

A jazzy tribute

Eastwood's 'Bird' pays tribute to jazz genius

By RICHARD SMITH
Staff Writer

If an instrumental solo can be described as a musical representation of honesty, then the improvised jazz solo is more honest than any other. It is an unparalleled form of individual expression. A band will be playing on stage, the musical theme, the melody, is over and largely done with, and now the fun begins. The soloist is up; he has to think ahead, go with the mood, carve out of the piece's rhythm a clear, precise, specific path. He can explore the depths and heights of music. In these breathtaking moments, the sky is the limit.

Clint Eastwood's *Bird* is about the life and times of Charlie "Bird" Parker, widely regarded as the greatest innovator of a style known as bebop — basically improvised variations of well-known jazz themes, with an occasional tendency toward the dissonant. It was a new sound, and Parker, together with other jazz giants like Dizzy Gillespie and Theolonius Monk, made it even newer.

The film itself unfolds like a great jazz number: a variation on a theme. The screenplay is knowingly complicated, its tempo is mixed, its tone light and dark (mostly dark). "Bird" presents a contrast of purity and dirt, of brilliance and waste.

And so does "the Bird" himself. Parker was an undoubted musical genius, a jazz visionary, but his offstage life was filled with trouble and unhappiness. He was a heavy drinker and intermittent heroin user. He had a reputation for being easy with women (there

is a wonderful scene in the film where he spots some likely prey in the audience and directs his playing to this single woman — seduction by saxophone!), and he suffered from ulcers and continuous heart trouble. Apart from his music, only his wife Chan was ever able to calm him — "You make me feel peaceful," he tells her.

The film begins with these aspects of his life at the forefront. The film is at its dramatic darkest, and is narratively hard to pin down (almost evasive). In this respect, director Eastwood disarms us somewhat. The audience is ready to have Parker's genius proved — is this supposed to be reverence or criticism? is the question. We hear him play, we see him play, but we don't feel for him yet. We're given flashes — important incidents in Parker's life, split up by the view of a cymbal flying in slow motion across the screen.

And then, in a flashback, we see Parker in 1936, aged 16, approaching the stage in a Kansas City nightclub to prove himself at a talent night with a fictional veteran saxman. The "Bird," the man who will one day redefine jazz, is not good, not good at all, and the band members and audience exchange despairing glances as the tubby youngster plays away, until the drummer lifts a hi-hat cymbal off its stand and throws it at the boy. It flies in slow-motion across the screen and lands to the side of Parker's feet, silencing him immediately. Pathos doesn't come any more devastating than this. We see here, more than at any other moment, what is behind the music and inside the man.



Clint Eastwood directs Forest Whitaker as Charlie Parker (right) and Dizzy Gillespie as Sam Wright in "Bird," which opens tomorrow.

Eastwood takes this tack in the same way that Parker fooled with his associates. Played with stunning dexterity by Forest Whitaker ("Platoon," "Good Morning, Vietnam"), Parker is alternately gentle and childish, intense and intelligent. The chameleonic qualities of his character are Eastwood's guide and Whitaker's triumph. Trained by Lennie Niehaus, the film's musical supervisor, Whitaker exudes the artistic temperament. He is the 30-year-old adolescent whose eyes, tired and bloodshot, water over as his brilliant horn solos soar through the air of nightclubs and

barns, dance halls and theatres. It would be the performance of many an actor's career, and yet it is just going to be Whitaker's big break. (What an exciting prospect.) He won, apparently to his surprise but not to anyone else's, the Best Actor award at Cannes last May.

Parker's wife, a spirited and beguilingly strong character, is played with confidence by Diane Venora ("Ironweed"). She appears to be "the Bird's" perfect foil, until she too shows her vulnerability. Chan Parker herself was a consultant in the making of the film. One can only wonder what she made

of Venora's extraordinary performance.

