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Voicing Silence: The Legend of Buddy Bolden

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It could be said that all art involves “improvisation” if it is to be more than rote repetition of established norms, practices, and procedures.[1] However, jazz can perhaps be deemed the art of improvisation par excellence. In jazz, established norms and historically derived conventions—ranging from notes to styles to pre-written “songs”—have weight and resonance, but “innovation” is welcomed. The skill with which the individual player or free-thinking group bend and break “the rules” is, when imaginatively undertaken, widely praised. Indeed the very “slipperiness, mobility and inventive flexibility” of jazz, its drive to accent “contingency, improvisation, risk, dissonance and play [in order to] buck oppressive systems of culture and knowledge” (Heble 91) is one of the music’s great strengths. “Innovation” and “improvisation”—the distance between these two words is not great, but one might argue, of some importance. Improvisation implies something more immediate and spontaneous, although any such “improvisation” is obviously also “structured” by experience, understanding, and foresight. “Innovation,” which addresses the idea of rule breaking or opening up new territory, is even more self-conscious (although this notion itself as a marker of distinction between the two concepts is a tricky one) and, at least in some sense, more reflected upon. In other words, both acts require structure, art and imagination, and overlap markedly at the edges of their meaning.

Much human creative endeavour—writing, playing, painting—has this tendency to be innovative and improvisatory, and even “to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any [. . .] desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination” (Hutcheon qtd. in Heble 209). This is, of course, something that various post-modernists have been at great pains to emphasize. At the same time, there is also a “real” out there, however fugitive and debatable, that is most self-evident in documented historical, social, and biographical accounts. Behind cultural memory lies a structure, and a lived record of person and event. The creative writer and the conscious artist, as well as the commentator who seek to evoke the past, must live the inevitable tension that exists between the imaginative creation of the person, place or time they wish to invoke and the record of established “facts” that must also claim our attention.

As this article will establish, this is nowhere more true than in the case of Buddy Bolden, the legendary—and we use the adjective advisedly—cornet player of early New Orleans jazz, said indeed by some to be the first jazz-man (see Shipton). For dealing with Bolden, himself a putative godfather of jazz improvisation, demands an especially strong measure of creative imagination on the part of both writers and players, in order to allow us to invoke his memory. As we will see, with Bolden we must, even beyond the normal requirements of such an exercise, “improvise” the man and even his sound in order to represent him and to position him both within the New Orleans of his time and the broader tradition of jazz to which he is deemed to have made such a singular contribution. We have no aural record of Bolden’s actual playing and only fragmentary, often contradictory, accounts of his life. “Improvising the improvisor”—in effect voicing Bolden’s silence—is precisely what writers and players have sought to do. Jazz-men like Jerry Granelli and Malachi Thompson, for example, and perhaps most notably on the printed page, Michael Ondaatje, whose highly regarded “novel” *Coming Through Slaughter* attempts, quite precisely, an imaginative “re-creation” of Buddy Bolden.

Who was Buddy Bolden? What did he sound like? How can improvisations on Bolden’s life act as both reconstruction and revelation? Granelli, Thompson, and Ondaatje offer creative answers to these questions. But let us first begin with context and setting. What of jazz and of New Orleans itself—Bolden’s stage—in the music’s very earliest days?

Jazz and New Orleans: Blending Communities, Expanding Musical Practices

The launching of “jazz” (including whatever role Buddy Bolden played in this endeavour) was a dramatic undertaking in a very broad sense. Indeed, it stood as a crucial means by which the black population in the United States found its voice and encouraged others to listen. This is complex historical terrain, of course,

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and we will point here merely to certain key dimensions that must form the background for our subsequent discussion. First, what of the centrality of New Orleans itself? Not only was it Buddy Bolden's own hometown, but also the setting for the "birth of jazz" or so it is often argued. Perhaps its importance could be overstated (much also happened elsewhere to hasten "the birth"), but the city's centrality is widely acknowledged. New Orleans also gave birth to an extraordinary number of the early masters, from Bolden himself to Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet, the Dodds brothers, Johnny, Baby, and Kid Ory, to such remarkable women as Dolly Adams and Emma Barrett, and within the cornet/trumpet lineage, to Freddie Keppard, Joe "King" Oliver and Louis Armstrong (while also including, amongst the more limited white contingent of early players, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band who made the first known phonograph record of "jazz" in 1917).

