

Early Bird

Jay McShann Orchestra

featuring Charlie Parker

Early in 1939 Tom Pendergast, the crocodile-faced political boss who had run Kansas City for thirteen years, went to the federal penitentiary for income tax fraud and the fiefdom of gangsterism and corruption that had fostered a jazz renaissance collapsed. Fifty-odd cabarets that had been the scene of historical jam sessions and battles of bands closed their doors. Jobs for musicians dried up. The good times that had made the Heavenly City a major center of jazz style and a mecca for the jazzmen of nine states came to an end.

That spring the last of the Kansas City bands completed its recruitment of unemployed jazzmen and took to the road on a long barnstorming tour that would lead it through the deep South and eventually to Wichita, Kansas. The last band to leave the Heavenly City was headed by twenty-four year old Oklahoma blues pianist Jay McShann and included such hometown talents as Buddy Anderson, Orville Minor, Gus Johnson, Gene Ramey, John Jackson, Bob Mabane and Walter Brown. Heading up the reed section, and playing a similar role to that of Lester Young in the Count Basie Orchestra — catalyst and idea man — was Charlie Parker, then just shy of his nineteenth birthday.

For eighteen months the Jay McShann Orchestra toured the cities and towns of the South and Midwest, filling club and ballroom engagements, fighting an occasional battle of bands, enduring the rigors of the road, returning to Kansas City for a short rest or a refit, until one weekend it found itself in Wichita. There a memorable recording session took place. McShann had worked Wichita many times as a member of of obscure territorial bands (Al Denny, Eddie Hill) and knew Fred Higginson, manager of local radio station KFBI and a jazz buff. At Higginson's suggestion and for a small fee a group from the orchestra met at KFBI to cut two sets of transcriptions, theoretically for broadcast to the not very jazz minded listeners of the Wichita area, but mainly for Higginson's personal enjoyment.

Saturday, November 30, 1940, the rhythm section (McShann, Ramey, Johnson) and a front line consisting of trumpeters Anderson and Minor, trombonist-violinist Bud Gould, and saxophonists William Scott and Charlie Parker cut *I Found a New Baby* and *Body and Soul*. The following Monday, after playing local dance dates, the "band within the band" was back in the KFBI studios, this time with Bob Mabane, a Lester Young style saxophonist replacing Scott, and the rest of the personnel intact. Six more sides were cut — *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Lady be Good*, *Coquette*, *Moten Swing*, an untitled blues, and a trio side featuring McShann's percussive boogie woogie piano, *So You Won't Jump*.

That the original 1940 transcriptions should be preserved after a lapse of thirty years, let alone in good condition is something of a miracle. They were discovered by McShann on one of his visits to Wichita in the late 1960's. For several years the music has been traded back and forth by a handful of collectors of tape and Parkerania. On one occasion, incomplete and badly reengineered, the material appeared on a short-lived LP. Its availability now to collectors, musicians and jazz scholars in its complete and splendidly listenable form is therefore something of an event.

The transcriptions afford a record rare if not unique in discography of a major artist in the formative period of his career. They also make clear the Lestorian role that the (barely) twenty year old Parker played in the Jay McShann Orchestra, his great debt to Lester Young, his familiarity with historical saxophone style, and his deep roots in the blues-Basie tradition.

Taking the solos in the order of what seems to me their relative importance in Parker's development, *Coquette* is the sentimental Tin Pan Alley ballad

played in the commercial manner. This kind of performance, overly embellished and barely improvised, goes back to the hotel bands of the Twenties and, before that, to the bravura style of Rudy Wiedoeft, the world's first virtuoso on an instrument originally designed to enrich the sonority of the French military band. During the early Twenties Wiedoeft was a familiar figure on American vaudeville stages and a best selling Victor recording artist (*Sax-o-phobia*, *Sax-o-fun*, &c). A man incapable of playing a single bar of jazz, Wiedoeft nevertheless demonstrated to a large public the potential of the odd new instrument. Such hotel band leaders as Guy Lombardo and Vincent Lopez further popularized the saxophone by creating reed choirs to replace string sections in their hotel bands. Finally jazzmen, led by Coleman Hawkins, made the saxophone the most versatile and expressive of jazz instruments.

