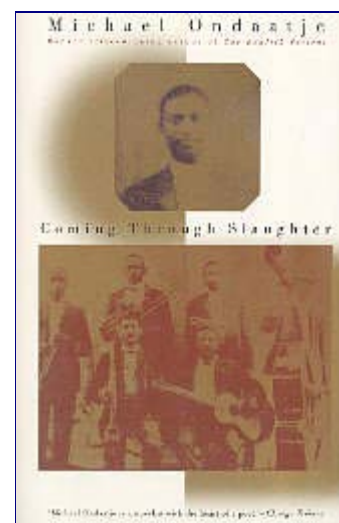


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A READER'S JOURNAL
Coming Through Slaughter
by
Michael Ondaatje

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"Somebody say he heard Buddy Bolden play" —
so goes a traditional song in New Orleans and
represents just about all we know about the famous

cornet player is that somebody heard him play. The few other things we know is that Buddy Bolden played loud! You could hear him from blocks away as he led a band down the street. Loudness was a prime attribute of a cornet player in pre-1907 days, and Buddy Bolden was by all accounts, few that we have, the loudest of all cornet players, always playing in B-flat. And yet, 105 years after he went crazy while leading a parade in 1907 and stopped playing, we have no recordings of his playing and no one alive who actually heard him play. We have only one photo of him, the one on the cover of this book. Michael Ondaatje, the author of *The English Patient* has done a masterful job of filling in for us the life of Buddy Bolden from his birth in 1856, his active jazz playing life from 1900 -1907 and his period of insanity from 1907 till his death in 1931.

What can we learn from the photograph? He was the only cornet and the only band member who was smiling, perhaps because his good friend Bellocq was taking the picture. We see a bass fiddle, a guitar, a valve trombone, and two clarinets accompanying Buddy's cornet. There are no music stands because, as Louis Jones said, Buddy's was a "strictly ear band." He added, "Later on Armstrong, Bunk Johnson, Freddie Keppard — they all knew he began the good jazz."

Buddy lived during the heyday of the Storyville brothel district in New Orleans, a district named after a councilman who wanted to confine prostitution to one section of town, the area of Basin Street and Rampart Street. Anyone who knows the sanitized and plain Basin Street today cannot imagine why anyone would write a song about it, especially "Basin Street Blues," a street where as Louis Armstrong sings is the only place he can lose his blues, his longing for the life and vitality of Basin Street, the main thoroughfare through Storyville. It was the most jumping place in the country at the time: jazz clubs playing all night, restaurants filled to capacity, and brothels offering every kind of entertainment a low tech world could conjure up. Take *Olivia, the Oyster Dancer*, as an example:

[page 9, 10] Tom Anderson, 'The King of the District', lived between Rampart and Franklin. Each year he published a Blue Book which listed every whore in New Orleans. This was the guide to the sporting district, listing alphabetically the white and then the black girls, from Martha Alice at 1200 Customhouse to Louisa Walter at 210 North Basin, and then the octoroons. The Blue Book and similar guides listed everything, and at any of the mansions you could go in with money and come out broke. No matter how much you took with you, you would lose it all in paying for extras. Such as watching an

Oyster Dance — where a naked woman on a small stage danced alone to piano music. The best was Olivia the Oyster Dancer who would place a raw oyster on her forehead and lean back and shimmy it down all over her body without ever dropping it. The oyster would crisscross and move finally down to her instep. Then she would kick it high into the air and would catch it on her forehead and begin again. Or at 335 Customhouse (later named Iberville), the street he went crazy on, you could try your luck with French Emma's '60 Second Plan'. Whoever could restrain his orgasm with her for a whole minute after penetration was excused the \$2 payment. Emma allowed the odd success to encourage others but boasted privately that there was no man she couldn't win. So no matter how much you took in you came out broke. Grace Hayes even had a pet raccoon she had trained to pick the pockets of her customers.

How did Buddy Bolden earn a living? Not by playing but by being a barber. He drank constantly so customers who wanted a shave made sure they got to his shop before noon while his hand was still steady with the straight razor. He spent his money on booze but rarely had to buy any for himself while he was working as he had a couple of patrons who kept him supplied with his favorite whiskeys and wine.

