

IKE AT THE MIKE

By Howard Waldrop

Ambassador Pratt leaned over toward Senator Presley. "My mother's ancestors don't like to admit it," he said, "but they all came to the island from the Carpathians two centuries ago. Their name then was something like Karloff." He laughed through his silver mustache.

"Hell," said Presley, with the tinge of the drawl that came to his speech when he was excited, as he was tonight. "My folks been dirt farmers all the way back to Adam. They don't even remember coming from anywhere. But that don't mean they ain't wonderful folks. Good people all the same."

"Of course not," said Pratt. "My father was a shopkeeper. He worked to send all my older brothers into the Foreign Service. But when my time came, I thought I had another choice. I wanted to run off to Canada or Australia, perhaps try my hand at acting. I was in several local dramatic clubs, you know. My father took me aside before my service exams. The day before-I remember quite distinctly-he said, 'William' he was the only member of the family who used my full name-'William,' he said, 'actors do not get paid the last workday of each and every month.' Well, I thought about it awhile, and next day passed my exams with absolute top grades."

Pratt smiled his ingratiating smile once more. There was something a little scary about it, Presley thought, sort of like Raymond Massey's smile in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. But the smile had seen Pratt through sixty years of government service. It had been a smile that made the leaders of small countries smile back as King Georges, number after number, took yet more of their lands. It was a good smile; it made everyone remember his grandfather. Even Presley.

"Folks is funny," said Presley. "God knows, I used to get up at barn dances and sing myself silly. I was just a kid then, playing around."

"My childhood is so far behind me," said Ambassador Pratt. "I hardly remember it. I was small. Then I had the talk with my father, and went to service school, then found myself in Turkey, which at that time owned a large portion of the globe. The Sick Man of Europe, it was called. You know I met Lawrence of Arabia, don't you? Before the Great War. He was an archaeologist then. Came to us to get the Ottomans to give him permission to dig up Petra. They thought him to be a fool. Wanted the standard ninety percent share of everything, just the same."

"You've seen a lot of the world change," said Senator E. Aaron Presley. He took a sip of wine. "I've had trouble enough keeping up with it since I was elected congressman six years ago. I almost lost touch during my senatorial campaign, and I'll be damned if everything hadn't changed again by the time I got back here."

Pratt laughed. He was eighty years old, far past retirement age, but still bouncing around like a man of sixty. He had alternately quit and had every British P.M. since Churchill call him out of retirement to patch up relations with this or that nation.

Presley was thirty-three, the youngest senator in the country for a long time. The United States was in bad shape, and he was one of the symbols of the new hope. There was talk of revolution, several cities had been burned, there was

a war on in South America (again). Social change, life-style readjustment, call it what they would. The people of Mississippi had elected Presley senator after he had served five years as a representative. It was a sign of renewed hope. At the same time they had passed a tough new wiretap act and had turned out for massive Christian revivalist meetings.

1968 looked to be the toughest year yet for America.

But there were still things that made it all worth living. Nights like tonight. A huge appreciation dinner, with the absolute cream of Washington society turned out in its gaudiness. Most of Congress, President Kennedy, Vice President Shriver. Plus the usual hangers-on.

Presley watched them. Old Dick Nixon, once a senator from California. He came back to Washington to be near the action, though he'd lost his last election in Fifty-eight.

The President was there, of course, looking as young as he had when he was reelected in 1964, the first two term president since Huey "Kingfish" Long, blessed of Southern memory. Say whatever else you could of Joe Kennedy, Jr., Presley thought, he was a hell of a good man in his Yankee way. His three young brothers were in the audience somewhere, representatives from two states.

Waiters hustled in and out of the huge banquet room. Presley watched the sequined gowns and the feathers on the women; the spectacular pumpkin-blaze of a neon orange suit of some hotshot Washington lawyer. The lady across the table had engaged Pratt in conversation about Wales. The ambassador was explaining that he had seen Wales once, back in 1923 on holiday, but that he didn't think it had changed much since then.

E. Aaron studied the table where the guests of honor sat-the President and First Lady, the Veep and his wife, and Armstrong and Eisenhower, with their spouses.

