# The Hot Jazz Trio Short Guide

## The Hot Jazz Trio by William Kotzwinkle

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# Characters

The narrative of these novellas concentrates on a magician named LeBlanc, another member of Kotzwinkle's gallery of artists-as-conjurers who are given to reflection on their art.

LeBlanc knows many of the secrets of traditional magic, but his skill goes beyond the mere arrangement of devices and contraptions to the more powerful modes of magic that deal with psychic transformation, hypnotic suggestion, and the revelations of the hidden meanings of the subconscious.

When his assistant, Loli, disappears after being placed in a magic box, LeBlanc and his friends and fellow cafe performers, the Hot Jazz Trio, seek out Jean Cocteau, the poet/mystic, to help in the search for her. Although Kotzwinkle does not precisely claim that his versions of the famous historical figures are accurate, the characterizations, like his European setting, provide associations which are useful in evoking the ethos of the world where the action takes place.

# Social Concerns/Themes

The Hot Jazz Trio is composed of three short pieces. The most ambitious one, "Django Rheinhardt Played the Blues" is set in Paris in the first part of the twentieth century and is Kotzwinkle's fullest rendering of his idea of Europe. He pictures it as a land laden with the accumulated history of many centuries; so much has occurred on every inch of ground that the weight of circumstance has literally pressed time into folds so that there seems to be a series of parallel strata running throughout the terrain.

The story begins in the Paris of Andre Breton, Pablo Picasso, and Jean Cocteau, and accordingly, it is governed not by the conventional Newtonian physics of standard realistic fiction, but by the precepts of surrealism which include a fracturing of time, space, and personality, as well as a Dada-inspired lunacy.

# Techniques

The club where LeBlanc works and the Trio plays, and the streets of Paris, are drawn from the collective unconscious (Yeats's spiritus mundi) that has shaped a fabled "place," and rendered it timeless and romantically colored by selective nostalgia. The gypsy rhythms of Reinhardt's spirit provide its soundtrack, the music he plays "joining itself to a far-off time" in an art-fashioned fantasy of eros-tinged dreams. Every gesture, nuance, and remark carries the added significance of its legendary setting, and Cocteau's reply when Reinhardt explains that he would "interrupt your dreaming only with a matter of urgency" is to point out that "Life is the interruption"—an observation which clearly establishes the doubled realm of setting. Cocteau's suggestion that Loli is "lost in a poem" further fuses the fictional and the real so it is not surprising to discover that the "box" that has abducted Loli is not only an elaborate contraption of legerdemain from Hamburg, but also a piece of the past and in a metaphysical sense, a particle of memory. Kotzwinkle's conceit is that such objects can actually become animate due to the force of gathered human experience.

The "box" has taken Loli to "another world" where, as Cocteau points out, "you cannot use common sense, a world of shadows, thoughts of flowers, convulsive moments" — a world, in other words, of the psychic imagination. Whereas LeBlanc operates as a rational man (of sorts) who knows that his illusions can be explained ("Reason underlies the magician's art"), Cocteau, the poet, leads them into "the soul space of the inanimate" to follow Loli and her abductor. As the other characters follow, it becomes clear that the psychic dimension they have entered involves each one's most intense desire (or fear). But in keeping with the comic/absurdist nature of the tale, Kotzwinkle lightens the mood by such devices as Reinhardt temporarily living with half his corporeal body in each realm, leading to such specific physical difficulties as the problem of sitting down ("I lost half my ass trying to rescue you," he complains to a woman named Mignonne) until he is reconstructed by Pablo Picasso out of a collage of found materials.

As the human characters move into the Plain of Rectangular Configuration, which is the domain of the Box creatures, a farcical chase ensues in which Eric Satie, an unspecified Pope, and others appear briefly as absurdist commentators on the action. Everyone eventually escapes from "who knows what" and returns to the routine of nightclub entertainment. The Hot Jazz Trio and LeBlanc continue as if their adventure was nothing extraordinary, with Reinhardt's guitar now singing "nights of a Gypsy's Paris, and nights of rectangular configuration, and no one in the nightclub crowd knew exactly how he did it." Argos, the bassist of the trio and the most down-to-earth of the artists, sums up the experience by saying, "We're blown to the winds eventually, but for now, for now we have brought Django back from the Land of Boxes." But the adventure is not quite concluded. Recalling the words of the Tunnel Troll in the story "Hearts of Wood" (1986), Loli tells LeBlanc that his attempt to write to the manufacturer of the box for an explanation is futile since "the explanation is love." As the magician then discovers, the box has one more offering.

Responding to a loud, rapping sound, the magician opens the box and discovers Sing Woo, a magician "dead" from a failed trick who has returned to life.

LeBlanc and Sing Woo join in partnership, and as Loli secures the lock again, the box whispers to her, "I did it all for you, Loww-leee," reemphasizing the powers of animistic spirits and concluding the story with the motif of the natural and supernatural worlds forever intermingled.

The other two stories are not as fully developed. "Blues on the Nile: A Fragment of Papyrus," is not much more than an extended anecdote about the reversal of fortune as human beings move from "life" to a version of "afterlife." In it, Kotzwinkle's typical control of tone provides a haunting, almost chilling aspect to a rather slight jest.

"Boxcar Blues" is an allegory in which itinerant performers travel endlessly on a kind of railroad of existence, fleeing from a death-figure and chasing the nebulous circus of General Lopez, a fleeting vision of a kind of salvation.

The allegorical overtones are muted since the characters, Poppo the Clown and Melrose, Soup Kitchen, and Dipper, are anchored to a very mundane and plebeian existence. The power of creative imagination permits them to change and transform their beings, however. As Melrose observes, "We were never who we thought. We were other travelers, hidden in the midst of things familiar." The story reaches a kind of conclusion when the tramps are elevated into the vault of heaven in the guise of acrobats swinging in an arc through the celestial night. "Pearl of a poor bum's dreams," Dipper says, capturing the grandeur of the universe seen through the mind in its most wide-ranging manifestation.

# Literary Precedents

During the time that Kotzwinkle has been developing his comic vision of the contemporary world in books such as The Fan Man (1974) and The Midnight Examiner (1989) — relatively realistic novels with protagonists who are "good-natured zanies" somewhat adrift in an anarchic environment — he has also been working in another, quite different form. While he has made it clear that he does not consider any of his work a part of the "sword-andsorcery" category, his interest in the fantastic as another aspect of the realistic (in Paul Valery's terms) has led him to explore realms other than the modern world, locating stories, poems, and hybrid genres in time and place considerably removed from the late twentieth century. One of his favorite settings is a version of "Europe" in the not very distant past, as in Fata Morgana (1977), which takes place in Paris in 1861, or Herr Nightingale and the Satin Woman (1978), which moves through Germany in the 1920s. In each of these books, the landscape of "Europe" carries centuries of history, cultural tradition, and political intrigue which reverberates through every street and every building. Kotzwinkle has surrounded his characters with the shadows and spirits of other eras, so that all action has a double direction, first outward to the world and then inward toward the subconscious. In many of these pieces, there is a fundamental separation of dimensions so that the movement from the realistic to the fantastic involves crossing a specific boundary, and while the dividing line is permeable, it is discernible as well. In The Hot Jazz Trio, however, Kotzwinkle has merged and blurred these previously separate realms.

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