

APOLLO

EDUCATION

APOLLO THEATER
WALK OF FAME
LEGEND

CHARLIE
"YARDBIRD"
PARKER

CHARLIE "YARDBIRD" PARKER



© Herman Leonard Photography, LLC

Charles Parker Jr. was born August 29, 1920 in Kansas City, Missouri, just blocks from the famous jazz clubs which lined 18th Street and Vine. In his teens, he listened and learned from the great jazzmen in Kansas City. Bandleaders like William "Count" Basie, and saxophonist Lester "Prez" Young, stomped the blues away night after night, at **venues** like the Hi Hat and Reno Club.

Asking his mother for an alto saxophone at age 12, Charlie didn't become serious about the instrument until age 15. After more than one experience playing at **jam sessions** growing up, and being laughed off stage, Charlie became determined to get better so to never be laughed at again.

Modeling himself after saxophonists like Leon "Chu" Berry, and his mentor Henry "Buster" Smith, Charlie started practicing several hours a day. Kansas City bandleader, Jay McShann, took notice of the young saxophonist's improvement, and hired Charlie to play in his big band. It was during his time with McShann, that Charlie received the nickname "**Yardbird,**" or what many endearingly shortened to simply, "Bird."

In early 1942, the Jay McShann Orchestra was booked to play the Savoy Ballroom in New York. Their arrangement of "**Cherokee,**" which featured Charlie's strikingly different approach to **improvisation**, was broadcast live over the radio. Musicians listened in awe, having never heard someone solo with such flawless technique and limitless harmonic invention.

Trumpeter John Birks "**Dizzy Gillespie**" and pianist **Thelonious Monk**, who both heard Charlie at the Savoy, were also experimenting

WORDS TO KNOW

Venue

A place to see and hear live music.

Jam Sessions

An informal gathering of musicians who call songs on the spot.

Improvisation

To make something up on the spot, such as a musical solo.

Bebop

A fast-paced, improvised music which developed in the 1940s; extending the rhythmic, harmonic, and technical complexities of jazz.

Standards

Songs commonly played amongst musicians, respective to a given musical style.



© Herman Leonard Photography, LLC

FUN FACTS

“Yardbird”

Parker received his nickname while playing with the Jay McShann Orchestra. On their way to a gig outside of Kansas City, they accidentally ran over a chicken, often referred to as a yard bird in the south. Charlie insisted they stop, pick up the yard bird, and at the first opportunity, cook it for all to enjoy. From that moment on, his band mates called him, “Yardbird.”

“The Firebird”

In 1951, while playing at Birdland, Parker learned the famous Russian composer, Igor Stravinsky, was in the audience. At breakneck tempo, Charlie quoted the beginning to Stravinsky’s “[The Firebird](#)” while improvising over his own composition, “[Ko Ko](#).” Stravinsky was so delighted by Bird’s musical wit, he roared with laughter, and spilled his drink on nearby neighbors.

with new ways of approaching jazz in the 1940s. Monk’s jam sessions at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem, which Bird and Dizzy regularly played in, led to the creation of a fast-paced, technically challenging music, called **bebop**.

While the big band era had lost popularity by the end of World War II, orchestras like those of Earl “Fatha” Hines and Billy Eckstine, remained virtual breeding grounds for the new generation of beboppers which emerged. Along with Bird and Dizzy, saxophonists Gene Ammons and Dexter Gordon, trumpeters Miles Davis and Fats Navarro, drummer Art Blakey, and vocalist Sarah Vaughan were all alumni of the bebop big bands.

Though born in Harlem, bebop grew up on **52nd Street**, in clubs like the 3 Deuces and Birdland, which was named after Bird. Parker’s first recording as a leader, in 1945, featured 19-year old trumpeter Miles Davis, drummer Max Roach, and Dizzy playing both trumpet and piano. The session produced such classic bebop **standards** as “[Ko Ko](#),” “[Billie’s Bounce](#),” and “[Now’s The Time](#).”

Pursuing his love of classical music, [Charlie Parker with Strings](#) was recorded in 1949. Parker premiered the collection of Broadway standards at Birdland in 1950, followed by the Apollo Theater and Carnegie Hall later that same year.

Charlie “Yardbird” Parker died of pneumonia on March 12, 1955. His legacy laid the roots for exploring new directions in jazz and changed the course of music history forever. In turn, generations of jazz musicians have built upon Bird’s legacy, growing wings of their own, and setting flight to new musical **innovations**.

BIRD AT THE APOLLO

Parker played at the Apollo Theater on several occasions throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, including his performances with strings in 1950 and 1951. In late 1951, Bird had his cabaret license (which all musicians had to carry in order to play in venues that served alcohol) revoked. The Apollo became one of the few places Parker could perform at between 1951 and 1953, when his license was reinstated. In 2013, the [Complete Bird at the Apollo](#) recordings were released on RLR Records, showcasing Parker’s historic performances at the theater.

“I’D LIKE TO STUDY SOME MORE, I’M NOT QUITE THROUGH YET. I DON’T CONSIDER MYSELF TOO OLD TO LEARN.”
— CHARLIE PARKER



DID YOU KNOW?

52nd Street

52nd Street was the place to be for bebop in the 1940s and 50s. Venues like the 3 Deuces and Onyx Club featured the greatest bebop bands of the day. In 1949, Birdland opened on Broadway and 52nd Street in New York City, named in honor of Parker, who was at the height of his popularity both in the United States and Europe.

“MUSIC IS BASICALLY MELODY, HARMONY, AND RHYTHM, BUT PEOPLE CAN DO MUCH MORE WITH MUSIC THAN THAT.”

— CHARLIE PARKER

experience could be considered an innovation? What can you take that already exists, and in some way make it new?

Taste Test

Charlie Parker loved many different styles of music, evident by his recordings ranging from small group bebop, to playing with classical strings, to Machito's Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite. *What different musical tastes do you have? How can you combine those different tastes into making music uniquely your own?*

Smile for the Camera

Charlie Parker appeared on camera only two times. His first appearance, for a pre-recorded soundie filmed in 1950, featured saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, pianist Hank Jones, bassist Ray Brown, and drummer Bernard “Buddy” Rich. The second appearance, featured Bird and Dizzy playing the bebop standard “Hot House” at the 1952 Downbeat Awards, sponsored by Downbeat Magazine.

Innovation in Jazz

Bebop musicians took songs that already existed and did something new with them. In jazz, similar innovations have developed almost every decade since the early 1900s. *What in your life*

CREDITS

Written by
Tim Sullivan

Apollo Theater Education Staff

Shirley C. Taylor
Director of Education
Debbie Ardemendo
Associate Director of Education
Jason Steer
Education Manager
Princess Belton
Education Coordinator
Chinai Hardy
Education Associate

Photo Credits

Charlie Parker and The Metronome Allstars
Charlie Parker, New York City, 1949
Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, 1949
© Herman Leonard Photography, LLC

Designed by
Van Gennep Design

Leadership support for education programs from:



The Ronald O. Perelman Family Foundation

Generous support from Apollo EmpowerHer, Conscious Kids Inc., Con Edison, Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation, Insperty, The Reginald F. Lewis Foundation, Ellis L. Phillips Foundation, Pinkerton Foundation, and public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.