

RHONEL ROBERTS

Gileesa's World, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

WESLEY BROWN

In the Land of Oop-Pop-a-Da

It was a cool spring afternoon when Anna and her father took the bus to Randall's Island. The huge crowds, pouring into the stadium, blended together in their felt hats and lightweight jackets. People quickly filled the folding chairs on the grass and packed into the stands above. Jacob Danova had brought a camera with him to take pictures of musicians who were regular customers where he worked, at Walgreens Drugstore at 44th Street and Broadway, only a few blocks from the Danovas' apartment building.

Anna hadn't wanted to go with her father at all. She'd never paid much attention to the music he raved so much about on the radio. But he was so persistent in his efforts to get her to go to the concert that she finally agreed, just so he would leave her alone. She was fifteen. And it wasn't as though she had so many other things she could be doing on a Sunday afternoon. A thick-bodied girl with strong hands inherited from her mother, Anna didn't have a best friend and didn't date. When she thought about it, there was nothing in her life that mattered enough for her to look forward to it. So why not go with her father to this stupid concert?

Jacob led Anna to a row of seats to the left of the stage. He didn't sit down, telling her he wanted to move closer to the musicians with his camera. Anna couldn't remember, exactly, when her father's interest in taking pictures started. But he always seemed fascinated by anything he knew very little about. Jacob often told Anna and her two older sisters that, when he arrived in America from Russia with his parents at the beginning of the century, they were determined to become "American" as quickly as possible. They changed their name from "Danovich" to "Danova," and that began what her father called his "great love affair with the English language." He saw America as a magical place, and wanted to make his way in this exciting country by doing things just well enough to keep himself in suspense about what he still hadn't figured out.

Unlike Jacob, Anna's mother, Lila, did one thing very well. Her hands could take a piece of fabric and sew it into something that made the girl or woman wearing it feel like she was in the company of a close friend every time a sweater, skirt, or blouse touched her skin. Lila wasn't the talker Jacob was, and Anna often wondered whether that was because of the difficulty her mother had speaking

English out of a mouth still filled with her native Russian. Except for the small talk that was part of living with someone who happened to be her mother, Anna had no recollection of them ever having a real conversation. But what Lila lacked in words, she more than made up for with hands that not only made Anna’s clothes but talked her into a waiting bosom whenever she needed it. But Anna was no longer interested in the refuge her mother offered.

A man onstage spoke into a microphone, announcing that the concert was about to begin. There was a roar that swelled like a huge hot air balloon until it burst into a shower of noise, sending a buzz over Anna’s body. Nothing she’d ever heard had made her feel this way. The emcee introduced the Duke Ellington Orchestra. As the musicians took their seats, cheers greeted a man who walked out wearing a blue double-breasted suit set off by a white tie against a black shirt, a white handkerchief sprouting like rose petals from his breast pocket. He stood in front of the mic a few seconds without saying a word. But the smile spreading across his face seemed to Anna as though he was opening a door for her to enter. The shiver in her skin told her—this was how she felt when she was around boys she had a crush on. When Ellington began to speak, it was his voice more than his words that held her attention. He seemed to savor the taste of each word in his mouth before he spoke. By the time his enjoyment of the words he’d eaten reached through his voice to Anna’s ears, she was hungry for whatever the band was about to play.

Ellington turned, faced the orchestra, raised his arms, and shouted to the musicians. His arms jerked up and down in one motion, and a sudden blast of horns hit Anna with a sheet of heat. At the piano, Ellington’s fingers were knives and forks, sampling several notes at a time as though they were finger food. All during his hand race across the keyboard, he would grunt if something he played pleased him. His pace slowed and he lightened his touch as a saxophone player stepped up to the mic. Up on his feet again, Ellington whip-cracked his arms to urge him on. Thunderous booms from the drummer became louder, and people were jumping out of their seats to dance in the aisles between rows of folding chairs.

The whole stadium swayed to the tempo of Ellington’s orchestra. Anna was up on her feet, unable to take her eyes off of a Negro couple whose hands pulled each other in

close and then swung each other out at arm’s length while their loose-jointed legs hop-skipped at the same speed as the band. Their feet seemed to barely touch the ground, with the woman flipping the man over her head and the man flinging the woman between his legs without ever letting go of each other’s hands. It wasn’t until the music ended that Anna realized she had sweated through her blouse without ever having moved.

During an intermission, Anna’s father returned. “You enjoying the music?” he asked. Anna didn’t know what to say, since she thought enjoyment came from *doing* something that gave you pleasure. But she was getting pleasure without knowing what she’d *done* to feel as good as she did.

“Come with me a minute,” he said. She followed him to a huge tent behind the stage. Many of the musicians who’d played earlier were milling around. A man was seated in a chair with his legs stretched out. He seemed lost in thought, and the sag in his mouth and in the flesh around his eyes made him look very tired. “Maestro!” Jacob said. “I’d like you to meet my daughter, Anna. I thought it was time for my youngest princess to see how easy it is in America to meet a Duke.” He rose from his chair, took hold of Anna’s hands, and soaked her up in his eyes. Then she remembered. This “Duke” was the Ellington whose band had taken her breath away.

“Anna! It was such a pleasure when I first met you in your father’s words of praise. But now, as I meet you for the second time, I see that among the many gifts passed on to you by your parents was the saving grace of beauty inherited from your mother.”

Once again, Anna was enticed by the sound of his words while not understanding fully what he meant.

“What did you tell Mister Ellington about me?” she asked her father on the bus ride home.

