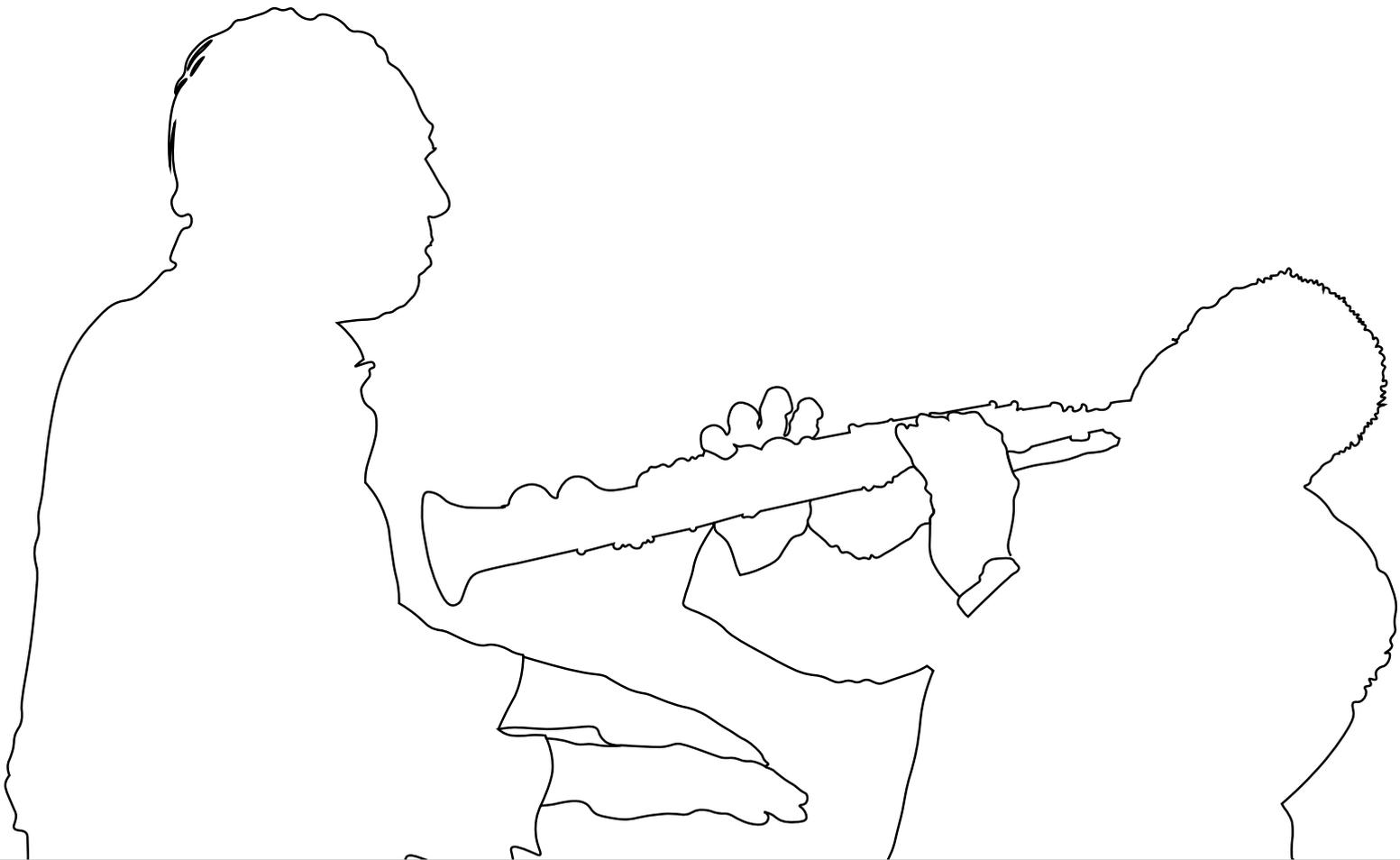


**WHEN DID
SIDNEY BECHET
PLAY WITH
DUKE ELLINGTON**



It is generally presumed that Sidney Bechet played with Duke Ellington in the mid-20s as a member of The Washingtonians. This presumption is based upon what Bechet and Ellington say in their respective autobiographies.

In "Treat Me Gentle", Bechet says that he linked up with Ellington in mid 1924; "It was a fine thing to playing with Duke Ellington in 1924." However, in *Music Is My Mistress* Ellington says that Sidney Bechet joined his band in 1926.

So was it in mid-1924 or in 1926 that Bechet became a member of The Washingtonians?

It can't have been in 1926. By that time, Bechet was in Europe with *Revue Negre* (The Black Revue) and he stayed there until 1930. It is difficult to understand how Ellington made this mistake (or was it Stanley Dance's error?).

This article will try to find the dates when Bechet played with Ellington as a member of The Washingtonians.

The main sources for the article are:

John Chilton's well researched and detailed biography of Bechet - *Sidney Bechet; The Wizard of Jazz*. It has some information about what Bechet did in 1924-1925 but for crucial dates, it is rather incomplete.

