

of the Great American Novel.

Epstein once shared Aaron's enthusiasm but says he finds his opinion tempered by a fresh reading. Originally awed by "the god-like aura of a novelist working on a vast stage with a huge cast of characters," Epstein now believes U.S.A.'s "truths were almost entirely

political ones—and such truths are all too mutable." Dos Passos "missed the main story"—"the eternal confusions of human beings." Still, although Dos Passos failed to fashion "a book for the ages," Epstein says, U.S.A. "was a book for his age, and that is no small thing."

## *When Bebop Was Born*

"Bebop: Modern New York Jazz" by Peter Rutkoff and William Scott, in *The Kenyon Review* (Spring 1996), Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio 43022.

On November 26, 1945, a little-known young saxophonist named Charlie Parker entered the recording studios of radio station WOR in New York with trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie and four other jazz musicians. They were about to introduce the public to a startlingly different sound: bebop.

"Energetic, sometimes frantic, and bluesy, bebop's incendiary style, pulsing rhythm, and intensity contrasted with the melodic, linear, and commercial qualities of swing," note Rutkoff and Scott, who teach history at Kenyon College. With bebop, they argue, modern jazz divorced itself from the dictates of commerce and returned to its African-American roots—and black jazz musicians liberated themselves from "white control."

The jazz world was segregated during the first three decades of the century, the authors note. "White musicians, played, wrote, and arranged jazz, organized orchestras and tours, made recordings and performed on the radio, often borrowing the most innovative styles and songs of African-Americans for their own, achieving commercial success and popularity." Most black jazz musicians in New York, for example, recorded on "race" records and performed in Harlem for black audiences.

Only during the '30s did this racial segregation give way. But the music and the industry remained white dominated. Parker, like many other players, chafed at the creative restrictions imposed by the swing bands. He and others also resented the money white bandleaders made by "covering" tunes originated by black artists.

Playing alto saxophone (and washing dishes) at Dan Wall's Chili House at Seventh Avenue and 140th Street in December 1939, Parker had a musical epiphany. Working over "Cherokee," a danceable and melodically straightforward tune, he later related, "I

found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive."

During the next few years, the authors write, Parker, Gillespie, drummer Kenny Clarke, and pianist Thelonious Monk, "individually and collectively, built on that innovation" and created bebop. It was a form of music that demanded extraordinary virtuosity, and so, they believed, could not be "covered."

A union ban on recording (in effect, a strike against record companies) from mid-1942 to 1944 kept the new music underground. In the fall of 1945, Parker and his friends stepped into the WOR studios and put "Ko-Ko," whose jagged melody he constructed over the harmonic structure of "Cherokee," on acetate for the Savoy record label, starting a revolution in jazz that has never really stopped.



*Charlie Parker, shown in 1948, led the bebop revolution in jazz.*