

Shuck and/or Jive
By: Zachariah Ezer

Characters

Leo- mid 30's, past his prime Jewish musician living in Tin Pan Alley

Louis- early 30's, past his prime Jewish lyricist living in Tin Pan Alley

James- 30, black radio DJ

Jackson- 18, high school senior, also black

Woman- Ontologically Certain of her own existence

Old Man- White Charon

Pam- James and Jackson's mother

Lydia- Leo's ex-wife

Sam- Lydia's new boyfriend

Benjamin- Uncle Tom

Callers 1-3- Interlocutors

Jerome- late 60's, James and Jackson's grandfather, deceased

Robert Atwell- The Man

Jack Johnson- the heavyweight champion of the world, snow-blind

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood."

- MLK

"I believe in the brotherhood of man, all men, but I don't believe in brotherhood with anybody who doesn't want brotherhood with me. I believe in treating people right, but I'm not going to waste my time trying to treat somebody right who doesn't know how to return the treatment"

- Malcolm X

Act I Scene 1

(AT RISE: A WOMAN is on stage with an oar slung across her shoulder. The backdrop should reflect or at least be representative of the Hudson River, from the New York point of view.)

Woman

Joseph Campbell has this story about New Jersey. Maybe I should back up. Joseph Campbell is the guy who definitively proved that there is only one story, the hero's journey. Basically that a hero is happy, something happens, and he has his entire journey to regain it. *(Pause)* Should I have said her? I never know with these things. I guess it's kind of like when I say goddamnit. No one believes in god anymore, but religious imagery is still powerful and old habits die hard. Speaking of religious imagery, the Campbell story is really just a whitewashed Buddhism. It's the old story of the yonder shore, but I think stories mean more to more people if they resemble something they know about. Anyway, on to the story. "Let us imagine ourselves standing on this shore; let us say, on Manhattan Island. We are sick of it, fed up. We are gazing westward, over the Hudson River, and there, behold! We see Jersey.

(The distant Jersey looks enticing in a manner that only locations free of ontological damnation can)

Woman *(cont'd)*

We have heard a good deal about Jersey, the Garden State; and what a change that would surely be from the filthy pavements of New York! There are no bridges yet: one has to cross by ferry.

(In comes an OLD MAN on a rowboat)

Woman *(cont'd)*

And so we have begun to sit on the docks, gazing longingly over at Jersey, meditating upon it; ignorant of its true nature, yet thinking of it ever with increasing zeal. And then one day we notice a boat putting out from the Jersey shore. It comes across the waters, our way, and it docks right here at our feet. There is a ferryman aboard, and he calls...

Old Man
Anyone for Jersey?

Woman
Here!

*(The Old Man stretches
his hand out)*

Old Man
Are you completely sure?

Woman
However, as we step down into his craft, he warns...

Old Man
There is no return ticket to Manhattan. When you put out from
this shore you will be leaving New York forever: all your
friends, your career, your family, your name, prestige,
everything and all. Are you still quite sure?

*(The Old Man does not
wait for her reply. He
pulls the woman into the
boat and rows offstage
into a land of spiritual
fulfillment that she can
never leave. Blackout)*

Scene

Act I Scene 2

*(JAMES and JACKSON sit
in the WXPX station.
James is on the mic)*

James

All right, bitch. You're listening to WXPX in the morning. Satellite Radio's only morning hip hop history show with some attitude. You know who the fuck I am, but I am introducing my lil' bro Jackson, here on his college visit. Say what's good to the people, Jackson!

Jackson *(nervously)*

What's good?

James

That's what I like to hear. We've got some sick jams for ya'll. Starting with "Fight the Power" by that classic Flavor-ful group Public Enemy. Here we go.

(James spins the record)

Jackson

I'll never understand why you do that ridiculous caricature. You went to Brown for chrissake, James.

James *(condescendingly)*

You don't understand the biz, Jackson. Sometimes you've got to do things that you wouldn't normally do in order to get ahead.

Jackson

So shuck and jive for these white people sipping Frappuccino's on their way to work? I don't know how "down" with that I can be, even if you do get ahead.

James

Well I tried it the other way. Remember my show in college?

Jackson

Yeah, the Afro-positive Affirmation Hour. What about it?

James

Well that was me being real, and my listenership peaked at around the population of this studio.

*(James gestures around
the empty studio)*

Jackson

Well at least you could be proud of what you were doing. This isn't you man.

James

Me, do you even know me? I haven't seen you in five years.

(James notices the Public Enemy song is ending. He fades the mics back up.)

James

Yo, it's yo boy D James here on the mic. Once again with my brother Jackson, that was that Public Enemy anthem "Fight the Power." What did you think of that shit, Jackson?

Jackson

Well, D-James. I thought that it was a perfect cathartic release for a group of black men who felt victimized by a system of oppression that had recently gone underground only 15-20 years prior. Flav of course brings his unique style to the track and the samples are really relevant Civil Rights clips.

James

Okay, so next up, we've got one for the working man. All ya'll niggas who on that 9-5, you know I got you. This De La Soul's "The Grind Date." Hit it!

(James spins the record and brings down the mics)

James (to Jackson)

What the fuck was that? I'm trying to do you a favor here. You know Harvard doesn't actually give a shit about you, right? They just need a diversity quotient. The only problem is, I'm not sure if you qualify. When mom told me you were going to be on my show, she said you weren't going to fuck my shit up. If you don't straighten up, I'm going to lose listeners.

Jackson

Sorry, man. I just can't get behind all that ignorant shit for no reason. We're educated, act like it.

James

Nigga, you need to be down with the cause. Our dialect of English has just as much legitimacy as theirs. They just formed the structures of power around their version. Ebonics is an

amalgam of sounds from Ibo, Yoruba, and a shit-ton of other languages that got forced into English during the days of slavery. Why is po' any worse than poor, you understand me don't you, if I 'axe' you a fucking question, don't you? Think about it, what makes it less legitimate. Who writes the dictionaries?

