

CHAPTER ONE

Central Avenue Breakdown

the linear neighborhood

Los Angeles has no true neighborhoods—instead its distinctive cultures stretch out horizontally along specific streets. Hollywood Boulevard, Sunset Strip, Mulholland Drive, Olvera Street, Rodeo Drive, La Cienega—these are to Southern California what Greenwich Village and Soho are to New York. They are Los Angeles's linear neighborhoods, its criss-crossing geometry of local colors. Each of these Southern California streets boasts a unique sensibility, one that defies city limits and zoning laws—a Sepulveda, a La Cienega might cut through a half-dozen separate townships without losing its special aura, although a couple blocks on either side of these thoroughfares city life collapses back into the faceless anonymity of cookie-cutter car culture. Travelers from other parts of the globe, faced with this specifically West Coast phenomenon, can see only urban sprawl—looking for village geography, they miss the stories encrusted alongside the pavement, the flora and fauna of the LA city street.

Years ago electric-powered streetcars ran their linear routes down many of these same streets, a patchwork of rails that tied together the fifty-six communities that comprise the Los Angeles area. That was before General Motors, leading a consortium that also included Standard Oil and Firestone, bought up the smog-free streetcar system and dismantled it. Ripping out the tracks, or paving over them, they made the automobile a necessity where until then it had been a luxury. Today over two million GM cars traverse Southern California roadways, bringing heady profits to Detroit and leaving a permanent haze of air pollution in Los Angeles and its environs. LA now stands as the epitome of car culture, with all its

attendant curses and blessings. The linear neighborhood has been locked into place, almost certainly for good—or at least as long as fossil fuels remain—but now even the locals speed by, mostly oblivious to the stories of the sidewalk.

Along Central Avenue from 42nd to Vernon, few such stories remain today. Almost no visitors come here any more. The general perception among LA natives is that this section of Central is not safe for casual strollers. (“You want to get out of the car?” asked my wary companion on a recent visit.) But in fact this part of Central is too run down to pose much of a danger—so little is happening here that even street criminals must have left long ago. Anyone seeking the former centers of Los Angeles jazz, such as the Club Alabam or the Downbeat, today finds only vacant lots or deserted buildings. The only leftover signs of the Alabam are a small strip of rose-colored sidewalk that once led to its door and a couple of holes that years ago supported an awning; where the club once stood there is now a dirt lot littered with garbage.

Where buildings still stand—at the former sites of the Memo, the Last Word, the Bird in the Basket—they are bombed out, graffiti-covered wrecks. “For Sale” signs can be seen everywhere. Those seeking to purchase a piece of Los Angeles cultural history can get it at a bargain price in this neighborhood. But even without owning a parcel of land, historians of LA culture can learn quite a bit from visiting the area—little building has gone on here for half a century, and the neighborhood’s surviving architecture retains the flavor of prewar years. For current residents, however, Central Avenue is the urban equivalent of a ghost town, the hollow middle of an economy now flourishing only at its edges. It is a depressing sight.

Yet in its heyday this stretch of Central stood out as one of the most distinctive of Los Angeles’s linear neighborhoods. Central Avenue was not, as some have asserted, the West Coast’s answer to 52nd Street. It was much more: an elongated Harlem set down by the Pacific. By 1920, some 40 percent of the black population in LA lived within a few blocks on either side of Central Avenue between the stretch from 11th Street to 42nd Street, and a panoply of businesses, residences, social clubs, eateries, and nightclubs had sprung up as part of this blossoming culture. With the enormous growth in the California black population—since 1900 it had doubled every twenty-years—the Central Avenue scene of the 1940s represented a city within a city. Entertainment was just one small part of what Central Avenue was all about, and jazz was just one small piece of the entertainment picture, co-existing over the years with R&B, song-and-dance, comedy, blues, revues, shake dancing, vaudeville, and the like. The Club Alabam, the best known of the nightspots that dotted the landscape,

is sometimes spoken of by jazz writers as a West Coast Birdland or Village Vanguard, but it was both more and less. The Alabam featured lavish revues that covered the gamut of the entertainment spectrum, and though the jazz might be spectacular—with Charles Mingus, Dexter Gordon, or Art Pepper playing in the house band, it no doubt was—jazz was still just a small part of the show.

Sometimes much of the show took place in the street: Mercedeses and Bentleys, Cadillacs and Lincolns, movie stars and athletes, singers and dancers. The avenue contained a round-the-clock cacophony of comings and goings. Celebrities from the black community, both local and national—Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Duke Ellington, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson—gravitated to Central Avenue whenever they were in town. The Dunbar Hotel, next to the Alabam, was one of the first high-class black hotels in Southern California and attracted the cream of black society. When heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, one of the greatest boxers of his or any day, decided to open a nightclub in the mid-1930s, he established it in the Dunbar. When the Ellington band came to Hollywood in 1930 to be in the movie *Check and Double Check*, Duke stayed at the Dunbar, then newly built, as later did many other visiting jazz luminaries such as Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Lunceford, Don Redman, and Sy Oliver. When drummer Cozy Cole lived at the Dunbar, Lee Young (Lester’s brother), a fine drummer in his own right, showed up regularly each morning, practice pad in hand, to run through rhythm exercises with the master. Nellie Lutcher rose to national fame as an entertainer only after she switched from piano playing to singing: a change that took place while she was performing for two dollars a night at the Dunbar. The hotel’s name appears in few jazz history books, yet its halls are laden with many musical memories.

On Central Avenue, black music history was compacted within a few city blocks. The Downbeat, two doors past the Alabam and three doors beyond the Dunbar, boasted an equally rich past. Howard McGhee’s pioneering bebop band—the first modern jazz ensemble on the West Coast, predating the more heralded arrival of Parker and Gillespie by several months—was formed there in early 1945. Charles Mingus and Buddy Collette premiered their short-lived group the Stars of Swing—perhaps the most important unrecorded jazz band in West Coast history—at the Downbeat a few years later. Saxophonists Wardell Gray, Dexter Gordon, and Teddy Edwards frequently engaged in tenor battle on the spot throughout the late 1940s. Edwards recalls the long rectangular room as “about my favorite place to play jazz,” a sentiment shared by more than a few others.¹ The layout of the room focused everyone’s attention on the music: The bandstand was in the center of the room, with patrons border-

ing it on three sides, while the long facing bar was backed with a mirror, so even hard-drinking patrons sitting on the barstools could check out the action without turning in their seats.

Between the Downbeat and Club Alabam was a café, run under various names over the years, which hosted more than its fair share of musical luminaries. Its inelegant piano would occasionally attract a prominent patron to the keys, with even Art Tatum known to engage in impromptu music-making on the premises. Across the street from the café stood the Last Word, another important club of the late 1940s—Hampton Hawes on the night of his high school graduation came there to perform with Big Jay McNeely. Less than a block south stood the Memo (pronounced Mee-mow by the cognoscenti), another jazz club of note. A little farther down at Vernon and Central one found Ivie Anderson's Chicken Shack, run by the celebrated ex-Ellington singer—an eatery that occasionally featured live jazz—as well as Lovejoy's, a black-owned nightclub favored by prominent musicians such as Art Tatum and Charlie Parker. Around the corner on Vernon was the Ritz, an after-hours club in a converted house some ways off the street, as well as John Dolphin's celebrated music emporium. Along that stretch of Central, black music flourished at every corner.

