



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Charlie “Yardbird” Parker (1920-1955)

Arguably the most famous saxophonist in history and one of the most notable jazz musicians of all time, Charlie Parker was an improvisational genius, leaving his mark on both jazz and bop music. Parker’s name is spoken among other legendary jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, and has served as an inspiration to decades of musicians who’ve followed.



Charlie Parker was born in Parsons, Kan., the only child of Charles and Addie Parker. The Parkers moved to Kansas City while Charlie was still a boy. His first exposure to music came at school, where he played baritone horn in the band. At age 15, Parker’s interest turned to the alto saxophone. In no time, Parker was playing with semi-professional groups and local bands before he left to pursue a music career in 1935.

For the next four years, Parker, or Bird as he was referred to, played with a variety of local bands but focused mainly on mastering his craft. He spent a great deal of time listening to other legendary jazz musicians perform in Kansas City and learned more through trial and error from playing in competitive bands and jam sessions. It was also during this time that Parker joined fellow Kansan Jay McShann’s band.



The group toured in Chicago and New York, which prompted Parker to move to New York. Here Parker recorded his first tracks with McShann’s group and participated in more jam sessions when he wasn’t working odd jobs to support himself. While washing dishes at a local restaurant, Parker met Bidley Fleet, from whom he learned about musical harmonies. He began hearing something that was missing from performances but couldn’t yet translate this into the music he wanted to play.

Parker briefly returned to Kansas City, playing with Harlan Leonard’s Rockets after his father passed away. He returned to New York to play with McShann from 1940 to 1942 and continued recording with the group, including solo performances on tracks like “Sepian Bounce” and “Confessin’ the Blues.” He caught the attention of Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk while performing at Minton’s Playhouse and Monroe’s.



In 1942, Parker left McShann’s group to play with Earl Hines for a brief time. Finally, in 1945, Parker led his own group and performed with Gillespie in several ensembles. The pair spread their music to the opposite coast on a nightclub tour in Los Angeles. In 1946, Parker suffered a nervous breakdown and spent six months in a state hospital to help combat his heroin and alcohol addictions. Upon his release, he returned to New York to start a quintet.

Miles Davis, Duke Jordan, Tommy Potter, Max Roach and Parker combined to perform some of Parker’s most notable pieces. At the end of the decade, Parker performed overseas to adoring fans and made a number of recordings before attempting suicide twice in 1954. Parker died in 1955 from a bleeding ulcer and pneumonia. Bird left behind a wife and two children, along with a musical legacy filled with brilliant and innovative improv that is truly one-of-a-kind.

