

The Boogie-Woogie Kid

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THE BOOGIE-WOOGIE KID

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By Jim Fusilli

The St. Louis Browns continued to install the organ even as the country went to war and despite the objections of the St. Louis Cardinals, co-tenants of Sportsman's Park.

The Cardinals' top National League rival, the Chicago Cubs, had been the first team to feature an organ at their ballgames, mounting a pipe organ in the centerfield bleachers for the 1941 season. The American League Browns went with a sleek Hammond Model C electric organ with built-in vibrato and choral effects – a snazzy piece of modern musical gear. And then they hired Gladys Steubens, who taught piano and played the organ at the church attended by Don Barnes, the team president. Ms. Steubens provided diversion by offering Browns fan a pre-game and between-innings feast of familiar show tunes with mechanical precision and a notable lack of zest.

In a surprise that bordered on shock, in 1942 the Browns challenged the Yankees for the pennant, finishing 82-69 and showing a league-leading 17% increase in attendance over the previous year when they finished a characteristic 31 games behind the leaders. The Browns, who had never won the American League pennant and thus never appeared in the World Series, entered the '43 season plump with hope. The league's best players including Joe DiMaggio of the Yankees, Bob Feller of the Indians, Hank Greenberg of the Tigers and Ted Williams of the Red Sox were now in the service.

But '43 soured quickly. With their best hitter, Walt Judnich, gone to the Air Force, the Browns played uninspired ball into mid-May, losing as many games as they won, then spiraling to a 3-12 record over the next 15 games. They enjoyed a modest spurt in July, then lost 14 of their next 17. They limped to season's end, finishing 72-80 and in sixth place.

Adding to their misery: The Cardinals won the National League with an impressive 106-48 record and then went on to beat the Yankees in five games, two of which were played to packed houses at Sportsman's Park.

When it was time to assign blame, some of it was parceled to Mrs. Steubens at the Hammond Model C.

"She knows nothing about the game," said Benny Bauer, the park's usually affable superintendent. "I kid you not. Bat, ball, base. She doesn't know."

They were in the clubby office of Roy Hayward, a vice president under Barnes, who was off tending to his duties as president of the American Investment Company. Also present were Browns' crotchety player-manager Luke Sewell and Stubby Cairns, his bench coach.

"Back me up, Stub, will ya?" With a cowlick jutting from his wheat-blond hair, Bauer presented as much younger than his mid-40s.

Cairns was a round man who wore his brown fedora on the back of his round head, much as he did his baseball cap. He cast a glance at Sewell before speaking.

"Yeah, no," he said finally. "She don't know the game. Or she's got herself a peculiar sense of humor."

"Example," said snooty Hayward, who sat behind his desk, the green expanse of the outfield over his shoulder.

“How’s about she plays “S Wonderful” after Hollingsworth gives up a five spot to the White Sox.”

Hayward enjoyed musical theater. Ira Gershwin’s lyrics ran through his memory. No, giving up five runs could not be deemed wonderful, marvelous or awful nice. “I see. Well, yes, that could be considered inappropriate.”

Benny Bauer continued, “We load the bases with no outs, strand them all, a goose egg, and she plays ‘I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin.’”

Gershwin again, thought Hayward.

“Gutteridge kicks two and throws another into the stands and she gives us ‘You’re Getting to be a Habit with Me.’”

Cairns tapped the end of his nose with a knotty forefinger.

“Gentleman,” said Hayward.

Here comes the bullshit, though Sewell. He resented Hayward who, built like an 11-year-old girl, hadn’t played the game.

“Those are but three examples,” Hayward said. “We have 76 games at home, nine innings a piece. Why, that’s—”

“Six-hundred and eighty-four,” said the portly Cairns, whose arithmetic skills had been honed by calculating batting averages, earning-run averages and so forth.

Benny Bauer said, “I could maybe give you six hundred examples.”

“Oh, somehow I doubt that,” chortled Hayward.

“Look,” said Sewell sharply, “I didn’t come here to talk about the goddamn organ. Are you and Barnes going to get me some ballplayers?”