Nor was it only black notables who found their way to Central Avenue: Mae West, Lana Turner, Ava Gardner ("I saw all those bitches down there," attests one avenue regular), John Barrymore, Orson Welles, John Steinbeck, William Randolph Hearst—literally anybody who *was* anybody might show up at any hour. The war had made Los Angeles a round-the-clock town. Defense industry plants were operating twenty-four hours a day, and "swing shift" dances sprang up for the late-night workers, with bands playing from 2 a.m. until dawn.

On Central Avenue even retail stores kept odd hours. Dolphin's of Hollywood, the neighborhood record store—which, despite its name, was located miles away from Hollywood—*never* closed. Proprietor Big John Dolphin—a colorful local character—was true to his name. He smoked large cigars, wore oversized hats, talked a blue streak, and invariably carried a wad of big bills (which he never missed an opportunity of displaying). Dolphin was so committed to round-the-clock retailing that he eventually threw away the key to the building—and invited the local media to watch the event. Of course Dolphin, like many Central Avenue proprietors, always sought to stand out from the crowd. Around this time he had prominent local disk jockeys broadcasting from the front window of the store, while in the back room he ran his own record label. Dolphin's biggest publicity coup proved to be his last. One day a disgruntled musician confronted Dolphin in his office and demanded money he had coming to him. Dolphin, who hated to pay royalties, pulled out a switchblade. The

musician drew a .32 caliber gun. Two shots were fired, and John Dolphin was dead at the age of forty-six.

The kind of late-night marketing that John Dolphin pursued was, of course, mostly legal, but the flagrant sale of alcohol during the wee hours was another thing entirely. Some after-hours clubs served booze in coffee cups and kept the police at arm's length with regular payoffs. Others simply sold setups, letting the customer supply the hard stuff—not a difficult task, since one or more dealers would usually be in attendance near the door. Still, drinking after hours could be a costly proposition: Street price at these odd times ran twice the going day rate in the liquor stores, and often only expensive name brands were available. In a pinch, those looking for a taste after 2 a.m. could make their way to the market parking lot at 53rd, where a strolling vendor of firewater seemed to be ever-present.

The after-hours and breakfast clubs—Jack's Basket, Brother's, Backstage, the Ritz, Glenn's Backroom, the Casa Blanca—dotted the landscape, and they often featured the finest jazz in the funkier locales. Charlie Parker was not the only hot alto saxophonist to grace the Casa Blanca—proprietor Stanley Morgan occasionally brought along son Frank, later to become one of the top altoists in jazz, and patrons were impressed by the fourteen-year-old's precocious bebop chops. Brother, the proprietor of another after-hours gathering spot, might not have been able to match the plush interior of the Alabam, but his musical offerings were not to be overlooked either. "At Brother's once there was a two-day, nonstop jam session in which they kept on playing 'Stompin' at the Savoy,'" recalls pianist Nadi Qamar, then known as Spaulding Givens.² "I would play some, then somebody would take my place." On nights when he wasn't playing, Qamar would often get up at three in the morning, get dressed, and head over to Lovejoy's, where Art Tatum, Qamar's fourth cousin on his mother's side, would be just starting up at the piano. After hours was a way of life during these postwar years.

The history of Central Avenue is often told as a tale of black musicianship, but it is just as much an account of black entrepreneurship. "Central Avenue Assumes Gigantic Proportion as Business Section for Colored Men" boasted the front-page headline of the *California Eagle* of February 12, 1916—and with good reason: Two hotels, a dry goods store, a motion picture theater, the Booker T. Washington Building, a drugstore, and numerous other smaller black-owned businesses were either already running or in the process of being established on the street. The Angelus, the movie theater that had opened only weeks earlier on 9th and Central, advertised itself as "the only Show House owned by Colored Men in the entire West." A constant hubbub of construction signaled more black-owned businesses to come.

From the first, black music was part of this economic expansion. An easily overlooked notice from the last page of the same edition of the *Eagle* announced a dance at 19th and Central featuring the Black and Tan Orchestra. "The Black and Tan Band in Los Angeles was the only band around there playing ragtime for a long time," bassist Pops Foster recounts in his autobiography.³ "I think the Black and Tan made some records around LA before Ory did." If so, they've never been found, but if one ever comes to light, it would establish the B&T as the first black jazz band to record.* Any precedence in this regard would be, of course, somewhat academic. Although the West Coast took the lead in recording jazz, it looked to New Orleans for inspiration. In the 1920s there was no "West Coast jazz," if by that one means a distinctive regional style. The Black and Tan was no exception—Paul Howard, the most prominent member of the band, had heard Freddie Keppard as early as 1915 and was soon trying to capture the same New Orleans sounds with his pioneering quintet.

Conventional jazz history tells how jazz first traveled from New Orleans by riverboat up to Chicago. Yet just as early, jazz came by railroad from the Crescent City to California. Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Ory, and other jazz notables played in the area before 1920, along with a host of local musicians. The story of these West Coast pioneers of prewar jazz is beyond the scope of this book, but the contributions of Les Hite, Sonny Clay, Paul Howard, Reb Spikes, Curtis Mosby, and others are far from negligible. The modern jazz scene of the 1940s would flourish a number of blocks away around 42nd and Vernon, but the lower streets, around 12th and Central, were a musical hotbed by the start of the "Jazz Age" in the 1920s.

Curtis Mosby, the honorary mayor of Central Avenue, bridged the gap between these two generations of black music. As such, he played an important behind the scenes role on the street during the transition years of the 1940s. Despite his importance, Mosby remains something of a mystery man, around whom more than a small amount of controversy rages. A businessman who founded the Club Alabam (then known as the Apex) in the roaring twenties, Mosby appears at first glance to be a black Renaissance man of the day; in addition to his career as the most prominent club owner on the avenue he could boast of his skills as drummer, composer, bandleader, music store owner, and man about town.

* Albert McCarthy, in his *Big Band Jazz* (New York: Exeter Books, 1983) says that the first known reference in print to the Black and Tan is from March of 1920, but in fact the local black press from World War I years and after is full of references. The most interesting one, perhaps, comes from an October 12, 1919, ad for an appearance at the Dreamland Café—here for the first time the band calls itself the Black and Tan Jazz Orchestra. This is not the first reference to jazz in print (that is another West Coast first, dating from a San Francisco newspaper account of a few years before), but may well be the first time a local California group adopted that innuendo-laden name.

Or could he? Virtually all these talents have been challenged. Mosby, one is told, couldn't drum to save his life, completely lacked skills as a composer, called in Lionel Hampton to play drums on key gigs and recording sessions, etc. Although recordings can be found of Mosby's soundtrack to the film *Hallelujah*, Marshal Royal—one of the most knowledgeable of Los Angeles old-timers—insisted to me: "He couldn't write a note. He didn't write any soundtrack music."⁴ When I mentioned Mosby's music store, Royal replied: "Bullshit. The only music store on Central Avenue was Spikes Bros. Music at 12th and Central." But ads from newspapers of the day, as well as other accounts, clearly place Mosby's music store at 23rd and Central. Hampton, furthermore, has denied ever recording with Mosby's band. The criticisms just don't seem to stick. Such acerbic comments, however ungrounded in the facts, nonetheless reveal the low esteem in which Curtis Mosby was held by his fellow musicians.