Jackson

College Graduates.

James

White people, exactly. That's what I'm trying to tell you, how can you even try to approach being genuine when you don't know the first thing about the real thing?

(James pots up the mics)

James

That was the "Grind Date" by De La Soul. The Plugs be getting back together for some new stuff this year, check out "First Serve" with Plug 1 and Plug 2. It's straight fire. Ain't that right, Jackson?

Jackson

You ain't lyin' fam. This shit is troof. I have not seen a track bang and go off on the bullshit of the day-to-day like that before. And that Yes sample is dope! What's next, breh?

James

Yo, that's a hard act to follow, but we could go with a classic. Since today is a good day out there in the Central Connecticut Area, (860!) let's spin "Today Was a Good Day" by the Are We There Yet star himself, Ice Cube!

(James spins the record)

James (to Jackson)

See? Was that so hard?

Jackson

I feel like I just played a fiddle for them. Do you even have black listeners?

James

Where do you think we are? Hell nah, this is Central Connecticut. There's like 8 black people in this state, and we're two of them. But everybody wants to be down, and that's a service I provide. A service I should say that people pay handsomely for.

Jackson

But is that all that matters to you? You were about more than that when you were still at home.

James

Well shit was different then, for one thing, Dad..
(Phone rings)

James *(on phone)*

You're on with D James.

Caller

Hey, I really like the interplay between you and Jackson. Your shit is so real. This is an art piece, man.

James

I appreciate the love, my brother, but I have no idea what you're talking about.

Caller

Pretending to do a radio show about history and just bitching about race relations with your brother. I love it. "You went to Brown," that's fucking gold.

(Caller hangs up)

Jackson *(laughing)*

We haven't been playing any music this whole time. That's fucking amazing.

James

I am so fucking fired.

(Blackout)

Scene

Act I Scene 3

*(LEO sits in a
rundown apartment,
absentmindedly
plucking the keys
of a dilapidated
piano when LOUIS
bursts into the
room)*

Leo (*excitedly*)
Louis, tell me you've got good news.

Louis (*matching his excitement*)
Leo, I've got news.

Leo
Oh, god. Tell me you at least got us a job.

Louis
I did get us a job. It's with Columbia.

Leo
Columbia who? I don't think there is a Columbia on the jazz scene right now. What does he play? Saxophone, Clarinet?

Louis (*sheepish*)
Columbia like Columbia Records, Columbia.

Leo
Columbia fucking records! Are you kidding me, the fucking phonograph is driving us out of business! We can't go write songs for Columbia Records!

Louis
They asked for The Whitmark Brothers specifically, and the check is enough to pay the next two month's rent.

Leo
Well, I stand corrected. Columbia Records might be the only thing keeping us in business... wait, did you say check?

Louis
Yeah, I know, not ideal, but we do need the money.

Leo (*exasperated*)

Louis, are you insane, we need the rights to our shit. We can't sell those right now, what if we have a huge hit. Remember when we used to have huge hits? We did one for Joplin for chrissakes.

Louis

Sure I do, but that was years ago, during ragtime. We haven't had a jazz hit yet, and it's been years. The story of selling one to Joplin isn't going to buy us food this week. We need a hit and we need it now, and we'll still get the credit for this one, even if we don't get the residuals.

Leo

Okay, fine. What's the artist, and what genre are we playing in? I'll do some warmups now and we can get started after dinner.

Louis

Name's Smith I think. Mamie, Bessie, I can't remember. There's a ton of Smith's these days.

Leo

Did you just say Smith! We're doing one of those novelty fucking race records! What kind of insult is that? Do those recording fat cats know who the fuck we are?

Louis

I never understood your problem with these race records Leo. Like you said, we wrote for Joplin. Why is one of these Smith ladies any worse than that?

Leo

Because Lou, I understand Joplin. He's a nigger, sure, but a nigger with class. Joplin, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong. These are niggers I understand, niggers with class. I don't get this new Kentucky Fried Bullshit that these Delta Blues shysters are peddling into town. Harlem is a fucking dump now, and it's only a matter of time before we're competing with those clowns for jobs from your precious Columbia Records if this is the way things are going right now.

Louis

Well I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Leo, but Columbia Records, maybe more accurately Columbia Race Records, are the only one's hiring us. Is Joplin calling?

Leo

Scott Joplin is dead.

Louis

You know what I mean. Are any of them calling? Any of the one's we worked for, any of the one's we didn't. No, you know why? They aren't working either. Ragtime's done, people like race records now. This is what does numbers now. And you know what? The phonograph is better than sheet music as a way to record music. You don't need a trained musician or band, just a machine. And it doesn't have to be live, you can play music anywhere, even over the radio. And when your records aren't popular, people don't just stop playing them. The people that like the songs will have them for the rest of their lives. So, no, I don't want to compete with a nigger for a songwriting gig, but if we don't get on this train now, because I don't think we're getting a lot of other chances, we're getting left behind. So, you can talk about niggers with class and niggers without class, but I'm going to write this song. I'd like you to help, but if not, I'll manage.

(Long Pause)

Leo

I only have one question, Lou.

Louis

What's that, Leo?

Leo *(breaking into a grin)*

How are you going to write a song, when you can't carry a tune in a bucket?

(Leo and Louis share a laugh)

Louis

Fuck you. Let's get started.

(Blackout)

Scene

Act I Scene 4

(James and Jackson are still broadcasting in the station. The door to the station is now barricaded shut)

James

Yo, what it do. This is D-James. You are here on a very racially charged episode of WXPX. I am here with my lil' bro Jackson as we talk about anything and everything about the black experience in America. What was born as an accident has now become my life. Caller number two, you are on with James and Jackson, what is on your mind?

Caller 2

Uh, hey guys. Loving the show thus far. James, why don't you speak as to what it was like to be in your "persona" for so long on the radio? I mean I was listening for a year and a half and I had no idea.

