

Love, Oh Love, Oh Careless Love

Careless Love is perhaps the most enduring of traditional folk songs. Of obscure origins, the song's message is that "careless love" could care less who it hurts in the process. Although the lyrics have changed from version to version, the words usually speak of the pain and heartbreak brought on by love that can take one totally by surprise. And then things go terribly wrong. In many instances, the song's narrator threatens to kill his or her errant lover.

"Love is messy like a po-boy – leaving you drippin' in debris."

Now, this concept of love is not the sentiment of this author, but, for some, love does not always go right.

Countless artists have recorded *Careless Love*.



Rare photo of "Buddy" Bolden



Lonnie Johnson

New Orleans cornetist and early jazz icon Charles Joseph "Buddy" Bolden played this song and made it one of the best known pieces in his band's repertory in the early 1900s, and it has remained both a

jazz standard and blues standard. In fact, it's a folk, blues, country and jazz song all rolled into one.

Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues, cut an extraordinary recording of the song in 1925. Lonnie Johnson of New Orleans recorded it in 1928.

It is Pete Seeger's favorite folk song.

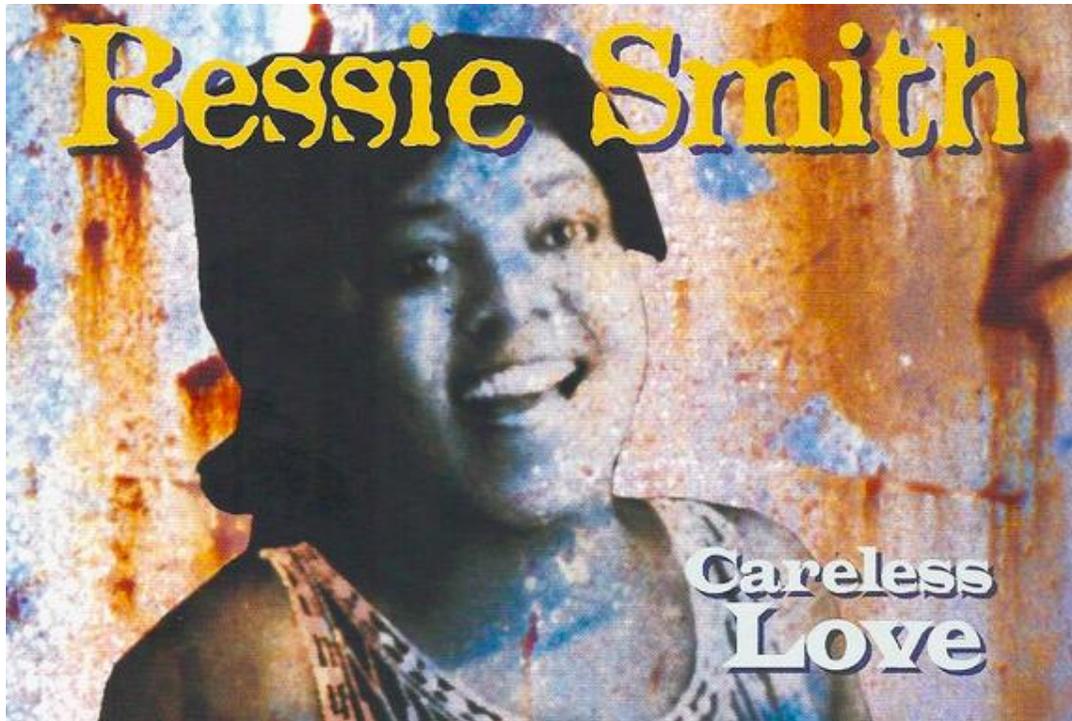
Careless Love has been recorded by Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash. Fats Domino recorded his version in 1951. Crescent City jazz clarinetist George Lewis (born Joseph Louis Francois Zenon, 1900 – 1968) played it, as did other New Orleans performers, such as Dr. John, Snooks Eaglin and Harry Connick, Jr.



Bessie Smith's Columbia recording *Fats Domino's on Imperial*

And the song keeps going strong. Born in Athens, Georgia, American jazz singer and songwriter Madeleine Peyroux (born April 18, 1974) began her career as a teenager on the streets of Paris. She sang vintage blues and jazz compositions before finding mainstream success in 2004 when her album *Careless Love* sold half a million copies.

A hometown standard for almost every New Orleans inspired jazz band, *Careless Love* delivers a strong emotional wallop every time it is performed.



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"Buddy" Bolden is credited as the founding father of "jass," later to be called jazz, and his band (playing from circa 1900 – 1907) held court in the South Rampart and Perdido area of downtown New Orleans. Not too long ago, that is where I enjoyed Dr. Michael White performing his splendid rendition of *Careless Love* on June 24, 2017, at the Little Gem Saloon. Originally operated as Frank Douroux's Little Gem Saloon, it is located at 445-449 South Rampart Street, corner Poydras.

