

## Jazz Was Bechet's Crown

By Ralph de Toledano

THEY CAN DEFINE JAZZ. They can analyze it. But for those who made it—and for those who were so close that they thought they were making it—jazz was more than music. It was an expression and an explanation of life. Sidney Bechet, the titan among New Orleans reed men, called it “a kind of memory that wants to sing itself.” He never lost that memory, never in the six decades of his life. In *Treat It Gentle*, his dictated autobiography, he said:

All God's children got a crown. My race, their music—it's their way of showing you something. It's what they've got to make *them* happy. Somewhere, all God's children wear a crown. ... Oh, I can be mean. But not to the music. That's a thing you got to trust, you got to treat it gentle. The music, it's the road. You stop by the way, and you can't never be sure what you're going to find waiting. But the music itself, the road—it's the thing that brings you to everything else.

From almost the beginning, New Orleans recognized his genius, as did others not of that germinal period when jazz scattered its seed. Go back to 1919, when Bechet was touring Europe with Will Marion Cook's band. Ernst Ansermet, the young Swiss conductor already famous for introducing Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat*, heard him play. In the *Revue Romande*, he celebrated an “extraordinary clarinet virtuoso” whose improvisations were “admirable for their inventive richness, rhythmic strength, and daring innovation. Their form was as compelling, direct, forceful and relentless

to stop Schlafly, with Betty Ford playing the crucial role—Schlafly formed a new organization, STOP-ERA, to block passage of the amendment. The better-funded and better-organized feminists possessed almost every advantage from the start, but they lacked unity. Schlafly dominated STOP-ERA. She was the organization's national public face and vehicle for conveying the anti-feminist message. Supporting her were thousands of churchgoing women, united in their belief that ERA, *Roe*, and other feminist policies threatened the traditional values in which they believed. They had confidence that Schlafly could convey these ideas, and their faith in her proved well founded.

Both STOP-ERA and the National Organization for Women (NOW) had similar memberships. The majority of both organizations consisted of college graduates, and both groups had women of similar income levels. Feminists tended to be younger, and there was a prevalence of single and divorced women in NOW. But the fundamental distinction between the two organizations was religious. “A remarkable 98 percent of anti-ERA supporters,” Critchlow writes, “claimed church membership, while only 31 to 48 percent of pro-ERA supporters did.” It is not wrong to claim that STOP-ERA was the backbone of today's social conservative politics.

The pro-ERA forces had the media on their side, including women's magazines, celebrities such as Alan Alda, *Playboy* magazine—which the feminists played down—and the major television networks and newspapers. They were not unified politically, however. Some wanted to push for lesbian rights, others for gender equity, and still others for full equality with men on every level. Their divisions worked in favor of the determined Schlafly. In 1982, ERA's deadline for ratification expired before it could be approved by the needed 38 states.

For her role in stopping ERA, Schlafly drew the venom of feminists and the Left. To say she was hated is to put it mildly. She received reams of hate mail,

pornographic pictures, used sanitary napkins from screeching feminists incensed at her “treason.” Critchlow recounts this and more. Feminists developed a Schlafly voodoo doll, complete with pins. Betty Friedan famously said in a debate with Schlafly, “I'd like to burn you at the stake.”

One episode recounted by Critchlow involved the popular CBS show “Cagney and Lacey.” In a story that was to air a few days before the final expiration of ERA, the title characters guard an anti-feminist leader—whose mannerisms mimicked Schlafly's—against a threat on her life. Coming as it did only a few months after John Lennon's assassination, Schlafly supporters were exasperated and petitioned for the episode not to air. (It was aired a few months later.)

Since the ERA's defeat, Schlafly has lost a lot of public attention and exposure. But she continues to fight for her causes, believing that judges threaten democracy and constitutional government. (She wrote about this in *The Supremacists*, published in 2004.) She also has taken up the fight against trade agreements and against illegal immigration. She remains active, a vigorous octogenarian maintaining a crowded schedule that includes lecturing, hosting a weekly radio show, writing a column, and running her activist organization, Eagle Forum.

