



Chan Parker

Location: France
Date: May, 1998

Tell me your first impression of Charlie Parker.

Ah... well, I had, I had knowledge of his reputation. I'd been waiting for him since Don Bias left the band at, and at the, not the Three Duesces, The Onyx. And they said, "Oh, this little cat from Kansas is coming." So, I'd been waiting, but Bird didn't show up. And when he finally showed up, somebody brought him to my apartment at Seven West Fifty-second Street, and I was on a high ladder painting my high ceiling and there was Bird at my feet, and I was very young.

What drew you to him? What was attractive about him?

I, he was, he was irresistible. I mean, men, women, nobody would say 'no' to Bird. He had a life force, an incredible life force and he dominated everything, music... He knew, he knew how to meet somebody and if he didn't like them, with a smile, he could put them down, you know. He just, he was, I couldn't resist. (Laugh)

What did he do to the music? He changed it.

The music was completely revolutionized. You know, I was used to Johnny Hodges' sound and Benny Carter, and, and when I heard Bird, my God! I mean at first, his sound was very bizarre to me, but what he was playing, aw!! It just overwhelmed me, overwhelmed me.

What did he do? How did he find that? He found an opening...?

Yeah. You know, for years, oh, I didn't know two five ones. Well, I, this is technical. But I realized, when I finally understood what he was doing, that he was playing at the top of the chord, the nine, elevens, thirteenth, and he was integrating that into the chordal changes. So, there weren't a lot of

people that could deal with that, you know. The older guys, although some of them, Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins knew perfectly well.

Was he hearing...?

The upper partials, the upper partials.

But not even technically, what was it that drove him?

I don't think, I don't think Bird was searching for them. I think it's the way he was hearing them. You know, he was hearing that upper sound. So for me, it was very easy because when I was a child, I studied piano and I loved Bach and... But I was bored with most of the repertoire and I was bringing Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue to my piano teacher. I was searching for another sound, and I think Bird just heard that upper sound.

Tell me about the 52nd Street scene.

(Laughs) Fifty-second Street was one of the grand moments of my life and I just lucked up an apartment there and there were all these clubs. Well, every night, because they had two bands a night in each club. So, during intermission the guys used to come to my apartment or we'd walk down the street and smoke a little and, and then I'd go back and hear the next set. Every night, I heard music there. It was gorgeous for me.

And it was coming out of clubs everywhere.

Yeah.

What were you hearing?

I mean there was Art Tatum. There was Erroll Garner. There was Max Roach, Don Bias, George Wellington, oh God, on and on. Billy Eckstein, big band of Charlie Ventura... you know.

And Charlie Parker.

And Charlie Parker.

What was his special gift?

In what way?

His musical gift, his human gift. What distinguished this man?

Bird was a giant. He was a giant. He was above all other facets of men that I had ever known. He was, had a maturity beyond his years. In fact, he said to

me one day, "I'm not one of those boys you're used to." And I went "Oooo!" (laughs) He had, he had a command.

Do you hear a sadness or a trouble in his music?

I don't hear sadness, no. Not in the way you can listen to a Sinatra ballad and hear sadness, no. I mean, you think of The Embraceables. I think it's embracing life and I don't hear a sadness; I hear joy.

What was it like when he hit the street?

Oh, yeah. He had a lot of battles to fight over that. The moldy figs. (Laughs) And I mean Cab Calloway wrote an article about funny chords, funny notes. Louis Armstrong, even and when he went to California, he was just com..., they, they banned his music from the radio.

But there were some people who recognized ...

Oh the musician - I mean the hit musicians, yeah. I mean, he had a following, you know? But I don't think that deterred, deterred Bird in any way. He knew, he knew what he was doing, and he wasn't going to change for anything. That's what he heard, you know?

He drew his influences from everywhere, right?

Oh, yeah. I mean, he loved Jimmie Dorsey, Frank Trumbauer. Yeah, even Kay Kaiser, you know.

Can you tell about singing Mario Lanza?

