

# BOB WILBER - A STUDY IN JAZZ EDUCATION

By David Poulter

*The following article was written to commemorate Bob Wilber's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and was published in the Spring 2018 issue of the magazine of the United Kingdom's Clarinet and Saxophone Society, under the title of Bob Wilber at 90. It is reproduced here by permission of the author.*

Bob Wilber may not be a household name like Benny Goodman or Jack Brymer. His contribution to music over the last seventy years, as clarinettist, saxophonist, composer, arranger, bandleader and record producer may be at least as significant. As Wilber celebrates his ninetieth birthday, it is timely to pay tribute and share the inspiration his music has provided to so many jazz-loving reed players.

Wilber's active and varied musical life has been well documented, not least in his autobiography, published in 1987. Since then Wilber has remained active, performing at festivals throughout Europe and maintaining a busy recording career, which now extends from 1947 to at least 2012. In 1992 he was clarinet soloist during a London performance of concertos by Mozart and Artie Shaw, conducted by Shaw. The CD *A Man and His Music*, made in 1993, sums up his performance on five reed instruments, and although Wilber had announced his retirement by the mid-1990s, he has packed enough additional musical activity into the following twenty years to demonstrate impressive imagination, stamina and enthusiasm. A large part of this is due to the support of the singer who wrote him fan letters from England in 1947, who he met ten years later, married in 1978 and who has been closely involved in his music making ever since.

Projects included recording previously unrecorded arrangements made by Fletcher Henderson for the Benny Goodman Orchestra, and recording a tribute to Coleman Hawkins featuring four tenor saxophonists. His orchestras and small groups have toured extensively and been frequently recorded. Many people will have heard Wilber's re-creations of Duke Ellington's music which give so much character to Francis Ford Coppola's 1985 film "The Cotton Club", for which he won a Grammy Award.

In this present article I focus on Wilber's involvement in jazz education, including his own, which as apprentice to a master, followed a time-honoured tradition in many walks of life but one which has less significance in the pressured worlds of professional music-making and formal education. Wilber has enhanced this tradition by becoming master to his own apprentices, including the noted Finnish saxophonist and clarinettist Antii Sarpila, whom he has taught over a period of a decade or more.

What is this thing called jazz education? From Sidney Bechet, who was playing professionally in the very earliest days to Antii Sarpila's current activity lies a century of jazz characterised by joyful improvisations. Jazz tends to express polarised emotions - the joy arising from liberation, from slavery and other forms of repression, some would say the dots of written music, contrasting with the anger and disappointment on finding that life is still full of discrimination and other problems. The Bechet-Wilber approach remains firmly on the joyful side. Two quotations from Dave Gelly's *Masters of Jazz Saxophone* (London 2000) neatly set this out. Bechet's credo, according to Wilber, was "to grab the listener's attention, to carry him away on a continuously rising curve of excitement". According to Gelly, Wilber has often remarked "that the first task of music is to make people enjoy it". Added to this is the complicated relationship between the emotions experienced by the listener and by the performer, the latter sometimes playing for himself as a change from playing more "commercial" music.

## **The Early Years**

Wilber grew up in New York where his father played ragtime and Broadway show tunes on the piano. He has clear memories of hearing his first jazz record, Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo*, at the age of three. Wilber began playing along with records at an early age, initially on a tin whistle, and

from the age of thirteen on a clarinet. By this time, he had also learned enough piano to play boogie-woogie at social gatherings. In 1941 Wilber and his father went to New York's Cafe Society Uptown and heard pianists Teddy Wilson and Hazel Scott. Wilber's, and his friends' record collections helped him discover the music of Benny Goodman and swing era bands, as well earlier music via re-issues of recordings by Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, Eddie Condon and others. As a teenager he was allowed to attend Sunday afternoon jam sessions at Jimmy Ryan's. By 1943 he had persuaded a school friend who was having piano lessons with the stride pianist Willie (The Lion) Smith, who had recorded with Sidney Bechet in 1941, to share these lessons with fellow enthusiasts. Also in 1943, Wilber attended Duke Ellington's Carnegie Hall concert at which *Black, Brown and Beige* was premiered, and bought a second-hand alto saxophone. His autobiography records that "when I blew my first note I expected to hear a mellifluous sound, something like that produced by Johnny Hodges. What a terrible disappointment! The screech that came out sounded like a rooster having its neck wrung. I was so devastated I sold the horn and never worked up the courage to try the alto again until the mid-1970s." Like so many aspiring jazz musicians of the time, Wilber was part of a school "hot club" listening to records and holding jam sessions. At one end-of-term school concert the club persuaded a group of musicians to play which included Art Hodes, Wilbur De Paris, Pops Foster and Mezz Mezzrow.

