

BOB WILBER
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May 1, 1961

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Also present: William Russell.

Interview held at WR's shop, 731 St. Peter St., New Orleans, La.

Robert Sage Wilber was born on March 15, 1928, in New York City. He became interested in music at a very early age. The first jazz recording he heard was Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo"; his parents had gotten the record right after it came out, which must have been around 1930. [Check date]. He became interested in jazz mainly by being interested in the popular bands of the late thirties. He bought the re-issue albums of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five; this was his first contact with New Orleans jazz; this was around 1940; at first he didn't understand the music at all; it was so different from the big band music, the riffs that he was used to; the melodies were too complex for him; but it intrigued him and inspired him to become a musician. BW started playing clarinet at 13; he studied with the school band director and joined the junior band right away; he played the Boehm system; it was a Penzel-Muller gold clarinet with silver keys. He really tried to play jazz two or three years before that; he had a buddy who was a drummer, and he himself would play a tin flute; they tried to play along with records of Bob Crosby and Benny Goodman. He grew up in Scarsdale [N. Y.] and there were a lot of youngsters around there who had good record collections and he thus got introduced to the different jazz styles and

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musicians. Contemporaries of his who are still active in music now are Dick Wellstood, piano; Johnny Glasel [check spelling], trumpet; Charlie Trager [sp?], bass; Jerry Blumberg, trumpet; Bob Mielke, trombone, from San Francisco; Eddie Phyfe, drums. (When BW started playing, the emphasis among the young musicians around Scarsdale and Westchester [county] was on Chicago jazz; on Sunday afternoons, they would go to "Nick's" and listen to musicians like Brad Gowans, valve trombone; Pee Wee [Russell], clarinet; Chelsea Qualey, trumpet; sometimes Bobby Hackett, trumpet; BW was 13 then, but they would let the young musicians in. When he was 14 and 15, he would go to the places on 52nd Street. One night he sat at a front table in "Kelly's Stable"; Coleman Hawkins walked up to the bandstand; one bandsman asked "What do you want to play, Hawk?" and Hawkins said "Body! One, two--." Then there was "George's Tavern" in the Village, where Frankie Newton [tp] used to play, with Al Casey, guitar. Art Hodes, piano, had a trio at the "Village Vanguard", with Max Kaminsky [tp] and Freddy Moore [drums]. WR remembers hearing Albert Nicholas [cl] there, and Zutty [Singleton], also Leadbelly [vo., g]. Around 1941 Teddy Wilson had a fine group at "Cafe Society"; it included Edmond Hall [cl], Sid Catlett [d], Emmett Berry, Benny Morton [tb].

(WB) heard Sidney Bechet for the first time when he bought the Victor records of "Rose Room" and "Lady Be Good"; he liked the tunes,

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had not heard of Bechet before. Then he met him in person at a so-called Swing-Soiree at the "Pied Piper" [now [1961] Café Bohemia] in the Village, where Wilbur de Paris ran some sessions with Bill Coleman, trumpet and Mary Lou Williams, piano; he was quite impressed. BW started studying with Bechet through Mezz Mezzrow, clarinet; BW met Mezz when he [Mezz] was playing at Ryan's, in a trio with Art Hodes and Danny Alvin, drums; he would let BW sit in; it was the first time BW played with professional musicians. Mezz had started "King Jazz" Record Co. then, and he would record with Bechet. At that time Bechet was not too successful as there weren't too many jobs, so he planned to open a school and teach music. BW was his only student, though; it was a pretty tough time for Bechet. WR remembers visiting Bechet in 1939 when he was completely out of music, had a pressing shop; he'd take some food with him; Bechet was really down and out then; he then started working at Nick's at that time, "The Spirits of Rhythm" were there, with Zutty, but he and Zutty didn't get along. [This part unclear]. In the spring of 1946 BW took his first lesson from Bechet; he hadn't had any lessons [with Bechet] before that; WR remembers hearing BW's group in the fall of 1945; at the time WR mentioned, BW was at the Eastman School of music in Rochester, having lessons in classical clarinet playing; Bunk Johnson was playing at the Stuyvesant on 52nd Street. BW just

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stayed at Eastman for one term; he was more interested in jazz than the classics; he told his parents he wanted to "study jazz at the Stuyvesant Casino and 52nd Street," and he did. Bechet had an old house in Brooklyn, on Quincy Street; BW thinks it must have reminded him of New Orleans, that's why he bought it. There was a sign "Sidney Bechet School of Music," At the time he was living with an Indian girl from Canada, named Laura, and a Great Dane. Bechet was obviously pleased with BW, because BW was trying to play like Bechet; he was his idol. BW then had a Boehm system wooden clarinet; he took lessons once a week; Bechet charged about \$ 5.00; he seemed to enjoy teaching; he'd explain his idea of improvisation; he'd play the melody and show BW how to phrase it, and then play variations on the melody. BW remembers working on "Rocking Chair," and "Intermezzo" [from the movie], which Bechet never recorded but had a beautiful set of variations on; the second chorus of that would be variations in double time, against the melody; another tune they worked on was "Prisoner of Love." Bechet never thought of New Orleans jazz as a thing of the past that he was just recreating, so he didn't like to play the old tunes too much; he believed in playing the tunes that were popular and playing variations on them; the relationship between the melody and variation always had to be clear. (Bunk Johnson was the same way---the crowd would want him to play old New Orleans

