

Charlie Parker 1920-1955

“Yardbird, Bird”

Key Recordings: “Now’s the Time,” “Ko-Ko,” “Billie’s Bounce”, 1945; “Ornithology,” “Yardbird Suite,” “A Night in Tunisia” 1946; “Au Privave” 1951

Key Partners: Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Max Roach

Key Musical Styles: Leading founder of bop. Enriched song harmony to free melodic ideas. Spontaneous rhythmic and melodic imagination. Influence only rivaled by Louis Armstrong.

There was the era of jazz preceding Charlie Parker and the era transformed by him - just as there had been the period before Louis Armstrong arrived and a new landscape after his vision of jazz lit the future of the music. Charlie Parker was the messiah of modern jazz, and when he died, graffiti artists scrawled the words “Bird Lives!” in New York’s subways and around Greenwich Village.

Like Armstrong, Parker changed jazz with a unique approach to rhythm and phrasing: a profound conviction that stories in music could be told differently. Like Armstrong, he too played with a passion and fervor that went beyond technical mastery. Parker, however, was not playing in an idiom that enhanced and extended the potential of popular dance music as Armstrong’s work did. He arrived at a point where at least part of his audience was ready to perceive jazz as a serious art form and a symbol of youthful rebellion. Bebop became the soundtrack for bohemian disengagement and the alto saxophone of Charlie Parker a comet in sound devoted to the intense and fleeting moment.

Parker’s Mood

Charlie Parker was the son of a Kansas vaudeville performer who left the family home around 1931. Charlie’s mother, Addie Parker, devoted to her son, would not let him do odd jobs for her pocket money like other kids and gave him everything she could, including his first saxophone. When she secured a job as a night cleaner, Charlie, age 14, went out into Kansas City’s club land, listening to saxophone players like Ben Webster and Lester Young. Young was Parker’s hero, and improviser of immense tonal subtlety. Indifferent to his formal education, Charlie Parker devoted all his learning energies to saxophone, which he taught himself in a personal, eccentric, yet liberating way.

Jazz at the time was mostly played in a few key signatures convenient for regular instrumentation. The young Parker was unaware of this and he learned to play in all of them. One of the characteristics of bebop, which Parker was crucial in developing, was an agility in transposing from one key to another. He practiced constantly, convinced that his methods were right - but it was a confidence that sometimes made him overstep. Sitting in one night at the Reno Club, attempting the kind of key change that players much older than him found difficult, in the midst of a furious “I Got Rhythm,” the young Parker became hopelessly lost. Count Basie’s whirlwind drummer Jo Jones completed the humiliation, hurling a symbol at his feet to gong him off. Parker told his mother, “There’s got to be a way,” By 1939 he had found it.

When Parker joined Jay McShann, who ran the last of the big-time Kansas City bands at the end of the 1930s, he had made it. He left his home town at age 19 already married, divorced, and the father of a son. Parker stayed with McShann until 1942, by which time he had made the breakthrough of method. "I kept thinking there's bound to be something else," he said later. "I could hear it but I couldn't play it... I was working over "Cherokee," and as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related [chord] changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive."

Now's the Time

Parker soon met the other New York musicians working toward the same ends: drummer Kenny Clarke, pianist Thelonious Monk, guitarist Charlie Christian, and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. The beginnings of bop were explored and Minton's Playhouse and in after-hours and occasional onstage experiments with sympathetic employers like Earl Hines, Coleman Hawkins, and Billy Eckstine. At this point in his life, Charlie Parker's use of narcotics and alcohol - dependencies started in those long Kansas City nights as a teenager - was already a professional liability. But although his punctuality was a prolem, his imagination teemed with music.

In 1944, Parker began to record under his own name with a mixture of swing and modern players, and a year later cut the immortal tracks that were to make his reputation. On scraps of paper or during the warm-up to a recording session, Parker wrote tunes that became beacons to jazz musicians everywhere. His improvisations on scalding themes like, "Now's the time," "Billie's Bound," and "Ko-Ko" were displays of technical virtuosity and energy, switchbacks of phrasing and timing that would constantly subvert expectations, all couched in tone that could only have descended from the blues. Only Louis Armstrong's playing on his recordings with the Hot Five's and the Hot Seven's rivaled Charlie Parker's work in the 1940s for sheer fire, originality, and revolutionary influence. *Down Beat* magazine did not appreciate these qualities at the time: it gave "Now's the Time," a no-star rating.

The following year Parker joined Dizzy Gillespie's band at Billie's Bergs West Coast club, staying on after the group left, and signed to Ross Russell's Dial label. From seven sessions, six albums of phenomenal improvisations resulted, including "A Night in Tunisia," "Ornithology," and "Yardbird Suite." But Parker's physical and mental health were worsening. On the second Dial session, he could barely stand - but he played. His fraught, anguished "Lover Man" is one of the most revealing and emotional of all jazz sessions.

As Parker became better known, impresario Norman Granz involved him in more elaborate but less spontaneous projects, often with strings. Parker was not an unwilling participant, believing that tribulations of jazz life would ease if he shared the status of conservatory composers like Stravinski and Varese. Although some of the Varese recordings with strings show his alto still soaring and a capacity to be romantic as well as brittle and defiant, the earlier small group sets remain the most unforgettable 20th-century music.