“Shall we yank them out of the service, Luke? Is that your suggestion? Out of Guadalcanal? Off the island of Sicily?”

Uh-oh, though Benny Bauer.

“You can yank ‘em out of your ass as far as I’m concerned.” As the 43-year-old Sewell stood, his joints cracked, his knees as dry as kindling after decades of squatting and pounding them into the dirt. “I look at the roster and you’re giving me hitters who can’t hit, fielders who can’t field, pitchers who can’t pitch.”

Not fair, though Cairns who would never disagree in public with Sewell. We got the kid Vern Stephens, an all-star, and the pitching staff looks good with Kramer, Potter and Muncrief.

“It’s like the goddamned circus out there with the organ. A roller rink,” said Sewell as he navigated around a standing ash-tray. “Who gives a damn? Throw it in the Mississippi.”

“Noted, Luke,” replied Hayward. “I’ll convey your message to Mr. Barnes.”

Sewell waved in disgust.

After the manager exited, it was decided Bauer should speak to Gladys Steubens. Perhaps teach her the game.

As they shuffled past a closed concession stand, a wind snapping through the concrete-and-steel mezzanine, Benny Bauer said, “They should send you, Stubby, seeing as you coach.”

Cairns said, “A) I have no idea who she is, seeing as I ain’t never seen her.”

“She’s kind of built like a catcher, Stub. Clouds of blue hair. Cat-eyes glasses. Thick heels.”

“And B) now I gotta go peel Luke off the ceiling before he fires half the team by telephone.”

They took a few steps in silence, Cairns waddling, Bauer already trying to figure how to approach Mrs. Steubens, who had the air of a disapproving schoolmarm.

“I’ll say this, though,” Cairns added. “She does play a rousing National Anthem.”



DESPITE A DUSTING OF snow in eastern Missouri and western Kentucky, Mrs. Steubens arrived on time, sitting patiently outside Benny Bauer's office, knees together, handbag on her lap, her scarf folded neatly beneath it. Every now and then, she coughed, excusing herself though no one else was in the waiting area.

Bauer appeared, a burst of nervous cheer. He apologized for his tardiness and the chill that had infiltrated the unheated park. Mrs. Steubens smiled with forbearance. One of her nephews was on a ship somewhere in the South Pacific while her daughter, a nurse, was at work in a Naval hospital in San Diego. How could she complain?

He ushered her to a chair before his desk, the walls of his office populated not by photos of great St. Louis ballplayers, but by various views of Sportsman's Park. Though the stadium was owned by the Browns, Bauer thought of it as his own, going so far as to take up a broom and dustpan to clean up peanut shells between innings. Nonetheless, he resented Hayward for roping him into this assignment. The organ itself may have been his responsibility, but the organist and the tunes she played certainly was not. Several sleepless nights were spent developing the best way to approach Mrs. Steuben, who was a friend to the owner.

As Mrs. Steubens settled in, Bauer circled around his desk and stood behind his high-back chair.

Mrs. Steubens coughed.

"I see you've got yourself a little cold there," Bauer said. "Lot of it going around. The wind off the darned river. You don't want to be sick for Christmas, though."

In her elephant-gray cloth coat still buttoned to the collar, Mrs. Steubens allowed that no, she wouldn't want to be sick for Christmas. She folded her hands atop her purse.

Bauer drummed on the back of the chair.

"Mr. Bauer," said Mrs. Steuben, taking the initiative, "I'm not certain why I'm here. Is Mr. Barnes dissatisfied with my performance?"

"No, no. Not— No. The general thinking, Mrs. Steubens, is that we – and by 'we,' I guess I mean me – don't help you as much as we ought to."

"I've no complaints, per se, Mr. Bauer. But how so?"

"With the finer points of the game, for example."

"I see."

Benny Bauer came around to sit. "How much do you know about baseball, Mrs. Steubens?"

"I hardly know anything about baseball. Is it required?"

"Do you watch? The games, I mean."

A devotee of classic American fiction, Mrs. Steubens read while play was underway, looking up when a cheer rose around her.

"Well, of course, to see when the inning ends."

"Do you enjoy it? The action?"

Mrs. Steubens offered a half-hearted shrug.

