

Bob Wilber, Champion of Jazz's Legacy, Is Dead at 91

The clarinetist and saxophonist Bob Wilber, left, in an undated photo with Sidney Bechet, his mentor and biggest influence. “I modeled myself after Bechet,” he once said. “He was very



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By Giovanni Russonello

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Bob Wilber, a clarinetist and saxophonist who fell in love with swing and early jazz just as those styles were going out of fashion and then

became an important carrier of their legacy, died on Sunday in Chipping Campden, England. He was 91.

The death was confirmed by his wife, the British vocalist [Pug Horton](#), his only immediate survivor. He had lived in New York City for most of his life before settling in England.

Mr. Wilber began his professional career while still a teenager as the leader of the Wildcats, one of the first bands devoted to reviving the jazz of the 1920s and '30s. His love for the old guard soon endeared him to the pioneering New Orleans musician [Sidney Bechet](#), who became his mentor and biggest influence.

"I modeled myself after Bechet," [Mr. Wilber told John S. Wilson](#) of The New York Times in 1980. "He was very complimented by this because he felt time was passing him by. All the talk then was of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. He felt his music would die unless it was passed on to younger players."

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Over a long apprenticeship, Mr. Wilber developed his own take on Bechet's style, with its ribbony vibrato and stoutly articulated melodies, first on clarinet and then on soprano saxophone. For much of Mr. Wilber's career his affiliation with Bechet would be both a calling card and a cross to bear; he would never fully escape his identity as Bechet's top protégé.

The Wildcats — which sometimes employed a racially integrated lineup, a rarity for the era — recorded a number of well-received sides

for the Commodore and Riverside labels, a few of them featuring Bechet as a guest star.

Mr. Wilber soon grew tired of the comparisons to Bechet, and of the murmurs he heard that he would never define his own approach. He studied briefly in the early 1950s with two leading modernists, the pianist [Lennie Tristano](#) and the saxophonist [Lee Konitz](#), before being drafted into the Army in 1952. He spent two years playing in a military ensemble in New York while studying with [Leon Russianoff](#), working to expand his identity on the clarinet.



Mr. Wilber performed at a Jazz at Lincoln Center concert in honor of Benny Goodman's centennial in 2009. He was best known for reviving the traditional jazz of the 1920s and '30s.

Credit

Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

After his discharge, Mr. Wilber and some Wildcats alumni formed a band called the Six, which aimed to interpolate recent developments in bebop and West Coast jazz into a traditional framework. The band [released one album in 1955](#). Writing in DownBeat, [Nat Hentoff](#) commended it for playing "without regard to restrictions of schools or styles." But the Six failed to catch on with listeners in either camp, and soon disbanded.

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Mr. Wilber said that he had twice been invited to join Louis Armstrong's touring band but declined because it would have required him to be on the road for a year at a time.

After making an album of Bechet's music in 1960, he recorded only occasionally in the coming decade, most notably the album "[Close as Pages in a Book](#)," a collaboration with the vocalist [Maxine Sullivan](#).

In his searching, often self-lacerating autobiography, "[Music Was Not Enough](#)" (1987, with Derek Webster), Mr. Wilber described feeling underappreciated and at sea in the middle years of his career. His "mild and almost self-apologetic demeanor in a world that demanded dynamism and charisma," he wrote, "were real and painful problems."

But in 1968 he became a member of the World's Greatest Jazz Band, a standard-bearing group devoted to Dixieland and swing, and it reinvigorated him. He began playing the alto saxophone more often — a clear attempt to put some distance between himself and Bechet — and gave himself a makeover, growing a beard and swapping his

glasses for contact lenses. “For the first time the world was able to look into my face,” he wrote.

“He took off; he sparkled,” Ms. Horton said in an interview. “He was his own man again.”

Mr. Wilber’s work in the World’s Greatest Jazz Band helped solidify his reputation as a leading preservationist, just as jazz history was becoming a topic of broad academic interest. In the mid-70s he and Kenny Davern — also a clarinetist and soprano saxophonist — formed Soprano Summit, an all-star combo whose fervid renditions of old repertoire made it a favorite among fans of traditional jazz.

After their marriage in 1976, Mr. Wilber and Ms. Horton formed Bechet Legacy, a band devoted to his mentor’s music, which recorded intermittently over the next two decades.

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Mr. Wilber became the musical director for George Wein’s New York Jazz Repertory Company in the mid-1970s, and the inaugural director of the Smithsonian Jazz Repertory Ensemble soon after. He won a 1985 Grammy Award for his arrangements of Duke Ellington’s music for the soundtrack of the Francis Ford Coppola film “The Cotton Club.”

Alan Nahigian

Mr. Wilber at the Newport Jazz Festival in 2013. As a youth he slept on a couch in Bechet’s parlor for six months.



Credit
Alan Nahigian

In his last decades, living primarily in England, he continued to tour and record frequently. From the 1980s to the 2010s he released dozens of albums.

Robert Sage Wilber was born on March 15, 1928, in New York City. His mother, Mary Eliza Wilber, died when he was less than a year old. His father, Allen, a partner in a publishing firm that sold college

textbooks, remarried when Bob was 5 and moved the family to suburban Scarsdale, N.Y., north of the city.

Allen Wilber, an amateur pianist, encouraged Bob's budding love of jazz and took him to Carnegie Hall in 1943 for [Duke Ellington's first concert there](#).

A shy student, Bob connected with classmates most easily through music, and in high school he started hosting jam sessions at his house. He and his friends sometimes sneaked into New York City to go to jazz clubs.

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He spent a semester at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester before dropping out, frustrated with its focus on Western classical music.

"I said, 'Well, Dad, I just want to hang around and listen to all these great musicians, maybe meet them, maybe get a chance to sit in and play with them,' " Mr. Wilber remembered in a 1998 interview with [the Jazz Archive at Hamilton College](#) in upstate New York. "He says, 'Son, you want to spend the rest of your life blowing your lungs out in smoky dives?' I said, 'Yeah, yeah, that's what I want to do.' "

In 1946, after Bechet refashioned his home in Brooklyn as a music school, Mr. Wilber became his first serious student. He also began sleeping on a couch in Bechet's parlor and ended up staying for about six months.

Speaking to Whitney Balliett decades later for [a profile in The New Yorker](#), Mr. Wilber remembered Bechet's teachings.

“He was particular about form: Give the listener the melody first, then play variations on it, then give it to him again. And tell a story every time you play.”

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