

## The Wyandotte Parkers

Born in 1920 in Wyandotte County, Kansas, the saxophonist Charlie ‘Yardbird’ or ‘Bird’ Parker emerged onto the jazz scene at the end of the Second World while Big Band or ‘Swing’ was at the peak of its popularity. He was at the vanguard of a new style of jazz curtly titled ‘Bebop’, which became the foundation of modern jazz. Charlie Parker revolutionised the musical establishment, combining complex melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic forms, whilst displaying a completely mastery of the saxophone. Although Parker’s innovations have become part of the jazz lexicon and popular music, by the end of the 1940s he remained relatively unknown outside jazz circles. Most of the public never celebrated the young saxophone artist from Kansas City during his life and only learned of his role as a giant among modern jazz pioneers after his death in 1955.

There is little in the Parker family history to suggest Charlie would become such an original and influential musician. His paternal grandparents were the Reverend Peter C. Parker from the Carolinas, and his wife Ella Goodloe or Goodlow from Alabama. Ella gave birth to six children, of which, only three reached adulthood. Without question, the parents imbued in their children the love of God, a Christian work ethic, and gave them an education fitting the offspring of a man of God. The eldest son Charles was born in 1886 and little is known of his early years, but in 1910, the census records him as a hotel waiter living with his mother, grandmother, and sister Bessie, in Jackson, Missouri. The marital status for Ella states that she was a widow, signifying that the Reverend Peter C. Parker was deceased by this time. It has been generally accepted that at some point Charles worked in vaudeville for the T.O.B.A circuit, a black only theatre chain. However, the only recorded occupations for him are those of a hotel waiter, waiter or chef on the railways and as an apartment janitor.

In 1914, Charles was in Chicago, Illinois, and had fathered a son, John A. Parker, but the relationship failed, and the mother disappeared from their lives. The child remained with the father, and about two years later, Charles Parker met Addie Boxley from Oklahoma and of Choctaw and African American descent. Addie at one time had been a maid or a servant in Oklahoma although little else is known of her lineage or the circumstances of her meeting with Charles, but in 1916, they were married. The location and exact date of the ceremony are unknown, but it was probably in Chicago as John was born there and this is where they were living before moving to Kansas.

It was around 1919 when Addie, Charles, and John Parker moved to Wyandotte County, Kansas City. It is unclear at which of three locations they stayed when they first arrived, but in an interview, John A Parker, stated that they lived with Ella Parker, his grandmother, at 844 Washington Boulevard and also at a house on 9<sup>th</sup> and Splitlog. They also lived at 852 Freeman Avenue and it was there on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1920 that Charles Parker Junior was born. The house number of the Splitlog address is unknown, and the other two houses have long since been demolished. Today, 852 Freeman is a vacant lot, and a more recently constructed dwelling stands on the site of Ella Parker’s house on Washington Boulevard.

Moving to Kansas was probably the result Addie’s pregnancy and the necessity to be near family. At this time, America was in the grip of the Great Depression and work was hard to find. The lack of work often resulted in whole families migrating to find employment or be near extended family for support. Charles Parker Senior’s younger brother, also named John, was living either with, or near Ella and was working for the railroads. Perhaps introduced by his brother, Charles also found work there and became a chef or waiter. However, this meant

that he was away from the family home for long periods, perhaps leaving Addie as the only provider or reliant on her in-laws.

Addie stated that she had to place Charlie in a Catholic Day school while she went out to work. The school and its location are unknown, but when he was five, Addie enrolled Charlie in the first of two years at Douglass School at 920 Washington Boulevard, not far from their home. At the time, there were only three schools in the immediate area for black students: Douglass, Sumner, and North East.

There are school records documenting Charlie's entry into Douglass School for kindergarten and first grade. The records state that Charlie completed kindergarten and first grade and his advancement to the next grade. There is a small clerical error on the forms noting his birthday as 10<sup>th</sup> August rather than the 29th, but errors such as these would have gone unnoticed as parents rarely saw official school documents. However, the school census forms for the years 1924 and 1926 name another person living at 852 Freeman Avenue, a brother called Frank. The school census forms were signed on two separate occasions by Addie, and scholars have previously believed that this was another clerical error and that the child was actually John. It is rather peculiar that Addie had an opportunity to correct these errors in 1926, but they remained unchanged. Curiously, not only is the child's name wrong but the birth dates on the form are widely different making Frank a year older than John and therefore in a different grade. In addition, the forms state Kansas as the state of birth, instead of Illinois. Furthermore, at the time, John was living with his grand mother, Ella Parker, who is on record as the signatory on his enrolment forms, so there is a question as to the identity of Frank.