James

My friend, I am so glad you asked. Since I'm going to be fired as soon as any one of our many station managers gets wind of this, which may be a while, since those dudes would never dream of actually listening to a hip-hop show, I might as well put it all out there. I'm a big fan of show tunes as well. I have a theater degree. I originally applied to this station in order to work as a producer on the Broadway show, but here I am. In America, white people are the only people who are allowed to have more than one personality trait. Kind of like how white people are the only ones who are a lot of shit. *(Puts on a mocking tone)* I'm a quarter Irish, half German, and I think there's a little Italian in there somewhere. Bullshit! I'm Ghanan, Cameroonian, and Jamaican, but people don't fucking care. I'm just from wherever black people are from, and I'm lucky I even know. It's a travesty, and it's the same way with personality traits. I'm a certain kind of black guy. One of the good ones, one of the bad ones, one of the typical ones, one of the weird fucking ones. You are on a constant tightrope of other

people's expectations that you could never even know about. Long story short, it's some bullshit. Thanks for calling. Now, we are going to hear from A\$AP Ferg with his new "Work" remix.

(James hangs up, plugs his iPod into the mixing board and plays a track. He then, very deliberately, turns off the microphones)

Jackson

I'm sorry you're probably going to get fired, but this is probably the best thing I have ever seen in my entire life.

James

If I'm being totally honest, this was a long time coming. I've hated this job as long as I can remember, and I told myself at the beginning of every month that I'd quit and go do something I actually cared about, but at the end of the month, that check comes in, and I was so happy I didn't have to go back to eating ramen, that I sold out. I caved, and it wasn't cool, and it's not the kind of thing that Dad or anyone else would have wanted from me.

Jackson

I'm really glad to hear that, but we are not even close to being done with this yet. We still have another forty-five minutes on the air. What else have you got?

James

I've been working here for three years and I've been black for 27 more. I have a reservoir. Forty-five minutes will not be long enough.

Jackson

That's what I like to hear.

*(Jackson pots up the
mics)*

Jackson *(on air)*

We are back with WXPX in the morning and this time it's personal. I'm Jackson, with your regular host D-James doing everything *Birth of a Nation* convinced you we would do. We are burning sacred cows, menacing white women, and encouraging gang violence, but more than that we are taking.. your.. calls! Let's hear it.

*(Phone lines are lighting up.
Jackson picks one at random
and answers it)*

Jackson

You are live on air with Jackson and James. No call screening, no filter, just truth. What's on your mind?

Caller 3

I have a question about that last song.

Jackson

It was a remix of "Work" by A\$AP Ferg and...

Caller 3

I wasn't actually wondering what the song was called, I was more curious in your having played it.

Jackson

I'm not sure what you mean.

Caller 3

Well, it seems to me that the whole thing you have going here is the educated black man game. But then how can you listen to a song so misogynistic like that, to me, it kind of undermines the entire thing that you're going for.

(Jackson is speechless)

James

It's exactly that kind of attitude that delegitimizes our struggle. This same kind of misogyny, homophobia, and generally ignorant behavior is just as clear in music made by white artists. How come when Day Above Ground writes a song called "Asian Girlz" filled with nothing but clichéd and antiquated stereotypes about, well, Asian girls, all that happened was that that band got wiped off the map? There was no public outcry that this was endemic to white musicianship culture, but every fucking time Migos puts in another sixteen about the reality of selling drugs, we get a CNN update about it. Our job is to be a model if we are at all in the public eye, and me playing Ferg on air is to tell you that I don't care about that. I can be an intelligent black man and a responsible role model all while listening to Struggle Rap, and implying that I can't is just another part of the problem. Next caller.

(James hangs up the phone and puts on "Harlem Streets" by Camron)

Jackson

Thanks, man, you really saved my ass on that one.

James

Don't worry man. Like I said, there's a fucking reservoir in there, and it is time to let it out.

(Phone rings)

Oh fuck, go time!

Jackson

What's up?

James

That was the in station line. Someone else on WXPX has heard at least some of our broadcast, and would like to have a word with us.

(Blackout)

Scene

Act I Scene 5

(Leo and Louis sit in their apartment. They are struggling to write a song)

Louis *(singing)*

I don't have anything left to live for... *(Stops)* What did you think of that one?

Leo

First, you're as off-key as ever, but second, that was depressing. C'mon man, it's the 20's people are happy, and excited, and finally able to express themselves in ways that were unimaginable only a few years ago. Where the upbeat? Where are the major chords?

Louis

Leo, this is a race record. This isn't for the socialites we've been writing for the past couple of years. This is about people who've been falling on hard times for the better part of three centuries. We gotta get into their heads better. If we wanna write like niggers, we gotta think like 'em.

Leo

How the hell are we supposed to do that? It's scientifically proven that the Negro and the White Man think differently. That's why things are how they are in the first place.

Louis

I don't know anything about that science, but if we want the paycheck, we have to deliver something to the people at

Columbia, and fast. We are pretty easily replaced at this point in the process.

Leo

Let me tell you who's replaceable. After all we put into this fucking business, I...

(A brick smashes through the apartment window)

Leo (*cont'd*)

The fuck was that?

Louis

It looks like a brick.

Leo

Well shit, put it on the pile.

(Louis takes the brick and places it on top of a large pile of bricks at the edge of the stage)

Leo (*cont'd*)

A few more of these, and we can build ourselves a bigger apartment. This town is full of assholes.

Louis

There's a note on it.

*(Louis takes the note
off of the brick and
reads it)*

Louis *(reading)*

Fuck You Yids. That's it, it just says fuck you yids.

Leo

Bunch of fucking animals in this town. They're not even creative either. Put it in the file.

*(Louis takes the note to
a file cabinet on the
other side of the room.
He mutters to himself
until he finds the*

*letter "Y" and files the
note)*

Leo

The anti-Semitic fucks in this town are gonna pay! Windows are really fucking expensive, and I...

Louis *(interrupting)*

Leo. That's it!

Leo

What's it?

Louis

I think this is how niggers feel all the time.

