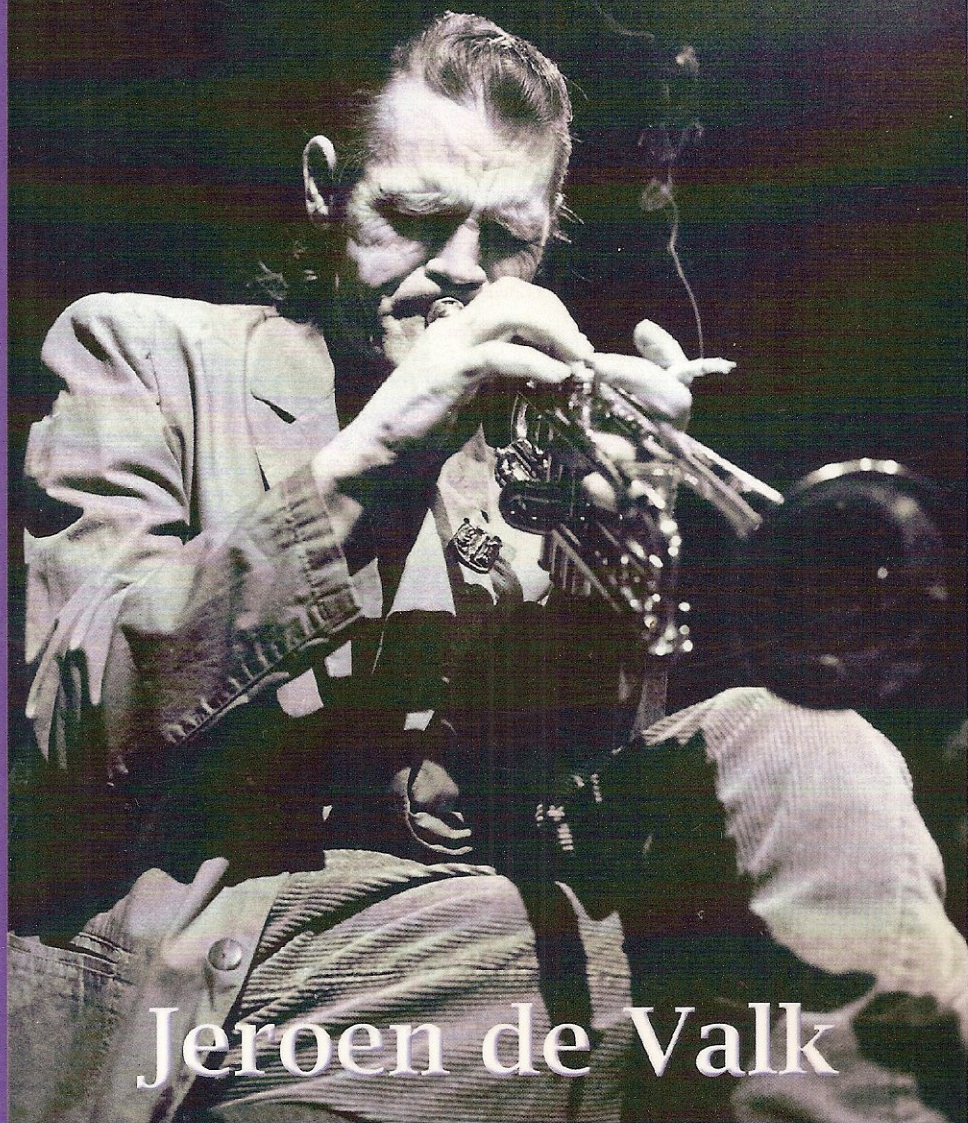


Chet Baker

his life and music



ASPEKT

Jeroen de Valk

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Aspekt Publishers

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Amersfoortsestraat 27, 3769 AD Soesterberg, The Netherlands
info@uitgeverijaspekt.nl – <http://www.uitgeverijaspekt.nl>

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Preface

Chet Baker may be the most misunderstood jazz musician of all time. Read anything about Chet Baker - an article in a magazine or a newspaper, for example - and it is likely you will be told that Chet was a pitiful character who started using drugs when his popularity dwindled and his piano player Dick Twardzik died. That he faded into obscurity after his spectacular early success and was rescued from oblivion by filmmaker Bruce Weber, who also inspired his last recording, the soundtrack for *Let's Get Lost*. That he was murdered in Amsterdam, where the police handled the case carelessly.

