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# Jazzman Buddy Bolden — man and myth — explored in new movie with music by Wynton Marsalis

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Gary Carr as Buddy Bolden in 'Bolden,' a Wynton-Marsalis-produced film about the life of the pioneering New Orleans trumpeter, premiering May 3, 2019.

Photo by Fred Norris/courtesy of King Bolden Productions

Buddy Bolden is a mystery.

While the early 20th-century New Orleans cornet player is generally considered to be the first true jazz musician, there are no known

recordings of his music. Despite scholarly books about his life, much is unknown and open to speculation.

That's what viewers will find in "Bolden," a film about the jazzman that opens nationally Friday, May 3. The movie is not a History Channel-style documentary, but a dream-like exploration of Bolden's childhood, music and descent into madness. It will be shown at the Broad Theater in New Orleans.

"If you are going to make a movie about Bolden, it is going to have to be a myth," said director and composer Wynton Marsalis after a private screening in New Orleans April 28.

Marsalis was brought on by director, co-writer and co-producer Dan Pritzker to write the film's music, as well as arrange existing songs and perform the soundtrack. He is also a co-producer.

"Musically, I am a descendant of Bolden," said Marsalis. "Just by being from New Orleans and being a trumpet player."

Charles "Buddy" Bolden was born in New Orleans on Sept. 6, 1877. He grew up in the city and started playing the cornet with his band as "King" Bolden, with his improvisations becoming jazz. One of his signature songs was the "Funky Butt," aka "Buddy Bolden's Blues."

Bolden's mental health began to decline in his 20s, and in 1907 he suffered an episode of acute alcoholic psychosis. He was diagnosed with what is now called schizophrenia, and, after a series of arrests, was admitted to the Louisiana State Insane Asylum at Jackson, where he remained until he died in 1931.

"Bolden" has been part of Pritzker's life since 1997, when, as a guitarist for the Chicago-based rhythm and blues band Sonia Dada, he discovered Don Marquis' book, "In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz."

Pritzker was hooked. After doing more research, he started filming in Wilmington, N.C., in 2007. Bolden was portrayed by Anthony Mackie, who at that time was an up-and-coming actor.

Not satisfied with what he had created, Pritzker shelved “Bolden.” But he'd also been making another film to complement “Bolden,” a movie about Louis Armstrong called “Louis.” Released in 2010, it is loosely based on Armstrong’s childhood and, like “Bolden,” has music composed and arranged by Marsalis.

In 2014, Pritzker, whose family owns the Hyatt Hotel chain, scrapped the near-complete “Bolden” and started over. He shot the film in Wilmington, Atlanta and New Orleans. By then, Mackie was unavailable, immersed in his role as Falcon in “Captain America: The Winter Soldier,” “Ant-Man,” and “Avengers: Age of Ultron,” among other major roles.

In came British actor Gary Carr, known to U.S. audiences for his work on “The Deuce” and “Downton Abby,” in which he portrayed a jazz singer. He already played classical piano, but Carr had to learn a new instrument and the jazz genre for the film.

Most of the cast was new, with one of the exceptions being Karimah Westbrook, who portrays Bolden’s mother, Alice Bolden.

“It was a painful way to lose a son,” said Westbrook, referring to Bolden’s mental illness and subsequent time at the asylum.

Filming in New Orleans was special, because “it was where Buddy was raised, so I felt really close to where it all began. It was thrilling to have that experience.”

Westbrook, who was in town for the private screening, is currently in the TV show “All American.”

Other stars in the movie include Erik LaRay Harvey, Yaya DaCosta, Ian McShane, Michael Rooker and Robert Ri’chard. Reno Wilson plays Louis Armstrong, whose performance in New Orleans at Suburban Gardens a few months before Bolden died in 1931 was broadcast live via radio.

This scene kicks off the film, which then goes back and forth in Bolden’s life. Starting the film with Armstrong, and other flashbacks, was intended to show how far African-American musicians had come to that point and illustrate Bolden’s influence on Armstrong.

Cinematography is by Neal Norton. Pritzker says a trip to Florence influenced the look of the film with its tone and atmosphere. Period-appropriate costumes are by Colleen Morris, known for her work as assistant costume designer on “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” and “The Deuce.”

“I shot about 300 miles of film roughly, so what you saw (at the screening) was a a mile and three-quarter of it,” Pritzker said. The outtakes may be added to the movie's official web site, [boldenmovie.com](http://boldenmovie.com).

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[Click here to see the "Bolden" trailer.](#)

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