



debut records presents:

the Quintet'

charlie
parker
dizzy
gillespie
bud
powell
max
roach
charlie
mingus

jazz at massey hall

parent

The Quintet: Jazz at Massey Hall

1. **Perdido** 7:43
(Juan Tizol) Lindabet Music Sales Corp.-ASCAP
2. **Salt Peanuts** 7:39
(Gillespie-Clarke) MCA Music-ASCAP
3. **All the Things You Are/52nd Street Theme** 7:51
(Hammerstein-Kern) Universal Polygram Int'l-ASCAP/
(Thelonious Monk) Embassy Music-BMI
4. **Wee (Allen's Alley)** 6:41
(Denzil Best) Music Sales Corp.-ASCAP
5. **Hot House** 9:10
(Tadd Dameron) WB Music c/o Warner Chappell Music-ASCAP
6. **A Night in Tunisia** 7:34
(Gillespie-Paparelli) Universal Music Corp.-ASCAP

Massey Hall. To generations of musically focused Torontonians, it's a real, bricks-and-mortar building: a 2,750-seat theater that has hosted tens of thousands of concerts in its 118-year history. But to jazz fans the world over, the words refer not to a structure but to a rare and very specific performance.

It was a gig headlined by a group that featured the biggest names in modern jazz, and yet drew less than a half-packed audience to Toronto's primary venue in May 1953. Even then, the performers were well-known. Each was chosen as the exemplar on their respective instrument; each required a mere syllable or two for instant recognition: Bird, Diz, Bud, Mingus, Max. More than fifty years on, they are revered as the brightest stars in the jazz firmament, the title *Jazz at Massey Hall* still conjures the idea of an all-star, once-in-a-generation lineup, and when one calls out the name "The Quintet"—this is that same convergence.

Timing, as always, had a lot to do with it. That Jazz at Massey Hall took place in 1953 placed it in the middle of an especially pivotal year for jazz. Bebop was in its maturity, more established and much less controversial than it had been in the mid-'40s. The harmonically dexterous approach had been around long enough to have produced its own offspring: the then-current Cool wave blowing in mostly from the West Coast, and more rootsy, driving style that would soon be named Hard Bop. (In the coming year, Roach would play a primary role both as a hard bop sideman, and as co-leader with trumpeter Clifford Brown of a groundbreaking quintet.)

Even so, it was as rare an event as it was unlikely. In fact, there's much about the Jazz at Massey Hall legend that seems implausible. The concert was pulled together on a whim by a small group of Canadian jazz enthusiasts, rather than the result of careful planning by seasoned promoters. The basic arithmetic essential to any successful concert—budgeted costs vs. projected box office receipts—was certainly not a priority. It was a guileless devotion to the music that drove a fan club to reach out to the top jazzmen of their generation—Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Max Roach, and Charles Mingus (the last a fill-in for first-pick Oscar Pettiford)—and

negotiate the details that would make them perform together.

Somehow the schedules of all five matched up. Somehow, despite the “history” (at times warm, at times bristling) that many shared, and the divergent career paths each was on at the time, they agreed to the union. Perhaps most improbable was the fact that their coming together was actually recorded, and released on a short-lived artist-run label founded and run by Mingus and Roach, Debut Records. Other celebrated live jazz albums—Art Blakey Quintet’s *A Night at Birdland*, Ellington at Newport, Coltrane’s and Evans’s respective recordings at the Village Vanguard—had the advantage of catching road-honed ensembles at a creative peak. *Jazz at Massey Hall* relied on the hit-or-miss impromptu drive of a jam session, a one-night-only affair that lived up to the promise of its historic billing.

The Massey Hall concert featured not a band but five marquee names looking back on greener, more humble days when most, except for Mingus, had been regular sparring partners. Even the setlist—comprised of well-worn standards and bebop workhorses—had a slightly musty feel. They were all still relatively young, but time was moving on. And save for Roach—the youngest among them at 25—all members of the quintet were then leaders in their own right, including Gillespie (35), Parker (32), Powell (28), and Mingus (31).

