

Charlie Parker's Yardbird

Music by Daniel Schnyder
Libretto by Bridgette A. Wimberly

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Charlie Parker's Yardbird

Opera in one act, sung in English

Music by Daniel Schnyder

Libretto by Bridgette A. Wimberly

Premiered June 5, 2015, Opera Philadelphia, Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts

THE CHARACTERS

Charlie Parker, *Bird, Yardbird* Tenor

Addie Parker, *Parker's mother* Soprano

Rebecca Parker, *Parker's first wife, high school sweetheart* Mezzo-soprano

Doris Parker, *Parker's third wife* Soprano

Chan Parker, *Parker's fourth wife (although they were never married)* Soprano

Dizzy Gillespie, *Parker's friend and musical colleague*..... Baritone

Baroness Pannonica "Nica" De Koenigswarter, *jazz patroness, Parker's friend*....

..... Mezzo-soprano

Inmates at Camarillo State Mental Hospital, Birdland patrons

SYNOPSIS

by **Bridgette A. Wimberly**

As his body lies misidentified in the morgue, Charlie's ghost enters Birdland, a 500-seat club named after him that also featured caged finches as decor. Celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, and Joe Louis could be seen there regularly. Owing no part of Birdland, Charlie was kicked out in 1954 after an altercation with another musician. On March 4, 1955, he made his final appearance there. Eight days later he was dead.



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c. Dominic M. Mercier
- Opera Philadelphia

A Synopsis of the Opera

His spirit, both surprised and inspired, now stands in this new Birdland. Here, he will create his final masterpiece. He is interrupted by Nica, his friend, who appears frantically in search of his wife Chan, so she can tell her Charlie is dead. Charlie needs all the time available to write. Nica, on the other hand, needs Chan to claim Charlie's body and end the potential nightmare of the press announcing that he has died in her hotel suite forcing the hotel to evict her.

Charlie tries to write but the notes will not stay on the paper. As a master of improvisation, Charlie long realized that the twelve semitones of the chromatic scale could lead melodically to any key, freeing musicians from the twelve bar blues.

Needing a new freedom, Charlie is visited and inspired by people who have meant much in his life. With the inspiration of his strong mother Addie, three of his four wives, Rebecca, Doris, and Chan, and his partner in the jazz revolution that was bebop, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker will struggle to calm his demons and write his new masterpiece before his body is identified in the morgue and this gig is up forever.

Can he do it or will the demons of his past rear their ugly heads? Will he succumb to heroin or alcohol, or is he just too tired and sick to go on? Will he channel the strength and love of his mother, a woman who worked long hours to give him everything she could? He was her only child. Did she mother him too much or will he honor her with a new masterpiece? He left his first wife Rebecca with an infant son nearly 15 years earlier. Can she forgive him?

Charlie will bravely revisit Camarillo State Mental Hospital, a purgatory, searching for inspiration and healing. Will he find it and will he be able to forgive himself for the death of his daughter Pree, whom he could not save?



c. Dominic M. Mercier - Opera Philadelphia

Baritone Will Liverman as Dizzy Gillespie and tenor Lawrence Brownlee as Charlie Parker

Can her forgiveness save him? This opera searches for the music in dreams deferred and the power of redemption.

We proudly close the opera with "I know why the caged bird sings," the last stanza from "Sympathy," a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), understanding and acknowledging both the struggle and triumph of Charlie Parker.

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By George L. Starks, Jr., Ph.D.

Charles Parker, Jr., was born on August 29, 1920 in Kansas City, Kansas and grew up across the river in the fertile musical environment of Kansas City, Missouri. This was the wide open Kansas City of the Tom Pendergast Machine during which nightlife flourished. In the city's African American neighborhood, so did the music of Bennie Moten, Andy Kirk, and Walter Page. Count Basie from Red Bank, New Jersey, Lester Young from Woodville, Mississippi, and Mary Lou Williams from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania took up residence in Kansas City. Theirs was the Kansas City of all-night jam sessions, riff-based blues, spontaneous "head" arrangements, and blues shouters - big voiced vocalists who sang the blues.

This was Charlie Parker's Kansas City. He absorbed it all, particularly the lessons of residents like tenor saxophonist Young and alto saxophonist Buster Smith. From guitarist Efferge Ware he learned about chords and their relationships. Here, he played in the bands of Jay McShann, Tommy Douglas, and Harlan Leonard. During a road trip with the McShann band, Parker retrieved a chicken which had been struck and killed by the car in which he was riding, a retrieval that earned him the moniker "Yardbird."

But Kansas City could not contain Yardbird. It was in New York during the 1940s that Bird truly spread his wings. He was the perfect example of a prime axiom of jazz – one must find one's own voice. It was in Harlem after-hours sessions at Monroe's Uptown House and Minton's Playhouse that he, along with participants like Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Christian, Thelonious Monk, and Kenny Clarke, found nurturing environments for the development of a new music known as bebop.

