

THE VERVE
YEARS
(1948-50)

CHARLIE PARKER

*Presented chronologically,
the legendary recordings,
including the first
"Charlie Parker with Strings"
sides; the Dizzy Gillespie,
Thelonious Monk,
Buddy Rich, Curly Russell
session; and Parker's
first Verve recording,
"Repetition," with the
Neal Hefti Orchestra*

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SET



Parker you once read or heard, it is because such heroes became exactly what their creators want them to be—and the legend of Charlie Parker is essentially an up-date of the legend of Bix. But, although groups of Beiderbecke's admirers still gather—almost half a century after his death—for an annual rally, firm in their belief that “Bix lives,” hero-worshippers in jazz are a dying breed. Even the graffiti that once so widely proclaimed “Bird lives” has been all but washed away as a waning Coltrane cult forms the last vestige of romantic attachment to jazz heroes; new generations of cultists focus their attention on such latter-day saints as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

While tales of Charlie Parker's escapades, his bouts with drugs, his social or anti-social behavior, and the number of hamburgers he ate at some given point will undoubtedly continue to see print in versions of diverse magnification, his recordings remain a constant; untouched by human imagination (except Parker's own, of course), they comprise the only tangible evidence of his artistry and its development, at the same time giving us a traceable—if vague—chart of the man's emotional ups and downs. Briefly, lest Hollywood should one day tell you otherwise, the Charlie Parker story begins in Kansas City, Kansas, on August 29, 1920. His father, failing to make it as a song-and-dance man, worked as a Pullman chef, leaving the home altogether in 1931 to take up a life of pimping and gambling. Charlie's mother, Addie, employed as a domestic, encouraged his education and saved money in the hope of one day enrolling him in medical school. When it seemed obvious that her wishes would come to naught and that her boy's only real interest was music, Mrs. Parker, unhappy at the sight of her son marching in the Lincoln High School band with a cumbersome tuba coiled around him, spent \$45 of the money she had saved up for his education to buy him the aforementioned first alto saxophone, an instrument dating back to 1898 and said to have been in such poor condition that it took an even larger sum of money to make it function at all. “The instrument wasn't fit for the worst kind of amateur band,” recalled bass player Gene Ramey, who had recently moved to Kansas City when Parker, “a chubby, happy-go-lucky kid,” joined just such a band, Lawrence “88” Keyes' Deans of Swing. It was a third-rate dance band, but, being his first job, it represented a major step for Parker and took absolute precedence over any interest he might have had in school.

By 1935, Parker had dropped out of school, joined the professional ranks as a member of American Federation of Musicians Local 627, married one Rebecca

Ruffing, and fathered a child: he was all of fifteen years old. Soon he was spending more time at the Reno Club, listening to Lester Young, the important new saxophonist, than he was at home.

When Parker's domestic situation became intolerable, he pawned his sax and made his way to New York by way of Chicago, where Billy Eckstine heard him play. “He blew the bell off that thing... he

Parker's dishwashing job at Jimmy's Chicken Shack was made bearable by the fact that the place featured the music of pianist Art Tatum...

blew so much he upset everybody in the joint,” Eckstine told Parker biographer Ross Russell. But, despite the enthusiasm (or perhaps because of it), Parker soon moved to New York, where he stayed in the apartment of Buster Smith, one of his early Kansas City mentors.

Musically, Harlem was jumping in those days: the great bands had resident blacks and visiting whites stomping at the Savoy and truckin' down the aisles of the Apollo; house bands throbbled with infectious rhythm in numerous little clubs, priming the customers for the late-hour jam sessions to come. It was a time when one could hear the greats, the near-greats, and the ne'er-greats side by side, slashing the smoke with riffs and imagination. Parker, new to the Big Apple, made the rounds, listened, and sat in here and there, but he failed to stir up a job offer (at least, the paying, playing kind). He *did* find employment as dishwasher and general pot cleaner at Jimmy's Chicken Shack, a popular restaurant on St. Nicholas Avenue where prominent black performers and sports figures congregated in the pre-dawn hours for a bit of food and fresh gossip. Parker's job was made bearable by the fact that the place also featured the music of pianist Art Tatum, whose eloquent style—incorporating clever musical quotations into impressive cascades of sound—made Parker think of the speed with which one could produce notes on the saxophone, and in general influenced his musical concepts. When Tatum left Jimmy's three months