Leo

I don't follow.

Louis

Like when we first figured out that they threw the brick in because they didn't like that we were Jews. That must be what colored folks feel like all the time, because they can't hide what they look like.

Leo

Fuck... Lou, you're right. We can use this!

Louis

Exactly, I feel like with this understanding, we can really do something to try to reach out to the black community..

Leo

No, I was thinking we more use this kernel of understanding to write the song.

Louis

Oh, I guess that works too. I'll be back in an hour with some lyrics.

Leo

Try to base them on what I've got going on out here with the melody.

*(Leo begins to play
blues chords on his
piano)*

Leo *(to himself)*

We're going to be collecting colored green for the rest of our lives. This is all they want, to be pandered to like this. Well, we can do that. We can give 'em an entire album of Negro sympathy tunes.

(Blackout)

Scene

Act I Scene 6

(The Woman appears center stage without Charon. Her oar is split into three distinct pieces. She is attempting to build a pyramid shape with them, but all three continue to fall apart. She stands up and begins to speak. She speaks only in radio broadcasts)

Woman

I HAVE A DREAM,¹ WE SHALL MEET BOMB WITH BOMB.² THESE ARE BITTER WEEKS.³ I HAVE FULL CONFIDENCE³ THE BLACK MAN⁴ IF IT BECAME NECESSARY WOULD RESORT TO VIOLENCE.⁵ LOOKING TO THE FUTURE AS WE ALL WERE⁶ BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY⁵ JEW⁴ AND¹ THE BLACK MAN⁴ LINKED TOGETHER IN THEIR CAUSE AND THEIR NEED.³ NO LESS A DEVIL FOR THAT.⁴ IF BEST ARRANGEMENTS ARE BEING MADE, THEY ARE BEING MADE,³ IT BURST INTO PIECES! IT'S CRASHING! OH THE HUMANITY!⁶

(Pause)

IT'S STARTING TO RAIN AGAIN⁶

WE SHALL OVERCOME, WE SHALL OVERCOME, WE SHALL OVERCOME¹

(Blackout)

Scene

Curtain

End of Act I

Act II Scene I

(AT RISE: Leo Whitmark sits at an ornate desk. He listens to a phonograph playing Salieri's "Requiem", the "Sanctus" portion, nodding his head. LYDIA enters, sharply dressed, and visibly distressed)

Lydia

Leo, this has gone too far. You need to stop this.

Leo

How the fuck did you get past my secretary? Rachel! What's the damn point of her if she can't even keep you out of my office?

Lydia

I'm not here to talk about your damn secretary Leo. It's time to stop playacting Negro and leave race records alone.

Leo

And why would that be? Does your new boyfriend not like Louis and me horning in on his territory?

Lydia

Leonardo Whitmark, these poor people have been through enough without you taking one of the few things they can do to make a living away from them. Have you no shame?

Leo

First of all, you abdicated your right to impose your morals on me the second you left, and secondly, if your Negro boyfriend is so upset that I'm taking all of his contracts, why isn't he here to tell me himself? I thought you would be happy now that I have a little pocket money.

Lydia

Sam didn't ask me to come here, and I didn't leave you because you were broke. I was broke too, I'm broke now. Sam is broke. What I really want from you is to just do the right thing. Stop profiting from these people's pain.

Leo

You think I don't know pain? You think the Negroes have some sort of monopoly on being oppressed. I've been white my whole life

and never treated like it. People have spit on me Lydia, fucking spit on me. I used to have nothing, but now that I've finally built something for myself for once, you want me to just, what, give it up. No one is writing better race records than Louis and I, not even the black writers. We've been selling like hot cakes and now Sam's jealous. Well he and his band can buy a song from us anytime if they want to see how it's done. Now, I'm done talking about this Lydia, get out of my office. And don't come in here with any more of your jungle fever blues.

(Leo stands and gestures to the door. Lydia begins to leave. She turns back)

Lydia

Leo, don't let the chip on your shoulder keep you from being happy. I am proud of what you and Louis built. I just wish you didn't have to take something from someone else to do it.

(Lydia exits as Louis enters carrying a cumbersome box. They lock eyes. It's awkward)

Louis

Uh... Hey, Lydia. How's Sam?

Lydia

Hello, Louis. Sam's doing just fine. I just stopped in to tell Leo I've been hearing about the two of you all over town.

Louis

Well, that's very nice of you. I guess I'll see you around.

Lydia

I guess so. Goodbye Louis

(Lydia exits)

Leo

What's in the box?

Louis

This is a portable phonograph recorder. This way, you can record different parts of songs you want and play them at the same time!

Leo

I don't know about this Lou, it's one thing to be selling records, but is this really going to help us any?

Louis

Watch this.

(Louis turns on the machine. He walks over to the piano, plays a few notes. He walks back over to the machine, and rewinds it. He walks back over to the piano and plays more notes. He rewinds the machine again and plays it all back. It is a cacophony of noise, but Leo is delighted)

Leo

Louis, that's a great idea. I can finally play around with more complex counter melodies. So, I take it this week's numbers are good then, if you're out buying me presents.

Louis

We've got two more contracts this week. We're a hit, Leo. I stopped in Harlem to pick up our checks and I actually heard someone playing one of our songs in their apartment.

Leo

That's amazing! Which one was it?

Louis

"Boot in the Swamp"

Leo

Hey, I knew that one would be great. And you didn't think it would play up here!

Louis

You're just lucky we got a band in from Louisiana who knew what we were talking about.

Leo

That reminds me. What are they doing next weekend? I'm thinking about doing a showcase of some of our new material for some record execs, see what they're interested in.

Louis

I think they're free. Where were you thinking?

Leo

Cotton.

Louis

The Cotton Club? Leo, that's Sam's usual haunt. I'm not even sure we could get a place like that.

Leo

I called 'em this morning. They'd love to have us. I also got a place on 111th for the band to rehearse. It's perfect.

Louis

I'd have to be pretty stupid to think this is just coincidence, Leo.

