It's about time you knew who Charlie Parker was

The Durham radio station was on a roll, playing one cut after another from arguably the greatest alto saxman of them all. Thus was the stage set for this memorable exchange:

Arriving at work that day I fell to talking with a co-worker, who after some moments mentioned she was from that Midwestern metropolis called Kansas City. "Oh yeah, Kansas City," said I. "You know, Charlie Parker was from Kansas City. The radio was playing a bunch of his stuff on the way into work."

Whereupon she replied, "Who's Charlie Parker?"

My jaw dropped. I turned to the guy at the next desk. "Brandon, tell this child who Charlie Parker was."

"Ummm….." Note to self: Never ask Brandon to back me on anything, ever again.

Bringing us up to speed: Charlie Parker is widely considered the greatest alto saxophonist and one of the most influential musicians in jazz history. Parker would have turned 90 years old this Sunday, Aug. 29, but never approached that rarefied age; years of heroin abuse and all-around hard living sent Parker to his grave in 1955, at age 34. Fifteen years before similar career arcs took the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Ron McKernan at unconscionably young ages, Parker — known as "Bird" to his contemporaries — was a prototype of the self-destructive artistic genius, cut down by his demons long before the biblical threescore and ten.

To me, born 20 years after Parker's death, he's always seemed more phantom than man, a horn-blowing spectre from the black-and-white shadows of the past, the coolest of cool cats. Listening to cuts such as "Parker's Mood" and "Now's the Time," the listener can sense that swing, that confidence, that unshakable command of his instrument that set Parker apart. His record sales were modest compared to big-band contemporaries like Glenn Miller, but his reputation was rock-solid; Parker served as bandmate and mentor to, among others, a young trumpet player named Miles Davis. The tunes must have been smokin' indeed when those two giants shared the stage.

And 50 years later, my co-workers hadn't ever heard Parker's name. (To be fair, they probably would have recognized Davis, who kept playing long after Bird shuffled off this mortal coil.) The likes of Elvis and the Beatles probably would have killed Charlie Parker had liquor and narcotics not finished him off; jazz was the oracle of hip in the '50s, but the rise of rock 'n' roll was just around the corner. And rock has flourished, unlike jazz in the new millennium. (The less said about the modern "smooth jazz" movement, the better.)

Fame remains fleeting, even for Parker, who once bestrode the music world like a colossus and today finds himself a relatively obscure figure. It's doubtful he would have cared.

So here's to Bird on his 90th birthday, even if popular music has largely moved on. Swinging horns and glittering piano solos turned out to be no match for amplified guitars and lyrics of rebellion and alienation; so perhaps it's true that as an art form, jazz has had its day. But this Sunday you might try this experiment: Step over to the computer and log onto Pandora (www.pandora.com), type in Charlie Parker's name,

pour the red wine and let Bird take you places you've never been. You'll be glad you did.

Such was my frame of mind when I got home that night, and related the day's events to the lady — about Bird, the Durham radio station, the co-worker from Kansas City. "She's from his hometown and she didn't even know who Charlie Parker was," I complained.

Replied the missus, "Who's Charlie Parker?"

I gritted my teeth. You can't win. You just can't win.

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