Charlie Parker's Nickname

By Ida M. Peters

Q. Where did Charlie Parker get his nickname? How many wives did he have and was he only 34 when he died? Why are people so obsessed with him since he's been dead since 1955? Did he have any children?

HALLIE GIBBS
Cambridge, Md.

A. The movie "Bird," produced by jazz enthusiastic Clint Eastwood, focused on the last years of Charlie (Bird) Parker. He was the legendary jazz saxophonist who grew up in Kansas City, Mo.; dropped out of school at 15; married at 16; became a professional musician at 17 and was a father at 18. He revolutionized jazz and was a master of improvisation. His talent made him a star of bebop, the jazz form developed in New York City in the early 1940's. He played the alto sax and influenced not only sax players but trumpet, bass and piano players. There is some controversy as to his wives. His first wife and childhood sweetheart was Rebecca Ruffin. His second marriage in 1943 was to Geraldine Scott. Both were black. He wed Doris Snydor, white, in 1948, but the legality was questioned during a five-year court battle over his estate. He began a common-law marriage with Chan Richardson in 1950. They had a daughter, Pree, born in 1951; died, 1953. A son, Baird, was born in 1952. He also had a son, Leon, by his first wife Rebecca, born in 1938.

As to his nickname, his first wife is quoted as saying he got the name "Yardbird" because he liked chicken . . . later shortened to "Bird." The name stuck after a 1939 incident when the band was traveling and the car hit a chicken and Bird told the driver to go back and pick up that "yardbird." He took it into the house where they were staying and asked the lady to cook it.

Q. This is in reference to Nathan Cook of "Hotel" and "White Shadow." It's been mentioned that he died. If this is true, what was the cause of his death and when?

D. SANTIAGO
Oakland, Calif.

A. Nathan Cook, 38, the actor who played the bellhop and then chief of security on ABC's "Hotel" for its entire 6-year run, died June 11, 1988 in Los Angeles apparently due to an allergic reaction to penicillin. This info came from an item in Variety's obits.

Nathan Cook

Q. Are Sugar Ray Leonard and his wife Juanita getting a divorce? Have they been separated long? What gives? Answer soon. I have money riding on this.

LMT
Philadelphia, Pa.

A. Sugar Ray Leonard announced in May, 1989 that he and his wife Juanita are separated but do not plan to divorce. The press release read, "In an effort to clarify inaccurate rumors relative to my marital status, my wife Juanita and I wish to announce that more than a year ago we mutually agreed to a trial separation . . . . "Neither my wife nor I wish to comment further, since we believe this to be a very personal matter."

Q. Please give me some background on Suzanne de Pass recently in the news as a Motown executive responsible for the TV series "Lonesome Dove." Is she black? I thought Motown was sold?

F. G. JONES
Baltimore, MD.

A. Suzanne de Pass joined Motown as executive assistant to Berry Gordy in 1968; headed talent and acquisition department in 1970 where she wrote and produced TV specials and movies. In 1981, she became president of Motown Productions. She signed Billy Preston, Stephanie Mills and Frankie Valli. She won an Oscar nomination for co-writing "Lady Sings the Blues" and two Emmys as executive producer "Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever" and "Motown Returns to the Apollo." De Passe grew up in Harlem. Her father, a Seagram's executive, and her mother, a teacher, were divorced when she was 3.

When Motown founder Berry Gordy sold Motown Record Company to MCA, Inc. for $61 million, he put the cash into Motown Productions, a TV and film company. She has run this business since 1981. She is 42 and married to actor Paul Le Mat of "Burning Bed" and "Melvin and Howard" fame.

All letters should be addressed to DAWN Magazine, 628 N. Eutaw St., Baltimore, Md. 21201. All questions are welcome, but while Dawn cannot provide individual answers, questions of general interest will be used in this column.

