? Peace, Father, it's truly wonderful, or Uncle Sam Here I Come?

Picking up from the sentence following the one about the Goodwill Hour, Sam D. Home, in his soliloquy, really said:

'If I understood things and was really smart, I'd have asked my girl friend to invite me to dinner on Thanksgiving Day. In fact, right now, I’d run to her comfortable home, ring the bell, bow to her father, and walk into the dining room, where I’d put a napkin around my neck, take a seat and start eating. But my thinking is faulty when it comes to quick thinking. That’s why I’m out on the street trying to promote a free dinner, instead of hitting home runs like good ballplayers do. Every time I put forth an effort, I fail to achieve my purpose. Everything I do turns out wrong. I’m really a simple fellow playing in hard luck. Instead of having my feet under my girl friend’s dinner table eating a good dinner, I’m out here in the wintry gale, trying to make my way without freezing to death at the lunch wagon for a bowl of chili for 20 cents I just borrowed from somebody on the Avenue. What shall it be, Father Divine’s Restaurant and Heavenly Kingdom, or do I join the United States Army?’

So contagious is the inclination to talk in this jive lingo that already certain aspects of it have and are emerging in the commercial world, in the movies, the daily comic sheets, over the radio and on popular recordings. Orson Welles, the playwright-actor, told the author one of his plays will have a jive theme. The movie hit, ‘Second Chorus’ with Fred Astaire and Artie Shaw, featured an overdose of jive talk and jive dancing, freshly imported from Harlem. Popular comic strip characters in ‘Terry and the Pirates’ were found talking in a really ‘hipped’ manner to escape from a dire predicament.

Some high-brow psychiatrist might say that jive is the language of the ‘infantile-extrovert,’ but be that as it may, one can wander up Harlem way, night or day, pause for a bus or a cab, and one’s ears are suddenly assailed by a bombardment of ‘Whatcha know, ole man?’ ‘I’m like the bear, just ain’t nowhere, but here to dig for Miss St. Clair’ … ‘An’ she laid the twister to her slammer on me, ole man, understand, and I dug the jive straight up an’ down, three ways, sides and flats’ … Or: ‘Gimme some skin, ole man. That’s righteous. Jackson, truly reecheous. in fact, it’s roaheous. I’m gonna put that right in my pocket so it won’t get wet’ … ‘I’m playing the dozens with my uncle’s cousins; eatin’ onions an’ wiping my eyes’ … ‘The heavy sugar I’m laying down, ole man, understand, is harder than Norwegian lardy. Lay a little of that fine skin on me, studhoss.’

Such jargon is reminiscent of Tibet, Afghanistan, as unintelligible to the uninitiate as listening to a foreign dictator's harangue over a shortwave broadcast. One is confused and bewildered over this seemingly incomprehensible idiom. You forget about taking a cab or bus, and, lured by a sense of the occult and exotic, edge in closer to hear more, completely enchanted by the scene which greets your eyes – fellows in wide-brimmed fuzzy hats, pistol-cuffed trousers with balloon-like knees and frock-like coats the length of a clergyman's; you listen in breathless fascination as they exchange verbal bombshells, rhymed and lyrical, and although you do not know it, you are listening to the new poetry of the proletariat.

You glance about you in dismay. What has happened to the Harlem you thought you knew so well, or about which you read so much? Where are the poets, the high-brow intellectuals, the doctor-writers, and musicians, who spoke Harlem’s language in the days of the Black Renaissance – that period ushered in by Carl Van Vechten and his ‘Nigger Heaven’? Harlem, apparently, has side-tracked her intellectuals. So, although you are unaware of it as yet,