Oh. And Mario Lanza he wanted on his next record date, and he used to come in the house singing "Be my love...." (laughs)

That's something I can see him doing.

Yeah.

Was he ever satisfied musically?

He was satisfied musically all the time. All the time. Unless his agents would send him out on the road with a strange rhythm section, and the piano player didn't know how to play anything except in the key of B-flat or ...

I just see him as sort of relentlessly questing and searching...?

He was, he wanted to expand his musical knowledge, technically. He wanted to write. And he met Verez in the village one day; he wanted to study with

him. He planned to. He wanted to come to France and study with Nadia Boulanger. He wanted to be able to write in a big format.

What was his relationship with Diz? Was it special?

Dependent on...?

Yeah, I just sort of thought there was a sort of needful thing between them.

No. I think that in the beginning Diz and Bird were musical co-freres, if you would like, and there was a bit of a rivalry because Dizzy was a comedian and commercial. But I don't think Bird ever had any animosity toward Dizzy, and I'm sure Dizzy resented the fact that he knew Bird was a greater musician.

What happened in California. He didn't come back...?

California was very difficult for Bird. They reviled his music out there. As I said, they banned it from the radio and Bird had a very bad habit out there and the source dried up. And he started to drink a lot and just went to, you know, he, he disintegrated in California and ended up in Cama Rio for three months, I believe and, no, he... But he was very happy to come back when he did, I'll tell you.

Let's talk about drugs. What drew him into drugs?

Bird was turned on when he was 15. And had a habit right after. And he was on it many, many years. In fact, when I first met him, he still had a habit, and he tried to kick many times while he was with me. Sometimes very successfully. But he told me once, you know, you can get it out of your body but you can't get it out of your brain.

How did you deal with the addiction?

He never let it, Bird never let it touch me. He never shot up in front of me. He kept it completely away from me, and I never had any desire to experiment, thank God.

But it was a tempestuous relationship...?

It wasn't a tempestuous life with Bird because he was my protector. And he always had me on a pedestal away from... He used to say, "That's dirty outside. You don't want to know about it." And it never entered our house. And when Bird was home he was loving and protective and sweet and a good father and adored our animals and... It didn't, it, believe me. It's hard to believe this but he never, he never brought any of that into our house, and I had no... I would worry about him, of course.

What did you hear? What is that 'that' that was going on?

The what?

When you hear such stories about what was going on outside the home in terms of the trouble he would get into?

Well, we lived in the seedier side of life; we lived on Avenue B. But no, that never touched it, touched our household. And if Bird got into arguments with people, Bird was usually right, you know? And I would always take his side.

When he got back from Cama Rio, he was the center of a new music.

Yeah, Bird, Bird was adored. He had a following of all the beboppers. But he still was having problems getting gigs. Also, they had the, I don't know if you know, know about it, the cabaret card, where you were not allowed to work in New York if you had any arrests and so, Bird had a hard time. That's why he used to be sent out on the road with a bad rhythm sections, because it was difficult for him to work in New York at that time.

How did he react to this cult following...?

Oh, Bird was... never thought of himself as a star, and never thought of his fans as groupies, you know? They were... In fact, he was very generous to young musicians and never put down any musician.

I know that he was disappointed or pained by so many young musicians emulated his drug use...?

Yeah, Bird used to tell musicians this is not the answer. You know, as you see in the film, Bird, when Red Rodney got a habit and he said, "It's not going to help, man. It's not going to help."

How hard is it to be the white woman of a black man in NYC in the 40s and 50s?

It was tough to be a mixed couple. But you know, it never bothered me. I've been an outlaw all my life. I was half Jewish in Westchester County, you know? I stood up for civil rights when there weren't any civil rights. I just, I didn't care. I really, it didn't let, it didn't touch me at all.

What would happen?

Well, look, people would look at us funny on the street or, and Bird carried himself so proudly, and I knew he was there by my side, and I carried myself that way. So, it never really, I never allowed it to touch me. In fact, I hesitated to live with Bird because of my daughter who was five at the time.