Born in 1877, it is presumed that "Buddy" attended the Fisk School for Boys, which was known for its discipline and outstanding music faculty. He probably learned to read music, to play different musical instruments and to have developed an accomplished singing voice. After his father's early death, Bolden's mother, still fairly young, became involved with a part-time cornet player who taught "Buddy" to play. "Jelly Roll" Morton, real name Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, called Bolden "the blowingest man since Gabriel".

Bolden, who solidified his reputation with the nicknames "Kid" and later "King" Bolden, was the first jazz musician to perform in an improvisational style. He also gained a reputation as a heavy drinker and a ladies man. His female fans were gob-smacked by his singing, and it was reported that he was "giving them the crawls."

Performing with the Eagle Band on Labor Day, 1906, Bolden experienced a psychological breakdown. New Orleans painter George Schmidt has recorded this incident in a beautiful and poignant historical painting. Bolden is pictured sitting on the curb with his head slumped down in a posture of mental collapse and utter despair. In mid-1907, after several months of violent, out-of-control behavior and "advanced alcoholism", Bolden was admitted at the early age of 29 to the Louisiana State Insane Asylum at Jackson, where he would spend the remainder of his life. He was diagnosed with *dementia praecox*, which we would call today *schizophrenia*.

Although Bolden's trombonist, Willie Cornish, among others, recalled making phonographic cylinder recordings with the Bolden Band, no copies have ever been discovered.



Only known photo of the Bolden Band (circa 1905), from Willie Cornish's personal collection

Top row: Jimmy Johnson, bass; Bolden, cornet; Willy Cornish, valve trombone; Willy Warner, clarinet.

Bottom row: Brock Mumford, guitar; Frank Lewis, clarinet.

Missing: Cornelius Tillman, drummer.

In addition to *Careless Love*, another song associated with the Bolden Band is *My Bucket's Got a Hole in It*, still a traditional standard.

"Buddy" often wrapped up his performances with the original number

Get Out of Here and Go Home, although for more “uptown” gigs, the final number would be *Home, Sweet Home*. But perhaps one of the most famous Bolden numbers is a song called *Funky Butt* (later known as *Buddy Bolden's Blues*), which is the very first song to introduce the concept of “funk” in a musical composition.



The Funky Butt Jazz Club, once active on North Rampart Street

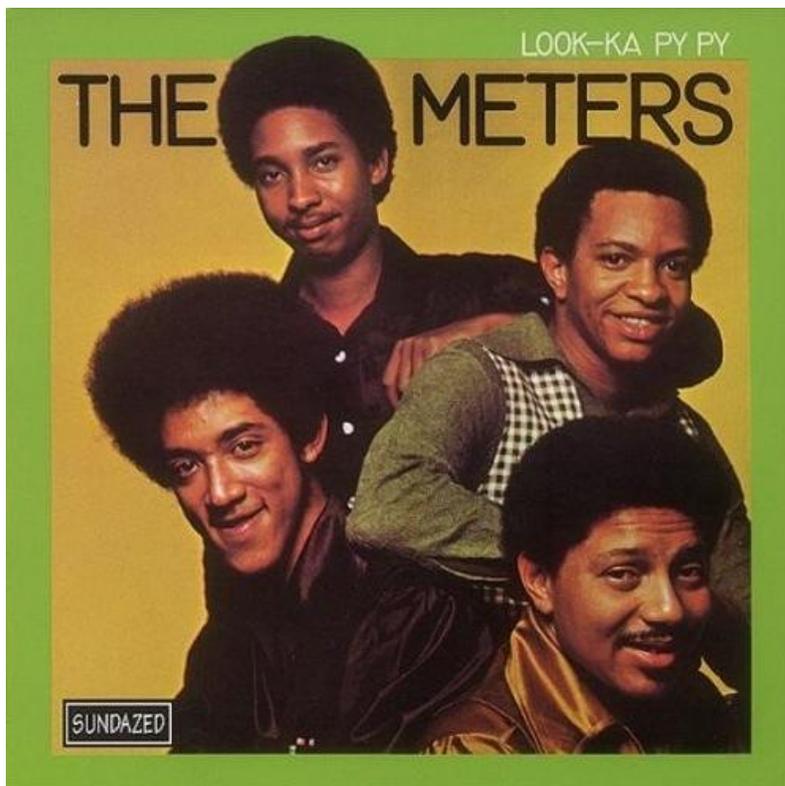
So what is the etymology of “funk” and “funky”? Anthropologist and art historian Robert F. Thompson postulates it is from a Kikongo word, *lu-fukji*, meaning “bad body odor”. Kikongo is one of two similar Bantu languages spoken in the Congo (Zaire). Or, according to another source, it comes to us from the French (from *funk*, strong smell, tobacco smoke, perhaps from French dialectal *funquer*, to give off smoke, from Old French *fungier*, from Latin *fūmigāre*, as in the word fumigate. In other words, something doesn’t smell quite right, and if it’s the butt one is talking about – well you get the picture.

