

RECONSTRUCTING A LIFE: CHARLES ‘BUDDY’ BOLDEN

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***Abstract:** Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Coming through Slaughter* is a fascinating attempt to bring literature and oral history together in order to recreate Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden’s mysterious life. Daily routines and gestures, inner thoughts and high musical notes form a puzzle to which the citizens of the flamboyant New Orleans keep adding pieces. With the help of his only existing photograph, the present paper focuses on the unquestionable father of jazz, who kept “away from recorded history”.*

***Keywords:** fragmentariness, (in)sanity, jazz, memory, New Orleans, oral history.*

1. Introduction

Coming through Slaughter is Michael Ondaatje’s attempt to give the history of jazz a new face and to introduce its father to a broader audience. The novel closely follows Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden’s existence, be it his personal life and his unofficial marriage to Nora, his daytime job at the barbershop, or his nightly appearances at bars and parades. The ups and downs of Bolden’s evolution are scrutinized with the eyes of the voyeur eager to notice every blink of an eye, each unique sound of the cornet or uncontrolled behaviour. Almost impossible to document, Bolden’s life builds the framework of this complex

novel, which reveals the history of a person, but also that of the flamboyant city of New Orleans.

2. The Birth of Jazz

In order to understand the history of a musician, one first needs to grasp the phenomenon called “jazz”. This new sound emerged in the unique town of New Orleans from a “base combination of syncopation from Africa and the Caribbean mixed with the melodic structures of Spain and France; was seasoned with Deep South humidity and oppression; and finally was slathered with the rhythmic and harmonic contributions of individual musicians to achieve a unique and delectable stew” (Bultman 2000:184). However, the term “jazz” was not applied to this new sound until more than twenty years later; back in those days (late 1890s), this kind of music was referred to as “gutbucket”, “ragtime” or “ratty music”.

The reactions toward “jass” were rather aggressive, as the *Times-Picayune* (one of the city’s widely read newspapers) suggests: “All [i.e. jass music and the jass bands] are manifestations of a low streak in man’s taste that has not yet come out in civilization’s wash. Indeed, one might go farther, and say that jass music is the indecent story syncopated and counterpointed. [...] Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great” (*Times-Picayune* qtd. in Rose 1974:106).

The ‘problem with jazz’ was that musicians, educated in the European tradition, regarded it as an inability to play “correctly” according to their own standards. Moreover, the birthplace of jazz was no reason of pride either: instead of being the result of professional musicians playing in concert halls,

this new music was heard mostly in the French Quarter (later known as Storyville) – more precisely, in the famous red-light district of this exotic town! Jazz was not a type of music destined for white people; instead, it brought together for the first time the musical knowledge of the downtown black (i.e. Creole) and the improvisational capacity of the uptown black (i.e. black). But where did it all start?

If I wanted to make a living, I had to be rowdy like the other group. I had to jazz it or rag it or any other damn thing. ... Bolden cause all that. ... He cause these younger Creoles, men like Bechet and Keppard, to have a different style altogether from the old heads like Tio and Perez. ... I don't know how they do it. ... But goddamn, they'll do it. Can't tell what's there on the paper, but just play the hell out of it. (Dominguez qtd. in Rose 1974:107)

Pete Lala's Café was the place most of the jazzmen raced to in order to entertain the eager audience. There was Joseph "King" Oliver, who won the "King" title after playing one night on the streets of New Orleans and succeeding to get the audience out of every place with a jazz band, seducing them all with his unique sound; Sidney Bechet, a great clarinetist, who later moved to Paris; Freddy Keppard who, gossip has it, used to cover his mouth with a handkerchief while he was playing so that no one could "steal" his notes, and who, in Bechet's eyes, imitated Buddy Bolden. And, of course, Manuel Perez, also a cornet player, preferred by many to Bolden. Nevertheless, all of them were united by the respect they paid to Bolden's innovating sound.

