



# Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker

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## **Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker** Stanley Crouch

*Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker* is the first installment in the long-awaited portrait of one of the most talented and influential musicians of the twentieth century, from Stanley Crouch, one of the foremost authorities on jazz and culture in America.

Throughout his life, Charlie Parker personified the tortured American artist: a revolutionary performer who used his alto saxophone to create a new music known as bebop even as he wrestled with a drug addiction that would lead to his death at the age of thirty-four.

Drawing on interviews with peers, collaborators, and family members, *Kansas City Lightning* recreates Parker's Depression-era childhood; his early days navigating the Kansas City nightlife, inspired by lions like Lester Young and Count Basie; and on to New York, where he began to transcend the music he had mastered. Crouch reveals an ambitious young man torn between music and drugs, between his domineering mother and his impressionable young wife, whose teenage romance with Charlie lies at the bittersweet heart of this story.

With the wisdom of a jazz scholar, the cultural insights of an acclaimed social critic, and the narrative skill of a literary novelist, Stanley Crouch illuminates this American master as never before.

## **Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker Details**

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**Stanley Crouch**

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## From Reader Review Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker for online ebook

### Duffy Pratt says

The subtitle of this book is accurate, so I guess it is shame on me to expect a full blown biography of Parker. It's not. It's not even really a biography of Parker's rise, although that story is strongly in the mix. Instead, it's composed of a scattershot history of jazz and the Kansas City scene, drawing on just about anything that Crouch thinks might be relevant. A lot of this stuff is fascinating on its own, especially things like the glimpse of Lester Young and Count Basie, and even more so with the more extended treatment of lesser known sax player Buster Smith.

Another large part of it is Crouch's imaginings of how things "must have been" or "must have felt like" to Parker. This may even be intelligent extrapolation from things Crouch actually knows. But a good portion of the time it sounds like Crouch is simply making stuff up. That makes me think that there is a very large part of Parker's early days that is basically completely unknown. For example, it appears we don't know how or why he first started using hard drugs, what drugs they were, or who supplied them. Crouch makes some guesses and is upfront about it. In other areas, however, Crouch will delve directly into how Parker "must have felt" about something, and it sounds like bullshit to me.

A decent portion of the book is describing music, and for the most part, Crouch does very well. Then, when he gets into something technical, I have to wonder whether he has no idea what he is talking about, or whether he has deliberately dumbed things down for his readers. So this is a mixed bag, but for the most part I enjoy anyone intelligent and passionate who is talking about music I love.

And then there is more than a heaping helping of race talk. This seems to bear more on the scene itself than it does on Parker. And I understand why it's here. But it seems strange to me that he dwells so long on *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With The Wind*, when neither have much, if anything, to do with Parker. He also gives lip service to players paying attention to anyone who could play, regardless of race, and yet I'm left with the impression overall that he deeply feels that Jazz is a black man's field, and whites have no business having anything to do with it.

The rumor is that this is only the first part of a longer biography. If so, I will likely read the next part, but do so with different expectations.

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### C. Michael says

*Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker*

Stanley Crouch

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Ross Russell, in the cover blurb of his biography of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker *Bird Lives--The High Life and hard Times of Charlie "Yardbird" Parker* (Quartet Books, 1973), asks "Why should a white man tell this story?" and proceeds to state the obvious: "Firstly, because [as Ross Russell points out] no black man

has done it yet." Now, after nearly 30 years of threatening to do so, columnist and social critic Stanley Crouch has delivered the first half of his two-part biography of Parker, *Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker*, thereby flipping Russell a well-deserved bird...pardon the pun.

Crouch, *New York Daily News* columnist, jazz expert and cultural critic, is best known for his collections *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (Basic Civitas Books, 2009) and *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979- 1989* (Oxford University Press, 1990), proves to be no kind of standard biography. Rather, Crouch casts a well-worn story, many times told, within the frame of an exhaustively-researched social history of Black America surrounding World War II. Add to the the cult of personality that surrounds Crouch's writing, making this biography as much a vehicle for that writing as for telling the story of America's great 20th Century composer.