Guy Demole's *Sidney Bechet - His musical activities from 1907 to 1959*. It is a very solid discography and has a lot of good information about his whereabouts.

Ken Steiner's *Wild Throng Dances Madly in Cellar Club*. It is the result of an impressive harvesting of contemporary newspapers and journals on Duke Ellington's whereabouts 1923-1927.

David Palmquist's invaluable online database *The Duke Where and When* (TDWAW). It is available at <http://tdwaw.ca/>. The information in Steiner's booklet is incorporated in the database together with Palmquist's own findings and those of others. All references to TDWAW in the article is from TDWAW 1.

Steven Lasker's also impressive and detailed *The Washingtonians, A Miscellany*.

Let's start to look at the information available from these sources for the period May 1924 to May 1925.

By the beginning of 1924, both Ellington and Bechet were firmly established in New York, Ellington as the leader of the house band - The Washingtonians - at Hollywood Cabaret while Bechet primarily worked in (touring) shows, participated in recording sessions and played in bands.

As regards Bechet, at the beginning of 1924 he got involved in the Will Marion Cook / Abbie Mitchell musical *Negro Nuances*. It was being written at that time and Bechet apparently contributed to it.

Chilton says that the project never got beyond the embryonic stage but the entry on the show in the *Musicals in Black and White* encyclopedia says that it "apparently went on tour in 1924".

If there was a tour with the musical, it was most likely a short one, not involving Bechet. According to *A Century of Musicals in Black and White*, Bechet had signed up with Jimmie Cooper's *Black and White Revue* and toured with it in the winter of 1924.

However, Bechet was back in New York at the end of February or early March 1924 and then joined the Noble Sissle-Eubie Blake show *In Bamville*, which opened in Rochester, New York on 10 March 1924 (Chilton). It was another short engagement for Bechet and when the show went on a tour that lasted 24 weeks, he remained in New York for short gigs and recording sessions.

Only two recording sessions, materialized. He participated in one circa 16 May 1924 with Clarence Williams and Eva Taylor and one circa 30 May 1924 in which he accompanied the singer Maureen Englin.

Guy Demole is the only one who gives some details about Bechet's gigs in New York during the spring of 1924. He says that Bechet played clubs around 134th Street in Harlem (*Small's*, *Leroy's Fritz's*, *Connie's*, *Owl's* and others). However, he must also have gigged in clubs in mid-Manhattan. like *Hollywood Cabaret* and others.

As regards Ellington, in mid-February 1924 he became the leader of *The Washingtonians* after Elmer Snowden had left the band. By that time, *Hollywood Cabaret* was running a new and apparently successful show

called Mississippi Revue but the club had also started to get into trouble for having served whisky and beer.

In the early morning of 4 April 1924, Hollywood Cabaret, burnt down and The Washingtonians was out of work. It then left New York for a tour in New England from about 12 to 26 April (Steiner page 16 and TDWAW 1924-04-03). There is no indication that Bechet was part of the orchestra at that time.

When Hollywood Cabaret reopened on 1 May, 1924, it was with a new show by Leonard Harper called The Virginia Girls (or The Virginian Girl Revue). James P. Johnson wrote the music and also led the band, which included Sidney Bechet and Benny Carter among others (TDWAW 1 1924-05-01).

It did not go well between Johnson and Bechet. Johnson expected the band to play his written arrangements and this was not Bechet's cup of tea. So he got fired by Johnson. Shortly thereafter, Johnson went the same way.

In Treat Me Gentle, Bechet says "after James P. had got me out then he went and got himself fired. And the band which took his place was Duke and me".

Possibly, this was what happened but according to TDWAW 1 (1924-05-15), Johnson's band was replaced by a "French Jazz Orchestra (TDWAW 1924-05-15) but it was also short-lived, and on 10 June The Washingtonians was back at the club (TDWAW 1924-06-10)

It is often presumed that Bechet joined The Washingtonians at this moment but it is contradicted by Chilton, who says that Bechet after having parted his ways with James P. Johnson joined the band at the Rhythm Club in Harlem and become a leader of it after a while. However, Chilton does not give a source for this information so it is impossible to know how accurate it is.

Chilton offers no date as regards when Bechet joined The Washingtonians but he identifies Leo Bernstein - one of the owners of Hollywood Cabaret - as the instigator of Ellington's recruitment of Bechet, and this points to mid-June as the date.

Another discography information to consider is what Bechet says in Treat Me Gentle: "When I first joined the band, Bubber Miley was in jail over some trouble concerning a girl."

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to establish when this was the case or how long Miley was in jail. Was he in jail in June? If so, it must have been only for a few days since Miley did a recording session for the Ajax label in that month (as he also did in May and July). If it was a longer jail period, then it must have been in the spring and have no connection to Bechet's linking up with Ellington and The Washingtonians.

