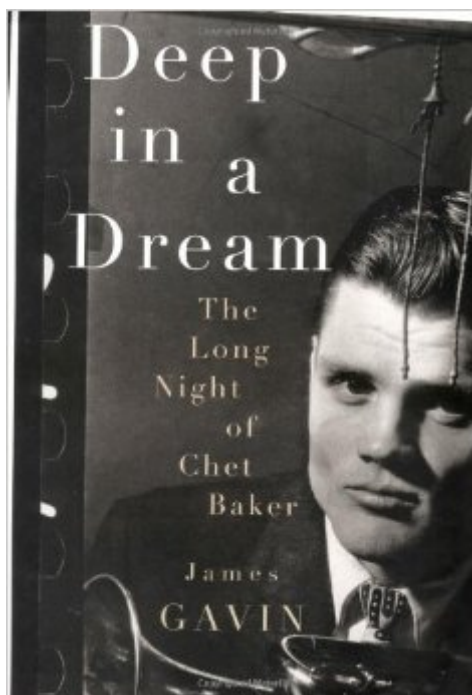


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Deep In A Dream: The Long Night Of Chet Baker



Synopsis

The wild ride of the most romanticized icon in jazz is thrillingly recounted in this first major biography. From his emergence in the 1950s "when an uncannily beautiful young man from Oklahoma appeared on the West Coast to become, seemingly overnight, the prince of the cool jazz" until his violent, drug-related death in Amsterdam in 1988, Chet Baker lived a life that has become an American myth. Now, drawing on hundreds of interviews and previously untapped sources, James Gavin gives a hair-raising account of the trumpeter's dark journey. The story of Baker's demise "a heretofore unsolved riddle" is revealed here at last. So is the truth behind his tormented childhood, the pain of which haunted his entire life. Gavin explores the birth of the melancholy trumpet playing, the fragile tenor voice, and the otherworldly personal aura that catapulted Baker to fame. Sexy, angelic, needy, and forbidding all at once, Baker became known as the James Dean of jazz. Like Dean, he struck a note of menace in the staid fifties: behind his ultracool, handsome façade lay something ominous, unspoken. The mystery drove both sexes crazy. But his only real romance, apart from music, was with drugs. And in mesmerizing detail, Gavin narrates the harrowing spiral of dependency down which Baker tumbled, dragging with him those who dared get close. From his golden promise to his eventual destruction, Baker's life mirrored America's fall from postwar innocence. *Deep in a Dream* is the portrait of a musician whose singular artistry and mystique have never lost their power to enchant and seduce us.

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Customer Reviews

While this book will certainly make compelling reading for any Chet Baker fan, or any follower of the

1950s-60s jazz scene, be prepared for a frigid treatment of the subject. Mr. Gavin may have a knack for writing about jazz musicians, but he neither understands nor appreciates the music itself one whit. There was a definite gap in the Chet Baker bio market, and Gavin has filled it. Unfortunately, he has not only taken the same angle that the tabloids always did, covering the drugs-and-domestic-violence aspect of Chet Baker, but he has gone them one better--to suit his theme he paints Baker not as a hip musician, which he was, but as a bumbling Okie square, who could never keep up with the music's 'advances'. Baker's conservative opinions of free jazz and fusion, to name just one example, are held up to ridicule. He is dismissed as being 'incapable' of such 'catharsis', as if his opinion were formed out of jealousy or open-mouthed incomprehension. In fact, Miles Davis, who is repeatedly held up as an example of what a great musician is made of so Baker can pale in comparison, despised free jazz. For that matter, many very hip black jazz musicians hated free jazz, and fusion as well. Louis Armstrong thought bebop itself was a joke. All the usual jazz cliches are resurrected here: white jazz is intellectual and precise but lacks feeling, while black jazz is earthy, charged with life and dripping with soul, etc. Except for frequent put-downs of Baker's music for its alleged "lack of feeling" (what, if not feeling, is Baker's music known for?) Gavin barely mentions any of Baker's recorded legacy, aside from occasional session details which always involved Chet's forgetting the date because he was stoned, and his subsequent lack of blowing power when finally coaxed into the studio. His quiet, intimate music is repeatedly dismissed as 'cold' or 'dead', either because Gavin apparently cannot understand feeling unless it is loud, sweaty and intense, or because any other analysis would complicate his single-minded theme. History features no shortage of creeps, louses or idiot savants who packed their music with feeling--Mozart anyone? Charlie Parker? Miles? Then what's all the fuss about? Why do we listen to this man's music 30, 40 and 50 years after it's been recorded? Why aren't we listening to Abbey Lincoln's or Albert Ayler's or any of the other cathartic free jazz or fusion that Gavin holds up as supreme examples of hip? If you didn't know before reading the book, you won't know after.