Not that this is bad in any way. Crouch is as much a biographer of Parker as Nick Tosches, another enigmatic culture writer, is of Jerry Lee Lewis in *Hellfire* (Grove Press, 2002), and that biography is a most festive read. Both men speak with their own singular voice and add their own mirepoix of expertise, knowledge and raconteur spirit to the stories they tell. Likewise, Crouch's biography has more in common with Russell's based on the narrative, story-telling quality of each. Both men spend much time setting a stage, a mood, and a perspective in which to place Parker when telling his story. While, Crouch's story, as would be expected, is more sympathetic and empathetic than Russell's, neither biography replaces the other, each offering their own important perspectives.

This is amply illustrated in the opens of both books, where Russell and Crouch each sharpen their respective lenses on a Charlie Parker in full flight. Russell begins his biography with an account of Parker's opening night at Billy Berg's Jazz Club, 1356 North Vine Street in Hollywood. Parker is debuting as part of the Dizzy Gillespie Quintet, who were in residence at the club from December 10, 1945 through February 4, 1946. This was the West Coast's much anticipated introduction to New York City's bebop jazz. The scene opens with a self-indulgent Parker eating two complete Mexican dinners and drinking the better part of a fifth of gin as he cheerfully carries on with Dean Benedetti, the wait staff before Berg himself, finally *encourages* Parker to do his job and go out and play.

Colorfully presented, to be sure, Russell, nevertheless, writes as a modern jazz church father from the perspective of one who had professional dealings with Parker, dealings that did not end well for either party. It was on this West Coast junket that Parker decided to stay after the rest of the quintet returned to New York City, cashing in his ticket home for heroin. Parker dissipated and become strung out on bad dope during this period, resulting in his six-month stay in California's Camarillo State Mental Hospital. This story is told dispassionately by Russell with an emphasis on Parker's progressive and profligate slide into dissolution.

In contrast, Crouch begins his story with a slightly younger Parker, then a member of Jay McShann's Big Band in 1941, as it embarked on a stay at the Savoy Ballroom opposite Lucky Millinder's Big Band. A competition between the bands was highlight with Millinder's group portrayed as suave big-city musicians while McShann's band is depicted as hillbilly "western dogs" from the middle of nowhere. McShann brought in his raggedy band, blowing Millinder off the stage. The narrative surrounding this event is scintillating and spark filled. Crouch has always been able to turn a phrase in his own sweet way and he fills his bandstand descriptions with such.

Further, what Crouch provides is a dense and terrible level of dignity to Parker's story. There are no lurid or

prurient descriptions here, only neutral, accurate characterizations told within a historical framework. Lacking is any shred of Romanticism of the like found in Robert Palmer's superb tome of the American South, *Deep Blues* (Viking, 1995). {{m: Chet Baker = 3578}} biographer Matthew Ruddick achieved the same descriptive balance as Crouch in his *Funny Valentine--The Story of Chet Baker* (Melrose Books, 2012), offering a neutral center between James Gavin's fine but cutting *Deep In A Dream-- The Long Night of Chet Baker* (Alfred A. Knoph, 2002) and Jeroen de Valk's informative *Chet Baker--His Life and Music* (Berkeley Hills Books, 2000).

However, Crouch spares no one when describing the rampant racism of the period, but he does so in as balanced and even-handed way as this history deserves. He pulls no punches when framing this story with Jim Crow America. This, coupled with Crouch's exceptional humanizing of Parker make the biography that much more compelling and real. What previous Parker biographies have lacked is a three dimensional picture of the artist, a fate suffered by the blues singer {{m: Robert Johnson = 8128}}, who, unlike Parker, is still awaiting his proper biography.