Leo

Louis, this is our time. We have to take everything we possibly can while we're this hot. The Cotton Club is one of the biggest hangouts of our time, and we'd be fools not to try and get a gig there. If we have to push a few less popular artists out of the way, didn't they do the same thing to us just a few months ago?

Louis

Well, I guess you're right. I just don't feel right about it.

Leo

Well, you better get right, because the band goes on in ten days, and we haven't even picked a set list yet.

*(Louis sighs, knowing
the futility of arguing)*

Scene

Act II Scene 2

(Grandpa Jerome stands on stage under a spotlight. Onstage with him is a simple, unfinished, black chair)

Jerome

Listen, James, I'm trying to teach you something. *(Pause)* No, don't get Jackson, he's helping your grandma cook, and let's be honest, she needs all the help she can get. *(Laughs to himself)* Plus he ain't old enough to learn this anyhow. Leave the boy a little childhood left. You see this chair, boy? Tell me about it. *(Pause)* Yeah, it's got four legs, and a seat, and what else? *(Pause)* Exactly, not much else. No cushion, no frills, no arms, but it's a chair. Now James, I am seventy-two years old, so believe me when I tell you, this is a black chair. *(Pause)* Yes, I know that literally it is a black chair, but I also mean that this chair is one of us, James. You see, back in the sixties, there was something called segregation. White folk called it separate but equal. If there was a white school, there had to be a black school. If there was a white water fountain, there was supposed to be a black water fountain right next to it. If there were white seats on the train, then there had to be black seats too. How it usually went, though, was that white people got the front door, and black people got the back. White people kept us from succeeding their way, so we had to get resourceful. We built Howard, we learned how to come in through the back, unnoticed, and slip out with exactly what we needed. So white boys got armchairs, and we got this piece of shit. *(Kicks chair)* But you know what? You can't do this with an arm chair.

(Jerome picks up the wooden chair and swings it with all his might in the air)

Jerome

Remember this James. Don't let anybody ever tell you you're nothin'. You've got everything you need right here.

Scene

Act II Scene 3

(Jackson and James are still in WXPX and have just answered the station call button)

James

You're on WXPX with James and Jackson. How can we direct your truth?

Brody

James, it's Brody from the Totally Tangential Traffic Tidbit. I'm here to tell you that I-91 is completely backed up because of an overturned eighteen-wheeler, and to tell you that I really support what you're doing. Keep up the good work brother.

James

Thank you. Always great to hear from a fan. So we are now entering our third straight hour of broadcasting. Perfect PBR&B might be a bit upset, but I don't think she'd exactly get what we were doing anyway. So, between songs, Jackson and I have been talking about the history of racism in America, and Jackson really came up with some salient points. Jackson, do you want to take it?

Jackson

What I was basically saying is that, at least to me, it is simply a result of people tapping into something much bigger than they knew. Like early race theory seems to indicate that race was something originally designed as a lower class division tool and this has completely spiraled out of control. It's just crazy to think about.

James

And while you all ruminates on that, we are going to play for you, a little bit of Busdriver. This is "Least Favorite Rapper" off of his Jheli Beams album.

*(James spins Jhelli
Beams)*

Jackson

Damn, that was a close one, I thought for sure that was one of the station heads.

James

I'm weirdly at peace with it. I know that I'm going to get fired at this point, but if we get any amount of listeners, go viral, or someone important sees this, I might just be making a vertical career move. And if I can do it doing a show that I believe in, that's great. I just hope this doesn't tank your chances with some of the stuffer colleges.

Jackson

Well, in my opinion, if they don't understand what's going on here today, then I don't think they have communities that would be a good fit for me anyway. *(Beat)* Anyway, thanks man, it's been really good to see you. I know you got bugged when the funeral happened, but I think Dad would be really proud of what we're doing here. And I'm sure mom would be too.

James

Mom hasn't listened to the show since I started. We actually hadn't even spoken before she asked me to let you on the show.

(Phone Rings)

James *(cont'd)*

Jackson, can you get this guy ready on the line for when this song ends?

Jackson

On it.

(Jackson answers the call and prepares the coupler for patching the call in, live on air. James pots down the music)

James

Okay, that was "Least Favorite Rapper" by Busdriver, but I hope it wasn't your least favorite songs. Busdriver is one of the best in the game right now, and he deserves his due. Now it looks like we have another caller on the line. Tell me your story brother, what's going on?

Benjamin

Hello, my name is Benjamin, and I gotta say that I'm not super down with the kind of thing you guys are doing here.

Jackson

Well, you wouldn't be the first. What exactly is your problem with us?

Benjamin

I just don't like the talented tenth mentality that you two have. All hail Jackson and D James, the literate house Negroes, here to tell us how it is, bring the rest of us up with them. This is exactly what I expect from light skin brothers like yourselves.

James

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

Benjamin

Well, I'm looking at photos from WXPX's website, and I Facebook searched Jackson, you two are yellow as all hell, and it's just like two yellow brothers like yourselves to tell the darkies how it is, isn't it? How is the house, nigga?

James

That's all you're upset about, the color of our skin. I'm sure you see the irony.

Benjamin

It's not just that. I have ideological differences too, I just wanted to tell everyone listening exactly where the two of you are coming from. I also think that black people need to take some personal responsibility for the rampant violence within our own community. Black on black crime is potentially the most serious problems within our communities. How can we form a cohesive platform until we resolve our internal issues first?

James

Well, I think that comes from housing reform, and from...

Benjamin

And another thing, we need to pay more attention to who we choose as our leader. Do we really want people, much like yourself, educated in the white tradition, telling us which way the wind blows?

(Jackson looks visibly distressed)

James

Let me ask you a question, Benjamin. Are you one of those Clarence Thomas republicans?

Benjamin

If you're asking me if I'm a conservative, definitely, but if you're actually asking me about a party, I'm a Republican the same way Lincoln was. And I think that...

