Buddy Bolden, the Blues, and the Jews

by Phyllis Chesler (June 2019)

Buddy Bolden, back, second from left. This is the only known photo.

***Bolden*, which focuses on the** legendary Buddy Bolden, long considered the founder of modern jazz, is a remarkable film. Its subject is African-Americans and African-American music in the early decades of the 20th century in New Orleans, but *Bolden* is really a searing, psychological portrait about the descendants of slaves—and of slave owners. It may be the most powerful, painful, artful, phantasmagoric, and appropriately surreal film on this theme that I have ever seen.

The characters and scenes are stereotypes, caricatures, but they nevertheless boldly capture the nature of the experienced

and perceived realities of Southern blacks and whites. And the music—oh, the music is divine and provided by Wynton Marsalis. Although Bolden's music has not survived, he has long haunted the imagination and memory of blues and jazz greats. Jelly Roll Morton sings "Buddy Bolden's Blues." Nina Simone sings a soulful "Hey, Buddy Bolden."

At the risk of being savaged for daring to "appropriate" the topic which belongs to another race, let me argue that I have some "skin" in this game.

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In 1952, when I was twelve years old, I began to haunt Birdland, the jazz club on Broadway near West 52nd Street which was founded and run by three Jews: Irving Levy, Morris Levy, and Oscar Goodstein who managed the place. The greatest jazz musicians performed there: Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, Stan Getz, Maxie Kaminsky, Count Basie, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis. No man ever harassed me. They were either high, already with a lady friend, engrossed in the spellbinding music, or not looking for trouble; as a result, they did not bother underage "ofay" chicks. Birdland even boasted an area for teenagers where no alcohol was served.

I was once a girl singer and I sang with bands all through High School and studied and loved music, all kinds of music—but enough about this road not taken. Suffice it to say that to this very day, I listen to blues, jazz, ragtime, doo-wop, Gospel, Broadway show tunes, cabaret, rock 'n roll,

classical music, and opera, beloved opera. I rarely forget a lyric and I still sing along.

Bolden was directed by Daniel (Dan) Pritzker, also a Jew. I am not sure what the Jewish relationship to African-American music or to the African-American experience is, but clearly there is one other than Jewish involvement in the NAACP or in the Civil Rights Movement. Sometimes I think that Jews understand that in America, African-Americans occupy the place that Jews have always occupied throughout the world; that to some extent, white Jews who did not look visibly Jewish could "pass" in America—whereas blacks could not. Relief, guilt, identification, the very Jewish mission to help those less fortunate than oneself may all have animated the Jewish-black relationship, at least before The Troubles challenged, even fractured, this blessed relationship.

Despite Spike Lee's negative presentation of two exploitative Jewish nightclub owners "Moe and Josh Flatbush" in *Mo' Better Blues*, Jewish-Americans have played an important role in supporting African-American jazz and blues musicians. Jews got African-American music out to a world that was unwilling and not ready to hear it.

In 2017, Michael Kaminer wrote a piece titled "When Jazz Sounds Jewish." He cites the work of Charles Hersh the author of *Jews and Jazz: Improvising Ethnicity*, Jews weren't considered white or Americans and, "in the early 20th century they were shut out of many professions. They went into entertainment . . . they used music to play with, express, and explore Jewish identities." In the 1930s and 1940s, they sponsored and worked with African American musicians "at a time when such interactions were taboo." A Baroness, (Nina de

Koenigswarter), who was born and raised a Rothschild, was Thelonious Monk's patron. Blue Note records was founded by German Jewish refugees in 1939 and was committed to recording "the best jazz (musicians) that have stood the test of time."

Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw hired black musicians—not to make a political statement but because they viewed them as the "best musicians." Eventually, Goodman hired Lionel Hampton; doing so cost him dearly in financial terms.

Their music owes everything to Louisiana-based Buddy Bolden. Or so it is believed.

Director Pritzker says that "I saw this as an opportunity to make an allegorical story about the soul of America." And he has done just that.

In the film, we are shown how slavery and post-slavery persecution has destroyed the soul of far too many African-Americans, so much so that they turn on each other. They are meant to do so. We are subjected to graphic, agonizing scenes of slave-like brothels and bloody black-on-black boxing matches with ecstatic white, betting voyeurs. We also see wildly orgiastic African-American dancing to Bolden's music, possibly as the only Saturday night respite to marrow-deep poverty and no-exit lives. While some African-Americans in the film also lead righteous lives and are portrayed as deeply Christian, (Bolden's mother-in-law for example), they are also shown as contemptuous of Bolden's music. It does not pay for food. It does not fund a caravan North. It does not elevate their suffering people but rather, leads them down to the

Devil, or to promiscuous paganism.

