

“Ko Ko”-- Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, and others (1945)

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Essay by Ed Komara (guest post)*



Charlie Parker



Original label

“Ko Ko” was Charlie Parker’s signature jazz piece, conceived during his apprenticeship with Kansas City bands and hatched in the after-hours clubs of New York City. But when “Ko Ko” was first released by Savoy Records in early 1946, it seemed more like a call for musical revolution than a result of evolution.

“Ko Ko” was developed from a musical challenge that, from 1938 through 1945, confounded many jazzmen. The piece uses the chord structure of “Cherokee,” an elaborate, massive composition that was written by dance-band composer Ray Noble. “Cherokee” was the finale to a concept suite on Native American tribes, the other four movements being “Comanche War Dance,” “Iroquois,” “Sioux Sue,” and “Seminole.” If a standard blues is notated in 12-measures, and a pop song like George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” is in 32 measures, Noble’s “Cherokee” is in 64 measures.

In 1939, Charlie Barnet popularized “Cherokee” through a hit version for RCA Victor. Meanwhile, jazz musicians noticed the piece, and they tried clumsily to improvise solos to its chord progression. Count Basie, for one, with his Kansas City band, recorded “Cherokee” in February 1939. At the time, Basie had some of the best soloists in jazz like Lester Young, Ed Lewis, and Dicky Wells. But on this record, these four musicians improvised only during the A sections, leaving the very difficult “bridge” sections (measures 33-48 of the piece) to be played by the whole band.

Parker (1920-1955) was only 19 and still playing in Kansas City when Barnet’s and Basie’s recordings of “Cherokee” appeared. By the end of 1939, he moved to New York City and, like a typical arrival there, scuffled for work during the first few months. Supposedly, at this time, he took a job at a restaurant just to hear the great jazz pianist Art Tatum perform there. During this uncertain period, Parker began finding his true musical style when he mastered “Cherokee” in a way that the Basie band soloists did not. As two “Downbeat” reporters, Michael Levin and John S. Wilson, reported in 1949 about what Parker remembered as his epiphany:

Charlie’s horn first came alive in a chili house on Seventh Avenue between 139th Street and 140th Street in December, 1939. He was jamming with a guitarist named Biddy Fleet. At that time, Charlie says, he was bored with the stereotyped changes being used then.

“I kept thinking there’s bound to be something else,” he recalls. “I could hear it sometimes but I couldn’t play it.”

Working over “Cherokee” with Fleet, Charlie found that by using higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, he could play this thing he had been “hearing.” Fleet picked it up behind him and bebop was born.

There are recordings of young Parker playing “Cherokee,” particularly a 1942 private recording made at Monroe’s Uptown House in Harlem, and a 1943 private studio recording with a guitarist and drummer. They show him making use of these “higher intervals,” such as the 9th, 11th and 13th scale tones in addition to the more often used root (1st), 3rd, 5th and 7th scale tones. But playing those tones in an even 8/8 meter sometimes clashes with the 4/4 swing time. Minimizing those clashes helped further towards refining the style that he was conceiving.

Parker’s commercial recording session for Savoy Records on November 26, 1945, his first as a leader, was his chance to make his mark with “Cherokee.” With Savoy owner Herman Lubinsky and producer Teddy Reig present, Parker held the session at WOR Studios in New York City. He saved “Cherokee” for last, recording “Billie’s Bounce,” “Now’s The Time,” and “Thriving on a Riff” with teenaged trumpet player Miles Davis, bassist Curley Russell, pianist Argonne Thornton, and drummer Max Roach. The session had its fits and starts. Parker and Reig called a break so that Parker could fix a problem with his saxophone. Later, a musician’s union official arrived to inform Thornton that he couldn’t participate because his transfer from Chicago had not yet been processed. Saving the session was Dizzy Gillespie, who had come to the session with Parker, and who knew the trumpet and piano parts to Parker’s current version of “Cherokee.”

What Parker planned to do was to play a 32-measure introduction, Noble’s “Cherokee” complete in 64 measures, improvise a solo that would use two playings of “Cherokee,” a full repeat of the “Cherokee” theme, and a full repeat of the introduction as a coda. But such a plan would require about six minutes, and a 10-inch 78-rpm record side could play only three minutes. Also, Lubinsky discouraged the original themes to be played, in order to avoid paying copyright royalties to their composers. So when Reig heard during the first take Parker playing the “Cherokee” theme, he ended the take, assured Lubinsky that the piece was called “Ko Ko,” and not “Cherokee,” and told Parker that the theme choruses were going to have to be omitted. Those cuts created a new problem: Gillespie was to play trumpet during the introduction, then piano during the solo, but he needed a little time to reposition himself at the microphone with his trumpet to help play the introduction’s repeat. A drum solo for Max Roach was inserted to buy some much-needed time for Gillespie.

The result was something to behold. After dispatching the introduction duet with Gillespie [time], Parker plunges into the first chorus (0:00-0:25), referring to the “Cherokee” theme with shortened note-values (0:29-0:31). To begin the second chorus, 1:15, Parker at, 1:15-1:18, embeds the clarinet solo from the New Orleans standard “High Society” as made famous by Alphonse Picou and Johnny Dodds. As a witty solution to executing the difficult “bridge” section (1:41-1:47), he refers to the pop song “Tea for Two” in the manner of Art Tatum. Although the tempo in 4/4 time is 300 beats per minute--or, five beats per second--Parker does not rush, giving every note its full durational value. As Parker aptly described during a conversation, “It’s just music. It’s playing clean and hitting the pretty notes.”

Upon its release on Savoy 597, “Ko Ko” received a snarky review (“another weird product”) in the May 1946 issue of “Metronome.” But over time, bebop was recognized as a style that had evolved while the nation’s attention was focused on World War II. “Ko Ko” was a watershed for Parker and the new bebop style, and his famous solo was as much a calling card for him as his nicknames “Yardbird” and “Bird.” Because of the long chord structure and the stamina needed

to execute the solo, Parker tended to reserve it for the big occasions like Carnegie Hall concerts and radio broadcasts. But whenever it took wing, it homed straight into every receptive ear.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.