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64 Billie Holiday

Lady Day would have turned 90 this year. In honor of her birthday, we present a collection of first-hand accounts of the singer, gathered from the new book *With Billie*. Also included is a previously unpublished 1956 interview with Holiday by a pre-*60 Minutes* Mike Wallace, courtesy of the CD/DVD collection *Billie Holiday: The Ultimate Collection*.

74 Tord Gustavsen + The Sound of Young Norway

Stuart Nicholson writes about the amazing pianist Tord Gustavsen, one of the latest in a long line of fine musicians ECM has plucked out of Norway. And Christopher Porter fills us in on the rest of the current Norwegian scene, which builds on ECM's legacy while creating its own.

84 Charles McPherson

He's best known as a veteran of Charles Mingus' band and the man who supplied Charlie Parker's solos in Clint Eastwood's *Bird*. But Charles McPherson had a solid solo career as well. George Varga reports on McPherson's latest CD, where the altoist revisits Bird—with strings.

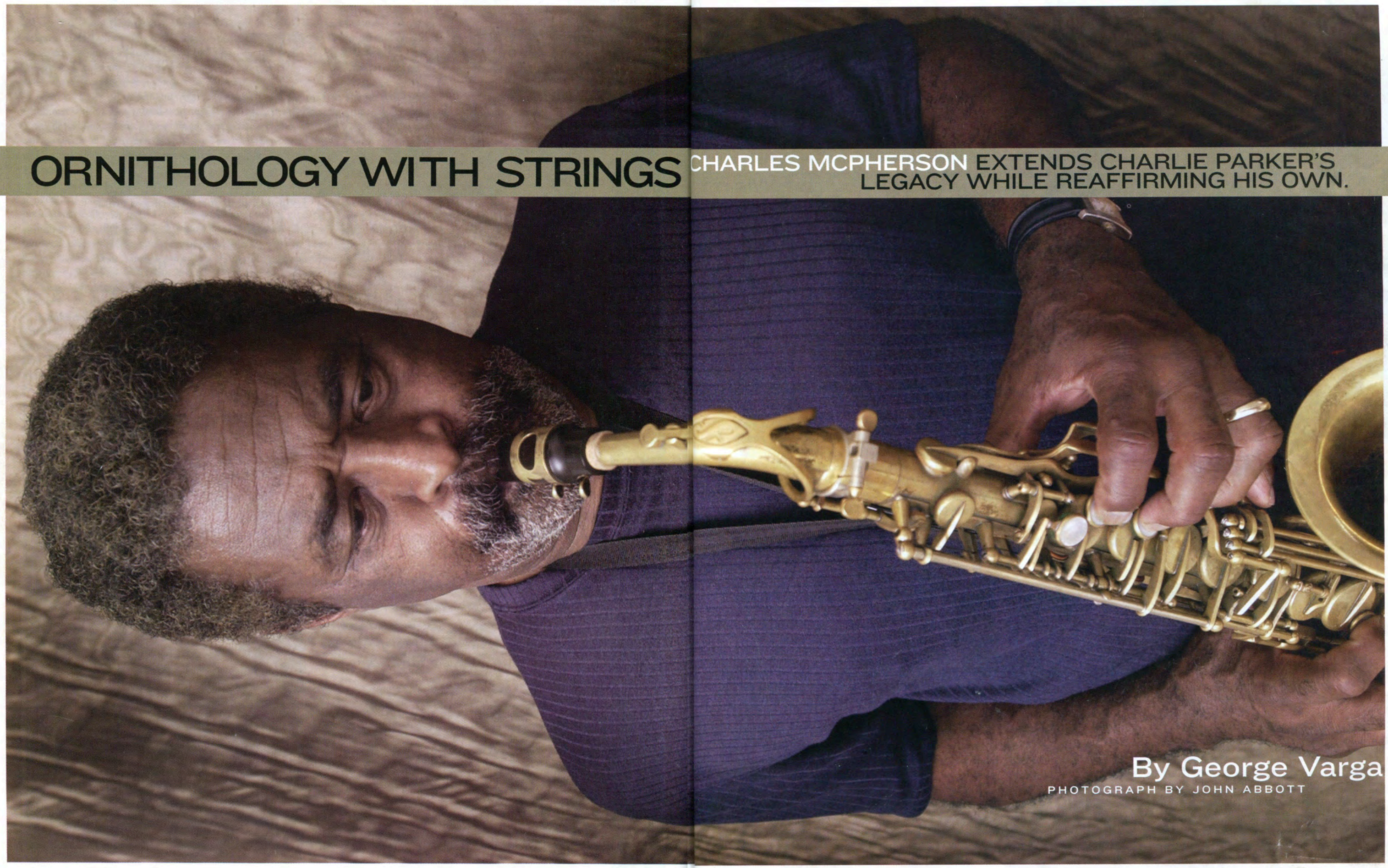
JazzTimes

Cover photograph of Billie Holiday and her dog, Mister, at the Downbeat, New York City, February 1947, by William Gottlieb.

