

Charlie "Bird" Parker

Jazz Musicians

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Charles "Bird" Parker Jr. was born in Kansas City, Missouri on August 29, 1920. Charlie is considered the greatest jazz saxophonist that ever lived and he was the founding father of Bebop..

Charlie Parker charged onto the national scene at a time of tension. It was the 1940s, World War II was raging and nothing seemed certain. The time was just right for saxophonist whose energy and originality would turn jazz upside-down. Parker was one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. More than any of his contemporaries, he was responsible for catapulting jazz into the realm of art. His dexterity on the alto saxophone has never been equaled, and musicians and scholars still marvel at his harmonic and melodic gifts.

Parker's status as a cultural icon may have as much to do with his times as his sound. In the 1940s many Americans were parlaying postwar prosperity into suburban complacency, he symbolized nonconformity and rebellion. "His music appeared to many to be radical, abrasive, challenging and disturbing," said David Meltzer, editor of Reading Jazz, a historical survey of writings on the music. "He completely transformed how the music was to be played, and how it was to be heard." Without Parker, modern jazz would have been impossible. Still, few of the jazz fans who heard his early Kansas City performances would have imagined him entering the jazz pantheon.

Parker was born in Kansas City, Kan., but grew up on the Missouri side. He got interested in jazz early, quitting school at age 15 so that he could sit in at jam sessions. It was a good time to pursue a jazz career: The nonstop criminal activity of the Pendergast era had turned Kansas City into a 24-hour town, full of boisterous clubs and opportunities to play. But by most accounts, Parker's early efforts on Kansas

City bandstands were less than successful. An apocryphal story tells of drummer Jo Jones throwing a cymbal at the saxophonist to shoo him away from a jam session. The rejection prompted Parker to head for what jazz musicians call "the woodshed." That means working at the music steadily, emerging only when you feel you're good enough.

And soon enough, he got better. His improved sound - influenced by the serene style of Lester Young - began to earn him the respect of local musicians. Still, in the early 1940s Parker left for New York, where he had heard that new things were happening. Upon arrival, he quickly found his place among a group of musicians who regularly gathered at a Harlem jazz venue called Minton's Playhouse. Among them were trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Thelonious Monk and drummer Kenny Clarke. They were all into a new thing that came to be called bebop. With its fast tempos, jumpy melodies and small-group orientation, bebop was a bold alternative to the swinging big-band jazz that had held sway during World War II. It wasn't dance music, and it wasn't designed to fade into the background. Instead, it was music designed for serious listening. And the mostly African-American musicians who invented it saw it not only as a way to express themselves, but also to gain them the kind of respect afforded classical musicians. They saw themselves not as entertainers, but as artists. "They had created a language that was different than that of their predecessors," said trumpeter Roy Hargrove, who recently recorded an album of Parker tunes with bassist Christian McBride and pianist Stephen Scott. "These were musicians who were getting frustrated with the constraints that the swing style was putting on them."

Although Parker collaborated with other musicians in working out some of the tenets of bebop (so named because of the music's quirky character), he is generally considered most responsible for its creation, said Nathaniel Mackey, co-editor of the book *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose*. "His importance is widely acknowledged and widely agreed upon," said Mackey, who is professor of literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "He brought the music known as jazz into its modern incarnation.

"It wasn't just him - that needs to be stressed. He, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk were the three main forces. But Parker was recognized even among his peers as a leader of sorts - the kind of person people reserve the term 'genius' for." At the time, some jazz fans held Parker and his colleagues in contempt. They longed for the more comforting, less anxious rhythms of swing, and looked upon the boppers as enemies of the music. They also opposed the drug-ridden lifestyle of some of the musicians involved. (Parker was well-known for his abuse of drugs.)

This anti-bop attitude persisted for many years. Writing in the 1960s, the British poet and jazz critic Philip Larkin condemned bebop as an unfortunate example of modernism in the arts. "How glibly I had talked of modern jazz," he wrote in *All What Jazz: A Record Diary*, "without realizing the force of the adjective: this was modern jazz, and Parker was a modern jazz player just as Picasso was a modern painter and Pound a modern poet ... There could hardly have been a conciser summary of what I don't believe about art." From its inception, this new form of jazz was well on its way to becoming marginalized - art music still performed in clubs but suitable for concert halls. Although bebop was never as popular as the big-band sound, the music quickly became codified as the soundtrack of the intellectual and the hip. Parker, after all, seemed to be a hipster's ideal - cool and soulful, spontaneously

expressing the angst of the age. But they might have been surprised to learn that he had studied the work of Igor Stravinsky and other 20th-century composers.

Neither was the saxophonist opposed to mainstream success. He toured with promoter Norman Granz's "Jazz at the Philharmonic" road show, which was aimed at bringing bebop to a wider audience. He also recorded with a string section. But eventually, Parker began to lose the battle with his longstanding drug problem. After years of abusing his health, he was unable to save himself. After his death on March 12, 1955, at the age of 34, newspapers cited the cause as a heart attack or pneumonia.

Since his demise, death by self-abuse has become a recurring theme among the artistically talented. The rock world alone has produced numerous examples of stars who burned out early, Jerry Garcia being only the most recent. Indeed, to some people Parker is more notable as a celebrity junkie than as an artist who redefined an entire musical genre. But to the musicians who continue to learn from his art, the failings of his life are merely secondary. "My concern is not with his personal problems," said pianist Stephen Scott. "When I hear his music, I hear greatness." It's ironic that Parker - a rebel and an iconoclast - should be the progenitor of a style now considered sober and conservative. Still, he laid the foundation upon which the future of jazz will be built. "He lived fast, and there's a kind of glamour in that," Meltzer said. "But there's no doubt that the work supersedes the legend."

Sources:

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