

Chet

He was the
James Dean of jazz.
GQ photographer
William Claxton
was there

There are three people I have photographed who stand out as having real presence and magnetism in front of the camera: Steve McQueen, my wife Peggy Moffitt, who's a model, and Chet Baker. They seemed to know instinctively what to do, how to move, which way to turn to catch the best light – without ever being conscious of those actions. They enjoyed being photographed, and appeared relaxed and spontaneous.

It wasn't until I started photographing Chet Baker in 1952 that I understood what the term "photogenic" really meant. He was just 22, not long out of the army, and playing trumpet with the greatest jazz musician of the time – Charlie Parker.





Triple echoes:
main pic, Chet the
jazz icon. Above
right, Chet the
musician. Right,
Chet the womaniser



Only after I started developing film in my darkroom after the gigs did I realise that one face just keep coming through unbelievably strongly – the face of Chet Baker. It was like magic; the whole picture just lit up.

Joining the ground-breaking Gerry Mulligan quartet later that year (1952) really helped Chet's musical talent shine, and he began to receive a lot more attention. I began taking pictures of him for Pacific Jazz Records, of which I had become a partner, and in a short time he had formed his own group, was winning polls, his record sales were soaring and he was being offered movie parts.

He was a terrific musician. He didn't read very well, and his technique was modest compared to virtuosos like Dizzy Gillespie, but he was a natural. His laid-back phrasing was unique; his degree of musicality was high. His music was a reflection of his personality: he had his mean moments and liked to get his own way, but he was sensitive – especially when it came to his art. He loved the lyrics of tunes and talked about them a great deal. He would recite popular songs like poetry, and his singing was like his playing: honest, frequently underrated and, as Charlie Parker once said to me, "pure and simple".

Women really threw themselves at him; this lost, baby-face tough boy who looked like he needed a mother

Chet also had a kind of a grace and was very healthy and athletic – he was always surfing and skiing and swimming. He would often wear just a T-shirt, Levi's and sandals, and his casual elegance became the epitome of the West Coast cool jazz scene. There was a reason he was dubbed the James Dean of jazz.

He certainly attracted women. Even though he had a front tooth missing (he hid it very well in photographs), he was handsome, seemingly innocent, boyish and sexy. He knew a lot of women intimately. In fact, he had more girlfriends than you could have possibly counted, in every city, club and on every recording date. He was notorious for always being in some kind of trouble, for going out the back window to avoid a bad scene. But women really threw themselves at him: here was this lost, baby-face tough boy who looked like he needed a mother. He frequently attracted very strong women who wanted to take care of him.

He smiled easily and charmed almost everybody. Although we were not great friends, I suppose I was about as close as anybody got to him – as a male, anyway. Besides music, we shared a passion for fast cars. I was into sports cars, while Chet preferred Cadillacs and Lincolns. To him they were symbols of success and he used to drive them around California, rarely at less than 80mph, pushing his luck.

The pictures I took are very much how I'd like to remember him. It was the best period of his music, of his art, and the best of his looks, of his photogenic qualities. These are his bright and formative days before he began using heroin, before he began to show signs of addiction, before he went to Europe in 1958 and didn't come back, before he spent time in and out of trouble and jail, before I lost track of him, and way before he fell to his death from a second-floor hotel room in Amsterdam in 1988, aged 59.

Photography is jazz for the eye. Just as jazz is the music or art of the moment – it is spontaneous and just occurs instantaneously – so is photography. Like recorded jazz, photography is a technical process which tries to capture and reproduce a feeling or experience that can be relived years later.

Looking at these pictures now, I can remember the times they were taken, what was going on, the exact day sometimes. I can pretty much still hear Chet's music ■

The GQ/Chet Baker Exhibition – Photographs by William Claxton, will be at the Special Photographers Company, 21 Kensington Park Road, London W11 (071-221 3489), December 2 to January 7. *Young Chet* is published by Schirmer Art Books, price £35, and will be available at the exhibition. A range of Chet Baker recordings is available on the Pacific Jazz label, most notably the four-CD box set, *Chet Baker: The Pacific Jazz Years*. William Claxton talked to Philip Watson.

Rise and fall: above, Baker records his first highly acclaimed vocal album in Hollywood in 1954. Below, just two years later, Baker is no longer able to hide the effects of his eventually terminal heroin addiction



