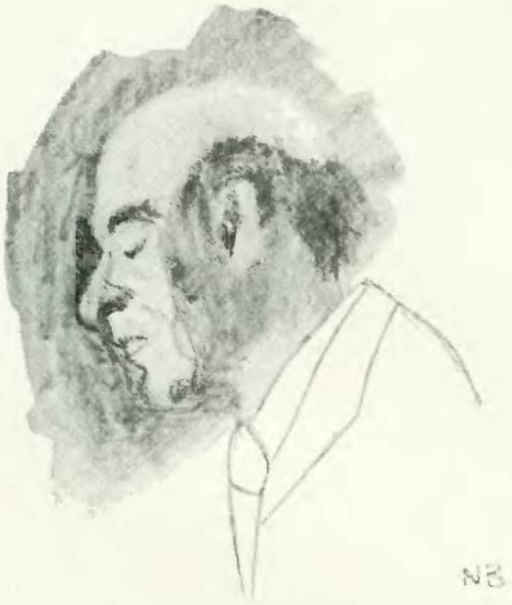
OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

HODES' BLUES

THE blues pianist Art Hodes left New York for good in 1950. He had lived here twelve years, and he left as the leader of a New Orleans-Chicago all-star band to play an indefinite engagement at the Blue Note, in Chicago. But the band and the gig fell apart after eleven weeks, because there were sometimes almost as many bottles on the stand as musicians. (Hodes had quit drinking a year or two before.) He had first come to Chicago with his parents and two sisters when he was six years old. "I'm not completely correct on when I was born," he has said. "It was in Nikolayev, Russia, somewhere between 1904 and 1906. We left hurriedly, and we had no papers." He had been raised in Chicago, and he and his wife, the late Thelma Johnson, decided they might as well settle back in. Hodes has returned to New York only a few times since 1950, and will be at Hanratty's, on the upper East Side, the first week in April.

Hodes is a fragile, primitive pianist, who grew up between Earl Hines and such blues pianists as Pine Top Smith and Cow Cow Davenport. He has a light, nervous touch, and he is most comfortable at slow tempos; his fast numbers, which tend to be spidery and jumpy, seem to spend their energy on getting finished. His style is chordal, and he rarely indulges in arpeggios or in complex single-note melodic lines. His playing is filled with the blues. Fragmentary boogie-woogie basses keep appearing in the left hand, and he uses a lot of tremolos and trills and blue notes in the right hand. He makes rags and "The Sunny Side of the Street" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Ain't She Sweet?" sound like blues. His slow blues are full of evening light, of keening winds, of a sense of endings and departures. They have no self-pity, and they seem to encompass every emotion. His slow blues are unique; in their intensity and depth they surpass those of any other blues pianist—Otis Spann, Ray Bryant, Pete Johnson, Speckled Red, Lloyd Glenn, Champion Jack Dupree, Meade Lux Lewis, Pine Top Smith, Ray Charles, Albert Ammons, Cow Cow Davenport, Little Brother Montgomery, Memphis Slim, Jimmy Yancey, Leroy Carr.



The blues are the simplest of all jazz materials, yet they are the most difficult to play well—slow blues in particular. Their freight is emotion, and sustaining the mood and atmosphere that must be established in the first four or five bars demands great steadiness and invention. A blues solo can be destroyed by a whisper or a cough. It can be destroyed by the slightest flagging of intensity, by a poor chord "change," by an uncertain rhythmic turn. Great blues solos—Pee Wee Russell's on "Mariooch," Red Allen's on "Jimmie's Blues," Benny Carter's (trumpet) on "Feather Bed Lament"—are seizures: they possess both the player and the listener. (Some of the most celebrated jazz performers have been poor blues players. They include Art Tatum, Joe Venuti, Benny Goodman, Stan Getz, Fats Waller, J. J. Johnson, Bix Beiderbecke, Miles Davis, and Gerry Mulligan. They either parody the blues or use them for displays of baroque muscle.) When Hodes goes "down" into a slow blues, he takes you with him and you don't get out until the last bar. He often stays in the three lowest registers of his instrument, and he will start with a descending right-hand tremolo pitted against irregular left-hand tenths. If he is in the key of C, he takes his tremolo into F and back to C, then passes through G and F and back into C with a short, wobbly right-hand run. In his next chorus, he fashions a brief ascending five-note figure in his right hand and repeats it with slight variations throughout the chorus. He settles into thunderous left-hand chords at the start of his third chorus, allows them to blow smartly away, and finishes with quick right-hand glissandos. His fourth chorus goes immediately into a clump of single notes struck above middle C, which have a falsetto effect, and he sinks back to the lowest register, where he rumbles up and down for most of the next chorus. He eases the pressure in his final chorus with a series of repeated right-hand figures and with snatches of a Jimmy Yancey bass. Hodes is as affecting to watch as he is to listen to. His head is shaped like a long egg. The top is mostly bare, and the bottom sharpens into a long chin. His frequent new-moon smiles slide from the right to the left. He has small hands. When he plays, he shuts his eyes, his mouth tightens, and his head moves in two or three directions at once—from side to side, up and down, and back and forth. At the end of a set, he springs to his feet, nods his head, and—still vibrating—bobs up and down half a dozen times.

