



After spending six months in detox at Camarillo State Hospital, a reinvigorated Charlie Parker went to Jack's Basket Room and gave what is considered by many to be the greatest performance of his life. Photo by William Gottlieb/Redferns.

By LYNELL GEORGE

Jack's Basket Room was an anchor of L.A.'s jazz scene, famous for its after-hours jam sessions and one of Charlie Parker's best performances.

In Los Angeles the past is fragile. Yet, for all the fast-forward erasure—razed landmarks, dramatically altered vistas, and, more recently, the hard press (and anguish) of gentrification—the city still holds a cache of rich built history. One shortcut might reveal an inventory of off-the-beaten-path structures that have eluded developers' desires, or tucked-away jewels lost amid a hodgepodge of architectural styles or on-the-fly renovations.

This has been, in certain respects, the case with 3219 South Central Avenue. For decades, the storefront has been one of those addresses that have nested various small enterprises—in this case, a sewing factory, a café, a butcher, office space, a discount store. Most likely, the proprietors of adjacent businesses and the neighbors who wheeled their metal fold-up shopping carts past it had little idea what one of its most glamorous identities had been.

Growing up in L.A., I learned long ago that to get back to the past, I'd have to rely on the power of story. I leaned hard on people's stowed-away histories—their stray memories and their internal maps. They were a pathway, like the device in that old Ray Bradbury story "A Sound of Thunder" that allowed you to wander back in time to view history. The caveat: just be careful how you step, or you break the spell, change the future.

My path to this particular past was jazz musician and composer Buddy Collette. I popped up on his porch one afternoon 25 years ago with a notebook, a cassette recorder, and a lot of questions about the old jazz scene that had coalesced, from the 1920s into the mid-1950s, along Central Avenue—"Jazz Street," as some of the older locals I'd grown up around called it. I was, as a reporter, working on a profile of Buddy, and he was always generous with his time and his stories. His memories were expansive. And because he was a musician, his ear was tuned to sense details of time and place that gave the stories a lush, surround-sound quality.

He had been a major figure in the amalgamation of L.A.'s segregated musicians' unions, black and white, that integrated under Local 47 in 1953. Buddy was avid about places where musicians came to unify—to play, yes, but also to share and commiserate; how they got the word around about what was going on—musically and politically. Gossip, too. How they all "vibed." Our initial meeting turned into many. Buddy was set on reanimating Central Avenue for me, its history and eminence, but also its meaning.

LISTEN FOR THE
WORD:

BIRD
IS PLAYING TONIGHT

'RELAXIN' AT CAMARILLO'

That first afternoon, in 1995, we slipped into my car and from his mid-city home in Los Angeles's Miracle Mile district wound east, then south on surface streets toward Central. The place he wanted me to see, first stop, was 3219, a place he referred to as "Jack's Basket." I drove, he narrated—a sweet, silky solo.

Central seemed wiped clean of any sentimental remnant of that former era, or so I thought. I'd taken myself there many times before, hoping to find some piece of the past: an awning, a staircase, a fading ghost sign. Buddy knew where to look; that was the difference. I had missed the building because I didn't know what to focus on, but there it was hiding in plain sight: a brick facade—low-key, revealing nothing. This was true especially in neighborhoods that had been "abandoned" or "de-invested" in, as addresses and structures acquired new identities and rode incognito into the future—this was what had happened with Jack's Basket, formally known as Jack's Basket Room.

Street and jazz lore has long put forth that Jack's Basket Room was operated by Jack Johnson the heavyweight champion. Jazz historian Steven Isoardi, who coedited *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*, an extensive collection of vivid and essential oral histories about the scene, has been trying for years to uncover a sturdy link in that story—photos, business licenses, press clippings—but it's all too tenuous. "That Johnson owned clubs on Central is indisputable, but Jack's? It's a bit of a mystery," he says. City records add another layer of story, and record that in 1944 owner Sam "Jack" Jackson applied for a business permit and he sold the building in 1955. Jack's had a listing until the early 1950s in *The Negro Motorist's Green Book*, a guide pointing black travelers to businesses that were, in the era of Jim Crow laws, safe to visit and patronize.

The Basket Room hosted after-hours jam sessions that flew 'til dawn and was known for its fried-chicken-and-french-fry combos served in wicker baskets. They didn't have a liquor license, Buddy recalled, but you could BYOB or be pointed a couple of doors down to pick up a package or two. Setups

LISTEN FOR THE WORD: BIRD IS PLAYING TONIGHT



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and mixers were provided in-house. As saxophonist Marshal Royal remembered in *Central Avenue Sounds*, "It wasn't highly decorated or anything, was sort of the barny type, and had some tables in there. It didn't have sawdust on the floor, but it was probably the next thing to that."

