

## MUSIC UNION FORCED BAND TO QUIT FRANCE

Interview with Noble Sissle at the RKO Theatre in Brooklyn.

By GEE BEE

Keith's Albee Theatre in Brooklyn is "the-dream-come-true" of every hooper and vaudevillian star in that absorbingly fascinating game of show business. Not in the sense that it places in his hand the palm of victory, and spins around his head the filmy halo of capricious Broadway approval (that is the peculiar honor dispensed by the Palace Theatre down on the main stem) but in a more direct and appealingly human way.

Imagine having travelled over the country stopping at the provincial one-night stands with their dirty and bedraggled stage entrances and their ill-lighted and unkempt dressing rooms with all the inconveniences that a hobo could think of, and then reaching a theatre whose brilliantly lighted stage entrance leads a white-panelled, thick-carpeted reception room with old prints, gold leaf, red plush furniture, and washed air.

It was 10:30 a.m. and Noble Sissle, the maestro of the widely heralded Ambassadeurs' band of New York, London, and Paris, was lounging comfortably on the wicker couch in his modishly fitted dressing room. Done up in cream and maroon with a thick dark blue pile carpet, it has a superbly fitted bathroom leading off from it, with running ice water. His room is named the Massachusetts Room, all the dressing rooms have state names.

Back to Stay

His secretary-and-valet hovered nearby.

"Well, I am back in the United States for good this time," he spoke in a quick, slightly nervous voice. "Yes, it is good to be back and see old friends."

"It's funny how customs in foreign countries cling to you for a time after you get back home. Now, take for instance, the Frenchman's custom of shaking your hand time and time again before he leaves you after a casual meeting on the street. I found myself offering to shake hands with my friends time and again and no hand met mine. At times it becomes amusing and even embarrassing."

"And then there is the French custom of kissing one on both cheeks. I haven't experienced that, and hence have had no trouble carrying that custom back home; but then there is my daughter who has been attending school in Switzerland for the last few years. When I saw her the last time she cupped my face in her hands and kissed both of my cheeks. It was funny and took me quite unawares."

"However I am getting away from this point. You asked me why I came back from Paris so soon. Well, I'll have to go back to 1926 when Florence Mills and the 'Blackbirds' were in Paris at the Ambassadeurs' Restaurant."

"This restaurant, that caters to the wealthy and exclusive American colonists like the Whitneys, Vanderbilts, Stranburgs, and to the English nobility, had just opened. The 'Blackbirds' company was a sensation. There was a colored band with the show that the public raved over."

"Paul Whiteman was playing the dance music for the restaurant, but the public wanted the colored band to play the music for the dancing, too. Whiteman was under contract and naturally refused to let them take his place, but a definite impression was made on Syag, the owner of the restaurant. As yet no colored band had played the dance music at this place."

"When I came to the Ambassadeurs after the 1927 season in England, it was the summer of 1923. I had been doing a single turn at private soirees and at the London music halls. I had come to replace Morton Downey at this restaurant. Waring's Pennsylvanians, under contract for eight weeks, at the end of the sixth week had a fight with the management and were about to leave."

Got Contract

"You see the season in Paris runs from near the end of May till the first week in July, closing with the Grand Prix race."

"Syag had heard me sing and do single turns, but he did not know of my interest in the orchestration field. He had a conference with me and asked me could I get together a band to finish out the season. I did this, and that was the first time that a colored band had played the dance music there."

"You see, Syag had not forgotten the impression made by the band in 'Blackbirds,' and he was now in a ticklish position. I already had contracts in London, so at the end of the season I disbanded my band and

went back to England, but with a contract for the next season at the Ambassadeurs in my pocket.

"The next season, this restaurant, that had usually employed three successive bands, employed my band for the entire season. After that season I toured England for sixteen weeks, and then came back to France at Monte Carlo, till March."

"The owner of Ciro's, the restaurant chain extending from London to Paris and Monte Carlo, heard me at Monte Carlo and so I went back to Paris in April to play for him."

"In the meantime, Hobson had taken over and rebuilt the Ambassadeurs to cut down the competition. I stayed with him for the 1930 season, going to the London Ciro's, which is not a restaurant, but a club, till December. I played before the Prince of Wales, the Duke and Duchess of York and Prince Henry, one night."

