

# Bird exhumes Parker legend with compassion and sensitivity

**Bird ★★★**  
Famous Players Garneau

**review by Mike Spindloe**

**C**harlie Parker was a junkie, but he was also a creative genius. His death at only 34 years old was the tragic end to a life story which is tailor made for the Hollywood treatment. Thankfully, however, *Bird* is told with sensitivity and compassion, a fact which likely has a lot to do with the involvement of Parker's widow, Chan Parker, in the making of this film.

*Bird* begins near the end of Parker's life, as he is about to unsuccessfully attempt suicide by drinking iodine following the death of his infant daughter; this attempt results in his confinement to a psychiatric ward for a short time. We are then taken back in time to the beginning of his career

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as a professional musician.

Parker is portrayed as an articulate, charming and even poetic man with a quick wit and an obvious love of life which contrasts starkly with his darker side; a tortured artist unable to deal with responsibilities or relationships, who found refuge in shooting heroin or whatever else he could cram into a syringe. Because both sides of Parker's personality are so well documented, we're not sure whether to admire him, feel sorry for him, or both. In any case, the portrait of the man who is still considered by many the pre-eminent saxophonist in jazz history is a paradox, creating a powerful atmosphere that holds you in its grip both during and after seeing the film.

Forest Whitaker captures the perverse nature of Parker's character perfectly. In almost every scene except those featuring the young Parker, he is the constant focal point of the movie, the next most important character being the long-suffering Chan, played by Diane Venora. Apart from these two, the character we see the most of is Dizzy Gillespie, one of the many people who Parker destroyed his relationships with through his unreliability and chronic drug use. Gillespie, like most of Parker's other friends, was willing to put up with an extraordinary amount of grief from Parker because of his unique talents, but was eventually forced to leave him behind; Parker became virtually unemployable as

a musician eventually.

At over two-and-a-half hours long, *Bird* could have dragged on interminably. There is, after all, a certain amount of repetitiveness to the scenes; for instance, Parker attempts to kick his heroin habit and restarts several times. Interspersed with darker moments, though, are genuinely moving and entertaining scenes dealing with the successes of Parker's life: his live performances, his romance with Chan (he wins her by pawning his saxophone to get the money to rent a horse on which to chauffeur her around town), and a successful tour of the South with a racially-integrated band (still a daring move in the 1940's).

Parker was also a heavy drinker and a dedicated womanizer. These other aspects of his self-destructive lifestyle combine with his drug use to reveal a man who was perhaps obsessed by his own mortality. In his early thirties he was determined to make sure his will was in order; Chan protests in the movie but is probably glad today that he at least took that much care to see that she would be looked after. There would not have been much coming her way in terms of royalties, since Parker either sold his songs outright for pittances or was cheated out of the rights to them by

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unscrupulous managers and record companies.

The music in *Bird* is one of its strongest assets. Original recordings of Parker in flight are used whenever possible, some of the songs featuring newly recorded backing tracks. Parker's love of all forms of music is documented as well; while playing in California he is genuinely humbled to see the house where Stravinsky lived, but when he rings the doorbell he is not admitted.

Charlie Parker's life seems to be one which was constantly filled with pain: waiting for the next fix, his health problems with bleeding ulcers and liver damage (at one point he drinks Scotch and milk, and, above all, the artistic pressures of having to improvise and compose on stage every time he played. *Bird* is a wonderful documentation of that life; one feels intuitively that the essence of it has been documented apart from whatever dramatic license has been taken. For that reason alone, it is well worth seeing.



Forest Whitaker as Charlie Parker contemplates life and saxophone in *Bird*.

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