If Buddy hadn't flagged it, I would have once more sailed past that nondescript brick building. He signaled with one long index finger angled toward 33rd Street, suggesting we look for parking there. I found a slot, and then Buddy and I walked up to Central. It's now been so long that I don't remember what business was inside—or if there was one. I was filled up with Buddy's stories about the street: The tiny galaxy of rooms—the Downbeat, Club Alabam, the Last Word, the Gaiety, the Jungle Room. Jack's special late-Monday-night jam sessions

that attracted local and visiting musicians to sit in after their club date at a down-the-street venue or across-town studio recording session was through. Buddy was mapping an L.A. that could just as well have been the moon. These places he described didn't have much in common with romanticized jazz-life images of shadows and smoke; they were full of sweat, exhaustion, laughter, and the mustiness of a taproom—they hosted people mingling after a long day of work, and the music was always the connector.

"When Duke Ellington came to town, you listened for the word: 'Well, is he going to be at Jack's Basket or Ivie's Chicken Shack?' The word...was even stronger than the newspapers," Buddy told me.

In its boom years in the mid-to-late 1940s, Jack's hosted matinees and free Christmas banquets for "underprivileged children," and

of course, those famous late-night sessions that would run until four or five in the morning. "That was when the Basket Room was really clicking," Buddy would write in his memoir, *Jazz Generations: A Life in American Music and Society*. "There was always gonna be a jam session...and everybody would come with their own story."

The most famous night, hands down, occurred more than 70 years ago, in early 1947, when Charlie Parker was released from Camarillo State Hospital. Word on the street lit up with musicians reporting that he was suited up and headed for Jack's, alto in tow. Buddy would recall the evening in his memoir: "[Bird] had been quite ill, having problems with drugs and going through other things. There was an announcement that he was going to come and jam."

Players—local and those just passing through—thirty or forty, Buddy remembered, made sure to be front and center, "wanting to show Parker how they could play. All the tenor and alto players were there—Sonny Criss, Wardell Gray, Dexter Gordon, Gene Phillips, Teddy Edwards, Jay McNeely, and on and on. They all played and Bird sat there and smiled.... Finally, Bird got up there and I don't think he played more than three or four choruses. But he told a complete story, caught all the nuances, tapered off to the end. Nobody played a note after that. Everybody just packed up their horns and went on home, because it was so complete, so right."

Seems anyone in the know about the Basket Room lands on that Parker story. Since Buddy's been gone (now almost 10 years), I still hear versions from musicians who were in the room and those who were far too young to be, the latter stories rendered in such precise detail that it's like they were there. Jazz guitarist and composer Anthony Wilson, son of the late trumpeter and band-leader Gerald Wilson, recalls his father's own excitement as he occupied one of those chairs, bearing witness to history. "[Jack's] was like a sort of hub of the community. Word got out that Charlie Parker was coming. There was a huge crowd inside and outside the place. He said Bird looked strong and healthy and that it was a thrill to see."

It was some phoenix move as only Parker could have managed: Bird passing through Los Angeles and, if only for a moment, turning his bad luck into gold in front of an astonished audience. Parker would go on to record a series of West Coast sessions for Dial Records in Southern California, including, in February 1947, "Relaxin' at Camarillo," his

famous nod to that six-month detox stint. And his Dial dates in October and November of 1947 produced selections that are considered by many to be some of "the most lyrical in Parker's entire output," according to *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*. "Bird of Paradise" is based on the sequence of 'All The Things You Are,' with an introduction (Bird and Miles [Davis]) that was to become one of the thumbprints of bebop." What gives that evening even more of an air of majesty is that it was a night of West Coast magic that doesn't survive in formal recordings or published photos, but does still live vividly in stories.

PLAIN SIGHT

Jack's was a joint, yes, but it was also a nexus. And arguably, of greater significance than that one incandescent night when Bird soared was the strength of the network the club linked and fostered—the conversations it spurred and the gigs it inspired. At the center was Jack's, and at the center of Jack's was music—from the clientele who were players to the radio broadcasts and the famous "cutting" sessions where musicians would display their prowess. Heavy hitters waltzed through: Ellington, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Lucky Thompson, Paul Gonzales, Art Farmer, Barney Kessel.

After-hours spots like Jack's were essential one-stop catch-alls—a place to play, to find work, and to go get one's head straight. By 1948 or so, postwar Los Angeles was changing. "There were a few jobs left and then eventually everything dried up," bassist David Bryant told Isoardi in *Central Avenue Sounds*. "Musicians that played jazz also played other kinds of music.... I mean to live they had to. All the commercial, top forty and all that shit. They were good musicians. That's why they used to have after-hour places so they could come in after they got off their gig. They had to get the shit out of their systems. So they'd go to sessions and play until morning."

