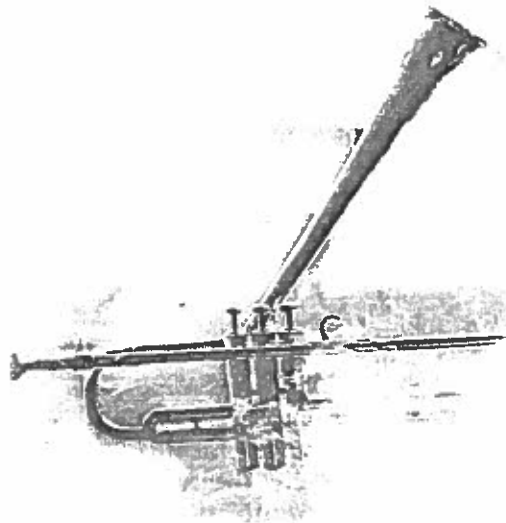


Modernism in Jazz: Bebop and Beyond



Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't
live it, it won't come out of your horn.

Charlie Parker

Chapter 6

Between 1945 and 1955 American popular music began to move in several different directions. At first, pop singers such as Frank Sinatra, Doris Day and Rosemary Clooney were at the top of the charts. As a younger generation of listeners began to control the pop charts, however, early rock-and-roll music began to take over. By the mid-1950s, the big stars of the day were Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bill Haley and the Comets, and Elvis Presley.

Meanwhile, a more advanced jazz style was taking shape in some of the after-hours clubs in New York City. In search of a more challenging musical experience, younger swing players including Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk started to make some radical changes to jazz. Inspired by Art Tatum, Lester Young and Charlie Christian, among others, the “beboppers,” as they came to be called, began to speed up tempos, dramatically alter supporting chord structures and frequently abandon the original melodies to songs altogether. In late-night jam sessions at clubs including Minton’s and Monroe’s, musicians pushed the envelope of what jazz could be throughout the early 1940s. By 1945 bebop had arrived in New York City. For most music fans in America, however, this new style was largely unknown. Even in New York there was a great deal of resistance to the new musical style. Some older swing musicians had very negative things to say about these young musical upstarts and their strange new ideas.

One of the major difficulties in discussing the evolution of bebop is the fact that in 1942 the American Federation of Musicians issued a recording ban. The union was fighting radio and record companies over royalty payments for recording musicians. No recordings were made for several years at the exact time bebop was taking shape. Historically, the result is that bebop seems to arrive fully formed in 1945, after the recording ban was lifted. While we have excellent written accounts of how bebop evolved,



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and we have great recordings from the periods before and after the AFM ban, we can only guess at what the historical jam sessions might have sounded like. Even the earliest bebop recordings are not quite true representations of what was going on in the clubs. In the mid-40s, music was still being recorded on 78-rpm discs that could only contain about four minutes of music per side. In live performances, bebop tunes frequently lasted much longer.

Bebop Techniques

With just a few exceptions, bebop used a small band format. Most bands consisted of one to three horn players in the front line backed up by the traditional rhythm section of piano, bass and drums. Most bebop tunes were complex **newly created lines** over a set of standard chord changes. The 32-bar format for the tune *I've Got Rhythm* and the basic 12-bar blues were two of the most popular sets of chord changes used. Other dixieland and swing tunes that Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie created new melodies over included *Indiana*, *Cherokee*, *How High the Moon* and *Honeysuckle Rose*. The bebop style tended to increase the tempo and expand both the rhythmic and harmonic complexity of jazz. The main goal for most bebop players, however, was extended improvisation. Some of the younger players felt constrained by the big band texture, where improvised solos were fitted around the written sections of most charts. At these late-night jam sessions, players were allowed much more freedom to break away from the written melody. They took four, five or even more solo choruses, allowing their improvisations much more time to evolve and expand. A tune's melody would be played once at the beginning of a performance and then again at the end. Often there would be more than ten minutes of improvisation between statements of the written melody.

newly created lines |3



In the book *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya* both Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie make comments on the beginnings of the bebop style. Notice that in both cases they discuss extending the harmonic language of the music as a major component of bebop. For most new listeners, this new harmonic complexity is perceived as more dissonance in the music.

Charlie Parker

I remember one night before Monroe's I was jamming in a chili house on Seventh Avenue between 139th and 140th. It was December, 1939. Now I'd been getting bored with the stereo-typed changes that were being used all the time at the time, and I kept thinking there's bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes but I couldn't play it.

Well that night I was working over *Cherokee*, and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.¹

Dizzy Gillespie

No one man or group of men started modern jazz, but one of the ways it happened was this: Some of us began to jam at Minton's in Harlem in the early 'forties. But there were always some cats showing up there who couldn't blow at all but would take six or seven choruses to prove it.

