

## The Nash celebrates 9 years with the music of ‘one of the giants of giants’: Charlie Parker

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Arizona Republic

Published 7:00 am MT Nov. 2, 2021

Talking to Charles McPherson, it's pretty clear why Lewis Nash immediately thought of McPherson as he was assembling musicians to celebrate the legacy of Charlie Parker as part of The Nash's ninth anniversary weekend. And it goes beyond the fact that he plays alto sax, Parker's primary instrument. Or that Clint Eastwood brought him in to help flesh out the music to his Parker biopic, 1988's "Bird."

Jazz musicians have been celebrating Parker's centennial (he was born Aug. 29, 1920, and died March 12, 1955) for the past year.

McPherson speaks of Parker with the passion of a true believer.

Asked about the bebop legend's impact on his own life as an alto saxophonist playing jazz, McPherson's first reaction is to say it's not about how Parker's music has inspired him.

"This really should be shouted from the highest mountaintop, that Charlie Parker's influence is not just alto, not just saxophone," McPherson says.

"His influence since probably 1940 or so is on every instrument in jazz."

Nash, the Phoenix-born drummer for whom the downtown Phoenix jazz club is named, says much the same in response to a question about what Parker means to jazz musicians.

"I'll say this right off the bat. Charlie Parker affected the way every jazz instrumentalist plays, not just saxophone players. He affected how everyone thought about rhythm, phrasing, technique, everything. He was one of the giants of giants in this music."

Charlie Parker's influence carries beyond jazz

And that impact stretches well beyond the boundaries of jazz.

"The world knows Quincy Jones as a producer who recorded things for Michael Jackson and a bunch of rock 'n' roll people or rhythm & blues people, Will Smith, whatever," McPherson says.

"Before all that, he was a trumpet player who wanted to play like Charlie Parker."

On the occasion of Charlie Parker's 1947 return to 52nd Street, "Bird" performs at the Three Deuces in New York City with Tommy Potter on upright bass, Duke Jordan at the piano, and Miles Davis on trumpet. This gig was a year after Parker's six-month rehab stint in California's Camarillo State Mental Hospital.

That influence went on to shape how Jones approached arranging songs that wouldn't make a casual listener think jazz had anything to do with the equation.

"Even when arranging pop music for somebody like Michael Jackson, the white noise in Quincy Jones' mind is Charlie Parker and it's going all through his head all the time," McPherson says.

"It's the same thing with Neil Hefti and so many of the great arrangers. He influenced everybody. And the reason why he was so influential is because he was so good at so many things."

Among those many things, of course, was playing saxophone.

He had the technique of a virtuoso but the magic of his music went beyond technique.

"He could portray all the emotions humans feel," McPherson says. "He could play so fast, the notes would be a blur. Or he could play so slow and beautiful, it would make people cry."

That virtuosity came through regardless of what type of music he was playing, from the blues to Afro-Cuban jazz, the Great American Songbook to salsa or the bebop school of jazz he did so much to pioneer.

"He had the perfect combination of inspiration and technique," McPherson says. "And when left brain and right

brain hold hands, you have genius.”

McPherson didn't know of Parker when he first started playing

Charles McPherson

McPherson started playing alto saxophone at 13, having started his musical journey on trumpet and flugelhorn in junior high, it didn't have a thing to do with thinking Charlie Parker was a genius.

“I knew nothing of Charlie Parker when I was 12 and 13,” he says.

“I didn't know a hell of a lot about jazz music, to tell you the truth.”

He has vivid memories of his first exposure to the music, though.

A kid at school had told him about Parker so he recognized the name when he happened to stumble across a song called “Tico Tico” on the jukebox in a Detroit candy store.

“I said, ‘Oh, Charlie Parker! This is that man my friend told me about!’” McPherson recalls. “So I put my money in the jukebox. And from that very moment — and I'm 13 years old, maybe 14 — I knew exactly that this cat was wonderful.”

At that point, he had no real understanding of the music theory that went into making something sound that wonderful.

“But even at that early age, the thing that stood out was he would play all these long phrases and I could hear how he was connecting them,” McPherson says.

“And I had a sense of the melodic logic while this man is playing these long elegant musical sentences that connect with each other seamlessly. I had heard other musicians play a lot of notes. But I had never heard the logic in it. And that's what stood out. Right then and there, I knew this person is really special.”

Charles McPherson

McPherson would, of course, go on to learn that how music made him feel that day was not uncommon.

“That feeling I got about how much sense everything made, every musician on planet Earth during the period, when they heard Charlie Parker, that is the thing that stuck out to them,” McPherson says.

Eastwood shared with McPherson the story of the first time he heard Parker play.

It was the late 1940s and Eastwood went to a Jazz at the Philharmonic concert to see Lester Young on a bill that also featured Parker.

“He had heard of Bird, but he'd never heard him in person,” McPherson says.

“He said, ‘When I saw Charlie Parker, the authority and the control and the complete mastery of what he was doing, you could cut it with a knife. And from that moment on, I knew exactly the kind of attitude I had to bring to film.’”

McPherson was a logical choice for The Nash's celebration

McPherson left Detroit for New York City in 1959. By 1960, he was playing saxophone for another jazz legend whose perspectives on music were shaped in part by hearing Parker, Charles Mingus.

He was in Mingus' band, off and on, through 1972, by which point he'd long since established himself as a recording artist in own right, having launched his recording with 1964's “Bebop Revisited!”

Jazz Times columnist Mark Stryker has praised him “one of the most potent musicians to emerge from Detroit's mid-century cauldron of bebop.”

Nash has shared many stages with McPherson through the years, although this is the saxophonist's first time at The Nash.

“Charles has a very personal and identifiable sound, which is very engaging and original,” Nash says.

“It pulls you in. If a musician is able to begin with a sound that's engaging, you've already set the stage for the listener to go ahead and take the next step, which is to listen to what ideas you have and what your level of musical

acumen is.”

From there, Nash says, what hits you is the clarity with which McPherson executes his musical ideas.

“When he thinks of extemporaneous ideas on the spot, in the process of improvising, they come out as though they have the completeness of someone who was sitting down with a pen and paper composing them and thinking about what they wanted to write,” Nash says.

McPherson assembled a quintet for his Nash anniversary weekend performance, with trumpet player Terrell Stafford, Nash on drums, Peter Washington on bass and Bruce Barth on piano.

In addition to saluting Parker, the quintet will share a few selections from McPherson’s latest album, “Jazz Dance Suites.”

“The focus is on Charlie Parker,” Nash says.

“But I think we would be remiss not to familiarize the audience with present-day Charles McPherson and what he’s doing.”

The Nash’s anniversary celebration kicks off Friday, Nov. 5, with a sold-out house party for 50 guests overlooking the downtown skyline with the Terrell Stafford-Lewis Nash Quartet.

McPherson joins the celebration Saturday for two shows at the Nash.

Stafford headlines Sunday’s concert with the 17-piece SCC Jazz Orchestra, under the direction of Eric Rasmussen, and a small ensemble.