[page 10] Anderson was the closest thing to a patron that Bolden had, giving him money for the family and sending him, via runner boys, two bottles of whisky a day. To the left of Canal Street was Dago Tony who, at the height of Bolden's popularity, sponsored him as well sending him Raleigh Rye and wine. And to the left of Canal are also the various homes of Bolden, still here today, away from the recorded history — the bleak washed out one-storey houses. Phillips, First, Gravier, Tassin's Food Store, taverns open all day but the doors closed tight to keep out heat and sunlight. Circle and wind back and forth in your car and at First and Liberty is a corner house with an overhang roof above the wooden pavement, barber stripes on the posts that hold up the overhang. This is N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked.

Buddy drank as he worked, but he rarely drank alone, as he shared his bottles with all the customers and visitors who frequented his shop. Here is a description of his work place on a typical day.

[page 12] One large room with brothel wallpaper left over from Lula White's Mahogany Hall. Two sinks with barber chairs in front of them, and along the wall several old donated armchairs where customers or more often just visitors sat talking and drinking. Pausing and tense when the alcohol ran out and drinking from the wooden coke racks until the next runner from Anderson or Dago Tony arrived, the new bottle traveling round the room including the half-shaved customer and the working Bolden, the bottle sucked empty after a couple of journeys, Bolden opening his throat muscles and taking it in so he was sometimes drunk by noon and would cut hair more flamboyantly. Close friends who needed cuts and shaves would come in early, well before noon.

In addition to being a barber and a jazz musician, Buddy was also a publisher of a daily news rag. With spiders used as a metaphor for search engine robots who roam through every nook and cranny of the world-wide internet today, it is interesting to see the metaphor's origin back in the early 20th Century when spiders were guys who came by his Parlor to share news to be put into *The Cricket*.

[page 13] What he did too little of was sleep and what he did too much of was drink and many interpreted his later crack-up as a morality tale of a talent that debauched itself. But his life at this time had a fine and precise balance to it, with a careful allotment of hours. A barber, publisher of *The Cricket*, a cornet player, good husband and father, and an infamous man about town. When he opened up the shop he was usually without customers for an hour or so and if there were any there they were usually 'spiders' with news for *The Cricket*. All the information he was given put unedited into the broadsheet.

In New Orleans improvisational jazz, each musician is holding a musical conversation with three or four other players, vamping on a theme or composition they had played before with other players perhaps, so each time something fresh and exciting came out, even from old familiar pieces, especially from old familiar pieces. In Preservation Hall, the most asked for piece is "The Saints" and the players have done it so many times that they have to work twice as hard to play it again and so they charge 5x the usual price for a request for "When the Saints Go Marching In." Note in the next passage how Buddy Bolden typically held conversations with three or four other people — somehow that process worked its way into the music which later became known as jazz.

[page 56] Buddy was a social dog, talked always to three or four people at once, a racer. He had no deceit but he roamed through conversations as if they were the countryside not listening carefully just picking up the moments.

Talking to Robin as she laid on top of him, his clothes off hers on, kissing him, talking quietly, his eyes closed. She thought he was looking through to the sky above the ceiling, maybe he was, and he was also composing some music.

[page 59] She was conscious that while they spoke his fingers had been pressing the flesh on her back as though he were plunging them into a cornet. She was sure he was quite unaware, she was sure his mind would not even remember. It was part of a conversation held with himself in his sleep. Even now as she lay against his body in her red sweater and skirt. But she was wrong. He had been improving on *Cakewalking Babies*.

Dude Botley tells this story of following Buddy Bolden back to the barber shop where he no longer worked, about 8 pm. He sees Buddy comes out of the back with a bottle and a cornet, his eyes filled with tears. Here is Ondaatje's lyrical report of someone who heard Buddy Bolden play. . .