Armstrong and Eisenhower. Two of the finest citizens in the land. Armstrong, the younger, in his sixty-eighth year, getting a little jowly. Born with the century, Presley thought. Symbol of his race and of his time. A man deserving of honor and respect.

But Eisenhower was Presley's man. The senator had read all the biographies, re-read all the old newspaper files, listened to him every chance he got.

If Presley had an ideal, it was Eisenhower. As both a leader and a person. A little too liberal, perhaps, in his personal opinions, but that was the only fault the man had. When it came time for action, Eisenhower, the "Ike" of the popular press, came through.

Senator Presley tried to catch his eye. He was only three tables away and could see Ike through the hazy pall of smoke from after dinner cigarettes and pipes. It was no use, though. Ike was busy.

Eisenhower looked worried, distracted. He wasn't used to testimonials. He'd come out of semiretirement to attend, only because Armstrong had persuaded him to do it. They were both getting presidential medals.

But it wasn't for the awards that all the other people were here, or the speeches that would follow; it . . .

Pratt turned to him.

"I've noticed his preoccupation, too," he said.

Presley was a little taken aback. But Pratt was a sharp old cookie, and he'd been around God knows how many people through wars, floods, conference tables. He'd probably drunk enough tea in his life to float the battleship Kropotkin.

"Quite a man," said Presley, afraid to let his true, misty eyed feelings show. "Pretty much

the man of the century, far as I'm concerned." "I've been with Churchill, and Lenin, and Chiang," said Ambassador Pratt, "but they were just cagey politicians, movers of men and materiel, as far as I'm concerned. I saw him once before, early on, must have been Thirty-eight, Thirty-nine. Nineteen Thirty-eight. I was very, very impressed then. Time has done nothing to change that."

"He's just not used to this kind of thing," said Presley.

"Perhaps it was that Patton fellow."

"Wild George? That who you mean?"

"Oh, didn't you hear?" Pratt asked, eyes all concern.

"I was in committee most of the week. If it wasn't about the new drug bill, I didn't hear about it."

"Oh, of course. This Patton fellow died a few days ago. Circumstances rather sad, I think. Eisenhower and Mr. Armstrong just returned from his funeral this afternoon."

"Gee, that's too bad. You know they worked together, Patton and Ike, for thirty years or so--"

The toastmaster, one of those boisterous, baldheaded, abrasive California types, rose. People began to stub out their cigarettes and applaud. Waiters disappeared as if a magic wand had been waved.

Well, thought Presley, as he and Pratt applauded, an hour of pure boredom coming up. Some jokes, the President, the awarding of the medals, the obligatory standing ovation. Then the entertainment.

Ah, thought Presley. The thing everybody has come for.

After the ceremony, they were going to bring out the band, Armstrong's band. Not just the one he toured with, but what was left of the old guys, the Armstrong Band, and they were going to rip the joint.

But also, also . . .

For the first time in twenty years, since Presley had been a boy, a kid in his teens . . . Eisenhower was going to break his vow. Eisenhower was going to dust off that clarinet.

For two hours Ike was going to play with Armstrong, just like in the good old days.

"Cheer up," said gravelly-voiced Pops while the President was making his way to the rostrum. Armstrong smiled at Eisenhower. "You're gonna blow 'em right outta the grooves."

"All reet," said Ike.

The thunderous applause was dying down. Backstage, Ike handed the box with the Presidential Medal to his wife of twenty years, Helen Forrest, the singer. "Here goes, honey," he said. "Come out when you feel like it."

They were in the outer hall, behind the head tables. Some group of young folksingers, very nervous but very good, were out there killing time while Armstrong's band set up.

"Hey, hey," said Pops. He'd pinned the Presidential Medal, ribbon and all, to the front of his jacket through the boutonniere hole. "Wouldn't old Jelly Roll like to have seen me now?"

"Hey, hey," yelled some of the band right back at him.

"Quiet, quiet!" yelled Pops. "Let them kids out there sing. They're good. Listen to 'em. Reminds me of me when I was young."

Ike had been concentrating on licking his reed and doing tongue exercises. "You never were young, Pops," he said. "You were born older than me."