later, so did Parker. Tatum went to play on the West Coast, Parker to his first New York gig, grinding out tired music for tired feet at the Parisien Ballroom on Broadway in the Times Square area. After-hours, Parker continued to sit in with more compatible musicians at such Harlem spots as Clark Monroe's Uptown House and Dan Wall's Chili House; both were eminently suitable for nurturing the seeds Tatum, Young, and others had planted in Parker's musically fertile mind. It was at the latter place, while rendering “Cherokee,” that Parker is said to have “hit upon a new way to go.”

That new way, using an eighth note as the basis for melodic rhythm, helped to chart a course jazz would soon be taking. But it is a fallacy to claim that Wall's customers that night witnessed the spontaneous birth of be-bop; by a strange coincidence, Dizzy Gillespie—then somewhere in transition between the Teddy Hill and Cab Calloway bands—was developing his own harmonic concepts that would prove to be the salt for Bird's egg.

Before anyone really paid attention to his music, Parker was called back to Kansas City by the death of his father; prior to returning to New York, he spent five weeks as a member of Harlan Leonard's Rockets, followed by a more successful stay with a new band led by pianist Jay McShann. In November of 1940 the touring McShann band stopped in Wichita where eight of its members—including Parker—recorded some transcriptions for radio station KFBI. Recently unearthed, they represent Parker's earliest recordings and give us an interesting glimpse of Charlie Parker on the threshold of his genius—a glimpse that, frankly, would not be terribly interesting had it all ended there. But it didn't end there; Parker was still with McShann when the band came to New York in 1942 to record a few sides for Decca. “When I look back,” Gene Ramey told *Jazz Review* in 1960, “it seems to me that Bird was at that time so advanced in jazz that I do not think we realized to what degree his ideas had become perfected.” When the McShann records were released (the band also had recorded in Dallas and Chicago the year before), and the band began coast-to-coast broadcasts from the Savoy, musicians began to notice Parker's playing, but few knew his name, as it was rarely if ever mentioned.

In the summer of 1942, when McShann took his men back to Kansas City, Parker was the only one who stayed in New York. Living off his share of the kitty, Parker became a regular at Monroe's. It beat washing dishes, but the kitty seldom yielded a decent amount, and Parker's normally plump figure is said to have dwindled down to pathetic proportions by the time two members of Minton's house

band, Thelonious Monk and Kenny Clarke dropped by to hear him. “He was playing twice as fast as Lester, but using harmonic Lester hadn't even touched,” recalled Clarke. “He was running the same way we were, but he was way ahead of us.” Monk and Clarke persuaded Parker to join them at Minton's, and so strong was their desire to have him play there that they paid him out of their own pocket when manager Teddy Hill refused to add him to the payroll. With former Teddy Hill band member Dizzy Gillespie a frequent visitor to Minton's, the addition of Charlie Parker to the group was comparable to finding the final jigsaw-puzzle piece.

But, as it all began to come together professionally, Parker's personal life began to fall apart: heavy drinking and increased indulgence in drugs had made him a shell of himself. He had divorced his first wife and married a second, but he continued to live the life of a gypsy, moving from rooming house to rooming house. Concerned about Parker's deteriorating condition, trumpeter Benny Harris managed to get him a regular job with the Earl Hines band, replacing Budd Johnson on tenor. Though Hines was the product of another era in jazz (that of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven, stomping flappers, and scorching bathtub gin), his musical thinking had advanced with the times; this is probably the reason that young revolutionaries such as Gillespie, Parker, and trombonist Benny Green—the avant-garde of the early 40s—

As the 40s pressed toward the 50s, Parker continued to breathe new life into American music, but he was slowly and painfully taking his own.

so easily managed to infiltrate the Earl Hines Orchestra. Due to the American Federation of Musicians' recording ban at this time, there is a two-year gap in the chronology of jazz recordings; one of the most unfortunate consequences of the ban is that this particular Hines Orchestra—the cradle of be-bop—lives on only in the ebbing memories of a diminishing rank of people who saw it in live performance.