Bolden is imagined as an innocent Piped Piper—but he is no Saint. Bolden drinks, takes drugs, visits whore-houses, cheats on his "good girl" wife, even while she is pregnant, even while she is in labor. He keeps abandoning her. And finally, she leaves for Chicago.

Bolden is also or mainly about talent, raw, great talent—and how it can be, and in this instance, was perhaps destroyed by extreme racist cruelty and misfortune; perhaps also by genetics or fate. Bolden is viewed as fragile and when someone newer and younger seems to possess a similarly seductive talent, Bolden cannot take it. An imagined savage beating in response to Bolden's increasingly "mad" behavior is the final blow. At thirty, Bolden descends into madness ("schizophrenia") and spends the last quarter-century of his life in a Louisiana insane asylum.

The film opens with Buddy in that asylum—and it is a scene I know and have written about many times. Tormented souls shriek, howl, and babble from dawn to dawn, and destroy what may be left of any other inmate's peace of mind. Such asylums are far worse than any prison.

Nineteenth and early twentieth century American asylums were hell-holes. Dr. Walter Freeman performed lobotomies mainly on African-American women who were, in his opinion, too angry. He performed these mutilating surgeries all through the 1940s and 1950s, all over the South, including at Tuskegee, in Alabama. Although men outnumbered women in state asylums, Freeman

performed at least 60% of his lobotomies on “boisterous, agitated” African-American women.

Some white American women wrote lucid, brilliant, heartbreaking accounts of their asylum confinements. Incredibly, these heroic women were not broken or silenced by their lengthy sojourns in Hell. They bore witness to what was done to them—and to those less fortunate than themselves, who did not survive the brutal beatings, near-drownings, and force-feedings, the body-restraints, the long periods in their own filth and in solitary confinement, the absence of kindness or reason—which passed for “treatment.” These historical accounts brought tears to my eyes.

For example, Elizabeth T. Stone (1842), of Massachusetts, described the mental asylum as “a system that is worse than slavery”; Adriana Brinckle (1857), of Pennsylvania, described the asylum as a “living death,” filled with “shackles,” “darkness,” “handcuffs, straight-jackets, balls and chains, iron rings and . . . other such relics of barbarism”; Tirzah Shedd (1862), wrote: “This is a wholesale slaughter house . . . more a place of punishment than a place of cure”; Clarissa Caldwell Lathrop (1880), of New York, wrote: “We could not read the invisible inscription over the entrance, written in the heart’s blood of the unfortunate inmates, ‘Who enters here must leave all hope behind.’”

White female patients were routinely beaten, deprived of sleep, food, exercise, sunlight, and all contact with the outside world, and were sometimes even murdered. Such asylums drove all but the strongest to madness. Sometimes, the women tried to kill themselves as a way of ending their torture.

I do not believe that asylum life for white men was any better. One cannot bear to imagine how it might have been for African-American men and women.

In Pritzker's film, we see Bolden (Gary Carr) sitting alone, bowed and despondent, in the dark, utterly silent—until he hears an actor (Reno Wilson) playing his music and naming Bolden as the composer. Wilson plays Louis Armstrong in a historic New Orleans concert on the radio—the first time that an African-American musician was allowed to speak and play music on the radio. Then, for a brief moment, Buddy urgently hurries through asylum hallways and dormitories seeking the source of his music—a radio, in a nurse's locked office.

The actors are superb: Nora, Bolden's "good girl" wife (Yahya DaCosta); Bolden's Satanic manager (Erik LaRay Harvey), the smugly racist white men (Ian McShane, Michael Rooker). Gary Carr plays Pritzker's Bolden brilliantly. Winton Marsalis's trumpet or coronet is assured and smooth, capable of heating the blood.

This film reminds me of Gayl Jones' extraordinary and under-appreciated novel *Corregidora*, which is equally phantasmagorical and painful. Her hero is Ursa Corregidora whose great grandmother, grandmother, and mother were all raped by the same Portuguese slave owner. Ursa is a blues singer and her relationships with black boyfriends and black husbands depicts dangerously violent and woman-hating men. Ursa is ultimately out for revenge. Jones was criticized for the way in which she painted such "politically incorrect" portraits. However, Kirkus described the book as "raw, harsh,

hypnotic.” It is that.

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Jones also lived a life on the run and a life with a dangerous and violent man. Like Bolden, her life caught up with her—but she also outraced it through her Art.

As I was researching this piece, I found a history totally unknown to me, one that concerns the extent to which African-American singers recorded Jewish cantorial and Yiddish melodies. We know that Matisyahu adopted black musical style. But I did not know that the Idelsohn Society of Music Preservation created a CD and an exhibit at San Francisco’s Contemporary Jewish Museum: “Black Sabbath.” Billie Holiday sings “My Yiddish Momme