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THE CIVIL DEFENSE FIASCO

ROBERT MOSES



Inside Samarkand and Other Unlikely Places

John Gunther

What Happened to the Farm Bloc?

Carroll Kilpatrick

The Huddleston Jazz Band

Rev. Trevor Huddleston

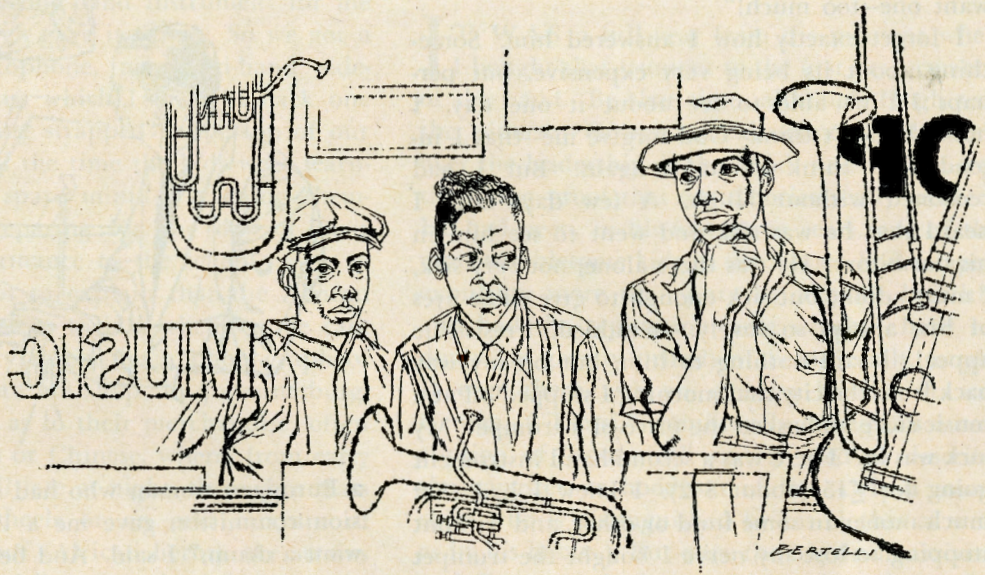
Intelligence Services:
Their Use and Misuse

Harold Nicolson

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By the Rev. Trevor Huddleston, C.R.

Drawings by Joseph Bertelli



The Huddleston Jazz Band

A teen-ager who dreamed of playing the trumpet and an Anglican monk who was determined to dent the South African color barrier turn jazz into a lively crusade.

IT ALL started, really, with Yehudi Menuhin. He had come from the United States to give a series of concerts in South Africa, and, typically, had insisted on playing to an African audience—an audience which, otherwise, would have no opportunity of hearing him. As we drove out of Johannesburg to the church in Sophiatown—the black district which most people would describe as a slum, but which to me is home—he turned and said: “Remember, Father, it was the Negro jazz bands which first broke the color bar in America. . . .”

About four years later, when I had left Sophiatown and was living at another of our missions in Johannesburg, Menuhin’s words came back to me with strange and persistent force. I was in my office one morning when Hugh walked in. He was one of the smallest boys in the school and one of the most mischievous and attractive. His

home was Alexandra Township, a compact but densely populated African suburb just outside Johannesburg: a place where 80,000 of Johannesburg’s black labor force made their homes. I know it well.

I know its streets, dusty, rutted, and teeming with children. I know its crowded back yards and the hundreds of corrugated-iron shacks which serve as houses. And I know, too, the many little groups of teen-age lads called “tsotsis,” who stand or squat all day at the corners dicing and rotting away in idleness, or, at night prowling like wolf packs and pouncing from the darkness with knives in their hands. You don’t have too much respect for human life or human dignity in Alexandra, because nobody cares what happens to Alexandra anyway.

Hugh’s father, a fine man, was one of the comparatively few African social workers in that area—and a sculptor in his spare time. And Hugh was in his early days at our high school—St. Peters, Rosetteunthe. So he walked into my office, sat down on the arm of my chair, pulled at each of his fingers till the joints cracked (a sign, always, of embarrassment), then suddenly took my hand in his and said, “Father, I want a trumpet. . . .” Before I could say anything he

went on, "You see, Father, I *know* I can be a musician—any kind of a musician—classic or jazz—but specially jazz. Like Louis Armstrong. My father won't believe I mean it. But I'm serious, Father. Can't you get me a trumpet, Father? I want one—too much!"

