

Gwen: Our first story illuminates the inspiring yet tragic life of a true American original. It's the late 1940s. In the smoky nightclubs of New York City's 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, one man is pushing the limits of music, developing a fiercely original approach to playing jazz. Rejecting the traditional chord changes used by most contemporary musicians, saxophonist Charlie Parker is helping create a new improvisational style known as bebop. Almost immediately, bebop becomes one of America's most important and successful artistic movements and changes the face of jazz forever.

Wes: 60 years later, we've heard a story about an old saxophone that, if true, could shed new light on the remarkable life of the man who became known as "bird." This saxophone is now in the possession of Jennifer Hood of Oakland, California. But according to a family legend, it once belonged to Charlie Parker.

Jennifer Hood: My father, who ended up becoming a pretty famous jazz musician -- he played with Quincy Jones and Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughn, bunch of other people -- he told me this amazing story about how he ended up getting this sax one day when Charlie Parker and he were working a club together, a nightclub in Portland. This was way, way early in his career. And Charlie Parker comes to the gig one night minus his horn and dad says, well, where's your horn? And Charlie says, well, I pawned it. And he says, are you nuts? This is your right arm. This is your axe. This is your living. And Charlie said, well, you know, if it's so important to you, Bill, you know, here's the pawn ticket. Dad got the pawn ticket and he got it out of pawn, and we've had it in the family ever since.

Wes: It's a great story, but could it be true? Would one of America's greatest jazz artists really pawn his horn, let alone give the ticket to a young white musician? I'm Wes Cowan. Gwen Wright and I are meeting with Jennifer to check out her story.

Wes: Jennifer, Wes Cowan.

Jennifer: Nice to see you. Come on in. This is the horn that my father got out of pawn in Portland when he and Bird were working on a gig together, at least as the story goes, anyway.

Wes: Well, you know, I used to play the sax when I was in junior high school, but this is about the only thing that I remember how to do with one, so don't expect me to play it. So what is it that you want us to help you out with?

Jennifer: What I really want to find out is if it is a true story. So I want to know if it ever was, indeed, Charlie Parker's horn.

Gwen: Well, if that story is true, if this really was Charlie Parker's saxophone, it's a very significant object.

Jennifer: I hope so.

Gwen: Well, do you have a sense of when this might have happened?

Jennifer: I know it was sometime in the late '40s or the early '50s, 'cuz we moved from Oregon to L.A. in 1953.

Wes: I assume that you don't have the pawn ticket.

Jennifer: In your dreams. I'm afraid not. We have lots of other things, but no pawn ticket.

Gwen: Well, it's quite a challenge, but we'll let you know what we can find out.

Jennifer: All right. Well, that's terrific.

Gwen: While Wes travels to Portland with the sax, I need to know more about Charlie Parker and his contribution to jazz. I've come to New York City to the famous Blue Note nightclub to meet jazz critic and Parker biographer Stanley Crouch. He explains what drew Parker to New York.

Stanley Crouch: By the 1940s, Jazz had really established itself as a music in New York City and so you had -- Louis

Armstrong was playing, Coleman Hawkins was playing, Count Basie's band was around at that time. You had all of this stuff going on, so it was a very, very vital scene.

Gwen: In this creative climate, a group of young black musicians developed an energetic improvisational style they called bebop. At the forefront of this new American art form was Charlie Parker.

Stanley: It wasn't that he could just play extremely fast, very confidently. He could play extremely fast, more brilliantly, almost, than anybody we've ever heard play. So he was a phenomenon.

Gwen: But while Parker was finding professional success, his personal life was in shambles. From early on, he had become an alcoholic and a heroin addict.

Stanley: He wasn't a drug addict; he was a drug fanatic. He was out of control. But he was out of control as a man; he was in control as a musician. So it's a very strange combination. Because he plays with such discipline that it's very difficult to address the totally anarchic way in which he lived, you know.

Gwen: Parker's anarchic lifestyle led to a string of failed marriages and a series of mental and physical breakdowns.

Stanley: Some kind of way, he was able to shut all of that out when he picked up the saxophone. And that may have also been why he loved music so much, was that that was the place in which he could be himself at his best. I think that's one of the reasons why there's such enormous power to Charlie Parker's playing, because he's summoning everything out of himself that's good, and it was a lot.

Wes: For our saxophone to have belonged to Charlie Parker, I first need to confirm it's the right type and age. I'm at the Portland Music Company in Portland, Oregon, meeting with dealer and appraiser Doug Metzker.

Wes: Doug, sounds great. What can you tell me about this sax?

Doug Metzger: Well, this is a Buescher Aristocrat e-flat alto saxophone.

Wes: Well, that checks out. We know Charlie Parker played the alto sax. But for Jennifer's story to be true, I need to confirm the sax was made before her father could have met Parker, in the late 1940S.

Doug: There's the serial number right there.

Wes: Oh, yeah, right.

Wes: The serial number tells an expert like Doug the approximate age of the sax.

Doug: The serial number puts it at early 1930S.

Wes: Great. Is this the kind of sax that Charlie Parker would have played?

Doug: It's the right vintage; it's a decent model.

Wes: I think Charlie Parker would play more than decent, wouldn't he?

Doug: Well, it's not gold-plated and it's not the fanciest brand, but that kind of stuff really doesn't matter with somebody of Charlie Parker's skill. The saxophone is not nearly as important as the saxophone player. Saxophones are really like microphones, and he was singing through this thing, so he could have made any saxophone sound great.

Wes: So, Doug, could Charlie Parker have owned this sax?

Doug: he certainly could have owned this one. Why not?

