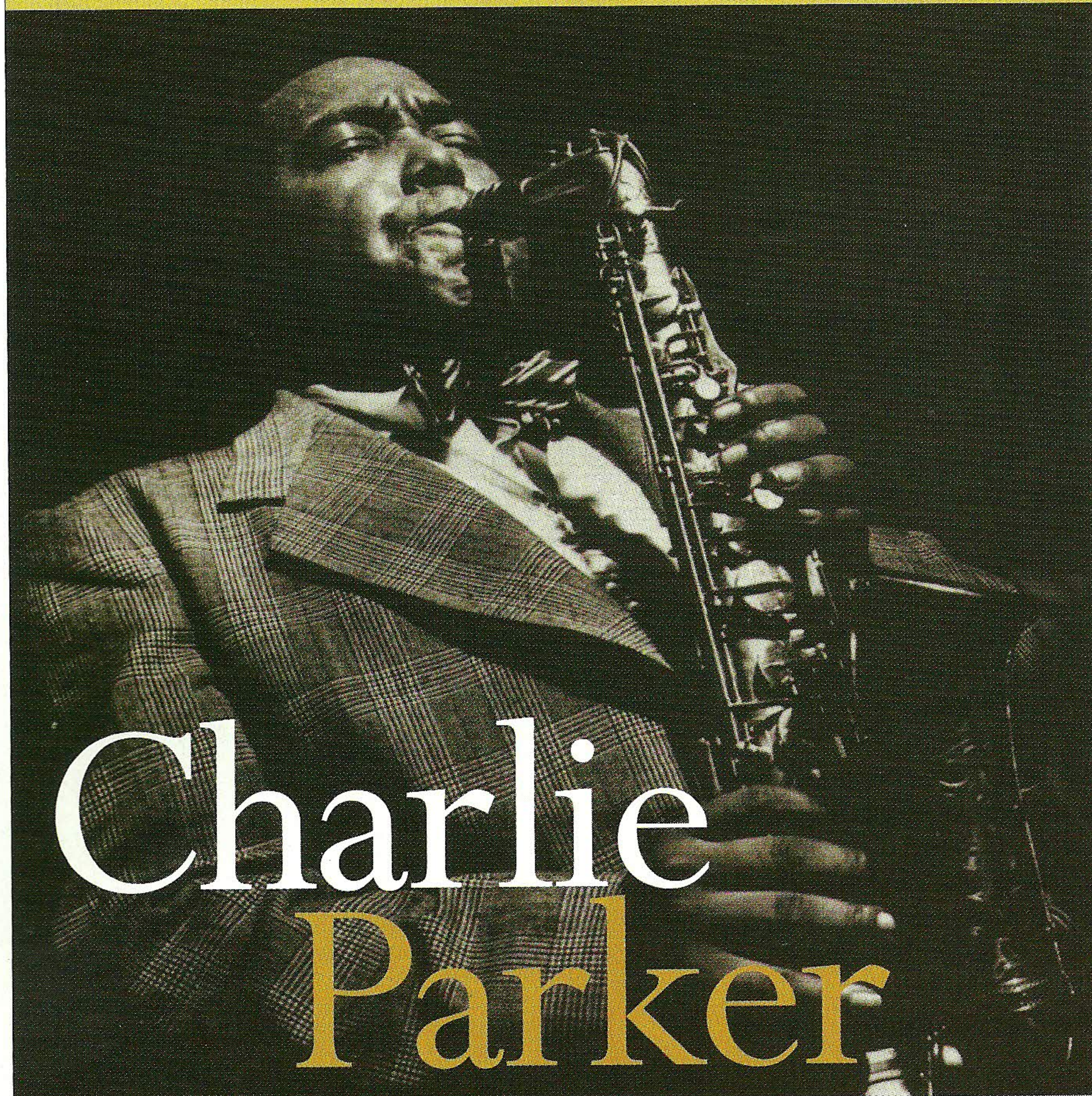


> "Don't play the saxophone. Let it play you." —CHARLIE PARKER



Charlie Parker

WHO: Charlie Parker

WHAT: Widely regarded as the greatest saxophonist of all time.

WHEN: Charlie Parker was one of the most influential jazz musicians of the 1940s and 1950s. He was born on August 29, 1920, and died on March 12, 1955.

WHERE: Parker was born in Kansas City, Kansas, but grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, where jazz, blues and gospel music were growing in popularity. He was 15 when he first started playing baritone sax in his school's band.

WHY: Parker was an icon for the Beat generation, and was a pivotal figure in the evolving conception of the jazz musician as artist and intellectual, rather than just a popular entertainer.

THE STORY: Charles Christopher "Yardbird" Parker, Jr., or "Bird" was an amazing saxophonist who gained wide recognition for his brilliant solos and innovative improvisations.

He started playing the baritone sax in his school's band at 15 but found that he preferred the alto saxophone. He was also married at 15. As a teenager, he developed a morphine addiction while in the hospital after an automobile accident. Substance abuse would plague him for the rest of his life.

He played in local bands and toured the Southwest where he got his nickname. He saw a car hit and kill a farmyard chicken, and he grabbed it for his dinner, exclaiming, "I want that yard bird." He soon went to New York where he was quickly discovered by other rising stars like (trumpeter) Dizzy Gillespie and (pianist) Thelonious Monk. Parker blended his jazz with other genres including classical

and Latin, something that other artists would do thereafter. He was regarded as one of the great blues players as well. However, Parker's musical innovations led him to become the central figure in a complex new form of jazz known as bebop, so-called because of the sounds Parker and other musicians of the time were making.

Parker's rapid and ragged improvisations were startling. Bebop musicians often played well-known standards, but instead of relying on a song's basic chords, they introduced extended harmonies, chord fragments, alterations and substitutions. Parker could play complicated and searing solos over these harmonies at very fast tempos—yet each note would be correct and make musical sense. But he was also able to play sensitive and expressive ballads. Parker said that he built chords on the higher intervals of a tune's harmonies in order to play solos he heard in his head. This new sound was criticized by some established jazz musicians, whom the beboppers called "moldy figs."

Parker became so popular that his solos were written down by other saxophonists wanting to copy him note-for-note. In 1953, Parker, Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Bud Powell and Max Roach recorded *Jazz at Massey Hall*, judged by many critics to be one of the best recordings of live jazz ever.

Parker's last public performance was an engagement at Birdland, a nightclub in New York that was named in his honor, on March 5, 1955. He died a week later, after a lifetime of drug and alcohol abuse (although the official cause of death was a bleeding ulcer and pneumonia). The coroner mistakenly estimated Parker's age to be between 50 and 60: He was 34 years old.

There are hundreds of recordings available of Parker in the studio, in concert, and in after-hours jam sessions. His life is chronicled in Clint Eastwood's film, *Bird*. **T**