

## CHARLIE PARKER THE ARTIST

by John Clare\*

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When Charlie Parker — the Bird — died in 1955 of a host of dissipations, there appeared almost immediately on New York walls the legend ‘Bird Lives’. Parker’s meeting with Jean-Paul Sartre had been recorded by writers with the same tone of awe and baffled curiosity as a similarly brief and laconic meeting between Marcel Proust and James Joyce. “I like your playing,” said Parker to Sartre. A small joke to some, while others have read much into it.



*Jean-Paul Sartre: Charlie Parker said to him ‘I like your playing’...*

One can understand to a degree a cult of Elvis Presley (one of the best known people of our age), a cult of James Dean (a Parker fan, incidentally; he was a film star, say no more), or a cult of Jean-Paul Sartre (who is taught in universities). It hardly needs saying that people are obsessed with fame. Charlie Parker never had that kind of fame. Tommy Dorsey, whom Parker was watching on TV when he died, was probably still better known than Bird. The legend is kept alive by a small minority, unaided by academia at that. Yet Bird lives. The name Charlie Parker is known to many people who are not particularly curious to hear his music, or even to see his photo or learn anything about him. The name is passed on by a small insistent band.

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*\*When this was written in 1982 John Clare was writing fortnightly for the Financial Review and general articles, including some jazz, for the National Times.*



*Trombonist Tommy Dorsey, whom Parker was watching on TV when he died, was probably still better known than Bird... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

Writers, awed by his capacity for drugs, sex and booze have made Parker the angel of bliss, a martyr to the cause of hedonism, as opposed to the Puritan ethic. And they have described him as the creator of a new, revolutionary jazz. Some of those writers were there, of course, while I was not. Yet I make so bold as to present a slightly different point of view.



*Bird: writers, awed by his capacity for drugs, sex and booze have made Parker the angel of bliss, a martyr to the cause of hedonism...*

To call Parker's contribution to jazz revolutionary, without qualification, is to ignore the work of swing era musicians who had made brief forays into the musical territory Parker was to cover so comprehensively. It is to deny the traditional elements which remained in Parker's playing, not as traces but as strongly stated expressive devices; and it is to deny that all jazz has been a part of modernism.

Charlie Parker's music was a radical (from the root) extension of an existing tradition. Like Bach, he presents a summation of the past as well as a portent of the future. In his mode of living he has been taken for the epitome of a new ethos; but it is an ethos whose precise beginnings are difficult to trace. Bernie McGann referred to Charlie Parker as the ultimate hipster. Not the original hipster.

Parker ranged so freely over musical territory which earlier musicians such as Jabbo Smith, Roy Eldridge and Lester Young had only probed, and took the 'hip life' to such extremes, that it did seem for a time that a revolution in music and in lifestyle had occurred. Yet his recordings with swing era musicians, with blues and ballad singers, do not sound incongruous today. He was clearly going further, because the others had done their exploring and their styles had set.



*Parker ranged freely over musical territory which earlier musicians such as Jabbo Smith (pictured above), Roy Eldridge and Lester Young had only probed...*

Parker was not the only one extending the vocabulary of jazz in the 1940s. He was, all in all, the best, and that is saying a lot when amongst the others were pianist Bud Powell and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, two of the most astonishing virtuosi and of the most original musicians jazz has produced. Not to mention Ray Brown, Fats Navarro, Max Roach, Roy Haynes, Kenny Clark, and a number of others whose places as style-setters on their instruments are unassailable.



*Pianist Bud Powell (above) and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (below), two of the most astonishing virtuosi and of the most original musicians jazz has produced... PHOTOS COURTESY PINTEREST*



Parker's real stature rests not on his being the first, the right person in the right place (a feat which can be achieved by a lesser musician), but on his consummate musicianship and towering genius. Black American culture has been discovered and rediscovered throughout this century, by whites and by blacks themselves — that is to say, blacks from time to time become suddenly aware that their culture has influenced and fits into the mainstream of modernism. Futurist painters, and some

cubists, were inspired by jazz and ragtime, believing that it expressed the accelerated, angular, jerky, swirling, strangely syncopated motion of industry and the cities. The cryptic fragmentation of an improvised solo would have had a particular significance for a cubist painter, one of whose aims was to depict the process of vision: the way the eye scans, or judders, rapidly, to build a smooth cohesive image from a myriad fragments.