"When I came back to the States in 1930, I had my contract for the 1931 season from Hobson of Ciro's Restaurant, for the Ambassadeurs. While in the States I opened at the Manhattan Casino, and, sponsored by Miss Elsa Maxwell, the woman who makes it easy for the society folk to have unusual parties, I entered the exclusive Princess Restaurant on Park Avenue for an eight-week stay, doubling at the Palace Theatre and also making my debut over the Columbia network."

"Later I went on tour of the States. Despite the fact that the Columbia Broadcasting Company wanted me to stay, I had to go back to Paris to keep my contract."

French Music Union Strong

"The musicians' union in Paris is the strongest of all the unions in France. Through their influence the labor minister will not grant permits to foreign dance orchestras in the country. Jack Hilton, the Paul Whiteman of England, was refused admission on this ground, and you know, of course, about the case of Texas Guinan."

"I was a personal friend of General Gouraud, the military governor of Paris. I had served in the French army, and I had a contract to fulfill. Hence my band was the only foreign band that played for any length of time. I was permitted to play as an 'attraction.' For eight weeks, I had six men who had permanent labor permits, from Paris, and three of my own men who had permits."

"I did play dance music, however. Like everything else, there are ways to do things if influence is to be had. The jazz artists got worse and threatened a general walk out; something had to be done. I decided, upon the advice of the minister, to come home."

"Three days after I arrived in New York I came here to the Keith Albee. You see, the Columbia Broadcasting system in conjunction with the RKO circuit is handling my engagements in one field, while Elsa Maxwell and Jullanna Cutting of the Junior League are handling my private engagements."

Likes Paris and Wine

"I like Paris and the red wine there. My wife likes the Paris gowns and bought some of them. I like English clothes. No, I do not have any hobbies except my music. I feel that Negro music will not expand until some well organized Negro music league gives the free field to Negro composers so that their wares may have an adequate sale."

"The Negro orchestra leader has to get the knack of combining the Negro rhythm with melody. That's what I tried to do when I came on the air. They say that Merton Downey and I were the two sensations during that time."

"After I got firmly established, and help other colored musicians to get into the opening wedge, anything may happen. Yes, some time I may go back to musical comedy with Blake, but this is my work at present."

Mr. Sissle's secretary gave the signal for leaving and I walked out of the theatre, not to take a fancy automobile to New York but the subway train."

The Old Gypsy Racket

One of the oldest known rackets in the world is the business of the fortune teller who trades on the superstitions of humans and their anxieties over the future. No one knows how far back into prehistoric ages goes the fortune teller's scheme of obtaining money in return for alleged supernatural guessing. Next of kin to the fortune teller is the astrologer, who may or may not find in the stars an explanation of why one is as one is or does as one does, but certainly cannot predict the future. The astrologer was doing a lively business in the days of the Babylonians and the Greeks learned about astrology from Babylon about 350 B.C.

Despite the ancient repute of the fortune teller and the astrologer and their prevalence in modern scenes, the Society of American Magicians is carrying on an active campaign against fortune tellers, astrologers, mediums, and their kind. The late Houdini, greatest prestidigitator and illusionist of them all, set the pace in his sweeping exposures and denunciations; and the society of which he

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was once the boast and leading spirit has carried on, even to asking the Department of Justice for its opinion on predictability of the future.

The Department, evidently believing that an organization learned in astronomy should know the possible relation between stars and humans, referred the inquiry to the Smithsonian Institution. The reply of the institution is what might have been expected from a scientific body.

Races Preserved by "Mediocre"

The preservation of races has been due to mediocre individuals. This is accounted for by the fact that the most brilliant representatives pay for great achievements in some deficiency of vital racial force. So affirms Dr. I. P. Tolmachoff in a report to the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Dr. Tolmachoff says:

"We are even able to establish an empiric law that 'the upwelling of future organic rulers begins in unobtrusive small forms,' or, as expressed by Cope, in the 'survival of the unspecialized,' because, as he states, the highly developed or greatly specialized types of one geological period are not the parents of the types of succeeding periods."

"The scientist says certain persistent types have passed through a number of geological periods without great alterations in structure. Their evolution," he says, "has been arrested and in recompense they have received a longevity that seems to approach immortality."

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