"That's a lie!" said Pops. "You could be my father."

"Maybe he is!" yelled Perkins, the guitar man, fiddling with the knobs on his amp.

Ike nearly swallowed his mouthpiece. The drummer did a paradiddle.

"Hush, hush, you clowns!" yelled Pops.

Ike smiled and looked up at the drummer, a young kid. But he'd been with Pops's new band for a couple of years. So he must be all right.

Eisenhower heaved a sigh when no one was looking. He had to get the tightness out of his chest. It had started at George's funeral, a pain crying did not relieve. No one but he and Helen knew that he had had two mild heart attacks in the last six years. Hell, he thought, I'm almost eighty years old. I'm entitled to a few heart attacks. But not here, not tonight.

They dimmed the work lights. Pops had run into the back kitchen and blown a few screaming notes, which they heard through two concrete walls. He was ready.

"When you gonna quit playing, Pops?" asked Ike.

"Man, I ain't ever gonna quit. They're gonna

have to dig me up three weeks after I die and . break this horn to stop the noise comin' outta the ground." He looked at the lights. "Ease on off to the left there, Ike. Let us get them all ready for you. Come in on the chorus of the third song."

"Which one's that?" asked Ike, looking for . his play sheet.

"You'll know it when you hear it," said Pops. He took out his handkerchief. "You .s taught it to me."

Ike went into the wings and waited.

The crowd was tasteful, expectant. .

The band hit the music hard, from the opening, and Armstrong led off with "The Y King Porter Stomp." His horn was flashing sparks, and the medal on his jacket front caught the spotlight like a big golden eye.

Then they launched into "Basin Street Blues," the horn sweet and slow and mellow, .. the band doing nothing but carrying a light line t behind. Armstrong was totally absorbed in his music, staring not at the audience but down at his horn.

He had come a long way since he used to hawk coal from the back of a wagon; since he was thrown into the Colored Waifs Home in New Orleans for firing off a pistol on New Year's Eve, 1912. One noise more or less shouldn't have mattered on that night, but it . did, and the cops caught him. It was those music lessons at the home that started him on his way, through New Orleans and Memphis and Chicago to the world beyond.

Armstrong might have been a criminal, he might have been a bum, he might have been killed unknown and unmourned in some war somewhere. But he wasn't. He was born to play that music. It wouldn't have mattered what world he had been born into. As soon as his fingers closed around that cornet, music was changed forever.

The audience applauded wildly, but they weren't there just to hear Armstrong. They were waiting.

The band hit up something that began nondescriptly-a slow blues, beginning with the drummer heavy on his brushes.

The tune began to change, and as it changed, a pure sweet clarinet began to play above the other instruments, and Ike walked onstage, playing his theme song. "Don't You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?"

His clarinet soared above the audience. Presley wasn't the only one who got chill bumps all the way down the backs of his ankles.

Ike and Armstrong traded off slow pure verses of the song; Ike's the sweet music of a craftsman, Armstrong's the heartfelt remembrance of things as they were. Ike never saw Storyville; Armstrong had to leave it when the Navy closed it down.

Together they built to a moving finale and descended into a silence like the dimming of lights, with Ike's clarinet the last one to wink out.

The cream of Washington betrayed their origins with their applause.

And before they knew what had happened, a new tune started up with the opening screech of "Mississippi Mud."

Ike and Armstrong traded licks, running on and off the melody. Pops wiped his face with his handkerchief, his face seemed all teeth and w sweat, Ike's bald head shone, the freckles standing out above the wisps of white hair on his s temples.

This wasn't like the old days. It was as if A they'd never quit playing together at all. This was now, and Ike and Pops were hot.

They played and played.

Ike's boyhood had been on the flat pan of J Kansas, smalltown-church America

at the turn of the century. A town full of laborers and businessmen, barbershops, milliners, and ice-cream parlors.

He had done all the usual things, swimming naked in the creek, running through town and finding things to build up or tear down. He had hunted and fished and gone to services on Sunday; he had camped out overnight or for days at a time with his brothers, made fun of his girl cousins, stolen watermelons.