I forget exactly how I answered him. Something about its being very expensive, but perhaps I'd be able to see about it one day. I honestly don't think—God forgive me—that I intended to think about it again. But I had reckoned without Hugh. A few days later I heard that he was sick and went to see him in his dormitory. He was there alone, not *very* sick, I must admit, but sick enough to give those eyes of his, always so lovely, an added, irresistible appeal. I said nothing to him, but on my way back from the city that morning I stopped off at a music store and asked the price of a trumpet. My luck was in. There was a second-hand instrument going for £15 (about \$42). I knew I had *that* much money in some fund or other, and without stopping to lose my nerve I bought the trumpet and took it straight back to Hugh. That was sufficient reward.

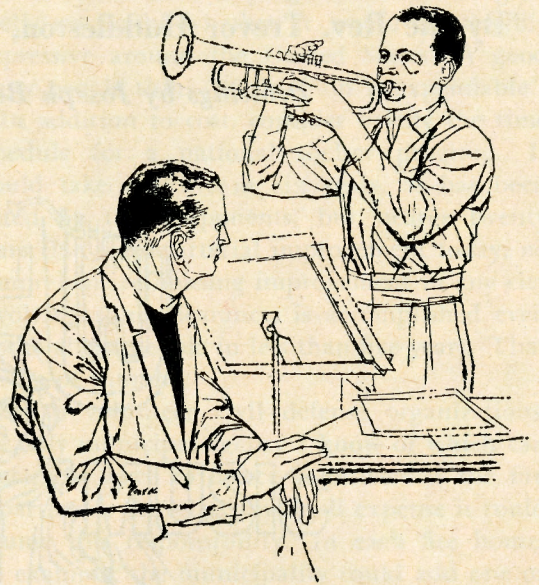
As soon as he was well, Hugh began practicing, and for two months I wondered what in Heaven's name had induced me to get such an instrument. For the one thing about a trumpet you *can* be sure of is that, whatever it is, it will be heard. There was another and deeper reason for my anxiety—would any small boy persevere through all the dreary hours of practice, when it must seem as if the Louis Armstrongs of this world are born and not made?

And then—so obvious, but somehow so unexpected—other boys beside Hugh came to my office and said, "We want to learn an instrument." And it began.

THE URGE TO BEG

I BELONG to a monastic order and therefore, since I have taken the vow of poverty, I have no money of my own. If a jazz band was to materialize I would have to beg the instruments or the money to buy them with or both. In fact it took me two years to get all the instruments we needed; two years during which the urge to beg was so insistent that it was almost like the urge to drink or narcotics—at least I suppose so. But I was lucky.

There was the drum set, for instance. We didn't have very high ambitions at first; just a single bass drum and something to hit it with would do. And one afternoon a friend of mine,



a European woman who had served on the mission committee, gave me a lift in her car. "I want a drum," I said. And before she could ask too much I was explaining the whole thing to her, trying to make her catch the vision I had caught from Menuhin—the vision of African jazz bands as a way to freedom.

"But I'm off to England in three days," she said.

"Well, you can bring that drum to the Priory before you go—please."

And, within a few hours, she drove up to our gates and unloaded a magnificent, deep-throated, booming bass. We were getting started.

But I did not know then just what vaulting ambitions would grip the boys when once they saw instruments of their own; when once I had opened the door to that new world which, for all of them until then, had lain behind the plate-glass windows of music stores or the glossy pages of magazines. To hold in your hands a golden trumpet; to twang the strings of a curved and polished bass—that is an unspeakably wonderful and exhilarating experience. But the cost, particularly the cost of saxophones, was a bit frightening.

I had tea one afternoon with a woman whom I knew to be interested in African problems. I dared to mention my dream. "A saxophone? How much would that be?" And then would come the long weeks of suspense, wondering whether she had really cared, whether she was ready to help still, and the kids, waiting, not too patiently, for the next mad moment when a new instrument would arrive. I would have to screw up my courage to telephone and find out—oh! so

tactfully—whether in fact the promise had been remembered.