(Jackson hangs up the phone coupler. James freaks out and puts on "Monkey Gone to Heaven" by the Pixies)

James

Jackson, what the hell was that?

Jackson

I didn't think that it was going very well. We can get the next one.

James

We can't just hang up on people who disagree with us, we need to show that our points can stand up against criticism from all sides, even from our own community.

Jackson

But is it our community, James? We are only half-black, and he might be right, you're Ivy League educated with a degree in theater. No one's saying you don't understand racism, but are we

the kind of people who need to be leading this type of revolution?

James

Jackson, I don't know what to say. Of course we need to be front and center at this movement. I...

(The internal phone line rings. James answers it without putting it on air)

James

Hello?

Robert

James. This is Robert Atwell, we at corporate have been listening to your broadcast.

James *(to Jackson)*

It's the president of the station. He's been listening.

Robert

We were, at first, very amused with what you and your brother were doing on air, we even allowed you to move into the timeslot after you, but I think it's time to call it a day. Security tells me that you've locked and barricaded the door. They have been instructed to break it down and you will be escorted from the building. Consider this your termination from WXPX.

(Hangs up phone)

James

Well, shit. The game's up, we don't have a lot of time before...

*(The door at the edge of
the stage reverberates.
Five second pause. It
reverberates again)*

James

Speak of the devil. Here comes security. We've got maybe another fifteen minutes at the most. What do you want to do? We can just go out there now and see how this looks in a few days.

Jackson

Hell no. We started this by accident, but we are finishing it on purpose. What's the one thing you've wanted to say more than anything? What has been inside you forever? Say that.

James

Okay. I think I've got something.

Scene

Act 2 Scene IV

(The Woman stands center stage. Her oar has been poorly taped back together and the three pieces hang off of each other awkwardly. She sits in Old Man's boat, but Old Man is not in it. She reaches her hand into the "water". On the left side of the stage, a support has been built)

Woman

Are humans subjects or objects? I don't think there are subjects. Humans are all travelling from one oblivion to another, bouncing off of each other, trying to reach each other. They invent ways to shout louder, ways to allow more to remember their shouts. In between oblivion, we can channel those shouts. ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU, BUT⁷ WHAT'S THE FREQUENCY KENNETH?⁸

Scene

Act 2 Scene V

(Louis stands in the audience of the Cotton Club. An all-black band dressed in overalls with no shoes stands on stage. The lead singer and keyboard player should be played by the same actors that played James and Jackson. There should also be a washboard player. Louis continuously checks the clock on the wall)

Louis

Okay, guys. The set sounds great. We're going to take it once more and hopefully Leo decides to show.

(Louis counts the band off and they begin to play a slow blues tune. Leo bursts in the door)

Leo

Stop everything! Louis, I've got the perfect showstopper for this showcase.

Louis

Leo, I taught them everything. We don't have anything else.

Leo

Sure we do. I just wrote it. Music and lyrics. It's called "Make a Change" and it's going to be huge.

Louis

Lyrics too?

Leo

Yeah, now give this to the band.

(Leo removes sheet music from his pockets, unfolds it, and hands it to Louis. He reads a few of the lines)

Louis

I don't know about this Leo. This song seems pretty against message. You're talking about the kind of stuff white folk tell colored folk all the time. Are you sure the execs are going to buy this?

Leo

Louis, I thought a lot about this, and they really are, and I will tell you why. Columbia Records, Capitol Records, Paramount Records, they can all buy a race record song about the black struggle. They can buy that from any writer, a black writer, a white writer, they could even buy it from a Chinaman if he got his hands on a typewriter, but you know what they can't get from a black writer? Something that goes against what they been saying. I'm offering a difference of opinion and they are going to see that. Louis, I am offering them the future of race records.

Louis

It feels to me like racist race records might not be the best way to go. I don't know if this is the best idea. I just think people will be awful mad.

Leo

Trust me, Lou. This is how we are gonna maintain our empire. Otherwise, what's to stop a black writer from sailing up the fucking Mississippi or taking a train from Atlanta and stealing all of our jobs? This way, we secure a spot for ourselves for years to come. Don't you see, we're going to build on this? And someday, there's going to be a Whitmark Records, and we can make whatever we want. We can be the ones giving out contracts, and we can even go back to doing jazz and ragtime stuff. Doesn't that sound great?

Louis

I don't know. We are already white writers that have been working in a black medium. We've been so successful precisely because we've been translating these black stories into something that white and black people can understand. I think going against that is going to be a bridge too far Leo. Can you understand where I'm coming from?

Leo

No, Louis, don't you see? These people don't know what they want, no one does. Today they want a black face and some pain, but what happens when someone tells them they want a white guy talking about the baby he lost? What if they start making music for Mexicans? Louis, we have to capture the guys at the top. We have to show them what they like, and the first step to doing that is this song. Trust me.

Louis

Okay, Leo. Guys, I think we're going to try this new one.

*(Louis passes copies of
the music to the band)*

A, one, two, three, four.

Scene

Act 2 Scene VI

(The cotton club is nearly completely dark. SAM enters with the singer and pianist from Leo's band)

Sam

Can you believe this? First, he takes my spot at the club, and now he's going to use it to take over our market with his racist garbage. We can't let this continue.

Singer

Well, there's not much we can do. The owners of the club want him, and we just don't have the draw.

Sam

I don't know about that. Leo's brother Louis came by my house last night. He warned us about taking our slot, so we have some sympathy there. We also still have our gig this weekend, we just got bumped to an opening slot, so we're not licked yet.

Pianist

Maybe not, but we're pretty close. We're going to be playing the same kind of stuff, and the Whitmark stuff does way better with the execs. I'm not sure if there's any way we can compete with Leo.

(Louis enters from stage left holding the portable phonograph recorder)

Louis

I think I can help you boys with that.

Sam

Lou, what is that thing? And why are you helping me?

Louis

Whatever he is, that is not my brother anymore, and I miss him. So if working with you is what it takes to get him back, I'm willing to try anything. Listen to this and you should have the perfect showstopper for the showcase this weekend.