He first heard recorded music on an old Edison cylinder machine at the age of eight, long-hair music and opera his aunt collected.

There was a firehouse band that played each Wednesday night in the park across the street from the station. There were real band concerts := on the courthouse lawn on Sunday, mostly military music, marches, and the instrumental parts of ballads.

Eisenhower heard it all. Music was part of his background, and he didn't think much of it.

So Ike grew up in Kansas, where the music was as flat as the land.

Louis Daniel Armstrong was reared back, tooting out some wild lines of "Night and Day." In the old days it didn't matter how well you played; it was the angle of your back and tilt of your horn. The band was really tight; they were playing for their lives.

The trombone player came out of his seat, jumped down onto the stage on his knees, and matched Armstrong for a few bars.

The audience yelled.

Eisenhower tapped his foot and smiled, watching Armstrong and the trombone man cook.

The drummer was giving a lot of rim shots. The whole ballroom sounded like the overtaxed heart of a bird ready to fly away to meet Jesus.

Ike took off his coat and loosened his tie down to the first button.

The crowd went wild.

Late August, 1908.

The train was late. Young Dwight David Eisenhower hurried across the endless street grid of the Kansas City rail yards. He was catching the train to New York City. There he would board another bound for West Point.

He carried his admission papers, a congratulatory letter from his congressman (gotten after some complicated negotiations-for a while it

looked like he would be ' Midshipman Eisenhower), hid train ticket, and twenty-one dollars in emergency money in his jacket.

He'd asked the porter for the track number. It was next to the station proper. A spur track confused him. He looked down the tracks, couldn't see a number. Trains waited all around, ready to hurl themselves toward distant cities. He went to the station entrance.

Four black men, ragged of dress, were smiling and playing near the door. What they played, young David had never heard before; it was syncopated music, but not like a rag, not a march, something in between, something like nothing

else. He had never heard polyrhythms like them before. They stopped him dead.

The four had a banjo, a cornet, a violin, and a clarinet. They played, smiled, danced a little for the two or three people watching them. A hat lay on the ground before them. In it were a few dimes, some pennies, and a single new halfdime.

They finished the song. A couple of people said. "Very nice, very nice," and added a few cents to the hat.

The four men started to talk among themselves.

"What was that song?" young David asked.

The man with the cornet looked at him. through large horn-rimmed spectacles. "That song was called 'Struttin' with Some Barbecue,' young sir," he replied.

Dwight David reached into his pocket and took out a shiny dollar gold piece. "Play it again," he said.

They nearly killed themselves this time, running through it. It was great art, it was on the street, and they were getting a whole dollar for it. David watched them, especially the clarinet player, who made his instrument soar above the others. They finished the number, and all tipped theirs hats to him.

"Is that hard to learn to play?" he asked the man with the clarinet.

"For some it is," he answered.

"Could you teach me?" Davis asked.

The black man looked at the others, who looked away; they were no help at all. "Let me see your fingers," he said.

Eisenhower held out his hands, wrists up, then down.

"I could probably teach you to play in six weeks," he said. "I don't know if I could teach you to play like that. You've got to feel that music." He was trying not to say that Eisenhower was white.

"Wait right here," said Ike.

He went inside the depot and cashed in his ticket. He sent two telegrams, one home and one to the Army. He was back outside in fifteen minutes, with thirty-three dollars in his pocket.

"Let's go find me a clarinet," he said to the black man.

He knew he would not sleep well that night, and neither would anybody back on the farm. He probably wouldn't sleep well for weeks. But he sure as heck knew what he wanted.

Armstrong smiled, wiped his face, and blew the opening notes of "When It's Sleepy Time Down South." Ike joined in.

They went into "Just a Closer ,Walk with Thee," quiet, restrained, the horn and clarinet becoming one instrument for a while. Then Ike bent his notes around Armstrong's, then Pops lifted Eisenhower up, . then the instruments walked arm in arm toward Heaven.

Ike listened to the drummer as he played. He sure missed Wild George.

The first time they had met, Ike was the new kid in town, just another guy with a clarinet. Some gangster had hired him to fill in with a band, sometime in 1911.