The roots of this musical centrality of New Orleans are much debated in the literature. Emphasis is placed variously on the interpenetration owing to a complex colonial history—of French and Spanish sounds and traditions (including a set of somewhat more flexible Catholic practices) with British and, of course, African ones, as well as the *entrepot* function the port played for multiracial Creoles and black freemen from various parts of the Caribbean from fairly early on. Much has been made of the Creole/freed slave dichotomy in post-Civil War New Orleans. The former community is seen to have spawned a more structured and formally trained musical itinerary for its practitioners and the latter, a more African, spontaneous, and rurally rooted one.[2] Indeed, in New Orleans itself the two groups lived in separate quarters of the town, divided by different cultures. Geographically, it would seem, they were set apart from each other by Canal Street. Such differences did have an impact, although it is also true that as time went on the grim, over-riding logic of black-white divisions was slowly, but surely, qualifying its saliency.[3]

As it is well known, in the broader setting of post-emancipation and post-reconstruction America (beyond, but also including, New Orleans) wider changes were afoot, changes readily apparent as we try to locate Bolden within an even broader politico-sociological framework. On the one hand, as Donald Marquis, a preeminent historian of Bolden's time and place, has argued in writing of Buddy Bolden's presumptive role as "the first man of jazz," certain musical innovations—such as Buddy Bolden's apparently dramatic improvisations within the sound world of established brass band and ragtime music at the turn of the nineteenth century—only became really possible in a post-Civil War context. Bolden belonged to a generation that "didn't know or particularly care what the rules had been [before the Civil War and its immediate aftermath] and saw life as an open challenge instead of a restricted corridor" (Marquis 21). Here was a world where, at least momentarily, "aggrieved communities [could] gain the hope to assert their own rights, to enhance [their] collective ability to see (and to hear) 'life as possibility'."[4]

On the other hand, within Bolden's own lifetime, and thanks to the death of Reconstruction and the spread of segregation that began to penetrate even New Orleans (especially in the 1890s), such possibilities were beginning to close down at least as rapidly as they were continuing to open. Creoles were shoved highhandedly by new white-made laws into much greater social proximity to, and a much closer sharing of fate with, their "Negro" brothers and sisters, already defined (by whites) as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Yet, inadvertently, this blending of communities, however ill received by many Creoles "of colour" at the time, would—as some "began to make the trip uptown to sit in with their darker half-brothers"—have favourable musical results, with both groups, as hinted above, bringing significant, if diverse, strengths to the musical table (Jones 78-9), whatever the obvious social costs of the resurgence of segregation more generally.

What would be the musical consequences—dare one say benefits—of such self-evident "costs"? LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) suggests:

> [T]he Negro could not even become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man's culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. (80)

Perhaps the lifting of the veil of oppression, however momentarily, also had other immediately positive results, albeit more for blacks (read: ex-slaves) in the South than for Creoles, giving the former a glimpse of what freedom might ultimately mean for them. Certainly, the voice of Buddy Bolden proved to be no voice "crying in the wilderness."[5] Indeed, to repeat, we can suspect that something profound was beginning to happen in America with the raising of Buddy Bolden's voice and the assertion of his improvisational vocation. For, beyond Bolden, the formal freedoms of America now gave the black community more room, literally, to move both geographically and, to some extent, professionally and socially as new practices—including new musical ways of thinking and playing—spread across the country. (The itinerant vocation of Jelly Roll Morton is a good example.) In these and other ways, the setting was changing, even if the crust of a redefined American racism was also, rather paradoxically, hardening.

The First Jazz-man: Memory and History

These, then, were forces that defined the world of Buddy Bolden, including his “sound world,” as these diverse crosscurrents ran through him, both socially and musically. It is here too, however, that our limitations as “listeners” without firsthand sonic references to Bolden’s actual playing (see below) betray us. For there is no doubt that history is drawing us forward from the nineteenth-century musical mélange of plantation music, blues and vaudeville, religious motifs (both “traditional” and new world centered), brass band sounds, and even the subtle yet somewhat overly stereotyped syncopations of ragtime, to the more confident and fluid style of jazz. Just where does Bolden stand in this developmental process? Opinions—guesses, really—differ. Some (Alyn Shipton, for example) present the case for Bolden’s innovatory role quite forcefully:

> Apparently a powerful lead cornetist, famous for his sheer volume, Bolden played largely by ear and was credited by many of those who heard him as being the first to bring the explicitly African qualities of flattened blue notes, vocalized tones and ‘hot’ syncopation into the ragtime setting—in other words, he was seen as the progenitor of improvisation in jazz. (82)

In sum, in this reading, “Bolden was apparently a pioneer of jazz before anyone knew what it was,”[6] holder of a proud place amongst those who were beginning, in the jazz way, to “talk back” on behalf of those apparently far too muzzled by the forces of history: “if Bolden had not existed someone would have had to invent him. He is the single figure on whom the transition into jazz can be pegged” (Shipton 82, 84).

Other observers are more guarded about the probable nature of Bolden’s playing. Leroi Jones, for example, suggests that “the Bolden band and other early jazz groups must have sounded even sloppier. The music was a raw mixture of march, dance, blues and early rhythm with all the players improvising simultaneously.” (145) Yet, as Jones also acknowledges, the distinctive characteristic of “the Bolden band was the blues quality, the Uptown flavour of all their music [even if] the music still [also] had the flavour of the marching band” (145). It embodied, he writes, “a wonderful concept, taking the unison tradition of European march music, but infesting it with teeming improvisations, catcalls, hollers, and the murky rhythms of the ex-slaves” (145). Similarly, Digby Fairweather begins by asserting that Bolden’s “improvisation, if any, would have been primitive, harmonically elementary (probably confined to melody embellishment) and with a rhythmic approach reflecting the current ragtime vogue” (80). Nonetheless, he too must concede that Bolden was undoubtedly “a riveting performer of personal charisma and crowd-pleasing musical power,” a man, in short, with the personality, if not yet quite the playing, of a true jazz improvisor (80).

Locating Bolden with reference to his historical moment, however guardedly this must be done, can still tell us a great deal. In the post-Civil War, “emancipation” context, Buddy Bolden, as putative founder, demands our attention since the very articulation of “jazz” can be understood as being a crucial means by which the black population in the United States “talked back,” found its own voice, and encouraged others to listen. We can also follow Paul Berliner’s metaphor of a great chain of the jazz tradition:

> In carrying forth the jazz tradition’s early voices within their improvisations, engaging their predecessors’ ideas and uniting them with their own, contemporary performers sometimes have the sense of escaping the normal experience of time. Such performances can assume a spiritual quality in which improvisers draw strength from a symbolic link to the past, as if becoming joined to a long chain of expressive human history. (491)

If Bolden can be seen as standing at the beginning of the jazz project’s “chain,” he is progenitor of an art form that has been defined by its continual state of evolution from firm, if inevitably somewhat hazy, beginnings. It is a small wonder that he has attracted attention and been evoked in song and story, both by earlier artists (Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington, for example) and by more recent writers and musicians. The idea of Bolden as the first jazz-man is a virtual truism of jazz history writing, but this is a perspective that remains controversial. After all, the very facts of his life are much debated and clouded by rumour and misinformation.

Thus, as Fairweather has also observed in writing his aforementioned biographical entry on Bolden for *Jazz: The Rough Guide*, much of the colourful flavouring of what we think we know about Buddy Bolden—he was not, in fact, a barber, nor a scandal-sheet editor, and his (or any other) cornet could not “penetrate for more than a quarter of a mile, even on a clear night”—is “standard Bolden folklore, and it seems a pity that most of it is untrue” (80).[7] Drawing, instead, on Marquis’ careful research, Fairweather sketches Bolden’s route from his birth in 1877 to his childhood home at 2309 1st Street, and to his leaving school in 1890; from his cornet study with Manuel Hall to his apprenticeship with Charlie Galloway’s band; and from his bravura playing as King Bolden in the first years of the new century to his dramatic mental breakdown in 1906-7.[8]

Unfortunately, coming as he did so early in the evolution of the recording industry, Bolden made no records whatsoever (the phantom cylinder which is said to present something of his sound has never been found). Moreover, as a result of his mental illness he remained more or less incommunicado until his death in a state mental hospital in 1931 and, therefore, was not able to elaborate upon, let alone burnish, his own story. As celebrated Canadian author Michael Ondaatje has suggested: “Buddy Bolden was famous but no one really knew him very well” (Wachtel 257). In fact, it is this very silence that has served as at least part of the impetus for other writers, artists, and musicians to inscribe their own stories and meanings onto this legendary figure, to, in effect, “improvise the improvisor.”