Those who did hear the band as it toured extensively on the theater circuit were becoming aware for the first time of a remarkable pair called Bird and Diz.

Although the band placed Parker in excellent company, and the arrangements gave him some room within which to work, Parker began to find it too restrictive, calling it a "jail" on more than one occasion. He was happier in 1944 when—back on the alto—he joined the more bop-oriented Billy Eckstine band, which also featured Dizzy Gillespie and the singing of an Earl Hines discovery, Sarah Vaughan.

The year 1944 was an important one, not only for Charlie Parker—who appeared for the first time on a commercial recording featuring his mature style—but also for the music he represented. As more and more ears were getting accustomed to the new sound, what had appeared "weird" just a few months earlier now clearly seemed to be the direction in which to go. By the following year, Parker had begun a series of extraordinary small band recordings under his own name; the new music had been christened "be-bop"; and Dizzy Gillespie had become the most prominent exponent of the new style. Gillespie's extroversion gained him such publicity that he became well-known to thousands of people who were not familiar with the music he represented and probably had never even heard of Charlie Parker; on the other hand, serious listeners were often put off by Dizzy's clowning—to them, Parker, or "Bird" ("Yardbird") as he was then called, was the true genius of the new movement.

As the 40s pressed toward the 50s, Parker continued to breathe new life into American music, but he was slowly and painfully taking his own. The effect of drugs and hard living is evident in some of his recordings—particularly the ones made for the Savoy and Dial labels—but even on the brink of collapse he never produced a sound that did not merit attention.

In 1946, Parker appeared on the West Coast, taking part in a Jazz at the Philharmonic concert that marked the beginning of a long and fruitful association with jazz impresario Norman Granz. Parker's recorded performances with JATP, including a breathtaking rendition of "Lady Be Good," will appear on future albums in this Verve reissue series. The present set is devoted to recordings made under Parker's leadership between the fall of 1948 and June of 1950 for various Granz-owned labels. Arranged in chronological order, it is the initial release in a series of reissues which will contain all the Granz/Parker sessions up to and including Parker's last appearance in a recording studio, just three months before his death.

The settings are diverse, but Parker's brilliance overcomes even the most

ludicrous accompaniment: for example, the opening track, "Repetition," a Neal Hefti orchestral arrangement written without a soloist in mind. The Hollywood-style arrangement is in such contrast to Parker's creative outpouring that some critics are convinced it is an overdub (which almost certainly is not the case). As chronology would have it, this set also contains four quartet selections (from two different sessions) and two early 1949 sessions with a quintet and septet including trumpeter Kenny Dorham, who—at 25—already was a veteran of several name bands. (The omission of "Diverse" from these sessions is deliberate, it being in actuality an inferior take of "Segment.") Side two features in its entirety Parker's celebrated 1949 session with strings (and Mitch Miller's oboe). Cries of "commercialism" were heard when these sides first appeared, but recognition of Parker's uncompromising solos has long since silenced such accusations. Jazz musicians often have been attracted to the melodic, pretty backgrounds that strings can provide, and although Parker's string accompaniment may have raised the ire of some critics, it stimulated the desire of many of his fellow musicians to follow suit and in fact started a veritable fad. Closing this set is the highly-touted Bird and Diz "reunion" session, which also features Thelonious Monk and the top bassist of the time, Curly Russell. Though one might wish that Granz had chosen a drummer better-suited than Buddy Rich for such company, this session produced some of the finest Gillespie/Parker work on record. With virtually unmatched rapport, the two giants create tremendous excitement and leave us with a taste of how it all began.

