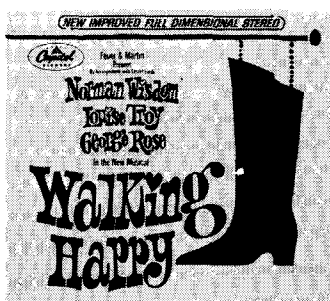


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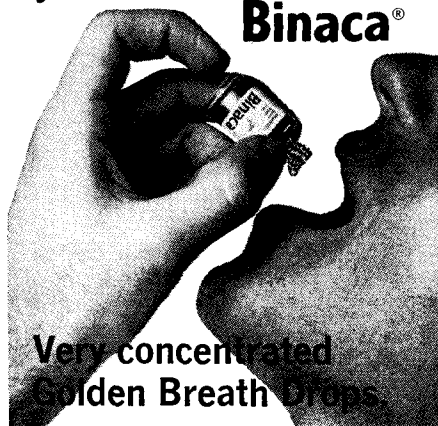


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Bechet the Prophet

IN FRANCE in the 1950s, New Orleans clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet found himself a celebrity: His records were collected by ardent teen-age fans; his company was sought by socially ambitious matrons; and his night club and music hall appearances were as avidly attended as those of Chevalier or Piaf. In our country probably only Louis Armstrong among jazzmen has received comparable adulation. But Bechet did not sing, did not mug, did not clown; he played his instruments, accompanied by French New Orleans "revivalist" ensembles of highly uneven quality, and he announced his numbers in the softly accented Creole French of his New Orleans upbringing. Armstrong, the glorious instrumentalist of the New Orleans school, was a prophet without honor at home to larger audiences until he became the grand old man. Bechet remained without honor at home to even a sizeable audience. Yet among instrumentalists, he was the second greatest glory of New Orleans music and her greatest reed man.

Bechet was recognized as a major jazz musician outside his own city by the teens of this century. He was the subject of the first serious appreciation ever written about a jazzman, conductor Ernest Ansermet's tribute of 1919. Ansermet saw in Bechet's work the beginnings of a new style and he conjectured that tomorrow perhaps the whole world would be following his path. During subsequent developments in jazz, Bechet was admired by musicians of all styles and schools; he was one of Charlie Parker's favorite players, and one of his last record dates was done with the respected modernist French pianist, Martial Solal.

In Antibes there is a square named after Bechet with a bust of the musician in its center. It would probably be foolhardy to expect such a thing in this country, but perhaps one can hope at least for an adequate posthumous tribute to his music in the form of LP reissues, for, although he remained a major player to the end, he did his best playing here and made his best records here, and for a jazzman, records are the enduring statements of his work.

Bechet made his most mature recorded statements between 1938 and 1941, most of them for Victor. Those recordings show him to be everything that a great jazz musician of his generation



Bechet—"admired by all schools."

might be, and more. Like the best clarinetists of his home city, he could improvise a superb secondary heterophonic ensemble part ("I Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None of This Jelly Roll"). And because his approach on soprano sax combined elements of both the trumpet and clarinet traditions, he could provide a unique lead part in ensemble as well ("Shake It and Break It"). He could discreetly interpret a lyric theme ("Indian Summer") or more boldly paraphrase a line ("Mood Indigo"). On occasion, he might even invent melody only within the harmonic guidelines of a piece ("Sleepy Time Down South"), a rare practice for a musician of his era. Above all, he was a great blues player ("Texas Moaner," "Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Mornin'"), and that means also that he could use the jazzman's growls, smears, bent notes, shouted notes, and whispered notes with innate esthetic discretion in any context.

When he growled or shouted or laughed, Bechet sang. And if the paradox of simultaneous shout and song were not enough, he was at once harsh and tender, introspective and declamatory, personal and communal, melancholy and joyous, and never egocentric. "The music," he said, "that's a thing you gotta trust. You gotta mean it." The words come from his book *Treat It Gentle*, which, for at least half its length, is one of the most remarkable autobiographies ever written by an American artist.