As pressure grew to attend college, Wilber opted for the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Jazz was not on the curriculum and he left after one term, declaring to his family that he wanted to study jazz. Like-minded friends at this time included pianists Dick Wellstood and Dick Hyman, who came to be called the "Westchester Kids", imagining themselves to be the new Austin High School Gang, guided by Mezzrow's 1946 romantic depiction of the jazz life, *Really the Blues*. In 1945 Bob Wilber's Wildcats Band had been formed. It was claimed to be the first band to be doing in the east what the better-known Lu Watters and Turk Murphy were doing on the West Coast, i.e. reviving the music of King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong. Wilber's first recorded composition, *Blues for Fowler*, was written in 1946. Friendships, and lessons, with older musicians, including Willie (The Lion) Smith, Hot Lips Page and Sammy Price were important at this time. In defending his stance, at a time when in America and Europe jazz tended to be either "Dixieland" and "bebop," Wilber said that one of common misconceptions about jazz history is that a style which started in one era is then superseded by another style which makes the first one obsolete, and then the style is superseded by a third and so on.

### **Studying with Sidney Bechet**

Sidney Bechet was according to Cook and Morton "the first great soloist in jazz. Even before Louis Armstrong came along, he was playing vertical improvisations on the chords of tunes, rather than simple melodic breaks." Duke Ellington described him as one of the truly great originals and the very epitome of jazz. Wilber started studying with Bechet in the spring of 1946 at his recently opened School of Music in Brooklyn and for while Wilber was his first, and only, pupil. According to Wilber, Bechet was very interested in teaching and wanted to write a book about jazz improvisation because he felt that so many young musicians didn't understand what it was all about. Soon after beginning lessons Bechet and the Wilber family came to an arrangement which resulted in Wilber living and studying at Bechet's house for eight months. In his autobiography Wilber describes Bechet's teaching methods in detail, stating that he (Wilber) firmly believed that there is no better way of learning than by apprenticeship to a master. Bechet used a piano and a tape recorder. They began with scale practice using different rhythms to swing logical variations. Bechet said to always have the rhythm in your head and to swing against it. Interpreting a song should start out by stating the melody and bringing out its beauty. The next step was to start the variations but always initially relating them closely to the melody. As they progressed the variations gradually moved further away from the melody, becoming new melodies based on the harmony, before the piece concluded with a return to the melody and often a coda. Wilber states that Bechet was much more harmonically oriented than his contemporaries who didn't advance beyond the use of dominant sevenths, and had a perfect understanding of augmented, diminished and ninth chords, and was perfectly at ease with the sophisticated harmonies of Gershwin, Kern, Porter and Ellington.

To Bechet, featured showpieces conceived on a grand scale, such as Summertime or Dear Old Southland, inspired by singers such as Caruso, were an extremely important part of his repertoire. Whilst he improvised freely when playing the blues, he would nevertheless follow the theme and variation form and make a definite development from chorus to chorus, the best example probably being Blue Horizon, recorded in 1944. Bechet used composed choruses to tunes as the finale or climax to his interpretations, which he taught to Wilber. Bechet felt very strongly that there was a right way to play jazz – one which embraced the concept of them and variations, and one which had respect for the melody and the parts that all the different instruments should play. It is significant that Bechet deliberately chose not to become a fluent reader of music, fearing that this might impair his ability to improvise.