The late Danny Barker referred to the olfactory effect of an auditorium packed full of sweaty people “dancing close together and belly rubbing”, a sort of earthiness. In time, its meaning was transferred to the music itself, i.e., played strong and sexy, riff-oriented with an insistent rhythm and very danceable. In early jam sessions, musicians would coax one another to “get down” and “put some *stank* on it!”. Legendary New Orleans-born drummer, the late Earl Palmer, is credited with being the first to use the word “funky” to convey to other musicians that their performance should be more syncopated and danceable.

Bolden's *Funky Butt*, for which Willy Cornish claimed authorship, employed numerous risqué or off-color lyrics, which delighted many in some of the rougher places where Bolden played.

Today the words "funk" or funky" show up throughout "soul" music, in such song titles as *Funky Broadway*, *Funky Nassau*, *Funkin' for Jamaica*, *Give Up The Funk*, *Play That Funky Music* by Wild Cherry, Allen Toussaint's *Everything I Do Gonh Be Funky (from now on)* or Rebirth's *I Feel Like Funkin' It Up*. And, of course, I can't fail to mention Rufus Thomas' *Funky Chicken* or a band named Funkadelic.

Most importantly, one must mention the incomparable Meters, who have been described as an American "funk" band. This New Orleans combo was formed in 1965 by Art Neville on keyboards, Zigaboo Modaliste on drums, Leo Nocentelli on guitar and George Porter, Jr., on bass. Their great songs, the *Cissy Strut* and *Look-Ka Py Py* are "funk" classics.



The Meters

Years ago, I, along with two dear friends, hired a memorable New Orleans band for a New Year's Eve party. The bandleader's name was Senator Jones and he and his band could not have been funkier (in a

rhythmic sense, that is), as evidenced by his CD's cover art (shown below). Many of these funky tunes were on the "Hep' Me" label.



And it all started with "Buddy" Bolden's *Funky Butt*.

Louis Armstrong wrote, "On Liberty, Perdido, Franklin, and Poydras there were honky-tonks at every corner and in each one of them musical instruments of all kinds were played. At the corner of the street where I lived was the famous Funky Butt Hall, where I first heard Buddy Bolden play."

The Union Sons Hall, built sometime after 1866 when several free persons of color formed the Union Sons Relief Organization of Louisiana, served as a popular African American dance and music venue called Funky Butt Hall and, on Sunday mornings, hosted Baptist church services. In the mid-1950s, the city tore down the original buildings on this block to clear an area for the present City Hall.



The original Funky Butt Hall, or Union Sons Hall, 1319 Perdido Street, between Liberty and Franklin Streets

There was a later Funky Butt Jazz Club that operated in New Orleans a century later. Located on North Rampart Street, it hosted a de facto jazz funeral for itself (minus the jazz) in 2005.

Many consider *Funky Butt* the oldest known jazz song. "Jelly Roll" Morton retitled the tune *Buddy Bolden's Blues* and wrote some of his own lyrics, the most popular line of which is, "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say ...". Another line goes, "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout 'Open up that window and let that bad air out'".

Today, "funky", in addition to its meaning "foul-smelling" or describing a song "having a strong dance rhythm," it can also mean "odd or quaint in appearance or feeling", such as a "funky" little café or "unconventionally stylish or hip," such as "funky" clothing.

Bolden died in 1931 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Holt Cemetery, right off City Park Avenue near Delgado, a pauper's graveyard in New Orleans.

BOLDEN—On Wednesday, November 4th, 1931, at 2 o'clock a. m., CHARLES (BUDDY) BOLDEN, aged 50 years, a native of New Orleans, La., brother of Cora Reed.

Relatives friends and acquaintances of the family are respectfully invited to attend the funeral, which will take place on Friday, November 6th, 1931, at 2 o'clock p. m., from the funeral home of Geddes and Moss, 2120 Jackson Ave. Interment in Holt cemetery.

Bolden's obituary in the New Orleans Item, November 6, 1931

In 1998, a monument was erected to honor Bolden in the Holt Cemetery, but the exact location of his gravesite still remains unknown. What we do know for certain is that "he occupies a high place in jazz history," wrote author Jason Berry. "We know what King Bolden did for jazz. The mystery, his life's tragic riddle, is that we know not who he was."

Love, and life, sad to say, can often be careless and "inconstant," like Shakespeare's moon, "that monthly changes in her circle orb."

What motivated such a talented young man to succumb to a tragic alcohol-induced psychosis? Perhaps it was love, oh love, oh *Careless Love*.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Love, Oh Love, Oh Careless Love"
Ned Hémard
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