Parker's innovations defined bebop and what came to be called *modern jazz*. Though rooted in tradition, the chord changes were nevertheless dramatic. On many levels the music became more complex. Parker's music demonstrated great harmonic acuity. He altered chords, developed new progressions, and substituted chords with substitutes! In pre-composed melodies and in improvisations, his work featured melodic twists and turns

that were completely new. Front line instruments interacted with rhythm sections in new and dramatic ways; pianists comped and drummers played polyrhythmically. He brought a new timbre to the alto saxophone and other saxophonists followed his lead. Most of all, the rhythmic sophistication that he brought to his music was unlike that of anyone who had preceded him.

The musical tradition of jazz has always been responsive to, and reflective of, the socio-cultural environment in which it is situated. Parker's music gave voice to much of what was felt in this country during the 1940s. This was particularly true of the African American community. Participation in the war effort led the black community to expect fundamental change in that community's position in American society. New times demanded new artistic expression, and bebop was a part of that expression.

Parker's contributions have been recognized in numerous ways. One of the first was Birdland, a jazz club in New York City named in his honor, which opened in 1949. Also, there is an annual Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in his adopted hometown of New York City, and a Charlie Parker Memorial sculpture in Kansas City. Largely as a result of the role it played in the development of bebop, Minton's Playhouse is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Dead at the age of 34, Parker had an enormous influence that has extended far beyond his lifetime. Much in the sense that Parker found his voice by studying the music of Lester Young, Buster Smith, and Chu

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Berry, many post-Parker musicians passed through his music on the way to finding their own voices. Today, bebop remains the principal style through which improvisation is taught in colleges and universities. Aspiring musicians on college campuses study Parker's improvisations and play his compositions. As a testament to his genius, recordings by Parker are still being issued or re-issued.

His influence is felt and heard both inside and outside of the jazz community. Evidence of that is *Charlie Parker's Yardbird*, the opera that you are here to witness this evening. What was written on walls in New York City after his passing in 1955 remains true today – "Bird Lives."

George L. Starks, Jr., Ph.D. is Professor of Music and Director of the Jazz Orchestra at Drexel University



Soprano Rachel Sterrenberg as Chan Parker c. Dominic M. Mercier - Opera Philadelphia

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by **Bridgette A. Wimberly**

On March 9, 1955, on his way to a gig in Boston, jazz great Charlie Parker stopped at the Stanhope Hotel to visit his friend and jazz patron, the Baroness “Nica” de Koenigswarter. He was near death; decades of heroin addiction, alcoholism, a bad heart, cirrhosis, and depression had taken their toll. His wife Chan had left him and moved to another state with their remaining children after the devastating death of their two-year old daughter, Pree.

For the next few days, Nica would try her best to nurse him back to health, soliciting the help of her physician who warned Charlie that he should be hospitalized or risk death, but Charlie refused. On March 12, while watching television, Charles Parker, Jr. died at the age of 34. His death certificate stated the cause of death as lobar pneumonia.

No good deed goes unpunished. The facts about his untimely death and what happened to him postmortem created quite a media sensation that followed the Baroness for the rest of her life.

Because Nica was part of the Rothschild family, her actions were attributed to covering up the scandal of a black man dying in a wealthy, married, white woman's hotel suite. Nica vehemently countered, stating she was only trying to help a sick friend get well and had immediately called the doctor when it appeared that he had passed.

Charlie was taken to Bellevue's Morgue with his correct name, and Nica said she wanted to find Chan to let her know about his death first, from a friendly source, before the newspapers or radio announced it. Nica searched all of New York, but Chan had moved to Pennsylvania.



Soprano Chrystal E. Williams as Charlie's first wife, Rebecca Parker, and soprano Angela Brown as Charlie's mother, Addie Parker in Charlie Parker's Yardbird

It wasn't until Nica was able to find and notify Chan's mother that Chan found out, adding a day or two more to Charlie's stay in the morgue. As soon as Chan claimed his body, however, Charlie's third wife Doris claimed him because Charlie and Chan had not legally married.

As they fought over his body and estate for decades, Nica was evicted from the Stanhope, a segregated hotel, and disinherited by her family. Her husband later divorced her and took custody of their youngest children. Unfortunately for both Chan and Nica, despite their best intentions, none of their good deeds went unpunished.

The women in Parker's life all lived full, long lives. Though, they would always be remembered in relation to the famous man whom they all once adored.

“If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn.”

–Charlie Parker, Jr.

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Charlie Parker's Yardbird

A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline



Parker and Fleet play in NYC



1931 Charlie Parker begins playing saxophone.

1936 Parker marries his high school sweetheart, Rebecca Ruffin.

Charlie injures his spine and ribs in a severe car accident. The doctor prescribes heroin for the pain.

1937 Parker performs at the Reno Club in Kansas City. His improvisations make the audience laugh. Drummer Jo Jones throws a cymbal at Charlie's feet to tell him to leave the stage. This becomes a defining moment in his life and a legendary moment in jazz history.

1939 Parker performs regularly at a 55th Street club in Chicago.

Bebop is born during a jam session with Parker and William "Biddy" Fleet.