When not playing at Pete Lala's Café, they entertained at exquisite mansions, where the guests were as varied as businessmen, politicians or policemen. New Orleans' brothels were not ordinary establishments, but

the most pretentious, luxurious, and expensive brothels in the United States – three-story mansions of brick and brownstone, many of them built with the aid of politicians and state and city officials, and filled with mahogany and black walnut woodwork, and furniture, Oriental rugs and carpets, silver door-knobs, grand pianos, carved marble fireplaces and mantels, and copies of famous paintings and statuary. (Asbury 2003:358)

The exotic owners of these fancy mansions had seen early enough that a “professor” (i.e. a live pianist), not a piano player, was the perfect twist for their business. Al Rose (1974) believes that jazz music was not literally born in Storyville, since it had also been played before, at parades. This is true, but the district provided the perfect background for this kind of music. In order for a musician to be experimental and flexible, he needed the audience to encourage him and it was only this kind of audience that would allow a musician to play freely.

3. The Man behind the Cornet

It is in this context that Michael Ondaatje placed his character and started his own search for his leading figure. Nevertheless, his quest was not to be very fruitful, as “there is little recorded history” (Ondaatje 1979:2) in New Orleans. When writing a study about *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Martha Ward encountered the same problem: as she was looking for files and data regarding

black people, she soon realized that very many official documents were either lost, or partially destroyed (Ward 2004:XII). Many New Orleansians who were certain about their white blood, were discovering the contrary in these files, so that they simply took the incriminating pages away from the City Hall records. When it comes to blood, New Orleans prefers to write its own history.

In this context, the only real data that Michael Ondaatje could gather was the only surviving picture of Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden (taken by his friend and famous Storyville photographer, Ernest J. Bellocq, “but I was using an old film and it’s no good”, Ondaatje 1979:51). There were some unverified facts as well:

Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden. Born 1876? A Baptist. Name is not French or Spanish. He was never legally married. Nora Bass had a daughter, Bernadine, by Bolden. [...] Bolden worked at Joseph’s Shaving Parlor. He played at Masonic Hall on Perdido and Rampart, at the Globe downtown on St Peter and Claude, and Jackson Hall. April 1907 Bolden (thirty-one years old) goes mad while playing with Henry Allen’s Brass Band. He lived at 2527 First Street. Taken to House of Detention, ‘House of D’, near Chinatown. Broken blood vessels in neck operated on. June 1, 1907 Judge T.C.W. Ellis of the Civil District Court issued a writ of interdiction to Civil Sheriffs H.B. McMurray and T. Jones to bring Bolden to the insane asylum, just north of Baton Rouge. A 100 mile train ride on the edge of Mississippi. Taken to pre-Civil War asylum by horse and wagon for the last fifteen miles. Admitted to asylum June 5, 1907. ‘Dementia Praecox. Paranoid Type.’ East Louisiana State Hospital, Jackson, Louisiana, 70748. Died 1931. (Ondaatje 1979:141-2)

These facts have all outlived Bolden, so that Ondaatje tries to reconstruct his life with the help of liquor bottles sent from various friends or

“patrons”, bars he could have been in, or his daily presence at the barbershop, where he used to earn his living. The novel has three parts, linked together by music and its major player. The first part corresponds to the “official” life of Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden, describing his daily habits, his music and friends, only hinting at what is still to come. The second part is rather inwardly oriented, switching to the inner world of a disoriented Buddy Bolden, desperately fighting to keep his sanity. The third part depicts Bolden’s last days before the parade, before everything changed from jazz to the real madness of the mind.

The novel opens under the heading “His Geography”, which actually lists New Orleans’ peculiar attractions:

Here the famous Bricktop Jackson carried a 15 inch knife and her lover John Miller had no left arm and wore a chain with an iron ball on the end to replace it – killed by Bricktop herself [...] And here ‘One-legged Duffy’ (born Mary Rich) was stabbed by her boyfriend and had her head beaten in with her own wooden leg. [...] History was slow here. It was elsewhere in town, in the brothel district Storyville, that one made and lost money – the black whores and musicians shipped in from the suburbs and the black customers refused. (Ondaatje 1979:2-3)

Even though Storyville was neatly documented, the other infamous parts of the town, where blacks like Bolden or Louis Armstrong came from, had a “slow history”. People were not interested in the violence and vice of the poor, but only in the fall of the rich. Thus, even if Ondaatje tries to describe the underground life in the ‘Swamp’ and ‘Smoky Row’, he ends up writing about

the district. This is the background for Ondaatje's novel; from there on, the author tries to reconstruct a life as we know it, with daily routines and gestures:

This is N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked. ... He puts the towel of steam over the face. Leaving holes for the mouth and the nose. Bolden walks off and talks with someone. A minute of hot meditation for the customer. After school, the kids come and watch the men being shaved. Applaud and whistle when each cut is finished. Place bets on whose face might be under the soap. (Ondaatje 1979:4-5)

The barbershop was not merely a place for a nice shave, but also the location where famous people waited for their alcohol deliveries made by Tom Anderson, the *tsar* of the district. Bolden was not only known for cutting hair, but also for his drinking habits, getting usually drunk till noon. Friends would accordingly come early in the morning for their hairdo, in order to avoid the more flamboyant cuts in the afternoons. In the evenings, he would always play so that "[w]hat he did too little of was sleeping and what he did too much of was drinking and many interpreted his later crack-up as a morality tale of a talent that debauched itself" (Ondaatje 1979:7).

Ondaatje tries to reconstruct an ordinary day in the jazzman's life: walking his children to school at 7 in the morning, and teaching them "all he was thinking of or had heard, all he knew at the moment" (Ondaatje 1979:7); going to the barbershop afterwards and chatting with the people from *The Cricket* newspaper – Bolden was their gossip columnist and they would print all the information given by him, unedited; cutting hair until 4 o'clock; then

going home and sleeping with his wife Nora until 8, when he would go out and play. The routine of a simple man, forgotten by the subjective history of jazz.

He was the best and the loudest and most loved jazzman of his time, but never professional in the brain. Unconcerned with the crack of the lip he threw out and held immense notes, could reach a force on the first note that attacked the ear. He was obsessed with the magic of air, those smells that turned neuter as they revolved in his lung then spat out in the chosen key. The way the inside of his mouth would drag a net of air in and dress it in notes and make it last and last, yearning to leave it up there in the sky like air transformed into cloud. He could see the air, could tell where it was freshest in a room by the colour. (Ondaatje 1979:8)

4. Debating Music

Opinions about Bolden and the way he played differ indeed. While, in his reputed documentary *Jazz*, Ken Burns says that real jazz emerged with Buddy Bolden (Burns 2004:DVD 1), Louis Armstrong seems to highly disagree. In *Satchmo*, Armstrong writes: “Old Buddy Bolden blew so hard that I used to wonder if I would ever have enough lung power to fill one of those cornets. All in all Buddy Bolden was a great musician, but I think he blew too hard. I will even go so far as to say that he did not blow correctly.” (Armstrong 1986:23)

When reading Armstrong’s lines about Buddy Bolden, one has to keep in mind an extremely important fact: Armstrong claims that he was born in 1900, but it is now known that he was actually born in 1901. The very last time that Bolden played in New Orleans was in 1907, and previously he had been out of town for two years. This means that Armstrong could have been six

years old when hearing Bolden play (even younger, in case he missed Bolden's final public appearance, which is highly probable). Accordingly, Armstrong was too young to fully understand if Bolden played incorrectly or too loud. The famous musician also states that "[o]f course Buddy Bolden had the biggest reputation, but even as a small kid I believed in finesse, even in music. [...] As I said before Bolden was a little too rough, and he did not move me at all." (Armstrong 1986:24-5)

Although Armstrong always had a good opinion about everybody, this was not the case of fellow instrumentist Bolden: he tried to dismiss Bolden from the history of jazz with the help of erroneous memories. At the beginning of his novel, Ondaatje introduces not only Bolden's daily life and his way of singing, but also his psychical instability which was to take him away from jazz. It was his mind that finally gave him away: he collapsed in the middle of the 1907 parade and was taken away to an asylum. The writer insists on his unstable, weak mind, and thus the novel is, at times, as chaotic as Bolden's mind and music were. It is only with the help of real life shades that the reader is able to decipher the pages to come: the novel is not very explicit in its construction and "plot", but rather improvisational, as life and jazz tend to be.