"There's no game like baseball. Honest."

"I've heard that said. The Great American Pastime."

"The Great American Pastime! Yep. Exactly." He nodded thoughtfully, his blue eyes fixed on the organist yet his mind watching Milt Byrnes settle under a high flyball or Stan Musial lash a double into the right field corner, the golden sun stationed above the well-tended ballyard and its manicured grass.

Mr. Steubens coughed again. She opened her purse to locate a Smith Brothers lozenge.

"It's a shame if you can't love it, Mrs. Steubens, really love it, while you're a part of the Browns family." He declined her offer of a cherry cough drop. "For example, do you know what the purpose is? Of the game?"

Mrs. Steubens did not say, as she thought, that the purpose was to keep Mr. Barnes entertained when the American Investment Company did not. "To make more points than the other team."

"Runs, not points, but yes. But do you know how you do that, Mrs. Steuben? You come home. Isn't that something? You tally a run when you come home."

"Poetic."

"Ain't it though?"



THE BROWNS OPENED THE '44 campaign with a sweep of the Tigers in Detroit, Kramer, Sundra and Jakucki looking good on the mound, Stephens on fire at the dish. Chaw in cheek, Sewell admitted he was pleased. When the team returned to St. Louis, Benny Bauer had the stadium in tip-top condition, bunting dangling from the mezzanine, a brand new Stars and Stripes on the pole in center field, countless fresh coats of paint. The scoreboard in left center sparkled as did the new advertisements on the outfield wall.

In his best three-piece suit, Bauer took a walk around the entire park, greeting the ushers, watching as the vendors prepared to hawk programs, little pencils on the house. Sportsman's Park

would open in less than 15 minutes. He was electric with excitement.

When he returned to his office, Hayward's secretary told him Mrs. Steubens had been trying to reach him.

"She sounds just awful, Benny," said the secretary, her face a sad mask. "Call her, huh."

Bauer had a boutonniere for Mrs. Steubens on his desk. After a half-dozen or so lessons about the nuances game of baseball, he had developed an odd fondness for the woman who was as upright and unwavering as her readings of Broadway hits. He felt pride of achievement when he saw a *Baseball Digest* on her end table. She wasn't ready to keep score but, as he told Stubby Cairns, at least now she knew the difference between a double and a double play.

He dialed direct. A few seconds later, he said, "My God. Mr. Steubens."

She barked and croaked. "Croup," she managed.

"Don't talk."

Calculating, he overlooked the park. Fans had begun to filter toward the seats. Soon a high-school marching band would take a station in the bleachers and play through batting practice. By chance, he had arranged for them to perform the National Anthem.

"My nephew Roland" – cough – "will relieve me."

She coughed yet again. Shards of glass now seemed to rattle in her throat.

"Roland," Bauer repeated.

At that moment, he heard behind him a syncopated knock on his door frame. When he turned, he saw a lanky teen in a two-toned shoes, baggy black slacks pleated and belted above the

waist, a long lilac suit jacket, a wide gaudy necktie and a porkpie hat that seemed to teeter above his hair.

Bauer gawked.

Roland stepped forward and extended his palm across the desk. "What's buzzin', cousin?"

Bauer blinked.

"Yeah, daddy. I'm the brainchild. Oh man, I am the killer diller."

In the distance, the high school band played Sousa.

Roland took Bauer's handset. "Dig you later, Aunt Gladys. And keep pounding that Listerine." He ended the call.

"Kid, just tell me," said Benny Bauer, "do you—"

"Oh yeah, I got chops. Major chops. And, also oh yeah, I know how to double switch and you don't ever get thrown out at third with two down and most times a walk is as good as a base hit, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen. Now where's the Model C, man? It's waiting on me. Can't you hear it calling?"



ROLAND CENTERED ON the bench. April sunlight flooded into the little booth.

Benny Bauer said, "Leave the PA off and show me something."

Roland cracked his knuckles.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Will you stop with the routine?"

"No routine, daddy. A-one, a-two, a-one two three, pow!"

And with that, Roland ripped into a swinging number that startled Bauer. The organ seemed to jump to life as the boy's right

hand flashed across the keys and his two-tone shoes tap-danced on the pedals. The booth levitated with excitement and joy.