The drummer-turned-businessman was equally unpopular with the legal authorities. Mosby declared bankruptcy in the late 1940s, but it was later discovered that he hid his part ownership of the Club Alabam, as well as other assets, from creditors and the bankruptcy court. A well-publicized trial ensued, with Mosby initially pleading guilty, but a few weeks later he suddenly changed his plea to not guilty and produced M. E. Brandenburg, who claimed to be sole owner of the Alabam. Judge and jury remained unconvinced: After ninety minutes the latter convicted the mayor of Central Avenue, and shortly the former, denying a request for probation, sent Mosby to prison. Without skipping a beat, Curtis's brother Esvan took over the job as honorary mayor—a position that included, among other duties, the job of leading parades for visiting black celebrities while perched on a horse. When Curtis was released after a short sentence, a homecoming party was held—where else?—at the Alabam. When not involved in equestrian or penitentiary pursuits, the Mosby brothers seemed to have ambiguous relations with most of the nightspots in the area. The Alabam, the Downbeat, the Last Word, the Oasis, and other venues found one or both Mosbys often running the show. Whether they owned, merely managed, or just hung around greeting patrons remained a matter of conjecture.

a certain change was coming

Modern jazz made its way to Central Avenue in strange and wondrous ways. Even before the local nightclubs became part of this mid-1940s musical revolution, many of the more savvy Los Angelenos were devoted to the new sounds from back east. Local stores rarely stocked

bebop records, and supporters of the music were forced into the subterranean economy to supply their habit. Dedicated fans often found these cherished recordings coming to them through the oddest intermediaries, and prices might reach three or four dollars a copy. A major dealer of the fugitive 78s, Emery Byrd (a.k.a. Moose the Mooche) was the underground economy on his stretch of Central Avenue. He dispensed Mexican green marijuana, heroin, and bebop records out of his shoeshine stand. Nor was such a combination at all strange. Both hard drugs and bop may have come to Central Avenue through the same unusual distribution channel, moving eastward across the country via accommodating Pullman porters willing to pick up some spare change through such sideline occupations. Another purveyor of the new music was an itinerant salesman known simply as Bebop. Bebop would set up his wares on a portable fiberboard stand at various places in the black community, dealing Bird and Diz to the hippest of the passers-by. It almost seemed that music so strange and different required an equally odd means of finding its buyers, and these quirky dealers of the new sounds from Manhattan only added to its allure.

But these records were just a taste of what was to come. Byrd and Bebop were merely the John the Baptists of bop, heralding the forthcoming arrival of Bird and Dizzy, the acknowledged masters of modern jazz, from their East Coast home base. The opening night performance of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie at Billy Berg's in December 1945 is often cited as the debut of live bop on the coast, but two important predecessors paved the way for this much-noted engagement. Coleman Hawkins's trip to Southern California earlier in 1945 had found him with a coterie of modernists in tow, including trumpeter Howard McGhee, bassist Oscar Pettiford, pianist Sir Charles Thompson, and drummer Denzil Best. Categorizing the style of this band is a tricky proposition. When I asked Sir Charles Thompson—the only surviving member of the group—about the band's sound, he chose to engage in a jesuitical debate over the meaning of the terms "bebop," "modern jazz," and "jazz," ultimately refusing to label any of his work with such blasphemies. But if this wasn't a bop band it was at least, to borrow the popular phrase (*pace* Thompson), close enough for jazz.

The question of Hawkins's music is confounded by the watered-down recordings the group made for Capitol while out west. Dave Dexter, who supervised the recordings, insisted that Hawkins play in a more accessible style than was the band's wont and initially even tried to replace McGhee—the group's strongest bop soloist—with Red Nichols, a traditional trumpeter whose playing was completely out of touch with the band's cutting-edge approach. "Hawk had a tune that Red Nichols couldn't play in no kind of way," McGhee recalled not long before his death.⁵

I was just waiting to see what was going to happen, and when Red started to play, Pettiford cracked up laughing. And that made Dave Dexter mad. . . . But he had no business putting Red in there in the first place, 'cause Red didn't know what our band was like. He didn't know what kind of music we were playing. It was just about the time of the game that a certain change was coming about in the music. Because when we'd gone into the studio, we didn't go into there playing none of that old-time shit.

Dave Dexter provided a much different account of the session:

McGhee, I believe, was not drunk [but] was on some kind of narcotics. He was belligerent and uncooperative from the start of the session. He fluffed every bar, and Bean [Hawkins] was embarrassed. In sheer desperation I phoned Red Nichols, a dear friend of mine, who lived not far away and he drove down to the studio with his cornet. But while McGhee sat on a chair giggling, poor Red couldn't cut that near boppish music, and after a couple of hopeless takes he went home.⁶

McGhee eventually took Nichols's place and, despite Dexter's assertions, played soberly enough. But Hawkins played it safe on these California sides. "I said to Hawk, 'Man, you don't need Dave Dexter, you're Coleman Hawkins.'" McGhee continued. "And he said, 'Maggie, you don't understand. This is business.'" As it turned out the session was a strange mishmash: McGhee plays in a pure bop style, while Hawkins pursues his own hybrid style, one that revealed a rich harmonic sense, which even the most ardent modernist couldn't fault, but retained a rhythmic feel looking back to the 1930s. On a song like "April in Paris" one can feel the whole rhythm section adapt to each soloist. Behind Hawkins they are almost pushing a two-beat feeling, but when McGhee enters for the trumpet solo the time becomes much more fluid and modern-sounding. Hawkins was never a full-fledged bopper, but his live appearances in Southern California no doubt found him pursuing a more contemporary line than these recordings suggest—indeed, Hawkins's 78s made in New York before his California trip are more in a modern vein than any of the West Coast sides.

After Hawkins left town, McGhee stayed on with a group of bop-oriented locals, which included drummer Roy Porter, guitarist Stanley Morgan, saxophonists Teddy Edwards and J. D. King, bassist Bob Kester-son, and a rotating group of pianists, including Vernon Biddle, Dodo Mar-rosa, and Jimmy Bunn. There can be no confusion about the brand of music this group played: It was modern jazz of the Minton's variety. Fast tempos, intricate head charts, a pressure-cooker rhythm section—no ingredient was missing. "I've never worked with anyone who played faster

tempos than Howard McGhee," recalls Roy Porter, now in retirement in Los Angeles.⁷ And Porter should know, for he went on to gig and record with Charlie Parker, Sonny Criss, Wardell Gray, Hampton Hawes, and Eric Dolphy, none of them a slouch at speed. McGhee's group was playing this authentic brand of bebop six nights a week at the Streets of Paris when Parker and Gillespie came out for their famous Billy Berg's stint.

McGhee let his sidemen know in no uncertain terms the kind of music he wanted to hear. Off the bandstand he was a warm and convivial person, but at the gig McGhee was a demanding, often authoritarian leader. "Teddy was playing alto, and Howard made him switch to tenor," recalls the band's first drummer, Monk McFay, now in his early eighties and also retired in Los Angeles.⁸ "And Howard got him a tenor. Howard wanted a sound with more bottom to it from the horns. And he wanted my drumming to be lighter. I had just been playing with a big band, but Howard wanted to hear less of the bass drum." About the band's place in the history of modern jazz on the coast, McFay is emphatic: "It was *the* first, not one of the first." Roy Porter soon replaced Monk and further enhanced the group's bop credentials, for while Monk was more in a Jo Jones/Sid Catlett mould with bop leanings, Porter was an uncompromising, bomb-dropping modernist. Tenorist Edwards was one of the first modern stylists on the instrument, boasting a conception that eschewed both Prez' and Hawk in deference to Bird—commonplace a few years later but still a novel conception for tenor players circa 1945. Bassist Bob Kesterson knew how to walk a tightrope both at and on the way to gigs. He would arrive, bass and all, on a tiny Italian motor scooter. But a brief stint by the young bassist Charles Mingus with the band bespoke no drop-off in quality. The piano spot was filled by a number of talented players, but when Dodo Marmarosa was in attendance, McGhee could boast the services of one of the finest modern jazz pianists on either coast, one whose fluid right-hand lines and preternaturally clean touch stand out on the band's recordings. All in all, the McGhee band had, for at least those few months before Parker and Gillespie's arrival on the coast, a monopoly on the finest modern jazz talent in Southern California.