Hodes worked almost constantly once he was established in New York, in the late thirties, but he also took on the role of teacher and prophet. For a year in the early forties, he had a radio program on WNYC. He played the New Orleans-Chicago small-band jazz he loved, and once or twice during every show he played the piano. Hodes said recently, "Gene Williams and Ralph Gleason, who ran a little magazine for jazz-record collectors called *Jazz Information*, suggested I try out for a radio show on WNYC that Ralph Berton was leaving. I did, and I got it, and they wrote some scripts for me. When I strayed from what they had written, they left me on my own. I didn't have many records, so I had to borrow things to play, which led me to get interested in collecting. I got really involved, and I haunted the record shops and junk shops and rummage sales. The program was on six days a week in the early afternoon, and generally it lasted a half hour on weekdays and an hour on Saturday, when I'd ask guests in to play. I was playing the recordings I grew up

with. It was beautiful jazz music going out into the air, and all I had to do, except for saying a few words, was sit there and listen. Everything was fine until the day Mayor LaGuardia broadcast right after me. While he was waiting to go on the air, he heard me announce what label each tune was on, and the label number. I guess it was the first time he'd ever heard the show, and he told the station manager to get rid of me—that I was giving commercials on a noncommercial station. Of course, what I was doing was giving my listeners the information they needed to get the records I had played. Otherwise, they would write to me by the dozen, and I'd have to write them all back myself."

A couple of months before his radio program ended, Hodes started a monthly magazine, *The Jazz Record*, with a printer and writer named Dale Curran. The magazine became the first preserver of jazz's oral history, and it was something of a racial pioneer: the cover photographs were strictly alternated between black and white musicians. "The existing jazz magazines were for record collectors," Hodes said recently. "There was nothing that gave the musician a voice, a chance to talk for himself. We'd invite musicians to the office, which was in a basement on Tenth Street near Seventh Avenue, and we'd give them a bottle and ask them questions. After a drink or two, they relaxed and didn't talk too fast, and Dale would take down every word on his typewriter. We got down Cow Cow Davenport and Omer Simeon and Zutty Singleton. John Hammond wrote for us, and the television writer Robert Alan Aurthur, and Carl Van Vechten, and Allan Morrison. We put out about sixty issues between 1943 and 1947. Our circulation never got above eleven hundred, and we never made any money, but I think we did a lot of good."

Four years ago, the University of California Press published a collection of pieces from *The Jazz Record* called "Selections from the Gutter," which is the title of one of Hodes' blues. Here is Cow Cow Davenport on the first sixteen or seventeen years of his life:

When I was a boy down in Alabama [around 1900], the people who played music played only guitars. The guitars were carried swung on the neck with a long string, and people called them easy riders. My father didn't like that idea of his son being an easy rider so he wouldn't let me learn music. In those days the musicians had all the girls, and daddy despised it; so

he didn't allow me to play in his house. He had purchased a piano, though. My mother was pianist for a church they organized. My mother admired me because I could play, and my daddy hated me because I could play. He was going to make out of me what he wanted me to be, that was a preacher. He sent me to Selma University, a Baptist college in Alabama.

The magazine had a great variety of textures. The novelist, critic, and photographer Carl Van Vechten describes in his slow, orotund style what it was like to see Bessie Smith in 1925 at the Orpheum Theatre in Newark:

She was at this time the size of Fay Templeton in her Weber and Fields days, which means very large, and she wore a crimson satin robe, sweeping up from her trim ankles, and embroidered in multicolored sequins in designs. Her face was beautiful with the rich ripe beauty of southern darkness, a deep bronze brown, matching the bronze of her bare arms, walking slowly to the footlights, to the accompaniment of the wailing, muted brasses, the monotonous African pounding of the drum, the dromedary glide of the pianist's fingers over the responsive keys, she began her strange, rhythmic rites in a voice full of shouting and moaning and praying and suffering, a wild, rough Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, but seductive and sensuous too, released between rouged lips and the whitest of teeth, the singer swaying slightly to the beat, as is the Negro custom . . .

Hodes contributes autobiographical pieces, and he has an elliptical, easy-as-you-go style:

And so I got a bit calloused. I watched people get drunk. I saw a lot of night life. I got better acquainted with the piano. Singers began to like my playing. I got a bit relaxed. I began to look around, visited other joints, met the help.

