

PRAISE FOR KID STERLING

“The author’s thoughtful rendering of dialect accurately captures the vernacular of the era, lending an authenticity that draws the reader in.”

—Andrea Kortenhoven, PhD Linguistics, Alumna, Stanford University

“A well-paced and gripping narrative that excels not only at capturing the young protagonist’s deep love of, and commitment to, jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden’s music, but also at offering us a powerful, and often very moving, account of some of the kinds of struggles, particularly around issues of race and class, that would have been part of the context of the day for a young boy, like Sterling, growing up in New Orleans.”

—Professor Ajay Heble, School of English and Theatre Studies, University of Guelph; Director, International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation; Artistic Director Emeritus and Founding Artistic Director (1994-2016), The Guelph Jazz Festival

“Of a time and place, not only of a culture... the story is convincing and respectful of the characters and their humanity.”

—Chris Benjamin, Managing Editor, *Atlantic Books Today*;
Canada Reads Top Essential Books list, *Author of Drive By Saviours*, winner of the H.R. Percy Prize

MID STERLING

CHRISTINE WELLDON



Red Deer Press

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To young musicianers everywhere

King Bolden, now,
there was a man could play.

—Robert Sargent, *Touching the Past*

Part 1

KICK IT OFF

ONE

“Need a shine, Mister? Get a mirror shine right here! Mirror Shine!” sang Sterling Crawford to the high-top boots, the brogues, and the army boots of men who hurried or sauntered by. They were headed to the gambling joints and pleasure palaces of the city, but Sterling managed to grab someone’s attention now and again.

“Thanks, Mister,” said Sterling to a customer who stopped to rest a foot on his stand. Sterling bent to deliver the polish he promised, paying half his attention to the job, and half to gazing out at more boots and shoes coming his way.

His eyes searched for a certain pair of low-top leather shoes with a fine pedigree, and he listened for the gentle voice of a special musicianer—King Buddy Bolden. Every afternoon, Buddy walked along

Basin Street toward one of the saloons in the District, and Sterling set up his shoeshine stool, the horsehair brush, the boot black, and the grease, right in his path.

Sterling owned this sweet spot on Basin Street near the train station. His brother Syl had used his fists and feet to win it fair and square from a boy twice his size. It was only a few feet of ground, but its location was prime.

From the river close by, the City of New Orleans spread outward, its beat pulsing with colors and sounds that blended with the aromas of frying fish, sweet beignets, rotting fruit, and a hint of salt from the marshes beyond. And around him, the melodies of street vendors swung crazily into a ragged harmony that set up catchy tunes inside Sterling's head.

"Ap-PULS, le-MONS, fine le-MONS, madamma, straw-BERR-ies," warbled the lady fruit sellers.

"I got O-kra, got CELery, got TURNIP greens picked o'ny YESSerday," the vegetable man rasped. "Got CREole tomatoes, get it all HYEAH!"

"Best shine in town!" Sterling would sing against the backup rhythms of freighter blasts, streetcars, and rattling coal wagons, the tin horns of rag men, and

the bellowing paddlewheelers that crossed the great Mississippi River.

Sterling finished his shine and reached out a hand for his nickel, scarcely paying attention to what coin his customer placed there, because, at that moment, he saw Buddy Bolden walking with his long, easy stride along the street toward him. Tall and slim, good-looking too, Buddy was dressed like a rich man. His tailored suit was pressed to perfection, his shirt starched to crisp whiteness. He placed importance on getting a high shine to his shoe leather, and Sterling felt proud to supply the finishing touch.

“Hey, Mirror Shine!” Buddy said, stopping to rest his foot on the wooden stand.

“Hey, Buddy. Teach me some licks sometime?”

But Buddy’s answer to Sterling never seemed to change. “Kinda busy now. Just got time for a little shine. Keep on practicin’.”

Sterling swallowed his disappointment, spread the boot black with extra care, and got to work with his brush. Buddy’s silver cornet was tucked under his arm, flashing in the sunlight. He never went anywhere without it, wouldn’t allow anyone to hold it, not even

the pretty girls who often ran after him. "Play me a tune, Buddy!" they called, and offered to hold his beer while he played them a special love song on his horn.

"Where ya playin' tonight?" asked Sterling.

"The Globe. You gonna come listen?"

"Nah. I'm gonna get in trouble if'n I stay out late."

After some spit and polish, Sterling stretched out his hand for payment. If he polished Buddy's shoes before a performance, he'd be lucky to get a nickel tip, but sometimes, when he caught him on his way back, that was another story. One time, Buddy tipped him twenty cents, and Sterling hid it away with money he had put aside to buy a new trumpet. He had eight dollars saved and needed only a few dollars more.

Two coins dropped into his palm. "You still savin' for that new horn?" asked Buddy. He didn't wait for an answer, his polished low-tops already moving along.

Sterling looked down at the coins. Fifty cents! "Thanks, Buddy!" he called. "You the King!" Buddy gave a backward wave as he turned the corner.

It was true. Bolden was King! Everybody knew it. That man could blow horn like no one else in New Orleans, but Sterling Crawford hoped that one day, it

would be him up there on that bandstand, playing his own horn as good as Buddy.

Or maybe better. Because when Buddy played horn, the girls came running.