Wes: If this saxophone was Parker's, would he have pawned it? I'm at the Multnomah County Library looking for clues from the many accounts of Parker's life. It takes a little digging, but then I find something. It's an account by Jay McShan, a bandleader who played with Parker in the early '40s. Listen to this. "There were two horns that always had to be gotten out of hock. Bird's was one." So Bird did pawn his sax, which makes sense. We know he needed quick cash to finance his addictions. And look at this, by Cliff Jetkins, a fellow saxophonist and friend of Parker's. "He once handed me a \$25 pawn ticket, which he told me to redeem and keep what I got. It was an expensive French Selmer tenor saxophone." Jennifer's story's starting to sound more and more convincing all the time. But for our sax to be one that Parker pawned, I need proof he was in Portland when Jennifer's father lived there, from 1945 through '53. Here in the newsprint collection, I'm checking contemporary newspapers for any mention of Charlie Parker in Portland during that time. Finally, in a paper from 1953, I think I've found something. Here you go. Here's an ad for the Charlie Parker quintet, playing at the Playhouse Theater in Portland, Oregon. This is great. But is there any evidence Jennifer's father, Bill Hood, and Charlie Parker actually met?

Gwen: I've flown to Portland to meet jazz historian Bob Dietsche. Bob claims to have some information that could help our investigation. Well, I'm trying to establish if Charlie Parker and Bill Hood might have known each other here in Portland.

Bob Dietsche: It's quite probable, because Bill Hood was one of the early white interlopers into this black scene.

Gwen: According to Bob, as a teenager, Bill Hood would sneak out of his house to visit the jazz clubs on Williams Avenue, a black neighborhood on the north side of Portland.

Bob: He liked to go to a club called the Frat Hall. And when Charlie Parker was in town, after he would finish his engagements, he would go to Williams Avenue, sometimes end up at the Frat Hall, so there's a good possibility they could have met.

Gwen: Well, quite probable is one thing. Do you have anything definite that shows the two men knew each other?

Bob: Well, I've been thinking about that, and there is a tape that came from a radio program celebrating Bill Hood's life. And on that tape there's a reference to a letter that Bill Hood wrote to his brother.

Gwen: The letter was written in 1954, within months of Bill Hood leaving Portland.

Man on tape: "Bill wrote me, says that he, Bird, Chet Baker and Jimmy Rowles jammed at his club. They got so conked that Bird played trumpet, Chet played baritone and Bill played vibes. The bass man got dragged with them as they went to Bill's house. Bird went to sleep in a chair and everyone draped him in Mexican garb with a sombrero over his face, and Bill said, 'he snores beautifully.'"

Gwen: That's fantastic. So it sounds like they knew each other pretty well.

Bob: What really piques my curiosity about this tape is that Chet Baker, Jimmy Rowles and Parker were all playing in the same group in Portland in 1953.

Gwen: Which suggests Bill Hood probably met Parker at the Portland performance. But have you ever heard a story that Parker once pawned his saxophone and gave Bill Hood the pawn ticket?

Bob: That's a new one on me.

Wes: To prove conclusively that Jennifer's story is true, there's only one more thing I can think of: try to find the pawn store where the transaction took place. I'm looking through a copy of the Portland city directory from 1953. Ten pawn shops in 1953. I'm cross-referencing with the current Yellow Pages. Let's see if we can find any matches. And there's only one. In 1953 it looks like there's an H&B Loan office and today there's an H&B Jewelry and Loan. It's a long shot, but...what have I got to lose? I've made an appointment with the shop's owner, Phil Tobin, to see if this might be the

place. Phil, how long has H&B been in business?

Phil Tobin: The company was started by my father back in 1948.

Wes: Wow, that's a long time.

Phil: Yes, it is.

Wes: I'm trying to track down a story about a saxophone that was supposedly pawned here in Portland sometime in the '50s, maybe 1953. This sax belonged to Charlie Parker, and the story goes it was picked up by a guy named Bill Hood. Have you heard of that story?

Phil: We don't have records going back into the early '50s. But we had an employee that worked for us back in those days who became good friends of the family, and on numerous occasions we would sit around and talk about all the unusual and interesting people who we'd waited on over the years.

Wes: What Phil told me next was the clincher. All that's left is to tell Jennifer everything we've discovered, starting with the fact that her father did play with Charlie Parker.

Jennifer: I'm really just delighted.

Wes: That's great!

Jennifer: 'Cuz, you know, you hear these stories and you never know whether they're true or not, you know, so --

Wes: Then I revealed to Jennifer what the owner of the pawnshop told me about his employees.

Phil: And I can distinctly remember him telling me on several occasions about the Bird pawning his alto saxophone with H&B Company.

Gwen: So we believe that this sax, your dad's sax, once belonged to Charlie Parker.

Jennifer: Yea! That's so good; that's so great. Thank you so much.

Wes: Jennifer, not that you would ever think about selling this -- I know it's a family heirloom -- but are you at all interested in how much it might be worth?

Jennifer: Oh, sure.

Wes: Interestingly enough, there are a number of Charlie Parker saxes who have sold in the past, and based upon these auction records, I think it's fairly safe to say that this sax, your sax, is probably worth somewhere between \$20,000 and \$30,000.

Jennifer: Wow! Whew! Man. That's great.

Gwen: Well, Jennifer, to thank you for bringing us such a haunting story of Charlie Parker and the birth of bebop, we'd like to give you two rare albums of Bird playing at the very end of his career, and have music that he might well have played with your father.

Jennifer: All right. That's great. You know, I have an old turntable, so I'll go -- I'll be able to play it. That's just so great.

Gwen: Bird rarely talked about his music, but he did say, "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn." Parker died in 1955, only two years after our story took place. But his legacy lives on with each young musician who, like Bird, refuses to compromise and flies.