

On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz

by Ralph Ellison

Oddly enough, while several explanations are advanced as to how Charles Parker, Jr.¹, became known as “Bird” (“Yardbird,” in an earlier metamorphosis), none is conclusive. There is, however, overpowering internal evidence that whatever the true circumstances of his ornithological designation, it had little to do with the chicken yard. Randy roosters and operatic hens are familiars to fans of the animated cartoons, but for all the pathetic comedy of his living—and despite the crabbed and constricted character of his style—Parker was a most inventive melodist; in bird-watcher’s terminology, a true songster.

This failure in the exposition of Bird’s legend is intriguing, for nicknames are indicative of a change from a given to an achieved identity, whether by rise or fall, and they tell us something of the nicknamed individual’s interaction with his fellows. Thus, since we suspect that more of legend is involved in his renaming—let us at least consult Roger Tory Peterson’s *Field Guide to the Birds* for a hint as to why, during a period when most jazzmen were labeled “cats,” someone hung the bird on Charlie. Let us note too that “legend” originally meant “the story of a saint” and that saints were often identified with symbolic animals. .

Two species won our immediate attention, the goldfinch and the mockingbird—the goldfinch because the beatnik phrase “Bird lives,” which, following Parker’s death, has been chalked endlessly on Village buildings and subway walls, reminds us that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a symbolic goldfinch frequently appeared in European devotional paintings. An apocryphal story has it that upon being given a clay bird for a toy, the infant Jesus brought it miraculously to life as a goldfinch. Thus the small, tawny-brown bird with a bright red patch about the base of its bill and a broad yellow band across its wings became a representative of the soul, the Passion, and the Sacrifice. In more worldly late-Renaissance art, the little bird became the ambiguous symbol of death and the soul’s immortality. For our own purposes, however, its song poses a major problem: it is like that of a canary—which, soul or no soul, rules the goldfinch out.

The mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos*, is more promising. Peterson informs us that its song consists of “long successions of notes and phrases of great variety, with each phrase repeated a half-dozen times before going on to the next,” that the mockingbirds are “excellent mimics” who “adeptly imitate a score or more species found in the neighborhood,” and that they frequently sing at night—a description which not only comes close to Parker’s way with a saxophone but even hints at a trait of his character. For although he *usually* sang at night, his playing was characterized by velocity, by long-continued successions of notes and phrases, by swoops, bleats, echoes, rapidly repeated bebops—I mean rebopped bebops—by mocking mimicry of other jazzmen’s styles, and by interpolations of motifs from extraneous melodies, all of which added up to a dazzling display of wit, satire, burlesque, and pathos. Further, he was an expert at issuing his improvisations from the dense brush as from the extreme treetops of the harmonic landscape, and there was, without a doubt, as irrepressible a mockery in his personal conduct as in his music.

(1953)

¹ American jazz musician and composer (1920-1955), a developer of bebop