The truth, alas, is less sensational. Chet started using drugs when he was at the height of his popularity and Twardzik was still alive. In the last ten years of his life, he was very popular in Europe, where he recorded and performed extensively. His trumpet playing was usually much stronger than it is in Weber's film. The soundtrack was certainly not his last recording; he made over a dozen albums afterward, both live and in the studio. One of them - *Chet Baker in Tokyo* - contains his best work ever. And, finally, Chet was not murdered. After thorough investigation, the police concluded that he died because he fell out of his hotel room, after having taken both heroin and cocaine. This may sound anti-climactic for a jazz hero, but there is nothing I can do about it.

And there's the story that Chet lost his front teeth in a beating, which of course would have been a disaster for any trumpet player. In reality, he lost one part of one tooth at some fight in the summer of 1966. He kept on playing afterwards, and not badly at all, initially. He was fitted with dentures only a couple of years later, simply because his teeth were in bad shape anyway.

The strangest thing in any discussion in which Chet turns up, is the constant emphasis on his drug use and his death. It's as if using drugs and falling out of a window were the most important things he ever did. But merely shooting heroin is not going to make anyone a legend. And how important was his fatal fall anyway? It ended his life much too early. But Chet fell only once, while his career as a professional trumpet player lasted for over forty years. (Don't worry - I investigated his passing at length, just continue reading.)

Chet was, first of all, a great melodic improviser. On the spot, he could create fresh melodies on almost any given harmonic framework, night after night. Just check his trumpet solos on *My Funny Valentine*, a song he recorded countless times; no two of them are alike. He played these solos with a fabulous, instantly recognizable mellow sound and an intensity that could be almost embarrassing at times.

He sang as well; as a youngster with a light, boyish, vulnerable voice, that seemed only pleasant but had a melancholy touch underneath. Later, his voice deepened and often sounded tired, but yet he was able to deliver his lyrics effectively; more than most trained singers. He loved to scat too; he did so especially in his later years and his scat singing (vocal improvisation) was quite a lot like his trumpet playing.

According to the party line, Chet was a washed-up musician after his comeback in the early 70s. Less than a shadow of his former self. Those who actually kept listening to him, heard a trumpeter with an impeccable choice of notes. His phrasing was always adventurous and unpredictable and his lyrical, intimate style of playing still serves as an excellent model for all aspiring jazz musicians. It truly epitomizes the phrase 'less is more'.

The first edition of this book was published in Dutch, in 1989. It was Chet's first biography and, together with *Chet / The Discography of Chesney Henry Baker*, the start of serious Chet Baker-research. Editions followed in Germany, the USA, Japan and Hunga-

ry, all with rather small publishing houses. In 2004, I finally started working on a thoroughly updated, expanded and revised edition for the US. Only one-third of the original manuscript remained; another third was rewritten, the rest of this book is new material.

Then, suddenly my US publisher folded, and it turned out no other English-language publisher would seriously consider publishing this book. Most of them automatically assumed I, being a non-American author they had never heard of, had jumped on the band wagon after the world-wide commercial success of the gossip bio *Deep In A Dream* (2002) by James Gavin. Any other information seemed to be too complicated to communicate. I had to shelve my manuscript until it turned out, late 2016, that Uitgeverij Aspekt also publishes books in English and was interested. It's a small, Dutch publishing firm without any budget but immediately, I started working on the book again. Because research never stops.

Bob Zieff, Bill Loughborough and the late Bob Whitlock - earlier just names to me on ancient, yellowed LP sleeves - turned out to be helpful senior citizens, willing to share any information they could provide. The musicians Bernie Fleischer and Sebby Papa straightened me out about Chet's trumpet career before his break-through with Gerry Mulligan. Drummers Artt Frank and Colin Bailey had interesting information about the hazy period 1968-1973, in which Chet had to master the trumpet all over again after having been fitted with dentures. The researchers Klaus Gottwald, Jim Harrod, Doug Ramsey and Peter Mansell sent me countless hours of unissued music and clippings from newspapers and magazines.

I couldn't have written this book without conversations with Chet's widow Carol Baker, his endearing tour manager and trouble-shooter †Peter Huijts, police inspector Rob Bloos, piano player and musical director †Russ Freeman, his fellow trumpet player and landlord Evert Hekkema and his manager Wim Wigt.

I talked to and/or corresponded as well with Chris Ackers, Fernando Argenti, George Avakian, Colin Bailey, Jasper Blom, Max Bolleman, Philip Catherine, Chuck Deardorf, †Maarten Derksen, †Teddy Edwards, Harry Emmerly, John Engels, Helene Fernandez-Lafaro, †Bernie Fleischer, Artt Frank, †Herb Geller, James Harrod, Jimmy Heath, Jarmo Hoogendijk, Eric Ineke, Rocky Knauer, †Jimmy Knepper, Lee Konitz, Bill Loughborough, †Cecco Maino, Ron McLure, †Red Mitchell, Jean Montagne, Ty Newcomb, Edu Ninck Blok, Sebby Papa, †Jacques Pelzer, Maurizio Po, Doug Ramsey, Ack van Rooyen, John Scofield, †Bud Shank, Gerry Teekens, Hein Van de Geyn, Thomas Welvaadt, †Bob Whitlock, Ria Wigt and Bob Zieff.

