

The surprising success of a 1920 recording transforms the life of an unknown singer and her pianist and alters the course of American popular music.

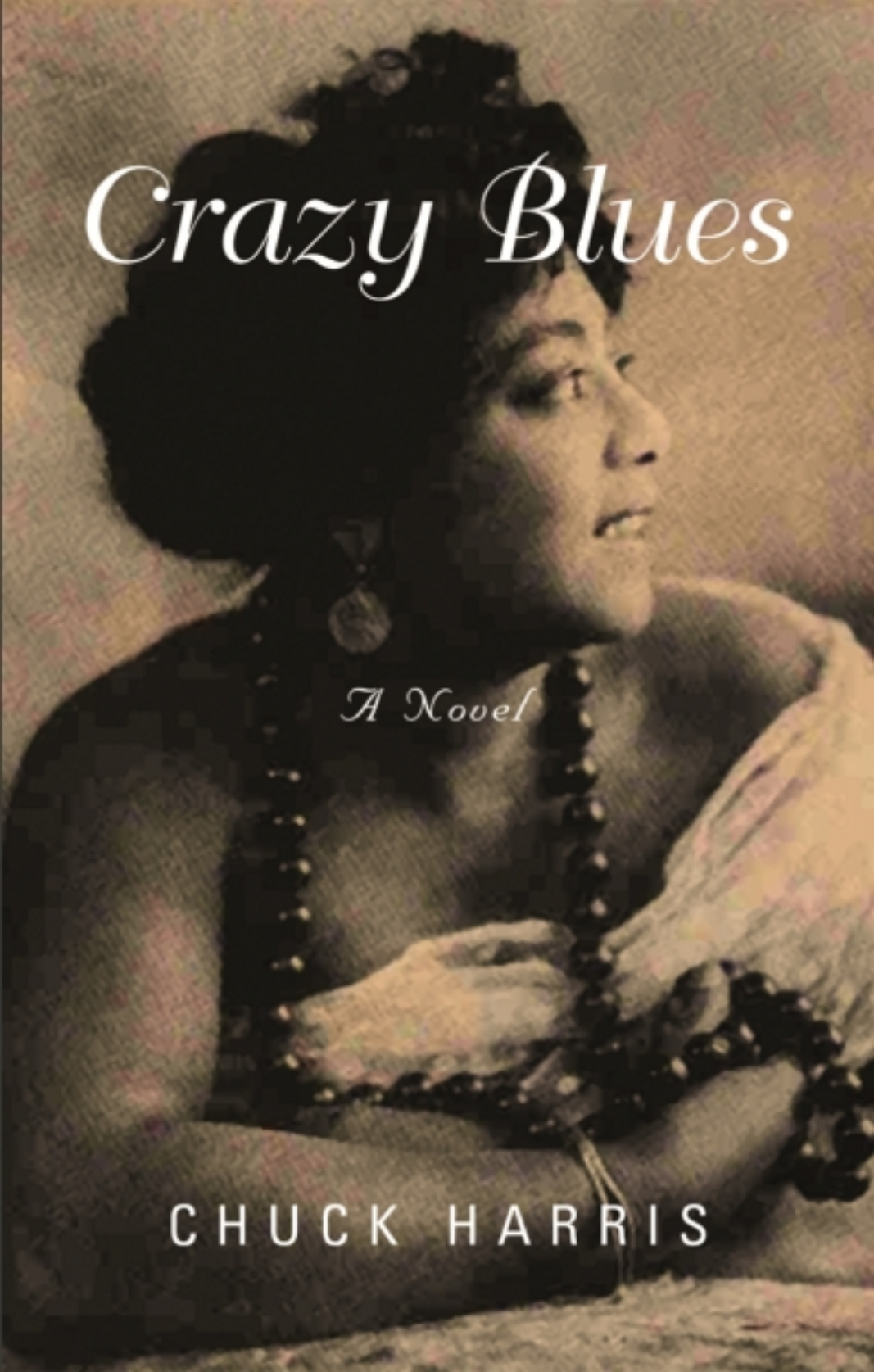
Crazy Blues

By Chuck Harris

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Crazy Blues

A Novel

CHUCK HARRIS

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This is a work of historical fiction. Many of the characters are real, and events the author has depicted happened in the places, times and manner he describes. Others were created to tell Mamie and Willie's stories as the author understood them.