What Charlie Parker seems to be saying here is, "Look, friends, this is the bad old style. But it requires a certain technique. And this, too, I can do." However the performance is not quite straightforward either. Between the cracks one hears telltale signs of the real Parker about to emerge from the intransigent man-boy — tiny rips, slurs, slight displacements of metre, notes just slightly bent out of shape. The performance survives on two levels, one square, sentimental, almost silly, and, on another level, half heard, a surrealistic musical landscape that foretells profound changes to come in the playing of jazz.

Body and Soul is another saxophone solo, this one in imitation of the expansive style of Coleman Hawkins. The performance is predictable and thin, lacking Hawk's opulent sonority and command of running changes. It strongly suggests that more than once Parker must have listened at those legendary jam sessions in the district with its fifty-odd cabarets as Hawkins took on such rivals as Ben Webster, Prof Smith, Dick Wilson, Herschel Evans and Lester Young.

That Charlie was indeed the mainspring of the band's mechanism is underlined by his prominence on the Wichita transcriptions. *Coquette* and *Body and Soul* are saxophone showpieces. On the faster tunes a wider distribution of solos follows, yet it is here that Parker demonstrates his real ability. *Honeysuckle Rose* surges ahead at a tempo too fast for everyone, except Parker, who seems entirely at ease although the metre is nearly 300 on the metronome. From a welter of fluffed and scrambled solos Charlie's alto line soars effortlessly above the orchestra, a jet stream of notes, propelled by a comfortable reserve of wind. Not only is Parker at ease, but he finds it possible to toss in those random triplets that were to be his trademark in mature years, devices that give the impression Parker is doubling time and operating in a rhythmic world of his own.

On *Lady Be Good* Parker acknowledges his debt to Lester Young. The Kansas City tenorman had recorded it for Decca with the Count Basie Orchestra and the record was likely one of those taken by Parker to the Ozarks a few summers earlier and memorized note for note. If one has the means to slow the turntable to 16 rpm, or copies the solo off on tape and replays the tape at half speed, he will have the eerie feeling of listening to Lester Young, although the player is Parker. The facsimile is that close, the debt that heavy, and ungrudgingly admitted.

There are further insights in Parker's early style on the classic Kansas City riff tune, *Moten Swing*, and on *I Found a New Baby* with its Chicago flavor. The astonishing thirty-two bars on *Honeysuckle Rose* are the kind of up tempo performance that few contemporaries could surpass — the names of Art Tatum, Roy Eldridge and Benny Goodman come to mind. Parker had already achieved their precision of phrasing and command of *ad temp*. Parker quotes *You're Mean to Me* on *Lady Be Good*, somehow making this echoic bit fit into his own line. The flow of ideas, gift for melodic invention and mastery of time are signposts of sweeping changes to evolve in the years ahead as the insurgents of the bebop movement, led by Parker, formed their ranks at Minton's Playhouse and on Fifty-Second street. Parker would not have full exposure of his talents for another five years, late in 1945 when he made the *Now's the Time* session for Savoy.

There are added bonuses for the serious listener. One notes the quality of the Jay McShann Orchestra, its closeness to Count Basie in style, concept and a book. The Wichita transcriptions are the only significant exposure on record or tape of that neglected and unlucky trumpeter, Buddy Anderson. As Dizzy Gillespie has told us this Oklahoma City brassman was into a new style that used a soft vibrato and combined shimmering legato and crackling staccato passages before anyone else. Anderson would work with Dizzy and Charlie in the Billy Eckstine Orchestra but not record with that organization. His career was cut short by tuberculosis in 1944. Anderson is heard on *Lady be Good* and *Moten Swing*. There are also excellent samples of the playing of Bob Mabane another unlucky jazzman who would have little opportunity to record in a studio.



Cherokee, later *Koko*, is the first of several recordings and innumerable live performances of this complicated tune that Parker chose for his most dazzling effects. The track was found on a paper disc among the effects of the late Jerry Newman, an amateur engineer who made on site recordings at Minton's and Monroe's Uptown House, when these Clubs were serving as the "bebop laboratory".

