

# Charlie Parker

Jazz Great  
1920-1955

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by Elonda Clay

Charles Christopher “Bird” Parker, Jr., was born in Kansas City, Kansas, August 29, 1920. At age seven, Parker came to Kansas City, Missouri, and began studying music. “When he was only a child, he wanted to be a music maker,” said his mother. He played baritone horn as a freshman at Lincoln High School. By age 15, he was serious about the alto sax. A year later, at age 16, Parker left school and put his age up four years to join the Local 627, a musician’s union.

In 1937, he was playing in Kansas City with Jay McShann. That same year he and his first wife Rebecca had a son. Two years later he met the legendary Dizzy Gillespie. The year following, at age 20, Parker said goodbye to Kansas City, heading for the Big Apple.

In New York, he went from marriage to marriage, from alcohol to drugs. Meanwhile, he played alto sax with the greats—Earl “Fatha” Hines, Cootie Williams, Billy Eckstine, and Dizzy Gillespie. Parker was versatile. He played tenor sax, doubled on clarinet, and experimented on practically every brass and woodwind known.

Parker is credited as an originator of bebop, the jazz style that followed the big band swing era. New York audiences were far more receptive to the new bebop jazz style than their Los Angeles counterparts during 1945-46. Bird’s dependence on drugs increased while playing with Dizzy Gillespie’s trio for hostile California crowds. His self-destructive course climaxed in his first suicide attempt. A stay of seven months in Camarillo State Hospital followed. He bounced back, and two years later was leading his own group on the West Coast.

In New York City, Birdland opened in 1949. That dance hall immortalized his name and his inimitable style. Another suicide attempt placed him in Bellevue Hospital in 1954. Amazingly, the following year he played again at Birdland. It was his last engagement, however. The next week he died of heart failure, pneumonia, and cirrhosis of the liver.



During his short life span of 34 years, Charlie Parker's musical genius brought new innovation to jazz music. His funeral was held in Harlem, but he was brought back to Kansas City for burial in Lincoln Cemetery. A sculpture in his honor is located in the city's historic 18th and Vine district.

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