[page 81] 'Then I hear Bolden's cornet, very quiet, and I move across the street, closer. There he is, relaxed back in a chair blowing that silver softly, just above a whisper and I see he's got the hat over the bell of the horn . . . Thought I knew his blues before, and the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen careful for he's playing something that sounds like both. I cannot make out the tune and then I catch on. He's mixing them up. He's playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together.'

Like Elvis Presley would do with his singing later, Buddy Bolden was doing with his horn, mixing Gospel rhythms with deep soul blues, both angelic and devilish music coming out in one pure voice wafting through the night, dripping into Botley ears, releasing tears dripping from his eyes. Botley is befuddled and a bit scared.

[page 81] '. . . a strange feeling comes over me. I'm sort of scared because I know the Lord don't like that mixing the Devil's music with His music. But I still listen because the music sounds so strange and I guess I'm hypnotized. When he blows blues I can see Lincoln Park with all the sinners and whores shaking and belly rubbing and the chicks getting way down and slapping themselves on the cheeks of their behind. Then when he blows the hymn I'm in my mother's church with everybody humming. The picture kept changing with the music. It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something tells me to listen and see who wins. If Bolden stops on the hymn, the Good Lord wins. If he stops on the blues, the Devil wins.'

It's too soon to tell whether this music started by Buddy Bolden will end on hymns or blues, but some 50 years later, that same section of New Orleans where Buddy hung out, on Rampart Street, became the beginning of a music genre known as Rhythm & Blues which later morphed into Rock & Roll, and the beat goes on.

Webb is a cop, an old friend of Buddy's who searches for him when he disappeared for two years. Finding him in the bathroom at Robin's house, the woman he shared with her husband, Jaelin, Webb sits on the side of the bathtub and chides Buddy for not playing his music. Buddy wants to know how Webb found him. This episode highlights the wondrous way Ondaatje creates dramatic scenes throughout the book.

[page 83] He sat on the edge of the tub where his friend was having a bath. At first Bolden was laughing. He couldn't get over it. He wanted to know how. Webb gave him all the names. Nora. Cornish. Pickett. Bellocq. Bellocq! Yes Bellocq's dead now, killed himself in a fire. What do you mean killed himself in a fire? He started a fire round himself.

They could hear Robin through the wall in the kitchen. And that's Robin Brewitt? Bolden nodded into the water. And Jaelin Brewitt comes and goes. Bolden nodded. And your music. Haven't played a note for nearly two years. Thought about it? A little. You could train in the Pontchartrain cabin. I don't want to go back, Webb. You want to go back Buddy, you want to go back. Webb on the edge of the enamel talking on and on, why did you do all this Buddy, why don't you come back, what good are you here, you're doing nothing, you're wasting, you're —

Till Bolden went underwater away from the noise, opening his eyes to look up through the liquid blur at the vague figure of Webb gazing down at him gesturing, till he could hardly breathe, his heart furious wanting to leap out and Bolden still holding himself down not wishing to come up gripping the side of the tub with his elbows to stop him to stop him o god jesus leave me alone his eyes staring up aching, if Webb reaches down and tries to pull him up he will never come up he knows that, air! his heart empty overpowers his arms and he breaks up showering Webb, gulping everything he possibly can in.

Breathing hard, yes ok Webb ok ok ok. Hunched and breathing hard looking at the taps while Webb on his right tried to brush the wetness off his suit beginning to talk again and Buddy hardly listening to him, listening past him to Robin and the morning kitchen noises that he knew he would lose soon.

I love the wonderful metaphors by Ondaatje, such as "giraffes of fame" and "the heat has fallen back into the lake and left air empty" (Page 98), but his long metaphors are like luscious canapes which one doesn't want to run out. Here is Jaelin playing his piano, just playing his piano, but Buddy Bolden, listening, became the piano.