Amongst blacks, Back To Africa movements have recurred, and so have movements which elevated those black writers, composers and performers who were most European in approach. Much later, swing and then modern jazz inspired painters, writers and poets with a sense of spontaneity and freedom. Jazz seemed not only to hold the essence of the 20th Century, but to express uninhibited, voluptuous, free impulses which were opposed to its mechanistic and regimented aspects.

The overlapping of two needs — to claim an art that was ‘respectable’ in European terms, and to have one’s own thing, independent of white values — created some wonderful and strange hybrids of behaviour, dress and music.

Jazz has been central in all this. All strands of black American music can be found in it somewhere, as well as conscious European influences and the rejection of same. Jazz represents also the major break from hymns and hollers and chants and the slow resigned wail of bondage. Jazz is the expression of the Negro entering or attempting to enter the mainstream of American life.

From Louis Armstrong, indeed from earlier than that, it has been obvious that in jazz there has been an aspiration towards a purely expressive music as opposed to a purely functional dance music. A music which could be a repository for the highest levels of virtuosity and invention. Yet it still had to be danceable, and perhaps few wanted it otherwise.



*From Louis Armstrong (above), indeed from earlier than that, it has been obvious that in jazz there has been an aspiration towards a purely expressive music as opposed to a purely functional dance music...PHOTO CREDIT CARELDE VOGEL*

By the swing era at the latest, the after-hours jam session had developed. After the dancing was over, freed from many of the constraints of playing for dancers, the soloists would line up and one by one extend themselves, show what they could do, make their reputations as Masters, or fail to do so.

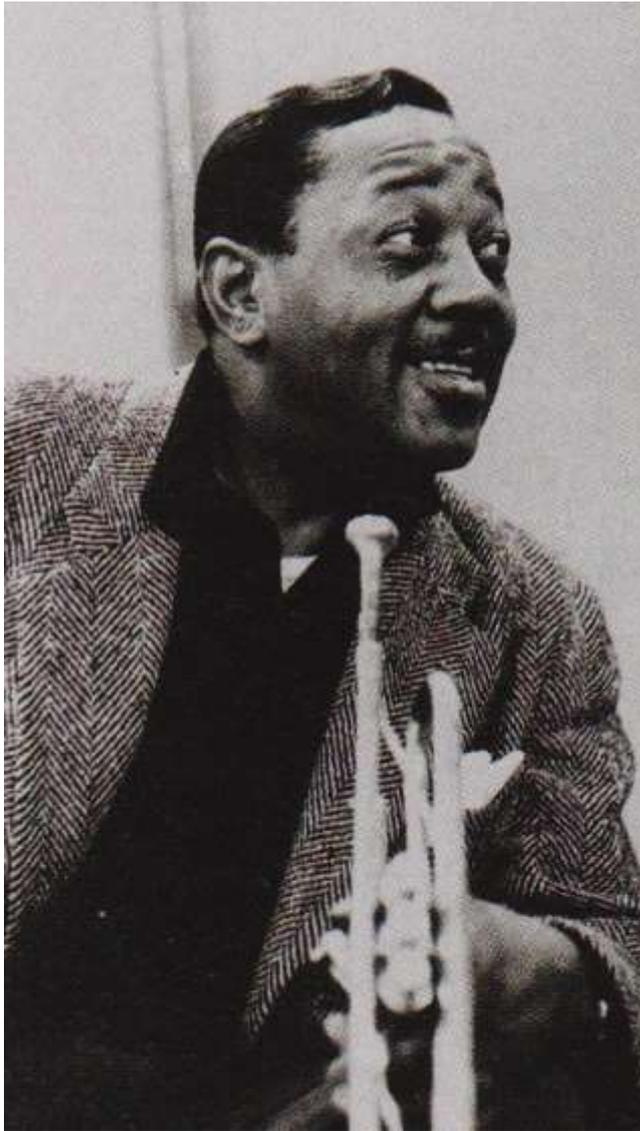
In this climate, Charlie Parker established himself as one of the High Masters, amongst older musicians, and amongst exponents of the new extensions. He established mastery not only with his originality, but with his virtuosity and with his harmonic knowledge, his extempore fluency in every key; in short, with his consummate musicianship.