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Chapter 1

Harlem

September 1928

Andy Washington was taking his time. No reason to hurry. He was by himself today. There was no one to talk to or play tag with, so he just lumbered along. Last school year, like the other two before that, Wally Johnson would come knock on Andy's door. Early, usually before Andy had finished putting on his shirt. His mother would offer a hungry Wally some hot oatmeal laced with sugar and cream.

Then the ritual would begin. Wally would decline the offer with a "No thanks, Mrs. Washington. I already ate." Andy and his mother knew better, since mothering was not something Mrs. Johnson believed in. Mrs. Washington would insist, Wally would relent, and Andy and he would sit together at the breakfast table and eat. Then, the two friends, their bellies full, would head off to PS77.

It had all changed. Now Wally and his family were living in Philadelphia. They'd left New York for his father's new job, one that Robert Johnson would keep for only a few years, forcing the family to move in with his mother's family in Atlanta. Wally had sent Andy two postcards worth of news, reporting that he missed New York and hoped that Andy would come to Philly so he could show off his new neighborhood and have Andy meet his new friend Sonny. Bring your glove, he'd written, there's a park a couple of blocks away with a nice ballfield.

Andy wanted to go, but his mom said he was too young to travel alone and besides, with four other kids to raise, they couldn't spare the train fare. Now, on the morning of the first day of school and the start of his fifth grade year, Andy was in a funk. Blue. Blue Andy. The summer, with the chance to sleep late, wear shorts and tee shirts, and play ball, was gone. Just like Wally, his best friend who he always walked to school with.

This morning his mother had reminded him to stick to sidewalks, no cutting through alleys, and to take care crossing streets, cautions she had dispensed every year to Andy and Wally. Now there was no Wally to mumble his agreement. Andy wondered if, down in Philadelphia, Mrs. Johnson was giving Wally the same warning. But he already knew the answer.

Maybe it was the funk he was in, or a need for some adventure, or a tinge of boredom that impelled Andy to step into the alley next to the 143rd Street carryout. He planned to take a little side trip -- to walk to the far end of the alley, go around the back of that building and the neighboring one, and return to the street through the next alley. A nice long loop, something that he and Wally had done on those rare mornings when there was plenty of time to spare before the late bell rang.

The buildings' walls blocked the sun, and Andy's eyes took a while to adjust to the dim light. The smell of rotting food scraps and other foul odors filled the air, tempting him to turn back. But a young boy's curiosity carried him farther down the alley. At first he was disappointed. There was nothing to see, just a balled up green towel next to a box overflowing with newspapers, a few trash cans, some with their lids missing, and a chair with three and a half legs.

Nothing worth stopping for, so he walked on. Then he saw something odd. A man's shoe. He bent down, picked it up, and

turned it around slowly in his hand. It was for a right foot, and it looked brand new. And fancy. It was not like anything his father had ever owned. A dressy shoe in two different colors -- black and grey, with lots of little holes in the front by the toe. It must have cost a lot of money.

What was it doing here in the middle of this trash? Is there a matching one? If I find it maybe I can bring it to Mr. Stephens. He could sell it in his store, and I could get money. Maybe enough to take a train to Wally.

He picked up his pace and moved another ten feet along the alley, then stopped. A human foot was peeking out from behind a cluster of trash cans. Moving closer he saw it was attached to a man. The shoeless foot was covered in a black sock, and a mate of the shoe in Andy's hand was on the other foot. The man was curled up, on his left side, his back to Andy. He could see his right hand. It was a large hand with long fingers. His skin was a lighter brown than Andy's, and he had a gold ring with a sparkling stone on one of his fingers. He must be asleep, or maybe he's drunk. Once he'd seen Wally's father in that position, on their front room couch, when he'd passed out after drinking the night before.

"Mister," Andy said. "Wake up."

No response.

"See this?" Andy held out the shoe and waved it back and forth. "I have your shoe."

The man did not move.

"Wake up," he repeated, louder.

Moving closer, he bent over and poked the man in the back with the shoe. "I've got to get to school."

Then he noticed the blood. It had formed a small pool under the side of the man's head away from where Andy was kneeling. Looking closer he saw an even larger pool had collected under the man's chest.

Andy turned, his heart racing, more from excitement than fear. He ran back to the alley and onto the street, squeezing the shoe tightly. Out of breath, he reached the school and went straight to Principal Hogan's office, pausing only to answer Roger Brown's shouted question. "Who did you steal that shoe off of, Andy?"

"A dead man."

