In Search of the Man Who May Have Created Jazz

By MICHAEL CHEPLEY

NEW ORLEANS

One is really sure what this city’s first “cornet king,” Charles (Buddy) Bolden, sounded like 100 years ago, much less what made him tick. The lore says a single wax recording of Bolden’s namesake ensemble was demolished with the old shell in which it was stored in the early 1900s. What is probably the most reliable rendering of his trademark tune, “Buddy Bolden’s Blues,” came from Jelly Roll Morton, who had heard it performed and put it on a record years after the maestro’s death. But even the song’s own lyrics were, against treating too much: “I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say,” runs the remarkably tentative opening line.

Yet this elusive character, who some aficionados say invented jazz before blipping into ultimate fatal insanity before the age of 30, has been coming back into focus in recent weeks as a unique of seasoned filmmakers and impassioned aficionados to capture Bolden and his world in not one but two, related, movies.

Eclectic in concept, ambitious in scope and not cheap—backers put the cost at more than $1 million—the twin pictures will probably stretch the limits of what independent film can do by the time they are seen on festival or commercial screens next year.

Dan Pritzker—a billionaire’s son best known as founder of a guitar shop, the guitarist of a rock band and an associate producer of “Street Musician,” an important documentary in the project as well as its director—has never made a movie. (Yet that nebulous status has not kept him from attracting an impressive group of actors and banjo—camera talents, including members of the Marsalis clan, to tell the story of a man Pritzker likens to “a shaman who flipped on the lights.”)

The first picture, currently titled “Bolden,” is a musical biography with music written by the late lead and Vincent Pierre (“The Wire”), and Jackie Earle Haley (Cecil oat Octave Montez) for this year’s “Little Children,” among the supporting cast. The second is an hourlong silent film called “The Great Ears,” in which a young man named Louis, recalling Bolden’s more colorful successor Louis Armstrong, dreams of playing the horn while becoming entangled with the denizens of New Orleans’s red-light district, played by a company of ballerinas.

The films, which have no distributor yet, are meant to mark their debut distributors. If all goes according to Pritzker’s plan, the second will play at a live performance by Wynton Marsalis, who is executive producer of the movies and has written original music that is meant to evoke the man Armstrong, Morton, Kid Ory, Sidney Bechet and other early jazzmen described as both influential and shadowy myth.

“There’s a fine line between guts and spectacle,” Pritzker said of his project last month. “We are making in the spring heat with 100 mostly local players on a set that will end on locations and sets in Winston-Salem, N.C. The day’s work took the group to the Currituck cemetery in the Overton neighborhood, where a row of small-frame houses had been painted blue-gray and modestly changed to

A neophyte filmmaker with an unusual vision takes on the legend of Buddy Bolden.

stand is for the city of bolden’s late-19th-century youth.

“This is a city that lives its history but doesn’t always know it,” explained Mr. Mackie, 28, who grew up here before leaving to attend arts school in North Carolina and then the Juilliard School. As a character in Buddy Bolden, the actor wore a heavy blue band uniform with red piping and spent much of the day287 and a scene in which notes from his horn jump the expected musical tracks at the end of a funeral, triggering a boisterous exit parade.

In and out of the clouds, the sun has only slightly assayed the director of photography, Vilmos Zsigmond, a film veteran (“The Black Dahlia,” “The Witches of Eastwick”) who suggested that weathermen should be as competent to predict cloudy and bright as cinematographers are to deal with uncertain light. As things settled on the bright side, Mr. Pritzker mailed a replay of the funeral parade on the video monitor, then set up another take, this time with Mr. Marshals’s buzzy from a loudspeaker. Arms started swaying. Wanderluth’s307 waved in unison, pumped in time as locals girls showed up the Bolden spirit.

“If this music doesn’t make you move around, something’s wrong,” said Mr. Pritzker.

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