

PROFILE ❖ Charlie Parker

Charlie Parker was one of the most innovative and influential of all American musicians. With his inspired saxophone playing; his technical mastery of his instrument; his melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic innovations, he was one of the architects of modern jazz, or “bebop.” His playing challenged his contemporaries, profoundly influenced subsequent generations of jazz musicians, and helped transform jazz from entertainment to one of America’s most respected art forms. But Parker was also troubled by drug addiction, mental instability, and tumultuous relationships.

Charles Parker, Jr. was born on August 29, 1920, in Kansas City, Kansas. In 1927, his family moved across the state line to Kansas City, Missouri. He had little formal musical instruction. But Kansas City had a rich, dynamic jazz scene. Pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams remembered the freewheeling atmosphere this way: “Now, at this time, which was still Prohibition . . . [m]ost of the night spots were run by politicians and hoodlums, and the town was wide open for drinking, gambling, and pretty much every form of vice. Naturally, work was plentiful for musicians though some of the employers were tough people.” Young Parker became a fixture at many of the local clubs where he also acquired a heroin habit that plagued him the rest of his life.

In 1939, searching for a wider audience and hoping to learn from the great instrumentalists of the time, Parker left Kansas City for New York, then the jazz capital of the country. In New York, Parker began to sit in, or “jam,” at Harlem nightclubs such as Monroe’s and Minton’s. In 1942 he was back in Kansas City playing as a member of Jay McShann’s band, a popular “territory

band” that traveled as far north as Lincoln, Nebraska, and as far south as New Orleans, Louisiana. During this time he acquired the nickname “Bird.”

Parker left the McShann Band in 1942 to join pianist Earl Hines’s band in New York. In March and April 1943, all the following musicians were in the band with Parker: “Little” Benny Harris, Bennie Green, Wardell Gray, and vocalists Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughan. This collection of talent reflected a musical environment that fostered innovation. New ideas spread by word of mouth from musician to musician and in late night jam sessions. It was from the close collaboration between Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in this period that bebop emerged.

Charlie Parker joined the first bebop big band, formed by Billy Eckstine in 1944. Eckstine’s friend and valet, Bob Redcross, remembers a particular night when the band was at its best.

Everybody was on. [Art] Blakey was on; John [Gillespie] was on; Bird was on; Bidd [Johnson] was on; everybody. Man, they upset this place. They had people screaming and hollering.

In the same year a recording of Parker’s composition, “Red Cross,” the first to be copyrighted in his name, was released on the Savoy label.

Parker and Gillespie first recorded together commercially in 1945. Gillespie formed his first bebop big band and took it on a tour of the South as part of the “Hepations 1945” package tour. Also in 1945, Parker led an expanded group at the Spotlight club that included trumpeter Miles Davis, tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, bassist Leonard Gaskin and drummer Stan Levey. During a disastrous trip to California, Parker had a nervous breakdown and spent several months at Camarillo State Hospital.

In 1947, when Parker returned to New York, he formed his “classic” quintet.



◀ “The Fortunate Slave,” An Illustration of African Slavery by Douglas Grant (1968).

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