In any case, based on what has been found, it seems likely that Bechet joined The Washingtonians sometime between 10 and 15 June 1924.

How long did he stay with the band?

It is not easy to give a clear-cut answer but Chilton and particularly Ken Steiner and David Palmquist give some help. I will use their information (and some other) to trace Bechet's movements from July 1924 to the spring 1925.

Apparently, Hollywood Cabaret stayed open all the summer of 1924 and "it seems likely that The Washingtonians worked at the Hollywood through the summer" (Steiner page 18). "Another possibility", Steiner says "is a side trip to New England" for the band and that such a tour could be the summertime tour of New England with Bechet in the band that Ellington writes about in *Music Is My Mistress* but misdates it to 1926. However, so far there has been no proof of such a trip.

In my view, a third possibility could be that Hollywood Cabaret was closed in August since Otto Hardwick is reported to have played with the White Brothers' orchestra in Chicago in August.

Anyhow, on 6 September, a new revue by Leonard Harper - Creole Follies - opened at Hollywood Cabaret and "Washingtonian's Hollywood Jazz Orchestra" was in place to provide music (Steiner page 18, TDWAW 1 1924-09-06). If Bechet was still in the band is impossible to say since no ads with listings of the band members have been found yet.

In the early morning of 16 December 1924, there was another burn-down of Hollywood Cabaret and The Washingtonians went on tour again.

There is some evidence that it played the Fox Theatre circuit in upstate New York for the rest of December and most of January 1925 (TDWAW 1 1924-12-16) but also some more firm information that the orchestra played dances and

did concerts in New England from 24 January to 7 February (TDWAW 1 1925-01-26)

Was Bechet in the band the this tour? It is doubtful since there is no mentioning of Bechet in any of the reviews of the New England tour reprinted in *Wild Throng Dances Madly in Cellar Club*.

Did he appear when Ellington and The Washingtonians went back to New York circa mid-February for the reopening of Hollywood Cabaret (now called Club Kentucky) on 19 February 1925? He is not mentioned in any of the newspaper articles, reviews and listings which were published after the opening but neither were other members of the band except Ellington.

All this indicates that Bechet was out of The Washingtonians in the late summer or early fall of 1924. In his autobiography, Barney Bigard says that Ellington fired Bechet after he had been absent for three days without any trace. "Where the hell have you been? Ellington asked Bechet according to Bigard. And he answered: "I jumped in a car and we got lost and I just now finally found out where I was."

Did this happen while the band was on tour or in New York?

One possibility is that he was fired in conjunction with "the side trip to New England" that Ken Steiner talks about in his booklet (see above). In *Music Is My Mistress*, Ellington says that the New England tour with Bechet was quite unruly in terms of band behaviour and that he had enough of Bechet when the band was back in New York.

Another possibility is that Bechet did not appear when Ellington and the band started to rehearse for the *Creole Follies Revue* or in conjunction with that.

Whether it was one or the other, there is evidence that Bechet may have been out of The Washingtonians by mid- August. An ad in *The Post-Star*, Glen Falls, N.Y. 12 August 1924, announces a three day appearance by Sidney Bechet and his orchestra of colored dancers and singers at the Empire Theatre on 14-16 August (Thursday, Friday and Saturday).

in late-night clubs after he was fired by Ellington and again secured the job as a leader of the Rhythm Clubs's resident group. But Chilton complicated matters for us when he start to talk about Bechet's recording activities. He does not say anything about Bechet's recording sessions during the last three months of 1924 but starts with the ones in 1925. This might indicate that Chilton considers that Bechet was fired by Ellington in late 1924 but he does not say this directly and does not provide a date or a span of dates for when it happened.

In the spring of 1925 Bechet had joined or was preparing to join a tour with with the show Seven-Eleven. In his book, Chilton quotes a news piece in the 9 May, 1925 issue of the Baltimore Afro-American: "Bechet, the clarinet wizard, has been added to the musical unit in Seven-Eleven." The tour was quite long and Bechet stayed with it until early July when it arrived in New York.

There he collected a big payment of royalties for his compositions and decided to open a club at 145th Street called Club Basha. Johnny Hodges joined the band there and "it was then he used to show me different things on the soprano" (Chilton). More about Club Basha can be read in Chilton's book and also about Bechet's departure for Europe with La Revue nègre in September 1925.

Postscript

The short stay in The Washingtonians was not the only time Bechet played with Ellington. It also happened in 1932 when Bechet joined the Ellington orchestra for a week (23-29 April). Ellington was to record The Sheik of Araby and when he heard that Bechet was out of work, he decided to invite him to be part of Ellington Orchestra for a week to help Johnny Hodges to recreate the spectacular chorus that Bechet usually played on the song. So he had and Juan Tizol transcribed what Bechet played. It become Hodges solo when Ellington recorded The Sheik of Araby 16 May 1932.

Those who would like to know more about this is recommended to read the article about it in the DEMS Bulletin 2002-2.

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