

“Meeting Madden” from the play *Jitterbug!* by D.C. Copeland

African-American male | 20's-40's | Harlemese and Irish/British accents

About the Play: *Jitterbug!* is a dramatic play set in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance and the Swing Music Era. It is based on real and imagined characters and incidents.

Time: Circa 1931.

About the Scene: 22-year-old Billy Rhythm is half of the Lindy dance team-- his new girlfriend Tharbis Jefferson is the other half-- representing the Cotton Club in a dance contest at the Savoy Ballroom sponsored by the Cotton Club. The pressure is on to say the least to win that contest for all of the publicity it will bring the club's new revue, “*Rhyth-mania.*” So it is somewhat nerve wracking when the club's owner gangster Owney “The Killer” Madden shows up unannounced angry and frustrated.

(MUSIC UP: “Kickin' the Gong Around.” Cab Calloway is singing while his band plays in BG at a Cotton Club rehearsal. MUSIC TO BG.)

My name is Billy Rhythm. I know, you gotta be kiddin', right? But it's my given name and it fits me just fine 'cause I'm a dancer. The best in Harlem. Cab Calloway is singin' in the background. He's just 22-years old. Like me. Aside from our talent and age, we share something else in common: this is our first gig at the Cotton Club. Cab replaced Duke Ellington and I blew away Guido and the boys with my tap dancin.' I ain't no standin'-in-place hooper like that ol' man Bojangles, I slide, skip, and roll across the stage. Those crazy icky ofay gangsters never saw nothin' like it. They HAD to hire me.

(Pause to listen to the song.)

Cab's singin' 'bout a frail strung out on coke. It's written by two nice Jewish boys. Hal Arlen and Ted Koehler. Who knew they knew, right? Since workin' here, I learned I'm a “schlimazel.” That's a lane with bad luck-- as opposed to a “schemiel,” a clumsy gate-mouth. My bad luck comes in spades and clovers-- 4-leaf clovers. My old Harlem gang the Jolly Fellows iced me and are threatening to kill me if I enter the club's dance contest at the Savoy. And my new employers are a bunch of gangsters led by an Irish bastard named Owney Madden. His nickname is “The Killer” 'cause he killed his first man when he was just 14 as a member of the Goofers gang in Hell's Kitchen. He's killed a lot more since then. Rumor has it he's carrying six slugs in him. They expect me and my dance partner Tharbis Jefferson to win the contest for them 'cause the new show needs the publicity. She's one of the eight “Tall, Tan, and Terrific” show girls. The only thing funny about Madden is he never lost his accent.

(SFX: Doors swing open, trampling footsteps.
MUSIC grinds to a halt.)

And then Madden surprised us with an unexpected visit by showing up at the club with his bodyguards. None of us “niggas” had seen him before except in the newspapers and it wasn't until we were alone and comparin' notes that we all agreed on one thing: killers come in all shapes and sizes and our little killer was strutting up the aisle like a bantam rooster with a smoking cigar hanging from its mouth. Cab was the first one to speak.

“Mr. Madden!”

Madden bounded up the steps onto the stage and ignored Cab's outstretched hand, leaving it hangin' in the still, heavy air.

He said, “I hear you've all turned into a bunch of cry babies since Big Frenchy disappeared and the cops have been sniffing around.”

Big Frenchy, a fellow gangster, is his club manager. I'll admit his disappearance kinda put a damper on us 'cause we don't know if the show's still goin on or not.

“I don't have time for any of this bullshit. It's not like I've got nothin' better to do than to take time out of my fookin' day to hold your little black hands and tell ya everything is going to be okay. Forget about the Plantation Club. I don't care what anyone tells ya, we had nothin' to do with it going out of business.”

Now that's a lie 'cause Tharbis and me saw Big Frenchy “managing” the event that night. He was ordering Madden's boys to throw everything they could from the rival club onto the street. And then he set it on fire. Right there, in the middle of 126th Street.

“As for any rumors floating around about Big Frenchy gettin' kidnapped, it never happened. Big Frenchy's on vacation.”

Scuttlebutt says Big Frenchy got himself kidnapped by another gangster named Vincent “Mad Dog” Coll. Coll got that nickname for accidentally killing a kid in a machine gun battle.

“None of this is going to keep the show from opening next week and when it does, it better be a fookin' hit! I've got too much invested in it for it to be anything else. *Or else*. Ya follow?”

None of us could say anything 'cause we were scared shitless.

“Say somethin, goddamn it!”

(Continued)

I'm sorry to say we all sounded like a bunch o' Steppin' Fetchits steppin' over each others words: "*Yas, suh! We understand, Mr. Madden, suh!*"

"Where's my dancers?" he snarled.

Nothin.' We lost our voices again.

"For my dance contest for crying out loud!"

Right here, suh, I whispered. I couldn't believe it either. I had my hand high up in the air like some school kid. I grabbed Tharbis' hand with the other to steady myself. Madden walked up to us and looked me up and down. I was taller but, man did I *feel* smaller.

"You don't look that tough to me," he says.