Sam

Thank you, Louis, what do I owe you?

Louis

One. You owe me exactly one. I'll collect it Monday morning. Goodnight boys, and have a great show this weekend.

(Louis exits)

Singer

What do you think? He could just be setting you up? He warns us about Leo to gain our trust and then he knocks us down by sabotaging our set. I don't know, I don't trust him.

Sam

Well, I do. He's always been good to Lydia and me, even right after she left Leo. I think we should at least listen to what's on the recording. Maybe it's an unused song we can use to get on the record labels' good side.

Scene

Act 2 Scene VII

(Lights up on the Cotton Club stage. Heavyweight champion JACK JOHNSON takes the microphone. He continuously checks his notes as he reads his introduction)

Jack

Ah... Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the Cotton Club label showcase. We've got a, uh, great show for you tonight. We've got acts all the way from the swamps of Louisiana and we've got a few of your hometown favorites.

(Jack changes his voice. He's rehearsed this part)

But before we begin, we'd love to thank our sponsors for tonight's showcase, and the discoverers of all of the new talent that the Cotton Club has to offer. Len Shwartz of Columbia Records. John Washington from Capitol Records. And of course Victor H. Emerson himself from Emerson records. We are so grateful to have you here and we're looking forward to a great show. So without further ado, I think it's time to let on Sam and his boys.

(Sam and his band take the stage. Meanwhile, you hear the three record executives talking amongst each other. One mentions the Whitmark band, one is more interested in Sam, but the executive from Emerson is seeing which way the wind is blowing, much to the chagrin of the Columbia records executive)

(Blackout)

Curtain

End of Act II

Act III Scene 1

(Jackson and James are preparing their last broadcast. "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke plays as they dial the phone coupler. The door is reverberating more and more frequently)

Jackson

I hope we get an answer. She can't be that busy.

James

Well, I haven't called in years, so I can only hope she even wants to talk to me.

(The song fades out as James deals with the phone. Jackson takes the mic)

Jackson *(on air)*

It has been incredibly real here on WXPX in the morning with your hosts Jackson and my brother D-James. It looks like the powers that be are going to break into the station and forcibly remove us from continuing our broadcast, but before that happens, we have one more caller.

Jackson *(away from the mic)*

Do we have one more caller, James?

James

We do. Pot up the phone coupler.

Jackson *(back on air)*

I want to introduce, for the first time on our last broadcast, a very special lady to both James and I, our mother Pam. Mom?

(The line is silent for an awkward moment)

Mom?

Pam

I'm here, honey. Hi guys, it's nice to be on. How are you?

Jackson

Mom, we're okay for now, but I don't know if you've been made aware, we're short on time.

Pam

Oh, right, of course. I've been listening all morning. Even for you James, this was a weird one.

Jackson

Mom, you've been listening to the show?

Pam

I listen to all of James' shows. I record them and listen to them before bed. I'm not the biggest fan of the music he plays, but it's always nice to hear his voice.

James

You've been listening to the show?

Pam

I don't think I've missed one. So guys, why I am I on the show?

James

Well, we've been going on for a few hours about the black experience in America, but Jackson and I only have a very limited perspective on it. Mom, do you care to tell the people about what it was like growing up black in America in the old days?

Pam

Sure. I'm not sure how many people out there know this, but I am a Jamaican immigrant. You guys know your grandfather, grandmother, and I all came over when I was just a little girl. Your grandfather took the way that black people were treated here very hard. He marched and he did everything he could to help end segregation, but I remember that he was never satisfied. I grew up mostly after all of that had ended, and because I was so used to being a Jamaican, I have never really thought of myself as an African-American. That's always been linked to this long history of a very specific type of slavery that I don't think carries over to the Caribbean exactly. I did know though, that raising two black boys in this country meant that was a legacy that we would all have to confront eventually.

James

And can you talk about what that was like, raising black kids in America?

Pam

Well, it wasn't easy. The two of you were a huge handful. As someone pointed out earlier, I married a white man and so the two of you are both mixed race. I always thought that it was an interesting way to grow up. You both look like black men, so we did our best to raise you that way, to prepare you for what the world would look like from that perspective, but we tried to expose you to some of your father's culture as well.

Jackson

Yeah, I remember that we used to go to Synagogue sometimes.

Pam

Exactly. His dying was the hardest thing I ever had to go through. I knew then that I had to teach you about how dangerous the world really was. If the cops would shoot a white man, what hope did the two of you have? I will always remember the talk I gave both of you.

James

I remember that.

(Pam enters. She talks directly to Jackson and James who seem to shrink as she begins to speak)

Pam

Boys, we need to talk about something. You're both getting older now, and you need to learn some things about the world. James, I believe your grandfather has mentioned some of these things to you, but you still need to listen. Jackson, you too, especially you.

(Pam sighs, she has never done this before, and it's something she's been dreading for years)

You guys need to know that the world sees you differently than it sees other people. You're boys and you're black. In this country, some people think that makes you dangerous. *(Pause)* Jackson, I know you're not dangerous, but not everyone has seen you cry when you stub your toe. So, you need to know what to do when you meet someone who thinks you're dangerous. If it's a policeman, you need to do whatever he says. You say "yes sir"

and "no sir" when he asks you a question. You need to stand up straight when he talks to you, keep your hands out of your pockets, and for god's sake, when you move, move slowly.

You also need to know that people are going to underestimate you. They are going to be surprised by the way you talk, and the way you think, and the way you act. They're not used to talking to black men like you. I need you to be patient. I need you to be kind. Just because they are ignorant does not mean that you need to be. You need to be careful around white women. If you sleep with them and their parents find out, they may say that they didn't agree to it. They say this out of fear because their parents don't know any better. You need to be especially careful of this. You're big, so you guys have to be careful when you get angry. You may scare people. When you get mad, it's not like when anyone else gets mad, so you have to be in control all of the time...

