

ZENOBIA

Jimmy “Cry Cry” was steaming. The Jackson Brothers were running late again, which means we would be late starting our gig at their club. It is a short drive from Norman to Cushing, but they always seem to have something to do that prevented them from picking us up on time.

We finished our first gig at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman, nearly an hour ago, and we still have the long night at their place, “Jacksonville’s.” We’ll probably play until sunrise in the morning. I love to play there though; it is always full of excitement.

The small place holds only about sixty-to-seventy people, and when we play there, its always bustling with excitement and small town flavor. The women always came dressed from head to toe in the latest dresses they can afford to buy. The more talented women, who know how to sew, go downtown and “window shop”, sketching clothes on brown paper from grocery bags. Then, they come back home and make the dresses they copy from the windows often better than the originals.

The men wear their “Sunday go to meeting” suits. They wear finely shined shoes, matching spats and long chains fastened to their pocket watches. Some of them sport diamond rings. Wearing hats completing the outfits all of this stuff, this puts them in high fashion for Negroes. It is the place to “See and be seen”, on a Saturday night... in Cushing.

There was, however, one person that set the club apart from other small town night joints. Zenobia. She is head and shoulders above all the other women put together, even in their best clothes. She was an African queen without peer in Cushing, long before I could find Africa on the map.

Zenobia runs Jacksonville’s. As a matter of fact; she is Jacksonville’s. Since her return to her hometown from New York City, She turned a small town juke joint into a first class swanky dinner house and nightclub. Folks from miles around come to Jacksonville’s, just to get a peek at this elegant goddess.

The Jackson brothers are kingpins in Cushing. Both of them were in their mid-thirties when they took over “The bottom” as the Northside was called. They looked

like two offensive linemen in the NFL, both of them topping nearly three hundred pounds. So their mere presence, spelled trouble for anyone who might be dumb enough to have a disagreement with them. But, in reality, they were just two country boys from Snake Creek, with a keen sense of what business should be and they went for it. They came by this business acumen naturally. Their father made and sold the best Chock in this part of Oklahoma and got rich doing it. Chock is an alcoholic brew, called "White Lightening," that is the downfall of any Indian ,or Negro that sees it, let along drinks it. Over the years both races have paid a heavy price for this addiction, sometimes losing everything including the land they stood on.

Cushing is forty-odd miles from the nearest big city. It's just like any other small town except for its high school basketball team. The whole town takes great pride in this team, both the black side and the white side of town.

The basketball team is Cushing's pride and joy. They were giant killers on the court. This small farming town with a population of less than five thousand Negroes, lived to see the basketball team from their school compete against the teams from the big cities. The likes of big teams from Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Muskogee and teams from the famous R.C. Cole High School from Kansas City and Arkansas, all came to town to challenge Cushing's High School basketball team. These teams almost always left town defeated, their tails tucked firmly between their legs, whipped to a "fair de well." Cushing's basketball team was like a well-oiled plow that picked up everything in its wake.

The Jackson brothers were major sponsors of the team and saw to it that the athletes had the best of everything that money could buy... except education. The players had money and beautiful leather monogrammed letter jackets, pretty girls and free nights at the local motel (also owned by the Jackson Brothers). In fact the Jackson brothers owned everything on the black side of town. They controlled the flow of liquor, (bonded and homemade), the night club, the grocery store, the gas station, the hardware store... and even the church. The Black side of town could easily have been named "Jacksonville" instead of just the night club.

We came to play music in Cushing in the early 50's all through the year, summer, spring, fall and winter. This was my first gig as a musician with the Jimmy "Cry Cry" Hawkins blues band.

At sixteen years old I made all of twelve dollars a night... big money. Jimmy Hawkins was a star at Jacksonville's. His band was billed as; Jimmy "Cry Cry"

Hawkins and his Teardrops of Joy. We had some great young players in this band and I was happy to be in my first band playing the blues. My weekends in Cushing were big time stuff for me, still too young to be thinking about nightclubs. nevertheless, there I was playing the blues and singing Johnny Ace songs.

Herman and Thurman Jackson, came to Tulsa to pick us up in their identical green '54 Hudson Hornets, and we stayed over the weekend, (where else?) in their motel, and ate all our meals... in their café.

Alvin "Bones" Jones, the talented trombone player and I usually ate in their bar-b-que joint down the street, run by an old basketball player. Everybody knew him as "Doll baby." He was known for his sweet jump shot in his hey day.

While the thrill of playing at a night club was new and exciting for me, all of my attention was focused on what happened inside the club. This is where my night club education began in 1953, and where I saw Zenobia for the first time.

Although the Jackson brothers owned Jacksonville's... Zenobia lorded over it. She had a style and class, the likes of Cushing had never seen, black or white.

Zenobia was the hostess in the club and she performed her nightly act with the greatest aplomb. She was a sophisticated lady even before I knew what the word meant. To watch her walk was something else, and she knew it too! Serena Williams must have seen some old clips of Zenobia, because when you see Serena strutting around just before match point at the French Open, you see Zenobia "back in the day." She was built like a brick outhouse, made out of the finest bricks that could be found.

This tall brown skinned lady strutted with the grace of a modern day Cleopatra, gliding from table to table, serving drinks, meeting and greeting, the local folks. She knew everybody in town, so Saturday night was like "Old homecoming night."

Always dressed in something that was both revealing and high fashioned at the same time, Zenobia "had some legs for ya baby." Every dress she wore, gave you plenty of those long sculpted yams to salivate over.

She could easily have been a model for one of those European artists who made their living painting portraits of beautiful women. She was that too; beautiful. And when she smiled? Men and women alike, melted faster than butter in a hot skillet. And don't let her get close and look deep into your man's eyes, he'd faint from the thrill. Many a man had to explain to his wife, (or lady friend) why they got googly-

eyed, when she laid across the table to take their dinner order and stared straight into their eyes, whispering with her sultry voice, “Whatcha want for desert, honey?” When she “addressed” the table, it was like the woman at the table, wasn’t there.

Some of the men got cut off from coming to Jacksonville’s alone. Some got “cut off” at home too, if you know what I mean. Zenobia was something else! The women for the most part, came just to see what she was wearing and she never wore the same thing twice.

She donned daring colors that most women wouldn’t be caught dead wearing. The colors worked on her though, and she knew it. Miss Zee gave them plenty to reach for... she set the bar to a high level. The other ladies weren’t even in the race come Saturday night.

Her perfumes came from New York City, a place light years away, from this small town with one main street. When she came back to town, women started locking their doors trying to protect their “happy homes.” Zenobia was the talk to the town.

Word spread like wildfire, when she just showed up to church on that wintry Sunday morning. She wore a long mink-collared green suede coat, with a split up the side damn near to her arm pits, and matching boots that went way up her legs. She coulda been “buck naked” underneath that coat it was so sharp, but she had on a suede dress and plenty of jewelry. Nobody had ever seen this kind of dressing before.

Her clothes were the chief topic of discussion with the ladies after church. The sisters discussed her like she was a new disease, at Sister Zackary’s house, over coffee and her legendary double crusted sweet potato pie. Zenobia made her statement that morning, and she never wore that outfit again. Nevertheless, every Sunday morning after that, the ladies began to come earlier, to see what she did have on. She didn’t disappoint them.