Of course, this latter kind of improvisation has a clear musical reference. What is the link between music and musicians to their tradition? According to Ingrid Monson, “music functions in a relational or discursive manner rather than an absolute manner [. . .]. [T]he musical quotation or allusion [. . .] embodies the conflict between innovation and tradition in jazz performance as well as the larger question of how instrumental music conveys cultural meaning” (97). In fact, as we suggest below, those musicians who evoke Bolden most directly in their recent music are well aware of this tension (even evidencing such awareness in their own liner notes) and alert listeners to some of the questions to which it gives rise while giving very different answers!

Truth and Fiction

Creative writers have also attempted to imagine Bolden in their literary endeavors, and this kind of literary “improvisation” is arguably less straightforward. It dismantles what has become a virtual truism: words are referential and music is emotional (as Louis Armstrong famously quipped, “man, if you gotta ask, you’ll never know”). Nonetheless, a range of authors have challenged this “truism” in their writings on jazz. How can words capture the sense of a musical experience, especially when the experience being evoked is as elusive, as mysterious, as Bolden’s cornet playing? While some authors such as Marquis struggle to establish as accurate a “factual” account as possible of the historical “reality” and to set the record straight, others take, literally, a more imaginative approach. According to Ajay Heble, it is perfectly “possible for imaginative writers to reclaim the world of lived experience in ways largely uninventoried in so-called factual representations” (107). Indeed, Heble explicitly cites Ondaatje’s novel *Coming Through Slaughter* as a case in point. In this text Ondaatje asserts the “truth of fiction,” suggesting, in effect, that his account may well be at least as faithful, and perhaps even more so, to the complexities of Bolden’s life, art, and significance as any strict “documentary style” biographical representation could be.[9]

In his essay, “A Great Northward Darkness,” George Bowering asks:

> Now how do you write the story of Storyville? How do you tell about jazz in the first place, and how do you tell about a legendary jazz trumpeter who could not write notes and who never went on record or made one? That is a very appealing problem for a postmodernist writer. How can you write a historical novel with no historical documents? (8)

This is an especially provocative question for Ondaatje who is obsessed with what he calls the “problem of history.” As Heble has argued, although Ondaatje repeatedly engages with history by rewriting marginal historical characters into his fiction, he does not do so unselfconsciously. According to Heble, “Ondaatje seeks to reconstruct the past while simultaneously providing a commentary on the very process of writing in which he himself participates” (“Problem” 98). Thus, faced with barely enough “facts” about Bolden to fill one page of his book and working with information that Marquis dismisses as false in his account, Ondaatje invents—at the point where history and structure meet artistic "improvisation"—the rest. For Ondaatje, it is less important, less interesting, and arguably impossible, to bring to life the mysterious Buddy Bolden than it is to explore the legend surrounding him through an examination of his effect on others. "History" for Ondaatje is less a product and more of a process. The power of Bolden lies in the way in which he has been passed down to us and variously constructed in the form of legend.

Like his version of Bolden who, when playing his cornet, "tore across the plot," Ondaatje jettisons conventional formal and generic expectations and writes a non-linear, multi-voiced account of the legendary first man of jazz in an attempt to foreground the constructed nature of historical accounting. As one of the first "poet-novelists" in Canada, Ondaatje is particularly conscious of generic boundaries and how they can be usefully transgressed. In his early long poems Ondaatje introduces his characteristic formal and generic experimentation by blurring the borders between fact and fiction and by layering various competing voices.[10] In *Coming Through Slaughter*, a text that George Bowering calls "a wild proliferation of genres" ("Ondaatje" 35), Ondaatje mixes quotations from the book *Jazz Masters* (changing words here and there), numerous testimonials from friends and family (both real and invented), documents and court proceedings from turn of the century Louisiana, the only existing photograph of Bolden and the band, and a healthy dose of imaginative reconstruction, to make use of the "border-blur" between fact and fiction.