This first half of Crouch's portrait of Parker leaves off with the artist in 1940 just after abandoning his first wife, Rebecca Ruffins, and just before the vignette that opens the biography. Parker has yet to fully develop and make his seminal recordings that would change the face of jazz. Let's hope that Crouch gets the rest of the story written before another 30 years pass.

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### **Sally Ooms says**

(I recently read an advanced review copy of *Kansas City Lightning* that I picked up at the Northern California Independent Booksellers Association trade show this fall. I am assuming that there have not been sweeping changes to the final version.)

As a Kansas City native, I found this book totally engrossing and informative. Besides seeing my parents roll their eyes at the mention of the Pendergast "machine" before I was born, I did not really know much about the era that partly nurtured, partly suppressed the jazz artists in the 1920, 30s and 40s. But this book is not limited to views of Charlie Parker's life or just the Kansas City scene. It gives amazing insights into the general lifestyles and mores of the country. Included are places ranging from Oklahoma City to Chicago and New York.

The book also details the lives of a multitude of jazz musicians and demonstrates the author's intimate understanding of the art form. It took stamina, grit and—of course— talent, to get hired on with bands and make a name for yourself. The personalities are engaging. The bygone era depiction is well done. Thanks to Stanley Crouch for such great research and writing.

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### **Tom Brannigan says**

Stanley Crouch is one of my favorite writers on all things Jazz. He has an "edge" to anything he gets involved with whether it be writing or doing a spin on the drums in a Jazz band. The only problem is that Stanley needs to write book two!! He leaves the reader at about 1945.....before Parker's epiphany on the chord changes of Cherokee.....please Stanley....please

## John says

Here's a telling thing that showcases in miniature what's nutty about this book: about 2/3 of the way through, Crouch mentions that one step in Charlie Parker's development as a serious (obsessive, really) saxophonist is that he began customizing his metal mouthpieces and shaving down his reed -- and Crouch then goes on to explain, in passing, what a reed is.

You've got to wonder: why? Who on earth does he imagine would pick up a biography of jazz's greatest sax player (and arguably it's greatest player period) and not understand what a reed is? And if he thinks that's his audience, why get 2/3 of the way through the book before providing a remedial discussion of the instrument Parker played (and had been playing, at that point, for at least 100 pages)? Why include that info?

And then you realize the answer is, "hey, why not?"

That's the spirit of this whole book, a biography of Parker up through a watershed appearance with Jay McShann's band at the Savoy in early 1942 (I assume a second volume is planned). Crouch has spent years -- decades -- talking with the men and women who knew Parker and are still around, and those conversations form the backbone of his research. This heavy reliance on reminiscences (which is bolstered to a great extent by jazz musicians' memoirs -- reminiscence in another form) gives Crouch a conversational style that's so informal and so removed from any careful, scholarly, traditional biographic narrative voice that he could have started the whole book with "Once upon a time..." and it wouldn't have been out of place. That same impulse -- plus, I suspect, a paucity of information about Parker's early life -- leads to an endless series of digressions, and digressions from the digressions, until you're scarcely surprised at anything that gets a couple of paragraphs, as long as it's tenuously related to jazz, Kansas City, or race. *Birth of a Nation*? It's in there, though I can't remember why. Buffalo soldiers? Sure! The migration of prehistoric Asiatic peoples to North America? Of course! And since he's digressing anyway, there's no need to support or even explain some of his wilder assertions -- that European artists feared urban life, that the blues was an industrial art form at heart, that Parker could plausibly be called part Asian because he was part Native American (and we know where they came from -- see above). Digressions periodically give way to free association -- Parker hops a train for Chicago, which leads to a meditation on the place of the railroad in the American psyche, which leads to a paragraph on the Underground Railroad because why the hell not. It's a crazy quilt, perhaps designed to structurally emulate a jazz piece -- spinning further and further away from its ostensible theme before returning -- but more often sounding like a gigantic Grandpa Simpson anecdote. Not that that's a bad thing -- Grandpa Simpson has no bigger fan than I -- but it makes for a really strange read.

