

# HOW JAZZ HAPPENED

James Dugan greets a new work on hot discography. Musical history not in the groove. Remembering the forgotten Scott Joplin and his Negro opera.

IF ALL the books on jazz this one is the best. The same authors a couple of years ago brought out *Jazzmen*, which was the first valid record of American jazz music with an emphasis on the great players and styles. Now comes *The Jazz Record Book*\* which is built around a listing of more than 1,000 standard records with critical notes on each performance. Unlike Charles Delauney's remarkable *Hot Discography*, the new book is concerned with records that are easily obtainable, not obscure collectors' items. The valuable reissues of the Hot Record Society, the United Hot Clubs of America, as well as Victor and Columbia, have made it possible for the collector to buy nice clean copies of the most outstanding records in jazz history, something impossible when Robert Goffin, Delauney, and Hugues Panassie wrote the first books on American jazz.

I have a standard beef against writing on jazz because it has lacked mature critical standards and above all a social understanding of the music of the American Negro. I think the key to a study of jazz is that it cannot be understood except as part of the struggle for self-determination of the American Negro. You can appreciate jazz without knowing anything about it as certain of the European writers have proved; but you can't answer—why jazz? The writers of the new book show a sturdy appreciation of this fact when they open up intriguing references to Scott Joplin, a highly gifted and sensitive ragtime composer of fifty years ago, who wrote a complete Negro opera in folktune form, but whose contribution has been sadly neglected. Joplin was a mature musician and very much of a modern Negro artist in his reliance on the real Negro for his material. The writers also deemphasize the absurd exaggeration of improvisation. Jazz is one of the boldest improvisatory forms in the history of music, but it is not entirely Pee Wee Russell playing something new at the inspiration of the moment. It has a definite mode, and its finest performances have a marked structure. Many times this formal aspect is fixed in the heads of the musicians, remembered and learned in many playings, instead of being taken from a score, and although every distinguished jazz record has plenty of extemporized content, particularly in solos and obbligatos, improvisation is too slender a characteristic to explain it.

The first 100 pages of historical introduc-

tion are therefore an important departure in jazz writing. The generous inclusion of Leadbelly, for instance, who as far as I know has never been recognized as a part of jazz, shows the deepening appreciation for the Negro folk qualities of jazz. Some day the authors must do another book with a thesis—that jazz is what it is because it has been the main creative aspiration of the American Negro. It is exciting to add that the musical language of the Negro has become a national music, no longer one of a racial minority. There are all kinds of degenerative influences in the picture of contemporary jazz; Tin Pan Alley and jukebox commercialism and utter neglect of many artists who still speak the golden tongue of early Negro jazz.

But the book is handsome evidence that the music is imperishable. No other kind of music had the staggering good fortune to go spinning down the years in its exact listenable form. The Elizabethan madrigal was another hot extemporized music, which one musicologist refers to with a straight face as "having a pronounced swing." But it lasted only thirty years and vanished quicker than the lads in Mermaid tavern. Today a staid suburban musical society will put on an evening of stiff madrigals; but we cannot hear the riffs from the haut-boys or the lutist in the groove. Ah, but in a hundred years Louis will still be playing *Mahogany Hall Stomp* and Jelly Roll will sit down to the piano and play and tell us about *Mamie's Blues*.

I was in a joint one night last week with an RAF combat pilot. When he heard the Golden Gates sing, we saw Europe start in wonder at America's music. Harry Lim, the hot jazz critic of Batavia, Netherlands East Indies, nodded smugly and tapped his foot. When it was over, the flier jotted down the information on where he could get Golden Gate records. "You know," he said, "I am to drive an empty bomber over to Britain and I might as well load up the back with records."

So load up on this *Jazz Record Book*.

JAMES DUGAN.

## Superb Screen Satire

Nunnally Johnson's film of the fantastic twenties.

WE NEVER expected to feel nostalgic about the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, the bathtub gin and the flapper. And yet . . . do you remember when newspaper scare headlines just meant that some redhead had Socked Spouse With Sashweight?

