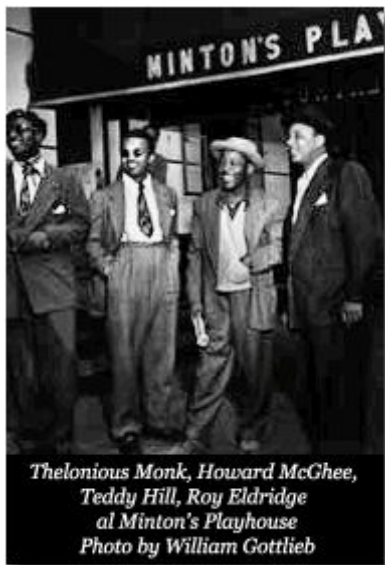


## Metaphorical thoughts on the birth of bebop.

by Renzo Carli\*



### *An environment.*

We are in the early forties of last century. Let's go together to a nightclub on New York's West 118<sup>th</sup> street, in the middle of Harlem: Minton's Playhouse, housed in a room of the Hotel Cecil.

The club takes its name from the owner, Henry Minton, an ex-saxophonist. In 1940, Minton handed over the running to Teddy Hill, a musician who had led a few orchestras in the past and was well liked by black jazzmen. Hill had a brilliant idea to make the place popular: have a small in-house group (Clarke on drums, Monk, as yet unknown, on the piano, Fenton on bass and Guy on trumpet); any of the numerous habitués who wanted to, could bring their instrument with them and play.

It is a Monday night and already in the room, filled with cigarette smoke, a strange music can be heard, different from traditional jazz. We go inside: there are a few musicians, all black, involved in a very lively jam session; they are surrounded by a dense crowd of attentive listeners, all strictly black and mostly jazz players. There is a lot of smoke in the room; the musicians are playing in what seems a discordant way, with a very rapid succession of notes and chords that sound sharp but at the same time enthralling.

We are at Minton's on a Monday night, and we are there deliberately; it is the night off for the big New York swing orchestras that play dance music for the whites, and they can have a drink at Minton's, listen to some extraordinary jam sessions, but also emerge from their passivity and throw themselves into the fray, improvising solos, developing the themes offered with daring new variations.

Some people know that there is a revolution going on; the protagonists are John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie (trumpet), Charlie Parker, often called Bird<sup>1</sup> (sax), Charlie Christian (electric guitar), Thelonious Monk (piano), Oscar Pettiford (bass), and Kenny Clarke (drums).

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<sup>1</sup> Bird actually comes from *yard bird* meaning courtyard rooster. In his early teens Parker spent whole days in the courtyard of his house imitating birdsongs with his saxophone. But, as Nunzi says, the nickname Bird "became the symbolisation of flight in the sense of a leap towards the absolute, which listening to Parker arouses in musicians and audience" (Nunzi, 2008, p. 177).

But before them there were Coleman Hawkins, Teddy Wilson, Art Tatum, Chu Berry, Mary Lou Williams and many others. It is a club that attracts famous and less well known musicians. It was here, in the jam sessions at Minton's, that bebop was born.



*Thelonious Monk*



*Charlie Parker*



Christian



*Kenny Clarke*



Gillespie



### *Bebop.*

What's the difference from the jazz played up to then? A few new "tricks", "to use a modest expression, dear to jazzmen" (Polillo, 1975, p. 190). Parker had for instance discovered that he could construct interesting new tunes by using the extreme notes of the chord of a specific theme. Often at the beginning and at the end of a tune, trumpet and sax played the theme in unison. Whoever listens to Miles Davis and John Coltrane remembers these thrilling moments. Parker played at a frightening speed, at least twice as fast as the great Lester Young, who was the essential reference point until the arrival of the brilliant, wild son of the two Kansas Cities<sup>2</sup>. But his virtuosity was not enough; it was Parker's musical ideas, his tonalities, the complexity of the themes and their surprising development that made him the genius of jazz, the Afro-American music. Genius and wildness: he had been mercilessly led into drugs by a relative when a teenager in the black ghettos of Kansas City where he

<sup>2</sup> Parker was born in 1920 in Kansas City in the state of Kansas, but his musical education took place in the Kansas City in Missouri, where his family moved soon after his birth.

mixed with the worst sort of people (Roncaglia, 1998). The drug problem accompanied him till his death in 1955: Parker was only thirty-five.