So on afternoons before a session, Thelonious Monk and I began to work out some complex variations on chords and the like, and we used them at night to scare away the no-talent guys.

After a while, we got more and more interested in what we were doing as music, and, as we began to explore more and more, our music evolved.²

The other major change in this new bebop style was faster tempos. Influenced by Lester Young, Charlie Christian and especially pianist Art Tatum, the beboppers began to double, triple and even quadruple the basic tempo of many jazz tunes. Like the transition from traditional jazz to swing, the rhythmic change from swing to bebop was also an evolutionary process. While the expanded technical facility of players such as Parker and Gillespie was truly amazing, much of the new rhythmic style of bebop was focused on the function of the rhythm section.

Bebop pianists, inspired by Art Tatum and Count Basie, broke away from stride-style playing in favor of the new **comping** style. Pianists would leave the basic time-keeping duties to the bass player and the drummer, while they concentrated on playing musical fills that "complimented" what the main soloist was doing. This comping style could take the form of sporadic interjections of a full chord or simple melodic lines that either filled a silent space left by a soloist or provided a counterpoint line that fit what the soloist was playing. Pianists also used the comping style to accompany their own solos, playing occasional chords with their left hand while their right hand did most of the improvisation. Bass players continued to play in the straight-four walking style popular in the swing era. In addition, both piano and bass players were faced with handling the more complex harmonic language of bebop. Led by drummers Kenny Clarke and Max Roach, the drum set became



Comping ::

an active weapon in this new musical style. In the manner of Jo Jones in the Count Basie rhythm section, basic time-keeping was taken away from the bass drum in favor of the lighter, crisper sound of the cymbals. Drummers played with more rhythmic complexity, often using loud outbursts to spur the improvising soloist on to new heights of creativity. One of their favorite tricks was **dropping bombs**, or playing unexpected accents on the bass drum randomly within a piece of music.

dropping bombs |;

Most of the jazz styles that are still played today can trace at least some of their roots back to the development of bebop. Many historians refer to the creation of bebop as the birth of **modern jazz**. At the time, however, there were two radically different views of this new musical style. During the same time frame bebop was evolving, there was also a resurgence in the popularity of traditional jazz. Louis Armstrong had gone back to a small, dixieland band format in 1946. In addition, swing music (though waning in popularity) and pop singers including Frank Sinatra still maintained the lion's share of popular music fans. The modern jazz players were called "beboppers," "reboppers" or just plain "boppers," while the older-style musicians and fans were referred to as "moldy figs." No one really knows who first coined the term bebop, but most historians gave credit to drummer Kenny Clarke. Apparently he was scat singing in an attempt to describe the sound of this new music and kept using the nonsense syllables "bebop" as he sang. Eventually, the term was picked up by the media and fell into common use.

modern jazz |;

In the following two articles, you can get a taste of the differing views about bebop in the 1940s. The first article by Leon Wolff appeared in *Down Beat* magazine in 1949. It does a good job of explaining how most non-bebop people felt about the new style. It also clearly demonstrates a lack of willingness to explore these younger musical artists' motivations. The longer second article is an excerpt from Dizzy Gillespie's autobiography *The Cult of Bebop*. In many ways, Gillespie became an icon for the entire bebop era. His look, his pattern of speech, and his supposed lifestyle all became media focuses. He wore a beret, a goatee and horn-rimmed glasses, and that look was taken on by other musicians and bebop fans alike. Many bebop musicians had drug and alcohol problems and this issue also became a media focal point. In all, Gillespie picks eleven things he feels the media got wrong regarding bebop and its practitioners. He often digresses into other topics, but his writing should give you a good overall sense of the jazz scene in the 1940s.

Charlie Parker

Like Louis Armstrong in the era before him, alto saxophone player Charlie Parker revolutionized solo improvisation and changed the face of jazz forever. Born in Kansas City, Parker got his start playing in the wide-open



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clubs and dance halls that spawned the relaxed, swinging style of bands like those led by Count Basie. While traveling to a gig in the mid-1930s, Parker got the nickname "Yardbird" when the car he was riding in hit a chicken that had run into the middle of the road. Parker made the driver go back to pick up the dead chicken. When the band arrived at the home they were staying in, Parker had the lady of the house cook up the chicken for a personal feast. After that episode, he was often referred to as "Yardbird," "Yard" or "Bird."³ On another fateful car trip, Parker injured his back in an accident. Apparently he became addicted to the pain medication morphine, and when he could no longer get the drug legally, he switched to heroin. There are other legends of how Parker's addiction began, but regardless of how it started, both heroin and alcohol would play a major role in his short and troubled life.

