

100 years since the birth of jazz master Charlie Parker

By John Andrews
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Today, jazz musicians and fans throughout the world are commemorating the centenary of the birth of alto saxophonist Charles Parker, Jr. (1920–1955), among the most influential figures in jazz history.

Nicknamed “Yardbird,” and then simply “Bird,” Parker spearheaded the movement that transformed jazz into its modern form during the closing months of World War II. His subsequent career lasted less than a decade, however. Sadly, Parker passed away at 34 in a New York City hotel room, suffering from a variety of maladies associated with the cumulative effects of heroin addiction and alcoholism.

Parker was a creator of bebop, the largely improvised, small combo jazz that emerged during the first half of 1945, the spirit and innovations of which still influence modern jazz as well as more sophisticated forms of American popular music. Bebop was often challenging and difficult, meant for close listening in contrast to the large dance orchestras of the swing era that blossomed during the 1930s, before they petered out during the war years.

Parker was a brilliant and imaginative soloist at every tempo, with an arresting tone that he used to articulate rapid, long, intricate, angular melodic lines, full of triplets, scoops, swirls and surprising accents. Most serious scholars rate Parker and Louis Armstrong, the trumpeter and vocalist who ignited the swing era, as the most influential instrumentalists in the history of jazz music.

Parker’s bumpy, difficult life unfolded as the United States completed its transformation into an industrialized, largely urban society that ascended as the dominant force in world imperialism, and all that entailed. His many accomplishments, and corresponding travails, reflect those dynamic times.

Parker was born to working-class parents in Kansas City, Kansas, but as a child moved with his mixed-race half-brother John, known as “Ikey,” to the Missouri side. A hub for the cattle industry and agriculture, Kansas City, Missouri, was known as the “Paris of the Plains.” Jazz musicians were drawn to jobs offered in its many nightclubs, casinos and brothels that operated openly under the protection of the notorious gangster and Democratic Party boss Tom Pendergast, who played a key role in the early career of Harry Truman.

Divisions over slavery that triggered the Civil War played out with ferocity in Kansas and Missouri, leaving both positive and negative legacies. One was that Kansas City, Missouri, became a leading African-American metropolis. Centered around the intersection of 18th and Vine Streets, the black community supported two daily newspapers, the first public schools for black children west of the Mississippi and the most prominent professional baseball team in the Negro Leagues, the Kansas City Monarchs, featuring pitching sensation Satchel Paige.

During the 1930s, as Parker passed through his teenage years, Kansas City jazz musicians developed a distinctive style that influenced early rock-and-roll as well as the course of modern jazz. Local stars included blues singers Big Joe Turner (1911–1985) and Jimmy Rushing

(1901–1972), boogie-woogie piano master Pete Johnson (1904–1967), and several swing bands, including the Bennie Moten Orchestra, Andy Kirk and His Twelve Clouds of Joy and the soon-to-be-world-famous Count Basie Orchestra, featuring the great tenor saxophonist Lester Young (1909–1959).

After Parker’s father left the family, Addie Parker supported her son and stepson with a nighttime custodial job for Western Union. That left the young Charlie Parker free to roam the Kansas City nightclubs and countless jam sessions where he could absorb the improvised lengthy solos by musicians competing to top one another in imagination and execution.

During these formative years, Parker was, by all accounts, a personable, intelligent, precocious and somewhat spoiled young man who practiced tirelessly on his chosen instrument, the alto saxophone. He memorized Lester Young solos off the recent Count Basie records and became a protégé of the fine alto saxophonist “Professor” Buster Smith (1904–1991), who had played with Basie and Young in the legendary Oklahoma City Blue Devils.

By the time Parker reached his late teens, he was married to the first of four wives, he was a father, he played professionally around Kansas City and, unfortunately, he had begun his lifelong addiction to heroin.

Parker’s first recordings were made with the Jay McShann Orchestra, the last great Kansas City swing band. While obviously grounded in existing musical conventions, Parker’s lightning-quick and flawlessly executed solos display his use of novel chromatic harmonies and surprising rhythmic shifts. Examples can be found here, here and here.

In 1941, during his time with McShann, Parker met trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917–1993), then with the Cab Calloway Orchestra. For the next five years, first in the big bands of pianist Earl Hines and singer Billy Eckstine, and then in a series of small combos, “Bird and Diz” became synonymous with the emerging new jazz vocabulary.

Unfortunately, most of the earliest bebop was not recorded because of a ban imposed by James C. Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians, that lasted from 1942 through 1944. When it finally ended, small, independent labels appeared, anxious to record new music for a public that was beginning to emerge from the horrors of the world war.

By 1945, “Bird and Diz” had appeared together and separately with other bebop pioneers in the clubs that lined 52nd Street, near Broadway, in midtown Manhattan. Their quintet performances for Guild Records included bebop classics such as “Shaw ‘Nuff,” “Groovin’ High” and “Dizzy Atmosphere.” These records shocked musicians and fans with their virtuosity and challenging departures from the dance conventions that dominated the big bands of the Swing Era.

Two Gillespie-Parker concerts at New York’s Town Hall during May and June 1945 ushered in the dawn of the bebop era. One highlight is the extended performance of Gillespie’s “Salt Peanuts” featuring the outstanding drummer Max Roach (1924–2007).