“That you’re my last and most beautiful princess.”
“I don’t want you to talk about me like that.”
“Why not?”
“‘Cause I don’t feel that way.”
“But I do,” he said.
“What was he saying about me?”
“He was paying you a compliment.”
“Was he saying you had nothing to do with how I look?”

“He was just having a little fun with me.”
“It didn’t sound like fun to me.”
“Anna! You don’t know how good it makes me feel to have you defend me.”
“Now *you’re* making fun of me!”
“No, my princess,” he said, as laughter bounced around in his shoulders. “I’m making fun ‘with’ you.”
Anna turned her head away from her father, stared out the bus window, and wondered why she even bothered trying to talk to him about anything.
The following week, as Anna was on her way to the school lunchroom, she heard someone speaking softly near her shoulder. Turning around, she saw a boy whose lanky body leaned toward her without making direct eye contact. Anna had seen him around, and remembered hearing boys call him Doyle and girls call him a “geek.”
“You say something to me?” she asked.
“I saw you,” he said.
“Saw me? Where?”
“At Randall’s Island.”
“Oh!”
“You liked the music?”
“Yeah, I never heard anything like it before. And I liked the dancing too.”
“I know.”
“You go to things like that a lot?” she asked.
He nodded.
“Like where?”
“The Savoy.”
“Where’s that?”
“In Harlem.”
“It’s okay to go there?”
“I guess. Why not?”
“I don’t know. It’s like here at school. When it’s over, kids go back to their own neighborhood.”
“Yeah, but they all meet back at the Savoy on weekends.”
Something happened in his face that seemed to lift whatever bent him over, to straighten him so his bony elbows and knees weren’t poking out underneath his shirt and trousers.
“You wanna go sometime?” he asked.
“I don’t dance.”
“Neither do I.”
A chill went through Anna’s skin, and she wasn’t sure

if it was from being asked on a date or the chance to see people dance again the way they had at Randall’s Island.
Danny Doyle and Anna took the subway to the Savoy on a Friday night. The crowd at the entrance spilled over the sidewalk into the street. As they walked up two flights of marble steps, with mirrored walls on either side, the rumbling feet and shouting horns above them became louder. Entering the ballroom, they saw a runway stretching several hundred feet, with dancers hand-locked to one another, moving to the feverish tempo of the band playing in the spotlight on one of two huge platforms set against a wall. On the other platform, a second band waited in the shadows. Anna couldn’t believe it as the dancers took flight, looking as if they were about to reach the extremely low ceilings that curved into the walls.
All the seats were taken, and Danny pointed to a spot near the band where they could sit on the floor. Anna looked around and was surprised to see that most of the people were white. Those seated on either side of them, with arms wrapped around their knees, were riveted to the dancers, and tapped the floor with their Buster Browns and low-heeled ankle-strapped shoes.
“Come on,” a voice said above them. “Let’s see what you can do.”
Anna looked up, and a colored man with a pencil-line mustache and straight black hair glistening like patent leather held out his hand, a ring bulging from his pinky finger.
“I can’t dance,” she said.
“Don’t worry! I’ll fix that.”
Anna turned to Danny, whose attention was only on the band.
“Do you mind?”
“Oh! I didn’t hear you,” he said.
“Is it okay if I dance?”
“Yeah, if you want.”
Anna got up, and the man who’d asked her to dance looked at Danny as though he couldn’t believe what had just happened. Once on the dance floor, Anna was surprised by how she felt herself being guided more by the music than by her partner. She quickly caught on to what was called the “lindy hop,” with all of its nonstop movement—from holding on to the hand and waist of the other person, turning and being turned around by one arm like

a top, and swinging away from him as far as she could go without releasing his hand. She liked the feeling of a dance that put you in touch with someone in a way that never stayed the same—where your distance from the other person was always sliding between near and not so far. But the part of the lindy that frightened her was when her partner let go of her hand so he could dance on his own. Anna stood on the dance floor helpless, not knowing what to do next, until a colored girl came over and began showing her how to do what she called the “breakaway,” by raising one side of her skirt like an opened umbrella, and pointing a finger in the air and shaking it while bouncing to the beat of the drummer.

Anna and her partner, who introduced himself as Wardell, danced for several numbers after the first one, but never spoke. She didn’t care, because he didn’t take his eyes off her the whole time, which made it impossible for her to talk anyway. When they finally took a break, Wardell invited himself over to the spot on the floor where Danny was sitting.

“When you gonna hit the floor?” he asked.

“I already have,” Danny said.

“When? I didn’t see you out there.”

“I listen. For me, that’s the same as dancing.”

The confused look on Wardell’s face was the same as the one he had when Danny showed no interest in Anna and Wardell dancing together. He sat down next to Danny. They began talking, and made no effort to include Anna. At first, she felt left out. But as the evening wore on, Anna found herself not drawn as much to Wardell when they weren’t dancing. And he wasn’t that attentive, either, once they sat down. However, it all seemed to work out—with Anna and Wardell continuing to steam each other up on the dance floor; and in between, when they took a break, Danny and Wardell would put their heads together for a meeting of their minds on anything related to music. In one of the rare moments when Danny spoke in a full sentence, Wardell nodded his head in agreement.

“You know, Danny, you’re all right. You’re hip without trying to BE hip.”