Table of contents photograph of Billie Holiday at Town Hall, New York City, 1946, courtesy of Avalon Archives Ltd.

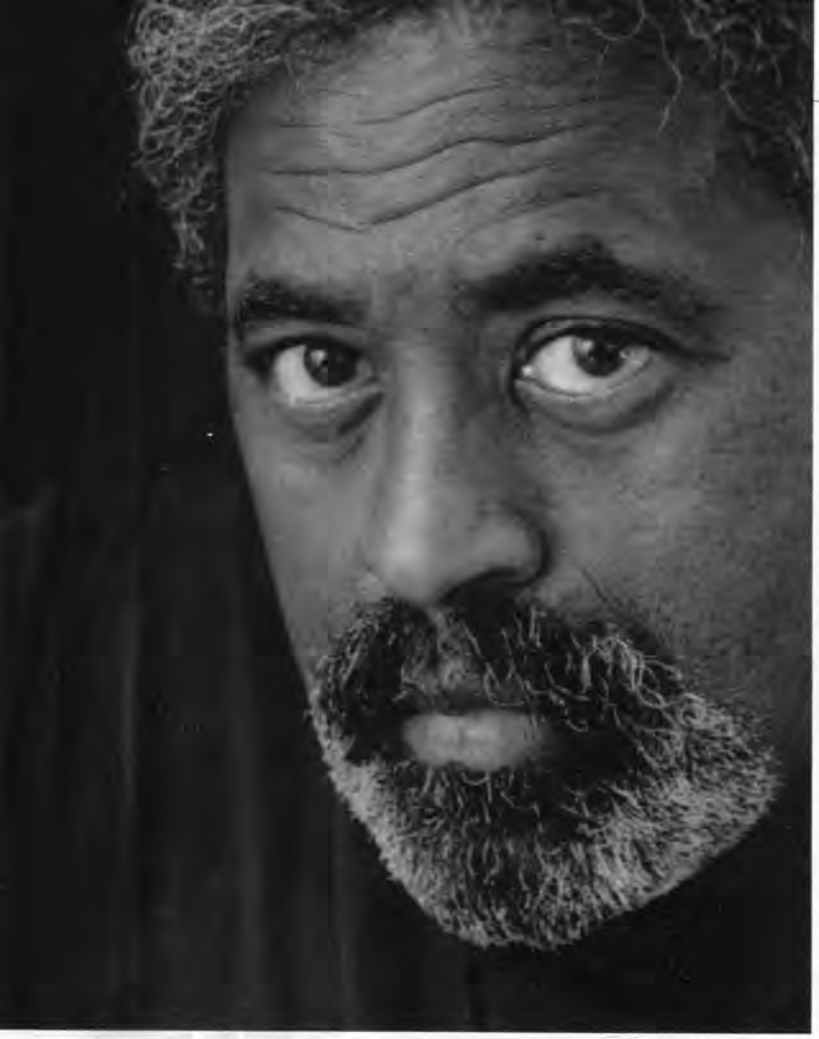
ORNITHOLOGY WITH STRINGS

CHARLES MCPHERSON EXTENDS CHARLIE PARKER'S LEGACY WHILE REAFFIRMING HIS OWN.



By George Varga

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN ABBOTT



Hindsight may indeed be 20/20, but Charles McPherson has little interest in looking back and even less in evaluating his formidable musical legacy. "I don't know if this is good or bad, or if I'm just childish, but I always think of myself as in a state of becoming," says the veteran alto saxophonist, who looks younger than his 65 years. "So I never even think to look back or be in a state of reflection. Maybe I will when I'm 75 or 80, but I'm still a work in progress. Terms like 'legacy,' I don't use. I guess I still think I'm 20 years old."

Appropriately, McPherson's music is a felicitous blend of urbane sophistication and youthful passion that combines fire and finesse in equal measure. He has consistently nurtured these qualities, first in the bands of such mentors as Barry Harris and the great and volatile Charles Mingus (with whom he made nearly two dozen albums), then with such illustrious recording partners as Eric Dolphy and Eddie Jefferson.

