

Eastwood's "Bird" relates life of jazz's greatest

By Sean Axmaker
Emerald Contributor

No jazz legend looms larger in the musical world than the brilliant Charlie "Yardbird" Parker. Featured in Dizzy Gillespie's groundbreaking be-bop quintet in 1944, he turned the jazz community on its ear with cascading solos of a tempo al-

most unheard of for horns. Parker was alternately loved and hated, admired and despised, by fans who thrilled to dynamic, expressive playing, by musicians who feared a standard they could not match.

His private life was equally driven. Heroin addiction, alcohol addiction, overeating and a turbulent series of marriages

led Parker to an early death in 1955, at the age of 35. The excess of his private life seemed to fuel the energy and passion of his playing, which in turn glamorized these darker addictions. In the months following his death emerged the now famous graffiti slogan "Bird Lives."

"Bird" is Clint Eastwood's reverent tribute to possibly the greatest genius in the history of jazz (few people are aware that Clint is a jazz aficionado who at

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one time played jazz piano professionally). The film is played mostly in flashback around the "present" of Bird's last few days, beginning with his attempted suicide by iodine ingestion and ending with his death.

Forrest Whitaker is Charlie Parker, a beefy, emotionally unstable man who seems equally at ease behind a horn in front of a crowd and "naked" with another human. Whitaker allows us, however, to feel his insecurity alone as powerfully as his command onstage. Diana Venora is his wife Chan, his one stable relationship in a rocky world of drugs, booze, depression and financial problems. As portrayed by Venora, Chan is the one person able to truly understand and match Parker, the one person able to love the man above the legend.

The violence and energy of this world is only really suggested by Eastwood, who lets Parker's music describe his passion. From the driving solo of his infamous "Ko-Ko" to the easy breathiness of the ballad "Laura," Parker's playing has no match, which must be what prompted Eastwood to use Bird's own music for the film. With a team of engineers, musical director Lennie Niehaus



Courtesy photo

Forrest Whitaker won the best actor award at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival for his role as Charlie Parker in "Bird."

(himself a jazz musician) extracted Parker's solos from vintage recordings (some never before released), cleaned them up and backed them with new rhythm sections.

"Bird" never delves into any relations between Parker and other women outside of Chan and only suggests the musical partnership of Parker and Gillespie; more time is spent on Red Rodney (Michael Zelniker), a white Jewish trumpeter who idolizes Bird and eventually tours with him. The focus is on the individual and his sustained relationship with Chan. Oliansky's script studies the central creative conflicts in Bird's life and presents the passion that led to both the great-

est jazz ever and a life used up at age 35.

Although choppy in the first half hour, with flashbacks coming too frequently to always follow and one confusing flashback within a flashback, the story sorts itself out as the narrative continues and makes thematic sense of the structure. Eastwood's cool, reserved direction provides a perfect canvas for Parker's passion, much like how Parker's own rhythm sections played simple counterpoints to his rhythmically complex improvisations. "Bird" is a bold, personal film, Eastwood's finest as a director and the first jazz biography to approach the music, and its creator, on their own terms.

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