He blows cigar smoke in my face. I try not to cough or look away. Or look surprised my reputation as a "tough" guy got to Madden's ears. For a while there I was comin' to work every day cut up and bruised because I was mixin' it up with the Jolly Fellows outside of the Club. And Madame St. Claire, the numbers queen of Harlem. The Jolly Fellows are hellbent on trying to convince me to "see the light," to come back and dance for them. And Queenie's got a gate named "Bumpy" riding my ass to get me to join up with her to flip on the Jolly Fellows so she can take over that part of Harlem. Maybe I should have explained those stories better, that the outcome was always the same: me lying bleedin' and unconscious on a dirty Harlem sidewalk.

"Pretty skinny."

He's looking at Tharbis now, looking her over like a piece of meat. Tharbis squeezes my hand and steps back.

"You afraid of me?" he asks her.

I step between them. I didn't mean too, it just happened. Madden can't believe it either. He quickly steps back and almost trips. His bodyguards move in.

"Are you kidding me?" he says to me in utter disbelief, his cold blue eyes flickering with rage. "Stop, don't touch this boy. He just might have what it takes. But does she got it?"

She's got it, I say. I must be suicidal.

Madden pauses and turns to me. "She better have it."

Or else? Again, I can't believe I'm talkin' to this guy like that. Why hasn't he plugged me yet?

“Or else” he finally says after giving me the once over.

And a sucker punch to the stomach. I fall to the stage gasping for breath. Tharbis screams and tries to help me up but I see the little Irish bastard slap her hands away. That's when I say, looking up at him through waterin' eyes, “Bossman, is that any way to treat your star dancer?”

That catches the little Mick by surprise. I'm pretty sure he didn't expect to hear “property” talkin' back to him. He pushes Tharbis aside, picks me up and whispers in my ear.

“Nigger, I like your style but you forgot your place. Don't ever let that happen again. I've killed men for lesser things. Now be a good boy and win my dance contest for me.”

He turns to Tharbis.

“You too, skinny.”

He shoves me over to her and turns to the cast.

“As for the rest of you, you better fookin' make my buddy Wally Winchell piss his pants it's so fookin' good.”

He turns and starts to exit and, with Tharbis holding me up, sucking breath for all I'm worth I shout, “Mr. Madden! May I have a word with ya?”

Tharbis grabs me hard. She thinks I'm crazy. So do I. Especially when Madden stops, sighs heavily, and slowly turns around-- *and I ask: In private?*

Cab leads the cast in a groan of sad disbelief. And even though I should know better, I still push away from Tharbis and stagger toward the mob boss. His bodyguards move to stop me.

“No, no, let him by,” he says. “What do you want that's so damn important it makes me stop everything I'm doing just so you can bend my ear?”

I whisper, “Mr. Madden, I don't ask nothin' from nobody. Never have; but this is different. I need your help.” Madden sighs and looks at his watch. “The Jolly Fellows and Queenie are threatening to kill me and Tharbis.”

“The Jolly Fellows? Who the hell are they?”

My old gang.

“Never heard of 'em. As for 'Queenie,' you talkin' about the numbers dame?”

Yas, suh... I said in the best Stephin' Fetchit impersonation I could muster. But this time it didn't come out of fear. I've seen the monster up close and personal and he don't scare me no more. No, this time it came out of pure unadulterated contempt.

“So?”

So if she does, the Cotton Club won't be winning no dance contest.

“What's your name?”

Rhythm. Billy Rhythm.

“Rhythm”? That your stage name?”

No, it's my real name.

“Boy, you really have a high opinion of yourself, don'tcha?”

High enough to win that contest for you.

“You know,” he says while sizing me up again, “I could never understand why you people didn't rise up to kill every last one of us bastards for what we did to ya. I know I wouldn't have put up with it. But the more I hang out with ya, I figure it must have been Jesus who saved our lily white asses; made you all forgiving and kind and stuff. Think you'll ever stop turning that cheek?”

I stopped turning my cheek a long time ago.

“Really? Me, too. Did any time?”

Not less you be talkin' 'bout the *time* step.

He laughs. “Boy, I'm surprised you can even walk much less dance swingin those extra large ones around down there. Now, about that black bitch, it's not like we travel in the same circles.”

But Dutch Schultz does.

“What, you want me to have him rub her out for you?”

No! Not at all. Just let her and Bumpy know they should leave us alone.

“Bumpy”?

That's her right-hand-man.

He just looks at me without saying anything before saying, "You know what?"

What?

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation with you."

And then he turns away and leads his men off the stage and out of the club. I don't know what to think.

Less than a week later Big Frenchy walked into the club like nothing had ever happened; that he hadn't been kidnapped and that Vincent Mad Dog Coll hadn't been machine gunned to death in a drug store telephone booth down on 8th Avenue in Manhattan. Rumor has it Madden was on the line negotiating the ransom drop-off and stalling long enough for his boys to kill Coll. I didn't realize it until I read the story in the papers but Coll was only a year older than me: 23.

(MUSIC UP: "Kickin' the Gong Around.")

As for that dance contest, I can tell you the Jolly Fellows didn't stop us from winning it but I won't tell you how. Just know a lot of blood was spilled that night across that dance floor while Queenie hid under a bed in her apartment up on Sugar Hill.

And that a legend was born.

(MUSIC DOWN.
END.)