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The first reaction of many listeners was that he had completely broken through the bounds of dance or entertainment music; perversely in the minds of many. It seemed to them that he made no attempt to sustain a consistent mood or a danceable beat. He might come on hot and strong for a few bars and then be off in some remote region of obscure rumination. He seemed to ignore the symmetrical phrase lengths so helpful to dancers. When you thought a phrase should be rounded off, it flared on over the bar line, and sometimes spun on and on in dizzy chromatic spirals that created a momentum of their own, adjacent to the beat.

But hadn't Roy Eldridge done all this to a degree? Hadn't there been an increasing tendency to create more contrasts, to spice the underlying harmony with passing tones, to encompass a greater range of feelings, to include the subtler emotions, to demand more and more the attention one has to give the development of, for instance, a movement in sonata form?



*Roy Eldridge: an explorer himself in his time, he suddenly felt redundant...*

It was not so much that Bird was different, musically, as that he was the lot all rolled into one. Musicians have made a name for themselves and have indeed expressed themselves powerfully by concentrating on one or two aspects of Parker's playing, but when Bird was in full flight, when you 'had ears' for what he was doing, he seemed to touch every nameless feeling you had ever had, and all the familiar ones, in such rapid juxtaposition that it seemed to come at you all at once.

In simple terms, Parker discovered that you could play more music on every chord, that every chord could be replaced by a related one, opening new vistas of tonal relationships. Rather than shattering what had gone before, he brought it to a new fruition, and as a little time passed, heightened its meaning. The new verse redeems the ancient rhyme. Some musicians felt threatened, inadequate, and some simply did not like it. Roy Eldridge was depressed for some while. An explorer himself in his time, he suddenly felt redundant. Then, some years later, he listened to the *Jazz At The Philharmonic* recordings on which he had been thrown together with Parker and other new stylists, and he heard that what he had done had its place in there, still sounded valid.



*“Go in and hear the truth,” said Al Cohn (above) to a young musician outside a club where Charlie Parker was playing...*

“Go in and hear the truth,” said Al Cohn to a young musician outside a club where Charlie Parker was playing.

It was the truth because it was the essence of the time for those who lived that life, as the best jazz had always been.

What was that life? What was the ethos which Charlie Parker seemed to embody? Most obviously it was an urban life, a modern life. It would be silly to call bop impressionistic or programmatic, but it seems to me it is still the most accurate and detailed realisation in music of the threats and possibilities of city life.

By reducing the emphasis of cyclically recurring accents, by reducing the up and down bounce as well as any cyclic tilting in its basic pulse, it created a feeling of pure speed at up tempo. Accents tick tocked and exploded unpredictably over this directional flow, between the beats, behind, before them, on them, seeming to accelerate or retard the beat, while the speed remained, after them as before. Lifting patterns came and went, like powerful but scarcely seen pressures. Hectic polyrhythms accumulated and peeled off.

No one could take so much advantage of this concept as Parker. Even at dirge tempo (the boppers would sometimes play not only faster, but slower also than jazz had ever

been played before) he would suddenly leap and race and make oblique strikes at the edges of harmony. It seemed to show ways of flying through the complexities of urban life; sometimes scalding hot, sometimes cool and inscrutable, it reflected the oblique cross town passages of the hipsters. For there was the feeling not only of urban life, but of the hip urban life, for whatever we may take that to mean.

The term hipster has been applied to a range of 20th Century types — from beatniks to zoot-suiters — and I have neither space here nor the scholarship to throw a great light on its permutations and derivations. However, I should give some indication of the complex strands which lead towards the state of hipness.

Immediately we might think of the white hipsters described by Jack Kerouac, who were drawn to Charlie Parker, and also to swing era musicians. It should be said that they read the same anarchic message in the solo flights of Illinois Jacquet and Flip Phillips as they did in those of Parker and Gillespie. It is clear that some of them were fleeing a 'square', and stultifyingly secure background. For the black hipster, almost the reverse was the case.