The school records hold another unexplained peculiarity in that Addie enrolled Charlie in the same school two years running. This is unusual, because it was not necessary to enrol a child at the beginning of each school year. A child would be enrolled only once in their first year and this would be carried through all subsequent years. A theory explaining these multiple enrolments suggests that Addie may have withdrawn Charlie from school in preparation for a move. However, if the family did not relocate, he would then have to be re-enrolled at the beginning of the school year. This not only suggests the Parker's may have been preparing to leave Wyandotte County a year before their actual move, but also confirms the rootless existence of Charlie's first 12 years. He lived in at least seven homes in both Kansas and Missouri and this migratory existence frequently implies financial difficulties, and even though there were a number of relatives in close proximity, it seems the effects of the Depression may have made life difficult for the Parkers.

One more indication of how badly the depression affected the Parker's was that John A. Parker was removed to his grandmother's guardianship at 844 Washington Boulevard, from about the time the Parker's arrived in Kansas. John is recorded on both the 1920 and the 1930 census records as being resident at Ella's home, and remained behind when Charlie moved to Missouri with Charles and Addie.

This move occurred in the summer of 1927 when the Parkers crossed the state line into Missouri to the affluent Westport District where Charles Senior had obtained a job as an apartment janitor. This appears to have heralded a period of consistency for the Parkers because Charlie attended Penn School for six consecutive years, moving homes only twice. The census records for 1930 also described Addie as being the homemaker suggesting a period of relative economic stability.

Addie stated that Charles Senior became an alcoholic, which probably contributed their subsequent separation when Charlie was around 13 years old. Addie maintained that Charles Senior died in 1940, stabbed in a drunken argument with a woman who herself later died of alcoholism. Years later, Addie said, “He was on the railroads as a chef. He could cook anything. He could dance; he was a good scholar; he could play the piano; but he was a drunkard.”

Charlie’s half-brother, John, affectionately known as ‘Ikey’, remained in Wyandotte County with his grandmother when his father, Addie, and Charlie moved to Missouri. Nevertheless, John remained in contact with the family and stated in an interview that he would regularly cross the river to visit his half-brother. Later on, he used to watch Charlie play at the clubs on 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine. In Wyandotte, John completed sessions at both Sumner and North East High schools, achieving his high school diploma, a qualification his illustrious half brother never attained. As an adult, John A. Parker worked for the Kansas City Post Office.

Ella Parker was the family matriarch. When her husband died, she was forced to lodge with her sister Florence, in Kansas City Missouri, taking with her, her mother Jane Goodloe, Charles, and Bessie Parker, Charles’s sister. Later at the Washington Boulevard residence, Ella took in boarders and lived there as John’s guardian for over ten years. The Parker women appear to have habitually out-lived their partners, as around the time of Charlie’s birth, the census form records Jane Goodlow as 75 years old and a widow also. She was Charlie’s great, grandmother.

While in her later forties, Addie Bailey Parker trained as a practical nurse and worked in the Kansas City Hospital until her retirement. She used several variations of her maiden name ranging from Boxley to Boxely, Bailey to Bayley, (there is one reference stating her name as Churchill), but the surname confusion has never satisfactorily been explained. Even today, relatives believe her maiden name was Boxley, although she signed her name as Bailey on two official versions of Charlie’s birth certificate. She died in 1967 at the age of 76.

Charlie Parker Junior died in 1955 at the age of 34. At his death, an attending physician mistakenly estimated the age of the deceased to be 53 years old. The genius that was Charlie Parker had worn out his body through alcoholism and drug addiction and died of pneumonia. He is buried in a family plot Lincoln Cemetery, Blue Hills, Missouri that he shares with his mother. As an African-American artist in pre-Civil Rights America, Charlie Parker suffered at the hands of promoters, managers, club owners, and a society that snubbed or exploited him. Shortly after his death, graffiti began to appear in New York and other cities simply stating, “Birds Lives”. Indeed, some five decades after his last performance, jazz enthusiasts worldwide seek Charlie Parker’s recordings, and young generations of musicians continue to marvel at his creativity and virtuosity.

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