Some of the smaller instruments like the clarinets came to hand more easily. I made friends with a musical instrument dealer in town who kept any likely second-hand instrument for me and sometimes even gave it to me. So we got a battered old saxophone, a second-hand side-drum, a strong-bass which I brought back one memorable morning strapped to the top of our small car. And all the time the kids were learning, using every spare minute, teaching themselves by ear, preparing for the day of their first public performance to the school.

I ought perhaps to explain that the African boy in the city listens to jazz whenever he can. Of course, he very rarely has a phonograph of his own. But there are shops in Johannesburg, strangely assorted as to their merchandise, often owned by Indians or Chinese, where, from early in the morning till late at night, through a mass of old bicycle wheels or an odd mixture of medicines and *muti* (African herbs), the strains of “bop” and “Dixie” meet and mingle with the crisp high-veld air. And outside those shops, in the “native” quarter of the city or at the corner of the Township Street, there will be a small crowd of African youngsters listening: their bodies swaying, their feet tap-tapping—and sometimes, when the music is too wonderful, they will join hands and dance.

Frequently in Sophiatown, that dusty outpost of urban Africa, you will hear “Satchmo’s” horn and see the rhythm of many brown, bare feet. Yes, the African boy can tell you, generally, all about the latest techniques in America, and the names of those who develop them. Even now as I write this article in the United States, I have before me an air-mail letter from Hugh himself. It came yesterday and he wrote:

How’s the States? . . . How I wish I were you, Father. I don’t think me and you’ll ever meet again unless you come to South Africa. . . . I will be happy if you could get me a jazz pen-pal over that side, especially one who is interested in bop. My favorites are Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Lee Konitz, Oscar Peterson, Lester Young. If you could get me their records, I will be much obliged. . . .

It is from gramophone records that the band gets its only real idea of how jazz ought to be played—records which are far too expensive to be theirs in any number and which are played ragged from overuse. Now that I am recalled to England, it won’t be too easy to meet Hugh’s

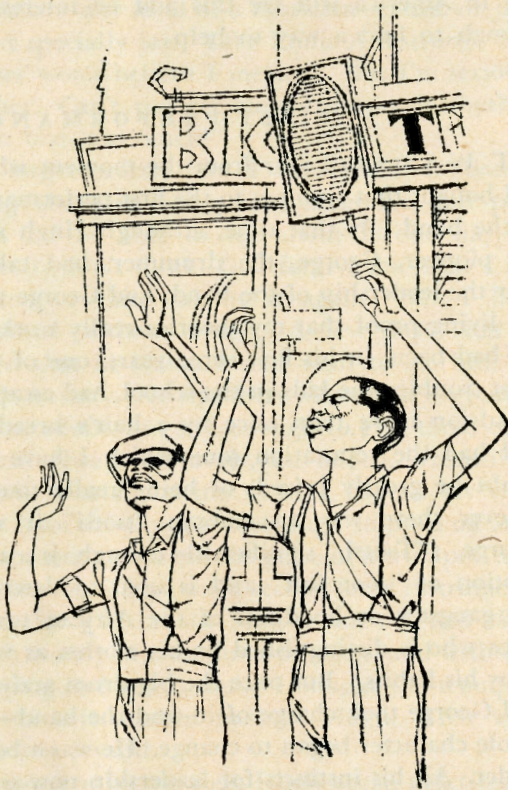
longings, and I can only hope that perhaps someone in America will see this and be interested enough to find a way to help.

FIRST PERFORMANCE

IT WAS a full year from the moment when I bought that trumpet to the first performance of the band. By that time, although Hugh was the pioneer, George, the drummer, had taken over the leadership of the band; and George was the living proof that my theories really worked. He had been, in his first three years, one of the most troublesome kids in the school, had escaped expulsion more than once by a hair’s breadth, and had the reputation (one which I have no doubt he greatly prized) of being really tough. If ever there was an embryo “tsotsi” it was George. (“Tsotsi,” significantly enough, is a corruption of “zoot suit” and is used to describe the gangster or hoodlum of the African townships who is distinguished by his clothes as well as by his habits.) But once the big drum arrived, and George took charge of it—and the band—his whole character began to change. He was a born leader. All his instincts for leadership now were directed into this new and thrilling business of molding the band; all his toughness was energized into the skillful beating of the bass-drum, the tender, tight tattooing of the side-drum.

