

Charlie Parker's Yardbird

Music by Daniel Schnyder • Libretto by Bridgette A. Wimberly

Study Guide to the Opera



Tenor Lawrence Brownlee as Charlie Parker with soprano Angela Brown as his mother, Addie Parker, in the World Premiere of *Charlie Parker's YARDBIRD* at Opera Philadelphia. Photos by Dominic M. Mercier.

Fantasia on an Imaginary Opportunity

Charlie Parker (1920–1955), a legendary jazz saxophonist, and Dizzy Gillespie (1917–1993), a virtuosic trumpeter, changed the face of jazz by ushering in Bebop. Both musicians had a tremendous impact on jazz, but their personal lives diverged dramatically. Parker lived hard, abused drugs and alcohol, and married multiple times before his early death. Gillespie remained with his wife until his death, generously gave of his time and “soul force,” promoted the elimination of racism, and even ran for U.S. president.

How was Charlie Parker chosen as the focus of an American opera? When Opera Philadelphia approached jazz musician and composer Daniel Schnyder to write an opera, he initially thought to focus on an African American hero who changed history, but then he met poet Bridgette Wimberly who was fascinated by the idea of writing an opera about Charlie Parker. Though Dizzy Gillespie became an important part of the opera, Wimberly wrote the libretto from the perspective of the women in Parker’s life—his mother, his wives, and his patron Baroness Nica von Koenigswarter.

Working in tandem, Schnyder and Wimberly developed a unique conceit for the story: when the opera begins, Charlie Parker has just died. His body lies misidentified in the morgue, but in this “limbo” he wants to compose a long piece for large orchestra, something he was never able to do in his life. All the important people in his life come to visit him, while he reflects on the history of jazz and working with Dizzy Gillespie. Parker’s mother and his wives fight over where he should be buried, and that gives them the opportunity to ponder about the problems of being a jazz musician, heroin addiction, African American heritage, and Civil Rights. Charlie Parker is never able to get his composition down on paper, which is a symbolic way to reflect on his genius for spontaneously improvising music.

The great saxophonist’s heritage is not just for jazz fans or the African American community, it is for the world and for all music lovers. Rather than tell the biography of a jazz icon, Schnyder and Wimberly created a fantasia, full of meaningful scenes with the sounds of jazz and opera. And the ideal opera singer to portray Parker in the premiere was Lawrence Brownlee, with his ability to sing florid passages quickly and effortlessly. At the end of the opera, we can all agree that “Bird Lives!”

Charlie Parker's Yardbird

Time: March 12, 1955, until his body is identified in the morgue
Place: Birdland, 52nd and Broadway, New York, New York
Run time: Approximately 90 minutes
Instrumentation: Bass, Clarinet, Alto Sax, Horn, Trumpet, Trombone, Percussion, Keyboard
World Premiere: Opera Philadelphia, June 5, 2015

About the opera:

Charlie Parker's Yardbird concerns the jazz icon Charlie Parker, his tumultuous life and his relationships; it is also about America, its music, its opioid crisis, and its racial inequality. This one-act opera features roles based on real-life figures Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Pannonica de Koenigswarter, Chan Parker, Charlie Parker's other wives, and his mother. The opera does not purport to depict actual events as they occurred or statements, beliefs, or opinions of the persons depicted.



Charles "Charlie" Parker Jr. (1920–1955), nicknamed "Bird" and "Yardbird"

Underwood & Underwood/Corbis, via VCG, via Getty Images

Synopsis

As the opera begins, Charlie Parker's spirit finds itself at Birdland, the jazz club named after him. He has just died; his body is still at the segregated hotel suite of Nica de Koenigswarter. Panicking about the scandal that will ensue when his body is found in her rooms, Nica finds his spirit at Birdland. She wants Chan, Charlie's wife, to identify his body; but Charlie begs Nica not to tell Chan where he is, to keep his secret for a while, until he has time to compose a masterpiece.

Birdland, The Secret, Just Us Birds Trying to Fly

Looking for inspiration, Charlie remembers growing up in Kansas City. His neighbors complain about all the noise he makes, learning to play saxophone—particularly the tritone, "the Devil's interval"—while his mother, Addie, worries about his lifestyle in the age of Jim Crow laws.

Rebecca, Charlie's first wife, joins Addie in a lament about the challenges of being a wife and mother to black males in the United States. Hoping to save his life, Addie tells Charlie he must leave Kansas City. He promises to make her proud one day, and asks her to take care of his wife and son.

Twelfth and Vine, Calvary, Addie's Blues

Charlie's third wife, Doris, tries to help him find peace; but there are still unanswered questions. Dizzy Gillespie, on the other hand, brings Charlie inspiration, and together the two musicians triumph as Bebop is born.

Charlie's Angel, Scandal, Bebop's Gonna Change the World

Charlie then remembers how he met Chan and went off to conquer California with Dizzy, despite his heroin addiction. Meanwhile, Addie remembers her pride upon hearing Charlie play on the radio.

Love Sick, YATAG, California, Jazzman, My Boy is King

In California, Charlie hears from Chan that their two-year old daughter, Pree, is dead. Charlie breaks down and ends up in Camarillo State Hospital. Music facilitates his recovery.