Did I enjoy reading it? I suppose I did; I like being told a good story and have the patience to listen to someone digress to the point of rambling (those who live in glass houses...). Did I learn things about Charlie Parker? I'd imagine so, with the caveat that Crouch takes old memories at face value and spends a lot of time imagining and asserting rather than demonstrating or verifying (especially the inner thoughts and emotions of Parker and those around him). So maybe more like 2.5 stars. But in the end it's less a book for jazz buffs or students of Parker than for fans of Stanley Crouch. I suspect that's a more rarefied audience.

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## Erin Cataldi says

A fascinating look at Charlie Parker's beginning. I assumed (wrongly) that this would be a full biography of Parker's life, but it stops before he truly hits the big time. It traces his rise in Kansas City, his hoboing to Chicago and then to New York to see the world and prove his worth, and ends with his eventual return to Kansas City. Included are many pictures, interviews with his first wife and a wonderful array of Jazz history and culture so that the reader can gain a better understanding of how Parker created a unique sound all his own while studying the Jazz masters of the day. A wonderfully informative book that makes me wonder if it's the first in a series. I want to know about his rise to fame, not just the beginnings!

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### **Andre says**

This book both fascinates and frustrates. It's fascinating in that context is richly provided and Bird is thoroughly situated in the era of his time. The Kansas City of Bird's time is thoroughly unpacked so that the reader gets a full understanding of the environment that Bird was navigating.

We follow young Charlie through his very early years and his entry into high school. He commented apparently that he entered high school as a freshman and left as a freshman. He marries at 16, clearly not ready to support a wife. While Charlie is coming of age, the story of the times is highlighted in brilliant prose by Crouch.

Charlie's interest in music and his budding genius is clearly illustrated by Crouch through his examination of the music of Kansas City and the club music battles. It was a time where you could be pulled off the bandstand if you couldn't swing with the best of them. So, if you wanted to be a major player, studios practice was necessary. And Charlie definitely wanted to be a player. And Crouch does a great job of making that clear

So what is frustrating? The book only deals with Charlie Parker's early years. In fact at its' conclusion Charlie is only 20 years old and has not yet made his mark on the world of music for which he would be remembered. I know there is another volume planned and I eagerly await it's' publication.

Although there is a premature end to this volume it is a fine representation of the early Charlie Parker and I would recommend it to all those who love jazz music.

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### **Britt says**

Charlie Parker's is a story that teaches. He was extreme and it is hard to tell if he was undone by music or by drugs. One thing is clear this man was genius and what is great about this book is that it isn't JUST Charlie Parker this is the story of Basie, Moten, Young, Fleet, and so many others. The books paints a large and beautiful portrait of a time before mine.

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### **Carl R. says**

Kansas City Lightning not only takes us inside Charlie Parker's life, but into the world of jazz, circa 1930's and 40's. Stanley Crouch's ending is a surprise because he stops in the middle, just as Parker is hitting it big in NYC. At first I felt a little cheated. Hey, this is only half a bio. Then I realized I knew all I really needed to know if I were looking to find out about about Bird, the musician and the man. The rest is more of the

same. The same what? Check it out.

Crouch opens the book as Charlie arrives in New York with the Jay McShann band for their booking at the Savoy. Their big chance. They're hicks, these guys from Kansas City, trying to do battle with established Harlem bands in the cutthroat world of 1930-40 musical wars. Plenty before them had gone down, returning to KC with their stomachs empty and their tails between their legs. Crouch places this event in musical, historical, and racial context. Joe Louis, Louis Armstrong, Pearl Harbor are all important to how the Savoy got there and to what goes on inside. Sometimes it seems like he's leaving Parker out of it. But he's not. Just as the music always returns to the melody no matter how far the improvisation appears to wander, Crouch's subject is always Bird, every moment.

