

Charlie Parker Plays the Grain Mill

for Bird's 100th Birthday

Friday nights in Great Falls, after school, we waited for dark. Then we poured into moon units, two surplus mail jeeps, wheel the wrong side, teal one that Mark owned, milk-green one that Don owned. We drove uphill past Black Eagle to the Northwest Bypass, searching for backroads, gravel fully drowned in wheatfields lit only by moon and distant light of our tiny city, the Great Stack. When we found the spot, powerlines hummed a language we had not learned. Don backed his moon unit, the rear door open, docking with Mark's open door, making a shag carpet room in the middle of the prairie. We swallowed Miller beer, cranked the car stereo, a cassette deck in the spare, metal dash. The music was Bebop. We left behind commercial jazz like Spyro Gyra and Jeff Lorber Fusion Group, left the neo-bebop Richie Cole behind for the root of jazz: Charlie Parker. If we stepped from the mail trucks, we stepped into fields, pulsing wheat for miles, star-scape that rendered gravity irrelevant—we were all floating. Charlie Parker chanted from speakers, bumped now and again by the thrust from Max Roach or lifted by chords from Bud Powell, Dizzy screaming, bending. We'd scratched "Bird Lives" in the green stall of the band room bathroom, but now we listened, nestled in Montana night. Bird wove braids through strings, invented in every beat over "Scrapple for the Apple," "Donna Lee," "Confirmation," "Now's the Time," indeed. I admit, this high school drummer, this sophomore held on tight to catch it, but sometimes I grasped on, relaxed, found the genius of Parker as he inhaled the stream of music. I caught Bird endlessly creating, sparks struck from stone in the Montana dark. In mail trucks, conjoined, we swayed our heads to match rhythm, to measure incredulity: Charlie Parker, head full of steam, made the future from every finger flick and breath, his mind so present yet three moons ahead.