But it is as a quietly determined solo artist, whose first release under his own name, *Bebop Revisited*, came out in 1964 on Prestige, that he has most distinguished himself. More than 20 solo albums have followed, including such notable works as 1966's *The Charles McPherson Quintet Live* (Prestige), 1972's *Siku Ya Bibi* (Mainstream), 1995's *Come Play With Me* (Arabesque) and 1998's *Manhattan Nocturne* (Arabesque).

Over the course of a career now in its 45th year, McPherson has established himself as one of the foremost practitioners of his instrument and as a notable composer and bandleader. His masterful prowess on the alto sax and improvisational ingenuity have been matched only by his steadfast refusal to dilute his artistic vision for commercial gain or public acclaim.

Never mind that McPherson placed first among alto players deserving wider recognition in a national music critics' poll as early as 1967, or that he has become one of the most frequent guest artists at Jazz at Lincoln Center. His goal has always been to make meaningful music that provokes and rewards, not to pander to the lowest common denominator.

"I wonder what the world would be like if artists did what they really wanted, with no regard for money. I have, and you pay a price for that," says McPherson, who articulates his thoughts with the same care he brings to his finely honed music.

"I entertain the idea of being able to stay true to my artistic self and still make money and still be solvent," he continues. "I know that might not happen, but I still hold out hope it will, even at my age. I think I've been fairly successful in doing what I want to do. But obviously, I'm not a rich man."

McPherson is a longtime resident of San Diego, where he lives with his wife, Lynn, and their 13-year-old daughter, Camille. But he was born in Joplin, Mo., and the mustachioed musician fondly recalls hearing various territory bands, including Jay McShann's, perform in a Joplin park each August. "I wanted to play then," he says, though he was not yet in grade school. "If my mom or somebody would have gotten me a horn, I probably would have."

The future saxophonist moved to Detroit when he was nine. A fan of Johnny Hodges, he started playing trumpet when he was 12, but only because his school marching band didn't have a sax available. He switched to alto a year later and soon experienced a musical epiphany when he heard Charlie Parker's recording of "Tico-Tico" on the jukebox in a neighborhood candy shop.

"That was it," says McPherson, whose new album, *A Tribute to Charlie Parker* (Clarion), was recorded live with his quartet and the Cleveland Chamber Orchestra. "When I heard Parker's version it made perfect sense to me right off the bat. I was 14 and knew nothing about harmony or him, but I thought, 'That's the way it's supposed to go.'

"Then someone says to me, 'This is a certain genre—modern jazz, bebop. Bird is one of the innovators and there's a whole slew of people like that—Monk and Dizzy.' That was all I needed to hear."

The budding alto saxophonist quickly immersed himself in all things bop. He also began hanging out in front of the Bluebird, a top Detroit jazz club, located just a few blocks from where he lived.

"The house band at that time was Elvin Jones, Tommy Flanagan or Barry Harris on piano; Paul Chambers; Thad Jones; and Pepper Adams on baritone," McPherson says. "When I found out this was the music I liked and it was just down the street, my life was set."

As a student at Detroit's Northwestern High School, McPherson began playing at area proms with a band that included future Mingus bandmate Lonnie Hillyer on trumpet and a gifted young contrabassist named James Jamerson, who became an electric bass legend playing in the now fabled house band at Motown. "James would have been a wonderful jazz bassist, as good as Paul Chambers," McPherson says. "He was exceptional."

What made McPherson's young band notable wasn't that it performed at high school proms, but that it exclusively played bebop and that the students in attendance happily danced the night away.

Bebop proms?

The very notion evokes vivid images of hyperactive teenagers in a near-frenzy, arms and legs akimbo, as they gyrated to the charged tempos and devious syncopations. Oop bop sh'bam, indeed!

"We had to modify it a little, so we couldn't play at breakneck speed, but they danced," McPherson says, chuckling. "Curtis Fuller is a little older than I am, and I remember him saying Detroit had a reputation for being the only city that danced to Charlie Parker. The dances then were based on 4/4; now, it's a 2/4 world."

Gifted beyond their years, McPherson and Hillyer started sitting in at Sunday-afternoon jam sessions at the Bluebird, although only if accompanied by a parent, since both were still underage. Pianist Harris, who lived around the corner from McPherson, became a mentor who shared his knowledge of music theory and harmony.

"I REMEMBER CURTIS FULLER SAYING DETROIT WAS THE ONLY CITY THAT DANCED TO CHARLIE PARKER."