During these conversations, colored girls would come over and pull Anna up from the floor to get her to dance with them. She couldn’t believe that she’d done anything so special as to make them want to seek her out. Anna

found herself not wanting to do what they were showing her as much as watch how their loose-fitting skirts and blouses, belted around the waist, gave them the freedom to take turns chasing each other through legs and over backs before their bodies collapsed from exhaustion at about the same time the band came in for a crash landing on its final note of the night. Anna left the Savoy feeling she had finally found something that really mattered.

* * *

For the next three years, Anna and Danny went to the Savoy almost every weekend. He was content to find a spot close to the bandstand, staying there the entire evening with his head tilted at an angle that allowed him to take full advantage of his gift for listening. Wardell was usually there; and when he and Anna weren’t dancing, she would find the group of Negro girls she’d become friendly with, especially one named Sylvia. They would dance together when there weren’t enough boys around, which became more frequent as talk of war grew louder. But it wasn’t so loud that Anna didn’t hear or see Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday with the Chick Webb and Count Basie bands.

The fact that Fitzgerald and Holiday were full-bodied women made Anna worry less about whether she had too much flesh on her bones. They were still in their twenties, and Anna liked the shy, carefree girlishness of Fitzgerald’s voice. When she sang, it was as though time stopped long enough for Anna to be a child again who skipped rope, recited nursery rhymes, and made up words like “Deedle-de-dum” before the hot hands of a grown-up world reached in to pull her back.

Unlike Ella’s, Billie Holiday’s voice was not a safe haven away from the gremlins and monsters in fairy tales or anywhere else. For Holiday, there didn’t seem to be a way to escape the harm that comes from living in the world. Her voice gave Anna the bad news whether she wanted to hear it or not. When Anna first heard Billie, she shuddered in a way similar to how it felt after the shot of vodka her father gave her to celebrate her eighteenth birthday. It was a small voice, the words coming out of her mouth in a naked stream of sound without a throat around it for protection. Billie seemed to lag behind the beat, not in any hurry to get where she would finally end up. But it was comforting for Anna to feel that Billie wasn’t taking her to

a place she wasn’t prepared to go herself. And there were the heart-stopping moments when Billie’s voice thickened, wrapping Anna in its broth to soothe her against the sting of the lyrics. But as different as they were, Ella and Billie loved the company of a song, whether they sang out of jeopardy or joy.

It was rare that a day passed when Anna and Danny didn’t spend some part of it together. She didn’t know quite what to do with her strong feelings for him, but hoped he would say something about his own feelings that would help her with hers. But it never happened. The only reason Anna could think of was the way she looked. However, she never saw him show interest in any other girl. There were times when she thought it was just her luck that the guy she felt closest to wasn’t interested in touching her or anyone else. And Wardell only seemed to want to be close to her on the dance floor. At other times, Anna wondered what she would’ve done if either of them had acted differently. But a part of her was glad she hadn’t found out.

* * *

Anna graduated from high school the year the war started. She began helping her mother in her work as a seamstress, which Anna was taught from the time she could thread a needle. Anna had noticed the drop-off in the numbers of people going to the Savoy. There just wasn’t the same feeling of wanting to have a good time that she remembered from the concert at Randall’s Island a few years before. Her father explained that the reason was because more and more families were getting the news of their husbands, brothers, and boyfriends being killed in the war. He also said that, among the musicians who came by Walgreen’s, there was talk of a group of newcomers who wanted to do more with their music than play in ballrooms. When Anna saw Danny, she asked him if he knew about any of this. Usually, whenever the subject of music came up, his excitement would nearly lift him off the ground. But something seemed to have gotten hold of Danny’s attention, pulling it away from Anna and her question.

“I’ve been hearing things,” he said without enthusiasm.

“Like what?”

“They’re meeting at places in Harlem and playing things people ain’t used to dancing to.”

“Have you heard them?”

*She liked the feeling of
a dance that put you
in touch with someone
in a way that never
stayed the same—where
your distance from
the other person was
always sliding between
near and not so far.*

Anna waited for an answer, but Danny’s eyes had already drifted away from her.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“It’s my heart.”

“What about it?”

“It’s not beating the way it should.”

“How do you know?”

“A doctor told me.”

“Did you feel like something was wrong before the doctor told you?”

“No.”

“So what made you go to the doctor?”

“I had to have a physical before I could join the army.”

“The army! You never told me you were thinking of doing that!”

“I was only thinking until last week. Then, the other day, I decided to stop thinking and just do it. And the doctor told me I couldn’t.”

“There’s no medicine you can take?”

“No.”

“So what’re you gonna do?”

RHONEL ROBERTS

Hugh Masekela, 2014
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

“Sit in an office doing paperwork at Fort Dix in New Jersey.”

“That’s important work too, isn’t it?”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

Anna winced. She’d never heard him raise his voice before.

“My father fought in the last war and wouldn’t even look at me after I told him. He said if I didn’t spend so much time listening to music and watching other people do things, I’d have a stronger heart.”

“Do you believe that?” Anna asked.

“I believe in doing what’s right. But it doesn’t matter what I believe, if my heart can’t take it.”

Nothing Anna said was able to pull Danny out of the pit of shame he’d dug for himself. And she didn’t quite understand why not being able to do something he believed in made him so upset. Most of what had always made her feel bad had had to do with things she believed about herself on the outside, not the inside. It had never really occurred to her that she could believe in things like Danny did and feel ashamed in a way that had nothing to do with how she looked. She wondered if the difference even mattered, since both of them still ended up feeling like shit.

