

Candidate 2 evidence

Chasing that golden note

Opening performance. The Sugar Bunny. Midnight. The bar heaves with the influx of guests who come to savour the evening's delights. Jewellery dances in and out of the shadows created by the cigar smoke of wealthy men. Laughter rolls around the small room, mingling with the aroma of aperitifs poured almost as quickly into glasses as they are down the throats of the guests. The whole place feels electric; ecstatic; alive.

Then the lights fade. All sound quickly stops as attention whips towards the spotlight focused on the curtain brought over the stage. Nothing happens for four, five, six seconds. Then the curtain rolls up, folding and creasing at it rises out of sight, the spotlight rippling upwards onto a young boy, no more than fifteen years old. The audience starts to murmur; they were expecting a professional band, not a kid. The kid looks up; slowly, he brings his trumpet up to his lips, inflating his chest and displacing the air that has grown quiet and still moments before. Quivering lips shake as he puts his mouth against the mouthpiece, tasting the abrupt tang against his trembling lips. He shivers, swallowing the bile that surges against the back of his throat, pursing his lips, ignoring the nerves ricocheting in his stomach. He breathes. In. Out. In. And the ear-splitting notes that follow are matched only in volume by the screams of approval from the awestruck crowd.

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It's the warm up; instruments out, tuning up, the start of the show. Chesney Henry Baker was born screaming, an aptly raucous beginning for a future trumpet player. It was apparent from an early age that Chet had inherited the gifts of music from his parents, and his talents were easily encouraged. His father had been a professional guitarist, and his mother played the piano. Chet's journey to musical stardom truly started when his father suggested playing a brass instrument. Chet tore through his father's vast vinyl collection: licks and riffs stampeded like wildebeest through the lush valley that was a fledgling brain, snorting and spitting steam and raw sound into sponge. Chet was in love with the sound, the raw emotion that came from the mouth of such a quivering beast as the trumpet hooked him on to the drug on jazz, perhaps mimicking the embrace of the other, far harsher drugs' he would succumb to. Such was his love for the art form that he begged his father to play. He pleaded and pleaded, holding on to his father's leg as he walked down the hallway, and every time the answer was the same: "Son, we can't afford it" "It's too loud, we'll disturb the neighbours" "Ask your mother". Chet left each encounter dejected, but he never gave up hope.

Then winter quietly crept into town, almost apologetically standing in the corner of the public's minds like an uncomfortable party guest. With war on the horizon, frivolous spending seemed worlds away. But on the Christmas morning of 1941, young Chet awoke too early. Any teenage nonchalant cool was kicked under the carpet, being replaced with hyperactive glee. He raced down the stairs, one last burst of anticipation coursing through his body. He swung open the door of the living room. The pine tree rehomed by the fire held onto a gift with subtle, delicate fingers of fern and fronds. Pine needles swept, crept and fell slowly into the gleaming brass bell that would ring glory for many days to come.

He made his way up to the stage. The crowd waited, the band riveted on the leader.

He breathed in, out, clicked his fingers once, twice

“And a one, two, three, four”.

The janitor was paid extra to pick up all the jaws that had dropped that night. The crowd watched in awe as Chet moved over from tone to tone, commanding total control over his instrument. He was a pioneer in his sound in that he disregarded the hard and fast bebop-style jazz that had come into fashion. He chased every single note for the euphoria of playing. To him, playing was his drug. He was a jazz junkie. He couldn't get enough of it. Every note sent waves of joy rippling down his spine, the sensation stronger the higher he played. Chet ran after the highs. He sprinted up the melodic lines, leapt onto the crescendos and flew into the blissful peace of improvisation. Liquid symphonies of brass cascaded out of the mouth of the golden river, sparkling and twinkling as it flowed into thirsty ears. From street corners to sold out stages, his trumpet sang. Mimicking the smoky streets of New Orleans, Chet stood on the sidewalks of California and poured his heart out into brass. He waited along the wide, sun baked boulevards lined with pine trees dying in the heat. Silver needles danced and fell through the viscous air, surrounding Chet's trumpet as they had all those winters ago.

