well red

He played with Charlie Parker, kicked heroin, advised on *Bird* – now trumpeter Red Rodney is in the pink.

REPORT: PHILIP WATSON PHOTO: MARC MARNIE

EDINBURGH, FESTIVAL time: the "visitors" are overrunning the city. Out of the lift of the imposingly Victorian North British Hotel breezes a small, rounded, definitively casual American "visitor" – head to toe tourist checks; all slacks, slip-ons and jovial smiles.

This embodiment of comfortable, cordial, middle-America is – Red Rodney? One of the first white musicians to master bebop? The razor-sharp dresser who spent an intense, intoxicating three-year period as a close musical and personal companion of Charlie Parker? Red Rodney, the heroin addict who lost seven years and most of the 1950s to narcotics hospitals and federal prisons?

Image and reality: the dichotomy is disconcerting. Hollywood and Harlem. The film industry is littered with shambolic representations of real people's lives. How was it meant to deal with a black, junkie, jazz musician? As a consultant on *Bird*, Red Rodney was determined to avoid the pitfalls.

"In 1980–81, Columbia bought the script for Richard Pryor. I told them that, as Bird, he was a terrible choice – it would have been a frivolous film."

Columbia scrapped the idea and the project was put on ice. Six years later, Rodney was astonished to discover that his new employers were Warner Brothers and Clint Eastwood.

"I had no idea Clint was a jazz fan. You know, he's a very quiet, easy-going, cultured man. He listens before making a decision."

Subsequently Rodney again suggests changes, this time to Joel Olianksy's original script. He eliminates the cursing for one; something he says Bird never resorted to. I ask him whether he

considers Eastwood's realisation an authentic one.

"There's some licence but it's a very accurate film. Clint made us look very real, very human. He gave us a dignity that musicians never get in films. Sure we were junkies, but Clint made it like a disease – and who wants a disease? He showed that Charlie Parker didn't want drugs.

"Take a look at other jazz films. *Round Midnight* made us look like itinerant drunks and drug addicts not really wanting the normal things in life. There's that Benny Goodman farce and *The Gene Krupa Story* – that broke Gene Krupa's heart. He was a decent man. Then, of course," Red screws up his face, "there's *Lady Sings The Blues*."

RED RODNEY is a squat, befreckled, garrulous man whose wavy, fiery-red hair gives him the enthusiastic air of a young Jimmy Cagney. Born Robert Chudnick in a mixed Jewish-Irish-Italian neighbourhood of Philadelphia, he had done it all by the time he was 22. Having toured with all the major white jazz orchestras of the 40s (Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Gene Krupa and Claude Thornhill provided the apprenticeships), his directions became increasingly moulded by the on-going bebop revolution. His singular ambition – a mark of his precocious self-confidence – became to play with its leading exponent, his idol, Charlie Parker.

In 1949, after Miles Davis walked out on Bird and Kenny Dorham enjoyed a brief spell in his place, Red took the trumpet's chair in the Quintet and his goal was realised. As Art Blakey told Red Rodney years later: "When you joined Bird some blacks hated both of you for it. I laughed. I said, Yeah, you should be there."

Here as one of the special guests of the 10th Edinburgh Jazz Festival, still displaying the broad, supple, liquid tone that he became renowned for, he had also crammed in a Film Festival screening of *Bird* a couple of nights before. What was it like seeing himself portrayed on screen?

"Spooky. Really spooky. I didn't know how to take it. But I think Michael Zelniker [the Canadian actor who plays him] did a great job.

"That was the first time I'd seen the film with a cinema audience. I'm antzy, and it's too long for me. But if that's the only complaint then it's a great film."

"Spooky" is a word that emerges again when Red describes his participation in the soundtrack recording. By isolating and digitally enhancing Bird's recorded solos, soundtrack co-ordinator Lennie Niehaus gave Rodney the opportunity to relive those moments from nearly 40 years earlier. And some of the younger players involved could "play" with Bird for the first time, albeit posthumously.

"Jon Faddis came running up to me shouting, Red, Red, I just played with Bird. He was born after Charlie Parker died. He freaked out – he'd played with one of his heroes."

Described variously as a psychotic (Camarillo State Hospital) psychopath (psychiatrist Dr Richard Freeman) and "sociopath" (James Lincoln Collier), Charlie Parker's personality remains a multifarious, kaleidoscopic mystery. Bird was (in)famous for the chameleonic way he altered his voice, language and mannerisms to complement those around him, and even his physical appearance, especially his body weight, changed alarmingly during his life. A biographer's (and an actor's) nightmare, numerous adjectives have been used to characterise him. I throw a few at Red Rodney.

All seem to agree that Bird was very intelligent.

"Exceptionally. He had an innate, natural intelligence. If something was important and interested him he had a photographic memory for it. If it wasn't, he'd discard it immediately."

Childish?

"Childish. Yeah," Red bounces up from his chair beaming a broad smile, "sure, he was a boy, a child. But in the best sense of the word. Bird liked to play games; he was a practical joker. We were stranded by a blizzard in a Detroit airport once and Bird bought some water pistols. All the police saw was a black guy and a white guy shooting each other. He was a happy man in spite of his circumstances."

Hostile?

"I saw anger but I don't ever remember hostility. Bird was a liker. He liked people. The racial problems were worse then but he could tell who was prejudiced against him and he discarded them from his life."

Compulsive?

"Yes. He was an addictive person – over-eating, drinking, drugs . . . over-screwing."

While "genius" is a much-desecrated noun, I ask Rodney what he understands by the word.

"Well, there aren't many of them. Bird was one. A person who can create an entirely new musical style with very little formal education and can play anything he hears, instinctively, in any key, has to be considered a genius. He still influences me today. I've embraced other forms, but I'm still a bebop soloist."

ALTHOUGH HE rigorously denies Ross Russell's assertion that he was the beneficiary of Bird's sexual jetsam, there was one area of Red Rodney's life over which his idol exerted profound influence. Shortly after joining the band Rodney began experimenting with heroin. Twenty years and several convictions later he wrestled off the addiction, but it wasn't until the early 70s that he fully re-established himself on the New York scene, co-leading a group with Ira Sullivan. There is a powerful scene in the film in which Bird threatens to beat up Rodney if he continues with the habit.

"Bird knew his drug-taking influenced others and he hated that. I was very young and immature and Bird was very special. Idolisation and imitation are the privileges of youth."

I ask Red whether he considers *Bird* to be an anti-drugs film.

"Not overtly. But listen, I got this from it. Charlie Parker, one of the great geniuses of the 20th century, died, aged 34, because he couldn't give up drugs. I've carried on to my 61st year because I could. That's a good message for the young."