They spent the whole morning preparing the stage—and our hall had very little about it that was attractive enough for the purpose. But when all was ready and the curtains (green calico, sagging in the middle) drawn, there stood revealed against a backcloth some shining, spangled letters “H.J.B.” and, painted on the face of the drum the legend “Huddleston Jazz Band.”

I cannot, in honesty, pretend that the first performance reached a very high artistic level. For one thing some of the instruments were so old that it was impossible to tune them properly. For another, in their great enthusiasm, there was a tendency for the band to draw out every tune to its maximum length, and to play it (with variations) on every instrument they had. But certainly they had an appreciative audience. And from that moment there was ever fiercer competition to learn an instrument, and I had somehow to contrive a system of practicing which would allow each boy his turn. I also saw, unmistakably, that the time had come for better instruments and for professional help. Both were forthcoming, though it took me another year before I had reached the end—or the beginning—of my endeavors.



There are, in Johannesburg, two or three really good white jazz bands; and there is a very big white public for them. Consequently, one evening two or three years ago the City Hall was packed with three thousand hep-cats, jazz-maniacs, or what you like—and I was there. For one thing, the proceeds of this concert were to be given to a scheme I had for building a swimming pool for Africans. I sat near the stage and watched, fascinated, the amazing technique of Bob Hill, recognized as one of the best string-bass players in England and now settled in Johannesburg. Bob and I soon became buddies. For one thing he served behind the counter in the largest music store in the city, and he was always ready to help me choose the right instrument (and knock a few pounds off the price). For another, he was genuinely interested in African musicians and especially in their longing for good jazz—a rare thing to find in white South Africa.

When I knew that I was to go back to England, I turned to Bob for help. "Will you look after these kids for me? See that they keep together, give them the advice they need? Perhaps rehearse them and protect them from any sharp practice? Bob gave his word, and I heard later from Hugh that he is doing all he can to help and encourage them. But that is to anticipate, as Hugh would say, "too much."

All of us went out and begged. A wealthy

school organized a fete (through one of my friends whose children attended it) and raised enough money to buy a really good alto sax. Alan Paton, author of *Cry the Beloved Country* and one of my oldest and dearest friends, came one day with a check as a thank offering for his own holiday; that meant another trumpet. Occasional secret donations to be used at my discretion provided us with two shining and superb trombones—and so it went on. I never had to look after the band—it looked after itself. My only worry was to prevent the kids playing when they ought to be doing their schoolwork. In this I was not always too successful.