1942 Parker begins performing with Dizzy Gillespie

1943 Parker briefly marries Geraldine Scott.

1945 "Greatest jazz session ever," Parker records for the Savoy label an album with Gillespie, Miles Davis (trumpet), Curley Russell (bass), and Max Roach (drums).

1946 Parker committed to the Camarillo State Mental Hospital for heroin and alcohol rehabilitation.

1948 Charlie marries his third wife, Doris Sydnor.

"Jazz at the Philharmonic" tour, which includes Charlie Parker, performs at Civic Opera House.

1949 Parker records "Charlie Parker with Strings."

1920 Charlie Parker is born in Kansas City, Kansas.

1928 Civic Opera House opens in Chicago.

1920s

1930s

1940s

Charlie Parker's Yardbird

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Dizzy Gillespie

1950 Parker begins living with Chan Richardson. They never marry.

Charlie Parker performs three nights at Chicago's Pershing Hotel Ballroom (64th and Cottage Grove). Recordings are later released as live albums.

1953 Dizzy Gillespie's trumpet bell is accidentally bent 45° and the horn becomes his signature.

1954 Inaugural season of Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Parker's daughter Pree dies from complications of cystic fibrosis.

1955 Charlie Parker dies in New York City at the age of 34 from complications related to drug and alcohol addiction.

1950s



1959 Jazz trumpeter Miles Davis releases his best-selling album "Kind of Blue."

1961 *Yardbird* composer Daniel Schnyder is born in Zurich, Switzerland.

1960s



Addie Parker

1967 Addie Parker, Charlie's mother, dies at the age of 75.

1975 Charlie posthumously wins a Grammy for Best Improvised Solo on the record "First Recordings!"

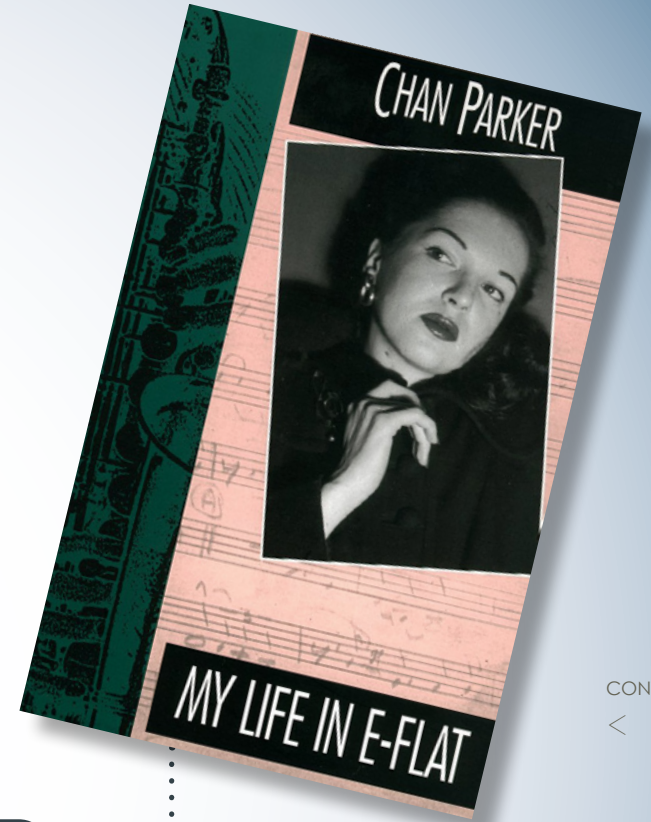
1970s

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Miles Davis



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1979 Parker is inducted into the Big Band and Jazz Hall of Fame.

1984 Charlie Parker receives a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

1988 Clint Eastwood's motion picture "Bird" is released. The biopic stars Forest Whitaker as Charlie Parker.

Nica Koenigswarter dies at 74.

1989 Doris Parker organizes the first "Evening with Friends of Charlie Parker" concerts to benefit a drug rehabilitation program in New York. Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie perform.

1980s

1991 Miles Davis dies at age 65.

1993 Chan Parker publishes her memoir *My Life in E-Flat*.

Dizzy Gillespie dies at age of 75.

1999 Chan Parker dies at age 74.

Brigette A. Wimberly's first play *St. Lucy's Eyes* makes off-Broadway premiere at the Cherry Lane Theater.

1990s

Charlie Parker's Yardbird

A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline



Daniel Schnyder



2001 Wimberly is included in the anthology "Best Plays by Women 2001."

2005 Schnyder's first opera, *Casanova*, premieres.

2006 Nica's book *Three Wishes: an Intimate Look at Jazz Greats* is published.

2008 The Jazz Showcase moves to Dearborn Station in Chicago. A large portrait of Charlie Parker resides behind the stage. The Showcase hosts "August Is Charlie Parker Month" annually.

2009 Wimberly's project that features ten plays written by breast cancer survivors, *From Breast Cancer to Broadway*, premieres in New York City.

2000s



Yardbird at the Apollo Theater

2015 *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* premieres in Philadelphia.

2016 *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* becomes the first opera performed in New York City's legendary Apollo Theater.

2010s