He fumbled. A wrong note. A slipped finger, a miniscule mouth movement, and immediately the audience snapped out of their trance. His nerves had got to him. During the long hot summers of 1964, Chet barely left his apartment. He practiced the same short, frantic riff that pierced through the walls of his apartment. The air reeked of warmth that night; mosquitoes swarmed around the damp lightbulb; rivulets ran around each other through the canyons carved into brick. The breath of the hallway curdled and tasted stagnant, the wooden teeth that leant against the wall cracked and chipped. The sun had long set when the door adjacent to Chet's apartment swung open, the hinges rattling as it hit the wall. Sleep deprived and angry, Baker's neighbour approached his room with barely contained rage, grabbed the wrought iron knocker and gave three sharp raps. The riff immediately ceased. The shuffled footsteps and staggered breathing of what sounded like an injured animal got louder and louder. Then the locks on the door were undone: one, two, three, in an almost swing rhythm. The chain slowly slid across, and the hinges squealed after days of lying dormant, and the neighbour's anger died crawling up his throat. He took one look at the swaying, sleep deprived superstar and screamed.

Chet strived for perfection, and it was in that quest to achieve the best that he stumbled on what would ultimately befall upon him: heroin. The drug was almost a necessity in the frantic, fast-paced world of jazz; performing up to five times a day in as many clubs for days, weeks and months on end was almost impossible without it. From the late 50's onwards, Chet would routinely inject with heroin, snort coke, smoke marijuana, take any numerous amounts of pills or a combination of the entire lot. He was hooked, and it wasn't just him. Almost every single jazz musician was on some form of drug in order to improve

their playing. From Miles Davis to Charlie Parker, Dizzy to Coltrane, Fats Morgan to Chet himself, the list goes on and on. The pretty boy of jazz was gone, replaced with a monster.

The band looked at Chet. The drummer, desperate to grab his attention, shouted over his kit:

“Whatcha doin’, man? Throw some sugar on it!”

Had the young white cat used up his nine lives? Chet’s luck and charm seemed to dissipate during his later years, making him abusive and dependent on drugs. His hair started to turn lank and greasy; his teeth started to rot; furrows appeared in his face, giving him the appearance of a man twenty years his senior. He strangled one of his girlfriends with a telephone cord; another he injected with heroin and left her passed out. His swagger had vanished: he rarely bathed, his hair was rarely clean, his teeth were rarely brushed. His conquest to seek out drugs caused him to sell his instruments, forcing him to cheat, steal, and lie in order to get his hits. One night after a gig in San Francisco he was walking to his car when his drug habit reared its ugly head. A gorilla of a man stood in his way, juttied out his jaw and growled “where’s our money?”

Chet turned on a dime, only to find four other men staring at him, softly growling.

“Now, gents, let’s be reasonable about this. I’m a busy guy, I can have the money to you by” -

One of the men cracked his knuckles. Crack. Crack. Crack.

As if on cue, they attacked. Knuckles slammed into teeth with a shudder. Fire exploded inside Chet’s mouth, filling his face with agony and blood. Fingers rifled through his pockets, stripping him of money and dignity. He sliced and fought back, clawing and hissing, only to be ruthlessly beaten to the pavement again and again. And every time he rose, he was forced back down. The stabs of needles scraped across his entire body. Wounded screams punctuated the urban jungle, only silenced when the hard thud of bone on flesh was replaced with a wetter, redder slap. The leader stood over the barely conscious Chet. The reverberations of the thud still vibrated along Chet’s broken jawline. The leader spat. Kicked. Then sloped off.

