

.second arrangement

Denzel Singer only ever really loved two things, jazz and Attie. And for a time, it was more like they were one and the same. He was a talented saxophone player and a rising star before he met her, but the music he made after her, and for her, and about her, and because of her, made of him a virtuoso and a visionary. Under her spell his records defined genres, eras, earning him the status of legend. And then it was all over. She was the muse, and when she was gone, so was the music.

Attie was the one. He was sure from the moment he first laid eyes on her. And she fell in love with him almost as quickly. Like him, she had a jewish father and an african american mother. Like him, she felt like she belonged to neither side of her mixed heritage. They had the same taste in music and films and books and the same sense of humor and of sex. She was gorgeous, with otherworldly eyes the

color of honey, and just as sweet. Everything about her was mellifluous.

Other lovers were kicked to the curb the night they met, and from then on they spent as much time together as was possible, were as in love with each other as anyone in the history of being in love has ever been, hardly ever leaving the bed. They got married three weeks later. Back then he called her Zoe, that was her name. But after a few months of spending almost every waking moment together, he started to call her Honey, and then Hun, and then as a joke once and a few times afterward Atila the Hun, and then eventually Atila, and then Tila, and then finally Attie.

The salad days lasted seven years. Seven wonderful years of Attie and jazz. He was at the height of his creative abilities, record after record of classic after classic, so many of his tunes from the time became standards. He was on a roll. But all it took for the roll to be downhill was Attie falling out of love with him. From then on each record was a disappointment, and all the living epithets began to disappear from mouths and pages and concert line ups, leaving only the legend, old and tired. And then even that was gone. His agent convinced him that it would be good for his career to do an album with an up and coming rapper. Jazz was on the way out, it was boring background music for upper middle class middle aged white men in their

sailboats, or else for the waiting rooms of suburban dentist's offices. If Denzel wanted to secure a future, not just a legacy, he should try something closer to popular taste, get with the program, involve himself in the culture.

It was a disaster. Mocked by the critics and ignored by the public. Worse still, his old jazz friends considered it a betrayal of the art form, and whatever remaining street cred he had was gone. After that, he couldn't play anything right. He had lost his confidence. Ten years later he made a timid comeback, but it was not about the music. He just needed the money.

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Things started to go sour with Attie way before his inspiration ran out. Attie wanted to have children, and Denzel wanted to have children with Attie. He often imagined how their kids would look like, and even dreamed of them. But no matter how hard and how often they tried, the child was not forthcoming. They went to the doctor, he debased himself in the antiseptic room of the sterile clinic, and a week or so later came the verdict. There was something wrong with him. His swimmers didn't like to swim, or something. Attie urged him to try a few treatments, but another year went by and she wasn't pregnant. And then she lost interest in sex, and in him.

He wasn't surprised when she said she was in love with someone else. Another jazzman. He played the trumpet, and his swimmers apparently liked to swim. She was pregnant. And it couldn't be his even if his sperm had decided to cooperate. They hadn't had sex in months.

It had now been twenty years since he last saw her, and more than that since he'd last kissed her, or made a successful record, or even an interesting one. His comeback did allow him a more than adequate living, when coupled with the royalties from his classic records. As for the new ones, they didn't sell, and even the kindest critics called them uninspired. Denzel knew it was true. After a few of these, and a few timid world tours, he finally decided a change of pace was needed.

Europe was always kind to jazz musicians. Or at least that's what he remembered from the twentieth century. But even there jazz was already dead. The spirit of it was gone, or perhaps it had simply changed, and he no longer felt at home in it. A couple of years were spent roaming, taking the pulse. He tried Paris first, then Copenhagen, then London, then he decided he should try Barcelona, and in the end settled even further west. He had played in the small southwestern country many times and was always received as a legend. It was a good place to retire, and he

resigned himself to watch the atlantic, yearning for his home on the other side of it. And for Attie. She always said she couldn't live anywhere other than New York.

One day an old friend called him in the middle of the night, unaware of or unconcerned about the time difference, to tell him that Attie had passed. Just like that. The love of his life was gone from this world. She died in her sleep, and he couldn't go back to it, so he spent the rest of the night listening to the records he made for her, most of them had her face on the cover, watching old pictures and playing old videos of her, and of them. In the morning he wasn't tired, and sat at the piano. Maybe the grief would make something come out of his fingers. Something did come out, and he thought it was good. Six months later he had six new tunes, and was putting together a band.