Skirts and the stock market and crime were going up; so were Lindbergh and a lot of other things that have had to come down since. In *Roxie Hart* Nunnally Johnson gives us the fantastic twenties at their funniest. We look at them with a sort of meditative wonder, as at the reconstructed skeleton of a dinosaur.

The peculiar originality of *Roxie Hart* lies in just this point of view. There have been other satirical farces, though few as lively and as subtle. Almost always in the films, however, the composite personality of author-director-cameraman identifies itself romantically with the screen characters; sympathizes with the heroine, shudders at the villain, rises to burning indignation or sinks in sorrow with its manipulations of the plot. The composite creator of *Roxie Hart* (about nine-tenths Nunnally Johnson) remains a detached and humorous observer, recording the absurdities of the twenties much as Dickens recorded his Victorian grotesques. The result is of course not profound and moving as Mr. Johnson's magnificent *The Grapes of Wrath* script was; it does not try to be. *Roxie Hart* tries to be—*Roxie Hart* succeeds in being—a biting comedy of manners in a style quite new to the movies. You do not love or hate its people, you do not judge them morally; you just laugh. How you laugh!

There is social criticism in the film's study of a publicity-mad, cynically criminal Chicago. As satire, however, *Roxie Hart* must observe the symptoms rather than analyze the disease. So we meet Roxie, a gum-chewing, raucous, mercenary, and sexy little lady, as she confesses to a murder she hasn't committed in order to get her picture into the papers and her legs into musical comedy. We see a newspaperman fake the confession for the sake of a story; a lawyer collaborate for the sake of publicity—and his fee. We are treated to courtroom scenes so fiercely honest in their debunking of our courts that they would be horrible if they weren't so irresistibly funny. The tear-jerking defense attorney, the swooning, tearful defendant with her crossed legs, the flashlight pictures every five minutes, the nation-wide radio hook-up—all these did not vanish with the twenties. We recognize the dignified judge, every inch a southern gentleman, who springs from his chair to get in on every flashlight picture; while the handsome D. A. with his neat little D. A.'s mustache does some very pretty broken-field running for the same purpose. We have seen their faces.

The film's direction never misses an opportunity to heighten these satiric effects. The

\* THE JAZZ RECORD BOOK, by Charles Edward Smith with Frederic Ramsey Jr., William Russell, and Charles Payne Rogers. Smith & Durrell. \$3.50.



introductory screen credits with their comic backgrounds, the touching little dedication, the wistful opening scenes in a 1942 barroom as a reporter recalls the days of Roxie Hart, combine to strike the fantastic note of the period instantly. Similarly there is a touch of screwy unreality in the photography and in the material itself. The jailbirds and reporters break into the Black Bottom; Roxie and another murderess tangle in a cat fight and make real alley-cat noises. The dialogue, though sharp and crisp, is stylized subtly, just far enough away from realistic speech to add to the atmosphere without sounding unnatural. Brilliant use has been made of understatement and suggestion, too; the actors begin gestures which the spectator's mind completes; you are never told anything which you can guess. The film respects the intelligence of its audience, and is thus enabled never to waste a moment. Perhaps the cutting room, an essential part of film-making too often overlooked in reviews, deserves special credit for the smoothness and suspense of *Roxie Hart*.

It would be unfair not to add that this is as much Ginger Rogers' film as Nunnally Johnson's. Miss Rogers studies Roxie as objectively as the film demands, plays her without a single false appeal to sympathy or tricky use of charm. The blend of phony and genuine, of innocence and vulgarity which makes Roxie's personality is superbly analyzed. Such supporting players as Sara Allgood, Lynne Overman, Adolphe Menjou, and William Frawley are equally in tune; so is the delightful score. Indeed, there aren't any false notes in *Roxie Hart*; it is that rare thing among movies, a completely thought-out and worked-out production.

IT WAS an inspiration to combine the French *Crime and Punishment* with the German *Brothers Karamazov* in one program, as the Fifth Avenue Playhouse has done. These two Dostoevsky films are pre-Hitler and magnifi-

cent, the French, however, being noticeably the better of the two. It has a unity and logic which the German film lacks, both in the development of its plot and in technique—it is far more smoothly directed and cut than *The Brothers Karamazov*. Nor has it sacrificed the agonizing and morbid intensities of Raskolnikov's struggle with himself and his crime; all the insight which Josef von Sternberg's Hollywood version of *Crime and Punishment* so conspicuously lacked is here, in the acting of Pierre Blanchard as Raskolnikov and, even more, of Harry Baur as the Inspector.

