

from *Treat it Gentle*
Sidney Bechet

In the opening chapter of his autobiography, *Treat it Gentle*, Sidney Bechet tells us that people “got the wrong idea of jazz,” that “they think it’s all that red-light business.” He goes on to say that there is a “real story [he’s] got to tell.”

One evening, after playing at the Vieux Colombier in Paris, a patron told Bechet how he was moved by hearing the “old music,” and that Bechet was still “playing New Orleans.” The man added, “This music is your music.”

Bechet responds, “you know, no music is my music. It’s everybody’s who can feel it. You’re here...well, if there is music, you feel it—then it’s yours too. You got to be in the sun to feel the sun. It’s that way with the music too....I began to think there’s a whole lot of people, all they’ve been hearing is how ragtime got started in New Orleans, and as far as they know it just stopped there...but...it’s more than a memory thing...it is happening right there where they are listening to it, just as much as it ever did in memory.

The patron wondered what was going to happen to Jazz when people like Bechet weren’t around any more, but Bechet insists “Jazz isn’t just me. It isn’t just any one person who plays it. There will always be Jazz. You take a melody...people can feel a melody...as long as there is melody there’s jazz, there’s rhythm.”

Bechet tries to explain to the patron that Jazz “got started way back...how [his] family beat time with their hands on drums...how that’s jazz too, how you can just beat on the table and it can be jazz.”

The patron worried that “we do not have today what we should have to make [jazz] and keep it going....that maybe it’s stopped in New Orleans.”

Bechet insists that “jazz” is “a name the white people have given to the music” and that it “does not explain the music.” He goes on, “There is two kinds of music. There is classic and there is ragtime. When I tell you rag time, you can feel it; there is a spirit right in the word. It comes out of the Negro spirituals, out of Omar’s way of thinking, out of his rhythm.”

But here is what I really mean. All God’s children got a crown. My race, they are music...it’s their way of giving you something, of showing you how to be happy. It is what they have got to make them happy...We can be told: ‘Maybe you do not belong in Heaven, and you haven’t got a place on this earth; you are not in our class, our race.’ But somewhere, all God’s children wear a crown, and someday we are going to wear ours too.

You know, the Negro does not want to cling to music. But he needs it; it means something, and he can mean something. He has always got to be honest, and people are always putting him to music. ‘That is your place,’ they say. How can you be honest to something when people are trying to make it unnatural for you?

But if you have a feeling for the music, you can understand him, and that is why he keeps it so important to himself....The black man, he's been learning his way from the beginning. A way of saying something from him inside himself, as far back as time, as far back as Africa, in the jungle, and the way the drums talked across the jungle, the way they filled the whole air with a sound like the blood beating inside himself."

Bechet believes he got his music from something inherited, like stories handed down from his father. "All of my life I've been trying to explain about something, something I understand—the part of me that was there before I was. It was there waiting to be me. It was there waiting to be the music. It is that part I have been trying to explain to myself all my life."

He likens it to a song he wrote for a little boy who had no toys, "but he had a song. He kept making that song over and over out of himself, changing it around, making it fit...and as soon as he had the song, he was not lonely anymore. He was lucky. He was real well off; he had this thing he could trust, and so he could trust himself.

Bechet wants to tell the story of the music, believing he has traveled down—and back—a long road that has brought him to a place where he understands the music. "That's a thing you gotta trust. You gotta mean it, and you gotta treat it gentle. The music, it's that road...it's the thing that brings you to everything else. You have to trust that."