Bauer's body began to swing. "What is that?" he shouted.

Roland looked over his shoulder. "The Duke, pops. 'Rockin' in Rhythm.'"

Chords worthy of a full horn section sweetened the air. Roland quickly pulled one of the organ's stops and issued a whistling solo with little effort over the walking bass line played with his feet.

"All right, all right," said Bauer, dropping a hand on the body's shoulder. "You got the job."

"Let me play through the bridge..."

"That button over there," Bauer said, pointing. "Turn it on when the infield clears after the third out. Don't forget to tune it off when the batter approaches the box."

"You got it, man," said Roland, who was still swinging Ellington. "Hey, send me up a couple of hot dogs. Mustard, relish, the whole doodle."



THE WHITE SOX WENT down in order in the first. As the Browns trotted toward the dugout, they heard over the public address system the fluttering notes that opened Tommy Dorsey's "Boogie Woogie" followed by the bopping bass line and punchy chords that mimicked the horn section. Half the team stopped before reaching the dugout. The players searched the St. Louis air for the music's source.

On the bench, Stubby Cairns bobbed his round head four beats to the bar.

Roland thought Dorsey had poured too much syrup on Pinetop Smith's original, but he figured it best to ease into his repertoire. He ended the bouncy tune just as Don Gutteridge threw down his pine-tar rag and walked toward the batter's box.

With unexpected verve, the Browns scored four runs, three via a home run by Mike Kreevich.

Between innings, Roland tossed off a jumpin' version of Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump." Potter then set the Chicago team down in order.

Roland kept it up for the full nine, mixing in boogie-woogie tunes with stripped-down big-band numbers. For the squares in the crowd, he tossed in his own arrangement of Glenn Miller's "Little Brown Jug." But mostly he swung Negro music that, for reasons he couldn't comprehend, resonated with him down to his marrow. If a buoyant Benny Bauer hadn't come to retrieve him when the crowd departed, Roland would've been content to swing all night, playing with the PA off in a lights-out empty ballpark.

"Roland," Bauer began, "meet Roy Hayward. Mr. Hayward is a vice president around here and a big music fan."

"Hey," said Roland.

"Why, he's just a boy."

"I'm wiped," Roland said, as he returned to the bench. "You got sixteen numbers out of me."

"And a win," Hayward said. "You're a good-luck charm."

"You think? Wanna do it again tomorrow?"

"We're off tomorrow," said Bauer. "Doubleheader on Sunday."

"Whoa, daddy. That's thirty-two tunes. At least."

Hayward dug into his pocket and came up with his billfold. "Ten for today. Twenty for Sunday."

"Make it twenty-five for Sunday and I'll play through between games."

"Deal," said Hayward, clinging to the boy's hand as he passed the bills to him.



ON SUNDAY, DRESSED in more of less the same gaudy ensemble, Roland played a mix of boogie-woogie, uptempo big band tunes and a dash of ragtime – lots of Albert Ammons, Meade "Lux" Lewis and Pete Johnson; barrels of Basie – he had such a blast reworking "Hollywood Jump" and "Blow Top" that he played them between innings in both games – and multitudes of Jelly Roll Morton, from his dainty "Bucktown Blues" to a rousing "King Porter Stomp." The Sportsman's Park crowd applauded and cheered with increasing enthusiasm for whoever it was up there on the Hammond Model C.

And the Browns took both ends of the twin bill. Kramer went the distance and hit a home run in the first game, then the team took the second half of the twin bill despite only five hits.

Now they were 6-0 and in first place.

The Sox departed and the Indians came to town. Roland served up Ellington, some Fats Waller – his reading of "The Joint is Jumping" drew a roar from the crowd and a tip of the cap from Cleveland's leftfielder – and a couple of uptempo Mills Brothers hits he threw into high gear. Down on the field, the Browns beat the Tribe's promising righthander Allie Reynolds.

Benny Bauer delivered the boy's pay and an ice-cold Vess Root Beer during the seventh-inning stretch.

“Who recorded that last number?” he asked. “I don’t think I know it.”