Michael Marmarosa, nicknamed "Dodo" in honor of his prominent beak-like nose, had come to California from his native Pittsburgh as a member of the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. After an engagement at the Casino Gardens, Marmarosa decided to leave the security of the big-band world behind and join the ranks of the LA beboppers. A skilled pianist with outstanding technique honed by years of classical studies, Marmarosa stood out as one of the most prepossessing pianists of the bop era. He seemed destined to join the ranks of Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk as one of the leaders of the new generation of jazz pianists. But his early retirement from the jazz world—he left Los Angeles to return to Pitts-

burgh before the close of the decade—prevented him from building on the reputation made during these brief glory days. Marmarosa only rarely ventured into the recording studio in later years, and rumors depicted him as a relentless perfectionist who preferred not to record rather than do it below his own high standards. Other accounts mentioned Marmarosa's dissatisfaction with his small hands, the meager span of which prevented him from realizing his Tatumesque aspiration.

Most jazz fans assume that Marmarosa passed away long ago, but in fact he is living in quiet retirement in Glenview, Pennsylvania, where he is described by those few people who have dealings with him as an extreme recluse who jealously guards his privacy. In my conversation with him he denied the stories that his retirement was precipitated by his reported eccentricities. As Marmarosa tells it, the record companies rarely sought his services in later years: "I just didn't have the chance to do a lot of records."⁹ His desire to return to his native Pittsburgh had effectively shut him out of the jazz mainstream well before he had reached his thirtieth birthday. His few recordings from the late 1940s, most notably the informally recorded "Tone Paintings" with their adventurous avant-garde constructions, stand out as major statements by an artist undeservedly neglected.

McGhee's recordings from this California stint are among the finest of his career. These were the kind of bop records in which the progressive quality of the music is brandished proudly. McGhee plays with something approaching total abandon—a rough-around-the-edges approach that made the modern music of 1945 seem light-years distant from the swing idiom of the prewar years. McGhee would later salvage the July 29, 1946, "Lover Man" session—at which Camarillo-bound Charlie Parker bailed out midway—with two quartet numbers that burn brightly. Record producer Ross Russell was suitably impressed—McGhee "had never played better. The trumpet crackled," he later wrote.¹⁰ A few months later, Russell recalled these heated performances when he began stockpiling masters in face of the looming recording ban. With Bird in Camarillo, the California state-run mental institution, Russell resolved to bring McGhee in on a separate leader date. The addition of Teddy Edwards for this October 18, 1946, date brought another bop voice to the musical fray, with Edwards shining on "Up in Dodo's Room" and "Dilated Pupils." Edwards recalled: "I ran into Fats Navarro some time later, and he said to me, 'Do you realize you changed the course of history?' He told me that "Up in Dodo's Room" was the first tenor solo that didn't draw back on either Lester Young or Coleman Hawkins."¹¹ When I asked Edwards point blank whether Dexter Gordon had developed his celebrated style by stealing from him—a claim I had heard from another musician of the day—Edwards somewhat hesitantly replied: "Well, Dexter dipped into my bag just to check it out.

Course he didn't need to learn from me, he had a thing of his own going. But if you listen to the 'Webb City' he did with Fats you'll hear him doing my bag."

These recordings are given little attention these days, but Edwards's innovative playing, combined with McGhee's virtuosity and the rhythm section's savvy, makes them some of the finest performances of the early days of bop. In the early 1950s, McGhee got caught in the downward spiral of drug addiction, eventually nursing a \$500-a-week habit that sent him to prison at Riker's Island. Although he was eventually rehabilitated, McGhee's trumpet work in later years rarely matched the unbridled passion of these early recordings. "I used to go all out to excite people," he said in the 1960s, "but I believe that pretty music is just as important. My future plans are to play prettier than ever. Anyhow, I think that music without beauty ain't saying too much."¹² This was a radical and unexpected change of heart from the virtuoso stylist who, years earlier, had forged a feverish trumpet style largely purged of any overt lyricism. The later renunciation was perhaps McGhee's way of following the path of least resistance: As a soloist the elder McGhee simply could not match the power and scope of his earlier self. The newfound lyricism was perhaps his way of making a virtue of necessity. The reunion album of McGhee and Edwards, made a decade after this first collaboration, never matches the same musicians' first recordings together.

These early Dial sides, even with their high energy level, had established the trumpeter—much to his chagrin—as a major West Coast player. For the Tulsa-born (February 6, 1918), Detroit-raised, New York-inspired player, this was sometimes too much to bear. "They just took it for granted that I was a California boy," he complained years later.¹³ "Everywhere I went, 'Hey, man! There's the California cat! Hey, man! How's California?' And I only lived there in '45-'46. I came back to New York in '47. And everybody still, *today*, they still ask me, 'When did you get back from the coast?' "

The "West Coast" label would soon become a pet peeve among a whole generation of players, even those who sold records because of the tag. "They coin a phrase and that becomes your identity," Art Pepper complained to me a month before his death—and Art, unlike McGhee, was not only California-born and -bred, but almost never performed as a leader outside of the Golden State until late in his career.¹⁴ Wherever their birthplace, modern jazz musicians in the postwar years grew wary of any regional label that cut them off from the New York-centered jazz scene. The stigma still holds today, perhaps more than ever before: In interviews for this book, any inquiry about "West Coast jazz" inevitably resulted in a perceptible rise in tension in the interviewee, followed by vehement denials of any connection with *that* music, almost to the point of pulling out

birth certificates to show out-of-state origins. The responses became so predictable that I eventually stopped asking. After decades of lambasting from the critics, the term inspires a Pavlovian reaction of aversion even among those who initially benefited from it, or who even defined it with their playing. McGhee, perhaps the first hard-core bop musician on the Coast, was ahead of the game in this regard. Long before such renunciations came into fashion, he wanted nothing to do with the West Coast.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bird in the Basket

a groovy atmosphere

If the journey westward of the Gillespie/Parker band was not a first, it was the most visible, the most celebrated, and the most controversial event in the development of modern jazz in California. If one is seeking a milestone, a disjunction, a rupture with the past, Billy Berg's one-story stucco building on Vine Street, December 1945, is the time and place. Billy Berg's would be the launching point for a musical invasion, a D-day landing of bebop on the Pacific seaboard. Proprietor Berg had learned about the New York beboppers through Harry "the Hipster" Gibson, who had come from 52nd Street to work at the Vine Street club. Gibson had recently risen to fame on the strength of his argot-laden recordings of off-beat original tunes such as "Who Put the Benzedrine in Mrs. Murphy's Ovaltine?" and "Get Your Juices at the Deuces." Having heard Bird and Dizzy (at the Deuces, among other nightspots), he hipped Berg to the new New York music.