One night at the Savoy, Wardell followed his usual practice of holding forth, especially when the audience included several women. He’d started wearing the latest style called the “zoot suit.” If Sylvia was in the group, Wardell made sure she received most of his attention. She was thick-limbed like Anna, and didn’t need pads in her dresses to accentuate the shoulders. Sylvia’s hair was usually teased up on top and cropped close at the temples, which highlighted her smooth apple-butter-brown skin against beautiful coconut-white teeth. Anna thought they hit it off so well because of how similar they were in size. Wardell would often say they were both built like a “brick shithouse,” making it sound like a compliment.

Wardell stood up and pulled everyone into his eyes who was waiting to hear what he had to say.

“My friend Danny and me are hip to the style that’s keeping up with the pace of music. When we make the scene together, I’m the mouthpiece, ’cause with Danny, ‘mum’s the word.’ So on behalf of both of us, I’m a give you the zoot suit tour.”

He proudly took hold of the lapels of his suit jacket.

“Notice my sadistic cape and its murderous shape, shiny as a halter. See how it’s draped, dropped, socked, and locked at the pocket. My pants make their entrance from my waist, wide as a boulevard, cruising down thirty-one inches to a knee that narrows politely to a twelve-inch cuff, making it necessary for me to grease my Garbos to slip ’em on. As for the flashy color of my zoot suit, the rainbow was my guide.”

Applause greeted Wardell’s butter-smooth way with words, and Anna could tell Danny’s spirits were lifted by the zoot suit routine. But the music that made their feet frisky on the floor of the Savoy was about to be stopped in its tracks. Without warning, in the spring of 1943, the police were ordered by the government to temporarily padlock the doors of the Savoy. Anna, Danny, Wardell, and Sylvia were among the angry crowd on the sidewalk in the front of the ballroom who heard it was closed because several servicemen had contracted venereal disease from women they met there.

“Do you think it’s true?” Anna asked.

“Shhiit!” Wardell hissed. “The only ‘vd’ those servicemen might’ve caught up here was of the ‘very dark’ variety.”

“You got that right!” Sylvia chimed in.

“But even if the government was really worried about ‘vd,’” Anna said, “I don’t ever remember seeing any G.I.’s trying to pick up colored girls.”

Anna thought she had given an example of the government looking for fire where there wasn’t even smoke. But she saw Danny drop his head, Wardell raise his, and Sylvia smile in her direction, which was hardly a welcome.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure I get your point, Anna,” Sylvia said. “Are you saying, since you never see white soldiers sniffing after colored girls, it doesn’t happen?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Maybe you were thinking it and that’s why it came out the way it did.”

Sylvia’s words had the sting of a slap in the face. Anna opened her mouth but could barely get the words out.

“I wasn’t thinking that!”

“Well, if you weren’t thinking it, that’s even worse!”

“Let it go, Sylvia,” Wardell said.

“Excuse me, Wardell. But we’re not on the dance floor

right now. So I'd appreciate you not telling me what I should let go of."

"What's this all about?"

"For a change, it's not about YOU!"

"Okay! Let's move it along!"

They all turned toward the voice, which belonged to one of the policemen.

"You're going to have to find some other place to jitterbug tonight."

The policemen started laughing and twirled their nightsticks. There was a lot of grumbling, but the crowd began to slowly disperse.

"You wanna go to the Apollo?" Danny asked. "There's some new musicians with the Earl Hines band I've been hearing a lot about."

"Not me," Sylvia said. "I'm gonna head on home."

She turned to Anna.

"Don't mind me. Those cops closing down the Savoy put me in a foul mood. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

Anna hesitated before speaking, wanting to make sure her words wouldn't be turned against her.

"You really think I could've meant to say the things you said and not know that's what I was saying?"

"I do it all the time," Sylvia said, laughing.

She began walking away, and shouted over her shoulder.

"See you, Anna. Danny. And since I can't help myself, I guess I'll see you too, Wardell."

"You still wanna go to the Apollo?" Danny asked.

"Yeah! Why not?" Wardell said. "If we can't change the story, we might as well change where it happens."

When Anna entered the lobby of the Apollo Theater, she was surprised to see her father. He already knew Danny. And when Anna introduced him to Wardell, something happened in their faces that disappeared as soon as a grin made a gated cave of both their mouths. Jacob Danova launched into how he was helping the Earl Hines band, setting up the microphones and taking care of other details involved with the performance at the Apollo. He then hurried off, saying he had some last-minute things to do. Anna wished Sylvia had decided to come. She would have loved to have seen her pick Wardell apart about what that grin on his face really meant.

After the musicians took their seats onstage, Anna's eyes were fixed on a man who had come out from behind the curtains. He faced the audience, flashing a wide toothy grin. Then, turning around to the band, he jabbed his finger to the left. There was a rush of sound from the trumpets and trombones, screeching slowly to a halt from an incredibly high speed. They gave way to the slow walk of the deep-in-the-throat saxophone voices, lasting long enough for the drummer to quicken the pace again as one of the trumpet players stood up. He blew into the horn and it cried out with a life of its own. As he breathed the trumpet, it spoke in sounds of laughter, anger, and mischief that grabbed hold of Anna and then were gone before they wore out their welcome. When he stopped playing, his body continued dancing the sounds his breath made through the horn.