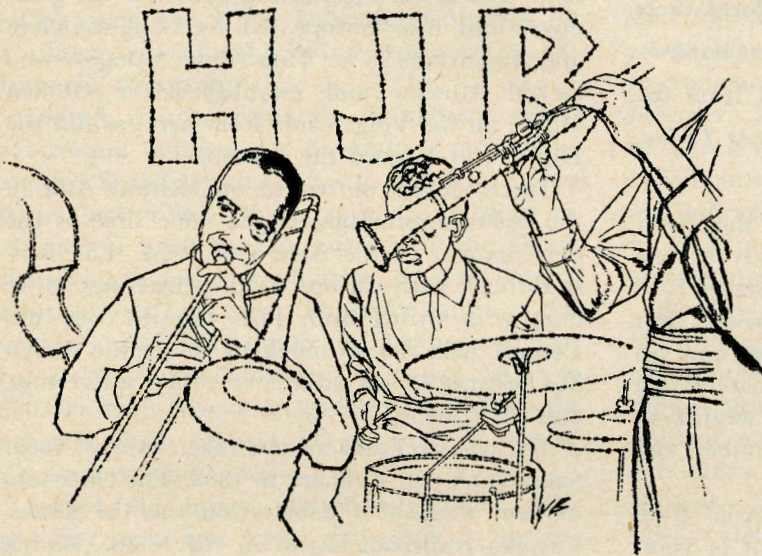
A SAX FROM SKOURAS

AT LAST we had everything a band could need—except the most expensive instrument of all—a tenor saxophone. I have always believed that, if you want something urgently enough you will get it. I wanted that tenor sax. And I had no money to buy it with. But it was just then that I read in the newspaper that Spyros P. Skouras, head of Twentieth Century-Fox, was visiting Johannesburg in connection with a big movie deal. It happened that, three years previously, I had met Mr. Skouras at a tea party. I was sure he would not remember me, but at least it gave me an opening. For three days I tried vainly to make contact with him, and each time I tried I was put off by some secretarial watchdog with a pleasant voice and firm procrastinating excuse. But at last (miraculously I believe) I got through on the telephone to Spyros P. Skouras himself. "What do you want, Father?" "A saxophone—a tenor saxophone for my jazz band." "How much does it cost?" I drew a deep breath, said a brief prayer, answered, as firmly and confidently as I knew how, "Eighty-five pounds." "Well—you're a gold-digger, but you can have it. Send the account to me." Within an hour, in my bedroom at the priory, that glistening, golden thing was there in its case—and the band, *my* band—was all around me gazing at it in wonder and in an enraptured silence. *We had arrived.*

Well, not quite. There were fourteen players, fourteen instruments, but it looked a pretty amateur affair without a uniform. Naturally we ought to have had tuxedos, but the price was way beyond our means. I saw an advertisement in some illustrated weekly—I think it had something to do with Spain or South America; anyhow it gave me an idea. Instead of tuxedos we had gray silk blouses, with a deep collar of red, gold, and

blue, and with a white fringe, a white cummerbund round the waist, black trousers. And I managed to get the firm who made these clothes to let me have them at wholesale price.

By this time one or two influential white friends of mine had become interested. It seemed to me essential, as I was so soon leaving South Africa, to try to get the band established on a permanent basis—an easy enough thing to do in America or England, but not so easy in a country where segregation is so rigid and so all-pervasive as in the Union. For one thing it was desperately hard to find a central studio, a place where they could practice, once they had left school (and all of them were leaving). For another, they would at first need money—money for their bus fares, for their music (they had learned to read), for repairs and new instruments.



ON THEIR WAY

THEY had already tried to raise their own funds—and in doing so, learned that “show-biz,” as they love to call it, isn’t always a bed of roses. Just before term ended, George came to my office: “We want to go on tour, Father—to Durban, Capetown, Port Elizabeth. We could pay our way easy, make a lot of money—then we should be independent.” I told George that, if they went on tour they would have to organize everything themselves. I simply had not the time. Besides, I wanted to test their quality. In the end they decided that Durban would be far enough (400 miles) and they trimmed their schedules accordingly.

Although they did not raise much money; although they found themselves having to go

short of food and to sleep in bug-ridden beds; although some of them lost their clothes while they slept—they got safely home, with their precious instruments, more determined than ever to improve, and to show that they could really be something worthwhile.

A Greek restaurant owner asked me to see him. “I’ve heard about your band, Father; now I want to hear *them*. I’m prepared to risk it. I’m prepared to put them on in my place. And if *I* do it, then tomorrow all Johannesburg will be wanting to copy me.” I tried to persuade him that they were not good enough yet, but he was persistent. Just before I left the city, he came for his audition.

Perhaps one day I shall hear that some of them, at least, have found employment in a white restaurant, have smashed the color bar by their own skill, their own determination. But perhaps

that too is a dream which cannot materialize yet in a land of such fierce, fanatic racialism

What is *not* a dream is the band itself, and the truth of which it is a symbol; the truth that young Africa is capable of finding itself, of proving its vitality and its ability and its talent—if only it is given the chance. I greatly wish I had thought of the band ten years ago and had been able to acquire some skill in an instrument myself. It is one of my deepest convictions that you will never overcome, or over-leap, the fearful barrier of race and color unless you can *identify* yourself with those who stand across on the other side.

Saying good-by to the Huddleston Jazz Band was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. Yet I can look back on the days of its beginning as days of immense, superlative happiness. And there is one small incident that I remember above all others, and which gives me the greatest joy.

One afternoon the band was practicing. I had allowed them to use the veranda, and their music filled the warm afternoon air. A little white girl of six or seven stopped at the gate and listened. “Can I go in, Father?” I took her hand. She stood, open-mouthed, gazing at this band of African boys—or Kaffirs—of those who in South Africa were separate and apart, were servants. Then, turning to me and looking wistfully up, she said: “Father, I *wish* I was a native.”

It was a splendid recompense.