Dissonant harmonies, with the systematic alteration of chordal harmonies which with Parker reached the limits of polytonality, the flattened fifth interval, that bring bop to the blues and to its blue note<sup>3</sup>, minor seventh chords, sharp stops, fresh improvisations, octave leaps; the beat marked by unusual musical phrases, riding the hi-hat and not using the bass drum, with the double bass providing the walking bass line in an essentially polyrhythmic approach.

Bop is not easy to listen to, it cannot be sung like a song, it makes no concessions to popular taste and to the accessibility of music for entertainment. It is a difficult kind of music, at first not pleasant, with its "strange melodies, not at all catchy, built on highly dynamic staccato zigzagging phrases, with intervals that hadn't been used before; phrases that support each other, linking up in an unstable equilibrium, which at first is disconcerting. Very often the new themes were so different from the underlying harmonies that they got a new title and were credited exclusively to whoever had created the elaboration, namely the soloists. In this practice – essentially different from the variation on a theme or from improvisations on chords, as in the Hawkins style – nobody could equal the boppers: all the more stunning if we think of the small number of standards they constantly "regenerated". Some of the most often used chord progressions were those of *How high the moon*, *I got rhythm*, *All the things you are*, *Whispering*, *Indiana*, *Just you*, *Cherokee*, *'S wonderful*. The first (*How high the moon*) was repeated so often that it came to be called the boppers' hymn" (Polillo, 1975, p. 198).

One characteristic of the boppers was that they were an elite, based on technical excellence and musical insight, with such complex harmonic variations that mediocre musicians were discouraged. It is said that at Minton's, in the afternoon, Gillespie, Monk and Clarke used to meet to work out complicated chord changes for that night, so that those incapable of improvising on them, the ones with no talent, would be put off<sup>4</sup>.

Bebop owes its name to the onomatopoeic way the quintet led by Gillespie translated into words the two note theme recurring in a tune that was then called Bebop. The quintet, which had its debut at the Onyx in New York at the beginning of 1944, was made up of the native American bass player Pettiford, the pianist Wellington (actually a Sicilian called Giorgio Foglia), the tenor sax player Byas, the drummer Roach and by Gillespie on the trumpet.

Dance bands played an entertaining kind of music, where the "pet negro" was asked to dance, sing play and entertain the public. Whoever rebelled and refused to play the role in the routine that was set aside for black musicians, was immediately fired.

The boppers rebelled against all this. Their way of playing showed scornful indifference to the audience; they often played with their back to the listeners. The music they played was difficult and at times irritating for those who could not understand the complex structure of the phrases and of the harmony. It was a type of music that aspired to be art, and it was compared to Wagner or Debussy.

There are many opinions on bebop, at times of condemnation in defence of the tradition, at times praising those who supported the new musical vision in jazz.

The new jazz was a cause for pride among the African-Americans who identified with the boppers' exceptional skill. In the mid forties, with the end of the second world war, it became a kind of black uniform: inseparable dark glasses and beret, and their unorthodox slang made the boppers and the hipsters (their fans) a group apart, and this spread rapidly among African-Americans, followed by the young white protesters seeking to oppose the power system. The beatnik movement of the fifties derived directly from the boppers. Many boppers converted to Islam and took Muslim names. Why? It was thought that a "Muslim Arab", at the time, could arouse more respect than a black, the direct descendant of the slaves of the previous century. The blacks were disillusioned by the promises of integration present in Roosevelt's speech on the four freedoms: equality of opportunity for the young,

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<sup>3</sup> The blue note, typical of the Blues, is a note in the non-equal tempered scale, more than a half tone flat. The blue note gives the Blues a sweet, and at the same time sad, ambiguity, a tonal vagueness evoking nostalgia and sadness.

