

Pick of the Berry

In 1938, Charlie Parker named his first son, Francis Leon, after Leon "Chu" Berry, the 1930s tenor titan who was then his favorite saxophonist. Listening now to the bluesy, floating double-time bursts from Berry on the best of *Classic Chu Berry Columbia And Victor Sessions* (Mosaic 236; 77:30/76:43/72:40/72:45/70:22/71:57/76:11) ★★★½, it is easy to hear suggestions of the saxophone style Parker made famous in the mid 1940s. Unfortunately, Berry was dead by the time bebop came along—killed in a 1941 car crash—and so he has largely been forgotten, an "also ran" mentioned alongside Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young as one of the premier saxophone stylists of the 1930s, but little investigated by contemporary fans and musicians.

Berry had an instantly recognizable sound—warm and fluid, bubbling with a large vibrato and rolling figures that could push a band along without sounding rushed or forced in the least. While the connection to Parker—and also to Dizzy Gillespie, with whom he worked for two years in the Cab Calloway Orchestra—is interesting for establishing the context in which bebop took shape, Berry is worth exploring on his own because of the enormous inventiveness, warmth and personality of his playing.

These seven discs contain a lot of material. The set begins with the saxophonist's first recordings, made with Benny Carter's *Chocolate Dandies* in 1933, and ends with his last, made with Calloway a few days before his death. Altogether, the 203 tracks cover the full spectrum of work available to an in-demand swing-era sideman, from backing vocalists like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, to serving up dixieland with Wingy Manone, to the section work and short solos of big band jazz with Fletcher Henderson, and the more commercial fare of the Calloway band.

The real fun, however, is in the loose small group sides led by Henry Allen, Mildred Bailey, Lionel Hampton, Teddy Wilson and others. Roy Eldridge plays on many of these, including a joyous 1935 date with Gene Krupa and Benny Goodman, and the wonderful "Blues In C Sharp Minor" with Wilson. Berry's Bird-like flights can be heard on tunes like "Limehouse Blues" from a date he led in 1937 and "Sweethearts On Parade" and "Wizzin' The Wiz," from 1939 Lionel



Chu Berry: giant luster

DOWNBEAT ARCHIVES

Hampton recordings.

Unfortunately, Berry spent the last four years of his life grinding along in the Calloway aggregation, making good money and featured as a star soloist, but trading water musically while the world changed. These sides, which make up more than a third of the collection, drag the set down, no matter how inspired the solos. Few listeners will want to suffer through three takes of "A Chicken Ain't Nothin' But A Bird" or "Papa's In Bed With His Britches On." No wonder Gillespie headed to Minton's after work.

But gems such as Berry's most famous recording, "A Ghost Of A Chance," an obvious response to Hawkins' "Body And Soul," and "Pluckin' The Bass," a feature for Milt Hinton, buoy the set. Also, it is interesting on many of these sides to compare Berry's solos—completely self-assured, effortless and inventive—with Gillespie's still evolving concept.

The box has beautiful sound, and Loren Schoenberg has written awe inspiring track-by-track liner notes, blending pithy musical analysis with deep historical understanding. Though Berry will never be much more than a footnote in jazz history, this set restores the luster to his legend and reveals that in the age of giants, Berry measured up to the best of them.

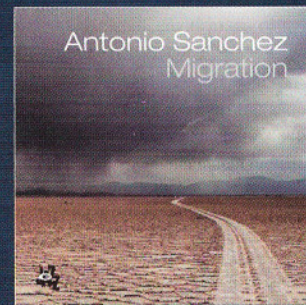
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