Ike didn't say much. He was working his way south from K.C., toward Memphis, toward New Orleans (which he would never see until after New Orleans didn't mean the same anymore).

Ike could cook anyone with his clarinet horn player, banjo man, even drummers. They might make more noise, but when they ran out of things to do, Ike was just starting.

He'd begun at the saloon, filling in, but the bandleader soon had sense enough to put him out front. They took breaks, leaving just him and the drummer up there, and the crowds never noticed. Ike was hot before there was hot music.

Till one night a guy came in-a new drummer. He was a crazy man. "My name is Wild George S. Patton," he said before the first set.

"What's the S. stand for?" asked Ike.

"Shitkicker!" said the drummer.

Ike didn't say anything.

That night they tried to cut each other, chop each other off the stage. Patton was doing two hand cymbal shots, paradiddles, and flails. His bass foot never stopped. Ike wasn't a show-off, but this guy drove him to it. He blew notes that killed mice for three square blocks. Patton ended up by kicking a hole through the bass drum and ramming his sticks through his snare like he was opening a can of beans with them.

The bandleader fired Patton on the spot and threatened to call the cops. The crowd nearly lynched the manager for it.

As soon as the hubbub died down, Patton said to Ike, "The S. stands for Smith." And he shook his hand.

He and Ike took off that night to start up their own band.

And were together for almost thirty years.

Armstrong blew "Dry Bones."

Ike did "St. Louis Blues."

They had never done either better. This Washington audience loved them.

So had another, long ago.

The first time he and Armstrong met was in Washington, too. It was a hot, bleak July day in 1932.

The Bonus Army had come to the Capitol,

asking their congressmen and their nation for some relief in the third year of the Depression. President Al Smith was virtually powerless; he had a Republican Congress under him, led by Senator Nye.

The bill granting the veterans of the Great War their bonus, due in 1945, had been passed back in the Twenties. The vets wanted it to be paid immediately. It had been sitting in the treasury, gaining interest, and was already part of the budget. The vote was coming up soon.

Thousands, dubbed the B.E.F., had poured into Washington, camping on Anacostia Flats, in tin boxes, towns of shanties dubbed Smithvilles, or under the rain and stars.

Homeless men who had slogged through the mud of Europe, had been gassed and shelled, and had lived with rats in the trenches while fighting for democracy; now they found themselves back in the mud again.

This time they were out of money, out of work, out of luck.

The faces of the men were tired. Soup kitchens had been set up. They tried to keep their humor. It was all they had left. May dragged by, then June, then July. The vote was taken in Congress on the twelfth.

Congress said no.

They accused the Bonus Marchers of being Reds. They said they were an armed rabble. Rumors ran wild. Such financial largess, Congress said, could not be afforded.

Twenty thousand of the thirty thousand men tried to find some way back home, out of the city, back to No Place, U.S.A.

Ten thousand stayed, hoping for something to happen. Anything.

Ike went down to play for them. So did Armstrong. They ran into each other in town, got their bands and equipment together. They set up a stage in the middle of the Smithville, now a forlorn-looking bunch of mud-straw shacks.

About five thousand of the jobless men came to hear them play. They were in a holiday mood. They sat on the ground, in the mud. They didn't much care anymore.

Armstrong and Ike had begun to play that day. Half the band, including Wild George, had hangovers. They had drunk with the Bonus Marchers the night before and well into the morning before the noon concert.

They played great jazz that day anyway. Just before the music began, a cloud of smoke had risen up from some of the abandoned warehouses the veterans had been living in. There was some commotion over toward the Potomac. The band just played louder and wilder.

The marchers clapped along. Wild George smiled a bleary-eyed smile toward the crowd. They were doing half his job.

Automatic rifle fire rang out, causing heads to turn.

The Army was coming. Sons and nephews of some of the Bonus Marchers there were coming toward them on orders from Douglas MacArthur, the Chief of Staff. He had orders to clear them out.

The men came to their feet, picking up rocks and bottles.

Marching lines of soldiers came into view, bayonets fixed. Small two-man tanks, armed with machine guns, rolled between the soldiers. The lines stopped. The soldiers put on gas masks.

