Parker, Charles ‘Charlie’ Jr. (1920-1955)

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

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Charlie Parker, 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, representing a break from the more established and traditional forms of jazz were popular in the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties.

Parker was born in 1920 in Kansas City, Kansas to Charles and Addie Parker, before moving to Kansas City, Missouri. There, 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. In New York, 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 and thus hindering these new sounds from reaching a wider audience as well as keeping later listeners from being able to hear this style of jazz in its initial stages.



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 for listening. This style, perhaps best articulated on ‘Ko-Ko,’ contrasted with the regimented, big band style of jazz popular at that time. Rather than playing jazz for dancing, in the style of Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Duke Ellington, Parker ushered in a form of jazz designed to be listened to and appreciated. 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, set fire to his hotel room, and was committed to the Camarillo State Hospital for six months. He translated this experience into ‘Relaxin’ at Camarillo,’ one of the recordings to emerge after his hospitalization. Following his release from the Camarillo State Hospital, Parker went on to record an album with a string section produced by Norman Granz, entitled *Charlie Parker with Strings*, covering a selection of jazz standards, and to release an album of a performance in Toronto with Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Bud Powell, entitled *Jazz at Massey Hall*.

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. Parker’s body was laid in state in New York, with a funeral paid for by Dizzy Gillespie, before having his body flown back to Missouri and buried at Lincoln Cemetery.

While Parker had a large effect upon jazz itself, his techniques and ideas influenced areas beyond music. Parker’s 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 wrote about him in ‘On Bird, Bird Watching, and Jazz,’ saying of the saxophonist,

For the postwar jazznik, Parker was Bird, a suffering, psychically wounded, law-breaking, life-affirming hero […] He was an obsessed outsider— and Bird was truly alienated: as Negro, as addict, as exponent of a new and disturbing development in jazz—whose tortured and in many ways criminal strivings for personal and moral integration invokes a sense of tragic fellowship in those who see in his agony a ritualization of their own fears, rebellions and hunger for creativity.

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, along with finding inspiration in Parker’s status as outlaw and a rebel artist.

**References and Further Reading:**

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