

Horn of Plenty
by Doug Marx

Charles "Buddy" Bolden, king of the silver cornet in turn-of-the-century New Orleans and founding father of jazz, was never recorded. We can only imagine how he must have played. His legendary reputation as a musician and tragic hero rests upon the testimony of figures no less eminent than Kid Ory, Bunk Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong. Though one could do worse for witnesses, and despite the 1978 publication of Donald M. Marquis' appreciative, myth-debunking biography, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, the man, his sound, and the legend persist as one of this century's tantalizing enigmas of musical genius and personality.

Poet Michael Ondaatje must have spent a long while musing, conjuring how Bolden must have played, because *Coming Through Slaughter* -- originally published in 1976, and now on the shelves as a Penguin paperback novel -- is his lyric tribute to that sound, to the mind and spirit that created it, a tribute made all the more fascinating and unique by its poetic, rather than reportorial force. *Slaughter* has little to do with biography. It is instead the imaginative record of one artist's attempt to live inside the soul of another's genius; a journey, by turns harrowing and hallucinatory, that leads the reader through a labyrinth of myth in which the only guide is the certainty that factual niceties will be transformed or sacrificed to larger, more lasting poetic truths about the human spirit.

The basic outline of Bolden's life is fairly simple. Born in New Orleans on Sept. 6, 1877, he was weaned on the music of the brass bands that flourished in a social network of black funeral parlors, fraternal orders and community clubs, not to mention churches and fabulous holiday parades. He formed his first band while in his teens. Handsome, a flashy dresser, married and a father, he was a ladies' man and a man-about-town. He drank a couple of quarts of whiskey a day. He played loud, louder than anyone had ever heard, he played brashly, he improvised. Jazz was born when he played. Dancers couldn't get enough of his music, and he was known to play himself into trances. By 1904 he was the acknowledged king of the cornet, and by September 1906, it was all over. Not yet 30, he went mad while playing in the Labor Day parade. After a period of police detention, he was sent to Jackson, where he lived the last 24 years of his life in silence and obscurity, locked up in the East Louisiana State Hospital for the insane.

What Ondaatje gives us, by abandoning biographical truth altogether, is a mystery that becomes a morality tale upon the meaning and consequences of fame and success. In *Slaughter*, Ondaatje's Bolden, 26 or 27 years old and at the height of his glory, chooses to leave it all behind and split with his mistress. "He was scared of everybody. He didn't want to meet anybody he knew again, ever in his life." An old sidekick and confidant named Webb, who also happens to be a former cop, is given the job of locating the runaway Bolden. The course of his investigation, a kind of haunted, shadowy stream-of-consciousness affair, becomes the vehicle, the process by which the plot unfolds and the character of Bolden is given dramatic force.

Slaughter is a book of voices, some historical, some imagined, but all charged with Ondaatje's language and fused by the terms of his vision. Each voice contributes his or her six bits' worth of testimony and gossip to the legend, recreating the legend, perpetuating it, clue by clue confusing or clarifying the character of the missing Bolden -- just as the real Bolden, his spirit, is an essence distilled and defined, located by the guesswork and suppositions by which history attempts to make up for a lack of facts. The book is a chant, a chorale offered up by sidemen and friends, by a wife, by a mistress, by a narrator, by Bolden himself trying to understand his life, by Webb circulating among them, until the whole forms a kind of telepathic conversation, a dialogue made up of memories, gossip, confessions, nightmares, and prayers that carry the story forward to Bolden's eventual homecoming and the fate that awaits him. This is heady stuff, and it works. Narrative passages read like prose poems spliced and interwoven with flashbacks and vignettes, tableaux, poems, medical fact sheets, police reports, the least scrap of voice or information that will lend itself to a coherent portrait of a soul in chaos. There is something improvisatorial in this technique; something in its essential structure swings. Beneath it all these voices are harmonized and driven by continual call and response of the blues. Listen to the narrator:

So many murders of his own body.
From the slammed fingernail to the sweat
draining through his hair eventually
bleeding brown into the neck of his
shirt. There was a strange lack of care
regarding his fingers, even in spite of his
ultimate nightmare of having his hands cut
off at the wrist. His nails chewed down and
indistinguishable from the callouses of his
fingers. He could hardly feel his lady
properly anymore. So many varieties of
murder. After his child died in his dream
it was his wrist he attacked.

Or to Bolden himself, recalling his musical heritage:

My fathers were those who put their
bodies over barbed wire. For me. To slide
over into the region of hell. Through their
sacrifice they seduced me into the game.
They showed me their autographed
pictures and they told me about their
women and they told me of the even bigger
names all over the country. My father's
failing. Dead before they hit the wire.

Buddy Bolden was the progenitor, the first in a long line of gifted musicians whose tragic lives haunt the 20th Century. Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Bix Beiderbecke, Billie

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Before he was locked away in the Louisiana State Hospital, Buddy Bolden had been the king of the silver cornet.

Holiday, Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker -- the list is all too familiar and seems endless. New Orleans of the early 1900s was Bolden's milieu, his stage: Basin Street. Pervasive racism eating at the heart of the country. Storyville, the brothel district. Two thousand whores listed alphabetically and by race in guide books: white, black, "then octoroons". Syphilitic whores packing mattresses up and down sidewalks. Whores selling "Goofer Dust" and "Bend-Over Oil." Cocaine. Dr. Miles with his cure-all for clap. Dr. Miles who went on to become Mr. Alka Seltzer. A few bucks spent poorly in the sporting districts bought

...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 in the air and would catch it on her forehead and begin again.

All this is in a book that can be read in a sitting. *Slaughter* is so well-constructed, so concise word by word, sentence by sentence, that one has the feeling that if the pin of one punctuation mark were pulled, the whole thing would explode like a spring-loaded puzzle. But mostly, *Slaughter* is a book about music and the love of it. Black music, certainly, but more than that, music in its universals, what it means to those who make it, how it affects those who listen and can't live without it, and the relation of art to life.

Of all the books I've come across about music and musicians, fiction and nonfiction alike (among them Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues*, David Amram's *Vibrations*, Mingus' *Beneath the Underdog*, stuff by Sam Charters, Frederic Ramsey Jr., Amir Baraka, Kenneth Rexroth, Ralph Gleason, Nat Hentoff, and Seymour Krim), *Slaughter* contains some of the most insightful and penetrating imaginative writing about music I've encountered since Kerouac's pop-jazz raps. Bolden's crazed, raptured, manic interior monologue that goes on and on as he plays, marching through that last Labor Day parade, is unforgettable, and by itself worth the price of the book.

Coming Through Slaughter
by Michael Ondaatje
Penguin Books

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