Chapter 2

Two Months Earlier

Early Sunday morning, and Harlem was yawning itself awake. Mamie Smith had already been up for nearly two hours, sitting at the piano, playing, singing along, and writing notes on her sheet music. Her 135th street apartment was large, five good-sized rooms, one of the many benefits of her decades-long career. It was a far cry from the Cincinnati walk-up she'd lived in as a child. Jack Goldberg, still asleep in his bedroom at the far end, was oblivious to her too-many-to-count run-throughs of "Crazy Blues." She had been tweaking her signature song, hoping to make the old number sound fresh.

She knew that the fans who would show up at the Lafayette Theater on Saturday wanted to hear it just the way it sounded on the 1920 recording, but she was bored with that take. A new, more modern version would give her that "energy" she craved. She had been doing the number for nearly a decade and knew that younger singers like Bessie Smith and Alberta Hunter were right on her heels, belting out some good blues.

"The Queen of the Blues," they called her. Mamie embraced the label, as well she should, since agreeing to let Perry Bradford, her mentor, use it. At the moment she was working on making sure that "The Queen" wouldn't lose her crown. Already in her forties and on her third marriage, and with the easy successes behind her, she needed to reinvent herself.

Known in the business as a “triple threat” -- singer, dancer and piano player -- she was an artist who’d single-handedly created an industry: blues recordings aimed at colored audiences that sold truckloads of 78’s. A million copies of “Crazy Blues” had started it all. Her recordings of “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” “You Can Have Him, I Don’t Want Him Blues,” and “You’ve Got to See Mama Every Night” along with her southern state tours and lucrative night club work kept the momentum going and made her a rich woman.

Having made some progress, she decided to take a break. She walked down the hall to the airy kitchen to brew some coffee. Standing at the sink, filling the coffee maker, she felt a pair of burly arms surround her. A newlywed, she was still adjusting to Jack’s large contours -- nothing like the feel of Smitty’s spare frame, or first husband Sam’s athletic body.

Mamie and Jack were an improbable couple. While only three years apart in age and both in entertainment, they were a world apart in appearance, background, and disposition. Mamie, a petite colored singer who never went beyond the fifth grade was now married to a tall college-educated white man who couldn’t carry a tune, but had mounted several Broadway-level musicals.

On the heels of his failed first marriage, Jack had found himself intrigued with the great Mamie Smith. A long-time fan of Harlem-style entertainers, he had seen something special in Mamie – her musical instincts, ability to mesmerize an audience, and the ease with which she made any tune her own. His friend Perry Bradford and Mamie’s manager, had introduced them after a show at the Sugar Cane Club one night, and he was smitten, on the spot.

At first, Mamie was indifferent to Jack. She found him pleasant enough and was surprised at his knowledge of the Harlem music scene (he knew something about every one of her Jazz Hounds), but did not see him as a potential romantic partner. Her two ex-husbands, Smitty and Sam, as well as Ocey Wilson, her long-time lover, were trim and handsome colored men, nothing like this ordinary-looking white man. Jack had made such a slight impression on her that when he showed up at the Club a second time, he had to remind her who he was.

But Jack wanted Mamie and he had persisted, wooing her with dozens of pink roses and boxes of Amedei Porcelana chocolates. “They’re her favorites,” Perry had informed him. Soon she relented, and they started dating. Jack grew on Mamie; she began to imagine a future with a man who adored her, and who just might stabilize her floundering career.

“How long have you been up, honey?” Jack asked with a yawn.

“Awhile. Maybe two hours.” She felt his hands exploring her breasts and belly.

“It was after two when you got in from the Club. You hardly got any sleep.”

“So. Is my Jewish husband turning into a Jewish mother?” she asked, rubbing against Jack, a sinuous version of a slow dance move.

“Well, maybe. And would that be so bad?”

Kissing her cheek as he released her, Jack said, “Don’t bother with coffee. I’ve got breakfast plans for us.”

“I thought we’d stay here and go out later.”

“Well, it’s business first. I’m your manager as well as your lover. This morning I’m putting on the manager hat. Maybe later for the loving. Who knows?”

Laughing, Mamie answered, “Sounds promising. I’ll get dressed.”

It took Mamie, an unapologetic clothes horse, nearly an hour to get ready. After trying on several outfits, she settled on a green and white cotton dress, matching pillbox hat, heels and, despite the July heat, silk stockings.

Jack was reading the Times. He looked up as she walked into the living room, purse in hand.

“You didn’t need to get so gussied up. We’re only going down the street.”

“I still have to be presentable. Never know who’ll see me. Maybe somebody will want to snap my picture.”