Bechet had Wilber concentrating on the clarinet, believing that once the clarinet had been mastered the soprano saxophone would not be a problem. Wilber comments that generally Bechet had to fight the clarinet, whereas he could fly on the soprano saxophone. Learning with Bechet included playing duets in nightclubs and on the radio. In July 1947 Bechet suggested that the Wildcats record with him. He was aware that the musical ideals he had stood for all his life were under attack from bebop, and Wilber thought he believed that he could perpetuate his musical message through this group of young, willing pupils. Lessons came to an end in the autumn 1947 when Bechet began working in Chicago. The climax of Wilber's time with Bechet came in February 1948, when he performed at the Nice Jazz Festival on the recommendation of Bechet. He played with Mezz Mezzrow's band which included the New Orleans veterans Baby Dodds and Pops Foster.

### **After Bechet**

After touring France with Mezzrow, Wilber led a band at George Wein's Storyville Club in Boston but began to be bothered by being too closely identified with Bechet's style of playing. Being disenchanted with Dixieland and not feeling comfortable with bebop, Wilber was very aware that the middle ground of swing music had disappeared and in the resulting confusion began studying again, this time with Lennie Tristano and Lee Konitz, though without a whole-hearted commitment to their approach to music.

Drafted into the army in 1952, Wilber traded his soprano for a tenor saxophone, trained as bandsman for eight weeks at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then became an instructor there, teaching music theory and harmony. He then joined the First Army Concert Band as solo clarinetist, which led him to study with the noted classical clarinet teacher Leon Russianoff, which he continued to do over many years. Leaving the army in 1954 he became a student at the Manhattan School of Music, but found it a very unrewarding experience and left to lead his band known as The Six which survived only two years, leaving Wilber with more time for continued solo practising. As well as studying clarinet with Russianoff he began weekly lessons with the tenor saxophone and also studied jazz piano with Sanford Gold. Wilber later played with Eddie Condon, including a UK tour in 1957, Bobby Hackett, and Benny Goodman.

### **Music Minus One**

Wilber began working with Irving Kratka's Music Minus One in 1962, five years before the first of Jamey Aebersold's play-alongs was published. He arranged and recorded several popular Dixieland pieces for two albums, using high-calibre musicians, including Buck Clayton, Bud Freeman and Dick Wellstood. Sheet music outlined the main melodies, harmonies and structures to help the home performer fill in a missing part. One aim was to ensure that the home player had the feeling that it was essential that he played his part well in order to complete the performance. Two other MMO albums, aimed at soprano saxophone players (Play Lead in a Sax Section) and at alto and tenor players (For Saxs Only) were also recorded to a high standard and featured compositions mainly by Wilber. The association continued, with a tribute to Johnny Hodges for alto players, published as recently as 2014. All are still available at the time of writing. Wilber collaborated with the tenor saxophonist Bud Freeman to write "50 Modern Jazz Phrases – A Series of Daily Instrumental Exercises Designed to Develop Proficiency in the Art of Jazz Improvisation",

published in 1961. It's not clear why "Modern" was included in the title. It now appears to be a rare collectors' item.

### **The Master and his Apprentices**

Never one to preach without practising, Wilber has helped many instrumentalists to play better jazz, by intensive teaching over extended periods, sometimes involving taking up residence in the Wilber household, performing and recording together. They include Antii Sarpila, Nik Payton, Alex Mendham and Luca Velotti.

Wilber began teaching Antii Sarpila in 1980, when Sarpila was a sixteen-year old clarinettist. Reminiscent of the earlier master/apprentice relationship, Sarpila sometimes lived with the Wilbers over a number of years. They recorded together in 1991, with Sarpila playing soprano and tenor saxophones as well as clarinet. By this time he was also leading his own band in his native Finland. He was still Wilber's student in 1995 but proficient enough on tenor saxophone to be one of the four tenor-players who recorded *Bean – Bob Wilber's Tribute to Coleman Hawkins* in 1994, and as a composer to have contributed his *Flight of the Hawk* as the last track on the CD, which in Wilber's words "convincingly demonstrates how well he has absorbed the message of American jazz. As his teacher, who is most proud of his celebrated pupil, I chose to give him the last word." They recorded together with small bands in Florida, in 1998 and 2011. By the time of the latter recording Wilber and Sarpila were performing on cruise ships as Bob Wilber and the Three Amigos.