Charlie Parker

- 1932 Mother buys run down saxophone for \$45.00.
- 1930-38 Rich K.C. tradition of jazz musicians. Similar to what Las Vegas would be like today.
- 1932-38 Tom Pendergast, local mob figure, who keeps many bars to open for live music.
- 1932-34 Begins to practice heavily and listen to the local musicians.
- 1934 Lawrence Keys, local pianist allowed Parker to come over and practice alto with rubber band and cellophane. Listens to Al Lewis, Deans of Swing, and Buster Smith.
- 1934-35 Keys and Bird practice daily - all day long. Oliver Todd - after Deans of Swing break-up.
- 1935 Deans of Swing, Lawrence Key's mother buys Parker a Silver Conn alto.
- 1936 Count Basie - After-hours session in which Jo Jones throws a cymbal at Parker's feet (Reno Club).
- July '37 started using narcotic.
Working with Ernie Daniles. Car accident in which the bassist was killed. Insurance money enables Parker to buy Selmer gold saxophone.
- 1937 Hooks up with Mary Lou Williams and Jay McShann. Clearly playing different than anyone in Kansas City by this time.
- 1938 Joins Harlan Leonard's Band
Pawns saxophone, catches a freight train to New York City.
- 1939 Clark Monroe's Uptown House - Joins Jam Sessions
Seeds of new style - This is where Parker discovers the upper partials of the chords - begins to improvise on a broader scope of chordal harmony.
- 1940 Joins Jay McShann band. Records first solos with McShann in April, 1941. Improvisation still a swing improvisation.
- 1941 Begins frequent sessions with the likes of T. Monk, Dizzy Gillespi, Bud Powell, Max Roach and Kenny Clarke.
- 1942 "The Jumpin' Blues" - recording with Jay McShann.
- 1943 Remarries.

- Plays tenor with Earl Hines Big Band. Same band as Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro.
- 1944 First combo recordings - Tiny Grimes Quintet
Goes on the road with the Billy Eckstine Orchestra (Diz, Fats Navarro, Sonny Stitt, Gene Ammons, Dexter Gordon, Tadd Dameron and Art Blakey)
- 1945 Records with Dizzy - "Warming up a Riff".
November 26 - Parker signs on with Savoy Records - famous "Ko-Ko" recording
- 1946 March - signs with Dial Records - famous recording of "Lady Be Good".
- 1947 Returns revitalized from drugs.
- 1947-54 350 Parker improvisations surface - constitutes a treasure with few parallels in musical history. Studies with Edgar Varese - looks to grow in his musical language.
- 1953 Great Massey Hall Concert
- 1954 Great Carnegie Hall Concert
- 1955 Dies of Pneumonia.

Charlie Parker (1920-1955)

- Contributed most to the development of modern jazz.
- Most historians consider him the most important saxophonist in the history of music.
- Took the music of L. Young, Art Tatum and Coleman Hawkins, and built an entire new system of music; seen in his improvisations and compositions. This system embodies:
 - 1) new ways of selecting notes to be compatible with the accompaniment chords
 - 2) new ways of accenting notes so that the phrases have a highly syncopated character
 - 3) methods of adding chords to existing chord progressions and implying additional chords by the selection of notes for the improvised lines.
- Parker astonished other musicians with tremendous fertility of melodic imagination and unprecedented mastery of the saxophone.
- Bird's sound sharply contrasted with Benny Carter and Johnny Hodges' sweet sound. He was influenced by Buster Smith who had a drier, biting sound. Even though his sound was very full, it was lighter and contained lesser vibrato than the swing masters.
- Parker's improvisations drew from the early phrasings of Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, Buster Smith and many early Blues artists, yet put these influences in a technical, new harmonic and melodic style.

- Parker's many tunes drew from Blues - "I Got Rhythm," and many popular songs and ballads - but contained his melodies and the new language of be-bop.
- Parker's impact on jazz was immense. Bud Powell & Dizzy Gillespie cite Bird as the primary influence on the music of be-bop. Bird's method of improvisation was emulated and copied by many saxophonists in the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

Parker's Impact

1. Wrote an enormous amount of music which is now expected by all jazz musicians to know.
2. He influenced an entire school of playing; carrying over from not only saxophone, but piano, trumpet, and all other instruments who play jazz.
3. Bird set the standard for approaching rhythm, harmony and melody in improvisation for the rest of the century.
4. Parker's improvisational techniques extended the chords 9, #9, #11, b13 (like many of the French Composers) and set the direction for reharmonization technique and substitution.
5. Considered the author of be-bop music.

A Few of the Many Saxophonists Influence by Charlie Parker:

Phil Woods	Lou Donaldson	Sonny Rollins
Charlie Mariano	Sonny Stilt	Ornette Coleman
Sahib Shihab	James Moody	Wardell Gray
Ernie Henry	Jackie McClean	Dexter Gordon
Sonny Criss	Cannonball Adderley	Art Peeper
Charles McPhearson	Eric Dolphy	Bud Shook
Frank Strozier	John Coltrane	Joe Farrell
Jimmy Heath		
	And many more...	

Charlie Parker Notes

- 1) Founder of modern movement
- 2) Created a new musical language based on new Harmonic emphasis
- 3) Put Jazz music in the realms of Artistic expression
- 4) His new approach to improvisation is still in use today. The use of extended harmonies is widely imitated.
- 5) Embodied a large amount of musical composition that codified “Bop” music
- 6) Strongly associated with the drug movement in jazz
- 7) Revolutionized the art of saxophone.
- 8) Many imitators on every instrument to [ianist bud Powell to trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie
- 9) Trademark musical contributions:
 - a) Stretching tempo's, both fast and slow
 - b) Creating new musical language
 - c) Had a unique rhythmic approach
 - d) Creating new compositions based on improvisational styles of bop
- 10) One of the early Black-American poll winners. Opened doors for other great Black artists to be recognized