Images come in fragments, while different characters overlap on the same page, in order to build the bigger picture. We witness a cinematic approach to Bolden's existence, which corresponds to the fragmentariness of his life story. At the same time, *Coming through Slaughter* is a collage of texts: interviews with musicians or ordinary people; doctors' opinions or imaginary conversations with Bolden's friends. Although these different points of view

may mislead the reader at times, they are necessary in order to reflect the way memory functions and the way music can be perceived.

While the writer and the characters are looking for him,

this is what Bolden sees: The woman is cutting carrots. Each carrot is split into 6 or 7 pieces. The knife slides through and hits the wood table that they will eat off later. He is watching the coincidences of her fingers and the carrots. It began with the colour of the fingers and then the slight veins on the carrot magnified themselves to his eyes. In this are of sight the fingers have separated themselves from her body and move in a unity of their own that stops at the sleeve and bangle. As with all skills he watches for it to fail. If she thinks what she is doing she will lose control. [...] The silver knife curves calm and fast against carrots and fingers. (Ondaatje 1979:28)

When reading the novel, one has to keep this image in mind, as it stands for Bolden's conscious desire to let his mind wander away, to associate images beyond reason, and for the instability which will finally conquer him and drive him away from jazz. Experimenting with reality was also typical of his music because, as one of the interviewed people declared,

There was no control except the mood of his power ... and it is for this reason it is good that you never heard him play on recordings. If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes – then you should never have heard him at all. [...] It was just as important to watch him stretch and wheel around on the last notes or to watch nerves jumping under the sweat of his head. (Ondaatje 1979:35)

5. A Beautiful, Yet Unstable Mind

The stories surrounding Bolden suggested that he went mad because of the power he used when blowing his horn. That he literally blew his brains out. Although jazz was described as having “so little wisdom”, it screamed with spontaneity and subjectivity instead, a music rising from the deep caverns of the soul. The emphasis on the lack of any pattern is important, because it simultaneously talks about the music and the musician: the feeling of a jam session, where everything can and will turn into music, is essential for any understanding of jazz and its creator. A strange figure, refusing to be recorded, Charles Bolden preferred to stay in the shadow, walking in and out of the audience as he pleased, taking distance even from himself.

His songs spoke not only of music, but also of life as it really happened:

He [his friend, Webb] watched him dive into the stories found in the barber shop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change. The music was coarse and rough, immediate, dated in half an hour, was about bodies in the river, knives, lovepains, cockiness. Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. (Ondaatje 1979:41)

Jazz stood for everything that was real, that could easily be identified by the masses so that they could, eventually, identify *with* it. Perhaps this was the most specific aspect of jazz: it was a mirror of life as it unfolded, with ups and downs, quick changes of mood and situation, beginning and ending in the strangest places.

The image of Bolden’s later return to the barbershop is vivid due to its connotations: he goes back and looks for his old self, but is unable to “locate”

himself; instead he sings his story under the amazed and scared eyes of the voyeur.

I'm sort of scared because I know the Lord don't like that mixing the Devil's music [i.e., the blues] with His music [i.e., a hymn]. But I listen because the music sounds so strange and I guess I'm hypnotized. [...] It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something tells me to listen and see who wins. (Ondaatje 1979:83)

The mixture of the sacred and the profane mirrors real life more than one would be willing to accept. Yet, it is not a matter of “who wins”; the essence lies precisely in the ambiguity (rendered so truthfully by Bolden's own life), in the ‘both/ and’ that people are so afraid of. The unexpected is also captured later, when the public can no longer identify the beginning or the end of a song. Breaking the rules of ‘canonized’ music, Bolden chooses (the verb is, in fact, wrongly used, because it is not a matter of rational choice) the inner realm, surprising and unexpected even to himself. The lesson of his “forefathers” (as Ondaatje puts it) is rather the lack of any serious lesson, any craft that should be carried along in the same manner. It is the lesson of the “purest note”, of the oblivion of patterns, the celebration of the genuine. But this willing lack of control (in music) also stands for real life, where chaos reigns over solid principles.

