

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twenty-fifth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

SIDNEY BECHET

Along with his fellow New Orleansian, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet was one of the first great soloists in jazz. His throaty, powerful clarinet and his broad vibrato on soprano sax are among the most thrilling sounds in early jazz. And he even recorded one hit playing the sarrusophone. The what??

Sidney was born on May 14, 1897, and as a Creole of color, he grew up within the musical world of New Orleans. He watched brass bands play marches and ragtime numbers, attended operas and listened to circus bands. By age 7, he began to play his big brother's clarinet with such ease that he was "drafted" to play with his family's band, the Silver Bells, which featured four of his brothers.

By age 12, Bechet performed with several local bands. Trumpeter Bunk Johnson introduced him to Louis Armstrong. Bechet and Armstrong, plus a drummer, played on the back of a furniture truck, advertising Saturday night boxing. "While still in his teens, he was acknowledged as one of the best clarinetists in the city—to many the best," wrote author Martin Williams in his *Jazz Masters of New Orleans*.

Bechet's big break came in 1919 when he was asked to join the Southern Syncopated Orchestra for an engagement in London. There, he came to the attention of Ernst Ansermet, the premier Swiss composer and conductor. Ansermet wrote in a Swiss musical journal, "The extraordinary clarinet virtuoso Bechet is an artist of genius!" Now, at the tender age of 22, Sidney's reputation had spread to two continents. [Note: Ironically, I was finishing this article while on a Rhine river cruise, and as I walked down a narrow street in Cologne, I found a Jazz Club with pictures of three musicians in the window, one being Bechet. Spooky!]

While in London, he bought a new soprano saxophone, and played with a renowned group led by drummer Benny Peyton, at The Embassy Club and the Hammersmith Palais in London. Then Sidney got in trouble. He always had a rough edge about him, so it's entirely believable that he was arrested for assaulting a prostitute. Despite Bechet's musical achievements in

England, he was deported to America. And he brought his prized soprano back to New York with him, and recorded several small combo hits.

In 1924, Sidney took a brief job at the Kentucky Club with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Duke held Bechet's talent in high regard, but could not abide Sidney's eccentric habit of bringing a large dog on-stage. As quoted in *American Musicians*, Ellington said "When Bechet was blowing, he would say 'I'm going to call Goola this time!' Goola was his dog, a big German shepherd. Goola wasn't always there, but he was calling him anyway with a kind of throaty growl."

Bechet soon tired of playing with Ellington, and left to tour Germany and Russia as part of "reviews" from 1925-1927. He moved to Paris in 1928, intending to stay there for the rest of his life. As a result of a tough upbringing, he carried a pistol for protection -- not the thing to do for a man with an anger management problem. Outside a Montmartre night club, Sidney got into a fight with a man, and accidentally shot and wounded a woman. He was arrested, convicted, and served 11 months in jail. And was deported. Again!



In the 30s, Sidney and trumpeter Tommy Ladnier soon formed a six-piece band, the New Orleans Feetwarmers, and made camp back in New York at the famous Savoy. Ladnier turned out to be Bechet's most important sideman of the thirties and they recorded together some of the most boisterous and jubilant music of the decade," according to jazz writer Graham Colombe.

During the 1940s, Bechet's career was fueled by a renewed interest in traditional jazz, and in 1951 Bechet took up permanent residence in France, recognized as an international celebrity. He made enough money to actually buy a small estate outside Paris. Bechet recorded often on the French Vogue label, yielding several notable recordings, such as *Le Petite Fleur*.

Sidney was interviewed in the mid-50s and was asked about that Sarrusophone I mentioned earlier. The instrument was invented in the mid-1800's to compete with the Saxophone, and looked more like a piece of plumbing than something musical, for use in military bands to bolster or replace oboes and bassoons. Bechet played it on the recording *Mandy, Make Up Your Mind*. According to one of his biographies, Sidney "pulled a face" when asked about the solo on "Mandy", though he did not deny playing it.

In 1958, Bechet experienced stomach pains while in Boston, and was taken to Boston General Hospital, where he was diagnosed with cancer. He returned to Paris and died on his birthday May 14, 1959.

Years later, a colleague paid tribute to Sidney, saying: "Of all the musicians, Bechet was to me the very epitome of jazz. He represented and executed everything that had to do with the beauty of it all, and everything he played in his whole life was original...I honestly think he was the most unique man ever to be in this music - but don't ever try and compare, because when you talk about Bechet you just don't talk about anyone else." The speaker was none other than Duke Ellington.

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