

Kansas City – The Sounds of New Music

By John Conner

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I feel a sense of grief, yet do not understand it. On my first visit to Kansas City I try to create my own Charlie Parker tour.

Stopping by the jazz museum I hear that recording of "Embraceable You" that I hadn't heard in years. I am reminded of the immensity of the gift given this man. The horn he played behind the glass almost casts a spell on me. If I touched it would I be a better player somehow? Like a religious icon, it is evidence that this man actually existed.

I learn he had lived at 1516 Olive Street with his mother when he was 7 years old but I am told the location doesn't exist anymore. I find Olive Street at the intersection of Truman which I figure to be 15th and the building one block south which is 1601. The site has to be somewhere between them on the west side of the street. How did this little boy who first picked up the sax in ninth grade and then died 20 years later change his world the way he did? Maybe it's wrong to say he changed his world. Maybe he didn't see it changed. Maybe it only changed in the wake of his life, only comprehended after he was gone.

Why do I feel grief?

I then look for 602 East 12th Street, the site of Club Reno where young Charlie stood in the alley (or sometimes in the balcony) and listened to the Big Bands inside. It's now a Police Station parking lot. Is this where young Charlie found the influence of men to play the role of father in his life?

Named after his father, Charles, there is no mention of him in the home. Was this part of Charlie's tendency to live a life dissipated by drugs and other excesses? Was this modeled by the men who became his "father" image?

It snowed as I drove into the Lincoln cemetery. I was concerned I would be stuck in ice and snow there but I wanted to find Charlie Parker's gravestone. All the stones were covered with snow but I noticed one that looked larger than the others. I cleared off a small corner with my hand and saw the date 1955. I knew I had found it.

I cleared off as much as I could that wasn't frozen down. I looked to see who was buried next to Charlie and realized it was his mom. Again, no father present.

But what is the grief I feel?

What an amazing gift entrusted to a human vessel. "Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father..." Here is a ravaged life yet entrusted with a remarkable gift. Here is a

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candle lit at both ends by it's owner. Despite his great gift was this life invested well? Was his a life to be emulated as one of my jazz teachers had done and also died too young?

Life is short. Whether it's 34, 70 or 106 years our time on earth is short in the light of eternity.

While in Kansas City I had the pleasure of playing tenor at a few of the local jazz spots (so I can say I've played jazz in KC). During my visit I also met some musicians who are stepping into something new.

These musicians have incredibly played a gig that has lasted continuously for 5 years without a stop (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)! Where could you find an audience who would be attentive, much less awake, for that period of time?

Their desire is to play for the Giver of their gifts, to God Himself, and to invite and experience His presence in their worship, words and songs.

Just as Kansas City was instrumental in formulating the bebop structure (head, solos, head) so too have these musicians laid out a limited structure, much like the banks of a river, that allows them to improvise, create and respond to their Creator by singing and playing an ever new song.

They improvise melodies and sing call and response lyrics to the Giver of their musical gifts.

I make my living in the music business in Nashville, TN and am impressed not only by the vision of these folks but by their musicianship as well.

Currently there over 400 in KC committing themselves to this 24 hour a day offering.

I don't know the heart of Charlie Parker and whether he chose the atonement offered through Jesus as Lord and Savior but I have seen a creative spirit being birthed in KC perhaps unlike anywhere else in the world. I've seen musicians presenting themselves and their giftings as an offering in the light of eternity. I believe these musicians have chosen well.

This article © 2004 by John Conner.

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The IHOP (The International House of Prayer) can be found in Kansas City.