

Sydney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, excerpt:

*He's describing things he saw when he was a kid
growing up in the black community in New Orleans,
maybe around 1910*

Everyone in our house liked music. When they heard it played right, they answered to it from way down inside themselves. If my brothers weren't around the house playing, they was out playing somewhere else. My father, my mother, and me too—we was all the same about music. Even when I was just a little kid I was always running out to where the music was going on, chasing after the parades. Sometimes I'd get into the second line of the parade and just go along.

The second line of the parade, that was a thing you don't see any more. There used to be big parades all over New Orleans—a band playing, people dancing and strutting and shouting, waving their hands, kids following along waving flags. One of those parades would start down the street, and all kinds of people when they saw it pass would forget all about what they was doing and just take off after it, just joining in the fun. You know how it is—a parade, it just makes you stop anything you're doing; you stop working, eating, any damn' thing, and you run on out, and if you can't get in it you just get as close as you can.

In those days people just made up parades for the pleasure. They'd all get together and everyone would put some money into it, maybe a dollar, and they'd make plans for stopping off at one place for one thing, and at some other place for something else—drinks or cake or some food. They'd have maybe six places they was scheduled to go to.

And those that didn't have money, they couldn't get in the parade. But they enjoyed it just as much as those that were doing it—more, some of them. And those people, they were called “second liners.” They had to make their own parade with broomsticks, kerchiefs, tin pans, any old damn' thing And they'd take off shouting, singing, following along the sidewalk, going off on side streets when they was told they had no business being on the sidewalks or along the curbs like that, or maybe when the police would try to break them up. Then they'd go off one way and join the parade away up and start all over again. They'd be having their own damn parade, taking what was going on in the street and doing something different with it, tearing it up kind of, having their fun. They'd be the second line of the parade.

When I was just a kid I used to get in on a lot of those second lines, singing, dancing, hollering—oh, it just couldn't be stopped! But sometimes you had to watch out: the police, sometimes they did nothing but smile, other times they just weren't taking anything for pleasure.

The police would come by sometimes and, like I say, some of them didn't do nothing to stop what was going on, but others used to beat up the people and break them up and get them moving away from there. You'd just never know which it would be with those police. But somehow they never did touch the musicians; I never did see that happen....

Sometimes we'd have what they called in those days “bucking contests”... One band, it would come right up in front of the other and play at it, and the first band it would play right back, until finally one band just had to give in....

A brass band, it was twenty pieces, you know. And the leader, he'd take his band right in amongst the other, and he'd stop. You'd be standing there on Claiborne Avenue and the bands, they'd come closer to each other, keep coming closer, and you'd be hearing the two of them, first one in a way, then the next. And then they'd get closer and you couldn't make them out any more. And then they'd be right in together, one line between another, and then it was just noise, just everything all at once. They'd be forty

instruments all bucking at one another. And then you'd have to catch your breath: they'd be separating themselves.

Then came the beauty of it. That was the part that really took something right out of you. You'd hear mostly one band, so clear, so good, making you happier, sadder, whatever way it wanted you to feel. It would come out of the bucking and it would still be playing all together. None of the musicianers would be confused, none of them would have mixed up the music, they would all be in time.

And that other band, getting scared, knowing it couldn't go on further, it was finished. It couldn't be trying any harder, it was there still doing its best, but hearing the other band, say some good band like the Onward—it had thrown them off: It wasn't a band any more. It was just some excited musicianers. It would have three or six different tempos going. The men, they didn't know their music and they didn't know their feeling and they couldn't hear the next man. Every man, he'd be thrown back on his own trying to find whatever number it was they had started out to play. But that number, it wasn't there any more. There was nothing to be recognized.

And the people, they just let that band be. They didn't care to hear it. They'd all be gone after the other band, crowding around it, cheering the musicianers, waiting to give them drinks and food. All of them feeling good about the music, how that band it kept the music together.

And being able to play in that kind of band, it was more than a learning kind of thing, You know, when you learn something, you can go just as far. When you've finished that, there's not much else you can do unless you know how to get hold of something inside you that isn't learned. It has to be there inside you without any need of learning. The band that played what it knew, it didn't have enough. In the end it would get confused; it was finished. And the people, they could tell.

But how it was they could tell—that was the music too. It was what they had of the music inside themselves. There wasn't any personality attraction thing to it. The music, it was the onliest thing that counted. The music, it was having a time for itself. It was moving, It was being free and natural.