From New York, we go to Kansas City and Charlie's upbringing in a fatherless household by a doting mother. His tutelage under great musicians of his time both in the segregated school system and on the streets. We hear of his romance with first wife Rebecca (Beckerie) in her own words. "My eye fell on him . . . and I knew there was gonna be trouble. I knew I was in love with him." And trouble there was. Clear as she was about what might lie ahead, she can't help herself any more than Charlie can help shooting up his heroin. Parker is no kind of husband and father and really doesn't want to be. He plays at it occasionally, but he brings Beckerie crabs, leaves love letters lying around, and even puts a pistol to her head. All Parker's really good for is music, and sometimes he isn't even good for that--missing gigs, pawning his sax for drugs, falling asleep on the bandstand. There are those who recognize his talent, but believe God made a mistake giving it to Bird--a little like Salieri's attitude toward Mozart in Amadeus. But those folks are not God, and beneath all Parker's apparent deficiencies is a drive toward perfection, toward creating with his horn what he hears in his head. He seeks out mentors--probably Buster Smith is the most prominent--who are educated in music, who can take him through the theory he needs in order to understand the mysteries of the scales and chords and other harmonic complexities necessary to give his improvisations the power he yearns for.

Day and night, often going with little or no sleep, Parker works his horn and his mind. Natural talent? You bet. But ultimately what he accomplished came as much from intense study and practice as talent. And all that made it impossible for him to fit into in everyday world. But on the bandstand? Different story, And unlike Gary Giddins in his bio of Louis Armstrong (Satchmo) Crouch never lets his feeling for his material get bogged down in technical jargon, though he doesn't shy away from that either when necessary. Instead, he helps us feel the pulse.

With the Jay McShann Orchestra shouting behind him, Parker--a great ballroom dancer himself, whose high-arched feet force him to move from his heels--choreographs his improvised melodies through the saxophone. Feinting, running, pivoting, crooning, he is inspired by the dancers and inspires them in turn, instigating them to fresh steps.

And thus, in passage after passage, does this superb writer paint for all of us an intense portrait of the triumph and tragedy of the gift to the world that is Charlie Parker.

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## **Tim says**

Absolutely loved this book & am hoping its true that there is a part two planned. This is excellent if you want Parker's life & career put into context, and lots of it - Kansas City, the history of jazz, some racial stuff - fantastic and highly recommended. I say I hope there's a 2nd part as this one only goes up to about 1940, so obviously there's a bit more of the story to tell.

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## Nancy Oakes says

Super book about one of my ultimate favorite jazz musicians.

*"What he gave the horn, it gave back. What it gave him, he never forgot."*

The ultimate reading day for me includes the following: rain (which we get a lot of down here in the south), a cup or two or three of strong black coffee (no pods -- I love freshly ground) and most important, the jazz music playing in the background. One of my favorite musicians is Charlie Parker, about whom this book was written. I have been wanting to read a biography about Parker for a long time; when *Kansas City Lightning* was published last year, I scooped it up. But here's the thing: this is less of a biography than I thought it would be. At first I was disappointed, but I kept flipping back to the book cover with its subtitle "The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker," and came to terms with the fact that a standard biography was not the author's intention. I say that up front so that if you start reading and Parker disappears for long periods of book space, don't despair and keep going. The end product as a whole is informative and frankly, quite a ride, one not solely for the jazz lover. It also speaks to African-American culture of the time, and expands out into a look at blues, swing and jazz in the context of a wider American culture.

Starting out at New York's Savoy Ballroom, the "Madison Square Garden of the battles of the bands", the story takes you back in time to the Kansas City and the origins of Parker's eventual rise to fame. It was a place where musicians held court at 18th Street and Vine, where the blues morphed into a new form of jazz. The book is filled with the people, music, culture etc that influenced Parker, often related via interview by people who were there who had a connection with him. There are also times where the author goes off on serious but informative tangents and not just in the world of music: he spends time talking about the Buffalo Soldiers, the impact of D.W.Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," which portrayed African American men as the white man's worst enemies vis-a-vis white women; there is also a brief history of minstrelsy which eventually serious African-American musicians refused to be a part of; the rise and downfall of boxer Jack Johnson and his later betrayal of Joe Louis among many others. But it's when he's into the music and the musicians that the writing shines; the descriptions of after-hours jam sessions where musicians were free to be themselves are amazing. Even though there are a number of gaps in Parker's personal life story here (as the author notes, it's largely because so much of his early years remain undocumented), the beauty of this book lies in the world surrounding Parker and how it influenced his near fanatic drive to create something new, something already inside him needing to come out.