He meets the one-armed New Orleans trumpet player Wingy Manone:

And so started a most important period in my life. In a short time we were roommates—then buddies—the best and closest of friends. We lived every minute of each day—and each day was a complete life in itself. . . .

Wingy had a big bear coat that we both took turns wearing. Louis [Armstrong] used to greet us with: "Who's the bear tonight?" . . . Louis and the boys in the band kept a flat especially for themselves, to be able to drop in at all hours and relax. You know the conversation that takes place on the record by Armstrong called "Monday Date" where Louis says to Earl Hines: "I bet if you had a half pint of Mrs. Circha's gin" . . . well, that was the name of the woman who kept the flat for the boys. For a half-buck you got a cream pitcher full of gin which was passed around as far as it would go. In those days that was what the boys drank.

Hodes talks more formally than he writes. He talks slowly and softly, and

when he listens he closes his eyes, as if he were playing what he is hearing. He talked about himself one night recently:

"My parents settled in Chicago about a mile from the Loop, in the Twentieth Ward—the Bloody Twentieth, people called it. It was an Italian neighborhood, with a sprinkling of Russian Jews. My sisters were named Sema and Zena. One lives in New Mexico and the other in Chicago. My father's name was William, and he was a tinsmith. He was a hard-working homebody, a free soul who liked solitude and quiet. He didn't play cards, but he shared some conviviality with our relatives. He was kindly inclined and the smile was there quite often. He loved music—Chaliapin, Caruso. He had studied singing in Russia but had been told by his teacher that he was not good enough to be a professional. This somehow gave my father the idea that music was not a profession that a young man should follow. He dreamed that I would be a civil engineer. My mother, Dorothy, dreamed that I'd be a concert pianist. My father was medium-sized, but my mother was shorter and had a little more weight. She had dark hair and very expressive eyes, and her face came down to a point instead of fattening out. She was artistically inclined without being artistic, and she was affectionate and helpful to the neighbors. I didn't have any trouble in grammar school, but then my father exercised his reasoning and got me to go to a trade high school. A gap of understanding opened between us. I didn't fit in the school, I was out of step. I started skipping classes. I discovered vaudeville, and I'd sit next to the pit orchestra. I saw Jimmy Durante, and I was fascinated, and my fascination lasted a month before my father found out what I was doing. When he got over his anger, he told me it was either go to school or get a job. I went to a regular high school and finished very well. My father had bought a piano on time when I was six, but he lost his job and the piano was taken back. When it reappeared, I started to study. I enrolled at Jane Addams' Hull House with the Smith sisters. One taught voice and the other piano, but you had to take one to take the other. So I learned to sing soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, and it developed my harmonic sense, and I studied classical piano. I also started playing for dances and discovered I was a natural swinger—that is, that it was very easy for me to play

in time. I hadn't heard any jazz yet, but I listened to the Coon-Sanders Nighthawks and to Paul Whiteman on my crystal set. When I got out of high school, I took all sorts of jobs. I was a messenger, I copied letters, I delivered mail, I worked in a can factory. I never lasted too long. Meanwhile, I had started playing at Italian weddings and at dime-a-dance halls. A drummer named Freddy Janis asked me would I like to audition for the Dago—Dago Lawrence Mangano. He owned a place on Madison Street called the Rainbow Gardens. One flight up, twenty-five steps, and you were in a room that held about seventy-five people. When I went for the audition, the Dago took out a banjo, which he had tuned like a ukulele, and sang all these dirty songs. I played along behind him, and he said, 'You're hired.' He paid me thirty-five a week, which I don't know if my father got that much. On top of that, I made a lot in tips, and pretty soon I had myself a little car. The Dago had a couple of girl singers who alternated going from table to table singing, and I played for them and by myself. There were no intermissions, and whenever things got quiet the Dago would say, 'There's a lull in the joint. *Do* something.' All of us entertainers were supposed to divide the tips, and one night I caught one of the girls putting a big bill down the front of her dress. I accused her and slapped her and walked out. I stayed away one day, and when I came back the Dago lectured me: 'It's always better to listen than talk because you never know who you're talking to.' It turned out the girl I had hit was a gangster's moll. I had walked into the Rainbow Gardens knowing nothing, but I got a liberal education. I learned my trade in the midst of gangster kingdom. The Rainbow was managed by the Dago's girl, Lucy Labriola. One night, she had a hurry-up call that the Genna brothers and a big party were coming. They had reputedly killed her husband, and they thought it was funny to have her wait on them. She was in tears the whole evening. They also thought it was funny to buy me drinks and make me drink them. Eighteen in all, and it nearly killed me. Another night, a couple of wiseacres posing as federal agents went around the room sampling customers' drinks. One got away, but the Dago and his boys beat the other up and threw him down the stairs. I have never seen a person get

hurt that badly before or since, and I never want to see it again. I was also getting a musical education. I had to play songs like 'Melancholy Baby' and 'I Wonder What's Become of Sally' and 'My Man,' and I was learning different keys and how to accompany singers.