At the other end of the bandstand, the last man in the saxophone section stood up. His fingers ran frantically over the keys of the horn. But the rest of his body was still as a stone. As sounds sped out of the saxophone, it was as if he were in a great hurry to get somewhere he'd only heard about. But once getting there, he was off and running to find another place he'd never been before. He didn't play very long, but Anna's flesh was pebbled with bumps by the time he sat down. There was also something cautious playing out behind the stillness of his chubby face that seemed to know that terrible things can happen when pouring out so much of yourself for all to see. Having only begun to come out of her cocoon when she'd started going to the Savoy, Anna had some inkling of what this man was risking. If the trumpet player, who'd taken the earlier solo, was concerned with any of this, he didn't show it. He was having too much fun blowing the sounds he heard in his head and listening to the rest of the band shouting back at him through every bone and joint of his body.

Just before the man, who must have been Earl Hines, signaled the band to begin the next number, a man with "take-your-breath-away" good looks walked out onstage. Stepping in front of the mic, his luscious smile and teeth let it be known that he knew how easy he was on the eyes. His voice came up from the well of his chest, slid back down even deeper, and then climbed back up the rung of notes in his throat. The words streamed out of him, and

he shaped his mouth in a way that stretched them out as if they were elastic.

Before the next number, Hines announced that he was pleased to introduce their new vocalist, who'd recently joined the band after winning first prize in an amateur night at the Apollo the year before. When he said the name "Sarah Vaughan," a woman whom Anna had barely noticed got up from the piano and walked over to the mic next to the other singer, who was introduced as Billy Eckstine. There didn't seem to be much more to her than skin and bones. Her slip was showing from beneath a dress that didn't quite fit, and her stockings were a little baggy around the ankles. But when she lifted her chin and opened her mouth to join Eckstine in a duet, a voice with wings soared higher and plunged deeper into its top and bottom than any Anna had ever heard. She opened her mouth and took a deep breath, wanting to inhale the singer's voice out of the air and into herself. The band was close behind the flight of the duet, reminding Anna of the flocks of pigeons in Central Park bearing down on every twist and turn of the two birds leading all the rest.

After the show, Jacob asked if Anna, Danny, and Wardell wanted to go backstage and meet the musicians. But they were in too much of a daze to speak. He shook his head and motioned for them to follow him. Laughter and random sounds from instruments surrounded them as they entered the room where many of the band members had gathered.

Earl Hines greeted them, his face still split wide open in a grin.

"Who's this you brought with you, Jacob?"

"This is my daughter, Anna, and her friends, Danny and..."

Anna could see there was no strain in Wardell's smile this time. He seemed to be enjoying her father's struggle to remember his name.

"Wardell," he said.

"Wardell!" Hines said. "You play saxophone?"

"No sir. I don't."

"That's good, 'cause you'd be in a world of hurt having to live up to your namesake, Wardell Gray."

Some of the musicians looked over in their direction at the mention of the name.

"We have some special guests," Hines said, turning to where many in the room were sitting or standing. "This is Jacob's kid, Anna, and her friends. I'd appreciate it if you'd put a lid on the profanity and take some time with these young people and answer any questions they may have."

"We'll do it, Gate," a musician called out, "if you'll seal up that grin on your face for at least one day."

"Can't do that. It's my trademark."

"So is the story true about you giving up so much ivory one time that the muscles froze and you had to have somebody massage your cheeks to get the grin off your face?"

The whole room erupted. Anna and Wardell had to struggle to keep from laughing. But Danny was so focused on the lead saxophone player in the band that he probably hadn't heard what was said.

"Hey, I admit I might've gone too far," Hines said. "But a lot of you young fellas get moody and down in the mouth when something goes wrong. And you bring that onstage... I remember when Billy first started with me, he'd get so angry about one thing or another that when he bent over to take his bow, both hands would be balled into fists. The audience was so put off by his attitude that they didn't give enough applause to bring him back up. So we had to take him off stage just like that."

"Oh man, get out a here with that nonsense," the man said, as the trumpet player, who'd taken several solos during the show, led the rising tide of laughter filling the room while slapping palms with other musicians.

"Billy! Tell 'em!" Hines said. "If I'm lying, I'm flying!"

"I don't remember it exactly that way, Gate," Eckstine said. "But like always, I'm impressed by your recovery."

"You know me, B. No matter how bad things get, you never let an audience peep your hold card. It's like I been telling my bands for years: even if you have holes in your shoes..."

But before Hines could finish his sentence, all the band members shouted in unison:

"Shine the tops!"

There was another round of laughter before things quieted down.

"By the way, Jacob," Hines said. "I wanna talk to you about a few things for tomorrow night's show."

Jacob and Hines left the room. Sarah Vaughan was

sitting in a corner with Eckstine and a few other musicians. Anna turned to Danny and Wardell. They looked as nervous as she was.

“I’m John Birks Gillespie,” the trumpet player said, shaking each of their hands and giving them the once-over. “Look out, now! We got two suits, one regular and the other a zoot. And Anna, who’s very cute.”

Vaughan covered her mouth but a giggle came out anyway. That was the last sound Anna expected to hear from someone whose voice must have been handed down from God! She was acting like any other star-struck bobby soxer! Anna began to feel more at ease. The saxophone player, who still had Danny’s complete attention, nodded his head slightly; his cheeks pulled a smile into his mouth and his eyes took snapshots of the three visitors.

Eckstine’s stare was his only reaction to Gillespie’s remark. He had loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt, allowing the huge collar to spread out like a pair of wings. Suddenly, Anna caught sight of his hands. They were huge, with thick fingers and manicured nails the size of quarters, making them look like claws. As much as he’d made her swoon earlier, his eyes didn’t invite her to move closer the way Ellington’s had. They seemed to say: Come on, I dare you! And the mustache hovering just above the outline of his upper lip had Anna wondering if it might be hiding a snarl behind his gorgeous mouth. He was a little scary. But she had to admit—that excited her.