“We hadn’t worked together recently,” remembered Roach in Gillespie’s *To Be or Not To Bop*. “Everybody had gone their own separate way and either had their own groups or were engaged in other things...Mingus was new to us at that particular time, and on sessions like that you just come right in and say “Hey...!” Everybody is so happy to see each other, you don’t think about what’s going to happen until you get to the bandstand, and just prior to going to the bandstand we decided what we’re going to play on that particular concert. So it was pure spontaneity.”

What one hears on the Massey Hall performances are mature improvisers, comfortable in the material and confident in their distinctive, powerful styles, excited and digging each other. There

are humorous asides—often uttered by Gillespie—and flights of improvisational fancy with unexpected leaps and daring turns. The close of each tune, and that of each solo, is met by whoops and applause from an obviously thrilled audience. Spoken-word duties are shared by Gillespie and Parker; the saxophonist’s introduction of “Salt Peanuts” is playfully given, referring to the former as his “worthy constituent Mr. Dizzy Gillespie.” On the opening number, during Parker’s solo, laughter erupts, presumably brought on by Gillespie’s clowning. If one word defines the spirit of that evening, “delight” is surely it.

The evening’s schedule was unusually formatted: after an opening, 45-minute performance by the CBC All Stars—a 16-piece big band led by trumpeter Graham Topping—the quintet took the stage to tumultuous expectation. Together as a five-piece they performed for only 25 minutes: “Perdido,” “Salt Peanuts,” and “All the Things You Are/52nd Street Theme.” The brief set was followed by an intermission to accommodate the fight fans in the crowd, as a heavyweight boxing bout between Rocky Marciano and Jersey Joe Walcott had been rescheduled for that same night (Walcott lasted just over two minutes into the first round.) After 45 minutes, the concert resumed, first with a drum feature, then a few numbers featuring Powell and the rest of the rhythm section, and finally the quintet in full force again, with “Wee (Allen’s Alley),” “Hot House,” and the evening’s closer, “A Night in Tunisia.”

Whether you are familiar or not with these performances, rest assured that one does not need to dig for moments that remain impressive and fresh, or that reveal the personality of each player in their prime. Gillespie’s lightning runs on “Night in Tunisia” for example, are joyful and exhilarating—and the crowd responds accordingly. Parker’s bold and self-assured playing on “Wee”—another melody built on Rhythm changes. Powell’s solo on “Hot House” is a marvel of long, breath-taking melodic lines. Roach’s effervescent bounce and bomb-dropping on “Salt Peanuts,” and Mingus’s solid, yet pliant feel on “All the Things You Are.”

Though the audio quality is impressive considering that the concert was recorded through a

single stage microphone, and recorded on a borrowed Ampex tape recorder that Mingus had lugged on the flight from the U.S. The bassist was certainly underserved by the technology of the day—his playing was the least present of the instruments on the recordings. Subsequently, in New York, he overdubbed various bass parts to compensate for what the microphone had missed.

Jazz at Massey Hall—the gig itself and the subsequent releases of the recorded performances—proved historic in other ways. It was the last time that Parker and Gillespie—bebop’s originators—performed together. It was the second stop of the alto saxophonist’s only visit north of the border. It was an event studied in detail in a book devoted solely to the concert (Geoffrey Haydon’s *Quintet of the Year*). It was recalled in the biographies of three of its stars, Parker, Gillespie, and Roach. It was described in at least three sets of liner notes, including the original written by jazz critic Bill Coss in which he was obligated not to use Parker’s name and chose to refer to him as “Charlie Chan” and “Sparrow.”

It seems all worlds of music—rock, blues, R&B, soul, hip-hop and others—are able to point to impromptu get-togethers as proud moments in their timelines, encounters that were recorded and created music of lasting impression. In the jazz tradition there are a few, but none that has been revered for as long as *Jazz at Massey Hall*. In his book *Cool Blues: Charlie Parker in Canada 1953*, Mark Miller describes Massey Hall as “second only to Oscar Peterson among the most recognizable Canadian names in jazz.” That’s no empty claim, as the performances on this collection prove.