[page 92] You didn't know me for instance when I was with the Brewitts, without Nora. Three of us played cards all evening and then Jaelin would stay downstairs and Robin and I would go to bed, me with his wife. He would be alone and silent downstairs. Then eventually he would sit down and press into the teeth of the piano. His practice reached us upstairs, each note a finger on our flesh. The unheard tap of his calloused fingers and the muscle reaching into the machine and plucking the note, the sound traveling up the stairs and through the door, touching her on the shoulder. The music was his dance in the auditorium of enemies. But I loved him downstairs as much as she loved the man downstairs. God, to sit down and play, to tip it over into music! To remove the anger and stuff it down the piano fresh every night. He would wait for half an hour as dogs wait for masters to go to sleep before they move into the garbage of the kitchen. The music was so uncertain it was heartbreaking and beautiful. Coming through the walls. The lost anger at her or me or himself. Bullets of music delivered onto the bed we were on.

Everybody's love in the air.

No one's ever described what it is like to dance to waltz music so succinctly before.

[page 93] John Robichaux! Playing his waltzes. And I hate to admit it but I enjoyed listening to the clear forms. Every note part of the large curve, so carefully patterned that for the first time I appreciated the possibilities of a mind moving ahead of the instruments in time and waiting with pleasure for them to catch had never been aware of that mechanistic pleasure, that trust.

When Buddy's friend Willy Cornish came back from up north bringing with him sheet music with new songs, Buddy and his friends who only played by ear took the music Willy played for them on his valve trombone and vamped it into their own music. He became as forgotten as a metronome to a jazz band.

[page 112] Nothing ambitious on the valve trombone but being the only one able to read music he brought us new music from the north that we perverted cheerfully into our own style. . . . I had wanted to be the reservoir where engines and people drank, blood sperm music pouring out and getting hooked in someone's ear. The way flowers were still and fed bees. And we took from the others too this way, music that was nothing till Mumford and Lewis and Johnson and I joined Cornish and made him furious because we wouldn't let him even finish the song once before we changed it to our blood. Cornish who played the same note the same way every time who was our frame our diving board that we leapt off, the one we sacrificed so he could remain the overlooked metronome.

This is Buddy Bolden's last song, his last march, down Iberville, when he grew crazed and went insane never to recover.

[page 130, 131] March is slowing to a stop and as it floats down slow to a thump I take off and wail long notes jerking the squawk into the end of them to form a new beat, have to trust them all as I close my eyes, know the others are silent, throw the notes off the walls of people, the iron lines, so pure and sure bringing the howl down to the floor and letting in the light and the girl is alone now mirroring my throat in her lonely tired dance, the street silent but for us her tired breath I can hear for she's near me as I go round and round in the center of the Liberty-Iberville connect. Then silent. 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. God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere, she closer to me now and her eyes over mine tough and young and come from god knows where. Never seen her before but testing me taunting me to make it past her, old hero, old ego tested against one as cold and pure as himself, this tall bitch breasts jumping loose under the light shirt she wears that's wet from energy and me fixing them with the aimed horn tracing up to the throat. Half dead, can't take 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 in the air, she is sliding round and round her thin hands snake up through her hair and do their own dance and she is seven foot tall with them and I aim at them to bring them down to my body and the music gets caught in her hair, this is what I wanted, always, loss of privacy in the playing, leaving the stage, the rectangle of band on the street, this hearer who can throw me in the direction and the speed she wishes like an angry shadow. Fluff and groan in my throat, roll of a bad throat as we begin to slow. Tired, She still covers my eyes with hers and sees it slow and allows the slowness for me her breasts black under the wet light shirt, sound and pain in my heart sure as death. All my body moves to my throat and I speed again and she speeds tired again, a river of sweat to her waist her head and hair back bending back to me, all the desire in me is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, eternal, for my heart is at my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy dance of victory, hair toss victory, a local strut, eyes meeting sweat down her chin arms out in final exercise pain, take on the last long squawk and letting it cough and climb to spear her all those watching like a

javelin through the brain and down into the stomach, feel 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 pouring 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.

Buddy Bolden never spoke nor played his cornet again. He was declared insane and shipped to the East Louisiana State Hospital (Insane Asylum), first by train to Baton Rouge and then on a horse-drawn cart the rest of the way. After coming through Slaughter, Louisiana his drivers stopped to take a swim. They walked him to the edge of the water, but Buddy chose to watch from the shore. He had already been baptized by blood on the streets of New Orleans.