Gibson recalled to me, in his staccato Bronx/Harlem accent, his change of coasts and its after effects:

My album took off. The next thing, the Hipster is famous. I had been making \$56 a week in New York—that's scale—and Billy Berg calls me and offers a grand a week. The biggest West Coast club. Wants *me* as the feature attraction, not Tatum, not Eddie Heywood. [Pause] I'm out there. Billy Berg asked me "Who has the hottest band in New York?" On 52nd Street all the cats were blowing good, you know, but I tell him Dizzy's band is *the* hottest. So Berg went and booked them.¹

Berg had already run a handful of jazz venues in California before opening his eponymous locale at 1356 North Vine Street, and he would open sev-

eral more before his death in 1962. By that time the Vine Street location would be occupied by a beer-and-pizza joint, and the other nightspots were equally a matter of history. The Capri Club on La Cienega, the Trouville on Beverly and Fairfax, and the Swing Club on Hollywood and Las Palmas had paved the way for the Vine Street locale, while in later years Berg would be behind the 5-4 Ballroom, Kid Ory's, and other ventures. Berg brought everyone from Parker and Gillespie to Billie Holiday, from Louis Armstrong to Lester Young, into his venues—a boon for Southland jazz fans.

Yet perhaps more striking, and certainly more pioneering at the time, was Berg's insistence on allowing integrated audiences. This was still a sticking point in the Southern California nightlife of the late 1940s. At the Cotton Club in Hollywood—across the street from Dial Records' former offices—proprietor Hal Stanley booted out an integrated group in the audience, reportedly exclaiming "I'm not running a Cricket Club. I'm not going to have these 'paddy hustlers' bringing these ofay chicks in my place."² The Cricket Club, a major jazz club of the day on Washington Boulevard with more tolerant notions about race, considered suing. Stanley would seem to have been an unlikely opponent of civil rights—he had, after all, formerly run the Downbeat on Central Avenue!—and he later recanted, but not soon enough to save the business. A few months later the Cotton Club was on the skids, and Stanley implored his wife, vocalist Kay Starr, to pawn her engagement ring to keep the club afloat. She refused, and soon the Cotton Club was history. The same day the nearby Hollywood Empire, one of the classiest jazz clubs in the city's history, also folded. It had survived only a few months, but had already booked Armstrong, Ellington, and Tatum and had even imported the diminutive emcee Pee Wee Marquette from Birdland—obviously not enough to please the local jazz fans.

Black jazz fans had learned to be wary of almost all Hollywood nightclubs in those years. The Cotton Club incident was no isolated event. Mixed couples or groups were routinely stopped in their cars once inside the city limits—so often that even those with wheels often chose to take the #4 Melrose bus between Central Avenue and Hollywood. The bus drivers were comparatively cool, and the cops didn't want to hassle the public transit system. Yet Hollywood was not the only redneck area in late 1940s Los Angeles. Around the same time, Nat "King" Cole ran into resistance from his white neighbors when he tried to move into Hancock Park. Howard McGhee was harassed by Los Angeles police after going with his wife, a white ex-model, to a movie theater. In Glendale, the situation was so bad that blacks needed a permit to be in town after 6 p.m. Musicians who performed in the city were provided with a police escort after the gig—whether they wanted it or not—from the club to the city limits. Even on

Central Avenue, blacks were not free from police problems: Billy Eckstine was hauled down to the station simply for having a new Cadillac with New York license plates. The Newton Street station regularly brought in mixed couples for a pat-down on the flimsiest of excuses. Los Angeles was not the Deep South, but neither was it a model of integration. The police in particular, with more than a few relocated Southerners in their ranks, were an especially intransigent group of segregationists.

In this setting, Billy Berg's was a much-welcomed oasis of racial tolerance. "It was a sophisticated, cultured audience," recalls Sir Charles Thompson of his work there with the Hawkins band.³ "It was also an integrated audience, which may have had something to do with it. Generally when you found sophisticated audiences, you found integrated audiences." Sonny Criss adds: "Billy Berg's was a unique club. . . . It was the first really cosmopolitan club with a great deal of publicity behind it where Negro and white people mixed without any pressure. It was a groovy atmosphere, an atmosphere that embraced people from all walks of life."⁴ For the Gillespie/Parker group the integration carried over to the bandstand. Pianist Al Haig and drummer Stan Levey worked alongside bassist Ray Brown, vibraphonist Milt Jackson, and the two horn players. Although Gillespie was contracted to bring a quintet, he added Jackson as a sixth man to prepare for Bird's likely truanacies. Once on the coast he also enlisted tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson for the same reason. The rationale was sound, as events proved: Bird was apt to miss any given performance.

Billy Berg was an unlikely protagonist for modern music and civil rights. His attention was devoted, much of the time, not to the music or club management but to the nonstop gambling sessions he and his friends would pursue in the back room. "He was a little guy like me," Gibson remembers. "All his friends were Jewish comics—old vaudeville guys. He took a liking to me, and I fit right in. We'd gamble all night long." The gambling mentality—strangely common to a number of jazz club proprietors—carried over to his booking policies. With Dizzy and Bird (as with Gibson), he was willing to take a chance on new names with no West Coast track record.

Booking Charlie Parker, however, may have been more of a gamble than even Berg realized. As it was, Parker almost didn't make it to Los Angeles. At a train stop somewhere in the Arizona or New Mexico desert, Bird was roused from the narcotics-induced sleep that had kept him groggy since Chicago. Picking up his baggage, Bird wandered from the train and began making his way solo across the desert landscape. For a moment the other band members hesitated, afraid to chase after Parker lest they get left behind, but perhaps equally afraid of losing their Esquire poll-winning

saxophonist in the sandy expanse. Finally drummer Stan Levey took off in pursuit of the peripatetic altoist and convinced him to return to the train. Bird was going through withdrawal. After he returned to the compartment, his fellow bandmembers had to strap him into the seat for the remaining twenty-hour trip to Union Station.

Dean Benedetti, an amateur sax player and jazz enthusiast, greeted the band on arrival and quickly informed Bird about the heroin supply in Los Angeles—availability was limited, and prices were appreciably higher than in New York. Parker was able to cop some morphine from an obliging physician that day, thanks to a phony tale about kidney stones supplemented by a twenty-dollar tip. For the remainder of his stay Bird learned to make do with a host of substitutes for horse: morphine, pills, cheap wine—whatever he could muster. When only a small amount of heroin was available, Parker might combine it with a dose of morphine for what he termed an "H&M." Especially after his connection Emery Byrd—whom the other Bird found through an introduction from Benedetti—was busted, the H proved increasingly difficult to find. For perhaps the first time in his decade-long history of addiction, Parker now felt the strain constantly.

Bird buffs like to compare his opening night performance at the Vine Street club with the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, a riotous event that found concert patrons literally resorting to fisticuffs. No violence erupted at the Gillespie/Parker debut—although a few days later Gillespie and Slim Gaillard, the other headliner during the engagement, exchanged some backstage blows—but in almost every other respect the performance was the stuff of legend. Parker was more than fashionably late for the band's start, with the first two sets elapsing before he made his grand entrance from backstage, coasting over the changes to "Cherokee"—an appropriate clarion call for his debut out west. Parker's delay this opening night had nothing to do with being strung out—the morphine had brought him around—instead he procrastinated while eating two of Billy Berg's specialty Mexican dinners in the back room. This was the kind of cavalier behavior that Dizzy—who, despite his nickname, was a fiend for professionalism and punctuality—would never indulge in. But for Parker it was a comparatively minor infraction. When Bird did appear, walking through the audience in mid-musical phrase, he played with all the fire and creative energy that had characterized his finest work on record.