The Bonus Marchers, who remembered phosgene and the trenches, drew back.

"Keep playing!" said Ike.

"Keep goin'. Let it roll!" said Armstrong.

Tear-gas grenades flew toward the Bonus Marchers. Rocks and bottles sailed toward the masked soldiers. There was an explosion a block away.

The troops came on.

The gas rolled toward the marchers. Some who picked up the spewing canisters to throw them back fell coughing to the ground, overcome.

The tanks and bayonets came forward in a solid line.

The marchers broke and ran.

Their shacks and tents were set afire by Chemical Corpsmen behind the tanks.

"Let it roll! Let it roll!" said Armstrong, and they played "Didn't He Ramble?" The gas cloud hit them, and the music died in chokes and vomiting.

That night the Bonus Marchers were loaded on Army trucks, taken fifty miles due west, and let out on the sides of the roads.

Ike and Louis went up before the Washington magistrate, paid a ten-dollar fine each, and took a train to New York City.

The last time he had seen Wild George alive was two years ago. Patton had been found by somebody who'd know him in the old days.

He'd been in four bad marriages, his only kid had died in the taking of the Japanese Home Islands in early Forty-seven, and he'd lost one of his arms in a car wreck in Fifty-five. He was found in a flophouse. They'd put him in a nursing home and paid the bills.

Ike had gone to visit. The last time they had seen each other in those intervening twenty-odd years had been the day of the fist fight in Forty-three, just before the Second World War broke out. Patton had joined the Miller Band for a while but was too much for them. He'd gone from band to band and marriage to marriage to oblivion.

He was old, old. Wild George was only five years older than Ike. He looked a hundred. One eye was almost gone. He had no teeth. He was drying out in the nursing home, turning brittle as last winter's leaves.

"Hello, George," said Ike, shaking his only hand.

"I knew you'd come first," said Patton.

"You should have let somebody know."

"What's to know? One old musician lives, another one dies."

"George, I'm sorry. The way things have turned out."

"I've been thinking it over, about that fight we had," Patton stopped to cough up some bloody spittle into a basin Ike held for him. George's eyes watered.

"God. Oh, jeez. If I could only have a drink." He stared into Ike's eyes. Then he said, "About that fight. You were still wrong."

Then he coughed some more.

Ike was crying as they went into the final number. He stepped forward to the mike Helen had used when she came out to sing with them for the last three numbers.

"This song is for the memory of George Smith Patton," he said.

They played "The Old, Rugged Cross." No one had ever played it like that before.

Ike broke down halfway through. He waved to the crowd, took his mouthpiece off, and walked into the wings.

Pops kept playing. He tried to motion Ike back. Helen was hugging him. He waved and brushed the tears away.

Armstrong finished the song.

The audience tore the place apart. They were on their feet and stamping, screaming, _ applauding.

Presley sat in his chair.

He was crying, too, but quickly stood up and cheered.

The whole thing was over. _

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At home, later, in Georgetown, Senator Presley was lying in bed beside his wife, Muffy. They had made love. They had both been 4 excited. It had been terrific.

Now Muffy was asleep. _

Presley got up and went to the kitchen, poured himself a scotch, and stood with his naked butt against the countertop.

It was a cold night. Through the half-curtains on the window he saw stars over the city. If you could call this seventeenth-century jumble a city.

He went into the den. The servants would be asleep.

He turned the power on the stereo, took down four or five of his Eisenhower records, looked through them. He put on Ike at the Mike, a four-record set made for RCA in 1947, toward the end of the last war.

Ike was playing "No Love, No Nothing," a song his wife had made famous three years before. She wasn't on this record, though. This was all Ike and his band.

Presley got the bottle from the kitchen, sat back down, poured himself another drink. There were more hearings tomorrow. And the day after.

Someday, he thought, someday E. Aaron Presley will be President of these here United States. Serves them right.

Ike was playing "All God's Chillun Got Shoes."

I didn't even get to shake his hand, thought Presley.

I'd give it all away to be like him, he thought.

He went to sleep sitting up.