



Chasin' The Bird: The Life and Legacy of Charlie Parker

By Brian Priestley

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Charlie Parker has been idolized by generations of jazz musicians and fans. Indeed, his spectacular musical abilities--his blinding speed and brilliant improvisational style--made Parker a legend even before his tragic death at age thirty-four.

Now, in *Chasin' The Bird*, Brian Priestley offers a marvelous biography of this jazz icon, ranging from his childhood in Kansas City to his final harrowing days in New York. Priestley offers new insight into Parker's career, beginning as a teenager single-mindedly devoted to mastering the saxophone. We follow Parker on his first trip to New York, penniless, washing dishes for \$9.00 a week at Jimmy's Chicken Shack, a favorite hangout of the great Art Tatum, whose stunning speed and ingenuity were an influence on the young musician. Priestley sheds light on Parker's collaborations with Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Bud Powell, Mary Lou Williams, and Thelonious Monk, and he illuminates such classic recordings as "Salt Peanuts" and "A Night in Tunisia" and Parker's own compositions "Shaw 'Nuff" and "Yardbird Suite"--music which defined an era. Priestley also gives us an unflinching look at Parker's dark side--the drug abuse, heavy drinking, and tangled relations with women and the law. He recounts the death of Parker's daughter Pree, who was only two-and-a-half years old, and Parker's own death at thirty-four, in such wretched condition that the doctor listed his age as fifty-three.

With an invaluable discography that lists every recording of Charlie Parker that has ever been made publicly available, here is a must-have biography of a true jazz giant, one that helps us penetrate the dazzling surface to grasp the artistry beneath.

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Chasin' The Bird: The Life and Legacy of Charlie Parker By Brian Priestley Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #3342354 in Books
- Published on: 2006-03-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.30" h x 1.10" w x 9.30" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 264 pages



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Charlie "Bird" Parker achieved nearly mythic status as a difficult person and heroin addict. And while Priestley's book describes Parker's tumultuous personal life and his lifelong struggle with addiction, its focus is on Bird's music. The book contains a thorough investigation of Bird's prodigious musical talent and his contributions to jazz and bebop. Priestley, a jazz pianist and co-author of *The Rough Guide to Jazz*, cautions readers that "so much of Parker's sound and style has entered the present-day language as to make the original seem old hat" before describing what made Bird a legend: his mastery of the alto sax, his brilliant improvisations and the speed with which he played. Priestley asserts that confusion about details of Parker's life "is a consequence of the fact that, during his brief career, entertainers generally-and especially African-American instrumentalists-were not extensively interviewed." As a result, the book skimps on personal information and leans on speculation. It also scrutinizes his musical career to such an extent that the book can be tedious to readers with a casual interest in jazz. However, for a student or a serious Parker enthusiast, Priestley's thorough documentation and analysis of Bird's recordings and gigs, along with the 60 pages of included discography, will be quite a find.

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Review

"Priestley's dedication to setting the record straight is commendable. No doubt, his study presents the most reliable account of Parker's life."--Anna Harwell Celenza, *Notes*

"Easily enjoyed in a single sitting, with your favorite Parker record.... Well served by the breadth of Priestley's musical knowledge and his tenacious desire for accuracy."--*New York Times Book Review*

"The best overall book on Parker since Gary Giddins's photo-driven 'Celebrating Bird' of 1987.... Its 60-page discography is the most comprehensive Parker compendium yet published.... Priestley has listened to and listed everything, including all the rare, noncommercial material that's come to light in the last 20 years.... Priestley places them, for the first time, in the context of Parker's career. In so doing, he contributes significant pieces to the larger puzzle depicting Parker's role in the creation of modern jazz. Indeed, Mr. Priestley offers excellent analysis of the technical aspects of Parker's playing, explaining in detail what made his music so remarkable."--Will Friedwald, *The New York Sun*

"Even if you've read other books on Parker, you'll gain some fresh perspective from this one. And if you've never read a book on Parker, you'd be well-advised to make this the first. Though Priestley is clearly a fan, he writes about the good in a clear-headed way and writes about the bad unflinchingly."--*Kansas City Star*

"Priestley's revised and updated biography...offers valuable insights to Bird's career, mainly because it is

seen through the prism of his music.... This volume makes a valuable contribution to jazz literature.... A useful addition to the Parker library."--*Down Beat*

"Brian Priestley has not just chased but captured the elusive Bird, illuminating the turbulent life and marvelous music with human and musical insight."--Dan Morgenstern, Director, Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies, and author of *Living with Jazz*

"Brian Priestley is one of the most accomplished jazz historians, critics, and biographers, and *Chasin' the Bird* is an indispensable gem--an ideal introduction to a major figure in 20th century music and an inventive interpretation of Parker's life and art that will also engage veteran jazz lovers. The comprehensive discography is a major bonus, making this a handbook every Bird chaser will relish."--Gary Giddins, author of *Visions of Jazz* and *Weather Bird*

About the Author

Brian Priestley is the co-author of *The Rough Guide to Jazz*, now in its fourth edition, and the biographer of Charles Mingus and John Coltrane. He is also a noted jazz pianist, specializing in the Ellingtonian repertoire, and has recorded several CDs. He is also a critic and reviewer for numerous magazines, including *Jazzwise*, and a regular broadcaster on BBC Radio 3.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

John Morris:

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