"I quit the Rainbow after a year and a half, and I spent the summer in a band at the Delavan Gardens, on Delavan Lake, Wisconsin. I went with Earl Murphy, a banjo player, and he had a windup Victrola and a lot of records by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke, and those records turned me on. I listened day and night. Back in Chicago, I met Wingy Manone and moved in with him. I learned to play the blues from a pianist named Jackson and from Walter Davis and Pine Top Smith. Jackson really reached me. One day, he disappeared, and when he came back a couple of weeks later he was all spiffed up and he wasn't playing the blues anymore. I asked him how come, and he said, 'Man, I don't *have* the blues.' I stood around at the Savoy Ballroom with King Oliver and Louis and Manone. Louis told the jokes, he was the star, and we warmed ourselves at the fire. I watched his fans carry him across the ballroom to the bandstand, he was that popular. I listened to Earl Hines and he made me feel like taking my hands and throwing them in the river. I played rent parties, and I heard a lot of blues piano players at a black barbecue place where you could get fried fish and apple turnover and ribs. I heard Bessie Smith at the Michigan Theatre. She was wearing a white gown and she hardly moved when she sang. She sang staring at the floor, and she sang to herself. I walked the streets of the South Side, and there was music everywhere—jukeboxes, Victrolas, people whistling at each other. I sat in with Bix Beiderbecke once, and it was interesting. I think his records made him seem more powerful than he was. They must have stationed him right by the recording horn. He didn't play at all loud in the flesh—not much louder than Bobby Hackett. Armstrong was far more powerful, and they must have positioned him at the back of the recording studio.

"By the late twenties, most of the people I had worked with in Chicago had moved on to New York, but I stayed, because there were so many blues players. My friend Jess Stacy was also there, and I had enough work with my own groups and with bands led by Frank Snyder and Floyd Towne." (Stacy said recently, "Hodes was a good cat, and we were good friends. Any time I'd finish a job, I'd recommend him, and he'd do the same for me. It wasn't dog eat dog—and we were all starving to death. Hodes stuck to his guns. He liked to play the blues, and he played them. We used to go to a little barbecue place to hear blues piano players. There was always an old drummer there named Papa Couch. He had a beat-up set of drums, with one of those old leather pedals, and he'd shake his head and say, 'I sure will be glad when this radio craze dies out.' ") "By 1938, Chicago had become a ghost town. Accordions had come in, and strolling singers. I had begun to read about what was happening in New York. I had married my wife, Thelma—she was from Montana—and we packed our car with all our belongings and headed for New York. We found a place in the East Nineties and then the West Nineties; then we moved to the Village.

"The blues is twelve bars of music. Each bar has four beats, so there are forty-eight beats in a chorus. It's what you do with those forty-eight beats. The blues is an emotion that is happening inside you, and you're expressing it. Now, you can play the blues and just go through the changes and not feel it. That has happened to me for periods of time, and I can fool anybody but me. Right now I'm in a blues period. The blues heal you. Playing the blues becomes like talking trouble out. You work the blues out of you. When I play, I ignore the audience. I bring all my attention to bear on what I'm playing, bring all my feelings to the front. I bring my body to bear on the tune. If it's a fast tune —a rag—I have to make my hands be where they should be. I make sure they're following dictation. I'm from the old school—work, work, work. People say to me, 'Why don't you look at the crowd and smile when you

play?' I can't do that. I'm trying to get lost in what I'm doing, and sometimes I do, and it comes out beautiful.

"Five of my six children are alive. One lives near New York and one in Virginia, and the rest are within a few miles of me in Chicago. I even have two great-grandchildren. Why should I retire from something that gives me so much joy and seems to give joy to others, too? I'll quit when I'm not doing justice to what I'm playing. Because my personal needs are so in hand, I don't have the pressure to work all the time. I'll never let them do to me what they did to Joe Venuti in his last years—run, run, run. I'm going to stay out of that trap. I'm going to talk to myself about that. If I work three or four times a week, that's enough." —WHITNEY BALLIETT

•

DRIFT FENCE

Whose hungry souls are these,
all in a row,
already lost . . .

and are they penitent
in shackles of barbed wire
on the bare hillside?

Whatever they were before—
that is to say,
whatever living pine trees are—

these twist and suffer.
The drift fence
drops off the hill

and shambles down through timber
without separating
anything.

It affirms the imaginary
line by wandering.
It reels from tree to tree,

lost in sundry
mystifications
until the forest yields

to pasture
and the landscape
opens its eye.

They cross the open country,
single file,
faithful,

each bearing
an undivided sorrow
back into the world.

—JAMES GALVIN