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melodies like the "Saints", but he preferred to play things like "Bell Bottom Trousers" and "White Christmas.") Bechet would always point out that in New Orleans he had to play for all kinds of different people, so he always played all kinds of different music, Irish, Waltzes, etc. During the lessons, Bechet would play a tune first, and he'd have BW play the harmony or the accompaniment with him, and he'd show him how to do it, if he didn't like what BW played. During the lessons and at home, Bechet would play his clarinet; on jobs he'd prefer the soprano sax. In 1943 he almost gave up the clarinet entirely because he had trouble with his teeth, WR remembers; he had a bridge, but WR thinks his brother fixed it; BW doesn't remember discussing Bechet's teeth with him. All the old-timers in New Orleans thought Bechet to be the greatest clarinet player there was. BW says he would perhaps have been the greatest if he had stuck with it. WR relates a story that Natty Dominique told about Bechet; ND was playing in Chicago, with Johnny Dodds; Dodds was on the stage, Jimmie Noone was there and had his instrument with him; in walked Bechet, who was playing with the Noble Sissle band then; Dodds said "Oh, oh, here comes the devil. He done tore my playhouse down." BW says in New Orleans Bechet was respected so much because he would never play an A clarinet; when they'd play all these rags in the Red Book, which would be written

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with many sharps, he'd play everything on a B^b clarinet, which was quite a feat; everybody else played A clarinets. WR says in Chicago Bechet would get Dodds and Noone to play with him, and SB'd outplay them all. BW says that Bechet had the fastest articulation and tonguing he has ever heard. WR tells a story about Mary Karoly [sp?] who was a good friend of Noone's, Dodds' and Bechet's; when she once visited Noone, he said "Johnny Dodds thinks he's the greatest clarinet player." She asked "Who is really the greatest?", thinking he'd name himself, and Noone said "Sidney Bechet!" WR says it's too bad there aren't too many records of Bechet on clarinet; so it's hard to judge, but it seems that all the old-timers in New Orleans thought Bechet was the greatest on clarinet. BW says the records Bechet made for [Hughes] Panassie, such as "Weary Blues," "Jada" show the quality of his clarinet playing; WR remembers when Steve Smith, who then had the Hot Record Society made some recordings with Bechet, Bechet said in the elevator, "When Mezz hears these recordings, he'll think the clarinet sounds awfully good--and it won't be Mezz's clarinet!" He wanted to be the star of the recording. BW says Bechet could support and control a band better with a soprano than with his clarinet; he always felt he had to support the band; in fact he often hired inferior players--maybe so he could have the limelight [WR leading]--and he would get mad at them for

not performing up to his standards. WR says Bechet could have been great on clarinet, but a clarinet had to be played all the time--it's easier to control the reed on a sax for one thing--it's too bad Bechet didn't stick with it, he had a natural technique on the clarinet, and the tenderness in his nature would really come out in his clarinet playing.

Bechet played an Albert system clarinet, with not too many keys, the tone holes rather far apart; Noone played an improved Albert, and Dodds played a 15-key Albert. BW says he plays a Boehm system, a BT Selmer, about 30 years old, and he tries to get an Albert sound on it; WR says he always thought the sound of an Albert system clarinet was different, he liked it better, but he wasn't sure, it could have been just because his favorite clarinetists played Albert system, and he liked their sound; he says a lot of musicians say they can't tell the difference. BW says there is a difference; the Albert system clarinet has a darker tone quality, the sound of wood; modern clarinets sound more like trumpets; it has a larger bore hole than a modern clarinet which gives it more flexibility of varying the tone, getting different effects of timbres, glissandos etc. --a modern clarinet with a smaller bore has a more precise intonation, but it is less flexible. All the Albert system players have a certain tone quality in common, i. e. Irving Fazola, Noone,

Dodds, Jimmie Dorsey; Goodman, (i.e.) in contrast, who plays a Boehm, has a brighter, more brilliant tone. WR remembers a friend of his in Chicago who was taught by a symphony player to try to make a Boehm with a hard reed and different embouchure sound like an Albert. Apparently WR's friend was unsuccessful.