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The applause dies away. Chet looks up with a tender grin. He’s finally finished. The gigs were few and far between, his voice cracked and ravaged, his trumpet playing a husk of its former greatness. And he realised this. But he was hooked. Even if he wanted to give up now his body would never return to the regal grandeur it once possessed. So, he made up his mind. A far cry from the West Coast, Amsterdam in the winter was bitter. Chet pulled his coat around him further, his trumpet tucked under one arm and a small, brown clingfilm wrapped rock buried deep into his pocket. He started to sweat, as if oblivious to the Dutch storm that had succeeded in driving most of the city indoors to batten down the hatches. He stumbled through the narrow streets, ignoring the siren call of a whore, mocking him playfully in her scant outfit. But that was the last thing on Chet’s mind. His

keys fumbled in the lock of the guesthouse, and his need grew stronger with every slow second that teased through his mind. Eventually, his keys powered through the pins holding the lock shut, and he left them dangling there. He kicked open his door. In his desperation he flung the entire crockery drawer onto the floor, then huddled over a small spoon covered in brown spots and stains one could only wish was from an old cup of tea. Gas on; shirt up; belt around arm. The small rock started to crackle and fizz in anger, and Chet turned up the small blue flame as high as it would go. The seething teaspoon was sucked up, held high, then plunged into the gnarled vein that nestled deep in the recesses between Chet's first and second toe.

He shuddered in relief, and for five seconds the noise in his mind stopped. He was able to get inside every second of time, breathe it in, absorb the essence of the notes in the air that fluttered by: melodies of warmth and cold, fire and ice, happiness and bitter, bitter rain. All the secrets that were uttered in Amsterdam were carried on the air currents like whispers that crawled inside and around Chet's brain.

And the noise started again.

He couldn't take it. He had to make it stop. He started to slowly knock his head against the wall which he fell against, slowly at first but building up into a fever pitch that only increased in tempo and volume. He was suddenly too hot. The door had swung shut and jammed behind him. Ragged eyes scoured the tiny room looking desperately for a way out, like a monkey in a cage. His eyes caught on the streak left behind by a raindrop and followed it upwards. There! A small window that opened and looked out onto one of the many cobbled streets that carved up Amsterdam. He swayed. Blinked. Stumbled. Clawed at the handle. Tendons popped. He pushed. It swung open. The cold air invaded Baker's synapses. But his body was still too hot. He had to get out. Scrabbling for grip, Chet levered his upper body through the small window, contorting himself nightmarishly, constantly whimpering.

And he got out.

The white noise inside his head drained out as the raindrops spattered against his pockmarked-raised skin. Chet's swimming pupils dove across the narrow street, plunging into the window of a room: a young boy. His parents were watching him as he struggled with an object, obscured by his body. As if on cue, the boy brought up the object to his mouth, and turned slightly as if he knew one of the most famous trumpet players in the world was watching. The unmistakable glint of golden metal brushed over the face of a man whose entire world had revolved around the posing, the playing, the performing, reaching out with both hands for the perfect, golden note

But this time, he ran out of handholds.

Chet blinked.

His legs kicked uselessly at thin air.

The golden beam of light seemed to follow him as he started to fall, very, very slowly.

And the cobbles swooned upwards to kiss him.

Chet's affair with danger had finally caught up with him. His belief that he was invincible whipped round and bit him, and, like a rabid dog, continued to scratch at him and leave him desperate and bleeding. His fame and notoriety tore him up and shut him down.

Not that he seemed to mind.

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The lights fade back up. The crowd is in uproar.

"The wildcard pulled through!"

"There's no stopping him now!"

Chet licks his lips; dry from an hour playing and the half bottle of bourbon drunk backstage. A drop of grease runs, from his slicked back widow's peak down the side of his nose, disappearing into the corners of his mouth. Smoke snakes around his fingers, which tap a slow waltz against the valves of his trumpet. The table lamps flicker through the smouldering air. Then he steps up to the front of the stage, black glossed shoes clicking smartly against the unvarnished ash stage. The crowd go to applaud yet again, but he holds up a finger, and grins at one of the women sitting at the front tables. She swoons, falling back into the lap of her admirer. Chet's gaze shifts towards the house band. They grin back at him, drenched in sweat, but ecstatic.

He holds up the trumpet. The crowd start to scream:

"Encore!"

"Encore!"

"Encore!"

Almost nonchalantly, he softly clicks his fingers. The drummer starts to mimic him, one foot on the hats, the other resting over the kick pedal. He starts to shuffle on the snare drum, brushes drawing figure-of-eights over the skin of the drum. Chet breathes in, then out, then in, then out.

He whispers "one, two, a one, two, three, four".

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