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ne of the best American films in years to be seen in the official competition of the International Film Festival at

Cannes is **Bird**, produced and directed by Clint Eastwood.

**Bird** is about the life and career of Charlie Parker one of the world's most admired jazz musicians, the late alto-saxophonist who all but invented be-bop. As a child growing up in Kansas City, Missouri, he would hang around the back entrance of the Reno Club to hear Count Basie's Band. When the musicians took a break, they would sneak him in, and they called him "Yardbird." Later, when he himself became a musician, it was said, he seemed capable of flight and his nickname was shortened to "Bird" — which stayed with him for the rest of his short and turbulent life.

At his press conference in Cannes, Eastwood was undaunted by the reporters and photographers, the barrage of questions and the attempts by some correspondents to bring up irrelevant matters. The quiet-spoken Eastwood patiently brought out the history of his film.

"The first time I heard Charlie Parker" he said "I was overwhelmed. Living in the Bay Area I had been following the big resurgence of traditional jazz — Lu Watters, Bob Scobey, Kid Ory and others, but hearing Bird, even though I couldn't understand him at first, turned me around. I was 15 at the time and I had actually gone to see Lester Young, the tenor saxophonist who was Parker's model but when Bird came on, I knew he was something special — he was dazzling."

Filming **Bird**, was a labor of love for this remarkable actor turned producer-director. Although Eastwood does not appear in **Bird** he still enjoys acting in the many roles audiences associate him with. His involvement with jazz music off-screen is well-known and he attributes his love for it to his mother.

"She was a great Fats Waller admirer and by the time I was in my teens I had learned enough to play at the Omar Club in Oakland where the laws were loosely followed and they would let me play in exchange for free meals. At school the only instrument was a fluegelhorn and I did play the horn a bit; however, I mostly concentrated on ragtime and blues piano. Then I dropped it all, as you do about certain things in your life when you're young and eventually wound up being an actor. But I have never lost my interest in jazz."

Charlie Parker died in 1955. Ever since, his life on film has been proposed many times to different studios. Several years ago, Joel



# CLINT EASTWOOD'S BIRD



Oliansky (who wrote and directed *The Competition* 1980, with Richard Dreyfuss) — finished a screenplay for Columbia. They thought of starring Richard Pryor as Bird but there was so much opposition to this that Columbia shelved the

project. Time passed, Eastwood spoke to Warners about obtaining the script; nothing much happened again until Columbia asked for a screenplay which Warners had on its shelves. An exchange was made and Eastwood was given the

Oliansky screenplay.

"What I didn't want to make was the typical Hollywood film written and directed by individuals who didn't know the character, the period or the music. They never did get jazz right on the screen, so I decided I would produce and direct myself. **Bird** is a very personal story. I felt it should be done by unknown people. I think I understand the time-frame and I love the music, as I said. I liked the script and the way the story was told; the techniques of using flashbacks and flashforwards appealed to me."

Before he spoke his first words as Bird, Forest Whitaker (Robin Williams' friend in *Good Morning Vietnam*) spent two months studying the saxophone. "You won't hear me playing in the movie, but at least it will look right. If the audience doubts in any way that I can play, then Charlie Parker is lost."

Parker's chaotic life involved music, women, drugs and drink, much of which was brought on by his insecurity and racial discrimination. The most important woman in his life was Chan Parker. Eastwood brought her from her home outside Paris to work with Diane Venora, who plays her in **Bird**. "I think that had I not worked with Chan, I could never have played the part."

Red Rodney, the white trumpeter who toured with Parker (and is heard on the soundtrack) is played by Canadian actor, Michael Zelnicker. Dizzy Gillespie, who with Parker, pioneered the be-bop revolution of the 40's and whom Bird once called "the other half of my heart-beat" is played by Sam Wright.

Before he started on the film, Eastwood knew that the soundtrack would be vital and could make or ruin the film. He told his long-time musical associate and composer, Lennie Niehaus, to use Parker's low-fidelity mono records. But audiences today expect high-fidelity sound. The original recordings were "cleaned up" and Parker's solos were electronically isolated and combined with the best jazz musicians "we could find." It offered them the unique opportunity to play with Charlie Parker 30 or so years after his death.

Eastwood is known to be an efficient cost-conscious director but one who does not compromise artistic integrity. He says that working quickly "makes a person think better and move faster." With **Bird**, Eastwood has created a masterpiece from his two main loves.... jazz and making movies.

Note: At Cannes, Forest Whitaker won the "Best Actor" award and the film won the "Best Technical" award for its splendid soundtrack.

—Gerald Pratley