By crossing these borders, *Coming Through Slaughter* reminds the reader that any act of constructing a life story is, as Donna Bennett suggests, "already an act of fiction making" because narratives of lives (autobiographies and biographies) "must confront both a surplus of information, which requires filtering, and information gaps, which mean that what has been lost needs filling in or what is untellable must be elided" (203). Ondaatje works with gaps and absences throughout the text, playing off the mystery that was Bolden rather than trying to pin him down. As in many of his works, Ondaatje highlights the mysterious quality of the main character by making one of the central narrative voices in the text a detective or a searcher. Ondaatje uses the character of the detective to self-consciously draw attention to his own narrative act, his own "improvisation" of Buddy Bolden. Like Ondaatje, "Webb circled, trying to understand not where Buddy was but what he was doing, quite capable of finding him but taking his time, taking almost two years, entering the character of Bolden through every voice he spoke to" (60). Thus, among various voices in the text, shifts occur among the authorial voice (Ondaatje), the searcher (Webb) and Bolden himself.[11] These multiple shifts in the narrating "I" serve to further demonstrate Ondaatje's exploratory take on subjectivity, but also Bolden's own: "Webb had spoken to Bellocq and discovered nothing. Had spoken to Nora, Crawley, to Cornish, had met the children—Bernadine, Charlie. Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (60).

Ondaatje's text repeatedly demonstrates how identity is never fixed, but is rather, dialogic. As he reminds us, we continuously invent and reinvent ourselves through an improvisational process: our identity is in effect a series of constructions. This instability may be frustrating for a reader looking for some firmer seeming "truth" about Buddy Bolden, the specifics of his music, his significance in terms of a jazz tradition or even an "accurate" portrait of the complex social, historical, and institutional locations out of which New Orleans jazz emerged (in fact, at least one critic has chastised Ondaatje for not even once mentioning the word "race" in his "novel"). Instead, Ondaatje's text tends to reinforce Bolden's mythic status—passed down through gossip, tall tales, and hearsay, in other words, oral culture—undocumented, and thus largely unhistorical.

The text's focus on improvisation also allows Ondaatje to focus on one of his trademark concerns: the thin line between artistic genius and madness. A number of critics have written about Ondaatje's fascination with this tension in his writing and it is a tension, Ondaatje seems to imply, at the heart of Bolden's improvisational art.[12] Indeed, in *Coming Through Slaughter,* the story actually spins around like a great Bolden cornet solo as the book examines artistic creation as a flirtation with chaos, as constantly on the border between order and disorder. In the novel, Ondaatje has Frank Lewis' comment on this tension in Bolden's playing:

> There was no control except the mood of his power [. . .] and it is for that reason it is good you never heard him play on recording. If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the series of notes—then you *should* never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed even while others moved into history, electronic history, those who said later that Bolden broke the path. It was just as important to watch him stretch and wheel around on the last notes or to watch nerves jump under the sweat of his head. But there was discipline. We thought he was formless

> but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it [. . .] As it was, when he was playing he was lost and hunting for the right accidental notes [. . .] There was pain and gentleness everything jammed into each number. (32-3)

In this section Ondaatje could just as easily be talking about his own poetic practice. The tension in his book, between facts from the historical record—the so-called "thin sheaf of information" (135) —and Ondaatje's leaps of imagination, his "improvisations," mimics Bolden's own surprising and powerful playing. To further his point, Ondaatje contrasts Bolden's ability to hold in tension chaos and order with John Robichaux's insistence on order and patterns. Bolden asks:

> Did you ever meet Robichaux? I never did. I loathed everything he stood for. He dominated his audiences [. . .] When I played parades we would be going down Canal Street and at each intersection people would hear just the fragment. I happened to be playing and it would fade as I went further down Canal. They would not be there to hear the end of phrases, Robichaux's arches. (92)

Compare this to Ondaatje's description of his own creative process:

> I don't believe stories are told from A to Z anymore; or, if they are, they become very ponderous. I'm used to commercial breaks. We discover stories in a different way. I discover something about you after knowing you X number of years, and then after thirty years I will find out some other changes that occurred five years earlier. That sense of discovery, of memory, and how we reveal ourselves to each other—none of that is chronological. (Wachtel 258)

The fragmentary nature of Ondaatje's text and his rejection of what he has elsewhere referred to as the "steamroller of plot" echoes his evocation of Bolden's own improvisational style.