*Jack Kerouac (centre) with Al Cohn (left) and Zoot Sims (right)...*

I think it is safe to say that the black hipster was the byproduct of the Negro's attempt to enter the mainstream of American life after slavery. Of course he was not really allowed to do that, and a subculture sprang up of people living on their wits on

the fringes of respectable society. Some created a peculiar parody of that society — straightened hair, solid prosperity expressed in tremendously exaggerated suits with huge shoulders and yards of drape-shape cloth. They lived on their wits and they constructed their own system of values and pursued their own indulgences. To do this under the eyes of respectable society required furtiveness as well as flash. Somehow the two could be reconciled.

One either played Uncle Tom or one wore the mask. One was cool, and by conceptual extension, invisible. One lived the secret life. One had esoteric knowledge. One was hip. Lester Young, from whose style sprang Charlie Parker's, might be seen as a hipster, with his elaborately distanced manners, his inscrutability, his own language, or more accurately, code.



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Other impulses contributed to the distancing — to the wearing of wide hats in the zoot suit era, to the wearing of sunglasses by some bop musicians. The sunglasses (and I should say I can't recall seeing a photo of Parker wearing them) were a means of establishing distance from the audience, of saying 'this is serious music. We ain't gonna smile and sweat and tap dance for you'. And of saying, 'We don't give a shit whether you understand it or not, it's ours'.

Parker was seen as the epitome of all this, but not because he was the first. He was marked out by his musical genius, and by the extremes to which he took everything. The question which remains is, of course, whether Parker's impulsive, unpredictable mode of life was the result of a philosophy or simply a survival strategy. Whether Parker had really achieved a Zen or an Existential (whatever that means) state of mind, or whether he was just a super-typical product of his environment.

Certain courses were laid down for Parker which it would have taken enormous strength of will to avoid. It seems that he was addicted to heroin at a very early age (the story is that a relative first 'shot him up' at 16). He had neither the desire nor the ability to clown and sell his music to an audience.

Assessments of his character by contemporaries are startlingly contradictory. Miles Davis and Max Roach finally left him because they were sick of trying to get their rightful pay (they got it once at knife point, or so the story goes). It is said that he could use people around him and then, having got what he wanted, treat them as objects for ironic derision.



*Max Roach (left) and Miles Davis (centre) with Sonny Rollins (right): Roach and Davis left Bird because they were sick of trying to get their rightful pay...*

At the same time, his wife, Chan, insists that he was a kind, loving person. Trumpeter Red Rodney, who played with him for three years, said, "He was very considerate to other people. He was really a very modest, humble man".

His personality, like his playing, seemed to contain the lot. There is no doubt that he was a remarkable individual. Having left school at 15, he startled some mathematicians by solving a problem he overheard them discussing. They could not believe he had not had higher mathematical training.



*Parker with his wife Chan: she insists that he was a kind, loving person...*

Some saw him as having achieved some kind of ‘living for the moment’ — the eternal present, and so on — enlightenment. In the view of one writer he had a ‘personality disorder’ which prevented his seeing why he should not have exactly what he wanted, when he wanted it, regard less of the consequences to himself or others. In other words, he was just a very selfish fellow. He was brought up in poverty, but spoiled nevertheless by his mother, after his father, an out of work song and dance man, had drifted away. This is cited in support of the latter theory.



*Jay McShann: note the experience Parker gained playing in McShann’s basic, jumping band out of Kansas City...*

If he had attained enlightenment, I do not find the thought of his being followed about by drug pushers very enlightening — except insofar as it showed that he was quite normal, despite his genius. Nor do I believe that his various addictions and excesses contributed essentially to his musical achievement.

More important than any of that, it seems to me, were the hours he spent in his room, with the green curtains drawn, painfully teaching himself to play in every key, and the experience he gained of playing in Jay McShann's basic, jumping band out of Kansas City.



*John Clare can think of no element of the jazz which had preceded Bird that was not still present in his own music...*

To the end of his life Parker loved all kinds of music, from the modern classical composers to the earthiest blues and the most forthrightly sentimental pop songs. He did not throw anything out. I can think of no element of the jazz which had preceded him that was not still present in his own music. What may at first appear to be absent can be found soon enough in a subtler form.