Five years after these recordings were made, Charlie Parker's life ended and his legend began. The romanticists and sensationalists would probably not have bothered with Charles Parker, Jr., if his life had been a so-called normal one, and much less would have been written about him if he were still among us, a family man living in the suburbs. Charlie Parker is indeed a legend, but not because he had to suffer humiliations, not because he fell prey to drugs, and not because he was a genius relegated to a rooming house. He is a legend because he was one of the foremost creative artists America has ever produced, a man whose influence on the music that was his life has yet to be measured and probably never can be. If America ever learns to venerate its creative artists, Charlie Parker's name would not be out of place on top of the list, but that will be the day they scrap the "Star-Spangled Banner."

Chris Albertson is a contributing editor to *Stereo Review* and author of the book, *Bessie*, a biography of blues singer Bessie Smith.

SIDE 1

REPETITION

(Hefti) (2071-5) 2:55 ASCAP

Recorded in New York City, Autumn, 1948.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone) with Al Porcino, Ray Wetzel, Doug Mettome (trumpet); Bill Harris, Bart Varsalona (trombone); Vincent Jacobs (French horn); John LaPorta (clarinet); Murray Williams, Sonny Salad (alto saxophone); Flip Phillips, Pete Mondello (tenor saxophone); Sam Caplan, Harry Katzman, Gene Orloff, Ziggy Smitnoff, Sid Harris, Manny Fidler (violins); Joe Benaventi (cello); Tony Aless (piano); Curly Russell (bass); Shelley Manne (drums); Diego Iborra (congo, bongos); Neal Hefti (arranger, conductor)

THE BIRD

(Parker) (2081-5) 4:40 BMI

Recorded in New York City, February, 1949.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone), Hank Jones (piano), Ray Brown (bass), Shelley Manne (drums)

CARDBOARD

(Parker) (292) 3:05 BMI

VISA

(Parker) (293) 2:55 BMI

Recorded in New York City, April, 1949.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone), Kenny Dorham (trumpet), Tommy Turk (trombone), Al Haig (piano), Tommy Potter (bass), Max Roach (drums), Carlos Vidal (bongos)

SEGMENT

(Parker) (294-3) 3:17 BMI

PASSPORT

(Parker) (295) 2:56 BMI

Recorded in New York City, May 5, 1949.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone), Kenny Dorham (trumpet), Al Haig (piano), Tommy Potter (bass), Max Roach (drums)

SIDE 2

APRIL IN PARIS

(Harburg/Duke) (321-3) 3:03 ASCAP

SUMMERTIME

(Gershwin/Heyward) (322-2) 2:43 ASCAP

IF I SHOULD LOSE YOU

(Robin/Rainger) (324-3) 2:43 ASCAP

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TIME IT WAS

(Rodgers/Hart) (323-3) 3:09 ASCAP

EVERYTHING HAPPENS TO ME

(Adair-Dennis) (320-3) 3:13 ASCAP

JUST FRIENDS

(Lewis/Klenner) (319-5) 3:26 ASCAP

Recorded in New York City, November 30, 1949.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone), Mitch Miller (oboe), Bornislaw Gimpel, Max Hollander, Milt Lomask (violin), Frank Briett (viola), Frank Miller (cello), Meyer Rosen (harp), Stan Freeman (piano), Ray Brown (bass), Buddy Rich (drums), Jimmy Carroll (arranger, conductor)

SIDE 3

STAR EYES

(Raye/DePaul) (371-4) 3:26 ASCAP

BLUES (Fast)

(Parker) (372-12) 2:42 BMI

I'M IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

(McHugh/Fields) (373-2) 2:48 ASCAP

Recorded in New York City, March-April, 1950.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone), Hank Jones (piano), Ray Brown (bass), Buddy Rich (drums)

BLOOMDIDO

(Parker) (410-4) 3:21 BMI

AN OSCAR FOR TREADWELL

(Parker) (411-3) 3:17 BMI

SIDE 4

MOHAWK

(Parker) (412-3) 3:45 BMI

MY MELANCHOLY BABY

(Norton/Burnett) (413-2) 3:21 ASCAP

LEAP FROG

(Parker) (414-4) 2:26 BMI

LEAP FROG (alternate take)