Only a few days before leaving New York, Parker had recorded the path-breaking "KoKo" session for Savoy—the finest modern jazz sides to date—and his playing, at least in these early California performances, found him in equally top form. More than a few musicians in the audience—including Sonny Criss and Hampton Hawes—felt themselves irrevocably marked by the music they heard that night. Radio broadcasts of the Berg

sessions reached countless others over the next several weeks, not only in the Los Angeles area but, through Armed Forces broadcasts that carried the music, far beyond Southern California.

The conventional story of this engagement stressed the unhipness of the Los Angeles audiences. "They didn't understand our music" was Parker's alleged characterization of the West Coast upon his return to New York. Yet the standard account is worth scrutinizing more closely. Sonny Criss, who attended many of the Billy Berg performances, tells a different story: "I don't recall it that way because the club was packed every night. Contrary to the reports Bird and Dizzy did not play to audiences of ten or twelve people."⁵ Harry "the Hipster" Gibson, who, along with Slim Gaillard, shared the stage with Dizzy's band during the engagement, tells a similar story: "Slim Gaillard was packing them in. I was drawing them in. And don't forget, all the musicians were coming around to check out Bird and Diz. We were packing the joint. The joint *was* packed." Roy Porter, who was playing in an equally high-powered bop band with Howard McGhee at the nearby Streets of Paris, adds:

You can't go by the movie [*Bird*], which had the West Coast scene all wrong. The clubs were packed where we played. I'm not saying that the people understood the music, because it *was* new, but they showed up and were there to listen. While Bird and Dizzy were at Billy Berg's we were playing six nights a week to packed audiences at Streets of Paris. I couldn't go down to check them out because we were working ourselves, but if we were getting big crowds I can imagine that the same was true for them.

The Billy Berg's gig of 1945-46 may not have been a complete success—it no doubt failed to match the kind of record-breaking crowds Dizzy drew when he returned to Los Angeles in 1948—but neither was it the fiasco some have claimed. Porter and Gibson are quick to add that the club patrons, especially the nonmusicians present, may not have appreciated all the intricacies of the new music—Gibson argues, no doubt correctly, that the 52nd Street audience was more knowledgeable (there, he recalls, "even the *customers* knew")—but they came nonetheless.

If the Vine Street engagement was ill-fated, it was due less to poor attendance than to other factors. Media neglect or outright hostility—a chronic problem with West coast jazz then and later—was real, as was the disdain of many older musicians, especially among the Dixieland players who had settled in Southern California. Above all, if the trip west resulted in disastrous consequences, they took place not inside the four walls of Billy Berg's establishment but in the Civic Hotel, the LA County jail, Camarillo and the other less savory locales that Charlie Parker frequented during his extended stay in California. Bird's ensuing nervous breakdown,

more than anything else, casts the ominous shadow on the Gillespie band's West Coast engagement. Yet the Los Angeles audience for bop, which existed even before Gillespie and Parker left for Union Station, takes the brunt of the blame meted out by chroniclers of the music. "I once read a write-up," Howard McGhee recalled in reference to his own bop work out west, "that said that people walked out after every group. That's bullshit! They just stayed there and listened, to see what was going on."⁶

The real tragedy of Parker's stay on the West Coast began after the engagement at Billy Berg's, and as with many tragedies, it began almost as farce. The day after the close of the Vine Street gig, Ross Russell, a former merchant marine who was now proprietor of Tempo Music Shop on Hollywood Boulevard, attempted to record Parker with Gillespie before the band returned to New York. Everything seemed to go wrong with this date: Lester Young, then in town, was scheduled to be part of the session—if he had shown, the combination of Bird, Dizzy, and Prez would have been historic—but he never appeared. The rehearsal at the Glendale studio turned into a fiasco when a crowd of hipsters and hangers-on disrupted the proceedings and eventually caused a scene at the adjoining Forest Lawn Cemetery, where their consumption of cannabis and wild behavior were much out of place. For the recording session, scheduled for the following day, Bird joined Young as a no-show. The only usable take with Parker and Gillespie—a fairly daring polytonal outing on "Diggin' for Diz"—comes from the aborted rehearsal. Nor did Parker appear in time to board the flight back to New York. Instead he apparently cashed in the return ticket Gillespie had given him. His bandmates made a last-ditch effort to find him before leaving Bird behind. Shortly afterwards, Parker started working as a sideman in Howard McGhee's band at the Club Finale in the Little Tokyo district.

After the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II, this part of town had become another center of black-owned businesses. Bird was living down the street from the Finale at the Civic Hotel on 1st and San Pedro where, within a few doors, there existed a host of jazz venues. They included Shepp's Playhouse, with two separate floors of music perched above the ground-level businesses, the Cobra Room, and the Rendezvous. The Finale, at 230½ 1st Street, had been opened by jazz and tap dancer Foster Johnson in late 1945 or early 1946 and soon became a favorite of modern jazz fans, with a house band that might include, on a given night, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Howard McGhee, Sonny Criss, Teddy Edwards, Art Farmer, Gene Montgomery, or Serge Chaloff in the front line. The rhythm section might feature Joe Albany, Dodo Marmarosa, Russ Freeman, or Hampton Hawes on piano, Bob Kesterson, Addison Farmer, or Red Callender on bass, Roy Porter or Chuck Thompson on drums. No place on Central could match these line-ups.

The vice squad closed the Finale down after a few months, and Johnson bailed out of the business. But McGhee and his wife decided to run the club themselves. On Saturday night, March 16, the Finale reopened with Parker and Erroll Garner performing and a live radio broadcast going out over station KXLA. Given the sporadic appearances of their star performer, as well as the McGhees' decision not to sell alcohol, the venture proved short-lived, but not before establishing a musical environment unmatched in the country. In the spring of 1947, the Club Finale boasted the most exciting modern jazz from coast to coast. If California could ever brag of its own Minton's or Monroe's, the Club Finale was it.

Although Ross Russell's planned all-star record date had been a disaster, his next session with Parker hit pay dirt. Russell jumped at the recording opportunity provided by Parker's extended stay on the coast, and another session was scheduled for March 28 at Radio Recorders on Santa Monica Boulevard. Miles Davis, in town after coming west with the Benny Carter band, joined Parker in the front line, as did tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson. The remaining sidemen included perhaps the finest bop-oriented rhythm section Southern California could muster in those days, with pianist Dodo Marmarosa, drummer Roy Porter, bassist Vic McMillan, and guitarist Arvin Garrison providing a strong foundation for the horns. These are not well-known names, even in the jazz community—the scant discographies of Porter, Marmarosa, and Garrison are almost scandalous, while McMillan, a strong bassist in the modern mould, soon dropped into almost total oblivion—but they were solid journeyman players with a deep grasp of the new rhythmic vocabulary of modern jazz.

Even so, Parker threw them a curveball with his playing on the date. Bird's stunning four-bar break on "A Night in Tunisia" broached a devastating kind of syncopation that still sounds astonishing some forty years after it was recorded. The novice listener may be impressed by the speed of Parker's execution on this passage, but the dexterity is nowhere as extraordinary as the contorted placing of accents within the phrases. Has any jazz player since—Coltrane, Dolphy, Ornette included—ever matched this mastery of rhythmic phrasing? Little wonder that Miles Davis had to signal the beat to the rest of the group during this part of the performance. The group had rehearsed at the Finale the night before, but this kind of music was not to be assimilated in a single evening. Yet Bird must have had a Midas touch that day, as his daunting performance seemed to inspire outstanding work from the rest of the band. All the performances recorded during the seven-hour session—"Ornithology," "Yardbird Suite," "Moose the Mooche," "A Night in Tunisia"—rank among the landmarks of jazz music. On a level with Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Hot Sevens and Ellington's work from the early 1940s, the Parker Dial sessions stand out as monumental achievements.