“Nobody waxed it, Jackson. Not yet. That’s me messing with a 12-bar blues.”

“You write ‘em too. You’re a miracle, kid.”

“That I am and that I shall be.”

Roland didn’t mention that his well was running dry. Recycling was in his immediate future plus ample Ammons and lots of Lewis. Boogie-woogie bubbled in the 15-year-old’s corpuscles.

The next day, the Browns jumped out early to a 5-0 lead and Roland dug out the old chestnut “I Want to be Happy” and played it a breakneck speed.

“Don’t taunt, kid,” said Benny Bauer, sticking his head into the booth.

Roland nodded. “No, you’re right. And when you’re right, dad, you are right,” He went straight class with Ellington and Basie for the next few innings.

When the game ended, the Browns – the lowly Browns – were now an unfathomable 8-0 and alone atop the American League standings.

Roland was tidying up the booth, crumbling his hot dog wrapper, retrieving his empty pop bottle, when he heard the clatter of cleats on concrete.

“You don’t know me—”

“Or course, I do. Stubby Cairns. You’re indispensable. Skipper don’t make a move without you nodding, spitting, pulling your pants up...”

It had been decades since Coach Cairns blushed. “You’re good, kid. But you know that.”

“Yeah. I do.”

“The guys like you.”

“They dig the music. Can’t say as I blame them.”

“They sort of want to know A) What do you do with yourself when you’re on your own?”

“School until noon. Homework at night. Dullsville, but what can you do?”

Cairns watched as the boy wiped down the bench and organ cabinet with his handkerchief. “B) Any interest in coming with us to Chicago?”

“To do what?”

“The guys say you’re good luck. We’re unbeaten. Come and hang around. Some of the guys hit the jazz clubs afterwards.”

“Yeah, but no kids in clubs.”

“We can tell Hayward to get tickets for the ballgame to your favorites. You can meet ‘em.”

Roland knew Albert Ammons and Meade ‘Lux’ Lewis were based in Chicago. “Tempting, Mr. Stubby. But I’m stretching it with my folks doing this.”

Roland’s father was a sweet man who taught composition at Webster University, his mom a fashion buyer at Famous-Barr until they started a family. They knew he was gifted – they had to stack phone books on the piano bench when started playing by ear at age three – but they wanted a well-rounded son who could dodge the traps and temptations of a musician’s life.

“Tell the cats I’m with them in spirit, OK?”

“We was going to disguise you as a bat boy. Maybe rub your head between innings.”

“Gee, Stub, how could I pass that up?”

Cairns offered him a hand gnarled from years of foul tips and collisions at home plate.



THE BROWNS SPLIT THE series at Comiskey Park, a result that would've pleased the team in years past, but they liked the feel of winning and wanted more of it. They returned to St. Louis to take on the Tigers who were shaping up to be their rivals for the AL pennant.

His stadium aglitter, a chipper Benny Bauer strode to the organ booth to greet the boy whose music reflected the mood in the Browns' clubhouse and front office – bright, bouncy and buoyant with surprise.

Gladys Steubens was on the bench, tugging the organ's stops to her preferred positions, robust in her baby-blue sweater and bluebells-and-butterflies patterned dress

Aghast, Benny Bauer snapped back and said, "Mrs. Steubens. Hi."

"Mr. Bauer."

"Feeling yourself again, I see."

"I am."

"Good to know. And Roland?"

"In school, thankfully."

"You know," Bauer said, "he did a fine job. He's a major-league talent."

"We think so." She settled her thick black heels above the pedals.

"Have you been following the team?"

"I can't say I have, no."

“We’re in first place, Mrs. Steubens. Sewell’s got them pumping on all cylinders.”

She turned to look at the field. The grounds crew had arrived, rakes in tow. Batting practice had ended. Time for organ music to fill the Sportsman’s Park air.

As Bauer retreated, he heard the opening strains of “Puttin’ on the Ritz” delivered with maudlin precision.

“Oooh, that poor organ,” thought Bauer, avoiding a hurrying beer vendor, bottles rattling.

A little over two hours later, the final score had the Tigers on top 4-3. It was the Browns’ first home loss of the season.

