

# Jam

Jazz Ambassador Magazine

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## Bird at the Jelly Joint

Charlie Parker in KC  
A Rediscovered Photo

Celebrating Bird 2

Folly Jazz 2016

Bits of the Blues



# Bird at the Jelly Joint

by Chuck Haddix



The photo of an 18-year old  
Charlie Parker in KC,  
not seen since 1939

Like most jazz musicians, Charlie “Bird” Parker often played casuals, informal gigs arranged by an individual or group at a home, country club or other non-jazz venues. Casuals enable musicians to pick up extra cash during off hours and reach new audiences. While working with trumpeter Red Rodney in New York, Charlie was known to play the occasional bar mitzvah, entertaining the dancing throng with his version of Klezmer music.

During the fall of 1938 in Kansas City, Charlie played a series of casuals along with members of the Jay McShann

This photo ran on page 123 of the 1939 *Kangaroo*, the yearbook for what was then known as the University of Kansas City. Here’s the caption that accompanied it on a facing page: “Random shots from the Kangaroo jelly-joint which was opened near the campus this fall. More or less regularly on Thursday afternoon jam sessions were held which the jitterbug element from the University and Southwest High jiggled to the thunderous rhythms of Jessie Price and well-known name bands who were persuaded to give guest appearances. While the walls bulged before blasts from the brass and the shaking rhythm of the drum, the studes danced on the tile floor, leaned nonchalantly on the soft-drink fountain. Favorite hang-out of sorority and fraternity crowd, the atmosphere is cliquish and reception chill to those who ‘don’t belong.’ A place where one must be seen if he is to be known as one of Those Who Get Around.”





band for University of Kansas City students at a malt shop the students referred to as their "Jelly Joint." A student covering the festivities for an article in the 1939 Kangaroo Yearbook inadvertently snapped the only known photo of Charlie playing his alto in Kansas City.

The photo captured the then eighteen year old Charlie at a nexus in his career. Already a rising star in Kansas City, he would soon hop a freight train to New York where he made the musical breakthrough that shattered previous musical convention.

1938 brought a whirlwind of change to Charlie Parker, professionally and personally. On January 10, 1938, his wife Rebecca gave birth to a son. At the time of the birth, Charlie was away from home touring small cities scattered across the Midwest. Before leaving he made Rebecca promise that she would not name the baby until he returned. For several months after the birth, Rebecca and Charlie's mother Addie referred to the newborn as "Baby Parker." When Charlie returned home, he named the baby Leon after saxophone great Leon "Chu" Berry.

With a family to support, Charlie found steady work close to home with the Buster Smith band at Lucille's Paradise, a popular nightspot occupying two store fronts upstairs at 1711 East 18th Street, just west of the Kansas City *Call* newspaper. Radio station KXBY broadcast the band nightly from 11:30 to midnight. On stage Smith mentored Charlie, teaching him how to play double time and go in and out of key. Smith recalled that "It wasn't long before he could play anything I could play and make it better." In the summer of 1938, Smith left for New York, leaving Charlie in charge of the band. Under Charlie's unreliable leadership, the band quickly fell apart.

That fall, Charlie joined the Jay McShann Band at Martin's Plaza Tavern located on the Country Club Plaza. McShann, who was originally from Muskogee, Oklahoma, toured the southwestern territories before arriving in Kansas City in 1936. Genial with a winning smile, McShann quickly emerged as a band leader. In May 1938, he opened at Martin's with a small ensemble, becoming the first African American band to play on the Country Club Plaza. While working regularly at Martin's, McShann began playing casuals at country clubs for Kansas City's elite.

In October, Charlie joined the McShann band. Dave Dexter noted the band's popularity in his column in the *Kansas City Journal-Post*. "The Jay McShann and George E. Lee dance bands are attracting comment at the Plaza tavern and the Brookside tavern, respectively, both operated by Clair Martin. McShann, a pianist, features the singing of Selma Long, Jesse Price and Bob Mabane. Billy Smith's trumpet, William Scott's tenor and Charlie Parker's alto sax also are prominent. Gene Ramey is the hard working bass fiddle slapper."

Young white dance fans from the nearby University of Kansas City flocked to Martin's to dance to the McShann band. Established in 1932, the University of Kansas City (UKC) lacked a student union with extended hours for students to gather and socialize on campus. Over the years, students had

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tried to establish their own hangout at various sweet shops and restaurants in the surrounding neighborhoods. They referred to the places where they gathered as Jelly Joints. Like Jelly Roll, Jelly Joint was a sly reference to sexual relations.

In October, Bill Buffe, a UKC senior, and "Abby" Abercrombie, a UKC alumni, opened the Kangaroo, "K.C.U's new Jelly Joint," located at 300 E. 51st Street on a strip of businesses just east of the street car tracks. Lampooning Café Society, which was known as the "wrong place for the Right people," they billed the Kangaroo as being "on the right side of the car tracks."