From then on it was a downhill ride for Parker on the coast. On May 3, Parker signed over half of his Dial royalties in perpetuity to his connection Byrd—whose nickname had inspired the title of Parker's "Moose the Mooche"—no doubt in exchange for a fix. Byrd, a onetime honors student at Jefferson High, was shrewd enough to get a notarized document from Parker, thus establishing a legal transaction that would hold up in court. Within weeks, however, Byrd faced a court ruling of a less felicitous nature. "I wish to announce, due to misfortune," he wrote to Dial Records on June 30, "my change of address from 1135 East 45th Street, Los Angeles, to Box A-3892, San Quentin, California."⁷ He requested that any royalties from the Dial sessions be forwarded to this new—and, he hoped, temporary—residence.

Although he was still on the outside, at least for the moment, Parker, cut off from his major supplier, was strung out and short of cash. Around this time he disappeared for a number of days and was finally discovered by McGhee living in an unheated garage on McKinley Avenue. Bird was imbibing port wine by the gallon and hadn't eaten in days. He slept on a metal cot, using his New York overcoat for bedding. To any observer, he would have seemed just another skid row derelict, not the leading musician of his generation. McGhee brought Parker back to his own house on West 41st.

"[Bird] seemed drained and I really thought it was over," Miles Davis recalls. "I mean I thought he was going to die."⁸ Unable to score heroin, Parker started downing a quart of whiskey a day—in addition to port, bennies, whatever he could hustle. Parker developed, around this time, a nervous mannerism in which, in mid-solo, his arms would shoot up into the air. When he managed to show for a gig, Parker's playing, for the first time in his career, was often lackluster and mechanical. "Bird was strung out. His nerves were going haywire. He couldn't sit still," McGhee remembers.⁹ So I told Ross Russell, 'Man, Bird seems like he's cracking up.' He said, 'Man, we better get him in the studio.' Right away, he's thinking, 'Let's make money.' "¹⁰ Parker readily agreed to record—he needed the

* McGhee, Davis, Parker, and others have lambasted Russell as an opportunist, a money-grubbing record company executive intent on exploiting the musicians under his contract. But in point of fact Dial was something of a financial nightmare at the time, and Russell—whatever his other faults might be—was risking money on modern jazz record sessions at a time when virtually no one else on the coast was willing to take a chance on the music. After Dial moved back east, major LA players like Teddy Edwards and Dexter Gordon found no comparable supporter among West Coast record producers—indeed, there never was a replacement for Dial on the coast. The later dominance of the cool West Coast sound partly reflected this absence of aggressive independent record companies pushing the more bop-oriented sound. It is worth adding that Russell's writings about the Los Angeles jazz scene of the postwar years are among the most perceptive and vivid documents we have of the era. To those with an abiding interest in the music, Russell stands out as something of a godsend to West Coast jazz in the late 1940s.

cash—and Russell managed to convince his partner, Marvin Freeman, the financial support on which Dial was built, to ante up the money for the date. A session was scheduled for July 29.

That day encompassed the most disastrous twenty-four hours of Bird's California career. Parker somehow made it to C. P. MacGregor's studio on Western for the start of the date, but once present he seemed almost comatose. Dr. Richard Freeman, Marvin's brother and a psychiatrist, was in attendance at the session and assessed Parker as suffering from malnutrition and alcoholism. After a ragged take of "Max Is Making Wax," Dr. Freeman supplied Parker with six tablets of phenobarbitol—Bird asked for ten—and the session continued. During the following take of "Lover Man," Parker was supported by producer Russell, who grasped the altoist from behind, yet Bird still staggered off mike at times. He slurred his phrases, lingered over uncomfortably long rests, and in general played with a wrenching, agonized sound. Some have called this the most poetic record Parker ever made. Bird, for his part, was later furious when the 78 was released. To some degree, both sides of the argument are right. The performance is pathetic, but the pathos is gripping: It is a record that few can enjoy, but once put on the turntable it is mesmerizing. The ensuing two songs—"The Gypsy" and "Bebop"—were, in contrast, merely unpleasant musical disasters. On "Bebop," drummer Roy Porter shouts out encouragement to Parker in mid-solo, trying to rouse the saxophonist from his stupor. One gets no enjoyment from listening to these pieces and hears them only as documents of a personality on the point of collapse.

The collapse came that night. From his room at the Civic Hotel, Parker came down to the lobby twice wearing only his socks. After being escorted back to his room the second time, Parker set it on fire, probably by nodding off while smoking. When the authorities arrived, the still unclothed altoist grew irate. The police responded with a blackjack, hand cuffed Parker, wrapped him in a blanket, and brought him to the station. For ten days no one in the jazz community knew his whereabouts—rumors circulated, including one that Bird was dead. When Russell and McGhee finally tracked him down, Parker was in the psychopathic ward of the county jail in East LA. Confined in a small, dingy cell, wearing a matching gray straitjacket, Parker greeted his visitors with an outburst: "For God's sake, man, get me out of this joint!"

relaxin' at camarillo

Parker had hoped that Russell and McGhee could free him on the spot. It proved much more difficult to spring the caged Bird, and consid-

erable legal wrangling was required to limit Parker's incarceration to six months in a medical facility. Charged with suspected arson, indecent exposure, and resisting arrest, Parker was on line to go to a maximum security institution for the criminally insane. With the intercession of Judge Stanley Mosk—today a prominent member of California's supreme court—Parker was instead placed, for a minimum of six months, in the comparatively comfortable environment of the Camarillo State Hospital, located a two-hours drive north of Los Angeles in the sparsely populated community of the same name.

Parker positively flourished under the regimen at Camarillo. His wife, Doris Sydnor, came out from New York, found a job as a waitress, and served as lady-in-waiting for her spouse. Parker gained weight and soon looked healthier than he had in years. He worked in the institution's adjoining vegetable garden, played C-melody saxophone in the hospital band, and welcomed the visitors who made the trek from down south. Rumors spread. Parker was now a devotee, word had it, of clean living. He even had told Dean Benedetti, or so it was said, that he was considering giving up music to become a bricklayer. These stories, as they circulated through the jazz grapevine, raised almost as many eyebrows as had tales of Parker's excesses in days past.

As the months went by, Parker grew increasingly anxious to get out of Camarillo. He now told his friends that he would escape "over the wall" if a legal way out didn't quickly materialize. A group of especially ardent fans was said to be plotting to free the Bird. Since Parker was a New York resident, the conditions for his release proved convoluted, but a provision in the state code allowed for the release of an out-of-state inmate into the custody of an approved California resident upon the recommendation of a Sacramento board. Newcomer Doris Sydnor could not qualify, so Ross Russell accepted responsibility for Parker—who later complained that Russell refused to get him out until Parker had agreed to extend the Dial contract—and in late January 1947 the rehabilitated altoist was set loose.

Parker would never be so healthy again. In addition to the ferocious brilliance of his playing—which was now at a peak—Bird's appetite for more normal types of consumption resumed. He ate voraciously and even won a pizza-eating contest in Los Angeles. Around the same time he paraded around the beach with Doris, where he went bathing in a new suit from Zeidler and Zeidler. But soon Parker was again drinking heavily and missing the well-paying engagements that Howard McGhee lined up. Another gig in Chicago fell through when word began spreading about Parker's new dissipation.