One of the most arresting moments in the book comes when Ondaatje's authorial voice identifies directly with Bolden: "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that" (134). As in many of his other texts, Ondaatje identifies with the often tortured, always mysterious, main character.[13] Ondaatje, like his version of Bolden, recognizes that the need to break through certainties, to find new ways of thinking and being and seeing, is the very essence of creativity.[14]

Bolden's Song

What, then, of Buddy Bolden's own song, his voice, his music? We have seen that critics (such as Shipton, Jones, and Fairweather) have, with Ondaatje and other creative writers, all imagined Bolden's sound somewhat differently. As also noted, Bolden has been evoked by great jazz successors in their own works. There is, for example, Jelly Roll Morton's well known piece "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say" (Morton), and, somewhat later, Nina Simone sang Duke Ellington's song, entitled, "Yes, Buddy Bolden" on one of her early Colpix albums, *Nina Sings Duke Ellington* (Simone).[15] But it is worth turning to more recent musicians to find several who have sought, even more fully and self-consciously, to evoke Bolden in their playing, to most directly improvise the improvisor in specifically musical terms (although that musical exercise does provide its own share of distinctive ambiguities and complexities). Thus, both Jerry Granelli, in the album "A Song I Thought I Heard Buddy Sing" (1993) and Malachi Thompson, in his album "Buddy Bolden's Rag" (1995), played, unequivocally, music of the 1990s. But they also affirmed, in their own liner notes and related commentaries, Bolden's centrality to "the tradition." Note, however, that they also "hear" him quite differently.

For Granelli, who actually reproduces passages from Ondaatje's novel in his liner notes (as he says, it was through reading Ondaatje that he "became possessed with Buddy Bolden and his life"), Bolden's music is to be invoked as being quintessentially "the blues." Indeed, he calls his disk "a 10-song tone poem and reflection about the blues and the life of one very tortured jazz pioneer" (Seligman). He succeeds, says one reviewer, in capturing, through the life of Bolden, the "fantastic spirit and turmoil of the birth of jazz" (Kernfield 532-4), which is something he does, not by trying to have someone "double" for Bolden, but by featuring two guitarists (Robben Ford, a celebrated blues player and the estimable Bill Frisell, also an infinitely flexible and soulful player), and also two strong horn-men: Kenny Garrett on alto sax and Julian Priester on trombone.

The album as a whole is anchored by Granelli's bluesy premise, from the laid back loping recitation of Johnny Hodges "Wanderlust," through a gay, if perhaps overly raucous, version of the "Oyster Dance" (as celebrated in Ondaatje's pages themselves), to an upbeat version, with welcoming guitar, bass and warm swinging drum work of Charlie Parker's "Billie's Bounce." Then, in a second section ("Buddy's World"), we confront, with Granelli's own tune "Coming through Slaughter," a slow, probing, rather sad, blues-sax plus guitars and, towards the end, an eloquent trombone. Effective numbers like the upbeat "In That Number" (with firm echoes of "How I Want To Be In That Number") lead to a third section ("Memories") and several cuts in which a slower, more moody ambience prevail (including Jay Hawkins' "I Put A Spell On You"). His album's closing number is particularly eloquent: two versions of Ornette Coleman's "Blues Connotation" which segue from a loosely swinging bluesy vein in the first version, to a much slower and statelier, even appropriately funereal, second version, featuring first a most sober saxophone and then, once again, those mournful guitars.

For Thompson, who does feature trumpeters (his own, fellow members of his Brass Ensemble, and also the great Lester Bowie as powerful guest artist), we are given less Bolden the bluesman and more Bolden the muscular and assertive cornetist. For Thompson's "own investigations into the origin of jazz" have led him to see Bolden as primarily a "risk taker," one linked to ragtime but inclined to "buck tradition [. . .] by breaking away from the marching band and written music" and, as an improvisor, inclined "to embellish popular melodies, jack-up the tempo and rag the rhythm." Bolden found that, "playing with legendary force and power," his instrumental style very soon took "a definite shape," thereby ensuring that "jazz was born": "Thank you, Buddy," Thompson concludes his careful liner notes, "for your amazing gift."

