THE DEATH OF CHARLIE PARKER

by David Kastin*

This is the "Overture" in David Kastin's book "Nica's Dream: The Life and Legend of the Jazz Baroness" (2011), his biography of Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter. It appears before Chapter 1, with the title "Bird in the Baroness's Boudoir".

Whether frozen in Weegee's tabloid flash or shrouded in the murky chiaroscuro of the era's low-budget movies, New York in the 1950s is a city in black and white. The familiar images seem to offer both the gritty texture of reality and the comforting illusion of a simpler time. But on 52nd Street, neon lights flicker from the brownstone facades, and within the basement jazz dens audiences gaze up through an azure scrim of cigarette smoke at musicians haloed in tinted stage lights.

52nd Street in 1948: New York's "mid-town jazz mecca..." *PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB*

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For over a decade, "the Street," as it was known among the late-night set, had been New York's mid-town jazz mecca. But by the mid-1940s, its swing-era stalwarts and Dixieland jazz veterans were being challenged by a vanguard of young modernists still in search of a label for their radical new style. Over the next few years, they would largely overcome the resistance of mainstream jazz fans (and fellow musicians), settle on a name (bebop) that none of them particularly liked, and anoint one of their own as the movement's reigning deity. Like the gods of old, Charlie Parker was both omnipotent and capricious. But while his astonishing virtuosity and boundless creativity seemed to transcend the mortal realm, his fearsome destructiveness was directed only at himself.

Charlie Parker: his fearsome destructiveness was directed only at himself... PHOTO COURTESY GARY GIDDINS BOOK "CELEBRATING BIRD"

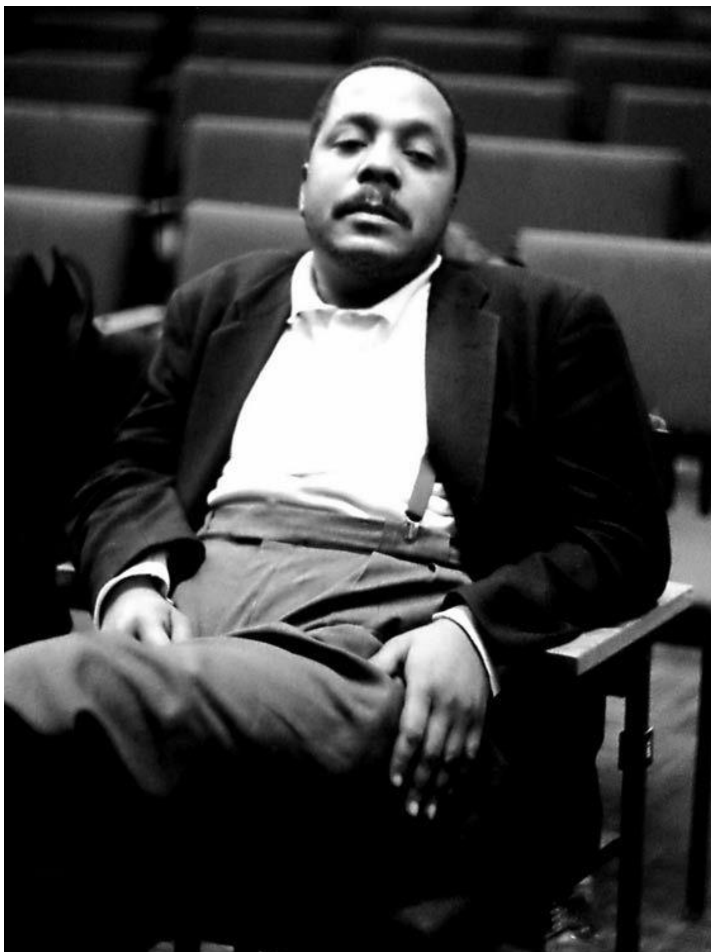
Known to even the most casual jazz fan as Yardbird, or simply Bird, Parker not only helped forge the new style of jazz in Harlem's after-hours jam sessions, but beginning with the 1945 release of his groundbreaking bebop anthem, *Ko Ko*, he produced a decade-long string of revolutionary recordings of both his own engaging compositions and his transformative adaptations of popular songs—that were shot through with technical brilliance and blazing inventiveness. He also amassed a legion of devoted acolytes who sought to emulate his every attribute, document his every solo, and preserve his every bon mot—and tragic flaw—in well-honed anecdotes.

Among the tangible manifestations of Bird's status as the once and future King of Bop, was the establishment of his own musical Valhalla, a new 400-seat jazz club at the intersection of 52nd Street and Broadway, appropriately dubbed Birdland. The club, which opened in late 1949, was owned by Irving and Moishe (Mo) Levy, Bronx-born brothers with organized crime connections; managed by the only slightly less notorious Oscar Goodstein; and hosted by Pee Wee Marquette, an ill-tempered three-foot nine-inch midget. From the beginning, the ambi-ence of Birdland reflected the conflicted nature of the man for whom it was named—a volatile combination of transcendent artistry and drug-induced dysfunction.

Morris Levy (born Moishe Levy), one of the founding partners of the Birdland jazz club…

Over time, the club would prove to be a microcosm of the dark side of New York's mid-century jazz scene, characterized by drug dealing, financial exploitation, prostitution, Mob-sponsored strong-arm tactics, police shakedowns, and random violence. Although celebrities (including Ava Gardner, Elizabeth Taylor, Marlon Brando, and Sammy Davis, Jr) could often be found at front-row tables, late one night Irving Levy, the club's co-owner, was stabbed to death while tending bar (an unsolved crime the tabloids dubbed "the Bebop Killing"); another night, Miles Davis was assaulted by the police for "loitering" a few feet from the front door during one of his own gigs. In retrospect, it might have been an omen when, one morning not long after the club opened, the birds that had been placed in cages around the room were all found dead (probable cause: smoke inhalation).

Although Bird played on opening night and appeared there numerous times, by 1954 his unreliability and erratic behavior had made him persona non grata at the club that bore his name. During this period Parker also became ensnared in a series of personal tragedies. In fairly quick succession he had suffered the loss of his infant daughter, separated from his wife, attempted suicide (by swallowing iodine), was sued by his own band for breach of contract, and checked himself into Bellevue Hospital for acute depression. He had been off heroin for months, but he was typically drinking a quart of alcohol a day. Nevertheless, he was somehow able to line up a trial engagement at Birdland for the weekend of March 4 and 5, 1955, with an all-star band that included Art Blakey on drums, Charles Mingus on bass, and the brilliant but emotionally fragile Bud Powell on piano.



*At Birdland on March 4 and 5, 1955, Parker's all-star band included the brilliant but emotionally fragile Bud Powell (above) on piano...*PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Opening night got off to a bad start when an obviously inebriated Powell greeted Parker with unprovoked hostility: "You know, Bird, you ain't shit. You don't kill me. Man, you ain't playing shit no more." The next night was even worse. When Parker showed up half an hour late, he was publicly chastised by Birdland's hard-nosed manager; and after joining the band onstage he was drawn into another verbal altercation with Powell, who was so drunk he could barely keep his fingers on the

keyboard. Challenged by Parker to shape up, Powell unleashed a string of curses and abruptly walked off the stage, while Bird stood at the microphone in a kind of trance, calling out Powell's name over and over—"Bud Powell . . . Bud Powell . . . Bud Powell . . . Bud Powell . . ." — as the audience slowly filed out of the club. Later, after downing a string of double whiskeys, Bird ran into Charles Mingus. "I'm goin' someplace now pretty quick," he told the bass player, "where I won't be able to bother nobody."

Just a few nights later, however, Parker scheduled an engagement at the Boston jazz club Storyville in the hope that he could put his career back on track. He never made the gig. On March 12, 1955, a stormy Saturday night in New York City, Charlie Parker died, at the age of 34. While jazz insiders who had been following his precipitous decline could hardly have been shocked at his demise, even some of his most fervent admirers were startled at its rarefied setting.

For Bird aficionados, Parker's death was fraught with bizarre discrepancies and unanswered questions that immediately gave way to conspiracy theories. Why did his body lie unclaimed in the city morgue for three days? Why were there two divergent cause-of-death statements? Why was he initially identified as "John Parker, age 53"? And why did rumors of a fatal blow suffered at the hands of a famous jazz drummer immediately circulate within bebop's inner circles? But when the news of Parker's death finally make it into the New York newspapers the following Tuesday morning, the headlines prompted a very different question: how did bebop's troubled genius come to meet his fate in a Fifth Avenue hotel suite overlooking Central Park that was the residence of an English baroness?

The baroness in her apartment (with her cats): how did bebop's troubled genius come to meet his fate in a Fifth Avenue hotel suite... that was the residence of an English baroness?

Of the various New York newspapers that reported on Parker's death, it was the *Daily Mirror*, a Hearst-owned tabloid, that provided the most colorful coverage, beginning with the classic hardboiled headline—"Bop King Dies in Heiress's Flat"—which appeared above its front-page mast-head. Following the (mis)identification of Parker as a "53-year-old" saxophonist, and the race-conscious reference to his white wife, Chan, as a "lovely fair-skinned brunette," the page-three story presented a fairly straightforward account of how Parker had been taken ill shortly after arriving at the "swank Fifth Ave apartment of the wealthy Baroness," a mother of five children ranging in age from 5 to 18," who described herself as "an avid music lover and jazzophile." Although the paper reported that "Dr Robert Freyman [sic], of 9 E. 79th Street [sic]," had been immediately called to treat him, Parker died a few days later "of an acute heart attack" while "watching a TV show."

Parker, pictured in 1951 with his wife Chan, who was referred to as a "lovely fair-skinned brunette," in the "Daily Mirror"... *PHOTO COURTESY GARY GIDDINS BOOK "CELEBRATING BIRD"*

A soberer account buried inside the *New York Times* added some context to the story by describing Parker's place in the jazz pantheon ("Mr Parker was ranked with Duke Ellington and Count Basie and other outstanding Negro musicians"), but it too gave prominence to the lofty locale of Bird's death. After identifying the location as "the apartment of the Baroness de Koenigswarter in the Hotel Stanhope, 995 Fifth Ave-nue," the *Times* informed its readers that "the Baroness, who is 40 years old, is the

former Kathleen Annie Pannonica Rothschild of the London branch of the international banking family of Rothschild."

So while initial reports of Charlie Parker's passing focused on what had led him to the Stanhope suite of a Rothschild heiress, before long the question became, what was she doing there? In the following weeks, gossip columns and scandal sheets launched a barrage of speculation about the answers to both.

The first to weigh in was Walter Winchell. On March 17, his syndicated column, "Walter Winchell of New York," carried a blind item about Bird's death that was charged with racial paranoia and sexual innuendo: "We colyumed about that still married Baroness and her old-fashioned Rolls Royce weeks ago—parked in front of midtown places starring Negro stars. A married jazz star died in her hotel apt. . . . Figured." One of the era's celebrity pulps, exploiting the murky circumstances of Bird's death, punningly hinted at "fowl play," while an *Expose* magazine story, "Bird in the Baroness's Boudoir," drew on its deepest reserves of purple prose to depict the innocent jazzman as the victim of an exotic (and perhaps ethnically suspect) seductress: "Blinded and bedazzled by this luscious, slinky, black-haired, jet-eyed Circe of high society, the Yardbird was a fallen sparrow."

Columnist Walter Winchell: his item about Bird's death was charged with racial paranoia and sexual innuendo...

While the tabloid spotlight soon turned to other titillations, the short-lived attention of the media had already taken its toll. After hearing the news reports linking his estranged wife to the fallen Bop King, Baron Jules de Koenigswarter, who was then serving as the representative of the French government in New York, initiated divorce proceedings. Meanwhile, the management of the Stanhope Hotel, which had grudgingly tolerated its guest's "unsavory" visitors, made it clear she was no longer welcome. After holding out for a few months, Baroness de Koenigswarter climbed into her Rolls-Royce convertible, drove across Central Park to a spacious apartment

at the (initially) more accommodating Bolivar Hotel, and, seemingly undaunted, resumed her singular role in New York's insular jazz subculture in relative anonymity.

A few years later, however, Nat Hentoff wrote a lengthy profile for *Esquire* magazine heralding de Koenigswarter as "the most fabled figure on the New York jazz scene," and the subject of "more fanciful speculations . . . than anyone in jazz since Buddy Bolden" (a reference to the shadowy, never-recorded New Orleans cornet player often cited as the "first man of jazz"). For the next three decades, Nica, as she was known to the cognoscenti, continued to play a supporting role in what Hentoff called "the inner councils of jazz," and over time, the legend of the "Jazz Baroness" became permanently woven into what remains one of the music's central myths: the decline and fall (and resurrection) of Charlie Parker.

Jazz writer Nat Hentoff: in his lengthy profile for "Esquire" magazine he described de Koenigswarter as "the most fabled figure on the New York jazz scene"...

Ironically, almost everything we know about the final days of bebop's tragic hero derives from a three-page statement Nica provided to Robert Reisner for his 1962 compendium of ornithological anecdotes and tributes, *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker*. Since Bird's sudden passing had generated a fog of paranoid fabrications and conspiracy theories, she began her account by attempting to debunk them.

As to the rumor that she had surreptitiously shipped off the body of the 34-year-old saxophonist to Bellevue (where it was supposedly tagged "John Parker, age 53"), Nica declared that in fact the doctor who had been treating Bird had arrived within five minutes of his death and the medical examiner had begun official proceedings within the hour. "He had Bird's name, Charles Parker, taken down absolutely correctly," she insisted, and "gave Bird's age as 53, because that was his impression."

Nica provided a three-page statement to Robert Reisner (pictured above) for his 1962 compendium of ornithological anecdotes and tributes, “Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker”...

She didn't correct him simply because "I didn't know." Point by point, Nica sought to set the record straight. Bird had simply shown up at her Stanhope suite, as he had on other occasions; he then collapsed on her doorstep, was treated by her personal physician, Dr Robert Freymann, and three days later expired while watching a juggler on a TV variety show.

