

KOKOMO KLEPTOMANIAC
An Indianapolis Literary Club essay
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The first scene in this improbable drama takes place in a San Francisco jazz club, where the leader, a trumpet player named Jim Goodwin, is heading up his small band in its usual repertoire which, in 1968, as now, was known as traditional, or “hot” jazz. As the musicians took one of their rest breaks, Goodwin was conscious of the presence of a man standing before him – a man he later described as “perhaps six feet tall, stocky, and good-looking, if slightly on the heavy side”.

The man, apparently anxious to talk, introduced himself as Jack Purvis, a name which immediately rang a bell, for Jim Goodwin was a student of jazz history and a record collector. The man seemed to be quite knowledgeable and “said all the right things,” according to Goodwin when interviewed many years later. The man called Purvis let on that he had had a long career in music in the old days and played mainly trumpet and trombone, often with famous bands of the day. Intrigued, Goodwin offered to let the man borrow his horn and sit in for a few numbers with the band, but the man smilingly declined. But he did return a week later to listen to the group. Then he disappeared and Goodwin never saw him again.

Thus, in 1968, the first piece of the puzzle that was Jack Purvis comes to hand. There is an immediate contradiction, for Jim Goodwin had no idea that some six years earlier a death certificate had been issued for a man of this same name who had been found dead in a gas-filled room. Even that was odd, for the cause of death was certified as cirrhosis of the liver!

During the early 1970s I was engaged in researching the history of jazz and popular bands of Indiana in preparation for a book I eventually published under the title of “The Jazz State of Indiana.” While much of the story occurred in Indianapolis, the other cities and towns of the state were rich with anecdotal material, including Kokomo. Talking with a pianist who had played with an important Kokomo band led by trombonist Hal Denman, the name of Jack Purvis came up during our conversation. The pianist said that Purvis was “awfully good – too good for around here. He just had to go far.” What he didn’t say was that Purvis already had a checkered background, something I was later to discover from record collectors and one in particular who had known Purvis from school days.

I no longer remember who it was who said to me: “Jack Purvis ? Oh, yeah – he’s the guy who used to steal instruments from other musicians. A real kleptomaniac.!”

He was born in Kokomo on December 11, 1906, to a real estate agent, Sanford B.Purvis, and his second wife, Nettie, who died when Jack was eight. Shortly thereafter, the father

remarried. In 1918, when young Jack was twelve, his father also died, perhaps from the flu epidemic of that year. This third wife was apparently ill-equipped to manage a household of four children from her own and Purvis's previous marriages. In what seems to have been an unfavorable atmosphere, Jack grew steadily more rebellious and unmanageable. In 1921, he was listed on the rolls of Kokomo High School, but in that year he left and was put in the Boys' School at Plainfield, Indiana, where it was hoped he would "straighten out."

In one sense, Jack Purvis was to be an outstanding alumnus of this reform school, for he came out of it in 1923 as a musician, able to play both trumpet and trombone, ready to participate in the band and orchestra of the high school he had unceremoniously left two years earlier. Unfortunately, he also brought a reputation as a dangerous and untrustworthy individual which did not endear him to younger classmates, excepting, perhaps, some of the more impressionable and adventurous females.

Enter on the scene one of the Purvis myths: he was reputed to have inherited the sum of twenty thousand dollars, a huge sum in those days, but one wonders, from where, and from whom? Jack is said to have run through it swiftly, buying a car, taking flying lessons and purchasing a small plane. The question remains unanswered, but the fact is that Jack had an early fascination with aviation, and was known to have been an enthusiastic pilot through most of his career in music.

Among his first professional jobs was playing with the local Hal Denman band, whose leader was also a high school teacher. While this connection was uneventful, it is worthy of note that Denman himself went through some rocky times later when he eloped with one of the high school girls, creating a local scandal and losing his teaching job in the process. But by this time, Jack Purvis was off and running. He worked for some time with a series of bands in Kentucky and Pennsylvania. He finally ended up in New York in 1926 with Whitey Kaufman's Original Pennsylvanians. He was mentioned in the music trade paper *Billboard* as contributing original compositions and special arrangements to the band.

This same year saw him married, presumably in Pittsburgh, to a girl named Betty, with whom he would father a child, also named Betty. As we shall see, being married to a person like Purvis, a traveling dance band musician, was not going to be easy. But Betty hung on to the marriage despite rumors that Jack took on multiple unofficial "wives" across the country and indeed, across the world.

In May, 1927, an event capturing the imagination of the country was the first solo flight across the Atlantic by Charles Lindbergh, who, on a shoestring, managed to beat the competition and win the Orteig prize of \$25,000. His well-known achievement and tumultuous reception in France could have only inspired Jack Purvis's sense of adventure. Shortly, he would feed it. In spades.