—Ashley Kahn
February 2012

Ashley Kahn is the author of *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece*, and other titles on music and culture, and teaches music history and journalism at New York University.

When Sparrow jumped last, not the jump described in Elliot Grennard’s short story, “Sparrow’s Last Jump,” which described only one of many jumps, it was like no Babe Ruth, no Lou Gehrig at home plate in Yankee Stadium heaped with gifts from loyal fans.

There was no fanfare for a final performance in a brilliant career, no warm oratory, no cushion for his retirement.

Instead, there was an upsetting debacle in a nightclub and an anti-climatic, shrouded, fizzle of a death four nights later.

And now, perpetuating a life which seemed purposely ended, there are stories about a tame bird who visits in a musicians’ bar, a feather which floated from the ceiling of Carnegie Hall. There are men who went back to their wives, some who left them; some musicians who are hastening to become pretenders to his throne, others who are content to blow séance sessions with him.

None of this seems strange, however, no matter how twisted, for this was a man who led adulators to grow fat or lean according to his own diet decisions. Young men used narcotics because he was rumored an addict; others changed their instruments because they could never hope to equal him; others copied their mannerisms, their hair styling, their clothes, their eating habits, in short, their lives, from this creature to whom they very nearly gave worship.

A strange God. A creature wanting and suggesting self-destruction; a familiar of every evil by his own admission; a companion of quantities of good, for what reason he could never fathom.

What did he worship, this one who was worshipped? His art, of course; his genius, if you’ll allow a qualified use of that word. But both these things were part of him, left and right arm, necessary, things he could not do without; things he was not allowed to do without, regardless of how he tortured his body or mind. They were his life and in their frustration he found a reason, among other things, for ending what hardly pleased him.

It never let him rest, so the worship was more forced than not; he did attempt several times to disregard it, but it never let him rest; it pulled his lazy body and pushed his lazy mind, somehow tearing him from mediocrity and thrusting him into clarity and brilliance of expression. He paid it reed service, nothing else.

Since pleasure and frustration were so evenly matched within his talent, he turned, or so it seems, perhaps he only made it seem so, to the talent’s reward—to money as an object of worship. “Bread,” he said, “that’s your only friend.”

At the same time, almost as a parallel line, he worshipped himself, even though, again by his admission and his actions, which were far more eloquent, he hated himself.

Then as God and his servant, as the adored and the adoring, finding both wanting, he did, as religious have always done; he made sacrifice, being, at once, penitent, victim, and deity. None were appeased, none were satisfied, the victim was more burnt than offering, but it was over and there could be no more bowing of head, no more scraping of soul.

That was “Sparrow,” “Bob,” “Charlie Chan,” or what have you; the terms are nearly interchangeable for most jazz listeners. A man of many aliases, of all kinds, he lived his life a bop did, sometimes foolishly, sometimes mystically and sometimes with an impatient, yet eloquent, expressiveness.

Before those years were finally spent, the New Jazz Society of Toronto decided to reunite as many of the early bop greats as they possibly could. Early in 1953, the club’s officers approached several musicians in the hope of running a mammoth jazz concert in Massey Hall in Toronto, which would feature both this bop-giant’s quintet and a number of Canadian jazz musicians who had formed a large band.

Running into early trouble, the club finally contracted with bassist Charlie Mingus to bring such a group to Canada in May. Mingus convinced Charlie Chan, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, and Bud Powell that this would benefit one and all. (Perhaps it’s only of passing interest, but one sidelight of the trip is that, having arrived at LaGuardia airport, they discovered that only five of their party of seven,

swelled by the presence of Mingus's wife and Birdland's Oscar Goodstein, could take the pre-arranged flight, that two would have to wait for a later plane. By some process of figuring they decided to leave Chan and Gillespie behind, then spent many anxious hours in Toronto, wondering if they would ever come. For those who knew him, the fascination in the story lies in wondering what Dizzy and Charlie did at LaGuardia airport for those several hours; waiting was hardly common to either of them and that is an uncommonly difficult place in which to wait.)