<sup>4</sup> Roncaglia (1998) reports various anecdotes about this, taken from Shapiro, N. & Hentoff, N. (1955).

an end to the privileges reserved for the few, a higher standard of living, and work for all. The participation of blacks in the war against Nazi-fascism had raised hopes that were then dashed. The black civil rights movement would grow stronger in the fifties with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The boppers, on the other hand, made music, high quality music. That was their way of gaining an identity, prestige and social importance.

There was a very strong reaction against bebop. "The fact that jazz after Parker stopped being popular music or music for light-hearted entertainment as it had been in the swing era, marked its condemnation – still in force today – by the Establishment, not only in America. It was all right to applaud a "negro who knew his place", especially as a clown, but too many people found, and still find, it hard to admit that a population believed to be inferior (if they weren't inferior, how could their social exclusion be justified, not to mention their oppression?) can have equal rights to full citizenship, the same as the whites, in the world of the arts. That is why today in both America and Europe the majority are willing to accept jazz only insofar as it somehow pays homage to the culture (musical and otherwise) of the whites." (Polillo, 1975, p. 204).

### *Some thoughts*

The boppers sought new roads through technical and creative excellence.

The spur was the desire to distinguish themselves, to get free of white domination which, in the swing era, had organised a major music business, using the blacks as an attraction for those seeking to forget and to enjoy themselves after the horrors of the war, the struggle against Nazism and Japanese imperialism.

Creativity and excellence led to autonomy and art. It is important to understand that the excellence of the boppers was not paraded, declared in resounding terms, or solemnly assessed by severe judges. No, it was an excellence that could only be enjoyed and appreciated by those who understood jazz. Still today, if we listen to the bop musicians' recordings, we find all the characteristics of obscure difficulty but also of sublime musical complexity of Charlie Parker, Gillespie, Christian (not when he played with Benny Goodman, but with trios and small groups), of Monk, and of many others through to Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

The birth of bebop coincided with the return to the black identity of jazz, and its differentiation from the dominant culture of the "white" orchestras for entertainment in the swing era. The history of jazz is the history of the black people of America. Many whites have certainly made surprising contributions to the development of jazz, from Bix Beiderbecke to Gerry Mulligan, from Lennie Tristano to Bill Evans and many, many others. But jazz, from its origins in New Orleans to its transfer to Chicago, Kansas City or New York, remains the music of the black African-American people. A people brought by force, in chains, to the United States from their native Africa; held for centuries in subjection, discriminated against, persecuted, humiliated in their identity, outcaste in the black ghettos of large cities, derided and despised in small towns in an often cruelly provincial country. Jazz for many long years was the cultural space where black Americans could find their identity and show the world their huge musical creativity. The boppers, thanks to the outstanding level of the music they produced, laid claim to this black identity of jazz. In Gillespie's life story there is the episode of Jimmy Dorsey, the great white saxophonist and clarinet player, then leader of a major band, who was astonished when he happened to hear Dizzy's quintet, and after the show, said, full of admiration: "I'd sign you up for my orchestra, if your skin wasn't so dark!"; Gillespie replied: "Pal, if it wasn't so dark, I wouldn't be able to play this way".

I boppers were badly paid, often had trouble getting by, but they were also aware of their own brilliance, and curious to pursue their adventure of exploring new paths in music.

Research by Eurisko (2008), shows that Italian psychologists have an annual net income of 17,800 euros (1,483 euros per month). The same research reports that until the age of 34, Italian psychologists earn on average 8,500 euros per year. We are on the poverty line.

What is the prestige of the psychology profession? Psychologists think that society has a very low respect for the profession. At the same time, psychologists are multiplying out of all proportion in our country, and the profession is rejected in the reigning scientism, by the questionable hybridisation of psychology in the areas of psychodiagnosis and psychotherapy dominated by medicine and psychiatry. Perhaps for Italian psychology, too, it is bebop time.

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