

# ABOUT CHARLIE PARKER'S YARDBIRD

## The People (in order of appearance)

**Charles Parker, Jr.** (1920-55) – Born in Kansas City, Kansas and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, he started playing saxophone at age 11, dropped out of high school after only one year, and spent his teens playing in clubs in Kansas City. He moved to New York in 1938 and rose to fame in the years that followed as a virtuoso sax player, master of improvisation, and one of the founders of bebop. Heroin and alcohol addictions intermittently derailed his career and life. He died at age 34; the coroner mistakenly estimated his body to be between 50 and 60 years old.

**Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter (“Nica”)** (1913-88) – A member of the wealthy British Rothschild family, Nica moved to New York in the 1950s, leaving behind her husband and five children. She became a major jazz patron, and numerous musicians named pieces after her, such as Thelonius Monk’s “Pannonica.” Charlie Parker died in her suite at the segregated Stanhope Hotel.

**Addie Parker** (1891-1967) – Charlie’s mother, who raised him largely as a single parent. She became a nurse after he left home and remained in contact with him, talking to him on the phone only three days before he died. She is buried next to him.

**Rebecca Parker** (c.1918-c.1990s) – Charlie’s first wife, who met him when her family started boarding at the Parker home when she was a teenager. They married when Charlie was 16 and she was a couple years older. They had one son in 1938, but Charlie left Kansas City that same year and that was the end of their marriage.

**Doris Parker** (1922-2000) – Charlie’s third wife, who he met when she was a hat check girl at a New York night club. She moved to Los Angeles to be near him when he was committed to Camarillo State Mental Hospital in 1946. They married in 1948 and separated in 1950, but were never divorced.

**John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie** (1917-93) – An acclaimed trumpet player, he met Charlie around 1940 when they were young musicians playing in after-hours clubs in Harlem. The two men played together on and off for the rest of their lives, from clubs around the world to Carnegie Hall, often with bands headed by Gillespie.

**Chan Parker** (1925-99) – Charlie’s final wife, a dancer and jazz lover who he met in the early 1940s. They moved in together in 1950, after Charlie split up with Doris, but were never legally married. They had two children together: a son, Baird, and a daughter, Pree, who died at age 2 in 1954 while Parker was on the road.

### Silently:

**Moose** – One of Parker’s New York drug dealers, who was in a wheelchair. Parker named the composition “Moose the Mooche” after him in 1946.

## The Places

**Birdland** – located on Broadway and 52nd Street in New York, the jazz club opened in 1949 and was named after Parker, although he did not own it. One of the club’s features was caged finches. Parker played there on occasion, but it was said that he was kicked out of the club at least once or twice. Celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, and Joe Louis were regulars at the club; Igor Stravinsky even dropped by to hear Parker play one night. Parker’s final major public engagement took place at Birdland on March 4 and 5, 1955. He died a week later.

**Camarillo State Mental Hospital** – located in Camarillo, California, it was run by the State of California from 1936 to 1997. Parker was committed there from July 1946 to January 1947, following an arrest for public nudity and setting his hotel room on fire.

## The Premise

Charlie Parker died on March 12, 1955 in the Stanhope Hotel suite of Baroness Nica. His body lay unidentified in the morgue for the next 48 hours, while Nica tried to locate Chan, who had moved to another state.

The opera takes place in those 48 hours, as Parker returns in spirit to a mythical Birdland. Although his genius lay in improvising on his saxophone, he is now determined to write a final orchestral masterpiece. People and events from his life swirl in and out of his memory, but he still finds it impossible to write down “black notes on white paper behind bars.”