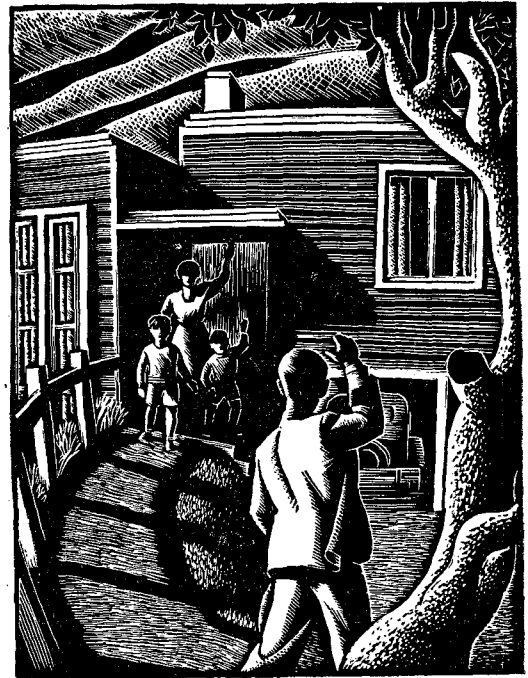
Perhaps the German film suffers in unity, by comparison, partly because *The Brothers Karamazov*, as a novel, is more diffuse and enormous in plot than the other Dostoevsky work; there is more of it than one can possibly get into a film. Even so, the movie is heavy-handed at times, badly put together, and far from clear. Yet the essential meanings of the characters are there, especially in Fritz Kortner's portrayal of Dmitri, though this is a little more romantic and sympathetic than the novel intends. What most distinguishes these two films, indeed, is the pervading personality of Dostoevsky, which comes through differences of language, of acting style, of camera style, to make both films profound and dramatic comments on human character.

JOY DAVIDMAN.

## Two of Those Things

"Guest in the House" and "Plan M."... Incredible proceedings.

WHEN the action of a play depends completely upon the facts that, (1) the leading character has heart disease, and (2) that same character is afflicted by a mortal terror of birds, it is possible to venture certain judgments and predictions. In the case of *Guest in the House*, which was written by Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson, the judgment



Woodcut from Giacomo Patri's "White Collar"

is that the play is completely contrived; the predictions of the outcome are realized before the end of the first scene of the first act.

The authors have here attempted to work out an impossible situation. Artist Douglas Proctor and his wife take into their home their heart-afflicted young relative, Evelyn Heath. When this young lady comes on stage, the audience knows exactly what is going to happen, though apparently the Proctors do not. She is going to enslave the household completely, the child daughter, the servants, the neighborhood. She is going to cause a scandal, nearly wreck the marriage and reputation of the artist, and the life of the artist's younger brother. But she is not going to get away with it, because there is wise old Aunt Martha Proctor, who was on to her from the start, even though the Proctors were not. And somewhere or other, the bird which Evelyn Heath mortally fears is going to appear again. It does, and Evelyn conveniently dies of a heart attack!

The attempt is made to examine the nature of a destructive, pathological personality, and its effects on normal human beings. It would have been an honorable attempt if the destructive, pathological personality had some relation to the world of human beings, and we knew—even in part—how she got that way. We don't. It might be that she inherited a tendency to heart disease, but how in the name of Freud or historical necessity did she come to be afraid of birds? No one tells us.

*Guest in the House*, as other critics have already pointed out, has borrowed certain ideas from at least two plays by Lillian Hellman—*The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes*. There all resemblance ends, and the authors bear sole responsibility for the mish-mash that ensues. (And it is laughable in the most outlandish places.)

As the harassed artist and his wife, Leon Ames and Louise Campbell do their best to make the proceedings credible. Little Joan



A water color painting by the Russian artist B. M. Konachevnya