**Charlie Parker**

Thomas Bevilacqua

Parker, Charles “Charlie” Jr. (1920-1955), known as “Yardbird” and “Bird,” was a famous American jazz saxophonist. Parker is best known for developing the style of jazz known as “bebop” or “bop,” which featured frenetic tempos, asymmetrical musical construction, improvisation, and virtuosic performance.

Parker was born in 1920 in Kansas City, Kansas to Charles and Addie Parker, before moving to Kansas City, Missouri. It was there that Parker learned the saxophone and was exposed to that city’s thriving jazz scene. In 1939, Parker moved to New York City, having visited earlier while touring with Jay McShann. There, Parker played in a group organized by Earl Hines and featuring Dizzy Gillespie, who would become a frequent collaborator of Parker’s while also playing in locations such as Minton’s and Monroe’s Uptown House with the likes of Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. However, the American Federation of Musicians instituted a ban on recording from 1942 until 1944, preventing these early performances and collaborations from being recorded.

In 1945, the ban was lifted and Parker was able to record for the first time, on Savoy Records on the twenty-sixth of November. These sessions, which featured Gillespie on trumpet as well as Max Roach on drums and Bud Powell on Piano, would yield many records such as “Now’s the Time”, “Billie’s Bounce,” and, most importantly, “Ko-Ko,” regarded as one of the foundational bebop recordings. On that record, one hears the stylistic hallmarks of bebop—the accelerated tempo, the introduction of a musical theme at the beginning of the song leading into a series of improvised solos before returning to that theme in the end, intricate and complex melodies, and an emphasis on each musician’s individual performance as the song was not designed for dancing but rather for listening. This style, articulated on “Ko-Ko” contrasted with the regimented, big band style of jazz popular at that time.

However, as Parker’s prominence as a jazz musician grew, he became more deeply addicted to heroin, which would plague him for the rest of his life. Parker would record again in 1946, this time for Dial, with Gillespie and drummer Roy Porter, leading to important records such as “Yardbird Suite,” “Moose the Mooche,” and “Ornithology.”

Building off the success of his recordings, Parker traveled with Gillespie to California to play clubs around Hollywood. While there, Parker suffered a nervous breakdown, setting fire to his hotel room, and was committed to the Camarillo State Hospital for six months, which would be referenced on “Relaxin’ at Camarillo,” one of the recordings to emerge after his hospitalization. Parker died in March of 1955 as a result of a bleeding ulcer, pneumonia, advanced cirrhosis and a possible heart attack, perhaps brought on by years of drug addiction.

While Parker had a large effect upon jazz itself, his techniques and ideas influenced areas beyond music. Parker improvisational techniques reflected a movement within art emerging from SURREALISM and its emphasis on automatism while also connecting the development of ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM. Parker also had an effect upon many late MODERNIST writers, being mentioned in James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” while Ralph Ellison dedicated an essay to him in *Shadow and Act*. However, Parker’s greatest literary champions were the writers of the Beat Generation, particularly Jack Kerouac who drew upon Parker’s improvisational style for his spontaneous prose method.

**References and Further Reading:**

**Biographies**

Koch, Lawrence O. *Yardbird Suite: A Compendium of the Music and Life of Charlie Parker*. (This provides biographical information, but also information on Parker’s recordings [both from his life as well as releases on CD after his death], his many live performances [when, where, and with whom he played] and on the instrumentation of his songs.)

Priestly, Brian. *Chasin’ the Bird: The Life and Legacy of Charlie Parker*. This is one of the more recent biographies of Parker, exhaustively researched and extensive in the ground it covers, while also featuring a very rich and extended bibliography covering the other works about Parker.)

Reisner, Robert George. *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker*.(This biography is structured as an oral history, with interviews from many of Parker’s contemporaries and collaborators providing insight and the majority of the biographical content.)

Russell, Ross. *Bird Lives!: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker*. (This biography is unique as it is written more like a narrative than a traditional biography. It also features an accurate catalogue of Parker’s recordings up to the point of publication.)

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http://www.cmgww.com/music/parker/images/gallery/largepics/016.jpg