And being brought up by a black man, in those days, and I worried about that. And she tells me now, you know, children are colorblind, and she tells me, "No. I used to vomit every morning before I went to school; I hated it, and the first morning that Bird took me by the hand to school, I had no problem." And she adores Bird.

You had a quote about Carl Jung in your book. Do you remember?

I don't remember it, offhand.

It's about "great gifts of the fairest and the most dangerous, the fruits on the tree of humanity..."

Yes.

"They are the weakest branches." When it was bad for Bird it was bad. What would he sink into?

I don't understand the context.

Just about his worst moments - what were they, the demons? No? You didn't see any of that.

No.

Some people talked about that. Tell me the rumor from the day Kim was born.

Ah. I was in the hospital giving birth to Kim and I had a phone call saying that Bird was dead. And he was in Cama Rio at that time. Ahh!, well, you know, how, how I must have felt. And it's later I found out that that was a rumor.

It seems like he's always followed by the police; they're always turning up at various times to bust him.

Aren't most Americans followed by the police, look at Clinton, my dear!
(laughs)

You lived near Tompkin Square for a while. What was Bird like in the neighborhood?

Yeah, we lived opposite Tompkin Square Park and Bird, a lot of Ukrainians, some gypsies, Hassidic Jews, and Bird used to hang out at the neighborhood bars and nobody knew who he was. I mean that he was Charlie Parker, you know. Well, they knew his name, but they didn't know he was Bird, and they just called him Charlie, and he would go down the bar with the other old

Ukrainian guys and hanging out and and then he'd come home and bring home Kaboshi. You know (laughing). He fit in wherever he went.

It seemed like he knew everything, too.

He did.

People would say that he could talk about any..., car mechanics...

Yeah. It's funny because I never saw him read any book except a book on Yoga, which I still have, and he, he wasn't a reader. But he knew all these... he said to me one day, "I'm Virgo, you know." I thought: now, how does he know? I mean, he had, he had a retentative memory, is the only way I can describe it. That he retained everything that he'd heard. And so, he could fit in anywhere.

Did family life change his music any?

Family life. I think it didn't change...

I have this sense of him being both strong and fragile.

You know, as, I know Bird was strong. I never saw him as fragile. I never saw any fragility in Bird at all. I don't think he was fragile.

In your memoir, you describe some periods where he moves away and he seems to be in trouble...?

Well, towards the end, you know, he was he was suffering. He had bleeding ulcers; he had many medical problems. But that didn't make him fragile as a person. I think Bird always had the strength to carry on, as I do. I think I'm strong and I don't think I, I'm not fragile at all, so I don't think that...

That works. Why did he go back to drugs?

Back to drugs? When?

You said that he would go off, be successful and he'd be pulled back...?

Well, you don't, as I said, as Bird said, you can get it out of your blood, but you can't, they can't get it out of your mind. So, I think that he was constantly hounded by drug dealers, you know. So, if there was a fix out there, maybe he was tempted to do it. But I don't think that had anything to do with fragility. I think...

I'm done with the fragility thing. People always bring together the drugs and the music, as if they're one and the same.

Oh. Do you know the highest incident of drug use is among doctors? (laughs) And how about the highest suicide rate among dentists? I don't think that correlates. Of course, the temptation is there for jazz musicians, because there's always somebody there to say, "Hey, man, try this," you know. But I don't think there's a correlation between jazz and drugs. I've been involved in jazz all my life and I've never had any desire to use drugs.

How bad was his health back then? I understand you had, did some shock treatment?

No. When Bird tried his suicide attempt, which was, no. He, was trying to get out of breaking a Birdland concert, you know.

What did he do?

Well, he took aspirin and iodine, you know, and so, I called Bellevue, and he went away in the ambulance, and he had this cut-off pair of pants and there was a very sympathetic doctor there. In the beginning, young guy, who knew who Bird was, you know. And then, the head guy, the chef came in and called me into his office and Bird could only stay in Bellevue a certain length of time it was in the hospital. Either you get dismissed, or you go to a state asylum. And so, the chef said, actually to me, "Madam," (and this is quoted in the film because a lot of the film is taken from actual words that Bird said) "I'd shock him." And I said, "This is a creative artist. You can't, you can't do it." And so, Bird never had shock treatment. I wouldn't allow it. And he said, "Alright, I'll have to let him go." I said, "Yes. You do that."