Critchlow captures Schlafly's importance for the conservative movement. Without activists like her, without their dedication and talent in mobilizing like-minded people, conservatism may not have made the inroads it has in American politics. In Critchlow's capable hands the story of grassroots organizing comes alive. The book is a splendid example of political history, telling the story of an important woman and the legacy she has left conservatism. ■

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as Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto. The name of this artist of genius: Sidney Bechet."

At a time when Louis Armstrong was serving his apprenticeship, Bechet was already known as one of the leading New Orleans jazz musicians. Many years later he would recall his introduction to Armstrong. A fellow musician told him, "You think you can play. But there's a little boy, he can play 'High Society' better than you." "It was Louis," Bechet said, "And I'll be doggone if he didn't play 'High Society' on the cornet. It was very hard for clarinet to do, and really unthinkable for a cornet." Bechet had begun playing the clarinet at age six, though he later gave it up for the more robust soprano sax. When he picked up his instrument, it was all there in the cascade of notes, the rich and pure and lambent tone, the melodic and harmonic surge his fingers transmitted.

He could be arrested for gun fighting on a Paris street. His temper could explode a thousand times—and it was

a very large temper. But where music was concerned, he treated it gentle, and it responded by giving him all the genius he could ask for as he pushed jazz ahead.

It is the conventional wisdom that Louis Armstrong lifted jazz from its ragtime tinkle and gave it its tighter, more driving 4/4 beat and intonation. And certainly he influenced every jazz musician from the time he made his Hot Five and

Tommy Ladnier, in which Bechet cut a very great "High Society" and a moving "Really the Blues." Issued variously on 78 rpms and LPs, they have been reissued in a compact 3-disc set by BMG as *Sidney Bechet: The Victor Sessions*—a gamut of jazz standards and New Orleans classics. (The discography of all Sidney Bechet's recordings runs to more than 20 pages, single-spaced.) Included in this BMG set are two cuts

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Hot Seven records in Chicago and revolutionized instrumental techniques and harmonics. But listen to the records he made with Bechet in the early 1920s, reissued by the Smithsonian Institution as *Louis Armstrong & Sidney Bechet in New York, 1923-1925*. You will discover how far ahead of his time Bechet was, even ahead of Louis. The full tone, the strong but controlled *vibrato*, the powerful and beautifully conceived improvisations, the beat enhancing the *rubato* are all there—and as always the hot intonation.

Sidney Bechet never became a star in America, never made movies with Bing Crosby, nor did he have a big swing band to fill the Paramount Theater with jitterbugs. But he was "the greatest" to other musicians and to the jazz *cognoscenti*. He played the smaller jazz clubs, with six- and seven-piece hands, recording with a who's who of jazz greats: Louis, Rex Stewart, Jelly Roll Morton, Tommy Ladnier, Baby Dodds, Earl Hines, Sidney DeParis. To lead a 1930s swing band, he would have had to be a manager, a taskmaster, and playing killer-dillers—and that was not his bag. Not once in his life did he play a commercial note.

But his legacy is there in the records he made between 1932 and 1943 for RCA as the New Orleans Feetwarmers, with one superlative session led by Jelly Roll Morton and another by

in which one-man-band Bechet, through the magic of recording, plays piano, soprano sax, clarinet, tenor sax, cornet, and drums.

Idolized throughout Europe, Bechet spent most of his life in jazz in London, in Paris, where he was loved, and points south and east, on great tours that took him to the Royal Albert Hall in England, the Vieux-Colombier in France, where he became a regular feature, and even through North Africa. Stricken by lung cancer, he made his last recordings in Paris in 1958 with a doctor at his side.

"I can't keep hanging on," he mused in his last years. "And all I've been waiting for is the music. All the beauty that's ever been, it's moving inside the music. I'd like to hear it all once more. What I'd be feeling, the music has the home."

Sidney Bechet went to his music on May 14, 1959, his 62nd birthday. At his funeral, 3,000 people gathered outside the Eglise de St. Louis in pouring rain to say their goodbyes to the man who had made jazz his crown and gave its rich and beautiful legacy of the blues and the Creole spirit to all God's children. ■

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# Degrees of Victimhood



In a Hollywood script, the New Orleans Saints would have stayed undefeated for the season, playing away from home every game and winning

each one in overtime. As their coach, Jim Haslett, recently said, almost wiping away a tear, “In the situation we’re in right now, we’re living day to day.”