He wanted to get the top tier of the jazz world to play for him, but they weren't available, or were too expensive, and so he settled for the second tier. The core band flew from america, and got to work in Denzel's home studio. But the tunes were lifeless, and his playing subpar. He always believed in what Louis Armstrong said about jazz. You either get it or you don't... and if you don't get it, you never will. And his age and experience taught him that the wisdom also applied to musicians playing together. A band

either grooves or it doesn't, and if it doesn't then it never will. This one didn't.

He cycled through two other bands, americans, europeans, anything, but the same happened every time. At this point, and as usual when he was stuck, he called his sister to express his frustrations. He could always count on her to tell him the truth. Stop wasting money, get a local band, some young kids with chops, that's all you need really, isn't this all about Attie... it's your tribute to her isn't it... I listened to what you sent me, it's Shekhina all over again.

Originally the tunes were composed on the piano. He then wrote parts for the saxophone, and played them, and improvised over the vamps. And then he kept expanding it, adding more parts for more instruments. It would be almost as big a band, and the tones, the textures, the melancholy, were the same as in his seminal album Shekhina. His sister was right. This would be part two of his masterpiece.

Everybody thought the album was a spiritual tribute to the hebrew half of his heritage, and it's true that at this time he was very deep into the study of mystical kabalah, but in fact and in the end the music as always was a tribute to Attie. She was his shekhina, the last sephirot, the sabbath bride, where God comes to rest. And he wanted his new album to be the same, a spiritual homage to the love of his life.

But soon new doubts came to plague him. After failing to play the music right even with a core band of highly trained professionals, how much more difficult would it be for a big band to work when composed of young players. His sister had an answer for that too. Just strip it down... if it's a tribute, it shouldn't be flashy and bombastic, that's not who Attie was... it should have a quiet dignity and charm, so a smaller band makes sense, maybe even just piano and bass. When she said this, he knew immediately who to hire.

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Close to his place there was a fancy shopping mall called Lux where the old jazz musician liked to stroll, window shop, and most of all sit for an espresso and a custard pie or two. Most days there was at the very least a competent pianist playing in the food court. And sometimes there was a bass player too. Two young white cats playing jazz standards with the smoothness and feel of another era. Once, he heard them play one of his. It sounded good and he was pleased. For a second it reminded him of his youth, when he had hope, and when he had Attie.

He went to talk to them at the first opportunity. They of course accepted, after a couple of minutes of open jaws and stunned looks. Rehearsals started in his home studio the week after. It was fun. For one, he had forgotten how it felt to be treated like a living genius, not just an old washed up

legend. The young kids, nineteen and twenty they were, revered him and his music, and from their perspective it was a magical experience they would never forget. And second, he missed jamming, to make music for music's sake, in the moment. But when he listened to the tapes at the end of the day he knew that it wasn't right. And it was him. The young kids played their asses off in every take, having the time of their lives, with that carefree intensity that is a privilege of youth. And the old man that he was could no longer keep up. This happened over and over, and after a month of frustration, he dismissed them.

A week after that he was sitting in the food court eating a custard pie and drinking his espresso, listening to them play. When the duo took a break, they came to him with a proposition of their own, one which they hoped would not offend the jazz legend. He wasn't offended, though it was a little ridiculous. But it was also harmless, and so he agreed. What's the worst that can happen, was a reasonable question that needed no answer. That very afternoon he booked the recording studio for the next day, as early in the morning as possible, the kids said that was the best time for their experiment. He was nervous, but also excited.

They picked him up at eight, the session would begin at nine. When they parked the old and beat up sedan in the studio's parking lot they had plenty of time still to sit and

smoke. The young bass player put on Shekhina. It was appropriate. They smoked, and listened to the classic album, and then it was almost time to go in.

When was the last time you were high mister Singer, Call me Denzel... oh boy... the last time... hmm... you weren't on this earth yet, the jazz legend said in his old raspy voice. How do you feel, Hmmm... good... good... I feel very, very good... let's play.

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From the first note to the last, almost an hour of unbroken song and improvisation, weaving all the tunes they had rehearsed into one single whole that was more than the sum of its parts, the three of them. Sometimes Denzel closed his eyes and saw Attie smiling, so lovingly, or was it when he opened them, but either way whenever he saw her the music would get fuller, and not only him but the band as a whole responded to her presence, from crescendo to climax and back down.

The music was at times slow and heartfelt and simple, at times frenetic and ecstatic and complex, but always intense, and always sincere. And when the last note was played, they all felt that it would be not only Denzel's best album in decades, but a recording that would define a new era,

initiating a jazz renaissance, born as it could only be from the joining of old and new.

But not a second after the last note, when they were all still reeling speechless from the experience, the lights went out, and when the backup system kicked in, they went to check, and the take had been lost.