Inspired first by Kansas City sax players Lester Young and Buster Smith and later by very diverse influences including Art Tatum, Jimmy Dorsey and twentieth-century classical composers Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith, Charlie Parker almost single-handedly created many of the most important elements of the new bebop style. He was an active listener who took in everything he heard and synthesized it into his own unique style. From players such as Lester Young he took the long, flowing improvised lines and pure, light tone that made Young so successful. From Art Tatum and Jimmy Dorsey he copied the rapid, almost frantic passages that displayed amazing technical facility. Drawing from Art Tatum and also from modern classical music, Parker helped create the complex extended harmonies that would become a trademark of the bebop style.

Parker's greatest successes came in New York City in the after-hours jazz clubs frequented by many of the city's best musicians. Parker, along with Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, became a major figure in this evolving new style. Along with Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker created many of the most important tunes in the bebop style. In his book *Jazz Styles*, Mark Gridley describes Parker's compositions and their impact on jazz:

Parker wrote a sizable body of tunes, and their character set the flavor for bop as much as his improvisations did. Though not melody-like in the pop tune sense, they were catchy lines in a jazz vein. Most were accompanied by chord progressions borrowed from popular songs. Many used accompaniments of the twelve-bar blues chord progression. Their phrases were memorized and analyzed by hundreds of jazz soloists. His "Now's the Time," "Billie's Bounce," and "Confirmation" were played at jam sessions for decades after he introduced them. This was the musical language of bop.¹

Many of bebop's early hits (such as they were) were recorded by bands that featured Parker and Gillespie in the front line. Two of their best tunes, *Bloomdido* and *Anthropology*, can be found on your listening CDs. Over the years, Gillespie and Parker would continue to work together off and on, but Parker's unpredictability strained his professional relationship with Gillespie. They were always close personal friends, but Gillespie began looking in other directions musically:

Several other famous trumpet players got early breaks playing with Charlie Parker. Miles Davis, Chet Baker, and Red Rodney all gained valuable experience playing in groups with the Bird. Sadly, all three used illegal drugs at some point in their lives. For most of his career, Parker fronted a series of quintets playing in the bebop style. He frequently worked with pianist Bud Powell, and enjoyed playing with drummer Kenny Clarke as well. Parker's genius was recognized by avid bebop fans, who began following him with a primitive tape recorder, taking down every note that Bird played. Unfortunately, to conserve tape, they frequently only recorded Parker's solos, so the modern listener is forced to guess at what the other players' improvisations might have been like. Toward the end of his career, Parker had the opportunity to make a series of recordings backed by a small chamber orchestra. These recordings, now known collectively as *Charlie Parker and Strings*, opened the door for many musicians in later years who would blend classical music with jazz.

In trying to imitate everything that Charlie Parker did, many musicians followed him into a lifestyle of drug abuse. They wanted to play like Bird, and many seemed to think the drugs were what made it all happen. Players seemed to disregard the fact that Parker was truly gifted with a natural ear for music, and he practiced relentlessly. Parker himself admitted that drugs and alcohol actually hindered his performances. He was known to encourage other players and fans to avoid the mistakes he made in his life, but this advice often fell on deaf ears. Charlie Parker died of lobar pneumonia in 1955 at the age of 34, his health condition exacerbated by years of drug and alcohol abuse. It has been said that the New York medical examiner estimated Parker's physical age to be between 55 and 60 at the time of his death.

Dizzy Gillespie

Along with Charlie Parker, trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie was one of the first bebop musicians to speed up tempos, alter chords, and focus on extended improvisations. In addition, it was Gillespie's personal look, speech patterns, and mannerisms that the mainstream media presented as characteristics of the bebop style. Like Parker,

Dizzy Gillespie and his orchestra performing at the Winter Palace in Stockholm, Sweden.

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Gillespie started out playing music in a series of swing bands, including those of Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, and Billy Eckstine. Later, Gillespie went on to front a big band of his own. Although only somewhat commercially successful, Gillespie led the first big band to play music in the “modern” jazz style. In fact, the cool jazz group the Modern Jazz Quartet got its start together as members of Dizzy Gillespie’s big band rhythm section.

Dizzy Gillespie’s trumpet playing was full of velocity. He had a great ability to play extended passages in the upper register of the trumpet, and he performed music with a real sense of drama. Although a member of the modern jazz circle, Gillespie was conscious of needing to play music with some audience appeal. He created tunes such as *Salt Peanuts* and *Op Bop Sh’bam* that added nonsense vocals the audience found engaging. While musically uncompromising, these witty vocal additions helped some listeners connect with this complex new music. Gillespie was also one of the first modern jazz musicians to explore Latin rhythms. As you read in the excerpt from his book *To Be, or Not to Bop*, he found many Latin and African rhythms to be very pure musical expressions. Listen to one of his early explorations of Latin jazz in the song *Manteca*, found on your listening CDs.