Pree is Dead, Relaxin' at Camarillo/Bellevue, My Horn

By now Charlie's body has been discovered. Addie wants him buried in Kansas City, but Chan wants to bury him in New York. Doris and Rebecca join the argument over where Charlie is to be buried while the world sings, "Bird lives!"

Next of Kin, Farewell, Starless Night

Charlie realizes that playing the saxophone was his life's work, his masterpiece. He makes peace with himself, frees his soul, and sings lines from Paul Laurence Dunbar's classic poem, "Sympathy."

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Adapted from Opera Philadelphia and Wikipedia

Characters

Charlie Parker *tenor*
African American, 34 years old
saxophonist

Nica *mezzo-soprano*
(Pannonica de Koenigswarter)
Caucasian, 41 years old, wealthy British
-born jazz patroness, writer, and Charlie
Parker's friend

Addie Parker *soprano*
African American, Charlie's mother,
born in 1861, about 60 years old,
overprotective, adoring, determined

Rebecca Parker *mezzo-soprano*
African American, about 20 years old,
Charlie's first wife and high school
sweetheart, frozen in time in this
production at the age they separated.
They had a son a year after they were
married who Charlie rarely saw

Doris Parker *soprano*
Caucasian, very tall, 32 years old, born
in Rock Island, Illinois and Parker's third
wife, married in Mexico. She was very
organized and helped keep Charlie's
business affairs in order when they
were together. She is quoted as saying
"Maybe he'll be remembered as not just
the most famous junkie of his time."

Dizzy Gillespie *baritone*
African American, 37 years old and the
other half of Bebop. Charlie's friend and
musical colleague, he was an excellent
trumpet player, composer, band leader,
and trailblazer. He was known to clown
around while performing, as well as for
his trademark glasses and beret, and
his business savvy.

Chan Parker *soprano*
Caucasian, 29 years old, born in New
York and Charlie's fourth wife (although
they were never legally married). They
had 2 children, a girl and a boy. Their
daughter Pree was sick most of her life
and died just short of her third birthday.
Her death broke them both and they
separated permanently shortly after.
Chan is a professional dancer and free
spirited.

Meet the composer

Daniel Schnyder (1961–)
is a Swiss American composer who
was born in Zurich, Switzerland and
lives in New York City. He is known
as a composer/performer with a
dynamic reputation in both jazz and
classical fields. He has recorded
multiple CDs of his own music and toured with classical
musicians, world music artists, and jazz players. Schnyder
is Composer in Residence with the Radio Symphony
Orchestra Berlin, Bremen Musikfest 2008, Orchestre de
Chambre de Lausanne, and the Absolute Ensemble NYC.



www.danielschnyder.com

Meet the librettist

Bridgette A. Wimberly
is an award-winning poet, librettist,
playwright, and producing director.
Her plays are included in several
anthologies and her poems are
published in Cave Canem. Wimberly
is Founder and Co-Program Director
of "From Breast Cancer to
Broadway," a program that teaches
playwriting to and presents plays by
breast cancer survivors.



www.ensemblestudiotheatre.org/bridgette-wimberly

"Sympathy" by Paul Laurence Dunbar



I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy", written in 1899,
from *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*.
(New York: Dodd, Mead and Company)
Source: *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004)

YARDBIRD: Historical Connections

Birdland is a jazz club in Manhattan's Theater District. Opened originally on Broadway in 1949, the "Jazz Corner of the World" capitalized on the popularity of musician Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, though he played few gigs there.



Jazz originated in the African-American communities of New Orleans in the late 19th century, with roots in blues and ragtime. The music genre that was born in the south flourished in the 1920s **Jazz Age**, when **radios** provided an avenue for the movement to spread nationwide. Charlie Parker was born in **Kansas City** when jazz was transitioning from the structured big band style to a more improvised, hard-swinging style, and he helped shift jazz from danceable popular music toward **Bebop**, a style with faster tempos, chord-based improvisation, numerous key changes, and instrumental virtuosity.

John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie (1917–1993) was a jazz trumpeter, bandleader, composer, educator, and singer who also helped popularize Bebop. With Gillespie's trumpet **virtuosity**, musicianship, showmanship, beret, and horn-rimmed spectacles, along with Parker's impeccable alto saxophone technique, **blazingly fast playing**, and large tonal palette, the two friends' contributions to jazz were huge. The term *pyrotechnician* is often used to describe their playing.



Tritone, a musical interval of three whole steps, is considered a dissonance in Western classical music, and referred to as *diabolus in musica* (the Devil in music). Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker relished the use of tritone substitutions to create tension during jazz solos.



Starting with Bebop musicians like Parker and Gillespie, jazz no longer simply catered to popular audiences. Instead, the music and the musicians came to the fore and jazz has since been symbolically linked to the **civil rights movement**. Because of **Jim Crow Laws**, Charlie Parker may not have been able to stay in any hotel he chose, but his music appealed to whites and blacks alike. His remarkable musical legacy lives on in history.

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Charlie Parker

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