Bechet, Sidney

(b. May 14, 1897, New Orleans--d. May 14, 1959, Paris), jazz musician known as a master of the soprano saxophone.

Bechet began as a clarinetist at the age of six and by 1914 was a veteran who had worked in several semilegendary local bands, including those of Jack Carey and Buddy Petit. After working in New Orleans with Clarence Williams and King Oliver, pioneer jazz greats, he moved to Chicago and then, in 1919, to New York City. In that year he toured Europe with the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, becoming the first jazz musician ever to be praised by a distinguished classicist, the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet. Through the 1920s he gradually concentrated on the soprano saxophone, working briefly with his great admirer Duke Ellington in 1925 before touring Europe again. Intermittently, he worked in the Noble Sissle band (1928-38) and from the late 1940s based himself in Paris, where by the time of his death he had attained the kind of eminence granted to such world-famed Parisians as Maurice Chevalier and Jean Cocteau.

Along with trumpeter Louis Armstrong, Bechet was one of the first musicians to improvise with jazz-swing feeling. He intelligently crafted logical lines atop the New Orleans-style ensemble, double-timing and improvising forcefully and with authority. Bechet produced a large, warm tone with a wide and rapid vibrato. It was his mastery of drama and his use of critically timed deviations in pitch ("note bending") that had the greatest long-lasting influence, because they were absorbed by his disciple Johnny Hodges, Duke Ellington's principal soloist from 1928 to 1970. With a style developed around Bechet's expressive techniques, Hodges became one of the two or three most influential alto saxophonists in the first half of the century. Bechet's autobiography, Treat It Gentle, was published in 1960.