Unlike Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie lived well into his seventies and continued playing music right up until his death in 1993. Over the years, he received numerous honors and awards for his many contributions to the world of music. Gillespie was also an active educator who often took time to work with younger students. As jazz education became a regular part of the curriculum at colleges and high schools across America, Gillespie was in great demand as a guest clinician and soloist. Over the course of his career, he made well over 100 recordings and was a frequent featured soloist on other musicians’ records as well. He made international tours under the auspices of the Department of State and was honored with a Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1992, National Public Radio honored his 75th birthday with a series of shows called *Dizzy’s Diamond*.

Bud Powell

Born into a family of musicians, pianist Bud Powell became a regular at the after-hours sessions at Minton's. Inspired by the playing of Art Tatum and encouraged by Thelonious Monk, Powell developed a very versatile style that alternated between feats of technical prowess and intensely beautiful melodic lines. As a rhythm section player, Powell was in great demand. Many of the finest bebop players of the day wanted to work with him. Unfortunately, Powell was mentally unstable and could be quite unpredictable. Some scholars have suggested that Powell's mental state had a major impact on his playing style. Alan Axelrod describes Powell's playing style and also offers one possible reason for his often erratic behavior.

Powell's pianism has a vulnerability about it, the demonstrations of technical prowess alternating with tenderness that never verges on sentimentality. Perhaps this fragility reflects Powell's own tortured life. Plagued by mental instability, he was frequently confined in institutions. Some believe his precarious mental health was the result of a beating dealt him by the Philadelphia police when he was arrested for disorderly conduct in 1944. Perhaps we are fortunate to have any music from this seemingly cursed genius, who died at 41 of a combination of alcoholism, tuberculosis, and malnutrition. The 1986 film, *'Round Midnight*, starring tenor legend Dexter Gordon, is loosely based on the life of Bud Powell.⁵

Other Instrumentalists

Obviously there were many other great bebop players whom we cannot explore in depth here. There were pioneers on virtually every jazz instrument, and skills and techniques were rapidly expanding. To go deeper into the world of bebop, check out some of the following players. For trumpet, listen to Howard McGhee, Kenny Dorham and Red Rodney. Some saxophone greats beyond Charlie Parker include Charlie Rouse (a regular with Thelonious Monk), Sonny Criss, Sonny Stitt, Dexter Gordon and the often overlooked Lucky Thompson. There were several great bebop guitarists including Tiny Grimes, Tal Farlow, Jimmy Raney and Barney Kessel. Because of the technical demands of the music, some trombonists struggled with this modern style of improvisation. Players including J.J. Johnson and Frank Rosolino, however, managed to develop new techniques for playing the instrument that allowed the trombone to be played with the same facility as any other musical instrument. In addition to the laundry list of players above, we will examine some bebop-influenced musicians in the mainstream jazz world in Chapter 10.

Bebop Singers

Due to the rapid tempo and complex melodies of most bebop tunes, singers at first found this new music very difficult to take part in. A few, including Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald, began to scat sing in a more modern jazz style. Listen to Ella Fitzgerald

sing the tune *Lemon Drop* on your listening CDs. (Please see listening guide on p. 101.) Eventually, the singers King Pleasure and Eddie Jefferson developed new vocal techniques for the modern jazz era. The new style was called **vocalese**, which involved singing a word or syllable for every note on a bebop recording. Singers would listen to recorded performances by players such as Charlie Parker, Coleman Hawkins and Dizzy Gillespie and memorize every note they played, both in the written melody *and* the entire improvised solo. They would then write words to every note and, using these lyrics, sing an exact recreation of the recording. Later, a group called Lambert, Hendricks and Ross came along doing the same style of vocalese, but they did it in three-part harmony. In addition, they also did a lot of scat singing, using their voices to make up new improvised solos just as any bebop instrumentalist would do. You can hear an example of vocalese in the tune *Cottontail*, by Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, on your listening CDs. These lyrics were based on a recording of the same tune made by the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

vocalese

Bebop Today

The bebop styles of the 1940s became the foundation for most of the modern jazz styles that would follow. Bebop techniques are freely mixed with other musical styles to create much of the jazz we hear today. Players including Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Joshua Redman, Terrance Blanchard, Randy and Michael Brecker, and even more mainstream players such as Paul Shaffer, George Benson and Harry Connick, Jr. are thoroughly skilled in the musical traditions of bebop. Even when they are not playing music in a purely bebop tradition, the style tends to permeate everything they play. At the high school and college levels, students regularly study the playing and compositional styles Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. In addition, the vocal groups Manhattan Transfer, Take 6 and New York Voices all perform in the traditions established during the bebop era.

Notes

1. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 354.
2. *Ibid*, p. 337.
3. *Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker*, Dir. Gary Giddens, (Long Beach, CA: Pioneer Entertainment, 1999), videocassette.
4. Mark Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 7th ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 152.
5. Alan Axelrod, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Jazz* (Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 1999), p. 167.