"Jazz" from its origins has inspired in Thompson's mind, "the principles of freedom and equality, [and] a truly democratic art form," with Thompson, as a result, feeling fully justified in encouraging his group, in Buddy Bolden's name, to play late twentieth century avant-garde music, music which he takes to be fully in the liberated spirit, if not precisely in the style, of Bolden himself.[16] Thus, Thompson moves from a loose avant-brass band sound (on "Buddy Bolden's Rag"), several steps further out, to expressive, well-crafted cuts like "World View," "We Bop" and to "Kojo Time" and beyond, to "Harold the Great." Here, the leader himself assays steer horn, sekulu, and conch shells to pull the global referent even wider while underpinning the whole with insistent, imaginative beat and rhythm from diverse percussionists and with additional expressive horn accompaniments. Particularly notable is the manner in which Thompson and Bowie move from their beautiful extended atmospheric playing on "Nubian Call" to reach a high note in complementing each other's strikingly adventurous playing on the remarkably free "The Chaser in America."

Both albums, in what unites them as part of "the jazz project"—both historical and contemporaneous—but also in what distinguishes them from each other, remind us of just how much the language of jazz continues to be available for diverse projects of "talking back," of sustaining innovative efforts to resist racist oversimplification, mere commercialization, and even tiresome quasi-critical rhetoric. Instructively, both contemporary voices also speak, however speculatively, to the reality that was Buddy Bolden: Buddy as a superior instrumental bluesman, one nurtured by his fellow denizens of New Orleans, with their diverse musical experiments and traditions, and notably by the prevailing semi-rural vibe of his own ex-slave community, but also Buddy as a free and untamed instrumentalist, pointing forward, however notionally, to the marvels of Armstrong and the others (whom Thompson actually specifies in his notes). Here, in one sense, was history—oblique and ambiguous—just beginning, with jazz poised dramatically, with Buddy Bolden, on the doorstep of the very first century of its greatness.

* * *

The jazz tradition, it can be argued, is about the revising, not the canonizing, of its own "traditions" and even its texts. If so, the examples above, both literary and musical, suggest just how appropriate, and indeed almost inevitable, it is that Bolden himself be subject to the kind of invention and improvisation we have traced. For Bolden's rather shadowy person and performance, make him more available, in both song and story, for just such improvisation of person than many other equally noteworthy figures in the jazz canon. Moreover, it need come as no surprise if Bolden's legacy were also to continue to be reinvented in order, in Heble's words, to "serve the political needs of the moment" (116), and the interests of those authors, who, in their own ways, are attempting to "talk back" to power, to prejudice, and to willful abuse. Amidst the current rebuilding of a New Orleans (especially its Lower Ninth Ward and Lakeview districts) so recently broken by the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, we find a rebuilding that is, in the entirely appropriate phrasing of one of the reviewers of this essay, driven precisely by an attempted “bleaching and reconstruction of the city without those who made its early musical wealth possible.” In the ongoing effort to resist any such post-Katrina “killing of New Orleans” (in Mike Davis’ chilling phrase[17]) is it fanciful to think that we can hear, amongst many other things, the wail of Buddy Bolden’s powerful cornet?

Notes

[1] It is worth noting that improvisation may also be found in science, but we are thinking, beyond jazz, especially of visual art here, and of abstract painting in particular.

[2] See *inter alia*, Shipton, chapter 2.

[3] On these and related themes see Ake, 10-41.

[4] These words are taken from the “Call for Papers” of the 2005 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium for which this paper was originally written.

[5] Ibid.

[6] True, as Shipton notes, since Bolden’s “career emerges into a hazy light only occasionally from the tangential and patchy [written] records of the period” the assignment to him of “the word ‘legendary’ is used advisedly”; moreover, as Shipton also states “his life is the first of many examples in jazz history where folklore and the sharing of stories among jazz musicians have become larger than the truth, as the Chinese whispers of time have exaggerated and distorted the original tale” (84).

[7] As an example, Jelly Roll Morton states, probably accurately, that he had the chance to actually hear Bolden play; however he also claims, rather hyperbolically, to have listened to Buddy’s cornet playing from a distance of ten or twelve miles away all the way from Lincoln Park to his own street!

[8] In addition to the findings of Marquis, see Barker for another carefully researched, if also occasionally itself somewhat fanciful, account.

[9] In his autobiography *Running in the Family* Ondaatje defends the “fictional air” of the text by reminding the reader that “in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (176).