Benny Bauer was in Hayward’s office when he heard muttered complaints and the clip-clopping cleats. Luke Sewell and Stubby Cairns entered. Both were in full uniform, Browns emblazoned in brown and orange on the jersey chest with orange piping surrounding the buttons. A red, white and blue patch on the sleeve honored the boys overseas.

“Benny,” barked the manager.

“Gentlemen, the carpet,” said Hayward, rising in alarm. “It’s Persian.”

Sewell paid him no mind. “Benny, get the kid.”

Coach Cairns said, “The boogie-woogie kid.”

“Get him back,” Sewell insisted.

Hayward was staring down at their metal cleats. Sewell noticed and twisted his heel into weaving.

Bauer was about to point out that the Browns had lost just one game – and under extenuating circumstances: Knowing Sandy Sundra was joining the Army tomorrow, Sewell let him pitch the opening frame so the crowd could give him a rousing sendoff. Jakucki came in and gave up four runs like he wasn’t

ready. Meanwhile, the Browns smacked around the Tigers' ace Newhouser, but couldn't get over the top.

But Bauer said nothing. He knew baseball players were superstitious to the point of absurdity, going days without bathing or washing their jocks during a winning streak. Truth told, Bauer himself thought the Browns looked a little flat. He wondered if Roland's swing could've pepped them up.

"The kid, Benny," Sewell said, shifting the tobacco chaw to the other cheek.

"Could be a problem. The family wants him in school."

"That kid?" said Cairns. "His talent, he don't need school."

Hayward chimed in. "And Mr. Barnes recommended Mrs. Steubens."

"Barnes ain't no dope, Hayward," Sewell said. "We got a shot at the World Series—"

It's May 2, thought Bauer.

"—which means cash in his pocket."

"Obviously," said Hayward.

"And you tell him the Cardinals are red hot. We tank and they keep winning and let's see if he likes Mr. Breadon drinking Champagne and eating T-bones."

Samuel Breadon owned the Cardinals and the bragging rights to St. Louis baseball.

Bauer said, "Let me see what I can do, Luke. After Thursday, you're on the road for seventeen straight. By the time you get back, maybe school's out."

Cairns said, "The guys want the kid. He's lively. He dares. It suits, you know?"

“I’m with you. But” – here Bauer held up an index finger and turned to Sewell – “the team looks good, Skip. You getting more out of them than you thought you would.”

“If the war ended tomorrow and the boys came home,” said Sewell, “we wouldn’t win another goddamned game all season. Get the kid, all right?”

A dour Bauer nodded as if already beaten.

Sewell and Cairns turned to leave.

“Next time,” said Hayward, “take off your cleats before you—”

Sewell spit his brown ball of chewing tobacco onto Hayward’s rug.



AS A COURTESY, BENNY Bauer called Mr. Barnes, then drove his Packard to the American Investment Company’s headquarters. The meeting took fewer than five minutes, Barnes expressing his gratitude, asking even if Bauer had what he needed for upkeep and what not. Then Bauer drove to a clapboard on Maffitt Avenue.

Gladys Steubens answered the door, dish towel in hand, apron over a floral dress.

“Mr. Bauer. Good morning.”

“I’m disturbing you, I know...”

“Not entirely. I was making a cake.”

“Can I borrow five minutes of your time?” Benny Bauer asked.

She led him to the living room. A glaring photo of her late husband on the mantle continued to appraise Bauer as it had

during the winter when he visited, the Sporting News Baseball Guide his companion.

"Mrs. Steubens... There's a feeling... We at Sportsman's Park... We... Oh, the heck with it. Mrs. Steubens, you're out."

"Meaning I'm dismissed?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh, thank goodness." She clapped, then clasped her hands and shook them in celebration. "What a relief."

Bauer wondered if he had ever seen her smile. "You're... I didn't know."

"I don't think I did your boys a bit of good, Mr. Bauer. Frankly, I found the entire exercise exasperating."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I assume you want Roland."

"We want Roland. Could you advise us? We certainly don't want to interfere with his education."

