

Woody Allen's New Orleans Jazz Clarinet



John Whitley
Country Life, 17 January 2002

It's natural enough to stumble across Woody Allen's nasal twang on Radio 3: the BBC's most cerebral network is where you would expect to discuss his latest film or the joys of psychoanalysis. The surprise this month is to hear him eulogising that least formal of all the arts, jazz. Since before Christmas, in fact, the man who made neurosis an Oscar contender has been savouring his alternative career as a clarinettist with regular half-hours that celebrate and analyse the great names of New Orleans jazz. It is a happy balance: fans of the movie-maker have been able to savour his self-deprecatingly authoritative judgments (as well as his odd malapropism) and jivers can luxuriate in the tracks he introduces of players at their peak.

Not surprisingly, we have heard an awful lot of clarinet, but no one can complain when it's manipulated by people like Sidney Bechet. That he is Allen's hero provides some intriguing hints about his own tastes – an emphasis on heavy vibrato and a delight in sheer power confirm that we have an unreconstructed Romantic here. The series, a commercial production, by Alan Hall for Ladbroke Productions, continues this Saturday with a portrait of the Chicago defector Jimmy Noone to provide a delectable seasonal present: it shares work of the highest quality without hectoring or self-promotion.