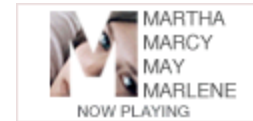


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JAZZ VIEW

JAZZ VIEW; An Intrepid Pioneer, A Consuming Fury

By Barry Singer

ECSTASY VERSUS FURY. Rapture versus rage. In Shakespeare these clashing "humors" yielded timeless drama: Romeo and Juliet and Iago and Lear. Jazz gives us Armstrong and Bechet.

The measure of the clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet may be taken as a soloist, improviser and intrepid musical pioneer who was not merely Louis Armstrong's contemporary but in every way his creative equal. For this reason, both Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall have for the past month made Bechet's centennial the focus of their jazz programing. So why, beyond the insular world of jazz, is the name Bechet nearly unknown?

The easy answer to this question touches pointedly on the impulses that underlie jazz expression itself. Bechet was an intense, frequently angry man, and his fury was in his music. Certainly, Armstrong was driven by furies of his own, yet he managed to transmute rage into a rhapsody of improvised melodic benediction. Does this difference of temperament make Bechet any less relevant? No. But it rendered him less approachable and, inevitably, less commercially successful. Even the pain in Armstrong's cornet and trumpet playing always tended toward rapture. All of the joy in Bechet's music seemed to border on pain.

Both men were born in New Orleans -- Armstrong on Aug. 4, 1901 and Bechet on May 14, 1897. In terms of background, though, all similarities end there. Bechet, whose parents were land-owning Creoles, enjoyed a childhood of relative bourgeois prosperity. Armstrong came into the world in a slum; his father was a laborer whom he barely ever saw, and his mother was a domestic and part-time prostitute. After growing up on the streets, Armstrong, in his teens, emerged from the Home for Colored Waifs clinging to the cornet he had learned to play as a means of escape. Bechet, by choosing a life in jazz, dived headlong into the New Orleans underworld that Armstrong strove to leave behind.

Both were brilliant, intuitive musicians, though, and both had something to prove. Bechet made his statement first -- initially as a local clarinet prodigy, then in Chicago during the first wave of

New Orleans jazz migration and finally in New York City. There, playing clarinet and soprano saxophone, an instrument he practically introduced to jazz, Bechet dominated the burgeoning jazz scene of the early 1920's. A maiden European tour with the bandleader Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra in 1919 prompted the first serious published jazz review, a glowing paean to Bechet's genius by the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet. In each instance and locale, Bechet preceded Armstrong, only to find himself soon eclipsed by the younger musician's dazzling and ingratiating persona.

Ever the loner, ever obstinate, Bechet alienated nearly as many in jazz as he inspired. No one ever doubted his musical integrity, though, and, unlike Armstrong, who increasingly found himself accused of "tomming," of selling out, Bechet refused to compromise. When his brutally frank buzz-saw style fell out of fashion and the Depression descended, he simply bought a tailor shop in Harlem with his sidekick, the trumpeter Tommy Ladnier, and jammed there in the back room. When a revival in New Orleans jazz again threw a spotlight on him in the 1940's, Bechet proved he had lost nothing of his fire, technique or inscrutable willfulness.

Yet he still justifiably felt neglected. In 1949, the year Armstrong and his touring band were described by *Down Beat* magazine as "probably the highest paid unit" of its kind, Bechet returned to Europe for the first time in nearly 20 years. To his own amazement, he was greeted with an outpouring of adulation. What had seemed abrasive and alienating about his behavior in America was suddenly viewed as the adorable orneriness of a jazz original. From 1951 on, Bechet's true home was Paris, where, in his final years, he transcended jazz to become a national celebrity. He died there on his 62d birthday, an expatriate hero, all but forgotten in his homeland.

On Thursday and Saturday, Jazz at Lincoln Center presents the final installment in a three-part Bechet celebration, a tribute featuring Bechet's one-time protege, Bob Wilber. Last week, a program of performance clips and a concert for young people (aptly titled "Who Is Sidney Bechet?") were presented. In October, Carnegie Hall offered its own wide-ranging salute that even included a reconstruction of a Bechet ballet score.

It is fascinating to watch this rehabilitation of perhaps the least convivial genius in jazz history (though here Bechet certainly had competition). How much of the beauty and poignancy of jazz expression can be said to be sublimated rage? Bechet, who never seems to have repressed even one drop of the emotion that surged through his music, must be smiling this week, somewhere. Or then again, maybe not.

Photos: **FIERY GENIUS** Sidney Bechet was an intense, often angry man, whose personality alienated more than it inspired. (Frank Driggs Collection)

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