So he never had shock treatment.

No. Never, never, never. Bud Powell did, but not Bird.

What happened with Pree?

At the time that Pree was born, she was always ill. And no doctor could find out why. And I had a heart specialist, a pediatrician, who discovered she had an opening in, in her heart. And this was before open-heart surgery. And now, since they have found out what cystic fibrosis symptoms are, I'm sure she had cystic fibrosis.

What happened?

She went into a coma and was taken to the hospital and died, you know? And that was very hard on Bird.

Those telegrams that he sent...

Yeah.

.... back are so poignant. What was it like getting those telegrams?

For me, getting those telegrams was horrific. I was in shock. They were giving me tranquilizers. I wouldn't let loose of her bathrobe that she went to the hospital in and then every hour, another telegram and I, you know, it was horrible for me. Horrible. I'm sure Bird didn't realize it; I'm sure he was going through his horror. And yeah, it was terrible, and then the next year, our son had ... God, I'm trying to think of the condition. It wasn't, it wasn't gruff...

Um-hmm.

...but my mother took him to the hospital for tests and Bird came to the house one night and Baird wasn't in his crib and Bird said, "Tell me. My son is dead?" I said, "No, no, no. He's just having tests, you know."

I think this death of Pree must have devastated him.

It did. It...

All the musicians who played with him tell us that he was just, after that, he was just... It really changed him.

Well, Pree died a year and a week before Bird, so, she... yeah. And it changed our relationship, because, at the funeral, I wouldn't leave the grave, you know? I just wanted to go in there with her. And Bird took my arm and I said, "No." So, I kind of withdrew from Bird in a way.

Do you feel guilty about that?

No.

No. Good.

No. I mean, that was a normal reaction for a mother, you now. I didn't want to leave her right now.

So, how did he die?

How did Bird die? Well, he was terribly ill, and he'd had pneumonia before and he went, he was on his way to Boston, to play a gig. Fell ill, went to Nikka's Hotel and she called the doctor and the doctor said, "This man needs to be hospitalized," and Bird refused to go to the hospital. And I think he'd just given up. His heart just gave up. I think, you know, life had been too heavy for him, really.

What made life so heavy for him?

All the ...huh, what made life so heavy for him? All the shit he went through in his life, since he was a child, all the racism, the taxi-drivers refusing to pick him up - that's why he bought his Cadillac - and all the negative things around his life, you know? I think the, the one good thing he had was his family and a family relationship.

How did you hear the news?

I was working... I had a check-room in a restaurant in Trenton, and I had this awful feeling. In fact, I wrote him a letter that night, saying, "I have this terrible premonition of your death. Maybe not your death as a man, but your death as a musician." And on the way home, I, it just haunted me so I stopped at a phone booth and tried to call Birdland and they said, "No, he's, he's gone." Well, it was too early for him to leave Birdland, you know. So, incidentally, aside from that, he had that big scene at Birdland that night...

How did you hear that he had died?

I tried to call Bird the last night a Birdland and he'd left. Well, that was when he was fired from Birdland and I knew he had this gig in Boston and obviously, after this debacle at Birdland, he was wandering around trying to figure out what he was going to do. He knew he had to get to Boston, but he was very ill. And he went to Nikka, to Connie's water and she took him in, doctor came and said, "The man belongs in the hospital," and he refused to go. So, he died there and Nikka didn't want to release the news until she'd contacted me. And she didn't have my number. But my, she called my uncle who called my mother. My mother knew the night I came from my job and didn't want to tell me because she thought I'd go rushing off in the night, hysterical and have a car accident. We were living in Pennsylvania. And so, she came in the next morning and told me.

How did you feel?

