

# Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



**Julie Macdonald (1926 - Pasadena, California 1982)**

## **Head of Charlie Parker**

Circa: circa 1955

circa 1955

54.4 cm

Never before shown to the public, this sculpture is a rare portrait of the greatest musical improviser of all time and a man who changed the course of jazz history. Charlie “Yardbird” Parker (1920-1955) was one of the most influential jazz soloists of all time. His saxophone playing was characterised by its fast tempos and virtuosic handling. Known for his revolutionary harmonic ideas and his development of a jazz style known as Bepop, Parker was a true musical genius whose life was tragically cut short by drug addiction and personal tragedy. The saying goes that there were two eras of jazz – before Parker and after Parker.

Aside from being illustrated in Resiner’s book, Down Beat magazine, and Esquire World of Jazz, the sculpture has remained hidden from public view. Remaining treasured in the artist’s possession from its execution in 1955 to 1961, it subsequently entered one of the greatest jazz collections of recent times in North America; before entering another important private jazz collection in Scotland.

Slightly over life-size the bust is imposing and exudes a sense of monumentality as the large distended head slants slightly backward. The facial features are simplified and striking. The pursed lips and swollen cheeks that help make Parker such a great a Saxophonist are celebrated. Framing a prominent nose are large almond-like, pupil-less eyes, which along with a general lack of expression, give the sculpture an ageless appearance and a sense of serenity and wisdom. It is these features which make Parker appear god-like, like some ancient Egyptian statue or a vision of buddha – peaceful and reverent – the chaos of his personal life to be forgotten but his supreme talent – given to us all to enjoy - to be remembered for eternity. The similarity to ancient Egyptian statues of Pharaohs was indeed intentional. Macdonald was greatly influenced in her carvings by these awe-inspiring sculptures and even recalls showing Parker an image of an XXVth dynasty Egyptian Bust, to which his reaction was to say “Things like this shake me up!”.

The beautiful pale striated sandstone has been carved with the utmost sincerity, by a sculptor who was completely at one with both her sitter and material. Parker and Macdonald were close in his final years and Macdonald wrote fondly in her memoirs of their relationship, specifically Parker’s “ability to perceive” and his prodigious intellect despite his lack of formal education. Macdonald and Parker probably met in 1952 when the musician first visited California. They were likely both guests at a gathering of artists, intellectuals and scenemakers who met at the Altadena ranch of the Turkish born painter Jirayr Zorthian in July of that year - a home recording of the event in which Parker plays saxophone survives. The two became close friends and enjoyed long conversations and visiting art shows around Los Angeles. However, Parker’s world was slowly unravelling. In March 1954 a drug addicted Parker was staying with Macdonald in California when he received the news that in the early hours of the 6th March his young daughter Pree had died in hospital in New York after a long illness. Two nights earlier Parker had been fired, for the second time in a week, by the owner of the Tiffany Club in Hollywood for behaving erratically. Macdonald recalled him drinking heavily and sending a series of increasingly incoherent telegrams to his wife. He then poured a bottle of scotch down the toilet, gave away his remaining supply of heroin, and Macdonald drove him to the airport. This would be the last time Macdonald would see Parker alive. Within a year of leaving to bury his child that Sunday morning in 1954, Parker himself would be dead. During this time Macdonald had been making preparatory sketches of ‘Bird’ in order to start work soon after his departure on the present bust.

Born in Pasadena, Macdonald was the daughter of a painter and attended the Chouinard Art Institute. She executed more than 400 works in stone, with her sculptures exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Pasadena Art Museum, the San Francisco Museum, and the National Academy of Design as well as being held in the Hirshhorn, Washington D.C. Her life long passions - animals, jazz and civil rights – dominated her sculpture and she also produced a stone head of Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. (whereabouts unknown).

Macdonald made two sculptures based on Parker’s likeness: the present sculpture, in Pasadena sandstone, and a full-length study in lignum vitae, a dark hardwood, last recorded in the collection of Robert Reisner who had promoted Parker in New York clubs. In 1961 Reisner, who already owned the wood figure, was in correspondence with Macdonald who was to be among the contributors to his book of stories about the life of Parker (op.cit). Macdonald indicated to him her interest in selling the stone head and Reisner put her in touch with jazz collector George Geisler in whose collection it remained for four decades before being sold to another jazz enthusiast William Dickson, based in Scotland.

Charlie Parker was born in Kansas City, and started playing saxophone aged 11. From the mid-1930s he began practicing diligently, and mastered the improvisation needed to play through the long nights

performing in the city's bars. Parker recalled that during this time he was spending three to four years practicing up to 15 hours a day. In 1936, whilst playing a jam session at the Reno Club in Kansas, Parker's attempt to improvise infamously failed when he lost track of the chord change and Jo Jones, the drummer for Count Basie's orchestra, took a cymbal off his drum set and threw it at Parker's feet to signal him to leave the stage. Parker, undeterred, avowed to practice harder. In 1939 he moved to New York, the catalyst for springboarding his career as he honed his skill in the city's clubs. One night in 1939 Parker was playing 'Cherokee' when he realized that the chromatic scale can lead melodically to any key, breaking the confines of simpler jazz soloing and pioneering the movement known as 'Bebop' - characterised by fast tempo, complex chord progressions with rapid chord changes and numerous changes of key and improvisation. Parker's brilliance during the following decade was tempered by his increasingly erratic behaviour caused by his heroin habit, which in turn stemmed from an addiction to prescription opioids prescribed to him after he was injured in a car crash aged 16 in 1936. His condition worsened, aggravated further by the death of his three year old daughter in 1954 and heavy drinking. After two attempted suicides in 1954 and a period in a mental hospital, he died the following year in 1955 due to complications from pneumonia and long-term substance abuse.

### **Provenance**

Provenance:

The artist, to 1961

George E Geisler, 1961 to 2000

William Dickson, 2001 to 2020

### **Literature:**

Literature:

R. Reisner (1961). Bird: the legend of Charlie Parker. De Capo press, 1971 edition, illustrated.

B. Green. (1963). Hero of the Jazz World. The New York Observer, September 22, 1963, illustrated.

Down Beat magazine, 1965, illustrated on the front cover (an issue that commemorated the 10th anniversary of Parker's death)

P. Miller (1975). Esquire World of Jazz, Ty Crowell Co., illus.

R. Williams (2010). "Charlie Parker: a genius distilled", The Guardian, London, 22 March 2010, G2. p. 17-19, illustrated.

R. Williams, (2013). "The Essence of Bird", The Blue Moment: A blog about music, 8 May 2013, [www.thebluemoment.com](http://www.thebluemoment.com)