And the King played loud! Sterling imagined those clear notes of his wending their way over the muddy Mississippi, past the barges and ferries, curling around the fancy boaters on Lake Pontchartrain, mystifying the dicty white passengers on their way across the lake to Algiers, laughing at them.

You think you the boss? Well, think again. No way you ever gonna play music like me!

At sundown, Sterling carried his tools to Paulo's fruit and vegetable shop, where he stored them every evening. Strains of brass band music filtered in from the street to tempt him. He forgot his promise to his mother to come straight home, and not to stroll along the streets near Congo Square.

He lingered outside tonks and clubs, listening to music that blared through open windows, then walked with purposeful step toward the Globe Ballroom. He was already late home, but his feet took him on to an alley behind the building.

It was raining—a lush, warm spring rain that did not discourage him. He leaned close to an open window to catch the liquid tones of Buddy's horn, rising up into the moist, velvet darkness. The piece ended, lingering on a plaintive note no keyboard could match. Sterling tasted the applause, the yells and whistles for more, and waited for the next tune.

“Boy! What you doin’ there?”

Sterling looked up. The dark form of a man filled the back entrance, his cigarette describing a glowing arc, highlighting the fine profile. Buddy Bolden himself!

“Jus’ listenin’.”

“You like my music? How old is you, ten?”

“Goin’ on eleven.” He stood and moved closer to stare up at Buddy. He could just make out the cornet tucked under his arm.

“I know you, don’t I? Mirror Shine! So, you come after all.”

“Name’s Sterling.” *About time the man know my name.*

“Well, Sterling. This your lucky night!” The King swung the door wide open and waited for him to pass through.

Sterling stood still, scarcely breathing, mouth half-open, feet stuck in place.

“You scared a-come inside?”

Scared? His nerve endings jangled for a grab at this chance!

His brain sent a message to his feet and he bounded over the step. At the threshold, he hesitated. *He funnin' me?*

In answer, Buddy's hand guided him in. Sterling followed him up some steps toward golden light and brassy music that spilled out through an open door. Buddy ducked through with Sterling close on his heels. He was in!

TWO

An explosion of cheers and whistles pounded in Sterling's ears. Hands pushed him gently forward into the saloon, patted his head, touched his cheek. A woman in a sparkling green dress reached out and hugged Sterling to her. "Ain't you just the sweetest thing!"

Sterling, dizzy from the noise and lights, felt he could drown in her warmth and perfume, but Buddy's hands lifted him out of her arms and up onto the bandstand. He led Sterling back behind the drummer for a view of the band and the crowded dance floor beyond, then took his place up front.

King Bolden put the cornet to his lips, stomped three times, and his band came in on the fourth beat and took it away. The dancers grabbed their partners and Sterling swayed to the beat. He could feel the crackling energy

of the man and sensed the strength that he channeled through his horn, like kindling to the flame.

Up this close, the notes from Buddy's cornet were cannonballs that shook Sterling's bones, the tone clean and pure, teasing and lusty, till he felt himself lifted up and away, a catfish on a hook.

Buddy finished the tune and paused a moment, head lowered. The women screamed for him. "Play it for us, Buddy! Play it!"

He lifted the horn again to play a melody that was pure sweet and low down—the beginning notes of a church hymn. Sterling recognized it from sitting on hard benches at the Sunday Baptist service. But Buddy suddenly ragged the beat and morphed that tune into the blues. His horn gently persuaded the churchy music toward seduction and devilry, as if Satan was stealing that hymn to suit his own self.

The King swayed in a trance, looking as if he was right inside the music and the music inside him. He played the bluesy tune and then he played notes that were frills; playful licks that danced around, under and over the tune, but in Sterling's head, he could still find the threads of it.

Willie Cornish answered on trombone, and Jimmy Johnson's bass embraced them like the throb of a heartbeat. The dancers clung to their partners, slowly swaying till Buddy's playing hit a peak and ended on a note that confused the crowd. They stopped dancing and listened. The low fading moan of the cornet seemed to gather in all the people, understand their losses and defeats, all the bitterness and hurts, and, yes, their triumphs, too.

The note touched something deep inside Sterling. It answered the secret parts of him that were confused, even angry, and it held a faint promise. In the hush that followed, Buddy lowered his horn, but the crowd would not let him stop.

"Buddy! Buddy! Play it, Buddy!"

Sterling felt someone's eyes staring at the back of his head and glanced into the shadows behind. Someone stood there, watching. From the looks of him, Sterling figured he must be the boss. The man jerked his thumb, meaning, "*Get off the stage and outta here.*"

Willie Cornish noticed and winked at Sterling, then put down his trombone.

"Boss wants you out. It's kinda late. You got a mamma

conducted and recorded young people's concerts. It is known that, noticing children on the streets of Chicago, selling newspapers and shining shoes near the college, he offered them opportunities to learn music and play in bands. I took artistic license with having Sterling trying for a place at the college, but it is highly possible that Ganz offered these opportunities. Many African American students from that era attended the school and distinguished themselves in later life: Florence Cole Talbert-McCleave, named "The First Lady of Grand Opera," by the National Negro Opera Guild; Johnny Hartman, jazz singer who eventually performed with John Coltrane; Walter Henri Dyatt, violinist and musical educator; Eddy Otha South, jazz violinist, among many others.

Thank you, Christine, for the powerful insights you have given us.