One could now turn about and write as many words on Parker as a musical revolutionary. He did, after all, extend the jazz vocabulary further in one swoop than anyone since Louis Armstrong — with the possible exception of that strange case Art Tatum, in whom one can hear pre-echoes of things as far on as McCoy Tyner. He did take off and fly untrammelled in regions where others had extended kites, with tight hands on the strings.

It depends on whether you see bop as a new language or a broadening of the old. It depends a great deal on what you think jazz is and should be about. Parker was a revolutionary to those who believed jazz should be dance and entertainment music, and an innovator to those who value jazz as a conscious artistic expression of modern times.

In truth, Parker did not invent a new musical system. All his harmonic liberties had long been taken by Debussy, Stravinsky and Bartok. He did invent a way of using some of these extended harmonic possibilities in the jazz idiom, within the rhythmic continuum which seems unique to jazz, and without destroying the blues tonality which is also one of jazz's most distinctive features. Others came later with more ponderous and deliberate European graftings. While these efforts are not without interest, how much more like jazz does Parker's music sound — and how much more daring and sophisticated? I believe it sounds that way because it is firmly rooted in the jazz tradition.

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## ON CHARLIE PARKER

by John Clare

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*[John Clare reviews the album One Night in Washington: Charlie Parker with the Orchestra (Elektra Musician E1-60019). This review also appeared in the September/October 1982 edition of Jazz Magazine.]*



Here is part of the Charlie Parker legend made suddenly real with the release of previously unissued tapes.

Accounts abound of Parker arriving unexpectedly and taking over. In some instances he is said to have come in through the door playing, and all the musicians on the stand have let their instruments fall from their mouths. In this case he was scheduled to appear, but because of his increasing unreliability by 1953, nobody was sufficiently confident to include his name in advertising for the concert. However, he did come, with a plastic alto (his brass saxophone probably in hock), too late to rehearse or even look at the charts, and while all the wind players did keep their instruments to their mouths and read the arrangements, it is doubtful that any of them would ever forget the compelling mastery of Parker's spontaneous inventions.



*The arrangements by such as Johnny Mandel (above) and Gerry Mulligan (below) are interesting enough, with some unexpected modulations...  
BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY PINTEREST*



The Orchestra was a big band sponsored by broadcaster Willis Conover. The arrangements — by such as Al Cohn, Johnny Mandel and Gerry Mulligan — are interesting enough, with some unexpected modulations. Considered to be the height of sophistication at the time, from Parker's first entrance they begin to sound

somewhat dated. At times they smack more of Hollywood than of jazz, and sound most interesting when Parker weaves his ad lib lines through the sections.

This may sound uncharitable and divisive, and Australian musicians who are still influenced by this kind of arranging might take offence. However, there is a point to be made. Around this time, Cool or West Coast jazz was thought by some to be the final product towards which bop had been leading — in an unschooled darky sort of way. These values are often thrust on reluctant young musicians here. There is some point to it, if the teachers concerned are prepared to admit that they are aiming for a “commercial product”, and therefore widening the prospects of employment for their young pupils. Don’t let’s have them pretend they are teaching “what jazz is all about”. For, I ask you, what sounds more vital, more advanced, more interesting today — these arrangements or Parker playing from the jazz tradition? And whose craftsmanship is the more impressive in retrospect?



All that aside, this is some of Parker’s best work on record. The apparent casualness with which he peels off the most daring figurations, the intensity with which the most abstract ideas are expressed, the sheer unfailing fluency of it all, create the feeling of spirit manifest. Technical difficulties seem not to exist. His line is like a track of light.

This is achieved, however, by an exceptional mastery of harmony and technique. One thing that will always astonish other saxophonists is the ease with which Parker plays complex phrases in registers where the fingering is very difficult. That is where he hears it and that’s where he plays it. A chorus of Parker presents a more compelling reason for students to learn their basics than the complete works of Mandel, Rugolo and Kenton combined.

However many modern jazz cliches have been appropriated by Hollywood and TV, playing like this always seems to stand apart from it. Well, for me, that’s jazz.