Ah! I was devastated. And I, I took the kids and I went to New York at my mother's apartment and then it got worse. Because everybody took over. And I didn't have any money, any money and for Bird's funeral. I called Norman Granz and couldn't get him. He had his assistant call me back and ask for Chan Richardson, and so I was completely shut out. My uncle and my mother had Bird taken to the funeral home where our daughter had been. Then, everybody stepped in, had him removed, take...

I understood he was a John Doe for two days in the morgue.

Because Nikka didn't want to release the news, who he was, until she had contacted me and told me first. But...

Who identified him?

My uncle identified him. I mean, it was all taken out of my hands. I was a pawn.

The funeral?

Hmm?

At the funeral, what did they play?

(laughs) The funeral was a travesty. I mean, you know, I wanted him buried next to our daughter, Pree. No, no, no, no. Dizzy stepped in; I will never forgive him for that, and had him taken up to Adam Clayton Powell's church in Harlem. I'd had a conservative suit put on Bird at the funeral home. Oh! When I walked into the funeral home, incidentally, all the bloat was gone. He just looked so beautiful, you know. And I almost collapsed. And I felt Bird there, holding me up. So, anyway, when I went to this funeral home in Harlem, and they had a big sign like coming attractions. Charlie Parker, you know. And they held the funeral at Adam Clayton Powell's church. Only Adam was in Washington with his Congress job, and the preacher was the Reverend Licorice.

Did they play any music?

There was an organ playing "The Lost Chord." Well, a friend of mine said, a friend of Bird's and mine said, "Bird never lost a chord in his life." (laughs)

You wrote about his sweetness and his tenderness.

Yeah. Bird was a sweet, tender man. He certainly was, a gentle, sweet, loving person. I'll never find another man like him.

Does he haunt you?

He's a friendly ghost. No. If I need something, I say, "OK, Bird, what are we going to do now?" And it happens. Truly does.

There was scrawled on the walls of Greenwich Village almost instantly, the words...

"Bird lives."

Why does Bird live?

Because, Bird lives because he touched so many people. Musically and personally. And he certainly lives in this house and he'll live with me and my kids forever.

What's his legacy musically?

When it's two hundred years old, they'll still be playing Bird and they'll still be copying him, and taking little snatches for commercials or whatever they'll have. No. Bird will never die, musically.

I heard this rumor that what he really him over the edge, physically, was a fight with Art Blakey. Did you hear this?

Oh, I've heard that. I've heard that. That's a rumor.

Just a rumor?

It's a rumor.

No fight.

No. I've seen Art many times since then and he shows no signs of guilt. No. No, no, no. They probably had an argument, but I don't think that contributed to his death at all.

Did Nikka, somebody said that she didn't contact the authorities because her house was in the center of drug use and that musicians were scoring there...?

No. I don't even want to comment on that. Nikka was a friend.

Tell me more about 52nd Street. Would you club-hop?

Yeah. I never went to bed, in those days, until six in the morning and hanging out with the guys. And I had my own table at the Three Deuces and, yeah. It was, it was a very energetic, wonderful, wonderful time.

And then Bird came into your life. That must have been incredible. What was his background?

Bird's background. What?

Tell me a little bit about what he inherited.

Huh! Bird came to New York, probably, a borrowed saxophone and little else. He had horrible clothes. I used to buy him clothes, in fact, when we were together. He didn't come to New York with very much except his wonderful gift.

That's amazing.

And his wonderful smile.

Someone said he was a man of insatiable appetites.

Yeah. Bird drank a lot of milk. Well, he wouldn't have a glass of milk; he'd take the whole bottle and glug-glug-glug, drink the whole bottle. And when he'd eat, he'd eat enormous piles of food. Well, that's very unusual for a junkie to have that appetite. But Bird certainly had an appetite. He, he taught me how to make ham hocks and beans, you know. He loved that and he loved sunny Sunday, sometimes when it was sunny, dinners at my house with my old aunt and my mother and my brother. That was respectability for Bird. He loved respectability. And the first time I gave him broccoli, he'd never had broccoli, he said, "Oh, that's white folks' greens."