The people of New Orleans did not know much about Bolden himself: he arrived in the city at the age of twenty-two and started to play his fascinating tune. He married Nora, a former prostitute at the mansion of “Lula White” (this is how Ondaatje spells her name; in Storyville, she was known as Lola White)

and then suddenly vanished. After his disappearance, Ondaatje locates him at Shell Beach, the place of some friends, where he has an affair. It is during this time that Bolden understands the real dimensions of his sickness, and believing, probably like everyone else, that he will “blow his brains out” (due to his cornet), he stops playing for a while, trying to rest at Web’s cottage on Lake Pontchartrain. When he finally comes back to town, he finds Nora together with Willy Cornish (friend and member of his band). His ties with reality are thus cut forever, but he still tries to reconnect by reading all the issues from *The Cricket* that he had missed while he was gone:

I read it all. Into the past. Every intricacy I had laboured over. How much sex, how much money, how much pain, how much sweat, how much happiness. Stories of riverboat sex when whites pitched whores overboard to swim back to shore carrying their loads of sperm, dog love, meeting Nora, the competition to surprise each other with lovers. *Cricket* was my diary too, and everybody else’s. Players picking up women after playing society groups, the easy power of the straight quadrilles. All those names during the four months moving now like waves through a window. So I suppose that was the craziness I left. Cricket noises and Cricket music for that is what we are when watched by people bigger than us. (Ondaatje 1979:120)

His last days of jazz(y) life are rendered almost by the minute, but also through people’s memories:

Interviewer: To get back to Buddy Bolden –

John Joseph: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: He lost his mind, I heard.

John Joseph: He lost his mind, yeah, he died in the bug house.

Interviewer: Yes, that's what I heard.

John Joseph: That's right, he died out there. (Ondaatje 1979:111)

This attempt at an interview proves to be a disaster: people cannot tell anything about Bolden, except that he went mad. He parted with his band at the parade, sang elsewhere, alone, and fell down in the middle of the street. Ondaatje tries to re-write his death, the moment when everything faded into oblivion:

For something's fallen in my body and I can't hear the music as I play it. The notes more often now. She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what I do through her. [...] Half dead, can't take no more, hardly hit the squawks anymore but when I do my body flicks at them as if I'm the dancer till the music is out there. *Roar*. It comes back now, so I can hear only in waves now and then, god the heat [...] the blood that is real move up bringing fresh energy in its suitcase, it comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop god can't stop it can't stop the air the red force coming up can't remove it from my mouth, no intake gasp, so deep blooming it up god I can't choke it the music still poring in a roughness I've never hit, watch it *listen* it *listen* it, can't see I CAN'T SEE. Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot I can feel others turning, the silence of the crowd, can't see *Willy Cornish catching him as he fell outward, covering him, seeing the red on the white shirt thinking it is torn and the red undershirt is showing and then lifting the horn sees the blood spill out from it as he finally lifts the metal from the hard kiss of the mouth*. (Ondaatje 1979:138-9)

This was the end: the end of jazz for Charles Buddy Bolden, and of Bolden's existence for the public. Ondaatje lists several of the hospitals the latter was in, talks to doctors and guardians, realizing that they had no idea

about medicine and mental illness. When Bolden was brought to the last hospital, his guards were taking a cold bath in a place called Slaughter, with him watching. When he died, his corpse was taken through several cities, the first one being, once more, Slaughter, and was finally buried in an unmarked grave. Slaughter becomes, thus, the place where Bolden departs from his New Orleans' life and, simultaneously, the one where his existence ends for good. From there, Ondaatje has undertaken the task of 'reviving' him, in order to bring him back where he belonged: to the history of jazz.

6. Conclusion

The novel itself is a mirror of the 'facts' related to Charles Buddy Bolden's life: some are mere fables, which one may choose to believe or, equally, ignore; other parts of the novel are pure fiction, meant to create a new kind of reality out of the old, unrecorded history. This fragmentariness is welcome due to the aim of the novel: that of reconstructing a figure from a lost, yet glorious period. At times, the shadow is allowed to play its own role, while both reader and writer bear in mind the only photograph which was ever taken of Bolden.

I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. [And as it happens in real life] There are no prizes. (Ondaatje 1979:170)

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