The opportunity came when he was invited to join a band led by one George Carhart, and consisting of dedicated young jazzmen. Carhart, who has been described as a *bon vivant* who “ played just enough banjo to make him look good with the ladies” had secured a job on the new liner *Ile de France*, playing for the tourist class passengers.

The first night out, things went well, but the next day the band’s new trumpeter was absent from the bandstand and would not show up for the rest of the crossing. What had happened to Jack Purvis ? Eventually, the facts came out: Jack had discovered that two famed aviators were traveling to France in first class, and lost no time in making his way to where they were and into their confidence as a fellow aviator, albeit one of relative inexperience. He so ingratiated himself with the fliers that they invited him to share their sizable accommodations. They were pilot Bert Acosta and businessman Charles Levine who became the money man for a couple of attempts to fly the Atlantic. Acosta had recently flown with then-Commander Richard E. Byrd and others on a trans-Atlantic flight originally intended to win the Orteig prize . This flight, coming too late to beat out Lindbergh, was forced to land in water off the coast of Normandy due to fog around Paris. It may be of interest that the beach adjacent to their touchdown was later to become famous in June 1944 as Omaha Beach. As for Levine, though not a trained airman, he nonetheless had been a passenger and navigator for a long distance Atlantic crossing with the well-known pilot Clarence Chamberlin. They reached Germany and landed one hundred miles short of their Berlin target and short of fuel.

One can only imagine the thrill felt by Jack Purvis in the company of these heroes of the day. If he felt guilt at deserting his musical friends in the Carhart band, he assuaged it by sitting in with the more celebrated orchestra of entertainer Ted Lewis, who played in the first class lounge area.

At Le Havre, however, Jack suddenly rejoined his companions, and proceeded with them for engagements at the resort towns of Aix-les-Bains and Nice. At the former spot, according to one of the band musicians, Purvis and several others took the funicular railway up one of the smaller Alpine hills, and decided on a lark to descend on foot. The story goes that Jack (or “Jacques” as he was now calling himself) felt more comfortable by removing his shoes and socks and continued barefoot for a while. How long he stood it is not known, but back home, his fellow Hoosier musician, Eddie Condon, picked up the story and spread the word that Purvis had climbed the Alps barefoot !

While working a hotel job on the waterfront at Nice, Jack is reported to have fallen in with some Arab boys who sold everything from rugs to pornography, learned some Arabic words from them and wound up appearing on the bandstand dressed in Turkish garb, including a fez and turned-up slippers.

Back in Paris, on the top floor of a cheap Montmartre hotel, a couple of the band members were startled one night by Purvis, whom neither of them had seen in weeks, bursting into their room, dashing out the window and across the rooftops with the *gendarmes* in hot

pursuit. It seems that he was wanted in connection with swindling a tourist out of his travelers checks.

Somehow, he made his way back to the U.S., and in October, 1929 was hired by Hal Kemp to play trombone, though he would soon switch to the trumpet section, where he made a number of recordings, not his first, but the earliest which show his exceptional talents. He was soon to become noticed in the music world for his originality and excellent tone, a rival to the great black trumpeter Louis Armstrong, who was then playing at his most creative and torrid level. Other black trumpeters vied with Armstrong for jazz primacy, but there were few white players who approached his ability. Among them was the Iowa musician, Bix Beiderbecke, whose style, unique but totally different from Armstrong's, captured the imagination of most of his white contemporaries. Purvis chose Armstrong as his model, but, as critics have noted, his solo work is less controlled, though equally exciting. Purvis's performances on records are like mirrors of his life – unpredictable, erratic, and sometimes wild – but always showing deep musical sense, and a devotion to the spirit of the music he was playing. His abilities as a composer and arranger show in his performances, and though his career was relatively short, and mostly in years when records sold poorly, today one wonders why he was not more celebrated in his time. Mostly we can blame a pattern of self-destruction, sometimes brought on by an adventurous and devil-may-care lifestyle.

Dick Sudhalter, an excellent writer, in his book *Lost Chords*, devoted many pages to this "mystery man of jazz" and compared him to a kid shouting "Look, Ma...no hands!" as he tears down the street on his bicycle, hoping that someone will notice him and gasp in horror or grudging admiration.

After one recording session in New York backing the popular Boswell Sisters, a singing trio, Jack decided he would like to know one of them – Martha – better, and, believing she liked horses, stole one from Central Park, and rode it into her apartment house. When the building authorities showed up, Purvis had fled, leaving it to others to solve the problem of getting a recalcitrant horse down six flights of stairs.

There were also dark sides to the Purvis personality. For example, he was prone to threaten suicide by turning on the gas or starting out an open window high above the street. On one reported occasion, he botched an attempt to gas himself, and was being carried from the building on a stretcher. As they hit the cold air, he apparently revived, and yelled: "Hey, you guys! What the hell are you doing? D'ya want me to catch pneumonia?"