(Parker) (414-6) 1:58 BMI

RELAXIN' WITH LEE

(Parker) (415-2) 3:51 BMI

Recorded in New York City, June 6, 1950.
Charlie Parker (alto saxophone), Dizzy Gillespie (trumpet), Thelonious Monk (piano), Curly Russell (bass), Buddy Rich (drums)

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THE SELECTIONS:

REPETITION

Charlie Parker (alto saxophone)
with the Neal Hefti Orchestra

THE BIRD

Parker, Hank Jones (piano), Ray Brown (bass),
Shelley Manne (drums)

CARDBOARD

VISA

Parker, Kenny Dorham (trumpet),
Tommy Turk (trombone), Al Haig (piano),
Tommy Potter (bass), Max Roach (drums),
Carlos Vidal (bongos)

SEGMENT

PASSPORT

Parker, Kenny Dorham (trumpet), Al Haig (piano),
Tommy Potter (bass), Max Roach (drums)

APRIL IN PARIS

SUMMERTIME

IF I SHOULD LOSE YOU

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TIME IT WAS

EVERYTHING HAPPENS TO ME

JUST FRIENDS

Charlie Parker and Strings

STAR EYES

BLUES

(Fast)

I'M IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

Parker, Hank Jones (piano),
Ray Brown (bass), Buddy Rich (drums)

BLOOMDIDO

AN OSCAR FOR TREADWELL

MOHAWK

MY MELANCHOLY BABY

LEAP FROG

LEAP FROG

(alternate take)

RELAXIN' WITH LEE

Parker, Dizzy Gillespie (trumpet),
Thelonious Monk (piano), Curly Russell (bass),
Buddy Rich (drums)

By Chris Albertson

Exceptional artistic talent, a colorful yet somewhat shrouded personal life, and a premature, tragic death seem to be the essential ingredients that go into the making of a jazz legend. Two of the earliest such figures

—Charles “Buddy” Bolden and Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke—died in 1931, the year a certain Mrs. Parker of Kansas City, Missouri, gave her son Charles his first alto saxophone. Bolden, a New Orleans cornetist, became a mental patient in 1907—before anyone thought of making jazz records; Beiderbecke, a Davenport-born cornetist, died an alcoholic at age 28—before anyone thought of becoming a jazz writer. The coincidence is worth noting because Charlie Parker, who made many records in a time when there were many jazz writers, became the most influential—and perhaps the last—jazz legend of them all, an object of the mass media penetrating the once-private lives and thoughts of people in the public eye.

As the 30s drew to a close—and Parker, in his late teens, unwittingly prepared to shape the future of jazz by absorbing every nuance of Lester Young’s solos on the first Count Basie records—the earliest attempts to chronicle the history and development

of this new music were beginning in earnest. The first book on the subject, Robert Goffin’s *Aux Frontieres du Jazz*, was only five years old; *down beat* magazine was in its third year; swing—the latest outgrowth of jazz—was well on its way to becoming America’s most popular music, and some of the men who led those big bands were about to be subjected to idolization such as only Hollywood celebrities previously had seen. As the legion of jazz fans grew throughout the world, and the new breed known as the record collector began scouring the country for rare jazz discs and colorful anecdotes, there arose the inevitable need for a romantic hero from the past. Bolden, whose music and life style by then had become, at best, somebody’s thirty-year-old memory, was simply too mythical to fit the bill, but Beiderbecke, besides being handsome and white, seemed tailor-made for the part: his lyrical style of playing—well-documented on records—earmarked a person of high sensitivity; first-hand accounts of his life style were plentiful, revealing intriguing eccentricities (imagine, he slept with his socks on!); and, being the truly misunderstood genius such figures ought to be, Bix drank himself to death, drowning—so the story went—his artistic frustrations in alcohol, as Paul Whiteman and a money-conscious society exploited his genius in their pursuit of commercial success.

If it all sounds like a story of Charlie
(continued)

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