It becomes clear that Eastwood's film (his 13th movie from the director's chair) is more sympathetic than it is reverent, which is one of the film's greatest strengths. It is not an awestruck celebration — the sort that Hollywood could churn out like a factory if it wanted. It is a beautiful, compassionate film about the pained life of a man who had a wonderful talent. The movie, dedicated to musicians everywhere, is filled with his magical music. It is sufficient tribute.

Chapel Hill's own Popes survive pop torture with new EP

By RANDAL BULLOCK
Staff Writer

Gentle readers, I've come under a bit of censure from Mom recently for the records I've chosen to review. "You're going to make the world think you're sick," she said.

"But Mom," I said, "I write about America. America's a sick place."

Mom paused then. "Son," she said with another pause, "if you really believe that, you just go right on doing what you're doing."

Right then I knew she'd won again. Mom, this one's for you.

Hi, We're the Popes — The Popes

First of all, I'd like to say that, in career-selection terms, the most exquisite torture I could pick for myself would definitely be that of a pop song writer. That's torture with a capital "E" for excruciating pain, by the way, because not only would the songs I write have to be salable, but they would also have to be worth listening to. Sound simple? Well,

back up...

One, it is virtually impossible to avoid the "reminiscent of that which has sold before" sound that characterizes any number of pop records since the Beatles. Which is why, when I drop the first cheap comparison in this review between the Pope's first EP and Scuffy the Cat's first EP, it is with the understanding that I have heard only three or four truly revolutionary pop bands. And of those, only a select few aren't either slowly starving to death or dead already. Besides, one could be compared to a lot worse, as I will explain later.

Anyway the Popes aren't dying or dead; they are quite alive and living in your very own backyard. This is important both for you, the potential consumer, and for me, the potential life-long torture victim. I say this because it illustrates the fact that not only are there garages and basements all over this nation, but also that there are bands in a good many

of them, trying their best to attract people to their garage and not some other. Competition is fierce and obscurity is the rule. If I'm going to starve to death for art, I at least want someone to know about it. That's my second angle.

Your angle is that, geographically, the Popes are your band, like the Tar Heels are your team. I'm not being an advocate for blind, "I'm being a good Nazi," my-area-right-or-wrong support, either. I wouldn't say that you necessarily need to like the Popes. I would say however, that it is a sort of obligation at least to listen to them. And, like the Tar Heels, either boo them off the field and make them sorry they were ever born, or cheer them on and give them a reason to continue. You can only give the Popes a chance. After that, it's up to them.

And that brings me to the third and final reason why writing pop songs would ultimately be torture

for me. It's not easy, like writing a review is. Pop music, aside from being the backbone and breadwinner of American music, is one of the most elusive art forms. Pop's stock in trade is the glorification of all the pedestrian aspects of both love and life. It not only has to be catchy, it has to sustain the world it creates long enough to fill up a 45.

Think about it. The world that great pop creates must be pure. Menstruation, acne and venereal warts must be denied existence since love in pop songs is different from love in real life. It is a Utopian kind of love where even if the love of your life is never found, it still feels better than any relationship you'll ever have. Even when love isn't the subject (as is sometimes the case here), this world still must be created to make the song work. And if you think I'm joking about the torture part, you try to create a Utopia that is fully expressed in three minutes.

So where does this leave the

Popes? A lot closer to my heart than just living in my backyard would normally allow, I assure you. I mentioned Scuffy earlier because when its first EP was released, the perpetually teenage part of my body was ecstatic for a month. The band had me believing that life was indeed fun, even though I certainly knew better by that point.

The Popes do the same thing for me. They make the world fun by creating a whole new one for me through the magic of pop music. And as anyone who knows me will tell you, pop music stopped appealing to me a long time ago. Except on rare occasions, the abuse of the rules above kept my ears far from any of the modern pop meccas and all of the fodder that is produced there. SO I HOPE YOU PAID ATTENTION. Besides, we need to keep these guys from starving. They live too close, their growling stomachs might keep us awake.

There Mom, is that better?