Jack shrugged. He was getting used to living with a celebrity.

They walked the two blocks to Mattie’s, passing under the “Best Breakfast in Harlem” sign. Jack opened the door for his wife and followed her into the noisy dining room.

Diners stopped talking and turned to look at Mamie. Those near her smiled, some offering a “Morning, Mamie.” Those farther away waved. A familiar routine that for Mamie never got old.

Jack led her to a back booth where two men sat, overdressed and out of place. Mamie thought they looked familiar, but she couldn’t recall their names. Jack introduced them. Both men were producers who Jack worked with. Along with Jack they stood out -- three white men in a sea of colored diners.

Mamie and Jack's table was also the only one where business would be conducted that July morning. By the time the last cup of coffee was drained and plates cleared, the four patrons had agreed to try their hand at a movie.

At first Mamie had been taken aback.

"Well gentlemen, I don't see committing to a film. I am still working on my music. And my Hounds depend on me for their pay checks."

"Honey, think of the audience you could reach. Only some people go to clubs, but everybody goes to the movies."

"But I'm not an actress."

"Exactly. People want to hear you sing and watch you dance. If they want acting they'll go see Bernhardt."

Mamie was still mulling over the agreement, listing the pros and cons in her head, when they entered their building. As they stepped off the elevator an unpleasant odor greeted them.

"Smell something?" Jack asked.

Mamie sniffed, "Paint. Maybe. But who'd be painting on a Sunday morning?"

As they rounded the corner to their apartment, they saw it. In bold red letters that covered their door and bled onto the surrounding wall. Hastily written in capital letters:

GIKE

BITCH

Jack unlocked the door as a splotch of still wet paint transferred from the door frame to the sleeve of his white shirt. He sprinted to the phone and made two calls in rapid succession.

The second was to the police.

Shaken and her breathing labored, Mamie closed her bedroom door. Who would do this? And why? She undressed and changed into her “Sunday comfort” outfit -- a loose-fitting sleeveless dress and low-heeled shoes.

Not that Mamie was a stranger to hostile threats. The first assault had come a decade earlier after she’d signed the contract with OKeh records and recorded “Crazy Blues.” A colored singer recording with a mainstream label? That’s a White Man’s domain. Death threats -- directed at both Mamie and Fred Hager, the label’s recording director -- followed. Cryptic phone calls. Unsigned letters. Notes slid under the studio’s front door. Hager took it all in stride. He knew Mamie could sell records to an untapped market. And that’s what mattered.

Two years later the nasty notes, mixed in with the fan mail, began reappearing. Smitty, a terrific bass player but less-than-terrific husband, responded to the threats by insisting that she have protection. He hired Dutch, six foot two and broad as a barn who, always armed, shadowed her. He went to every club date, waited outside her dressing room before and after her shows, sat in the audience, and checked any new visitors for weapons. After six uneventful months, Mamie let him go. Smitty was furious, but Mamie prevailed.

Soon, Smitty was history -- no longer Mamie’s bass man or husband. She had been wary of his motives. Was he a loving husband protecting a wife he adored, or a calculating

businessman trying to assure his Golden Goose kept laying eggs? When she discovered his affair with the young singer in a rival band, she had her answer.

Mamie was a survivor. At ten she'd left Cincinnati's Black Bottom neighborhood to go on the road with The Four Dancing Mitchells. At fifteen she was in the chorus of the Smart Set Company, landing her in Harlem. She never looked back.

It was there, in a small cabaret, that impresario and composer Perry Bradford heard her sing. Impressed with her pure voice and confident stage presence, he offered her a part in his Musical Maids of Harlem production at the Lincoln Theater. There, she debuted his song, "Harlem Blues."

Like Mamie, Bradford was a throwback. Both were blues musicians in a city that shunned blues. To New Yorkers blues represented the past -- a remnant of a musical form best left behind in the South, along with cotton picking and share cropping. For them jazz, with its free form, original harmonies, and absence of rules, was music's future. Bradford disagreed, reasoning that there was an untapped audience of Southern Negroes eager to hear familiar sounds, who'd flock to buy blues records, and turn shellac disks into gold.

And he was right.

As she left her bedroom Mamie heard a knock on the door.

Jack was still on the phone. "Yes. It just happened about an hour ago. Aimed at my wife.....and me. You need to come by and see for yourself."

Mamie approached the door and called out, "Who is it?"

A male voice, muffled by the thick mahogany door, answered. "It's James, Miss Smith."

