

Charlie Parker's Scorching Innovations

Born 100 years ago this week, the saxophonist pushed bebop to jazz's forefront and set a lasting benchmark for virtuosity and style.

By John Edward Hasse

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Charlie Parker blazed through American music like a meteor, burning out in his early 30s. Yet the alto saxophonist ranks high in the pantheon of American genius for his artistry, innovations and impact. A larger-than-life figure, he changed jazz forever.

Born in Kansas City, Kan., on Aug. 29, 1920, Parker evoked more passion, pro and con, than any of his jazz predecessors or contemporaries. Many of the negatives reflected his behavior as a societal outsider. His alcohol and drug dependency, instability, and periodic hospitalizations promoted a stereotype of jazz musicians as misfits and social deviants.

But Parker's prodigious positives are why he matters and why we still remember him.

While a teenager, Parker jumped into jazz, listening with open ears. He absorbed the blues-drenched swing of Bennie Moten, Jay McShann, Count Basie and other Kansas City notables, but sought his own musical way. He later claimed that for three or four years he practiced for 11 to 15 hours a day. Parker picked up the nickname "Yardbird," shortened to "Bird."

After permanently moving to New York in 1942, Parker joined late-night Harlem jam sessions, where players exchanged ideas, honed skills, and tested themselves against talented contemporaries. He bonded with the brash trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, just three years older. Like research scientists, Parker,



Gillespie and a few colleagues experimented in their jamming lab. They didn't invent a new style—bits of it were in the air—but their efforts made it whole.

Parker and Gillespie promulgated a complex new approach to improvising jazz melody and rhythm. Before them, the fundamental pulse of jazz was the quarter-note: a bar divided into four parts. The young musicians subdivided the bar into eight parts: The basic unit became an eighth-note, dramatically changing the feel of the music. In addition, they added triplets (dividing each beat into three parts) and a heavy dose of syncopation.

Parker's 1945-49 recordings such as *Klactoveedsedstene*, *A Night in Tunisia* and *Parker's Mood* reveal a musical innovator of the first rank, one who helped create a paradigm shift for jazz music, a fresh language for improvisation, and a new genre, dubbed "bebop" or simply "bop." Though their sound reimagined rather than denied the past, listeners used to swing music found it startling and radical.

Parker could spew hot ideas like a geyser: fluid but knotty and asymmetrical melodies with unusual, often dissonant harmonies. He became the greatest exponent of formulaic improvisation, manipulating what jazz players call their "licks"—a repertory of motifs internalized so deeply that they can be seamlessly inserted into a solo at will. Parker wondrously employed over 100 such patterns in his playing—for example, in his milestone *Koko* of 1945. The challenges of this approach? To select and apply the formulas at the speed of thought but avoid turning them into clichés. Parker did all that.

In different iterations of the same song, the solos of more than a few jazz musicians reveal similar shapes and patterns, more habit than pure spontaneity. But listen to Parker's two successive October 1947 takes on Gershwin's *Embraceable You* and you marvel at how completely different they are. Seven decades later, his imagination still dazzles.

Capable of jaw-dropping speed, he could push the envelope of tempo, taking *Shaw 'Nuff* (1945) at a blistering 280 beats per minute—more than four beats per second! He raised instrumental wizardry, as epitomized by pianist Art Tatum, to a new level. Parker created a touchstone of virtuosity and velocity for succeeding generations of players. But he never used his chops just to show off—they always served the music.

Like other Black musicians, Parker faced deep, dogged systemic racism and discrimination, a white-controlled music industry that often took advantage of musicians of color, and gigs where entertainment met the underworld. That he was able to make such enduring art despite crushing constraints and personal demons is cause for veneration and gratitude.

Parker pointed the way for countless musicians, among them pianist Bud Powell, trombonist J.J. Johnson, and saxophonists Sonny Stitt, Cannonball Adderley and Phil

Woods. By creating a new benchmark of excellence, Parker gave later musicians something to respond to and build on.

If the prevailing swing sound had been a dancer's music, Parker and fellow boppers struck a blow for modern jazz as a listener's music. Their changes furthered the growth of jazz nightclubs for listening and benefited scrappy, independent record labels such as Savoy and Dial that couldn't muster the money to record big bands, but could memorialize quintets such as Parker's. The boppers considered themselves artists more than entertainers.

When Parker died in 1955 at age 34, the attending physician thought he was 53. Defiant graffiti popped up all over New York and in jazz nightclubs across the country: "Bird Lives." Parker was immortalized in sculpture, paintings, fiction, films, postage stamps in 11 countries, and an opera, *Charlie Parker's Yardbird*.

In the cultural memory of Kansas City and Harlem, in his enduring new approach, in the standards he heightened, in dozens of compositions, in more than 1,500 recordings, in the playing of countless acolytes, and in the current centennial commemorations, truly Bird lives. . .and thrives.

—Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. His books include *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (Da Capo) and *Discover Jazz* (Pearson).