Students eagerly jellied at the Kangaroo from 8:00 a.m. until midnight. The student newspaper reported how a group of coeds arrived at the Kangaroo fresh from "sowing wild oats" on 12th Street, Kansas City's strip of sin: "They have wallowed in an orgy of sin in the fleshpots of Twelfth Street. Each has drunk a gin buck [bucket], each has furiously chain-smoked while avidly absorbing the structural faults and terpsichorean clumsiness of a hard-faced strip-tease dancer. A few of the bolder spirits have lost a quarter at the crap tables in the little back room." Shortly after their arrival at the Kangaroo, one of the coeds performed the splits in the middle of the room. Rising from the floor she proclaimed, "Whew, but I'm drunk."

In the spirit of Café Society, students hosted a series of Thursday afternoon jam sessions. They hired a group of musicians from the McShann band led by Jesse Price. Known as "The Mad Drummer," Price was noted for playing a 111-chorus drum solo on the popular novelty tune Nagasaki. Charlie, who was always ready to jam and earn some extra money, eagerly joined in on the sessions.

Charlie and the band gave the students a crash course on the art of the jam session. Covering the jam sessions at the Jelly Joint, the 1939 Kangaroo Yearbook reported that "More or less regularly on Thursday afternoon jam sessions were held during which the jitterbug element from the University and Southwest High jiggled to the thunderous rhythms of Jesse Price and well-known name bands who were persuaded to give guest appearances. While the walls bulged before blasts from the brass and shaking rhythm of the drum, the students danced on the tile floor, leaned nonchalantly on the soft-drink fountain."

In early November, Charlie left the McShann band to join the Harlan Leonard band. A few months later, Leonard

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Alex Littlejohn. Relatives or next of kin can contact Penn at [spennkc40@aol.com](mailto:spennkc40@aol.com)

## Elder Statesmen

The Musicians Food Pantry has put out a call for volunteers for the remainder of 2015. Non-perishable food items, canned goods and donations are needed to help replenish the Pantry. New program manager Donna Lenhart is available weekdays, especially on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, at 816-444-3693 between 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Contact her for more information. The Pantry is at Covenant Presbyterian Church, 5931 Swope Parkway, Kansas City, MO 64130. Rev. Kirk Perucca is the Senior Pastor and an Elder Statesmen of KC Jazz and a Kansas City Jazz ALIVE committee member. Musicians and their families are welcome to food free of charge twice a month.

## Metheny Scholarships

The Metheny Music Foundation has awarded its ninth annual music camp and summer studies scholarships. This is the third year the Foundation has presented its Knight Award college scholarship. Metheny Foundation awards are given to qualifying Lee's Summit, MO students in the fields of band, jazz, orchestra, vocal, "and any other forms of music where the student shows passion and potential," said Foundation chairman Mike Metheny.

Multi-instrumentalist Quinn Mosier of Lee's Summit West High School received the 2015 Knight Award at the May 9th Lee's Summit Symphony Orchestra (LSSO) concert. Summer



Pictured, left to right: Mike Metheny, Quinn Mosier, LSSO music director and Metheny Foundation board member Russ Berlin and guest LSSO conductor Kirt Mosier. Photo credit: Abundant Moments.

camp scholarships were awarded on May 15th at the Lee's Summit History Museum to Shane Anderson (Lee's Summit West), Miranda Chaffin (Lee's Summit North), Micah Ruiz Esparza (Summit Christian Academy), Quinn Mosier (Lee's Summit West) and Charles Nord (Bernard Campbell Middle School).

The new museum, which opened in April, features an exhibit recounting the 100-year history of the Metheny family in Lee's Summit.

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fired Charlie for being unreliable. Out of work and unable to get along with Rebecca, Charlie hopped a train to New York where he was reunited with his musical father, Buster Smith. While in New York, Charlie made the musical breakthrough he had been seeking while jamming in Kansas City.

Charlie went on to international fame as one of the originators of Bop, a revolution in jazz. He often returned to

Kansas City to visit his mother and play at Tootie's Mayfair, a roadhouse at 79th and Wornall, south of the location of the Jelly Joint. No doubt, while driving past the strip of shops on 51st Street on his way to Tooties, Charlie fondly recalled one of his more unusual casuals – jamming for those crazy UKC students at their Jelly Joint.

## NEXT JAM

Alice in Wonderland set to Coltrane? With Angela Hagenbach as Alice, Lonnie McFadden as the Rabbit, Pam Watson as the Caterpillar, Nedra Dixon as the March Hare and Bryan Hicks as the Mad Hatter? Plus Steve Lambert, Roger Wilder and Doug Auwarter? This you have to see. And you will, in the next issue of *Jam*.