By the time he was 20, McPherson was ready for the Big Apple. Just a few months after his arrival in New York, he hooked up with Mingus, with whom he worked off and on for 12 years. He was featured on a slew of albums by the storied bassist and composer, including such classics as *Mingus at Monterey* (VDJ/Prestige, 1964), *My Favorite Quintet* (Charles Mingus, 1965), *Let My Children Hear Music* (Columbia, 1971) and *Mingus at Carnegie Hall* (Atlantic, 1974).

"That started my international career," says McPherson, as he sips coffee in the living room of a friend's home in San Diego's rustic North Park neighborhood.

Was it daunting to get his start with a jazz visionary, whose fiery temper often had fellow musicians and audiences alike fearing for their well-being?

"I was 20, and it was intimidating," McPherson says. "Because he had a reputation for being quite the character, and he was indeed that. He was 45 or so and weighed 300 pounds—so, yeah, he was intimidating! His music was extremely difficult, and he was contentious. He was very hard to satisfy, and it seemed he blossomed in stressful situations. Maybe I'm wrong, but there was a certain tension involved that he liked."

Not long after McPherson joined, the Mingus band performed a benefit show at its leader's behest. When Mingus doled out $5 to each musician after the gig, McPherson was the only one who refused the money and asked that it be given to the concert's beneficiary instead.

"When I did that, Mingus' eyes watered up and he said, 'Thanks, Charlie,'" McPherson says. "From that point on, he never bothered me. If anyone else in the band did something wrong, he'd be livid and degrading to them. But he never bothered me. I could be late or be silly on the bandstand, which I was quite often as a young guy, and he'd never say anything to me because he'd pegged me a nice guy.

"He had a sense of values and was basically an honest man. So if you were that way, too, he respected that. Musically, I've been inspired by Mingus, almost by osmosis, especially in terms of my composing. My original tunes, particularly the ballads and slower things, remind me of Mingus without me trying to sound like him."

As a solo artist, McPherson quickly carved out a niche as one of the most resourceful and passionate postbop alto saxophonists. His 1969 Prestige album, *Horizons*, which was reissued in 1999 by Fantasy, is a vibrant gem that teamed him with Cedar Walton, Billy Higgins and Pat Martino. It found him already developing a strong compositional voice and exploring exciting new instrumental textures to match his bravura instrumental technique.

Nevertheless, some myopic critics have pigeonholed McPherson since the 1960s as merely a very talented Charlie Parker disciple, a view that gives short shrift to his own distinctive approach. True, McPherson is so adept at gracefully performing in the style of the alto sax icon that Clint Eastwood hired him to perform key instrumental segments in Eastwood's acclaimed 1988 film, *Bird*. And

JOHN ABBOTT

true, the new CD *A Tribute to Charlie Parker* deftly reprises the classic *Charlie Parker With Strings* album on Verve.

But *Tribute*, which he agreed to make only after extensive urging by its producer, Leonard Herring Jr., is no simple carbon copy. McPherson simultaneously pays homage to Bird and subtly injects his own artistic personality—a daunting feat when performing music so well known and revered. Then again, his love for Parker's music has always been a starting point, not a final destination, a distinction that seems to have eluded some listeners not conversant with the breadth and depth of McPherson's work.

"The elements that make one different from Parker don't loom for people and they don't seem to recognize it," he laments. "It's kind of a drag, but that's the way it is. So the challenge for me in making this album was, 'How can I do this and still have my own personality emerge?' You do it with a certain spirit that you want to maintain, but you want your own individuality to shine through. You want the

quality to be as good as Charlie Parker, without parroting him, so it's a double challenge.

"If someone says, 'Play these songs atonally, like Albert Ayler,' that would be easy. I just thought, 'I'm just going to be myself, and myself is already different enough from Charlie Parker. I don't need to play like him to be melodic; I know how to be melodic.' So I just played. You have the confidence, musically, to be yourself and that's it.

"This is something other alto players might also have to conquer. I'd say it this way: Sometimes the most musical phrase has to have what I call 'a divine sequence.' It is something so correct that it's almost a universal thing, and it's correct because of how it flows and unfolds. In a linear way, it's very straightforward and it's the truth of that moment. And if it turns out to be very Parker-like or Pres-like, it doesn't matter, because that divine sequence has occurred.

"So you just let it happen, and don't deviate just for the sake of deviation. If it smacks of Bird, so what? Alto players will be cognizant of that and worry about it. I don't worry about it anymore, and since I don't, I wind up playing things Charlie Parker never would have played, and then some things that he did, which happened because he played in that divine sequential form, like he was taking dictation. You don't interfere with it, you run with it. To me it's the right construction to bring about real creative playing, and a balance between head and heart. If you have the inspiration and the technique, it's a perfect balance." ***JT***

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