“I’ll be back,” Eckstine said, looking at Vaughan before he stood up. It happened very quickly, but Anna saw his hardened stare dissolve into something soft that lightened the air and caused Vaughan to blush.

“I hope you kids come back again before we close,” he said on his way out.

Anna could sense Vaughan sizing her up with a raised eyebrow as soon as Eckstine was gone. Had she done something wrong again without realizing it? Maybe it was staring and catching the singer in an unguarded moment. Finally, the curve of her eyebrow flattened and she poked her lips out, playfully, in a pout.

“Where’d you get that dress?” she asked.
“My mother made it.”
She walked over to Anna and fingered the beaded cut-out trim on the sleeve, above her elbow.

“You think she could make me one like this?”

“I hope to God she can,” someone shouted behind them.

Earl Hines had come back into the room.
“With a champagne voice like yours, it’s a shame for you to be going out onstage looking like homemade sin in a beer wardrobe.”

Anna couldn’t believe he could say something so cruel. But Vaughan didn’t seem upset by it.

“Don’t you worry none, Gate. I’ll have all that taken care of sooner than you think. But if you don’t quit bugging me about it, I’m a take this champagne voice of mine and leave you with an ill wind from my behind on the way out the door. After that, they won’t be calling you ‘Gate’ no more. You’ll be known as ‘Tight Lips!’”

A chorus of sidesplitting laughter followed Vaughan’s quick comeback.

“You somethin’ else!” Hines said, shaking his head.
“I know it,” she said. “You the one who needs to be reminded.”

“You’re right! I almost forget. Somebody from the *Daily News* wants to get some pictures of you and Billy outside the theater.”

“Don’t go anywhere, honey,” she said to Anna. “We need to talk more about them dresses your mama makes.”

Danny and Wardell had summoned the courage to move to the spot where Gillespie and the saxophone player were standing. Anna decided to eavesdrop, as she usually did when Danny and Wardell talked at the Savoy.

“Either of you play an instrument?” Gillespie asked.
“No,” Wardell said.

Danny shook his head.
“So what are you into?”
“Trying to find what you already have.”
“How’s that working out?”
“Mostly trial and error,” Wardell said.

“Don’t worry about the errors,” the saxophonist said, speaking for the first time. “They’ll take care of themselves. Finding something of value that’ll put you through the necessary changes is the hard part.”

His voice reminded Anna of Eckstine’s. It had the same deep, down-in-the-barrel quality but without any frills.

“Have you fellas answered the call from the UNCLE of us all?” Gillespie asked.

Danny dropped his head so as not to meet anyone’s eyes.

“What’s the matter?”
“His ticker’s not up to par,” Wardell said, pointing to his chest.
“What about yours?”
“My heart’s fine, but Uncle Sam felt it wasn’t in the right place.”
“Why not?”

“I was a little wild when I was younger. So the army decided I wasn’t desirable for military service.”
“The same thing happened to me,” Gillespie said. “All because I’ve used a blade from time to time to get a point across.”

Anna couldn’t tell if Gillespie was serious or just having fun like he did onstage.

“So you don’t agree with what Mister Hines said about acting like you’re enjoying yourself, even when you’re not?” Wardell asked.

A smile settled into Gillespie’s mouth. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a switchblade, and snapped it open.
“Nobody loves sharing the enjoyment of performing more than I do. So I’m with Gate on that. Of course, up to a point.”

Gillespie touched the tip of the blade with his finger, and then closed the knife, putting it back in his pocket. The conversation got around to the closing of the Savoy. And the saxophone player explained how this could hurt morale at home and raise questions about the democracy America was fighting to protect overseas. He seemed to know his way around words very well. He then looked directly at Danny.

“What do you think?” he asked.
“I agree with you,” Danny said.
“That’s not what I asked you.”

He picked up his horn, started playing, and stared at Anna. Danny began to shake, and held on to the back of a chair for support.

“I don’t like what you just did,” he said.
“I didn’t think you would,” the saxophone player said.
“But I found out what you think.”

Anna saw the musicians exchanging glances. But everyone, including Danny and Wardell, seemed to avoid looking at her. A high, piercing note from a trumpet broke

the silence, and the other musicians buckled over into laughter.

“You are a rascal, Charles Parker Jr.,” Gillespie said.
“Do either of you fellas play anything at all?” Parker asked.

“I play a fair game of pool,” Wardell said.
“Ahhh, a worthy adversary! And you?” he said, turning to Danny. Danny loosened his grip on the chair.
“I listen and watch what other people do.”

“Okay,” Parker said. “Why don’t you come along with Wardell and me around the corner and watch us play some pool.”

Whatever took place between the time Parker began to play and Gillespie blew his high note wasn’t at all clear to Anna. She had been around Danny and Wardell long enough not to be bothered by conversations between men that didn’t include her. But Anna had never been in the company of men who talked about HER as though she wasn’t there. She asked herself which was worse: thinking out loud in a way that couldn’t be understood, or speaking without thinking and being misunderstood, which was what Sylvia had accused her of doing earlier that evening.

* * *

Despite the upsetting incident backstage at the Apollo, an incredible new world opened up to Anna. Through Lila Danova’s gifted hands and Anna’s assistance, Sarah Vaughan’s wardrobe expanded and became more worthy of her extraordinary voice. Lila and Sarah took to one another immediately. And Anna was surprised by how comfortable her mother was around Sarah when speaking her Russian-flavored English.