[10] A number of critics have written about the role of generic experimentation in Ondaatje’s works. Manina Jones, for example, calls Ondaatje’s work an example of “documentary collage.” Linda Hutcheon sees his writing as exemplary of “historiographic metafiction,” and Joanne Saul sees much of his work as “biotextual.”

[11] For further analysis of the various narrative viewpoints in *Coming Through Slaughter*, see Turci.

[12] See, in particular, Sam Solecki’s article “Making and Destroying: Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art.”

[13] In *The Collected Poems of Billy the Kid* Ondaatje includes a photograph of himself as a young Ceylanese kid in cowboy gear as a way of suggesting a connection between the author and his subject. Of course, Ondaatje’s most self-conscious identification with the narrating subject occurs in his autobiography *Running in the Family*.

[14] If Ondaatje uses the silence around Bolden as a springboard for his “historiographic” and metafictional strategies and concerns, other writers have a less self-consciously artistic approach to the recreation of their subject. In his “faction” E.W. Russell attempts to capture the spirit of Storyville by playing on tired stereotypes of sexual depravity, demented killers, and venereal disease. Following Wynton Marsalis’ vision of New Orleans jazz as a kind of “gumbo” (a melting pot of all things musical), Russell suggests that jazz had to be born in New Orleans—with its whores, hot food, booze and general sinfulness—and that it couldn’t have happened anywhere else. But, interestingly, his text is also cut through with the politics of “race,” tracing the birth of Jazz back to slavery: “without fools [. . .] there would be no slavery (and, thus, no Buddy Bolden and Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong and Ma Rainey): which means there would have

been no jazz." He implies that Bolden's voice is lost to history because he was black: "if he'd been White: he almost certainly would have been recorded even though he *was* confined. But Buddy Bolden was only a nigger. All he'd done was to create—help to create the most soulful music ever heard on earth: [. . .] Jazz is his monument and everyone alive who can hear—*everyone with ears*—owes him a debt of gratitude that can never be paid" (108). What Russell's text at least acknowledges (in a way that Ondaatje's arguably does not) is the relationship between jazz and the politics of race, or "talking back" to white power, and reminds the reader, in Heble's words, that "[music's] meanings reside not in some understanding of the music itself, but rather in the broader social and institutional contexts (of production, distribution and reception) in which it takes place" ("Rebel" 236). Ray Bisso's "jazz poem," *Buddy Bolden of New Orleans*, is marked by rhythm and repetition and the sense that the author is trying to mimic in his writing the actual sound or at least the spirit of the sound of early jazz. In fact many of his stanzas sound like song lyrics (and he incorporates the lyrics of "Funky Butt Blues") and the short spare lines of his poetry maintain a rhythm throughout the text. Bisso evokes the music of Congo Square and the brass bands, the dance hall, the church, and Lincoln Park. By charting the growth of Bolden from an unknown to Kid Bolden to King Bolden and his slow, quiet demise, Bisso maps a geography of sound, always interested in how music becomes meaning: "Moving off the melody lead/Ragging new sounds/Taking the blues/And playing them loud/Copying the colors of/The voice blues/Sliding/Slurring/ Bending/Taking out of the horn/Words that were never spoke/Notes that were never wrote" (33).

[15] We also have the "New Orleans" music, notably in the 1940s, of Bunk Johnson, although we also know, thanks again to Donald Marquis, that, however good was Johnson's music, his accounts of his own direct contact with Bolden were grossly misstated.

[16] Of course, the likes of Lester Bowie, specifically recruited by Thompson for the project, needs no special encouragement to do just that, but it is also the spirit in which the group as a whole is encouraged by Thompson to play. As a result, as Alex Henderson has characterized the album in his "5-star" *All Music Guide to Jazz* review, Thompson and company "salute Bolden in an unconventional way: instead of playing traditional New Orleans jazz, they provide inside/outside post-bop that acknowledges Crescent City brass bands as well as avant-garde and AACM jazz" (1240). As Henderson concludes his commentary," Thompson looks back on jazz's early history, but does so without being the least bit dogmatic about it, and the result is a very entertaining and unpredictable LP," much like Bolden's music itself, Thompson would have us believe.

[17] See Mike Davis, "Who is Killing New Orleans?" Also two special issues of *Downbeat,* one entitled "We Will Swing Again" (2005) and another "New Orleans Roots" (2006), both of which contain a range of useful and evocative articles. See also Peter Vacher, "New Orleans Now."

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