It's difficult to recreate the arrival of Chet Baker to the world of jazz. At that time, around 1950, the trumpet masters were Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespe, Fats Navarro, and the Stan Kenton trumpet section, with Maynard Ferguson, and Buddy Childers. These "monsters" played above high C. F's, G's, and yes even DOUBLE high C's were their daily vocabulary. Along comes a kid from Oklahoma, whose family settles near LA, who never practices, has no high register(if he ever played a high C, I've never heard it) and decides to confront these guys, and the public with his idea of

jazz, and jazz singing. He is an immediate sensation. His chamber music approach to jazz trumpet playing affects many people as does his singing. There are those who rate him a spinoff of Miles Davis, and that his singing isn't singing at all. I rate him a true master in both categories. The only fly in the ointment was his discovery and love of heroin. It superseded everything in his life---loved ones (some say he only loved heroin) children, musical associates etc. James Gavin does a masterful job recreating a life if possible, more tragic than Art Pepper's, or Charley Parker's. It's not for the faint of heart. If you worship every note and vocal of this master as I do, it's a must.

Deep in a Dream is a thoroughly researched and well written biography of Chet Baker. Baker was one of the leading stars of West Coast jazz in the 50's and early 60's, and as he played trumpet, was at times held up as a white version of Miles Davis. This comparison was unfortunate; although gifted with a natural talent, Baker never matured into a major figure like Davis, and the one time they played on the same bill, Davis's group blew them away. Baker was also blessed with model-like looks (although by the time he died, he looked like a walking corpse), and often sang in an androgynous, subdued voice that many people found very moving. (Matt Damon imitates this in the Ripley movie, where he sings a Baker standard, My Funny Valentine, in the style of Baker.) Unfortunately, as this book documents thoroughly, Baker was a heroin addict for most of his adult life, and cared much more about getting drugs than anything else. Not surprisingly, this led to a downward spiral in his career. By the early 1960s he was getting bad reviews in the US, and relocated to Europe, leaving his family behind. He toured widely there, and became something of a cult figure. Baker's life does not make for pleasant reading. He used people whenever he could, paid no attention to his children (other than to steal his son's trumpet on a rare visit home), and recorded primarily to get money to fund his drug habits. Since he always needed money right away, he usually signed away royalties in return for an advance. This left him perpetually broke. Eventually he died under mysterious circumstances (probably suicide) in Holland. James Gavin has talked to just about everybody that had contact with Baker, as well as researching reviews of his performances and records. Gavin is clearly taken with Baker's music but does not hesitate to repeat the sometimes vitriolic reviews Baker received. As depressing as Baker's life is, Gavin has not written a slash and burn biography designed to show his subject as an awful person. His judgments seem quite fair. However, I would have liked more discussion of Baker's music -- what made his playing and singing popular even today. There is some discussion of this but not enough to convey why we should care about Baker as an artist. This book makes an interesting contrast with two biographies of Baker's contemporary Bill Evans (*My Foolish Heart* and *Everything Happens to Me*), who may

have been as big a drug user, but whose biographies mention his drug use in passing and concentrate almost entirely on the music. The Evans's biographies probably go too far in neglecting his messy life, but they still do a good job of showing why Evans is still an important figure today. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine anyone writing a biography of Baker as good as this one, and this is certainly the book to read if you want to know more about Chet Baker. There is also a tie-in CD, with the tracks selected by the author, that is an excellent introduction to Baker's music.

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