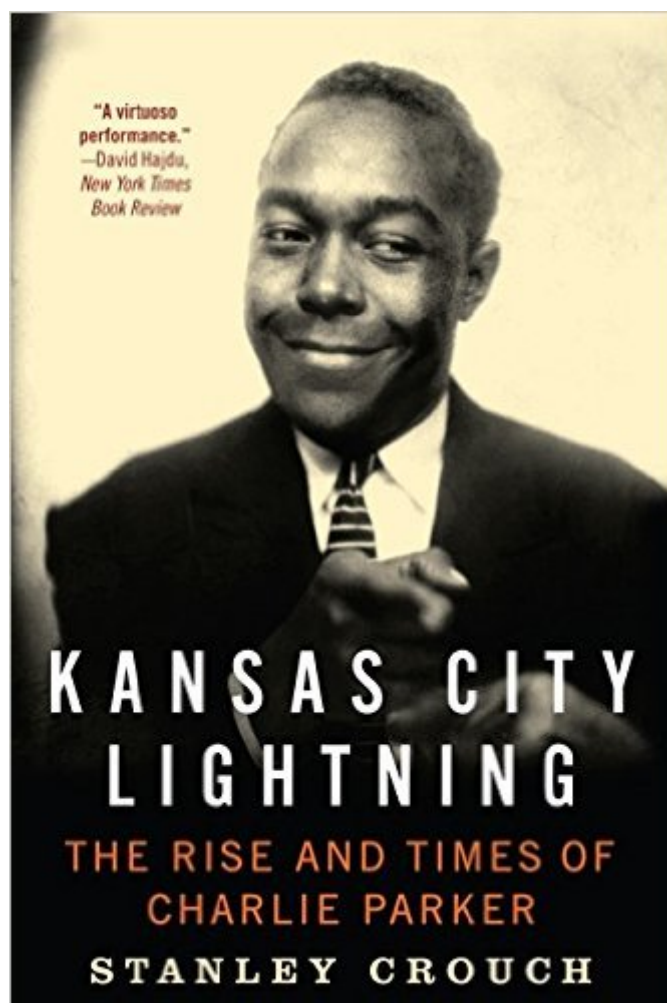


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Kansas City Lightning: The Rise And Times Of Charlie Parker



Synopsis

Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker is the first installment in the long-awaited portrait of one of the most talented and influential musicians of the twentieth century, from Stanley Crouch, one of the foremost authorities on jazz and culture in America. Throughout his life, Charlie Parker personified the tortured American artist: a revolutionary performer who used his alto saxophone to create a new music known as bebop even as he wrestled with a drug addiction that would lead to his death at the age of thirty-four. Drawing on interviews with peers, collaborators, and family members, Kansas City Lightning recreates Parker's Depression-era childhood; his early days navigating the Kansas City nightlife, inspired by lions like Lester Young and Count Basie; and on to New York, where he began to transcend the music he had mastered. Crouch reveals an ambitious young man torn between music and drugs, between his domineering mother and his impressionable young wife, whose teenage romance with Charlie lies at the bittersweet heart of this story. With the wisdom of a jazz scholar, the cultural insights of an acclaimed social critic, and the narrative skill of a literary novelist, Stanley Crouch illuminates this American master as never before.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Every few years a new book comes out on historical figures - Caesar, Napoleon, JFK, etc.

Sometimes, something new is added, but often, a repeat of the story is worth the effort even if only told in a different tone and with some different details or emphasis. This is such book. Charlie Parker was a major figure in American music, though probably now much forgotten in either legend or music by a younger generation. Crouch retells the story of 'Bird' from early life through his years

immediately before the explosion of the "be-bop revolution". (I understand that another Crouch book will follow on the second part of Parker's career.) Other good works on the topic include Ira Gitler's 'Jazz Masters of the Forties', Gary Giddins's 'Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker', and Ross Russell's 'Bird Lives' and 'Jazz Styles in Kansas City and the Southwest'. Crouch doesn't add a lot to these (and his narrative is close to that of Giddins), but nicely puts Parker in the context of Kansas City music in the 1930s. There is much information on Buster Smith, Walter Page, Benny Moten, Jay McShann and others who factored into the development of Parker's style. (Though I hope that additional information on McShann is forthcoming in his next volume.) There is also much on his personal life. In fact, this work has more value - and new information - in its telling of his family story, and relationship with his mother, his first wife Rebecca Ruffin and others, than it does as a musicological tome. There are some traditional gaps in Parker history, most notably the late 1930s. Crouch assigns definite dates to his first journey to Chicago and New York, but Giddins has different dates and Gitler acknowledges conflicts in the supporting information. None of these minor differences are greatly important in the history of jazz, but 'Bird-nerds' should be advised, it has been almost forty years since I read Russell's 'Bird Lives', but I recall it as the definitive biography of Charlie Parker. I recommend it for the single best work on him (and am moved to re-read it), but I highly recommend this Crouch book as a great introduction to the man, his early life, and the 30's music scene in Kansas City.

This biography is more a work of modern art than a documentary. Like most modern art, at first glance many of us will say, "What is he trying to do here." I had the same feeling when I first heard a recording of Charley Parker. So I guess it is fitting that his biography reads the same way. It is not that Stanley Crouch does not know how to write - this is far from his first book on Jazz, or African American History, or many other subjects. Therefore, I must assume he writes this way - flowery excess language, wide forays from the subject into related subjects, then return to the story line, like the jazz player, who leaves the melody to return later after many embellished variations. To understand the storyline or "tune" of this biography, read and memorize Chapter One. It culminates in a New York radio session with Jay McShann's band, recently arrived from Kansas City for a second try at the big time, this time with young Charley Parker - who had not yet shown up for the gig. As the band finished swinging some preliminary tunes and were ready to swing into Charley's now trademarked "Cherokee" everyone held their breath. Charley was well into his second trip with the big H and prone to show or not show. As he finally walked in there was a collective sigh of relief as the band kicked into Cherokee and Charley proceeded to blow the roof off with high velocity rips

through complex chord changes, the likes of which no one there or in radio land had ever heard before from a saxophone. This was the pinnacle to which the rest of the book climbed in a winding back and forth path - including grade school, high school band, domineering mother, childhood girlfriend whom he married, Kansas city in prohibition jazz club Prendergast days, Charlie's embarrassing rejections from his early tries to join KC jam sessions, his incredible determination to learn the sax, involving up to 15 hours a day practice. In later years, his dedication to find his own sound, resulted in leaving his wife and baby to go to New York and continue his search. It was amazing to me to find that this supposed musical genius had so much trouble, and not just with drugs, as has been highly reported, but with his music, which he worked on constantly (reminding us of what Edison said about inspiration and perspiration). After winding through Parker's many disappointments, with numerous forays into such things as African and Native American history, history of the railroads, and, of course, history of jazz, the Author takes Parker riding the rails to New York where he finds a guitar player of kindred spirit (Biddy Fleet) and they spend much time practicing complex chord changes. As he comes to that pinnacle experience and the end of the Story, Crouch picks another note in the chord of the tune and says: "During his most satisfying bandstand experience, Charlie Parker knew what every talented jazz musician has, before and after: how to listen and hear, instant by instant, and how to respond to that instant, gone now and never to return." The last twenty percent of the book is about Stanley Crouch, his family history, his many interviews to write this book (which he claims took 30 years), and the many footnote comments (indexed by page, so hard to locate on an e-reader) - that is where we find hidden the reason for Parker's nickname, "Yardbird, or Bird". There is nothing about Bird's further career, his hooking up with Dizzy and inventing Bebop, or his move to California, relapse into drugs and drinking, time spent in the Camarillo mental hospital, recovery, more recordings, then relapse and death. For this part of Parker's life, another book (or Wikipedia) will be required. However, for this reader, who lived not too far from Kansas City when Bird was there but knew nothing about him then, the detailed description of what went on with the Kansas City Jazz scene in those days was very interesting. Crouch's writing style was often as hard to follow as Bird's music. But if you like modern art and you like jazz, you probably will like this book.

It is rare to find a biography of this magnitude. Mr. Crouch does an excellent job of putting the complexities and dynamics of Charlie Parker's life into focus. The book is 'arranged' the manner of a musical score. This story has been marked, shaped, redone, formed, kneaded and baked. We are looking at well delivered FINAL draft. It is thoroughly researched and carefully told. This work is

done with style & precise detail. There are historic references which demonstrate solid & meaningful participation. It has the 'page turner' quality often limited to best seller novels...it reads like a story told at bedtime to children, to motivate them along a course of greatness. It flows like a lecture on the wonderful nature of humanity, outlining everything from settling the Western United States & breeding of horse in those plains, to the contributions of early 19th century Southern 'old timey' musicians to the tangible engagement of 20th century musicians who challenged each other on this very complicated network of 'notes on a page' which produce ART. We get a glimpse at those who forged the paths which led to such a great individual's capacity for 'such' spiritual and mechanical alignment. You are there at Cotton Club battle of the bands, you are there when Charlie Parker discovers adolescent love, you are there when he is driven to a level of superb dexterity & genius which makes him THE unique contributor we have grown to know. This biography is written with dedicated integrity.

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