Parker was anxious to return to New York, but he agreed to do a final session for Dial Records. As it turned out, Parker completed two more sessions for Russell before returning east. Only two instrumentals resulted

from a February 19 date due to Bird's insistence on using vocalist Earl Coleman, against Russell's wishes, for the other numbers. Coleman, a friend of Parker's since Kansas City, had visited Bird at Camarillo. At the time Parker had promised to help the singer out, and though Parker's reputation for keeping promises was shaky at best, in this instance he stuck by his word. He rehearsed with Coleman at Jack's Basket, a local after-hours spot where music ran from midnight until dawn, and he convinced Russell to include the vocalist on the session. Coleman's presence, along with a more conservative rhythm section of Erroll Garner, Red Callender, and Doc West, made this Parker's least adventurous record date in years. Perhaps Parker was interested in shedding the more avant-garde trappings of his music—much as he did a few years later in his recordings with string ensemble—in search of the mass audience he never found.

A week later, Parker returned to the studio for a much different session. This was a more bop-based band: Parker and Red Callender were the only carry-overs from the previous date, while the rest of the group included veteran Parker sidemen Marmarosa and McGhee as well as newcomers Barney Kessel and Wardell Gray. Parker had agreed to write four new originals for the date, but by the time of the rehearsal two days before the session, only one had been penned. This sinuous blues, "Relaxin' at Camarillo," is further testimony to the subtlety of Parker's rhythmic phrasing. The melody was only twelve bars, but the other musicians struggled, despite their all-star credentials, to master the line. By the time of the session, however, the players had the head down, and though Parker arrived over an hour late, the date proceeded without a hitch. The performance of "Relaxin'" ranks as one of the most memorable from Bird's California stay. The other three pieces recorded that day are almost at the same high level.

Russell has stated that Parker left Los Angeles to return to New York the day after this session, but a letter to Chan Richardson from a month later suggests that Parker stayed in California until the end of March.* In any event, the altoist had determined long in advance to leave Southern California, and a benefit from the previous December had raised enough money for plane fare. Parker was already in bad shape—ten days earlier he had, in Russell's description to Chan, "folded completely and had to go to bed"—and for his return to the east was only "half sober." Accompa-

* This, and below, from letter from Ross Russell to Chan Richardson, a photo of which can be found in Chan Parker and François Paudras, *To Bird with Love* (France: Editions Wizlov, 1981), 73. This letter from Hollywood, dated March 25, 1947, announces "Bird is leaving here today." Russell, in his several accounts of the period, has claimed that Parker left for New York the day following (or a few days following) the "Relaxin'" session, February 27 or shortly after. The postmark on the envelope, also legible in the photo, is March 26, 1947, 5:30 p.m. The March date is almost certainly correct.

nied by Doris Sydnor, his long-suffering and eventually abandoned companion, Parker boarded a plane to Chicago, with an ultimate destination of New York. The supposed eight-week stint on the dream coast had stretched into a fifteen-month-long nightmare.

After Bird flew the coop, the modern jazz scene in and around the avenue experienced a temporary lull, but by summer word was spreading of a series of heated sessions taking place at Jack's Basket on 32nd and South Central. Jack Jackson's establishment, also known as the Bird in the Basket—named not in honor of the departed altoist, as some have assumed, but after the house specialty of chicken and shoestring potatoes served in a rattan basket—kept no musicians on the payroll. But it didn't need to. The location was such an ideal spot for impromptu jams that Jack's became the center of the Central Avenue modern jazz scene during these months. The working-class patrons maintained a healthy interest in the modern music being played on the stand, and the layout of the room gave the proceedings a concert hall aura. In fact, the restaurant must have served at one time as a cabaret or meeting hall, because a large stage, on which sat an old but serviceable upright piano, dominated one end of the room.

Visitors today can still make out the faded lettering "Bird in a Basket" above the storefront entrance of the now apparently deserted building. "Chicken ain't nuten but a bird" announces a barely legible and enigmatic script above the far right-hand doorway. The still surviving signs are something of a surprise—apparently little has happened in this building since Jack moved out. But in this instance, looks are deceiving. Finding one of the doors ajar, I made my way into what seemed, at least from the exterior, to be just one more casualty of the shell-shocked Central Avenue economy. Inside I found, to my surprise, a burgeoning business in operation: a sweatshop with rows of Mexican seamstresses laboring over their work. The boarded-up and rundown exterior of the building was, of course, the perfect cover—few immigration officials, or anyone else for that matter, would think to look inside this decrepit building. A remnant of West Coast jazz history, the apparently empty Basket serves today, it seems, as a front for a different kind of underground commerce.

Some forty-two years before my visit, Bird had helped put the Basket on the map, frequently jamming there as well as holding rehearsals at Jack's for his Dial session with Earl Coleman. Right after his release from Camarillo, an all-star session in Parker's honor had taken place at the Basket with virtually every bop saxophonist in town—Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Sonny Criss, Teddy Edwards, Frank Morgan, and others—lining

up to pay tribute. Parker held off contributing to the music until near the end, then outclassed the assorted minions with superb playing that was light years beyond his pre-Camarillo playing and the "Lover Man" fiasco.

The sessions at the Basket continued in the weeks following Parker's return to New York, with Gordon, Gray, and Edwards standing out as the major participants. The atmosphere of an ongoing tenor sax battle permeated the setting, with especially heated confrontations taking place between Gordon and Gray. Regulars at these late-night battles began keeping score, remarking the occasions on which one tenorist would outshine the other. The strolling vendor of modern jazz records known simply as Bebop would usually be in attendance, cheering on the crowd, sometimes rooting for Teddy Edwards or Lucky Thompson, sometimes for Dexter or Wardell.

If the jam session is, as some have claimed, the jazz world's equivalent of war, then Jack's Basket was a Waterloo for the Central Avenue scene, a heated encounter that, in retrospect, also seemed to signal the end of an era. Before long the clubs along Central Avenue would close down, one by one, and the open jam session would be relegated to a minor role in the world of jazz, a mere way of filling off-nights at the few remaining clubs. The Los Angeles musicians' union helped to speed up the process by threatening to fine members playing for free at local jam sessions. The death of the Central Avenue scene and the precipitous decline in the demand for live jazz were only part of the nightmare waiting just around the corner. A whole booming economy, a way of life, a social fabric would be other, even more pointed, casualties of the changes to come. Less visible than the tearing down of the Club Alabam or the abandonment of the Dunbar, these more gradual transformations wrought even more destruction in the long run.

But in 1948 no one on the street could have envisioned the coming Central Avenue breakdown. Certainly at Jack's Basket one had little thought for such arcane reflections on urban evolution. This was a place where one got caught in the here and now, in the radiating energy of live jazz at its finest.

The proceedings would just get started around midnight and often continue until close to dawn. "There'd be a lot of cats on the stand," Dexter Gordon explains, recalling the Basket battles. "But by the end of the session it would wind up with Wardell and myself. 'The Chase' grew out of this."¹⁰ "The Chase," like so many of the finest things on the coast, drew from the best of the rest of the nation. It was a musical duel built from the age-old New Orleans clarinet showpiece "High Society," mixed up with a dash of East Coast bebop, and brought to a boil in the pressure-cooker jam session atmosphere of Central Avenue. The saxophone battle is by now a modern jazz tradition, perhaps even a cliché. But on the raised

stage of Jack's Basket, this was no practiced attempt at musical anachronism or even just another afternoon jam session. It was nothing less than combat, a throwing down of the musical gauntlet, a duel in which the weapon of choice was neither pistol nor dagger, foil nor sword—just a tenor saxophone.