

Through The Looking Glass by Charlie Parker and Jackson Pollock

A black man raises a saxophone to his large lips to play to the city, consumed by the night's darkness, and brought to a lifeless glow by inventions. The city is full of shadowy alleys, brick buildings, and bizarre characters, crawling out of their cement caves. As the mouthpiece is raised up and waiting, patiently, he pauses and draws breath; during the inhalation old boots crunch through country snow on an old dirt pathway leading to a small door. Paint cans are opened by an older, balding white man with coffee and a cigarette before the sun has graced the barren, leafless trees outside, his breath coming out in waves of steam puffs inside an old barn-house. A stick is enveloped in paint and raised over a large canvas covering the ground, fastened in place by old nails. Drippings of light gray paint fall in slow motion towards the canvas and the sax rings out its first crisp note, shattering the silence. The scene explodes as crimson paint begins to drip and be thrown through cigarette smoke onto canvas while notes stream out of the saxophone filling up all the space in the whiskey soaked air. Both men work vigorously on their art, facial expressions as abundant as the paint splatters and sax notes, their bodies swaying and moving with the piece they are creating. The saxophone is swung around, streaking gold strokes around the musician and the painter bats his stick rhythmically, as if it is hitting a drum and keeping time. Pitter-patters of pale yellow paint hitting the canvas are overshadowed by the fast squealing of the saxophone, jumping from note to note skipping along with every flick of the painter's stick. Sweat breaks both men's brows and time seems to melt away as both are carried more and more out of reality and into the reality they are creating until it all stops.

Abruptly. The musician leaves the studio where vinyl records with “*Charlie Parker*” printed on the cover are being shelled out, and the painter signs “*Jackson Pollock*” on the back corner of his canvas. As the old painter leaves his paint to dry and the musician packs away his golden tenor into its case, both are unaware of what each other has created.

The time stream seems to run backwards and white paint flies from Jackson Pollock’s canvas back onto the stick and drips back into its can. Charlie Parker walks home backwards, climbs in between two sheets and closes his eyes as the sunset rises over New York. The scene becomes a blur and time freezes on a black and white image that has been, or will be, immortalized. It is August 14th, 1945 and Times Square is frozen with a bustle of celebrating people. It is V-J Day in Times Square and a sailor is kissing a young woman in a white dress. World War II has just ended and all of America is in celebration while Europe is in tatters. The world has just seen the horrors of recent technology put to use through war and the surreal concentration camps that committed mass genocide. An unnatural amount of death and pain has entered the world causing people to look deeper inside themselves for the meaning of life and feel the world with much more emotion. Artists form Black Mountain College in order to think and freely express themselves. The artist begins to explore his interior states. Thus his emotions were being put into art, and he was not just painting what he saw, but what he felt. This artwork created a looking glass into the past, because the artwork of this time period, specifically the late 1940’s to the early 1950’s, reflected the emotions of the general population during this time.

The time stream begins its run backwards once again and we see the horrors of World War II begin to unwind. People begin to materialize out of nothing as enormous mushrooms made of fire shrink and are sealed within metal shells in a flash. Sickly, pale bodies, naked and malnourished, stand up and walk away from their piles. The world is turned from a state of war

to a state of unrest as Europe is once again in tatters from World War I. It is August 29th, 1920, in Kansas City, Kansas. Charlie Parker is born into a world that has just touched its tongue to taste industrialized warfare, and is spiraling towards a massive economic downturn. When Parker was only nine years old, the stock market took a massive crash on October 29th, 1929, which came to be known as Black Tuesday. This launched the world into the Great Depression, which is when Parker began to pick up and play the saxophone. In Parker's teenage years he began to play and master improvisation, using several years of diligent practice. He was involved in an automobile accident and got him addicted to morphine while in the hospital. This addiction would slowly grow to become a heroin addiction, which will grow another cancerous limb of alcohol addiction. By the time he was nineteen, he had moved to New York, and was trying to make it in the music industry ("The Official Site of Charlie "Yardbird" Parker – Biography"). A few years later, he was in a band, and by the time he was twenty-five he was recording in a studio, recording some of his best known work. The next year he went to California to play a few gigs, and decided to stay for a while. He struggled through his addiction to heroin by developing an alcohol addiction, and eventually had a stay at the Camarillo State Hospital for several months. After this he moved back to New York and continued recording. In March of 1955, when he was only 34 years old, Parker died of a heart attack due to the wear and tear of his addictions on his body ("Charlie Parker Biography").