Guys I know that this sounds like a lot, but you need to know that it doesn't take anything away from how special you are. You are smart and kind and you are going to do great things in this world, and no one can stop you from doing that. You just need to be careful, because this world isn't always ready for kids as special as you are. Just make sure that no matter what, you be yourselves, and don't let anyone tell you what you are. I love you both. Now go outside.

(Pam exits)

James

I never wanted to hear that growing up. I remember how you used to be so overbearing. I hated you for that. I thought lost my dad and my mom when that happened... I think it's time to open the door, Jackson. I love you, mom.

Pam

I love you too, honey. One more thing, boys.

Jackson

What, mom?

Pam

Don't go out without a fight.

(Pam hangs up. Jackson moves the barricade and the door bursts open)

(Blackout)

Scene

Act III Scene 2

(The crowd applauds as Sam finishes his last song. Leo and Louis can be seen in the rafters)

Sam

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. You have been a wonderful audience tonight. As many of you know, this is not our usual time slot, but thanks to all of you for coming out anyway. We have one more number before we go, but this one isn't one of mine. This is a Whitmark original. Let's give the brothers a hand, ladies and gentlemen.

(The crowd cheers. Leo looks surprised, but plays it off and waves to the crowd. Louis nods. Sam goes back stage and pulls out the portable phonograph player)

Leo *(on recording)*

These people don't know what they want, no one does. Today they want a black face and some pain, but what happens when someone tells them they want a white guy talking about the baby he lost? What if they start making music for Mexicans? Louis, we have to capture the guys at the top. We have to show them what they like..

(The crowd starts to boo. Leo and Louis flee the club. Jack Johnson takes the mic)

Jack Johnson

Well, uh, ladies and gentlemen, I think that we'll be moving onto our next act from there. What interesting things you can do with technology these days.

(Blackout)

Scene

Act III Scene 3

(Leo sits back in their old dilapidated apartment. Leo plunks at his old piano. Louis enters with Sam)

Leo

What the hell are you traitors doing here? What, you come to laugh at the washed up has been?

Sam

No, actually I'm here to offer you a job.

Leo

Working for you? Why would I do that? Louis, did he put you up to this?

Louis

Actually, I put him up to it. Leo, we need the work, and Sam's the only one willing to hire us.

Leo

Yeah, because you helped him ruin us? How could you do that to us Lou? How could you do that to me?

Louis

That wasn't the way to succeed, Leo. We can't profit from pain we didn't go through. That makes us no better than the people who owned Negroes in the first place.

Leo

What about us, Louis. We haven't exactly had it easy.

Louis

Apples and oranges, Leo. We can't compare what they've been through to what we have. It's not fair to either of us.

Leo

What about what I'm going through right now. We're starving again.

Louis

So come work for Sam with me Louis. You know that I can't write any music. It doesn't work with just one Whitmark brother. You saw that at the Club. We have to do this stuff together. No more

lies. No more stealing from other kinds of people. Just you and me, writing songs, like we always wanted to.

(Leo doesn't respond. He walks out the door. Sam and Louis follow)

(Blackout)

Scene

Act III Scene 4

(Jackson readies himself at the door. He holds a microphone stand in his hands like a bo staff)

James

This is D. James signing off, but before we go, one last song. This is an oldie but a goodie, Sam Smith with "Here Again".

(The song begins to play as the door bursts open. Robert Atwell and two security guards rush into the room. James takes the chair he was sitting on, an unfinished black chair in his hands. He strikes Robert with it, and Robert falls to the ground. Jackson and James fight with the two security guards, but are outmatched. They are dragged out of the station. The fight should last as long as the song does)

(Blackout)

Scene

Act III Scene V

(The woman stands on the left side of the stage. A bridge has been constructed between it and the right side of the stage. It is made from the pieces of the boat and the oar. Charon waits under the bridge, pensive)

Woman

The answer is a bridge. We cannot take the ferry at all. We must build our own bridge. We must *be* our own bridge. We do not have to choose between now and eternity. Between Manhattan and New Jersey. Between Black and white. We are, and that is all we are. All else is secondary.

WE'VE GOT SOME DIFFICULT DAYS AHEAD. BUT IT REALLY DOESN'T MATTER WITH ME NOW, BECAUSE I'VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP. AND I DON'T MIND.

SO I'M HAPPY, TONIGHT. I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT ANYTHING. I'M NOT FEARING ANY MAN. MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THE GLORY... (THE RECORDING CUTS ABRUPTLY HERE)⁹

("In the Aeroplane Over the Sea" by Neutral Milk Hotel plays)

(Blackout)

Scene

Curtain

End of Act 3

End of Play

Radio Samples

1. Martin Luther King Jr.- I Have A Dream Speech
2. Adolf Hitler- Declaration of War
3. Winston Churchill- We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches
4. Sylvia Plath- Daddy
5. Gandhi- Soldier of Nonviolence
6. Hindenburg Crash Audio
7. Inauguration of John F. Kennedy
8. R.E.M.- What's the Frequency Kenneth
9. Martin Luther King Jr.- I Have Been to the Mountaintop

Playlist

1. Fight the Power- Public Enemy
2. The Grind Date- De La Soul
3. Today Was a Good Day- Ice Cube
4. Work (Remix)- A\$ap Ferg
5. Harlem Streets- Cam'ron
6. Salieri- Requiem, Sanctus
7. Least Favorite Rapper- Busdriver
8. Monkey Gone to Heaven- Pixies
9. A Change is Gonna Come- Sam Cooke
10. Here Again- Sam Smith (Original Song)

Here Again Lyrics

Here Again

We are my friend

I ask you to be true

For there are things

That heaven brings

That I must trust with you

Chorus

I've tried to be different

Alas, I am only me
But I'm not indifferent
To your pain and misery
End Chorus

Here again
It all must end
So I guess I'll say so long

Tried to learn
But it's my turn
To sing that old swan song

Chorus

I've tried to be different
But it's just too much to bear
But I'm not indifferent
You'll never say I didn't care