

## **'Bird': The Biggest Bopper of All**

By Al Perlman

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"Motherfucker"

It was the only word that fit.

The band had been on stage for more than an hour without its leader, without the man the throng had come to see and hear – Charles Christopher Parker Jr. He was backstage stuffing his face with tacos, tamales, enchiladas, tortillas, beer and Gordon's Gin, but then he was ready. He put the food down and grabbed his alto sax. The band was playing "Cherokee." The tempo was fast and powerful, like a pneumatic drill ripping apart concrete.

The fans could hear him as he moved from backstage to the center of the club, playing all the way. "The Bird" was in flight. Notes poured from his horn like sparks from an erupting volcano. The speed at which they flowed was incomprehensible to the young black man in the tweed suit and horn-rimmed glasses, as were the melodies they formed, each one stemming from, yet more beautiful than, the one before it.

The young listener could take no more. He climbed atop a table and shouted the only word that fit, the only word he knew to describe Charlie Parker.

"Motherfucker."

He was right. Unfortunately, too many took too long to realize it.

### **Remarkable Talent**

During his lifetime, Parker, who died poverty-stricken at the age of 34 in 1955, received adulation only from fellow musicians and a select group of "hipsters." By the time most critics and fans recognized his genius, Parker was mentally and physically wasted from, among other things, heroin addiction, alcoholism and artistic frustration. Critical acclaim was, by then, of no use to him.

The Parker story parallels the stories of Dylan Thomas and Lenny Bruce – two other remarkable talents who appeared well before the general public was ready to accept them. Each man had immense talent. Each died young. Each had a twist in his personality, caused by addiction to alcohol, dope or both. Each had a love-hate relationship with friends and family. And each, in his own way, was at the vanguard of an artistic and social revolution. Parker had one added burden. He was black.

He did not begin to achieve recognition outside his native Kansas City until 1941, when he was 21. By then, he had spent a lot of time woodshedding, jamming and playing with Kansas City bands. Although he had no formal training, he had begun to develop the musical style with which he would be identified for the rest of his life.

He had already developed the personal style that would also remain with him. He was in his fifth year of heroin addition. He had already been married, a father and separated from his wife and son. He had long since finished high school where he spent three

years and wound up in the ninth grade. He had, since the age of 11, cultivated a taste of the nightlife, a taste he would never lose, and he had picked up the nickname “Yardbird,” later shortened to “Bird,” probably given to him as a result of his fondness for fried chicken.

### **Legendary Story**

The year 1939 was Parker’s turning point. It was during a jam session at an all-night chili joint in Harlem that Bird, as he said later, “came alive.” The story of him working over the changes of “Cherokee” and “discovering” that he could use the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line to get a new sound and a new feel is, by now, legend.

From there he moved straight to the forefront of the “bebop revolution.” Along with a number of other young musicians, Parker overturned everything that had been taught about jazz. The boppers changed the rhythms, played at never-before-dreamed-of tempi, played in small groups rather than big bands, played on chord changes that seemed to have no logical flow and did whatever else they wanted, as long as it hadn’t been done before.

They also berated older musicians, calling them Uncle Toms, turned their backs on audiences, hid behind berets, goatees and dark glasses and developed an exclusive “bop language” only the hip could understand, let alone speak.

They alienated older musicians and critics (one critic said, “Bebop sounds to me like a hardware store in an earthquake”) but knowledgeable jazz fans and younger musicians created enough interest in the new music that, by 1945, a good bop musician could make a living in New York City. And there was no better bopper than Charlie Parker.

### **No Recognition**

Then the boppers make a big mistake. They tried to conquer virgin territory in California. The people there were not ready for them. And drugs more difficult to get. Dizzy Gillespie returned to New York in a hurry. But Parker cashed in his plan ticked and stayed behind. By 1947, his drug connection in jail, Parker was placed in the Camarillo State Mental Institution for six months.

Meanwhile, the “revolutionaries” were gradually becoming the establishment, especially Parker’s old buddy Gillespie. Bop had caught on, but Parker had not. In the next two years *Life*, *Time* and *The New Yorker* did articles about bop. None mentioned Charlie Parker. He not only missed out on the recognition, but the money that accompanies it.

Once the superlatives started coming, after he died, they were as rich as they were deserved. Almost all agreed Parker was a musical genius, the finest jazz musician of his generation and one of the finest musicians ever to play jazz. There can be no argument about Parker’s contributions and influence. It would be as if a baseball expert carefully examined the game and concluded that Babe Ruth was a terrible player.

Musicians held Parker in awe from the first, and attempted to copy everything he played. “My first impression of Charlie’s playing was that he was a sort of Pied Piper,”

said drummer Stan Levey in a 1970 *DownBeat* interview. "I didn't really know what he was doing, but it made me feel good to listen to him."

"Bird befriended quite a few guys," said saxophone great Sonny Rollins. "It was like a father thing. When we were hung up personally, we went to talk to him, just to see him. The purpose of his whole existence was music, and he showed me that music was the paramount thing and anything that interfered with it I should stay away from."

## **Drug Addiction**

Unfortunately, Rollins and countless other musicians that idolized Bird did as he did, not as he said. It is ironic that they should have gone to him with their problems, because he probably had more than all of them combined.

But, the feeling was, to play like Bird, you have to do like Bird. As pianist Hampton Hawes said, "Those of us who were affected the strongest felt we'd be willing to do anything to warm ourselves by that fire."

So they did anything. Especially drugs.

