

MUSIC REVIEW

A Tribute to Bechet, With Tunes, of Course

By BEN RATLIFF

Eight horn players sat toward the front of the stage in a neat semicircle, on folding chairs; they shot one another sidelong glances and joked with one another, and except for the tuxedos, they looked as though they could have been in rehearsal. This was the lasting image from Thursday night's concert at Alice Tully Hall, when Jazz at Lincoln Center put on its Sidney Bechet centennial concert, "The Wizard at 100."

It's an unclichéd image, somewhere between big-band uniform alignment and small-group huddle, and the concert — with the clarinetist and scholar Dr. Michael White as master of ceremonies — used a similar ingenuity to get at the essence of Bechet, who died in 1959 at the age of 62. There were 19 pieces on the program, stretching from the 1920's to the 50's. Most of them were small-group nuggets that transcend the characterization of "small"; Bechet's presence as a soloist, with his stout, vibrating tone and audacious harmonic ideas, was intimidating, a sound of superlatives. "Blue Horizon," for example, a drawn-out blues from 1944, contains an operatic, oceanic kind of sorrow, and his 1932 version of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" is wild and headlong, like a bar brawl; both of these tall orders were on the menu.

So where six musicians might have played on an original recording, this abridged version of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra used 12, weaving a jabbing counterpoint in and out of the hot, rhythmic center protected by the drummer Herlin Riley and bassist Reginald Veal. And, appropriately, four different soloists — Bob Wilber, Joe Temperley and Victor Goines on soprano saxophone and Dr. White on clarinet — shared the Bechet role through the evening, rather than putting that enormous burden on one person.

Dr. White is always an easygoing presence, though pointedly astute in history and discography. As the program hopped from decade to decade, he lost no opportunity to announce the date and circumstances of each recording. There was, in fact, a lot of explaining to do: this wasn't just a set of Bechet's famous pieces. There



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Dr. Michael White at a tribute to Sidney Bechet at Alice Tully Hall.

was "Petite Fleur," famous indeed; but there were also lesser-knowns like "Tropical Moon Rhumba," a melancholy, uptempo Caribbean folk song which Bechet recorded in the 1930's with a band called the Haitian Orchestra; "Les Oignons," a driving Creole song made mostly of one chord, shot through with silent breaks; and "Texas Moaner Blues," a Bechet-Louis Armstrong confrontation through which Wynton Marsalis and Mr. Wilber shined, their trumpet and saxophone breaks full of gusto.

The band also had the funny idea to perform an ensemble version of "The Sheik of Araby," which Bechet recorded in 1941, playing all instruments himself by means of studio overdubbing. It began with an extended prologue in which the bassist, Mr. Veal, soloed over the song's chords and sang the notes of his improvisation; it was a sly allusion to the notion of overdubbing.

In revisiting Bechet, there's an obligation for a new band to find not just the notes but the strong spirit and the occasional outrage of the music; a too dry or too transformative approach doesn't work. This program, which will be repeated again at Alice Tully at 8 tonight, does him justice.