Lila taught Sarah Russian expressions, and loved how she would, with great dramatic flair, repeat them with perfect inflections. Sarah also helped Lila improve her English, adding scat words to her vocabulary like “Oop-Pop-a-da” and “Ool-ya-koo” that had her giggling like a schoolgirl. Anna watched the closeness develop between her mother and Sarah and couldn’t help feeling more than a little jealous.

When Sarah was in New York, Anna spent some part of every day with her, going over minor alterations in dresses and gowns and discussing what was appropriate to wear at the band’s next appearance. During their time

together, Anna watched this girl, who was the same age as she was, fight off insults aimed at her skinny legs and protruding front teeth with the foulest mouth she'd ever heard on a woman. It came as no surprise to Anna when she learned that the other members of the band referred to Sarah as "the Sailor."

* * *

Danny and Wardell were spending more and more time around Charles Parker, or "Bird," as he was called. Whenever he played, they were there. Even when he wasn't playing, they seemed to have a pretty good idea where to find him. Anna was kept busy with Sarah's wardrobe and didn't see either of them very much. One night she met Sylvia at the Savoy after it reopened. When Anna told her about hearing Sarah, Eckstine, Gillespie, and Parker for the first time at the Apollo, Sylvia didn't understand how anyone could just sit and listen to music and not end up dancing. Anna wanted to talk with Danny about this, but most of all about what had happened backstage at the Apollo. She couldn't believe it when he refused to tell her what Parker had done that made him so upset.

"But why won't you tell me?" she asked.
"I don't have to tell you. You were there."
"But I don't know what it meant. Like why was Bird staring at me? And why didn't anyone look at me?"
"I don't know about that."
"Why are you treating me like this?"
"It was something between Bird and me. When he said he wanted to know what I thought, it was like he was giving me the recognition that the army didn't. For someone who plays the way he does, to do that..."
How could he do this to her? They had danced so well together in their heads. But Anna could feel Danny letting go of her in a version of the "breakaway" move from the lindy hop.
"What about me, Danny? What about recognizing me?"

Anna was surprised when Danny did something he'd never done before. He reached out, grabbed her hand, and held it tightly. He stared at her without speaking, and continued to squeeze her hand until she pulled it away.
"That hurts!" she said.
"You see," Danny said.

"See what?"
"That's what Bird's music lets me do for as long as I want."
"I can't compete with his music."
"I'm not asking you to. But he's given me something I need to be around as much as I can."
"And if I could do that for you, would you still keep things from me?"
"But you can't. You pulled your hand away."
Anger flashed in Anna's eyes and worked its way down the side of her face into her shoulders, arms, and hands. Her fingers closed into two fists, and she thrust her arms forward with all her might into Danny's chest. The shove knocked him off his feet, and when he fell to the floor, he opened his arms as though ready to be embraced. Anna's whole body shook from a feeling she couldn't name, until she saw Danny looking up at her. It was the same disbelief he'd had on his face that first time at the Savoy, when he'd sat close to the stage so he could feel the sounds from the band hitting him. And then Anna realized she was shaking the way she had on that same night at the Savoy, when her body had done things on the dance floor she hadn't known it could do. Anna had no way of knowing if being knocked down had given Danny the kind of pleasure that knocking him down had given her. And she didn't bother to ask.
The next afternoon, Anna was in the dressing room of a club, doing some alterations on one of Sarah's gowns. She was lost in thoughts of the day before and didn't realize Sarah was speaking to her.
"Anna, you've been in a cloud ever since you got here. What's the matter?"
"It's nothing."
"Does that spell Danny or Wardell?"
"It's not what you think. We've all been friends for years. I've known Danny since high school."
"Go on!" Sarah said, impatient for Anna to get to the tasty part.
"The night we met you and the band at the Apollo, Bird played something backstage that upset Danny. Yesterday we had a big argument, when he wouldn't tell me what happened or say why Bird was staring at me while he was playing."
"Oh! So that's it!"

"You knew about it?"
"Of course. I'm in the band! I'm not a civilian like you."
"Tell me then!" Anna pleaded.
"Bird gives everything he's got when he plays. So if somebody tries to get close to him, he figures turnabout is only fair play. He wanted Danny to show something of what's inside him. When he didn't do it, Bird looked at you and played a few bars of 'You Go To My Head.' You can figure out for yourself which head he had in mind."
Anna sat very still, hoping for a different meaning to come to her other than the one Sarah had given. But the only thing that came was the taste of food backing up in her throat.
"What about what's inside me?" she said.
"It wasn't about you."
"Then why was I dragged into it?"
"Don't try to make more of it than it was, Anna. It just happened to be you."
"What do you mean?"
Sarah arched an eyebrow, surprised at being asked to explain.
"Have you seen any other females in this band other than the one you're talking to? Trust me, honey. There're times when all I want is to be ignored by some of these lame-assed men."
"How do you deal with it?"
"I don't. I deal 'in' it."
"So you get down and dirty just like the men."
"I get down, so I won't get dirty. Ask any man in the band. Nobody wipes their shoes on me."
"I don't see the difference."
"It doesn't matter if you do or not. Yeah, we have fun, bad-mouthing each other. But that's no different from what happens when we play. Either way, you have to bring something to sit at the table. If it's not enough, you can always come back, as long as you bring more than thin skin. And that ain't dirty, Anna. That's respect for what it takes to make the music we wanna hear."
Anna wondered whether she should've been tougher-skinned when Danny's harsh words bit into her.
"I got so angry with Danny that I pushed him down," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have gotten so upset."
Sarah gave her a playful punch on the arm.
"For a civilian, I like it that you stick up for yourself."