Relieved, Mamie opened the door to her super who was holding a scrub brush and a can of turpentine, with a thick stack of cotton rags at his feet.

"Terrible about this writing. I'll clean it up quick."

"Hold off," Jack called out from the living room. He had finished his calls and was walking toward them. "We need to let the cops see this first."

"Come inside, James," Mamie said. "We'll wait for them."

Jack began peppering James with questions. "How did they get into the building? Why weren't you watching the front door? Do you think they were colored or white?"

Apologetically, James explained that he had spent the morning cleaning out the furnace room. Someone could have gotten in by shadowing a resident entering the building.

"The fellows must have been colored. You're the only white man who ever comes and goes here, Mr. Goldberg."

"You'd think someone would have taken notice of a paint can and brushes," Mamie remarked.

Turning to Jack she asked, "Who else did you call?"

"Harry. He'll be by later, Mamie."

Mamie winced. "Harry? That sounds a bit extreme."

"Not to me." Jack and Mamie, but not James, knew who that meant. Harry was "Harry 'Gyp the Blood' Stein, a key figure in the City's Kosher Mafia.

Nodding his head toward James, he added, “We’ll talk about it later.”

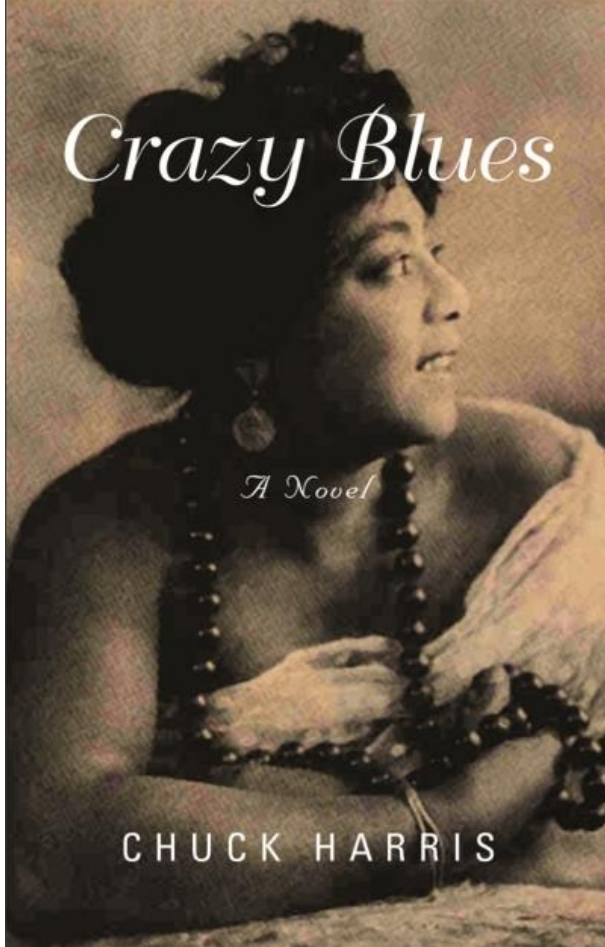
The Roaring Twenties and Prohibition provided fertile ground for organized crime. The economic opportunities were abundant for bootlegging, loansharking, gambling and prostitution. The Cosa Nostra was the trailblazer, but the Jews embraced organized crime later. After a few years, the two groups merged, combining resources instead of fighting for territory. There was plenty of opportunity for both groups, and together they proved a formidable force in the City.

And Harry was a Mamie Smith fan. He was one of a handful of Jack’s many friends who was delighted about their marriage, presenting Mamie with a custom-made mink coat at the news (which she happily added to her collection).

Early on, Mamie was certain that Jack was a minor player in all this nefariousness. After all, he and Harry had known each other since they were boys. To Jack’s credit he declined offers, or so he swore to Mamie, to join the syndicate. Nor did he participate directly in any criminal acts -- never bribed a cop, strong-armed anyone, or pulled a trigger on a mark. Mamie suspected that he’d gambled a bit, dabbled in bootlegging, and probably used the services of some of the enterprise’s girls for hire.

But that was in his past. She’d convinced herself that she was that “good woman,” the one who’d reformed the (minor) sinner. And, since they had started dating, she hadn’t seen any evidence of his straying from the straight and narrow. He was always at her side, at the club or at home. Praising her. Indulging her. And now, protecting her.

The hate mongers were back. And protective Jack wasn’t about to depend on the authorities. His people were on the case.



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