What's the story about Charlie's Tavern?

Charlie's Tavern was a musician's hangout. Everybody went there. And after Bird died, a pigeon flew in, posed himself on the loft ah, the high... what do you call them? Poots.

Rafters.

Rafters, thank you. And stayed there a week. Wouldn't leave. Which, of course, freaked all the musicians out. This pigeon just lodged at Charlie's Tavern.

It was Bird.

Well, a lot of people thought so.

How did he get his nickname?

Oh, that's such a... you know, it's such an old story about Bird's nickname. Jay McShann said they ran over some chickens and they're called yard-birds, and Bird said, "Stop the car. Pick it up and we'll take it and have the woman cook it for us." Bird told me, Bird told me, I got it from the mouth of the bird, that his cousin couldn't say "Charlie," so he used to call him "Yarley." So it went from Yarley to Yard to Bird, who knows? I don't know.

He loved animals, though. I see all these photos in various archives, of him with pets.

Yeah, we had, we had three Maltese poodles, two cats and then Bird brought home a afghan hound who was completely nuts, and he used to pee, it would run across the floor - I mean it was like a river, and jump on me when I was on the couch. He loved the water so he'd get in the bathtub and come with wet paws and land on me. I said, "Bird, that dog has to go, you know. It's either him or me." Un plus, what's more, the Maltese would attack him all the time, you know. So it was constant chaos. So, Bird said, "OK." And he

took him out one night, pouring down rain. Came back a few hours later; he said, "Well, I got rid of ..." (the dog's name was Mozambique, Mozandique, Mozandique.) And I said, "Oh great." You know. He took him to the Blue Note, I think it was then. My mother had a phone call an hour later saying, "Bird came here and tied up this dog and left. And what are we going to do with it?" So, my poor mother, aged, had to cross Manhattan to go pick up Mo, and Bird came home. He said, "Well. I got rid of him."

Tell me about the hipsters, the beats, those who were drawn to his music.

Oh, well, you think of all the beats, the beats, the books, all that, I don't know. I didn't know any of those guys and I think they were just on the outside of a trend and

They hitched their wagons to Bird?

Yeah. They hitched their wagons. (Laugh) But, oh, we had, we had as I said, two cats. And one morning, the female was very pregnant. Well, Bird went out to the bar. And in the meanwhile, it, there was Orphee and Euridice. So, Euridice had a litter. Well, Bird came back; he was full of wonder. (She sighs and laughs) He just looked at 'em. Yeah, he loved animals.

Tell me about France. He came here unexpectedly; he was a hero.

Bird adored France. And he came back. He had gifts of music and records and he was feted here. I had, I've met a man who, his mother had Bird to dinner one night. Gor..., garlanded he table with roses and really put on a French feast for Bird and Bird started talking about Omar Khayyam to this woman, an older French doyenne and she said, "Oh, I have a first edition of Omar Khayyam. I'll show it to you." So she went to her bibliotheque and she took out this leather-bound, -bound Omar Khayyam, and she presented it to Bird, and he said, "For me?" Aw!. Well she hadn't meant it for him and she was just bringing it to show him. So she said, "Of course." But...

Ken

...yeah. He was, he was received...

They respected him.

And he, he said, "I don't want my son raised in this country, meaning, America." And he tried to kidnap me one night and bring me to France. He wanted to be here, you know? So, in a way, he is here.

What is it that you would like the world to know most about Bird?

That he was a wonderful, warm, talented, dynamic man. Caring and loving.

Did he have a temper?

He had a temper... he showed his temper differently. For example, if he didn't like you, he'd call you "Jim," with a big smile, which is, of course, Jim Crow. And some dumb drummer was working with him. He said, "Whatever happened to that chic, Chan, you used to run with?" And Bird said, "She's the mother of three lovely children." You know? So, he knew how to turn whatever hostility he felt into a put-down with a smile. (Laugh)

Thank you.**The End**