The B side of *Spotlite 120* fills out the unofficial Parker-McShann discography. The source here are from the archives that broadcast to American troops during World War II. Parker's famous false or over-blown F sharp is heard on the haunting *Lonely Boy Blues*. *Jump the Blues* and *Bottle It* are first rate examples of the riffed Kansas City blues with the McShann sections in great form with John Jackson supplying exciting solo lines. McShann used the Basie tune, *One O'Clock Jump*, as his signature and here Parker's influence on John Jackson as chorus leader is evident.

PERSONNEL

JAY MCSHANN AND HIS ORCHESTRA:
Bernard 'Buddy' Anderson, Orville Minor tpt;
Bob Gould tbn; Charlie Parker alt; William J. Scott ten; Jay McShann p; Gene Ramey bs;
Gus Johnson d.
Station KFBI, Wichita, Kansas — Saturday,
November 30, 1940.

JAY MCSHANN AND HIS ORCHESTRA:
Bernard 'Buddy' Anderson, Orville Minor tpt;
Bob Gould tb, vln-1; Bob Mabane ten; Jay McShann p;
Gene Ramey bs; Gus Johnson d; Band vcl-2.
Station KFBI, Wichita, Kansas — Monday,
December 2, 1940.

CHARLIE PARKER alt. acc. by:
Unidentified musicians possibly including Jay McShann p. possibly Clark Monroe's Uptown House, 133rd. St. & 7th. Av. NYC-1941/42.
NOTE: Some sources state that this item is a broadcast of the McShann band originating from the Savoy Ballroom. The McShann band opened at the Savoy on Friday, January, 9, 1942.

JAY MCSHANN AND HIS ORCHESTRA:
Exact personnel unknown but possibly:—
Willie Cook, William 'Jeep' Hickman, Jesse Jones, Bob Merrill, Dave Mitchell tpt; Joe Taswell Baird, Alfonso Fook, Rudy Morrison tbn; John Jackson alt; Rudolph Dennis alt, bar; John 'Flap' Dungee, Paul Quinichette ten; Jay McShann p; Gene Ramey bs; James Skinner d; Walter Brown vcl-WB; Les Paul g.X. Exact location unknown but possibly NYC — c. late 1943

NOTES: Ross Russell (February 1974)
PRODUCTION: Tony Williams

SLEEVE DESIGN: Malcolm Walker

May thanks to Don Schlitten for his co-operation in the production of this album. T.W.

Jay McShann is now working out of Hutchinson, Kansas, using a small combo, similar in instrumentation to the KFBI group. He made a successful appearance at the 1971 Monterey Jazz Festival. If anything, he is playing better than ever. McShann has always insisted that the orchestra was a great deal more than a rhythm and blues band or a vehicle to accompany bluesman Walter Brown, as it appears to be on the basis of its Decca discography. Brown's juke box hit, *Confessin' the Blues*, made a few months later at the first Decca session, caused A & R chief Jack Kapp to limit future recording almost entirely to blues. McShann says the book was 25% blues, 25% ballads (featuring Al Hibbler and Charlie Parker) and 50% Kansas City style riff numbers like *Bottle It* and *Jump the Blues*. The Wichita transcriptions have a great deal to tell us, about McShann, about Kansas City and about Charlie Parker. In fact they might be called the Dead Sea scrolls of discography.

SIDE ONE (23:47)

I found a new baby (2:58)
Body and soul (2:50)
Moten Swing (2:46)
Coquette (3:08)
Lady be good (2:54)
Blues (3:06)
Honeysuckle Rose -1-2 (2:56)
Cherokee (2:45)

SIDE TWO (25:40)

You say forward, I'll march (3:00)
Lonely boy blues-WB (2:10)
Vine Street Boogie (3:53)
Jump the blues (3:52)
One o'clock jump (theme) (1:30)
Bottle it (2:55)
Sweet Georgia Brown (2:39)
Wrap your troubles in dreams (2:53)
One o'clock jump (theme) -X (1:30)

Spotlite 120