In Toronto the quintet performed brilliantly with asides for individual temperaments. And fortunately, there was a tape machine present to record most that came to pass. The asides are often more felt than heard: Chan's unusual amount of interpolations on "Perdido"; Chan blowing Bud off of his back on "Things"; Chan seemingly furious on his early choruses of "Peanuts" as if he were scolding the clowning Gillespie, whom he had announced before the tune as "my worthy *constituent*." One can wonder if the use of that word was deliberate or not.

Asides aside, they blew music of startling quality that night. These were no golden days of bop, this commemorates no zenith of a style, but it is eloquent music played by five exceptional musicians, something of a distinction among jazz recording circles as a general rule.

This was quintet that bop built, a quintet which had largely built bop, excepting Mingus, possibly, who had spent most of the early bop years on the West Coast. And the fascination of the music of the revolution it was, is more than equaled by the personal mark it made on each of these. Two choruses, a release and, now, this will be the last chorus.

First there was our Sparrow; his the most obvious tragedy. Then there is Dizzy Gillespie who early developed a mask for his protection; a beard and all that, a rug, a variety of nonsense and, finally, the tilted horn. A pretending clown prince, he occasionally plays that clown with sweet dignity, he can always play, clown or no, with exceptional brilliance.

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The seemingly impassive Max Roach, who has a disciplined relentlessness made hard by years of privation and insecurity. Some kind of strength has somewhat protected Max, has kept him whole, while not wholly sparing him scars.

Charlie Mingus who is less disciplined and more restless, made, not hard, but suspicious by years of privation and insecurity. But, like Max, less touched by the burden of the bop years than the rest. Potentially the richest of these talents, he is yet to fully mature, though his present is more than most futures.

And coda: This is an album liner? Where are the adjectives? How come no excitement? What kind of a cast is that?

A plaster cast, of course, formed for a crippled world; formed by a crippled world. A cast which matches each line of body, which alternately promises healing and disintegration, which preaches and curses, gives both good and bad, strength and itches. A cast which, in short, plays both sides against the middle.

And in this playing there is exquisite workmanship, seldom matched, artistry which will survive any last jump, and eloquence that is as exact as it is exacting whether speaking of life or death. There are the adjectives; not many of them; all that are needed in the presence of so much that is excellent; all of it truly dramatic whether in music, death, or life.

—Bill Coss

Editor, *Jazz Today*

These notes appeared on the original album liner.

Charlie Parker—alto saxophone

Dizzy Gillespie—trumpet

Bud Powell—piano

Charles Mingus—bass

Max Roach—drums

Original recordings produced by **Charles Mingus**

Recorded live at Massey Hall in Toronto, Canada;
May 15, 1953.

Reissue produced by **Nick Phillips**

24-bit Remastering—**Joe Tarantino** (Joe Tarantino Mastering, Berkeley, CA)

Booklet Notes—**Ashley Kahn**

Editorial—**Rikka Arnold**

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Design—**Andrew Pham**



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This modern jazz summit meeting in Toronto has been called “the greatest jazz concert ever.” We owe the survival of the music to Charles Mingus, who, along with Max Roach, taped the concert and subsequently issued it on his own new Debut label. There was tension between the giants before, during, and after the concert. Bird arrived without a horn and had to borrow a plastic alto (he made it sound like gold). The hall was three-quarters empty (the promoters had overlooked the coinciding heavyweight championship match between Marciano and Walcott). But the true heavyweights were on-stage, and the results have been knocking out the world of jazz ever since.

★★★★★ “...Let me recommend your getting the set and digging the cabinet level conference yourselves.”
—Nat Hentoff, *Down Beat*



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The Quintet - Jazz At Massey Hall

DIZZY GILLESPIE, trumpet;
BUD POWELL, piano

MAX ROACH, drums
CHARLIE MINGUS, bass

Featuring "CHARLIE CHAN" on Alto

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