Now the time stream winds back even further beyond WW1. Yellow gas is sucked into metal shells, and flies across trenches into large artillery cannons. The world is balanced, but teetering on the edge of war. It is January 28th, 1912, in Cody Wyoming. Jackson Pollock enters a world that is about to enter its very first industrialized war. He moved through the United States, through Arizona, and California, and eventually moved to New York to study art.

Alcoholism had begun to creep its way into his life. In October of 1945, Pollock married his wife, Lee Krasner and moved into a house on Long Island that would become his studio. Throughout the rest of the decade, he would make some of his most famous paintings. On August 11, 1956, Pollock drove his car off the road and died in the crash (“Jackson Pollock” *His Paintings, Quotes, and Biography*).

The time stream now spins back to where it first came to a rest: on the drying painting and vinyl record fresh off the press. We now can see the beauty of each piece in its finished form. Jackson Pollock labels his painting No. 5, 1948. The track Parker was playing is labeled Koko.

As Koko begins to play through an old phonograph, the notes and melodies begin to pop out of its horn in a vivid display. Notes leap in an upward beat and scale to achieve small bursts of sudden energy. The yellow slashes of paint on No. 5, 1948 seem to pulse whenever the notes reach the bright brassy tones indicating some sort of connection. The colors of the paint illuminate each note played. There is no end to the number of notes dancing out of the phonograph, nor any end to the paint as it reaches and extends over the edges of the canvas, existing further than it appears. The notes, and the drips of paint both appear to be a scene of chaos, but beneath it all, a structure exists. The music notes are confined to the chromatic scale, but it runs freely up and down the five line staff, giving it a frame. The painting, similar in its construction, uses colors that complement each other and lines that are consistent with each color. The bright yellow dashes around in long thin streaks and the burgundy red scatters about in thicker heavier splatters, whereas the gray clumps together and runs onto the next clump with a small short line. The space is filled completely in the air of the song as notes are crammed into every space possible, just as the space in the canvas is graced with dancing splashes of paint.

Both pieces radiate the same feeling and energy, of business brought on by the rapid notes and sheer number of paint drips, and of a mellow aura constructed of Parker's running scales which blend into each other seamlessly and Pollock's choices of color: light gray, black, white, and light brown, with the accents of yellow and dark red. Their lives also had uncanny parallels. Both had heavy addictions to substances, which eventually led to their death. Their work was inspired by previous artwork, for Pollock it was the Native American sand paintings and for Parker it was a recording of "Cherokee" by Ray Noble ("Charlie Parker's Koko"). One can only marvel at the massive coincidence: the name of the song which inspired Parker having Native American background, the same as Pollock's inspiration.

Pollock's No. 5, 1948 painting is a visual medium of Parker's recording of Koko, and Parker's recording is an audible representation of Pollock's painting. These art styles show great similarity because the people who created them had very similar lifestyles, and ideas. These ideas were a product of the times. Pollock and Parker both lived through the Great Depression and World War II. The mass death of societies and populations that were starving and struggling brought about new times for the artist. The artist began to focus on who he was as a person. Artists began to reflect not what they saw, but how they felt. This was a large leap in the art world of that time. Artists began to reflect on their interior and placed that into their artwork, revealing more of themselves than ever before.

Their artwork has created a portal in time through which we can see, but not step into. We can observe and learn from their artwork the emotions and feelings of the time period. The late 1940's and early 1950's was a time period where people felt rushed. Suburbia became the American dream, and television with its media influences began to creep its way into households throughout the United States. The whole era turned from a joyous end of war celebration to the

competition with Russia for dominance, and that entailed mass production of new technology discovered during the war. This was a very cramped rushing lifestyle that we can see through Pollock's paintings and hear through Parker's music. We can also see how people desired to begin to explore beyond conventional boundaries set up by society. Parker developed be bop jazz that broke the rules of conventional music at the time. Pollock desired to make something that did not have to abide by all the rules he learned while in art school. People were looking for change in their lives during this time, and we can observe how this change came through history books on how our society changed at the end of WW2. These are only a few of the emotions felt by the populace, and only a few that have been drawn from the pieces of art. The extent of the artwork's complexity reaches as far as the human spirit has, causing us take our looking glass, which has been crafted by Jackson Pollock and Charlie Parker and look into the emotions and feelings of the past.

Works Cited

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