"Why wouldn't he tell me what happened? That's all I wanted."
"You're fooling yourself. You would've wanted more, and he wasn't gonna give it to you. Face it. Danny quit you for Bird. Don't sweat it. There's a long line of folks ahead of you."
"But I told you. It wasn't like THAT between us."
"Might as well have been."
Anna didn't want to hear anymore. She felt Sarah had only made a half-hearted effort to take her side when she needed to be told she was right to feel the way she did. But there was no way around the fact that Danny had moved away from her and put his heart into Bird's music, something the army said it wasn't strong enough to do in the war. And if Sarah was right to call her a civilian, she needed to find another one to talk to.
Anna ran into Wardell later that day and was surprised to find out he and Danny hadn't been spending very much time together. Danny had wound himself so tightly around Bird that Wardell felt there wasn't much room left for him. And once he'd opened up about the change in his friendship with Danny, Anna felt comfortable enough to reveal what she'd learned from Sarah and ask why he hadn't told her about it.
"I didn't think it was my place to say anything," he said.
"Why not? Aren't we friends?"
"Yeah, but not like you and Danny."
"That hasn't been true since he met Mister Charles Parker."
Wardell nodded in agreement.
"Danny did the same thing to me. But I can't understand how this could've happened."
"The last time we talked," Anna said, "he held on to my hand so tight I had to pull it away. Then he said, when Bird played, he could hold on as long as he wanted."
"Right!" Wardell said excitedly. "That reminds me of something that happened a few weeks ago. The three of us were walking in Riverside Park when Bird stops and takes his saxophone out of the case. Then he says to us: 'You two are always telling me how much you love the music. If you do, I want to see how much of yourselves you're willing to give up for it. Hold your breath while I play.' Bird starts blowing and we both inhale. I only last about a minute before gasping for breath. But Danny continues to hold his.

It’s like he was getting air through his ears from listening to Bird. He finally stops and nods to Danny who starts breathing again like it’s no strain at all. Bird hugs both of us and there’re tears in his eyes. He looks at me and says, ‘Don’t feel bad that you couldn’t do what Danny did. It’s not that you love the music less. He just needs it more. When I have a bad day, even the music’s not enough. But it’s all Danny ever needs. Maybe some of what he’s got will rub off on me... You be careful, now. Because that’ll help you to be good.’ Then he and Danny walk off, leaving me standing there.”

“Sarah said I was a civilian,” Anna said. “I guess you’re one too.”

“What does that make Danny?”

“Not a civilian.”

“Maybe so. But he can’t dance like we do,” Wardell said.

That night they went to the Savoy, and Anna felt the heat that dancing always generated between them. But it wasn’t just the sweat that kept them hot. It was anger, keeping their temperatures rising even after they left for the evening. They walked without really knowing where they were going, and ended up near Wardell’s apartment building in the San Juan Hill section of Manhattan. They sat on a park bench, not talking or looking at each other. A few people walked by but they paid no attention to them.

“Well now!” a familiar voice said. “What have we here?”

Anna and Wardell jumped at the sight of Billy Eckstine.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” he said with a grin that wasn’t sorry at all. “You know, I’ve seen you two dance at the Savoy, and you’re usually the ones surprising everybody else. It’s not a good sign to be out here at this late hour, looking like you been caught doing something you’re not sure you ought to do.”

Anna could feel his chilly stare that always made her uncomfortable.

“Get up for a minute,” he said, in a tone that wasn’t a request. They got up and stood on either side of him. Eckstine put his arms around them, resting his huge hands on their shoulders. He spoke just above a whisper and Anna smelled alcohol on his breath.

“It’s not easy finding a special place where you can always count on having a good time with people you care about. But if you’re lucky enough to find such a place, you don’t want to ruin it by shitting where you eat.”

Eckstine took his arms away and walked off without another word.

“I guess that’s the voice of experience,” Wardell said.

“I guess.”

“Your father would probably agree.”

“What do you mean?” Anna asked, but already knew the answer.

“Come on, Anna! You’ve seen the way he looks at me.”

“But he’s never said anything to me.”

“Why should he? He’s getting what he wants without having to.”

“What’s that, Wardell?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to get into that right in front of my building.”

“You’re right. We should be careful. Because like Bird told you, that’ll help us to be good.”

They didn’t speak. But something in Wardell’s face told Anna that, like her, he wasn’t in the mood to be careful or good. And then, as if on cue, they reached out to each other and lindy-hopped into the building.

Like Anna and Wardell, Dizzy and Bird fade out the same way they began, creeping along and hesitating as they grope in the dark for another moment for everyone listening to dream in.

Wesley Brown is the author of the novels *Tragic Magic*, *Darktown Strutters*, and *Push Comes to Shove*, and the produced plays *Boogie Woogie* and *Booker T*, *Life During Wartime*, and *A Prophet Among Them*. He is co-editor of the multicultural anthologies *Imagining America* (fiction) and *Visions Of America* (nonfiction), and editor of *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. He also wrote the narration for a segment of the PBS documentary, *W.E.B. Dubois: A Biography in Four Voices*. He is Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University, currently teaches literature at Bard College at Simon’s Rock, and lives in Spencertown, New York.

RHONEL ROBERTS

John Handy, 2012
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24



COURTESY THE ARTIST