The Saints are victims, no doubt, but as far as living day to day is concerned, things could be worse. The Banda Aceh Scorpions are no longer living at all. For any of you unfamiliar with the Scorpions, or Banda Aceh for that matter, the former was a soccer team, the latter is a province in the Indonesian Archipelago. The Scorpions’ schedule has been cancelled as both their stadium and most of their players disappeared in the tsunami of last Christmas.

Banda Aceh is still there, but no thanks to the UN or other do-gooders. Almost 100,000 victims of the tsunami are still living in tents, while 300,000 live with host families. 170,000 people are dead or missing and presumed dead nine months after the disaster, but from the \$7 billion in aid promised and the \$4.4 billion received, only 1,500 flimsy houses have been constructed by the Indonesian government. Projects needing central government (read “bureaucratic”) approval have been put off indefinitely.

So before Bill and Hillary Clinton shoot off their big mouths about how they would have saved New Orleans had they been in power—they were warned for eight years and did nothing about the weakened levees—there are tragedies and then there are tragedies. America is not Indonesia, but reading the European press the former is worse off. (I wonder what the poor Scorpions’ coach would say if someone bothered to ask him.) Mind you, tragedy breeds political opportunity, and victimhood provides

the surest meal ticket of all. Just think what Jesse Jackson could do with the Scorpions, let alone Indonesia and the tsunami.

However sad, the cult of suffering is here to stay. My Holocaust is bigger than your Holocaust. Or my genocide is larger than your genocide. Taken alphabetically, here are groups who rightly claim genocide has been committed against them: Armenians, Bosnian Muslims, Chechens, Cambodians, Darfur Christians, East Timorese, Falun Gong followers, Iraqis, Irish, Jews, Kosovars, Laotians, Maoris, Native Americans, Palestinians, Roma, Tutsis, Tibetans, Yugoslavs, and Zulus.

## WE NOW SEE TELEVISION NETWORKS REPEATING THE WORDS OF A NEW ORLEANS EVACUEE BRANDING HIS PLIGHT “GENOCIDE.”

Alas, all these have experienced genocide, but in the haste for a catchy headline, we now see television networks repeating the words of a New Orleans evacuee branding his plight “genocide.”

My friend and *American Conservative* cover boy Norman Mailer thinks that there is a kind of moral superiority in killing what you can see. I agree. Bombing a bunch of Serbians and inadvertently killing women and children from 15,000 feet was not our finest hour but par for the course for cowards like Clinton and Albright. On the other hand, however, a machine-gun squad of Einsatzgruppen executing Poles and Jews are not exactly superior to pilots dropping bombs on civilians.

What the do-gooders in the West do is confuse the issues with false equiva-

lence. The Marine who shoots a car full of innocent Iraqi civilians who fail to stop is not a criminal, just a soldier sent to do the wrong job by some jerk back in Washington. No matter what the antiwar side says—and I take a backseat to no one as far as opposition to this war is concerned—there has been no instance of a town or hamlet or even a crowd where American soldiers have herded people together and shot them dead. It could happen, of course, such being the joys of trying to put down an insurgency without enough troops and without soldiers trained to put down insurgencies.

I read a very good column by Charley Reese recently in which he writes of how we had said that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were military targets, but in fact there were only 43,000 soldiers in those cities and more than 500,000 civilians. The civilians were nearly all women,

children, and old men. He finished by saying that all men who start wars should be put in the dock. And it gets worse, where Japan is concerned. In July 1945, leading military figures in the U.S. had concluded that Japan was beaten anyway and would soon sue for peace. Emperor Hirohito had sent out feelers to those nice guys, the Soviet leaders, that he was ready to talk. Stalin, being Stalin, ignored them. He wanted to grab some Japanese real estate, so off went the two A-bombs. Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Admiral Leahy were against it. But Truman and Burns had their way. Winners do not have to sit in the dock.

Victimhood is relative. Keep that in mind the next time a hurricane hits the good old U.S. of A. ■