In an effort to confront the fervid speculation that would haunt her for much of her life, she took particular pains to underscore the platonic nature of her relationship with Parker. "We did have a wonderful friendship going," she told Reisner, "nothing romantic." Along the way, she also recounted what has become one of the most treasured anecdotes in the sacred text of Bird lore. As Nica described it, during the doctor's initial examination of Bird, he asked the ailing saxophonist (who had been consuming prodigious quantities of alcohol for months), "Do you drink?" "Sometimes," Bird responded with a wink, "I have a sherry before dinner." Finally she engaged in a bit of mythmaking of her own, describing how, at the exact moment of Parker's passing, a tremendous clap of thunder echoed across the night sky above New York.

For hard-core jazz fans, Nica's narrative has taken on the aura of a bebop Passion play, or tableau vivant, each detail reverberating with profound significance. There in the foreground lies the lifeless figure of Charlie Parker, the savior sent to save mankind from the empty commercialism of swing (his crown of thorns the spikes of a heroin syringe); attending to his wounds is the good Dr Freymann (an extended finger directing the viewer's gaze toward the track marks on Bird's outstretched arm); and finally Nica herself, a modern-day Mary Magdalene (clutching the rent and bloody folds of a double-breasted pinstriped suit). And as if conceived to invoke the final element of the scene's metaphysical symbolism—painted on the backdrop's cityscape is the graffiti that had mysteriously begun appearing on the walls of Greenwich Village in the days after Parker's death: "Bird Lives!"

Since the baroness's own death, in 1988, a coterie of bebop loyalists and ardent Nicaphiles have also kept alive a Hirschfeldesque caricature of Pannonica de Koenigswarter, fashioned out of little more than a cresting wave of carefully coiffed black hair, an outsized cigarette holder, and a silver flask. A closer look at the 40-year reign of the Jazz Baroness, however, reveals an iconic figure whose extraordinary life was played out at the nexus of gender, race, and class during a transformative period in American popular culture. And while tabloid stories about an attractive European heiress openly consorting with African-American jazz musicians fed neatly into the era's racial and sexual hysteria, in fact the unique bond Nica forged with the jazz community transcended tawdry mid-century stereotypes. According to the bebop pianist Hampton Hawes, Nica's contributions also had little to do with the traditional tropes of noblesse oblige. "I suppose you would call Nica a patron of the arts," Hawes wrote in his memoir, *Raise Up Off Me*, a brutally honest depiction of his life as a jazzman and a junkie, "but she was more like a brother to the musicians who lived in

New York . . . There was no jive about her, and if you were for real, you were accepted and were her friend."

Pianist Hampton Hawes: he described Nica as a patron of the arts, but "she was more like a brother to the musicians who lived in New York"... COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS

In the years before Parker's death, Nica's Rolls-Royce (dubbed the Silver Pigeon) had become a fixture on 52nd Street, and she had developed personal relationships with a widening circle of jazz innovators, including the drummer Art Blakey, the pianist Horace Silver, and the tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, all of whom were now making regular appearances on "the Street" and each of whom would soon record a musical tribute to her. While most jazz fans continued to associate her with the scandal surrounding the death of Charlie Parker, Bird was only one of a score of jazz giants who were the beneficiaries of Nica's unwavering friendship and generosity. For example, following *Time* magazine's 1964 cover story on Thelonious Monk—which devoted a sizable portion of its feature to their intense, if unlikely, friendship—Nica became even more closely linked to the brilliant and inscrutable pianist who, two decades later, also died in her home.

Monk's own homage to the fabled Rothschild baroness, simply titled *Pannonica*, remains one of the most beloved of all his classic compositions. Although it first appeared on Monk's 1956 Riverside album, *Brilliant Corners*, a somewhat earlier solo version, captured on Nica's reel-to-reel tape recorder, has recently come to light. Here, in a spoken introduction, the usually taciturn pianist identifies the woman who

inspired his heartfelt ballad and offers an explanation for her unusual name: "It was named after this beautiful lady here," he explains. "I think her father gave her that name after a butterfly that he tried to catch . . . I don't think he caught the butterfly."

In relation to his homage to the baroness, simply titled "Pannonica", Thelonious Monk offered an explanation for her unusual name: "It was named after this beautiful lady here... I think her father gave her that name after a butterfly that he tried to catch"...

The baroness (left) pictured here with Monk, who also died in her apartment...

A few years later, when the jazz singer Jon Hendricks added lyrics to Monk's melody for a song he titled *Little Butterfly*, Hendricks directly addressed the intangible essence of its subject:

Delicate things, such as butterfly wings,
poets can't describe, 'tho they try.
Love played a tune
when she stepped from her cocoon.
Pannonica, my lovely, lovely, little butterfly.

And throughout her life, just like that elusive butterfly, Nica evaded every attempt to pin her down.

Other articles on this site, which may be of interest:

John Clare, "Charlie Parker The Artist", at this link
https://ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-20