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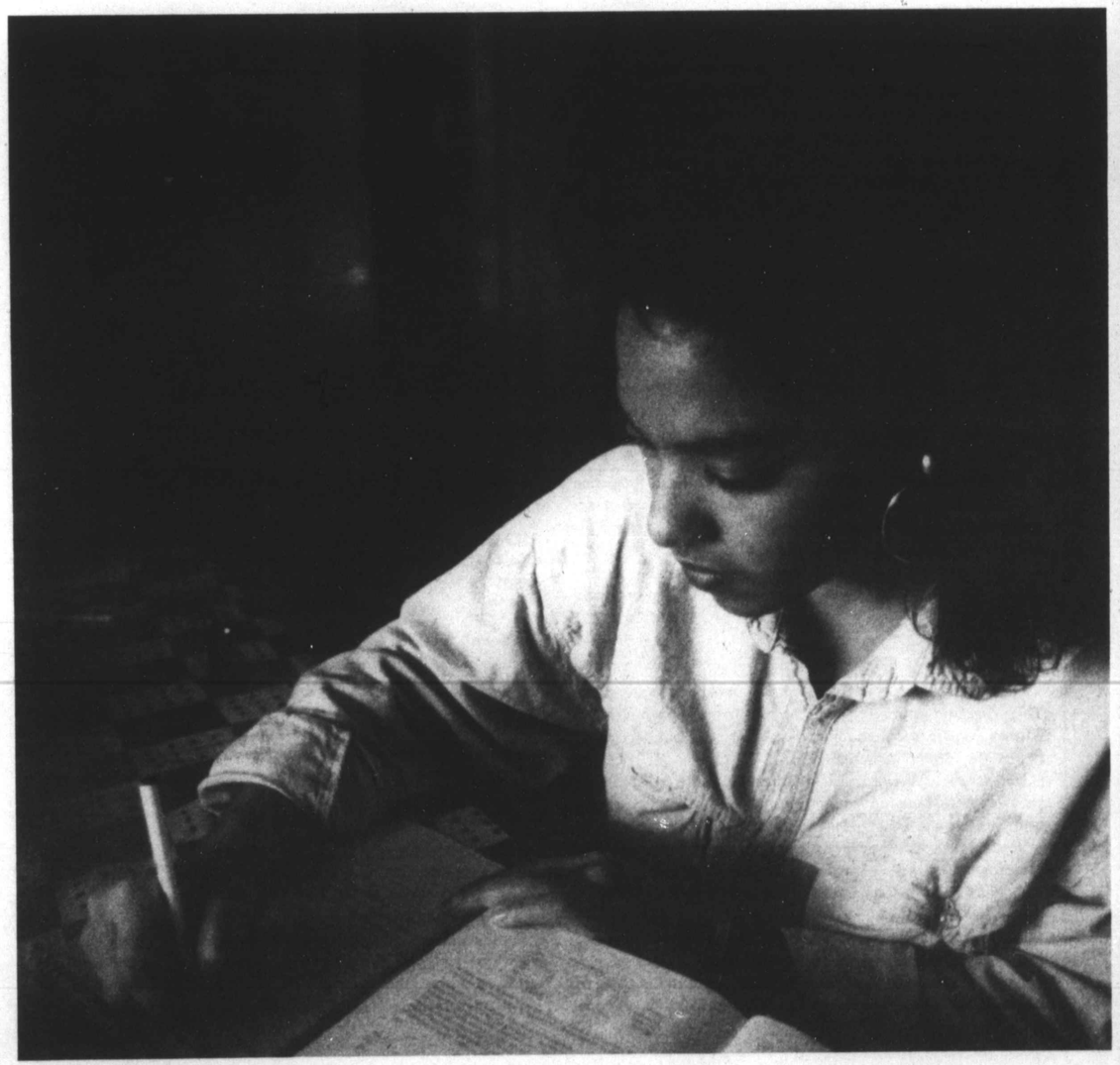
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