Bechet was never particular about his reeds; as a kid he used to cut his own out of wood; he always said "take anything and make music out of it," and he really could do that; WR remembers that Paul Barbarin says for a parade Bechet once played a strange yellow instrument he had picked up at a pawn shop; (WR shows a similar instrument that belongs to Raymond Burke); Willie Humphrey told BW about Bechet once playing on a mouthpiece that was all jagged and partly broken off. WR says a lot of players file down their mouthpieces to get a wider lay. He remembers that Omer Simeon advised a Symmetrikut [check sp] reed, and a special number [See Omer Simeon reel?] BW uses Van Doren Reeds, # 5, with a close lay mouthpiece, which gives more resistance but produces a bigger tone. He says Bechet never gave him advice on fingering, as they used different systems, but he had had all that classical schooling and learned it thoroughly; he remembers Bechet telling him to practice until he got tired but not to overdo it.

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Also present; William Russell.

Bechet practiced a lot. Around 1948 he had a Brush "Sound Mirror" tape machine; he was also composing his ballet then; in 1944 WR heard Sidney giving a preview of it on the piano. BW says the music is typically Bechet--he had typical progressions; it has a lot of turn-of-the-century romanticism in it, and blues; it came out on London [label]; he was soloist on it, with a regular symphony orchestra. BW thinks that Bechet wrote this ballet somewhat under the influence of his first trip to Europe, when he was about 19 years old; he then played as a soloist with the Will Marion Cook band; this was an ideal for him all through his life, and Will Marion Cook stayed sort of an idol with him.

BW doesn't remember Bechet talking much about himself and the old days in New Orleans during his lessons; BW says Bechet was always interested in the music of the day and didn't live in the past at all. He remembers Bechet teaching him "Raggin' the Scale;" he said you could practice your scales and have fun with it, swinging them at the same time. Bechet's idea of practicing concentrated on making the variations and on swinging; he said you should have the rhythm in your head and swing against it. Bechet used to tap his foot.

Bechet had the talent of playing in any company; in the later days

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in France he often had quite inferior bands with him, but somehow he made them play better, raised their level of playing; he brought out the best in players. WR remembers hearing Bechet play by himself in his apartment, after the session where he had played his own composition "Blues for you, Johnny," a memorial for Johnny Dodds, a quite sentimental piece; he gave WR the original manuscript that night; WR thought maybe someone else had written it out for him. BW says Bechet couldn't read as well as he thought he should; it bothered him to some extent. SB used to have a whole set of variations worked out for "China Boy," "I Know That You Know" and "Sheik of Araby;" he later recorded "The Sheik" on his one-man-band record; he played a tenor on the record, which wasn't as effective as the soprano, on which BW had heard him play these pieces; he had a horrible toothache the day he made the record, but BW thought it quite a feat. When BW played well enough on the soprano also, he would play these tunes with Bechet at Ryan's where SB was playing with Lloyd Phillips, Freddy Moore on drums; the two sopranos would play in unison; it was quite effective; too bad they never recorded it. BW made two records [i.e., two sessions] with Bechet, one for Columbia with the Wildcats, and one for Circle with BW's own band. Sidney wanted to give BW a break, he had gotten the Columbia date through George Avakian; it gave BW the chance to try his hand at writing; the band really wasn't up to Sidney's level, though.

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BW's favorite Bechet records: "Cake Walking Babies," both versions, on Okeh and Gennett (one has a vocal duo on it, one a girl singer, Eva Taylor); BW prefers the Okeh version with ET; BW says Bechet's virtuosity is unbelievable on this record, especially considering how young he was then. Another favorite: "Indian Summer," recorded on Bluebird in the late thirties; it demonstrates SB's pure lyrical playing of the melody; the first [SB's] New Orleans Feetwarmers records on Victor, "Maple Leaf Rag", "Shag," and "Lay Your Racket;" WR remembers SB telling that his own favorite record of all times was "Lady Luck" blues, with Mamie Smith; BW liked the clarinet chorus SB played on a Noble Sissle record of "I'm Just Wild About Harry;" "Swing Parade" [by SB's New Orleans Feetwarmers] would show good ensemble playing; it starts out with "Maryland my Maryland" and then goes into another march; the band is inferior, though; BW also liked a chorus SB played on "When It's Sleepy Time Down South" which was recorded in the same session, with Sidney de Paris, according to WR [check discographies.] BW thinks that SB's tone was best then, he had more finesse to it; later on his tone became heavier. WR remembers SB playing the tenor aria from Paliacci for him, the night he gave him the manuscript; BW says SB always liked that piece and used to include it in "Dear Old Southland;" BW remembers playing a concert with Sidney and the Wildcats at Colgate University; SB broke up the audience with that piece. Another favorite