Bechet's Victor recordings were made with pick-up groups; their size and instrumentation varies from trios through septets, and the approaches and styles of the players roam widely for the time—his drummers, for example, included traditionalist Baby Dodds and then-

modernist Kenny Clarke, his trumpeters Sidney de Paris and Charlie Shavers. For a listener, one of the revealing pleasures in these recordings is Bechet's adapting not only to the range of the selections of each date but also to the sizes and shapes of the ensembles and the personalities of his fellow improvisors—and sometimes on each of his two horns, Bechet accomplishes things which only a player of his technical and emotional largess could accomplish.

Thus Bechet's Victors present the strongest argument for an orderly LP presentation ensemble by ensemble, record date by record date. Alas, the two LPs in RCA Victor's Vintage series, the new *The Blue Bechet* (LPV-535) and the earlier *Bechet of New Orleans* (LPV-510), do not follow this obvious and easy procedure. Rather, they follow some strange principle of separating blues from stomps, a principle which does not work in practice—more than half the pieces on the *The Blue Bechet* are not blues, but one of the best performances on *Bechet of New Orleans* is. (The albums provide further disappointments: Neither contains Bechet's "What Is This Thing Called Love," which has never been issued in this country and which is quite possibly his greatest reading of a standard ballad, and the albums mistakenly claim to present a previously unissued "take" of "Sidney's Blues.") These reissues do give us a great musician at the peak of his greatness, and all of the above examples of his range come from just two Vintage LPs.

I would like to single out another performance from the second Vintage set, "Blues in Thirds." It was made during a Chicago visit in 1940 by a trio consisting of Bechet, pianist Earl Hines, and drummer Baby Dodds. As I have remarked in this space before, Hines is no bluesman, but he discovered in this piece a unique lyric modification of the blues idiom. And here that lyric mood is reinterpreted by a master bluesman, Bechet. Hines, in his two opening choruses, states his theme superbly and then provides a variation. Bechet enters, first with a return to Hines's melody, then with a powerful, contrasting Bechet blues invention. He continues with fresh improvisation in the final chorus, while Hines counterpoints the opening theme.

For Bechet, the performance exhibits nearly all the powers I have attributed to him—powers of paraphrase, powers of invention, powers of adaptation to a particular musical climate—plus a good sense of overall structure. "Blues in Thirds" is Bechet's masterpiece on clarinet, I think; indeed for both men, and possibly all three, it is a superb performance. This is its first American reissue and hence its first issue in twenty-six years. That is at least some kind of tribute.

—MARTIN WILLIAMS.

Jazz Books

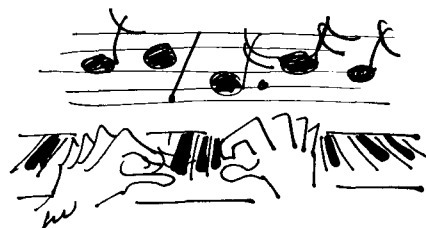
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sessions—where more jazz in the active state of creation is to be heard than anywhere else today—should prove illuminating to many. "A Basic Library of Jazz," always difficult to do, is perhaps more indicative of Williams's taste than it is basic. It cites, for example, three albums by Charlie Parker, two each by Miles Davis and Charles Mingus, but none at all by Johnny Hodges, Jimmie Lunceford, or Fletcher Henderson.

The Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties by Leonard Feather (Horizon, 312 pp., \$15) is a supplement to his encyclopedia published in 1960. Together, they compose the most useful work on jazz now available. The present volume contains some 1,100 biographies; it is a mine of accessible information which anyone concerned with jazz will find invaluable. In view of the enormous amount of work involved, any criticism may seem ungenerous, but there are serious defects which should be remedied in future editions.

Many biographies begun in the previous volume that should have been continued are not (e.g., Jimmie Crawford, Sir Charles Thompson, Doc Cheatham, Claude Hopkins). Many musicians ac-

tive in the Sixties are not included (e.g., Roger Ramirez, Reuben Phillips, Money Johnson, Bobby Donovan, Billy Butler, and two Basie trumpets: Al Aarons and Wallace Davenport). Moreover, the decision to exclude men because they did not have the good fortune to record seems distinctly arbitrary, as is Feather's system of crediting sources. Among performers of minimal jazz significance to



whom space is devoted are Herb Alpert, Barbra Streisand, Dionne Warwick, Lou Rawls, Miriam Makeba, Claus Ogerman, Morgana King, Nancy Wilson, and H. B. Barnum. Though the author wanted to give the book an international cast, there are far too many obscure, non-American musicians in it.