Sonny Stitt did two years in the Federal Narcotics Hospital in Lexington, Ky.; Red Rodney did five in Leavenworth. Rollins was addicted for several years before quitting cold turkey. Trumpeter Fats Navarro died at 26, in 1950, of, among other things, narcotics additional and tuberculosis. Tadd Dameron spent three years in the Federal Narcotics Hospital in Lexington before his 1965 death. Saxophonist Jackie McLean was arrested three times for possession and spent 11 months in jail. The list seems to have no end. Many of the men influenced by Parker are still addicted. Yet they still love and idolize the man.

"Jazz is nowhere near him right now," according to pianist Barry Harris. "Bird was a swinger from way back. No matter what the drummer and bass player are doing, you're supposed to be able to swing by yourself. And he could," Or, as Hawes put it, "Bird never once in his lifetime played a single bar of bullshit."

The thrust of Parker's influence could be seen in the number of imitators he spawned among saxophone players (Stitt, Charles McPherson, Cannonball Adderley, Gene Quill, Phil Woods and Charlie Mariano, to name a few), but his influence was not limited to that instrument.

## **New Movement**

"Bird was responsible for the way I played drums," claimed Max Roach. "Not just because his style called for a particular kind of drumming, but because he set the tempos so fast; it was impossible to play a straight, Cozy Cole, four style. We had to work out variations."

After the bop movement of the Forties, there were no major innovations in jazz (unless one counts the "cool" movement that came and when with barely a whimper) until the "New Thing" of the late Fifties and early Sixties. Ornette Coleman, who, like Parker, was ostracized and ignored (Dexter Gordon once kicked him off the bandstand, literally) has been called the Bird of the new movement.

Parker's influence on the now-acclaimed Coleman (he is in the *DownBeat* Hall of Fame) is pervasive. Pianist-composer John Lewis said Coleman's music is the next logical step after Bird, but cornetist Ruby Braff provides a more critical comparison: "Once I heard Charlie Parker sound like that (Coleman)," said Braff, "when he was completely sick." Ross Russell, Parker's biographer, points to Parker's influence on Coleman's "modal, jet stream style." Parker's major impact on jazz, however, has not just been harmonic or linear, but rhythmic. Coleman's music is not as influenced by Parker harmonically or melodically – where Parker still has it all over everyone – as it is rhythmically. It was Parker and his contemporaries who beat straight four-four time into the ground. Not only did they play at lightning tempi, but they wrote songs purposely accenting the "wrong" beat. One example is Parker's "Moose the Mooche." Another is his "Relaxin' at Camarillo," which had so many "off" accents that many contemporary musicians never could get it right, even though it's only a 12-bar blues, which any jazz player can play in his sleep.

### **Pervasive Influence**

Parker changed the concept of rhythm in jazz, making syncopation the rule rather than the exception. Coleman and other contemporary musicians went one step further, stripping the moving of all chord changes and harmonic forms, opening the way for unlimited rhythmic forms.

Russell rightly says that Parker has influenced all succeeding jazz players, from Coleman, to John Coltrane, to Eric Dolphy, to Miles Davis. "Even recent, controversial, iconoclastic improvisers – Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp and Sonny Simmons – have their roots in Charlie Parker."

Aside from the harmonic and rhythmic changes Parker instituted in jazz, he also introduced other, more subtle innovations. He changed the way altoists played ballads from the standard Johnny Hodges "play the melody straight and use all the vibrato you can muster" style to one in which vibrato was rarely employed, and one in which the melody line was implied but never stated.

He explored new techniques on the saxophone, helping to move it from, as Russell said, "a fattener of orchestral textures to the most expressive instrument." Parker also pioneered to use of "Tin Pan Alley" songs as jazz vehicles and was the first major jazz musician to record with a string section.

Although his influence is apparent in just about all music we hear today, many are still interested in the real thing. A "Back to Bird" movement has been underway for about three years. No few than seven record companies – ESP, Saga, Spotlite, Onyx, Almanac, Phoenix and Mark – have recently released previously unavailable material by Parker.

### **Unique Tribute**

In 1971, saxophonist Med Flory and bassist Buddy Clark formed Supersax, probably the greatest tribute to Bird ever conceived. Supersax employs a five-person horn section,

which, in unison, duplicates Parker's solos in exact or near-exact reproduction. It is like looking at him through a giant magnifying glass.

The ultimate effect is to put Parker on a par with classical composers. By orchestrating his improvised work, Supersax is eternally preserving his spontaneity while surrendering its own. What Parker played for the moment will be preserved as if he wrote it down on paper. No jazz musician has ever before been accorded such recognition, and it is doubtful any will in the future. The group's first two albums were Grammy winners, and the recently released *Supersax Plays Bird With Strings* may be the best of all.

It is apparent that Parker still hovers over the jazz world. "If I owned a radio station," critic Ira Gitler was recently moved to say, "I would program continuous tapes of every bit of music Charlie Parker recorded."

Gillespie was even more reverent. "The Negro people should put up a statue to him," said the trumpeter. "This man contributed joy to the world, and it will last a thousand years."

A Parker cult seems to be springing up again. When he died, this large eccentric group refused to believe it, and lined subway walls and buildings with "Bird Lives" graffiti to proclaim their faith. Now the cult is more preoccupied with finding rare tapes of Parker's concerts and recording sessions. For many, however, Parker is still regarded as a Jesus figure, a savior, and "Bird Lives" graffiti is again popping up on subway walls and on college campuses.

But it is only his music that lives. March 12 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Long live Charlie Parker.