

Little Bird: An Examination of the Early Alto Saxophone Style of Jimmy Heath

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In this centennial year of Charlie Parker, his influence on jazz music remains pervasive. Parker's revolutionary style has impacted players since the bebop era. The towering influence he had on other players led Lennie Tristano in a Downbeat Blindfold Test in 1951 to state, "You can ... pick at random any five records by well-known boppers and compare the ideas and phrases. You'll see that if Charlie Parker wanted to invoke plagiarism laws, he could sue almost everybody who's made a record in the last ten years." Although Tristano engages in some hyperbole, his point about the number of players who adopted much of Parker's style is well-taken. This presentation examines the early alto saxophone playing style of Jimmy Heath and the extent of Parker's influence on him.

Jimmy Heath has had a 70+ year history as a recording artist and is widely recognized as an outstanding saxophonist, composer, arranger, band leader, and educator. His mastery of the bebop idiom led Dizzy Gillespie to declare, "All I can say is, if you know Jimmy Heath, you know Bop." While primarily thought of as a tenor saxophonist, Heath began his career as an alto saxophonist. The influence of Charlie Parker loomed large during Heath's development to such an extent that he earned the moniker, "Little Bird" from fellow musicians. As Heath describes in an interview with Marc Myers of Jazzwax.com, "By the time I was with Howard [McGhee], I was copying Charlie Parker and sounded so much like him that they called me "Little Bird." Heath also stated, "I felt great about it because he [Parker] was the man."

This presentation examines recordings Heath made with Howard McGhee in the late '40s and traces the influence of Parker on Heath's early alto saxophone playing style. The main source material focuses on several transcriptions of solos based on some of the core bebop repertoire (including the blues, I Got Rhythm changes, Yardbird Suite, and two versions of Donna Lee). Included in the analysis are comparisons of several aspects of Heath's and Parker's style including saxophone sound and timbre, melodic material, harmonic devices, time feel, and phrasing. In cases where Heath explicitly quotes Charlie Parker licks, transcriptions of phrases from both players are presented to show how each player uses and develops a given phrase. Areas of similarity are demonstrated while also highlighting differences between them, particularly in the area of Parker's rhythmic feel and unsurpassed variety of phrasing.