

VOICE 7/84 Bebop Flambé

To ape Charlie Parker is one thing, to use his language as a source of inspiration is another. Detroit alto saxophonist Charles McPherson has accepted the challenges Parker threw down. His gifts are equal in the task: an enormous sound, commanding articulation of accents within the angular phrases, a knowledge of the weights tones gain through inflection, texture, rhythmic subtlety, and an unerring control of color. Above all, he plays with an emotion that bloats the notes until the saxophone seems about to melt or bend or crack. Thus his melodies take on an urgency one almost never hears from exponents of this style anymore. In that respect, he reminds one of Roy Eldridge, a self-willed blast furnace devoted to playing every night as though it might be his last. The result is a heated rendition of a profound style which proves that the melodic velocity of bebop demands more of the player's imagination than worked-out arpeggios.

A few weeks ago, McPherson led a quintet at Sweet Basil and shocked me with the overwhelming drive he brought to every song, setting a standard equaled only by pianist Ronnie Mathews and drummer Leroy Williams. But he played on yet another level of impassioned imagination last weekend at the Jazz Cultural Center, supported in his flame-throwing by the piano of Barry Harris, the bass of Hal Dodson, and Williams again at the drums. McPherson's bullish lyricism and his extraordinary control of swing and crystal-clear pitch inspired an edge of force in all the musicians. He was especially imaginative on "Embraceable You," singing the bell off the horn, and "Visa," where the hard Parker blues and ironic jubilation rattled the bandstand. On the blues especially, Harris was so melodically inventive and driving that each chorus seemed a new song determined to outswing the last. McPherson will return to the Jazz Cultural Center this Friday and Saturday. Over the last 25 years, since he first worked with Barry Harris and Charles Mingus, he has become one of the finest alto saxophonists in the world. If you want to know how good that level of playing sounds, I suggest you get over there.

—Stanley Crouch

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