In short, more concentration on American jazz biographies and less attention to the magazine-like features could effect a considerable improvement in a work that is indispensable to the jazz community.

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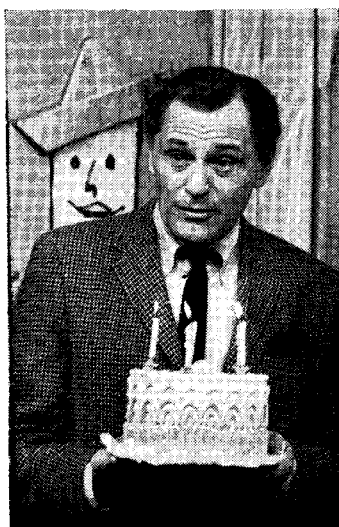
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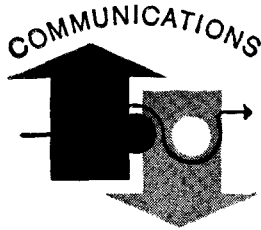
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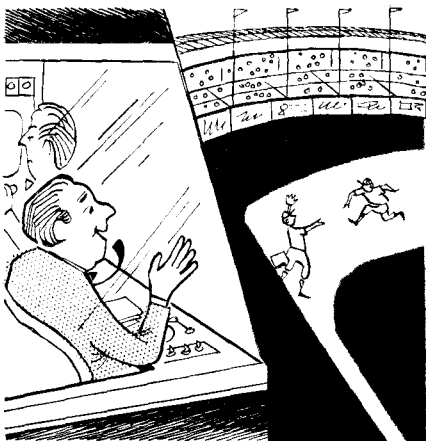
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It Happens Every Spring

THE BALL CLUBS are going South again, spring can't be far behind, and in many ways it is the happiest time of the year, particularly for those who follow what was once undeniably the national pastime but which now may be second to football in the American interest. Along with the clubs go hundreds of sportswriters, commentators, play-by-play broadcasters, and general hangers-on posing as newsmen. Some of the press contingent thoroughly know baseball and its complex rules, but many couldn't distinguish a triple from a squeeze play. At least one man in each ball park, however, has to be the official scorer and, since he is always a journalist appointed to this job, baseball scoring rules lie pretty much in the jurisdiction of those who earn their living by broadcasting or writing about one of the truly great games to play or watch.

Baseball rules are forever being changed, particularly the rules of scoring. Few winters go by without alteration here or there, in spite of the fact that major league baseball has been played in this country for more than two-thirds of a century and one would think every conceivable scoring subtlety would have been ironed out by now. Only last month changes were made in two scoring rules for the 1967 baseball season that bring to mind some others we think should be made in fairness to the players, the game, and the vast national audience. One new rule goes like this: A player who bunts for a hit will no longer automatically escape being charged with a time at bat, even if base runners advance on the play. Charley Segar, chairman of the scoring rules committee, says that it has been obvious in recent years that major league players have been bunting for a base hit when their teams were losing 8-1 or 9-1. So, instructions have been sent out to official scorers throughout the American and National Leagues as follows: "Do not score a sacrifice bunt when in the judgment of the scorer the batter is bunting for a base hit and not solely for the purpose of advancing a runner or runners. In that event charge the batter with a time at bat." Another change for 1967 credits a base runner who is trapped off base and reaches the next base without the help of an error with a stolen base, even if the runner didn't attempt to steal.

We once covered major league baseball (the New York Giants) and we'd like to put in our two cents' worth on a few of the anomalies we think still need correction in the scoring rules. We have always thought it unfair to charge a pitcher with a base on balls when that base on balls is intentional. Most intentional bases on balls are by order of the manager. A pitcher's record at the end of the season is judged in part by the number of bases on balls, as well as hits and runs, he has allowed opposing batsmen. Good pitchers will average a couple of intentional bases on balls per game, particularly in low-scoring games. If a star pitcher starts, say, thirty ball games and intentionally walks two men per game this may be a fair percentage of the total bases on balls marked against his record by the end of the season. It has always seemed to us that there should be a special category, perhaps an asterisk or another column of statistics, reporting the inten-