Nik Payton and Alex Mendham recorded with Wilber in 2009 as half of Dan Levinson's *Trans-Atlantic Saxtette* in a re-creation of the music of the Six Brown Brothers. Payton and Wilber have also recorded jazz albums together. Mendham currently leads a 1920s-style dance band based at the Savoy Hotel, London. Luca Velotti, described as "a worthy heir to Sidney Bechet and Bob Wilber" is keeping classic jazz alive and well in Italy and at jazz festivals throughout the world.

### **Jazz At The Lincoln Center, New York**

Wilber has written much original music, as well as arrangements and recreations of classic jazz from bandleaders such as King Oliver and Duke Ellington, partly stemming from his time as Musical Director of Smithsonian Jazz Repertory Orchestra. He has donated his sheet music to Jazz At The Lincoln Center so that copies may be made available to jazz educators throughout the world. Wilber has collaborated frequently on educational projects with the Center's Managing and Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis. Prior to these the SJR Orchestra made three tours, giving master classes and concerts at music colleges throughout the United States.

### **Afterword**

In recording his reminiscences about Soprano Summit, Wilber's most famous ensemble, their guitarist Marty Grosz described Wilber as "not outspoken, kind of quiet, thinking always about the music, thinking about arrangements ...." A contrast not only to his fellow reed player Kenny Davern but also to his volatile and imperious mentor Sidney Bechet, Grosz's recording is entitled *Jazzspeak*, included on a Soprano Summit CD (Chiaroscuro Records 1994). Wilber's personality has allowed him to steer his own precise musical path largely regardless of jazz's fads and fashions. Doc Cheatham, Harry Gold and Benny Carter were still performing in their nineties and we will be honoured, although not surprised if Bob Wilber does the same. A good omen is the Youtube clip of Wilber leading four reed-players in Sweden, playing *The Sheikh of Araby*, trading fours and twos, etc. as recently as 2014. Although highly entertaining, education remains clearly in evidence.

### **Main References:**

*Music Was Not Enough* by Bob Wilber, assisted by Derek Webster (London 1987) (The many quotes from this autobiography in this article are not separately identified.)

Sidney Bechet – The Wizard of Jazz by John Chilton (London 1987)  
Treat It Gentle – An Autobiography by Sidney Bechet (New York 1960)  
Really the Blues by Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe (1946)  
Giant Strides – The Legacy of Dick Wellstood by Edward N. Meyer (London 1999)  
The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings by Richard Cook and Brian Morton (Ninth Ed. London 2008)  
Jazz – The Rough Guide by Ian Carr, Digby Fairweather and Brian Priestley (London 1995)

### **A Listening Guide for starters:**

Bob Wilber's Wildcats with Sidney Bechet. On Sidney Bechet – The Essential Collection (Avid 2009)  
Soprano Summit – any of many recordings (World Jazz, Chiaroscuro, Arbors)  
The Bechet Legacy – any of several recordings (GMB)  
The Music of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band – The Bob Wilber Jazz Repertory Ensemble (GHB 1986)  
Moments Like This – Bob Wilber and Antii Sarpila (Phontastic 1991)  
Bob Wilber - A Man and his Music (J & M 1993)  
Bean: Bob Wilber's Tribute to Coleman Hawkins (Arbors 1995)

### **Favourite Playalongs**

Play Lead in a Sax Section (MMO 1997)  
For Saxes Only (MMO 2004)

### **The Author**

*David Poulter is an amateur musician, playing assorted saxophones, clarinet and piano in West Wales. He was first enchanted by Soprano Summit when broadcast by Humphrey Lyttelton in 1974. A thirty-year career in local government delayed his purchase of a soprano saxophone until 2011. He is now trying to make up for lost time.*

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