"Uncle Sam Blues"-- Oran "Hot Lips" Page, accompanied by Eddie Condon's Jazz Band (1944)

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Essay by Todd Bryant Weeks (guest post)*


Oran "Hot Lips" Page

Original label


Eddie Condon

> *Uncle Sam was no woman, but didn't he draft your man?*
> *Tell me them good-lookin' womens on the border's raisin' sand.*
> —Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Dry Southern Blues," 1926

In March of 1944, the Texas-born trumpeter Oran "Hot Lips" Page introduced a blues number that was to become one of the most well know records of the World War II era: "Uncle Sam Blues." Page recorded the tune as a V-Disc, a special record to be sent overseas to US servicemen. The recording was made with a group of "Chicagoans," musical stalwarts that included plectorist Eddie Condon, trombonist Miff Mole and clarinetist Pee Wee Russell.

The tune's lyrics hold at their core an unabashed patriotism, but they also express an ambivalence about the war that may have registered with a contemporary black audience:

> *Uncle Sam ain't no woman, but he sure can take your man,*
> *Women ringing hands and a-cryin'.*
> *All over the land.*

One of the most powerful of the World War II era blues singers, Hot Lips Page was among the very few jazz musicians to score big successes with the public both as a vocalist and as an instrumentalist. There are numerous stories of Page singing the blues for up to 45 minutes at a stretch without ever repeating a single line. His witty, modern vocals are at once part of a mid-century rapprochement to the country blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leadbelly, and also a primary influence on the next generation—figures like Lowell Fulson, Aaron "T-Bone" Walker, and Ray Charles.

Page's primary vehicle of expression *was* the blues, and considering his ability to articulate intricate musical ideas with harmonic and rhythmic complexity that was *de rigueur* for the war years, he remained, always, a musician whose devotion to melody and strong voice leading was paramount. To be fair, the great Dizzy Gillespie had perhaps the most astonishing technical abilities of any trumpeter of his generation, and Roy Eldridge may have rightfully been dubbed

the “King” of his instrument throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s. But it was Hot Lips Page that brought a diversity of emotion not present in much of Gillespie’s best work. He also possessed the uncanny ability (not always associated with Eldridge) to know when to pull back. Oran Page’s was a deeply emotive expansiveness that, like his mentor Louis Armstrong’s, generally knew the scope of its own limitations.

“The blues have been granted Lips,” wrote writer-historian Dan Morgenstern in 1962, “but not emphatically enough.” As a young man, the writer heard the trumpeter in numerous settings both in downtown Manhattan and uptown in Harlem. Page’s blues singing was always a showstopper, and Morgenstern recalled his voice from this period as a “jazz instrument beyond compare...rich in shadings and inflections that could transform the simplest blues into a fresh discovery. The words were his own, and like all great bluesmen, he drew freely on the tradition. And when he took up the trumpet after the vocal, there would ensue a demonstration of why the blues are the eternal wellspring of jazz—and of jazz melody.”

In an elegy to the forgotten school of manners that was once the jam session, Morgenstern also remembered how Page could be both a beneficent teacher and a punishing force: “Lips knew the etiquette of the jam session better than anyone. Unmusical behavior, on or off the stand, always pained him.... If a musician indulged in showing off, Lips would gaze at him with a bemused expression, and give him all the time he wanted. Then he would proceed to produce some music that made everyone forget that the other man had even picked up his horn.”

Complete with its bugler’s cadenza in its final bars, Hot Lips Page’s tour de force performance (with a lyric that hearkens back to Jefferson) may be read as a call to arms and a simultaneous expression of the frustration felt by many African-Americans who had been asked to serve by a government that refused to treat them as full citizens. The overt message of the tune was the notion of “Uncle Sam” as a benevolent patriarch to whom all Americans owed the duty of their citizenship, and Page’s lyrics did draw a distinction between the corrupted mores of a supposedly civil American society and the evils perpetrated by the leaders of Germany and Japan—here referred to as Fritz and Tojo. However, just beneath the surface lay the assertion that, like the rival “other woman” of so many blues numbers, *this* Uncle Sam was just as capable as taking away one’s man as any “other woman,” and, in doing so, leading him to his ultimate destruction.

During the height of the second World War, Page’s V-Disc recording of “Uncle Sam Blues” was heard in the South Pacific, the North Atlantic, and everywhere in between.

Todd Bryant Weeks is a writer, advocate and jazz historian. He has taught Jazz History at Rutgers University-Newark and with the acclaimed Bard Prison Initiative. His book, “Luck's In My Corner: The Life and Music of Hot Lips Page” won an Honorable Mention for Best Research in Recorded Jazz from the Association for Recorded Sound Collections in 2009. Mr. Weeks is a 2015 recipient of a Fellowship from the Jentel Artists Foundation and the Millay Colony for the Arts.

The above is excerpted from the book “Luck’s in My Corner: The Life and Music of Hot Lips Page” by Todd Weeks (New York: Routledge Press, 2008).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.