Mrs. Steuben stood. "My sister is amendable. I shall speak with my brother-in-law on your behalf, Mr. Bauer."

"That's very generous."

She walked him to the front door.

Burden lifted, Bauer strode toward his Packard, aglow in the mid-morning sun. Were he certain Mrs. Steubens wasn't peering through the lace curtains, he would've leapt to click his heels.

Instead, he went to the Western Union office and sent a telegram to Luke Sewell in care of Cleveland Stadium. "We got the kid," he wrote. Then changed it to: "We got the boogie-woogie kid."

THE BROWNS RETURNED to Sportsman's Park dragging their tails, having lost 12 of 17 on the road.

"Don't fuss, don't fret," said Roland when he turned up at Bauer's office. "Your boy is back."

Bauer frowned. "What's with the suit? The tie. You look like a clerk."

"Yeah. My Mom. You know, clothes make the man and all that. It don't bother me much."

"You're not playing it straight, are you?"

"I kept the hat, didn't I?"

Roland came on strong, letting Willie "the Lion" Smith roar – "Harlem Joys"! – and digging into the James P. Johnson songbook, playing "Charleston" as a boogie, much to the crowd's delight.

"Oooh, we're cooking on all burners now!" he shouted to Bauer when he turned up with his mid-game hot dog and pop.

The Browns won 7-3 behind Kramer and nine walks by Red Sox pitchers.

Then, lifted by royalty – King Oliver, Duke Ellington and Count Basie – they won again the next day, Muncrief tossing a gem and McQuinn smacking his first home run.

Perfection couldn't continue, but the Browns finished the lengthy homestand a respectable 11-8. Attendance rose steadily: On Sundays, they drew more than 10,000 fans twice and 17,700 for a doubleheader against the Yankees.

"They love me, huh?" said Roland as he swung "Tuxedo Junction" in double time.

"They do, Roland," Bauer replied.

"Think they'd come if there wasn't a game."

"Er, no, Roland. I do not. At least not yet."

But soon the newspapers took notice and Roland, who by now had turned 16, became a minor celebrity. Job offers rolled in: With the pool of musicians limited by the war, high schools and colleges booked him to play dances in the fall. Famous-Barr installed a Hammond Model C on its balcony to let Ronald entertain shoppers. Following a stretch in July when the Browns won 12 of 13 to boost their American League lead to 6 1/2 games, the Hammond Organ Company of Chicago, Illinois, invited him to their showroom while the Browns traveled to New York.

When school started up in September, Roland remained with the Browns, arrangements made for a tutor when needed. The pennant race was frantic with the Browns fighting to hold off the Tigers, Yankees and Red Sox, each trailing by only a game-and-a-half. Tickets sales were unprecedented for the Browns, who expected 17,000+ for today's Labor Day twin bill with the Indians.

Benny Bauer stopped by while the Browns took batting practice.

Roland was dapper in a crisp white shirt, floral tie and suspenders, his suit jacket on a hangar on the booth's door.

"You're still with us? I thought with the bright lights and all..."

"Abso-toot-ly. I'm no ingrate, B.B."

"Is that a mustache I see...?"

"You can see it?"

Not really. "It'll come in. Hey, Hayward told you what they said in New York, right? You can go East and play the theaters and whatnot?"

“Which is sweet, I know. But I’m not about to play where Willie the Lion and Lucky Roberts and James P. Johnson rule, no more than I’d touch the keys in KC if Count Basie was in town. Not yet anyhow.”

“We won’t hold you back, Roland. But if I had my way, I’d chain you to that darned bench.”

“No need. I got a feeling me and this Hammond Model C are going to be wailing in October.”

“I think Sewell agrees with you, Roland. Imagine that. The St. Louis Browns in the World Series.”

“I told you, Mister Benny Bauer. There’s no end to what good music can do.”

And with that, Roland took to the bench, cracked his knuckles and whipped into Willie the Lion’s “Rock and Roll and Weep.”

Benny Bauer exited smiling.

Also by Jim Fusilli

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Zerbie vs. The Pandemic
The Minnesota Twins
The Boogie-Woogie Kid
The Girl, The Jacuzzi, The Gardening Shears

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