tune of SB's was "Song of Songs;" he'd play it ad lib out of tempo; he once recorded it on Columbia; "My Woman's Blues" was on the same session. At the time they made the records together, BW was still studying with Bechet and living with him; he didn't have to pay Sidney rent; he'd sleep in the front room where they would have the lessons, and Sidney lived downstairs with Laura and the dog; upstairs he had some tenants. They had a few rehearsals for the recording session there at Sidney's house; SB would show all the players a bit, and BW wrote out the arrangement then. Sidney owned the house he lived in. BW had recorded for Commodore earlier that year. WR remembers visiting SB when he was living in a basement with John Reid; he had just bought a summer house in New Jersey, in a bad swampy area; he was a terrible businessman; he used to spend all his money on cameras and equipment, on cars, too; he once had a mink-farm, even. BW saw SB for the last time in 1952 or 1953; he did a tour of the States then; Sidney just suddenly showed up at the cashier's booth of the movie theater where BW's wife worked and said "Here I am;" she had known him before she even knew BW; had been a fan of SB's when he played at Ryan's; BW was in the army then; SB had just gotten a letter from his mistress in France, telling him she was pregnant, and SB was in a bit of a mess because his wife might not take that too well; but he got it straightened out; all the time in France he kept two households going;

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the child is a boy; WR remembers SB always had a lot of bad luck, but partly it was his own fault; in 1952 in Chicago on this tour Ruth Reinhart was going to sue him for breach of contract; the same day a woman tried to unload a baby on him, which wasn't his most probably; but with all this trouble he still played beautifully; "Big Chief" Russell Moore was in the band; it was just about a 4-piece group, no trumpet in it. BW adds that SB always had trouble with his stomach and would take medicine for it; Rudi Blesh had a Saturday afternoon [radio] show at that time, and SB would play for him, no matter how he felt. BW never got to Paris to see Sidney there, he only got to England in 1956; SB was in Italy at that time. WR remembers meeting Robert Lewis, who was also a friend of SB's and BW's, had taken a few lessons from SB and sent SB a soprano sax the year before he died. Lewis had seen SB in Paris. BW says Bechet's expression was so powerful, that he would automatically take over any musical situation. BW answers WR, saying SB played without trumpet because he had trouble finding a trumpet player whose playing he liked; they would get in his way; he liked working with Muggsy [Spanier], though; SB liked the record he made with him once.

WR remembers the 1945 Esquire All Star concert with Louis Armstrong and SB; SB wasn't happy at all with the way Armstrong played then, he played different from what he used to sound like in the old days; they had quite a row; LA said "I ain't going to have no two leads

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in my band!" BW says SB was never happy about the 1940 Decca sessions he did with LA. BW says in the 1947 Louis Armstrong Town Hall Concert, with Bobby Hackett, Peanuts Hucko, Sidney was supposed to play also; it was advertised as the great reunion of SB and LA; Sidney never got there, though; he got sick on the subway and rode all over town; people thought he was drunk; they asked BW to play in SB's place, but he didn't feel he could play well enough then; Sidney had had mixed feelings about that concert, though, anyway. BW thinks SB enjoyed playing the lead; WR remarks that a soprano sax is closer to a trumpet than a clarinet in some respects; BW says even on some records where he had a trumpet, SB would make the trumpet player play the second part; he lead well and enjoyed it. BW answers WR saying that Bechet advised him to cover the whole register in his playing; on clarinet he (Bechet) would stick to one register or the other, though, because he was a bit scared about it.

BW says Louis Armstrong impresses him more than anybody; he is playing with Bobby Hackett now, who admires Louis so much and plays all of his tunes, "[Struttin With Some] Barbeque," "Big Butter and Egg Man," "Cornet Chop Suey," "Someday [You'll Be Sorry]"; his early playing was inspired by Bix Beiderbecke; Max Kaminsky has a theory about Bobby Hackett; he says he sounds like the young Louis Armstrong used to sound, when he used to play with Clarence Williams' Blue Five and behind the blues singers.

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One of Sidney's compositions (that never got recorded) that BW likes especially is "Ghost of the Blues." BW recently compiled some of Bechet's old compositions and recorded them; "Black Stick," "When the Sun sets down South," all beautiful tunes. SB composed a lot in his last years, in France, sort of folk melodies; they became very popular; WR adds that they came from some old Creole numbers, probably. In all BW studied with SB from the Spring of 1946 to 1948, when he went to the Nice Jazz Festival in place of Sidney with Mezzrow. Baby Dodds was on that tour. Baby Dodds was marvellous; he could make a press roll swing. Mezz would sometimes have reed trouble and squeak and then give BW a dirty look. In Mezz's rhythm section were Pops Foster, bass, Sammy Price, piano and Baby Dodds, drums. They did tunes that MM had recorded with SB, with BW taking SB's part.

