

CHARLIE PARKER: TECHNIQUES OF
IMPROVISATION
VOL. I

T. Owens, 1974

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Music

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation

Volume I

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Music

by

Thomas Owens

1974

The dissertation of Thomas Owens is approved, and it is acceptable in quality for publication on microfilm.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of Sam Saxe, who cultivated the soil,
and to Dr. Robert Trotter, who planted the seed.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation

by

Thomas Owens

Doctor of Philosophy in Music

University of California, Los Angeles, 1974

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Charlie Parker (1920-1955) was one of the most important soloists in jazz. During his lifetime he was famous for his great technical facility and superior melodic inventiveness. Elements of his style of improvisation were widely copied by jazz musicians, and have made up a large part of the musical vocabulary of jazz for the past thirty years.

Parker's art is preserved in nearly 900 known recordings. From these, approximately 250 of his improvised solos were selected for transcription and study. One hundred and ninety of the transcriptions appear in Volume II, and are organized as follows: 1) a small group of early-period solos, recorded between 1940 and 1943; 2) the mature-period solos, recorded between 1944 and 1954. The latter are grouped according to key and, within each key-group, according to harmonic plan. For example, the B-flat-major solos fall into three sub-groups: solos based on the chords of the blues, of "I Got Rhythm," and of "Cherokee." Volume I, in the main, consists of a systematic examination of these groups and sub-groups of solos.

Much of the paper is devoted to Parker's use of motives, which are the building blocks of his improvised melodies. His principal motives, about 100 in number, vary greatly in size, shape, frequency of use, and application. Some of the shorter ones are adaptable to a wide variety of harmonic

contexts and thus occur frequently throughout the transcriptions. The longer ones often have well-defined harmonic implications, and are consequently rarer. Most motives occur in a number of keys, but some occur in only one or two keys, and a few occur only in a single sub-group in a single key (for example, in improvisations on "Night in Tunisia" in D minor).

Parker's decisions as to how to apply the motives were governed largely by the key and the harmonic plan of the piece being played. As a result, the catalog of motives is different for each key, for each sub-group within each key, and for each sub-group based on the same harmonic plan when that plan (such as the chords of the blues) occurs in more than one key. The details upon which these conclusions are based make up the central chapters of Volume I.

While specific motives often recur in specific locations within groups of pieces, the precise forms that they take are varied by means of metric displacement, augmentation and diminution, addition and subtraction of notes, and altered phrasing and articulation. In addition, they are juxtaposed in many different ways and are often connected by newly invented melodic material. Thus, no two improvised choruses are alike.

In the final portion of the paper, Salzerian (or Schenkerian) analysis is used to reveal larger aspects of Parker's melodies. The typical 12- or 32-measure chorus either prolongs a single pitch or presents some other simple melodic structure. Moreover, the structural pitches are almost invariably prolonged or connected by descending scalar passages. These descents are generally interrupted by chordal leaps and neighbor tones, and are further disguised by Interval inversions and octave-filling motion. While they are not obvious to the listener, they contribute greatly to the coherence of Parker's improvised melodies.

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Improvisation in Western music has had a long and varied, if sparsely documented, history. Some examples of improvisation have been notated during each period of our music history; many of these pieces are published in Ferand 1961. How close these notated pieces are to the actual performance is not known, since there is no way of ascertaining whether the notators reworked passages; but Ferand's accompanying essay establishes that improvisation played a role in virtually every main musical genre developed in nine centuries of Western music history. However, in choosing his examples, he excludes perhaps the most exciting period in the history of improvisation, our own century. In so doing he reinforces views of improvisation held by many within the musicological field. Willi Apel succinctly states these views in his Harvard Dictionary of Music when he writes that "the great days of improvisation" occurred when Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven were alive, and that today "the great art of improvisation has been lost, since it is no longer practiced by composers and survives chiefly among organ virtuosos." (Apel 1969: 404). His first point can hardly be argued pro or con, since we will never know exactly how those great composers improvised, but his second point represents a narrow view that ignores great traditions of improvisation in many non-Western cultures and snubs most improvising musicians in our own culture. Far from being a lost art, improvisation is flourishing and, for the first time in history, accurately documented by many thousands of hours of recordings. It plays a vital role, for example, in jazz, which has been preserved on record with increasing thoroughness since the 1920s. Indeed, the hundreds of recorded performances used for this dissertation represent only a fraction of the recorded jazz available for study.

In jazz, an Afro-American music that originated in the United States around the turn of the century, the typical piece is an unbroken series of harmonic variations, the melodies of which are partly or entirely improvised. The performing group usually consists of from three to six players, but may contain as many as sixteen or more. In a typical quintet, consisting of a trumpeter, saxophonist, pianist, string bassist and drummer, the trumpeter and saxophonist improvise most of the melodies, while the others provide continuous harmonic and rhythmic support, which is partially improvised but follows a precomposed harmonic plan.

This process of improvising harmonic variations is distantly related to the Spanish ostinato variations of the Renaissance, such as those of Diego Ortiz, and to the "divisions upon a ground" of seventeenth-century England. However, the musicians who founded jazz were unaware of these older genres, and the music they produced is fundamentally different rhythmically, melodically, and timbrally from these European traditions. Rhythmically jazz is closer to African traditions of improvised variations, although the passage of time and the repressive social pressures exerted by white Americans clouded the black musicians' memories of their ancestral music.

Jazz is largely a blend of musical elements of two traditions. Its metronomic sense and rhythmic precision, some of its rhythmic patterns, and its sense of spontaneity produced by improvisation come from Africa; its harmonic vocabulary, most of its melodic vocabulary, its instruments, and its form come from Europe. In addition, jazz contains some indigenous Afro-American techniques of tone production and pitch inflection.¹ This music had a folk origin, but by the 1940s had evolved into an art form, appreciated by a relatively small audience and played by a rigorously trained group of professional musicians. Differing radi-

cally in many respects from both African and European traditions, it is the most distinctively American contribution to the high-art musics of the world. Although jazz is now played by musicians in most countries of the world, all but a handful of the major figures in jazz history have been Americans, especially black Americans. One of the foremost of these black American musicians is the subject of this study.

For the past twenty years nearly every writer on jazz has named alto saxophonist Charlie "Bird" (or "Yardbird"²) Parker one of the key figures in the evolution of jazz. He and his colleagues, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Bud Powell, Kenny Clarke, Max Roach, and a few others, reworked the musical vocabulary of jazz in the 1940s and produced the style known as bop.³ Parker, with his great technical facility and superior melodic inventiveness, quickly earned the reputation as the finest performer in the new tradition. Elements of his style were widely copied, not only by other alto saxophonists, but by tenor and baritone saxophonists, trumpeters, pianists, and others. Countless players learned his recorded solos note for note, and sometimes even recorded them, or variations on them.⁴

The details of Parker's life have been documented several times, most recently in a fascinating book, Ross Russell's Bird Lives (1973a). Consequently, a brief biographical sketch will suffice here. He was born on August 29, 1920, in Kansas City, Kansas, and named Charles Parker, Jr. When he was seven his family moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where he lived for the next ten years. He acquired his meager formal musical training in public schools, where he played a variety of brass and reed instruments in various ensembles. His jazz training came during his teenage years, and primarily consisted of listening to the Count Basie Band and other groups appearing in the numerous jazz oriented night clubs in Kansas City, studying jazz record-

ings, practicing and applying what he learned by playing in small groups. Beginning in late 1937, he worked for a few months with a swing-style band led by well-known Kansas City pianist, Jay McShann, but quit to go to New York City, where he played intermittently and even washed dishes to earn a living. In 1940 he rejoined McShann's band and toured with him until July 1942. During both his initial stay and his subsequent visits to New York City, he frequently participated in after-hours jam sessions at Monroe's and Minton's, clubs that became important centers for young, experimenting jazz musicians.⁵ After leaving McShann, he worked in a variety of bands led by Earl Hines, Noble Sissle, Billy Ekstine, and others. By 1945 he was working mostly with small groups of bop-style players. Late in the year he left New York City, with a group led by Dizzy Gillespie, to play his first Los Angeles engagement, staying on the West Coast for a year and a half. In mid-1947 he returned to New York City to stay, although he often toured various parts of the country and visited Europe briefly in 1949 and 1950.

Superbly disciplined while in the act of making music, Parker was tragically undisciplined, unprincipled, and immature in virtually every other aspect of his life. He often took advantage of friends, borrowing their money, instruments, and clothing without the slightest apparent sense of obligation to repay them. He sometimes failed to keep performance engagements, causing many crises and near-crises in his professional career. He indulged his enormous appetites for alcohol, hard drugs, food, and sex with reckless abandon. The result was a series of problems that would crush any man: obesity, ulcers, cirrhosis of the liver, debts even during times of handsome earnings, broken marriages, suicide attempts, and institutionalizations. The wildly erratic life style he followed for years took its ultimate toll on March 12, 1955. Sources disagree as to the

exact cause of death; it may have been stomach ulcers, pneumonia, advanced cirrhosis, a heart attack, or any combination thereof.

Parker's recorded legacy begins in late 1940, when the 20-year-old saxophonist made some private recordings with the Jay McShann band for broadcast on a Kansas radio station. Other broadcasts and some studio recordings followed in 1941 and 1942, always with the McShann band. These 24 pieces plus a few pieces from some jam sessions are the only known recordings from his early period. More than two years elapsed before the next commercially-recorded solos appeared, and during that time his style underwent considerable change.

This two-year hiatus is primarily a result of a recording ban instituted by the American Federation of Musicians. On August 1, 1942, the Union prohibited its members from making any recordings that would be used on commercial radio programs and in juke boxes. The ban was an attempt to win better pay for recording musicians, and to force radio stations, restaurants, and night clubs to employ union musicians rather than to play records. It caused much public controversy, occupying the attention of the U.S. Congress, Justice Department, and Supreme Court. For over a year it was almost totally effective in keeping musicians out of the recording studios; they gradually returned during 1944 as the union negotiated contracts with individual companies.

In September 1944, when Parker first reentered a studio after the ban ended, his improvising style had evolved into its mature state. From September 1944 through December 1954 the recordings show no significant changes in technique or conception, and only a few subtle shifts in motive preferences can be documented during this ten-year period.

If by age 24 Parker had evolved musically, he had not evolved professionally, for he still found himself recording as a sideman in groups led by older, more established

musicians. Most of these groups were dominated by swing-style players, so Parker's style seems to be partially swing-oriented (although analysis refutes this impression). Even in the February 1945 session led by his fellow bop-style player Dizzy Gillespie, the rhythm section plays largely in the older style, blunting the impact of the new music. Only in the famous session of May 11, 1945 are the bop players clearly in control of the artistic direction.

The period of a year beginning in November 1945 brought great changes to Parker's professional and personal life. For the first time he entered the recording studio as leader of a session. Bop classics such as "Koko," "Ornithology," and "Night in Tunisia" were recorded that year. Although he occasionally recorded with swing musicians, it was clear that bop was the new movement in jazz and that Parker was the leader of that movement. Even the disastrous recording session of July 29, 1946, when he lost physical control of his actions and started a series of events that eventually led to his commitment to Camarillo State Hospital, failed to change the trend established by that time.

Early in 1947, Parker resumed his career with renewed vigor, temporarily free of drug addiction. From this point on, the discographies almost always list Parker as the leader of the recording sessions, concerts, and night club appearances. While the recordings reveal no gradual change in style, some unusually fine and some uncommonly poor records appear. The fine ones are discussed in later chapters; the poorest ones can be dealt with here.

In general, the least successful recordings involve string and choral groups. Unlike the bulk of his recordings, which are with small groups and permit uninterrupted improvisations, these contain frequent interruptions of dull passages anemically performed by rhythmically imprecise string and vocal ensembles. The portions of these pieces

devoted to Parker's Improvisations, for the most part, are frustratingly brief, and in some cases he apparently felt compelled to stay close to the melody rather than improvise freely.⁶ Yet poor as they were, these recordings achieved a measure of commercial success. Consequently, Parker made several concert and night club appearances with string groups and performed some of the same arrangements that he had recorded plus a few others of the same type. Thus, a total of 67 pieces from the Parker discography falls into this category of mediocrity.

A few sessions are of poor musical quality for different reasons. Throughout the session of January 30, 1953, Parker's playing was disturbingly lackluster and out of tune, partly because he was playing the tenor saxophone and apparently felt insecure on the larger instrument. On July 29, 1946 (mentioned previously), and in Spring 1948 and May 1952, he produced inferior recordings, probably because the mental and physical strains he suffered temporarily overcame him.

The excellent Parker discography compiled by Tony Williams lists nearly 900 performances and refers to several additional private recordings of unknown content. Of this tentative total, 360 were recorded in a studio under formal recording session conditions. As of this writing, 324 of this group are available; presumably the rest are lost or destroyed. In addition, 35 performances were broadcast from radio studios and are available on tape or disc. The rest, about 500 pieces, are from performances before concert hall, dance hall, and night club audiences, or from informal jam sessions and rehearsals. Often they were recorded by amateurs on cheap equipment, and their audio qualities are generally fair or poor. Nevertheless, they often reveal Parker at his most relaxed, expansive, and creative, for the restrictions of the 3-minute record are absent. A one-chorus solo from a studio recording becomes a two-, three-,

or four-chorus solo before an audience. Thus, many of these recordings, which may be trash to an audiophile, are pure gold to a jazz researcher.⁷

The typical recording dealt with in the course of this study was made by a quintet, consisting of Parker plus a trumpet player, pianist, string bassist, and drummer. The pieces is a set of harmonic variations on either a 32-measure theme in aaba form or a 12-measure blues, played in a bright tempo between $\downarrow = 125$ and $\downarrow = 250$. It begins with a short introduction played by the three-man rhythm section (piano, bass, and drums), and continues with the theme played in unison by Parker and the trumpeter. If the theme is a blues, it is often played twice. This same theme statement also occupies the last chorus (or last two choruses) of the performance, which either ends abruptly at that point or more smoothly with a short coda. In between the theme choruses are the improvised solos. Parker improvises first, followed by his trumpeter, who in turn is followed by his pianist in many cases. The chorus immediately preceding the final theme chorus is sometimes devoted to "trading fours" (alternating four-measure solos) between Parker and his trumpeter or drummer. Bass solos are rare except as substitutes for the b-section melody in the final chorus of an aaba theme.

This format is subject to a number of alterations but generally is found in both studio recordings, which last three or four minutes, and club and concert recordings, which often last two or three times as long. The solo sections constitute the chief variable between these two categories: the studio recording may contain only two or three solo choruses, while the club recording may contain eight, ten, or more choruses. In both categories Parker's solo is usually longer than those of his sidemen. Also, because of his superior skill, his solos are usually the artistic high point of the entire piece. Consequently,

his habit of playing the first solo of the piece makes little sense dramatically. Why he did not follow the format Louis Armstrong used in pieces such as "Muggles" (1928) and save himself for last remains a mystery.

Parker clearly had a number of favorite pieces in his repertory, pieces that he performed repeatedly during his career. Most of these will be examined in detail in subsequent chapters. They are:

Blues (many different titles)	175	known	recordings
I Got Rhythm (many different titles)	147	"	"
What Is This Thing Called Love (Hot House)	23	"	"
How High the Moon (Ornithology)	23	"	"
Easy to Love	15	"	"
Out of Nowhere	15	"	"
Scrapple from the Apple	14	"	"
All the Things You Are (Bird of Paradise)	14	"	"
Cherokee (Warming Up a Riff, Koko)	13	"	"
Night in Tunisia	13	"	"
Whispering (Groovin' High)	12	"	"
Repetition	11	"	"

Two of these pieces, "Easy to Love" and "Repetition," are on this list primarily because they are among the handful of pieces arranged for Parker and a string ensemble, and were, of necessity, played whenever Parker performed with such an ensemble. But the rest accurately reflect his preferences, since they were performed in studios, night clubs, concerts, and informal jam sessions. His preference for the blues and "I Got Rhythm" pieces is obvious; consequently, a substantial portion of this study is devoted to these important genres.