The story (and the legends) continue: when the Hal Kemp Orchestra prepared to leave for a winter's booking at Coral Gables, Florida, Purvis refused to go, and no one could persuade him otherwise. All he would say was "I'm wanted by the law down there." Much later, it was theorized that he had gotten into trouble on a morals charge in connection with a "Greek dancing school" in Miami that he had helped found, where there was a plentiful supply of aspiring, nubile young terpsichorean candidates on tap.

A little later, the Kemp Orchestra, with the up-and-coming trumpeter Bunny Berigan filling the Purvis chair, was off to Europe, and while at a Paris booking, some of the members were surprised to spot Jack on the street, dressed as a Frenchman. He initially affected the role of “Jacques”, sporting a dark moustache and beret, insisting that he did not speak “zee Eenglish.”

Let’s fast-forward to 1931. Late in the year, Purvis was hired to play in the large Fred Waring Orchestra, then riding high despite the Depression. Besides the lucrative work, one attraction was the presence of a diminutive girl harpist, occasionally used for important concert engagements. Purvis was immediately attracted to her, and wanted to impress her with the depth of his interest. Late one night in Chicago he visited a music shop where a harp was on display in the show window and proceeded to smash the glass, carting the harp off to the theater where they both were booked. The next day he showed it to her and asked if she would teach him to play the instrument. Half-frightened by his tale of how he got the harp, she turned him down, whereupon the next night he took the harp back to the store, smashed the replacement window and restored the instrument to its original place.

The famous band leader Charlie Barnet, with whom Purvis was to play for some weeks in the Thirties, told of an incident which caused the demise of Purvis’s Fred Waring period: “The orchestra was playing the 1812 Overture, and Jack was supposed to be featured playing with a pin spot focused on just his face. Waring, particular about the collegiate appearance of his musicians, told Jack beforehand that he’d have to get rid of his moustache, which was carefully trimmed and waxed. The next performance, as Waring came from the wings to give the downbeat, there stood Jack Purvis, minus his moustache, but also minus every hair on his head ! Collegiate ? Anything but !”

How many of the stories can we believe ? Did Jack really fly guns and ammunition across the Mexican border ? Did he really escape bigamy charges by shipping out as a cook on an ocean liner ? Would he take friends up in his plane, then proceed to serenade them with his horn while the craft swooped and rolled by itself ? Did he take a dare to fly underneath the bridges of New York ? Did he suffer from kleptomania and become known to many of his contemporaries as a “man who would walk away with your horn if you didn’t watch out ?” Was he really seen in later years playing the Flight of the Bumblebee in a garden in Honolulu ? Was he, as he claimed, once a cook on the island of Bali ?

One thing we do know for sure – in 1937 he slipped up at one point while in Texas, and was convicted on a robbery charge, and sentenced to the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville. Never letting time go to waste, he quickly organized fellow prisoners into an efficient dance band, and got air time over a Dallas station for a once-a-week program called, appropriately, “Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls.” In another band which featured Texas-style country and western music, he led from the piano.

A columnist for the music magazine *Downbeat*, who often dug up obscure facts about musicians of yesteryear, wondered in print about the whereabouts of a talented trumpet player named Jack Purvis he recalled from several years back. Surprisingly, he received a letter from a Betty Lou Purvis, who was employed as a disc jockey in Pittsburgh. She said she'd been looking for information on her father for some time, and despite applying to the Texas prison authorities for information, had been rebuffed. Some time elapsed, then a letter arrived saying that she had at last heard from Jack Purvis, her Dad. "He's in Europe now. He's doing some studying but will be back in the fall. Call it a miracle, or just down to earth praying – but it worked !"

Purvis was not in Europe, but back in Huntsville because of a parole violation. He kept a correspondence with his wife, Betty, who helped maintain the fiction that he was doing well.

By September, 1946, he was released again, and within a month Betty Lou was writing happily that her father was in Florida, working on a piano composition after having visited her mother and herself for a month. Her mother wrote much later to an interested jazz fan that she had tried to pick up the pieces of their marriage, but that Jack "couldn't stay off the sauce." She wrote and told him to stay away and never come back until he could be worthy of a loving and trusting daughter.

In March, 1962, then, the police were called to a rooming house in San Francisco by a woman who smelled gas. The victim, an apparent suicide, was, as we have said earlier, deemed to have died not from gas, but from cirrhosis of the liver. Like so much of Purvis's life, it presented us with another mystery. If it were Purvis, who was the man who claimed to be Purvis six years later as he talked with Jim Goodwin ? If not Purvis in that gas-filled room, who was it ? We will never know. All we have is his indelible music, the endless puzzles of his life, and a wonder about what might have been.

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