

Dispelling Myths About a Jazz Legend

IN SEARCH OF BUDDY BOLDEN. By Donald Marquis. LSU Press. 176 pages. \$9.95.

The Fair Grounds is crowded with musicians, listeners and dancers. Scattered across the grounds are beer drinkers and families enjoying picnics.

The brass band on stage is followed by a dance orchestra. Strolling through the field is a small string band.

But it is not the Jazz and Heritage Festival. The year is 1905, and Buddy Bolden is king.

"He was the blowingest man since Gabriel," the legendary Jelly Roll Morton once said. "The most powerful trumpet in history."

The brass bands used to end their parades at the Fair Grounds long before the word jazz had been invented. Bolden, however, was more likely to be found presiding over festivals at Lincoln and Johnson parks in Carrollton which make the current Jazz Fest seem calmer than a Perry Como concert.

According to advertisements in The New Orleans Item of 1905 and 1906, entertainment included: "A Festival of Fire" with \$500 worth of fireworks called "Mt. Vesuvius in Action"; a burlesque drama; motion pictures of the San Francisco earthquake and fire; Baby Glennon, "the sweetest little girl and sweetest singer in vaudeville today," and a dirigible. Also highlighted was a balloon ascension and parachute drop by "Professor" L.B. Haddock of Boston and the "colored aeronaut" Buddy Bartley.

Two bands would often compete at the park: John Robichaux's orchestra and Buddy Bolden's band. Although it is hard to say that any one person invented jazz, when Robichaux and Bolden would compete for crowds, here is what happened:

"Given Bolden's personality we can be sure he was looking for a novel approach — something to gain the crowd and sway the applause his way when he competed with other bands. His efforts took the form of playing 'wide-open' on the cornet and of playing in up-tempo or ragging the hymns, street songs and dance tunes to create a musical sound people were unfamiliar with. This style did not catch on immediately and the (black) Creoles scornfully called it honky-tonk music. But Buddy kept working, and he began to gain followers."

The rest, if not history, is at least jazz and heritage.

All of this comes from an upcoming book by Donald Marquis that is so fascinating that I have not had a chance to mention its name, "In Search of Buddy Bolden," until now. In conjunction with Tom Bethell's re-

cent "George Lewis," there are now two very factual and readable biographies about early jazz in New Orleans. These works are important because the history of jazz has heretofore been based on unfactual myths and legends.

It is also a good companion to a book I think has a lot of literary, although not historic, merit: Michael Ondaatje's "Coming Through Slaughter" which is a fictionalization of the Bolden story. Jazz is part fantasy and that element should occasionally be celebrated as well as debunked.

In fact, if Marquis' book disappoints at all (and this is no criticism of the author, because he's simply doing his job well) it is because it so successfully dispels myths that were fun to believe. "Buddy Bolden has always been an elusive, mysterious figure in the early jazz history of New Orleans," he begins. "His story has hovered at the edge of local legends like Jean Lafitte and Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, no one knowing where reality stopped and myth began."

This is no longer the case. Marquis shows, alas, that Bolden was not a barber and did not print a scandal sheet newspaper. One hopes he will not take on the Marie Laveau legend with the same success.

Much of this exposing of the legend is in the first chapter where Marquis corrects previous factual errors, some trivial, made in earlier studies such as Frederic Ramsey's and Charles Smith's "Jazzmen." This may be the most important part of the book for a handful of jazz historians, but for those of us anxious to hear about Bolden it is tedious to unlearn birthdates that we never knew were wrong in the first place. I wish biographers would use appendices to correct their colleagues.

This is not to denigrate the awesome, valuable research, including more than 50 interviews, conducted by the author. He plowed through old city directories, marriage and birth certificates, and police arrest records; found fascinating and enlightening facts, and presented them in a readable way. The book should be assigned in college history courses to illustrate the ideal product of primary research. It also shows the value of the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University.

Charles Joseph "Buddy" Bolden was born in the Central City area of Uptown on Sept. 6, 1877. He lived in that area (his home at 2309 First St. near Liberty was recently designated a local landmark) until June 5, 1907, when he was transported to the state mental institution in Jackson, La., where he remained for 24 years — until his death.

While institutionalized, Bolden neither recognized his family members nor participated in the hospital jazz band. But prior to that, he hung around barber shops, "drank

all the whiskey he could get," loved many women and helped invent a form of music. He was a master who could listen to a song, memorize each instrument's part, and teach it to his band.

His greatest song was "Funky Butt," which is now sung with "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say" as the first line. Funky Butt's Hall, which used to stand where the state office building now is, was named after it.

Bolden left no recordings of this or any other song. There is only one known photograph of him. Marquis was thus faced with a difficult task bringing Buddy back to us, but he succeeded well.

"A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES." Excerpts from a novel by John Kennedy Toole in the New Orleans Review, Volume 5, Number 4. Loyola University. \$1.50 a

The most recent issue of the New Orleans Review has a gem of a fiction selection by a local writer, never published, who died a while back. John Kennedy Toole's "A Confederacy of Dunces" is a comic and tragic story set in New Orleans about a fat, spoiled, neurotic boy named Ignatius and his mother.

Ignatius is a strange sight: "Shifting from one hip to the other in his lumbering, elephantine fashion, Ignatius sent waves of flesh rippling beneath the tweed and flannel, waves that broke upon buttons and seams."

He also has a strange view of the world: "Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offenses against taste and public decency. Possession of anything new and expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts about one's soul."

He becomes involved in an aborted and absurdist rebellion "for Moorish dignity" at the pants factory where he works, resulting in his firing. But it is his eye for the world and his relationship with his mother, rather than the plot, that grip the reader's attention.

In his introduction to the selection in the magazine, novelist Walker Percy says: "It is a one-of-a-kind novel which defies comparison. So I imagine the first reader must have felt when he read 'Catch-22.' . . . it is funny and sad and it's an original." These qualities, and the unique flavor of New Orleans, come through in the excerpts.

Mrs. Toole, the author's mother, says she is having problems getting the novel published, which shows that the reason it is hard to find imaginative novels these days is not because there are none being written.