

## Kevin McNeilly

### East Hastings Jelly Roll, 1919

He said: *Believe the worst, expect no less.* Bricktop the loudmouth belted out jass trash at the Patricia to rile the lumberjacks, hard Swedes who always paid better after a good brawl, tossing that funny-coloured currency on the bandstand like grace notes, curlicues. Itinerant, his tunes bent back on themselves, fingerbusters gone freaky. Chops might pass muster, but he'd use nearly anyone could hold a horn, so long as they stuck to his pep. Nobody had to read a lead sheet, just play the lines and land right side up—no strays, no clams—on the same downbeat. He said: *My word's no prayer book. Connect the dots your own damn way.* Left hand strolling octaves, he'd lean over and scoop bills off the floor, stuff his front pockets, and still keep time, rolling a slow boil. Bruised loggers yahoed his no-sweat finesse, then fell back to their fisticuffs. By four a.m., when the night's diehards had finally fallen penniless into unconsciousness, he'd adjust his tie and hightail towards the docks, turning down Cordova, with half a mind to cash in on his ginged luck. He'd strut his route along glass-peppered sidewalks, past snoozing drunks, their faces flattened on curbs, and drop a fresh nickel in each tin cup. He said: *Call me the temporary Creole Rockefeller. My sweet money means to flow.* By dawn he'd find a game, then gamble himself broke—his royal nibs fated to revert to a natty pauper, till the gig. He'd have to scrounge some lunch. So he'd nod across the felt-top table to his new foreign friend, a coolie turned bootlegger, make his excuses, retrace his steps to the hotel and turn in. Billfolds and piano rolls only make sense when you release the bounty they clutch, crafty ephemera. Nothing flatters like the feel of dollars next to skin. He got paid to crank out novelty songs. After a few months more the thrill wore thin; things change. Lovesick for his ex, he lit out on a boat to Alaska, with diamonds pinned in his underwear. He said: *I've wasted nothing but life on whiskey, ragtime, poultry and the scriptures.*