

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



CHARLIE PARKER

[This is the thirty-fourth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

It was trumpet-great, Miles Davis, who summarized the entire history of Jazz as “Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker.” How did a musician nicknamed “Bird” become an absolute legend in his own lifetime among those in Jazz circles, but stayed relatively unknown for most of his life to general musical audiences? Let’s examine this enigma, shall we?

Charlie Parker, Jr. was born on August 29, 1920 in Kansas City, KS, and acquired his interest in music from his father, who was a pianist, singer and dancer in vaudeville. Moving to Kansas City, MO, Charlie began playing the saxophone on his own at age 11, joined the high school band at 14, withdrew from school after 15 months and joined the Musicians’ Union. For four years, Parker played with local blues and jazz groups, and developed his early skills sitting in with local bands and jam sessions. He went to New York City in 1939 to work professionally, but found himself more times than not participating in informal jam sessions. Then, Charlie had an epiphany.

For several years prior, the jazz saxophone had followed established boundaries and stereotyped soloing, with which Charlie quickly became disenchanted. As in the later Peggy Lee song, *That’s All There Is?*, he related “bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes, but I couldn’t play it.” (It would be 5 years before he would define what he had sought). In the early 40s, Parker’s name started showing up in the music press, and early recordings demonstrated not just his swing-based style, but his growing gift for improvisation. Then, as luck would have it, the American Federation of Musicians went on strike and for the next two and one-half years, Parker’s developing prowess went undocumented. But the “silver lining” in that cloud gave him the opportunity to bring his musical style to maturity!

Charlie (by then known as *Bird*) was known to practice incessantly on his own, and by his own accounts, often played 15 hours a day, 7 days a week. (N.B., as any woodwind player knows, that amount of wear and tear would make chopped liver out of his lower lip). But giving him the benefit of the doubt, this hiatus enabled Parker to transition into Bebop, for which his mark became forever indelible. He realized that the 12 semitones of the “chromatic scale” can direct the soloist to any key, killing forever the concept of simpler jazz soloing. This means that, to Charlie, playing with 5 sharps in the key of “B” was no more difficult than playing in the supremely-simple key of “C”.

In late 1945 on the *Savoy* label, Parker recorded -- in the label’s marketing terms -- the “greatest jam session ever.” With sidemen Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis on trumpets, Curly Russell on bass, and Max Roach on drums, they produced classics such as *Ko-Ko*,

Billie's Bounce and *Now's The Time*. True classics! But success comes not without a penalty. Due to a prior traffic accident, Charlie's pain meds (morphine) had morphed (? ouch) into a full-blown heroin addiction! He began missing gigs, forgetting huge sections of the current tune, busking money from fellow musicians, pawning saxes for drug money, cashing in return airline ticket to score a fix. Sad to say, but it was such a current theme in the day – geniuses who felt their talent needed tweaking with a pharmaceutical hit. Problem was that drugs were so easy to come by in that scene. For the next half-dozen years, Charlie was in and out of rehab, yet always came up with phenomenal recordings, including his classics: *Ornithology*, *Yardbird Suite* and *Bird Gets The Worm*.

In 1949, Parker fulfilled his lifelong dream, performing with a string section, recorded by Norman Grantz as *Charlie Parker With Strings*, combining jazz and classical music (see my article # 16 – *Third Stream*). From those sessions came *Just Friends*, *Everything Happens To Me*, and *Summertime*; all truly magnificent tracks.



Charlie experimented with new sounds and materials, even resorting to playing the “plastic saxophone.” A man never satisfied with near perfection of his art?

He continued to amaze until the mid-50s, with his last public engagement on March 5, 1955 at *Birdland*, a New York nightclub named in his honor (watch for my article on *Birdland* next month). Charlie died one week later, with official causes of death listed as lobar pneumonia, a bleeding ulcer, advanced cirrhosis and a recent heart attack. The *New York Times* reported that “the coroner who performed his autopsy mistakenly estimated Parker's 34-year-old body to be between 50 and 60 years of age.”

A true musical genius, to be sure, albeit a tortured one. But a man who forever stamped jazz with his unique contributions. Oh – why was he called *Bird*? One story has it that while in a car driving to the next gig, the driver drove over a chicken in the road – a yardbird – and Parker insisted they stop, take the chicken, pay the farmer, and cook the “bird” for dinner. But I would rather think the moniker came from the way Charlie would feel when he played his horn. Free as a Bird!

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic