

NEIL POWELL

Bill and Bird

It was fifty years ago today... Sometimes it seems as if every other article, book, radio feature or television documentary hangs by the slender sustaining thread of an anniversary; and how strange it is that people and events should be made so very much more interesting by a random numerical coincidence. Yet we readily, indeed gratefully, fall for the ploy. Can it really be fifty years ago? we ask ourselves wonderingly, where forty-nine or fifty-one wouldn't excite the slightest surprise. And this time, the commonplace reflection comes with an odd codicil: for it was a BBC radio programme (which I missed), marking the fiftieth anniversary of Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock', that prompted the *Guardian*'s radio previewer to protest, like a character in panto, *Oh no it's not*. No, he explained, everyone knows that 'this inane yet influential song' was first released in May 1954. What happened in 1955 was that Brunswick 05317 dithered in the lower reaches of the top twenty at the start of the year, before eventually getting to No 1 in the autumn; then, for the next couple of years, it kept on popping up again and again. People just couldn't get it out of their heads.

I bought my copy from the curiously-named Rhythm Agencies, in Church Street, Reigate; the 'Agencies' bit, I eventually realised, came from the fact that they also sold theatre tickets. Their manager, a benign crinkly-haired teddy-bear, was amazingly tolerant of my seven- or eight-year-old self; for I'd quickly become the kind of child who hung around record shops, listening to interminable discs in a little peg-boarded 'audition room' before buying (on a good day) just one with my pocket money, and filching catalogues and leaflets while I was at it. You went into one of those two 'audition rooms', each furnished with a couple of junk-shop chairs and covered in posters which were years out of date, and the record you'd asked to hear would eventually emerge, after a satisfying click of stylus on shellac, from a home-made cabinet with a round speaker grille high up in one corner; lower down, within reach, there was a cream bakelite volume control, but I'm not sure that it worked. Depending on the label, ten-inch pop 78s cost either 5s 7d or 6s: the Decca group, including Brunswick, stung you for the extra fivepence and only ran to a plain buff paper sleeve, which in turn went inside one of Rhythm's paper bags, with red and white vertical stripes, like footballers' shirts, and the laboriously witty motto 'There is no form of music without Rhythm'. We lived five miles from the town, so getting a fragile 78 home, either wedged in a bicycle's saddle-bag or nursed among the fat ladies on the 424 bus, was a challenging business. By then, the technologically advanced had moved on to seven-inch 45s, but my own technology -- more than adequate it seemed, too -- consisted of a maroon wind-up HMV gramophone, found at a village jumble sale and installed in a garden shed safely distant from human habitation. 'Rock Around the Clock' probably needed that distance. For one thing, rock 'n' roll made adults nervous, partly because they didn't know quite what it was about, which was just as well: as Humphrey Lyttelton would cheerfully explain to readers of the *Spectator*, 'Rock Around the Clock', translated into 'the jargon of the police-court reporter', 'literally means "have sexual intercourse every hour, on the hour"'. For another, it was a famously accidental hit, recorded in a dis-used ballroom as a spare B-side, with no thought of immortality, which explains both the odd acoustic and the unbuttoned atmosphere. Despite an inherent rhythmic stodginess, it almost wants to swing -- it was produced by Milt Gabler, who'd previously owned the

Commodore jazz shop and record label -- and towards the end there's a coarse yet unmistakable echo of the manic riff that threatens to lift the roof in Louis Armstrong's 1929 'St Louis Blues'. I knew this because 'St Louis Blues' was the first jazz record I ever heard; it had come from the same jumble sale as the gramophone.

It was *really* fifty years ago today -- today being 12 March 2005 -- that Charlie Parker died; 'People call me Bird,' he'd explain, and everybody did, and does. Like Haley, he was as much a consolidator as a revolutionary. It seems strange now that the Amis-Larkin generation of jazz buffs were so affronted by him: after all, he was their contemporary (born 1920), and he made his early recordings while they were Oxford undergraduates. Just the time, one might have thought, for them to become devotees, but no: they found his tone too abrasive (yet cheerfully put up with the braying raucous-ness of early New Orleans jazz) and his harmonic invention too audacious. Parker certainly regarded himself as part of the mainstream, once telling Ella Fitzgerald: 'It's a good thing you don't play a horn. You'd take a lot of jobs from us.' And when Bird used the chords of 'How High the Moon' as the basis for 'Ornithology', Ella responded by including in her performance of the song a scat rendering of his version, note for note (try it, if you must, in the resonant privacy of your bathroom). That sort of creative give-and-take is among the delights of jazz, as well as a reminder that Parker, far from being only an exponent of hard bop, was at his luminous best when reinterpreting standards: the two quintet sets from late 1947, including a legendary 'Embraceable You' in which Gershwin's melody is only ever implied as an illusive (and allusive) shadow, have the delicacy and poise of chamber music. The sense of absolute rightness and cohesion is a quality shared with the Louis Armstrong Hot Five and Seven of two decades earlier: indeed, Armstrong is rather surprisingly the other great jazz soloist whom Parker -- with his combination of virtuosity and inventive-ness, improvisatory energy and lyrical grace -- most resembles.

In *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker*, Bob Reisner, the art historian turned jazz promoter who presented Parker's Sunday night sessions at The Open Door in New York, recalled their first meeting. It was after midnight and pouring with rain, and Reisner was walking home from a party on the East Side through deserted streets, when he saw 'a large, lumbering, lonely man, walking kind of aimlessly'. 'You're Charlie Parker,' he said, wondering 'what the devil he was doing in this poor Jewish neighborhood'. Bird explained: 'My wife is having a baby, and I'm kind of walking off my nervousness and waiting to call back.' They walked around for a bit, and eventually Reisner took him back to the party where 'everyone was terrifically surprised and delighted with my find'. 'He's an old friend, and I just recognised him in the street,' Reisner told his host, as he left for the second time. 'Where are you going now, Bob?' the host asked. 'I told him I was going out for a while and would return shortly with Louis Armstrong.' It's a scene that belongs in a novel. It belongs, in fact, in the opening section of James Baldwin's *Another Country*, with Rufus as Bird and Vivaldo as Reisner.

'Charlie Parker suddenly became a major deity of the Beat Generation, along with Dylan Thomas and James Dean,' according to Reisner, and it's true that they have a good deal in common: charismatic presences, reckless lives, early deaths in the mid-1950s. Thomas wrote a handful of magnificent poems, surrounded by much verbal floundering; Dean made three films, of which *Rebel Without a Cause* remains as iconic as anything from that icon-strewn decade. But with Parker, condensed into

little more than fifteen years, there's the trajectory of a whole career, a complete corpus of work with distinct though overlapping phases. The astounding early bop originals -- 'Tiny's Tempo' and 'Red Cross', 'Now's the Time' and 'Koko' -- elide, via his 1946 breakdown and hospitalisation at Camarillo, into the perfect cohesion of two great quintets. Both featured the young Miles Davis: one of them, with pianist Duke Jordan, produced those unforgettable standards; the other, with John Lewis on piano, combined mature eloquence with something of the earlier edginess. This latter group's work eventually appeared, chronologically arranged with all Bird's Savoy recordings, as a five-volume LP set in the 1960s, dutifully presenting up to six alternate takes of a piece in a sometimes ear-numbing sequence. But on 'Parker's Mood', recorded in Los Angeles in September 1948, the three takes are a revelation. Take 1 is so assured that you can't easily understand why it wasn't accepted straight away; take 2 breaks down halfway through with a reed squeak and laughter (a rare instance of Bird's recorded voice, to put alongside the lunatic 'Slim's Jam' from 1945); in take 3, Lewis refashions his introduction and solo, suddenly sounding precisely like his later MJQ-self, and Parker rises to new heights of grandeur, framing the piece with declamatory statements which again recall early Armstrong. Listening to all three versions is like reading a major poem, preceded by the author's working drafts.

That second phase in its turn elided into the third which, almost inevitably at this time, involved Norman Granz, *Jazz at the Philharmonic* and Clef/Verve records. Granz used to get a bad press as an over-ambitious operator who put incompatible musicians together in the interests of showmanship; but he seems to have realised that the jazz world of the 1940s and 1950s -- like the poetry world of the early nineteenth century or, for that matter, the 1930s -- was rich in diverse talents that simply became more interesting when rubbed against each other. Parker thrived in most of the small and medium group settings devised by Granz and relished the sessions in which he was improbably placed in front of a large string orchestra directed by Mitch Miller (yes, that's the one, of 'Yellow Rose of Texas' fame). He even remade 'Loverman', the number he'd notoriously stumbled over just before his breakdown, this time adding a phrase from Percy Grainger as a subversive coda, an oddly chilling stab at light-heartedness: 'See?' it seems to say, 'I got all the way through this time, and I can even mess it up with a stupid joke at the end.' That was in 1951, soon after he'd returned from a European tour suffering from a peptic ulcer, and his time was starting to run out. When he died, so legend has it (as well as Bob Reisner, who was there), a kind of spontaneous graffiti erupted all over New York: the two words *Bird Lives*. And fifty years on? You bet.