While sometimes the writing meanders, when he's ready to bring Parker back into the scene, he's in tight control. Some of these parts are reimagined, while others are based on personal memories and research. At the same time, he lets the reader know when discrepancies arise -- for example, stories told by Parker's first wife Rebecca don't always mesh with the eyewitness accounts of her sister. But while in places the writing might strike an off-key note (for me there were a few, especially when he equates "Charlie's curiosity about narcotics" to his affection for Sherlock Holmes mysteries) taken as a whole, the book has a cool flow to it, filled with vivid jargon in a style that is truly his own.

Reader response has been generally favorable toward this book; after perusing several professional reviews, the same is true on that level as well. I also discovered that *Kansas City Lightning* is just one of a two-volume set, so I'll sit tight and eagerly anticipate the next book. In the meantime, I can very highly recommend this book, especially to fans of jazz and of Charlie Parker, but also to anyone who is into African-American history. A definite no-miss.

### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

I honestly get annoyed by Crouch sometimes (especially his dismissiveness here: <https://youtu.be/jAtaxon9t5g>) and his overbearing editorial influence on Ken Burn's Jazz TV show (<https://wordpress.com/post/mfinocchia...>) but when he is writing about music he loves and musicians he respects, he is hard to beat. Bird is such a huge figure for jazz music and his origins and flaws are described in detail here in this excellent biography. The subtitle leads one to believe that there will be a second volume...I sure hope so because this one was excellent!

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### **Donna Lewis says**

I usually have difficulty reading a long non-fiction book just because of the density and huge amount of information. That said, I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I am a long time jazz lover, and I appreciated reading about which artists emulated others. Although the book is about Charlie Parker, it is also a book about the birth and development of jazz. And, it's about the development and growth of this country, the movement of immigrants and African Americans north from New Orleans to Chicago, the pervasive political corruption in Kansas City, Chicago and New York City. It's about the effects of the Depression on family life, as men abandoned their families to travel on freight trains. It touches on the beginnings of heroin addiction, particularly as it affected musicians. And, I loved the language! Stanley Crouch spent 30 years researching the facts of the book. But he also uses the language of the times, the musicians, and the African Americans in the 20s and 30s. What a rich, relevant, captivating story. And the bonus is that I could follow the movement of jazz through this time period. As Miles Davis once said, "You can tell the history of jazz in four words: Louis Armstrong. Charlie Parker." This book fills in all the between.

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### **Halli Casser-Jayne says**

Reads like the syncopated rhythm of a Charlie Parker riff. Meet Stanley Crouch on The Halli Casser-Jayne Show, Talk Radio for Fine Minds Wednesday October 9, 3 pm ET Online live @ <http://bit.ly/U4EEMd>

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### **David says**

With a flair for digression that only Melville could love, Crouch deftly paints pictures of the early factors in the life of Charlie Parker. This book covers Bird's life up to his return to New York with Jay McShann's band (~1939-1940). It is not a dry litany of historical facts, dates, and figures as some might expect. It is more of a fanciful attempt to reveal the environment and climate that contributed to Bird's life and development. Being a lover of Charlie Parker, it is an enjoyable read that I had a hard time putting down. Despite Crouch's solid writing, I did find myself wishing there were more stories about Bird and his playing instead of so much background and back story about everyone and everything but Bird. Nevertheless, it's a good read and full of plenty of information for further research into jazz and into what influenced the great Yardbird. Worth checking out for any fan of Bird.

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