

MELLOW LIKE A CELLO

As Hamlet says: "To dig or not to dig, Jack, that's the question; whether 'tis the proper play to eat onions and wipe the eyes"



FORMER DODGER PRESIDENT, LARRY MAC PHAIL, LISTENS TO BURLEY'S REASONS FOR ADMITTING NEGROES TO MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL.

By Haskell Cohen

ARE you groovy? Are you mellow, like a cello? Fine as wine on clinging wines? Are you in there? Are your boots on and laced up tight to your deuce o' benders? Or are you simply a square from Delaware, acting like the bear on the lam in Times Square? If you can't dig this heavy spiel, hard, like lard, groovy like a ten-cent movie, then you don't collar the jive and need to be hipped to the play that's frantic both sides of the Atlantic. In other words, you'll have to get it first-hand from the man who is the master at the new lingo; and the originator of countless terms that you hear in the new song hits, in the movies, at the jam sessions and in the classrooms.

The fellow responsible for this distortion of pure English is a Negro, Dan Burley, presently the editor of the New York *Amsterdam News*, one of the important colored newspapers in the country. His column, "Back Door Stuff," is among the most widely read Negro columns in the world. In it he has carried such masterpieces as "Hamlet's Soliloquy in Jive," "The Night Before Christmas," and other parodies true to meter and sense, in addition to countless bits such as prose description of Harlem's happenings, political discussions in jive, and jive fight releases which Mike Jacobs' publicity department sends to New York dailies.



WHEN BURLEY ISN'T OCCUPIED WITH WRITING AND EDITING, HE KEEPS BUSY AT THE PLANT MAKING UP HIS PAPER'S PAGES.

DAN BURLEY



AS SPORTS EDITOR, DAN BURLEY COVERS IMPORTANT EVENTS. HERE HE'S HITCHING RIDE FROM JOE LOUIS' MANAGER, JOHN ROXBOROUGH.

Jive talk is not to be construed as a typical Negro dialect. The truth of the matter is that colored intellectuals abhor this talk much as they do the zoot suit and flat hat that have taken certain Harlemites by storm. Actually, the lingo of jive is as much a part of the white musician's and white entertainer's vocabulary as it is the lexicon of the colored jitterbugging set.

Burley, who has been writing the stuff for eighteen years, doesn't profess to be the originator of the language, and other historians can't quite make up their minds who started this unique spiel. Cab Calloway, for example, was spouting jive talk back in the lush days of New York's fabulous Cotton Club. Burley came across it during his early days on the *Chicago Defender*. When he joined the staff at the age of seventeen, the veteran sport writer, Fay Young, advised him to keep his eyes open for something new and catchy in the way of language. Dan heard the young Negroes on the street jibing each other in a tongue all their own. In time this "jibe" talk developed into the "jive" of today.

Perhaps the fact that Burley is a boogie-woogie piano player of no mean talent accounts for his attachment to the language of jazzdom. Dan, a prohibition-era piano player and graduate of South Side Chicago speakeasys, sits in regularly on jam sessions with the largest names in the musical world, including Al Ammons, Pete Johnson, Joe Sullivan, Meade Lux Lewis, and Lionel Hampton. It is common to see Burley tickling the ivories at New York's famous Cafe Society Downtown, The Village Vanguard, and the palace of jump music, Kelly's Stable.

There was a time when Dan thought his future was wrapped up in his talented key-tickling fingers, but this idea is a thing of the past. Although he is a member in good standing in Local 802, Burley finds his greatest delight in his column.

"Back Door Stuff" was first written for the *Chicago Bee* in 1932, where Dan served from 1932 to 1937. The fame of the column induced the publishers of the *Amsterdam News* to bring



THE BOOGIE-WOOGIE ARTIST "SENDING" JAZZ DEVOTEES AT HOT JAM SESSION IN VILLAGE VANGUARD, NEW YORK'S BOHEMIAN NITERY.

DAN BURLEY

him East to handle sports and theatricals. With this larger paper, "Back Door Stuff" developed into a column with a wide reading audience. Burley received many letters from foreign lands before Pearl Harbor and today has soldier boys from all over the globe writing him in jive.

It is quite possible that Burley did not originate the language, but few will deny that he has added more to its lexicon than any other jive artist, white or colored. He generally adds a few new words to the lingo every week in his column. From time to time he carries a parody on Shakespeare or some other classic like Whittier's "Barefoot Boy," or "The Lord's Prayer."

When Orson Welles read Dan's "To Be Or Not To Be" soliloquy, he shouted, "Boy, this is great stuff." The Boy Wonder then wanted Burley to do a complete play of Shakespeare in jive so that he could produce it on Broadway.

There's nothing sardonic or cynical about Burley. While the jive world is out of focus with his personal life he takes great pleasure in jiving the classics. To those who look askance upon this lack of respect for the world's great epics, Dan gently but firmly explains that jive is a tongue for the hepcats, and that he sees no harm in employing it to rewrite the Bard of Avon, the Bible, or America's great poets.

His latest jive treatment for the bedtime prayer, "Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep," reads as follows:

Now I stash me down to nod
My mellow frame upon this sod.
If I should cop a trot
Before the early bright,
Lay my spiel on the head knock
To make things all right.

While there is little danger of jive becoming the language of tomorrow, Burley points with pride to the advance it is making. "Remember Barbara Stanwyck in the 'Ball of Fire'?" asks this authority. "If you recall, she spouted the lingo like a veteran 'Back Door Stuff' reader. Also, have you noticed how the comic strip, 'Terry and the Pirates,' has gone for the stuff? Why, when Flip Corkin, the American pilot, was in danger, he composed a whole letter in the spiel. Man, that's progress."