Denounced by some in the jazz establishment, including Armstrong, as

dissonant and unswinging, the new music was embraced eagerly by younger players, including trumpeter Miles Davis (1926–1991), who, after sitting in with Parker and Gillespie in the Billy Eckstine Orchestra during a stop in St. Louis, convinced his well-to-do father to send him to the Juilliard School in New York City, where he used the opportunity to become Parker's protégé.

Parker's first recordings as a leader, for Savoy Records in November 1945, featured 19-year-old Davis, with Gillespie...on piano. The chaotic but productive session culminated in "Ko Ko," a flawless, up-tempo, breathtaking reworking of the standard "Cherokee," unquestionably one of the greatest single recordings in jazz history. (The trumpet introduction is by Gillespie, who also played the subsequent piano accompaniment.)

Three weeks later, Parker and Gillespie began a two-month engagement at Billy Berg's Supper Club in Hollywood, California. Although the few recordings that survive show Parker continuing to play at his highest level, his addiction was spinning out of control and his behavior becoming increasingly erratic.

In early February, Gillespie returned to New York, while Parker remained in Los Angeles. While the availability of narcotics from Parker's connection, "Moose," no doubt played a role, Parker also wanted to establish his own identity musically. The fine bebop trumpeter Howard McGhee (1918–1987), who both played with Parker and managed a Los Angeles nightclub, explained in his unpublished autobiography: "Dizzy was a comical cat, and he got people laughing. Bird didn't dig that when he was trying to play serious."

In March 1946, Parker recorded for Dial Records, again with Davis on trumpet, producing four masterpieces, including his originals, "Yardbird Suite" and "Moose the Mooche."

Parker's mental and physical health continued to decline, however, and after struggling through a second Dial recording session that produced a painful rendition of the ballad "Lover Man," Parker was arrested and then hospitalized for six months at the California State Mental Hospital in nearby Camarillo.

The break did Parker good. With his health temporarily restored, Parker recorded sessions in Los Angeles for Dial in February and March 1947. While Parker was on the West Coast, bebop had become highly fashionable and Gillespie quite the celebrity. Parker returned to New York in the spring to a hero's welcome.

Parker made a series of recordings in New York City for the Dial and Savoy labels with a quintet featuring Davis and Roach, all of which are considered classics. In September, Parker joined Gillespie for a reunion at Carnegie Hall and played his own composition "Confirmation" with extraordinary passion.

Establishing a home in New York City, playing regularly with sympathetic musicians, and recording frequently, Parker was at the peak of his fame and powers. Unfortunately, his addiction returned, and he began drinking excessively. Parker was often undependable, sick and on occasions unable to perform.

Nevertheless, there were many highlights over the next several years. In 1949, after a successful trip to Paris, impresario Norman Granz arranged for Parker to record with a small string section, producing several pleasant sides and one stunning masterpiece, "Just Friends."

In December 1949, Birdland, a nightclub named after Parker, opened on Broadway, and immediately became the most important jazz venue in New York. The next year Granz reunited Parker with Gillespie and Thelonious Monk for "Bird and Diz," a record album comprised of original compositions such as "Bloomdido" in the classic bebop style. A CinemaScope film from 1951 depicts Parker and Gillespie performing "Hot House" after receiving awards on a television show. This film is the only surviving video of Parker performing live.

On September 26, 1952, Parker performed with both his small group and the string section at the Rockland Palace Ballroom in New York for

the benefit of Communist Party leaders then being prosecuted for violating the anti-democratic Smith Act. One highlight is Parker's spirited tribute to his main influence, "Lester Leaps In."

On May 15, 1953, Parker reunited with his 52nd Street colleagues Gillespie, Roach and the brilliant but mentally disturbed pianist Bud Powell (1924–1966). Joined by relative newcomer Charlie Mingus (1922–1979) on bass, the "Quintet of the Year," as they were billed, gave a concert for the ages in Massey Hall, Toronto, finishing off with Gillespie's classic "A Night in Tunisia."

Parker's life became a torment. The New York Police Department revoked his "cabaret card," making him unable to perform in nightclubs such as Birdland. In March 1954, his two-year-old daughter Pree passed away. That September, Parker attempted suicide by drinking iodine and was taken to a psychiatric ward at Bellevue Hospital in New York. On March 12, 1955, Parker died while watching television in the suite of the "jazz baroness," Pannonica de Koenigswarter, a Rothschild scion, who tried in vain to convince Parker he needed to be hospitalized. After a New York funeral, he was interred in all-black Lincoln Cemetery in Kansas City.

Over the last 65 years, record companies, fans and collectors have combed archives for surviving studio and live recordings, some made or preserved under very unfavorable conditions. At present, 224 separate sessions, with thousands of recordings, are documented to exist, and more are still being uncovered.

What is to be made of such a life? Parker was very much the product of a confluence of historic events that will never be repeated. That explains why so many musicians who have studied his music and mastered its logic cannot perform it with the same emotional impact.

Parker's early experience in Kansas City, his apprenticeship with big bands, his coming of age during the early days of the civil rights movement and his move to New York City all played a role.

Parker stood at the head of a musical movement that expressed the hope for a better future emerging from the wreckage and slaughter of World War II. In that sense, bebop paralleled other aesthetic developments in literature, film and painting.

In the end, we have the legacy of a musical genius, and we are the richer for it.

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