As I stood with Buddy that afternoon looking at a faded brick building, its facade and windows covered with a clutter of signage advertising new businesses, proprietors, and promises, we were both comforted to see that Jack's was still standing through all the scene changes and neighborhood neglect and urban uprisings and population shifts. A quiet, open secret.

'NUTHIN BUT A BIRD'

But Bird wouldn't be the only figure to attempt a resurrection at 3219. Back in 2015, I received a call from Isoardi alerting me that something was stirring at the old Basket Room.

Isoardi had participated in a panel discussion at the South L.A. youth nonprofit A Place Called Home, a lead-up event to the annual Central Avenue Jazz Festival. He was sharing stories about the rich history of the avenue and how much of it had vanished. "Then I mention 3219 South Central and how it was one of the landmarks left...and this young couple sitting in back jumped up. 'We just bought the place!' Here was this energetic couple wanting to do something."

met up with Isoardi at the site one afternoon in early 2017 and stood, for the very first time, inside that empty "barny" room, amid a scatter of bricks and dust—just roof and frame—and tried to tune in the echoes of the past. I listened to Isoardi talk and imagined the future: concerts and open houses for neighborhood kids, a garden out back. Once some of the grime had been cleared away, you could make out tracings of Jack's original signage laced along the top edge of



COURTESY OF THE TOM & ETHEL BRADLEY CENTER AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Above: Jack's Basket Room, open from 1939 to 1951, and its after-hours jam sessions were at the heart of L.A.'s jazz scene. Below: The building that once housed Jack's was destroyed by a mysterious fire in 2018. Opposite page: Jack's attracted greats like Buddy Collette, Duke Ellington, and Dexter Gordon. Radio host Bill Sampson (standing at left microphone) and his band often played at Jack's for KAGH.



In quick fashion, the couple, a designer and a general contractor, refocused their plan of rehabbing the building as an all-purpose, rentable community gathering space, bent on finding a way to honor the building's history. They began to research wall and floor treatments in an attempt to re-create the interior, down to the checkerboard floor. They wanted to bring Jack's back, they told Isoardi, to its full glory.

I wanted a glimpse, just one glimpse, of all this in motion. I

the facade, including a chicken head logo and a lyric fragment from an old jump tune: "Chicken ain't nuthin but a bird."

About a year later, Isoardi visited again. "We'd been gathering photos and testimonies and hoping we could open with energy," he told me recently. "They were talking about a June opening, and by early '18 they were ready for the build. Everyone's attitude was: What do you need? How can we help?"

That June opening would never

take place. About three months after Isoardi's visit, I received a jolting two-line email from him. "Jack's burned down." Apparently arson. How bad? We didn't know yet. The years of work spent trying to re-create the spirit of Jack's, literally brick by brick, were now rubble; the whole of it would be red tagged and ordered to be demolished within two weeks.

If tensions had been festering among any neighbors, the couple knew nothing of them, Isoardi noted. In fact, they'd been building solid goodwill, talking with local musicians and community members about offering the space for meetings and music education. If there was anti-gentrification animosity, they didn't feel it. But a 2 a.m. fire certainly begins to stoke those fears.

A FULL STORY

A year gone, the clock ticks; the owners still tread water in insurance-payout purgatory, Isoardi tells me. The site where Jack's once stood is ringed by chain link, just a big dirt lot. What happens next is anybody's guess.

I'm reminded again of that Bradbury story and how precariously positioned the past is. In that tale about time travel, participants are expressly ordered not to step off the path, not to change the course of history. The most minute alteration can have consequences. Did the restoration activity spark too much attention? Might Jack's still be here if it was still riding incognito? It's a question that has weight.

But what I know to be truer about Los Angeles is that even though Jack's had cheated time, that building, in its weathered and frail condition, most likely wasn't long for the world. If someone else had gotten to it, it might have ended up transformed into some mixed-use monstrosity, something soulless and disconnected to its past. What's most tragic to me is that the new owners were trying to do it right, trying to give a gift back to the neighborhood—for residents to use and shape—as well as honoring a legacy. What was in the works, says Isoardi, was much more difficult and painstaking to do. It was from the heart.

But as I know Buddy would say to them: They now have a story—distinct and original—an arc that ties them, and their best intentions, to this place. They are now part of the lore of the avenue. Part of its history. And in time, they will tell their full story, "so complete, so right." ■

Lynell George won a 2017 Grammy for her liner notes "Otis Redding Live at the Whisky A Go Go." Her latest book is After/Image: Los Angeles Outside the Frame.