I also owe thanks to Harvey Bloomfield, Chet's Choice magazine, Annemieke Claassens, Jules Deelder, Rob Dobbin, Lucille Dolab, the Dutch Jazz Archive, Paolo Gant, J. Robert Germeraad, Hans Gerrietsen, Klaus Gottwald, Bob Hagen, Jacqueline van Hattum, Frank van Herk, Peter Kok, Jacquelyn Lang, Ton van Leeuwen, †Hans Henrik Lerfeldt, Tom Mandersloot, Peter Mansell, Marieke Neervoort, Cheryl Dawn Philips, Floris Poll, Ken Poston, Fred Sandbergen, Rob Schilling, Osamu Shirota, Thorbjørn Sjøgren, Alexandra de Vos, Bert Vuijsje, Jan-Jürgen de Waal, †Peter Wolkenhauer, Ingo Wulff and †Mike Zwerin.

The film rights of this book have been sold to Kingsborough Pictures. The movie 'Prince of the Cool' is in the making. Furthermore, I worked as an advisor for 'My Foolish Heart', a Dutch 'neo-noir music film' which will be released in cinemas in 2018. Earlier, I contributed to the legendary documentary 'The Last Days'.

Jeroen de Valk
Amersfoort, The Netherlands, 2017

Chapter 1: A routine burial / Chet Baker's death

Peter Huijts, Chet Baker's tour manager in Europe and Japan, called it 'a wretched funeral'. Almost no one had come except a few family members. Of the old friends, Russ Freeman was one of the few who had taken the trouble to drive to Inglewood Cemetery outside Los Angeles. True, Christopher Mason had come - a rather obscure saxophonist, whose good fortune it was to have nabbed Chet two years earlier for an album of Christmas carols. Now he came to help promote this Christmas album. (1)

According to Huijts, the family did not appear very emotionally involved in the ceremony. His eldest son and namesake Chesney, by his second wife Halema, had even stayed away.

Luckily, some more guys from the old days - bassist Hersh Hamel, pianist Frank Strazzeri and saxophonist Bernie Fleischer - had showed up on this quiet Saturday afternoon, May 21, 1988. They all gave a warm little speech. Fleischer talked about his first encounter with Chet, when the trumpeter was 'a slight, blond kid with riveting good looks, one front tooth missing, wearing Levi's and a white T-shirt'. And about Chet's strange hobbies in those days, such as going sailing for four days, all the time wearing 'his gig suit'.

Chet Baker, the trumpeter and singer, who had created such intense, poignant music in the last ten years of his life, enjoyed little prestige in America. Not much of the music that he made since his final move to Europe in 1978 made an impact here. Of course, the fault was partly his own. He was inept at public relations. He often arrived late to his shows in New York, in bad shape - or not at all.

He even hardly cared about the family he left behind in the States. For fourteen years, his family saw barely a penny of all the money he earned. He was a master spendthrift. In his final years his manager Wim Wigt paid him at least \$1000 a concert, and \$5000 per record. Such sums sufficed for only a few days. When Chet visited his family, he was as burned out as ever. „Chet did nothing but tour”, said his fellow trumpeter and landlord Evert Hekkema after his death. „He had no home, not even a bank account. I always called him the high-class hobo.”

Chet's death on May 13, 1988 in Amsterdam after falling (or, less likely) jumping from a hotel window caused not only consternation but also bewilderment and scandal. It was twelve hours before the 'approximately thirty-year-old man' (as he was described in the initial police report) was identified as the 58-year-old Chet Baker. In countless articles Baker's drug addiction was publicized as if it alone were responsible for his fame.

Chet had taken the train to Amsterdam that Thursday, May 12, in the afternoon. He was in a rather bad way, because he hadn't had a fix since Tuesday night–Wednesday morning. In Rotterdam, he had spent the night in the house of Robert van der Feyst, who at the time was also the host of trumpeter Woody Shaw. Van der the Feyst - his American guests called him 'Bob Holland' - had tried to cop something for Baker, but without success. Chet went directly from Amsterdam's main train station to the Zeedijk area, where there was always something to be had. He bought not only heroin but cocaine as well. After so long a wait, perhaps he figured he deserved something extra.

After scoring, he looked for a hotel. After a brief search, he checked into the Prins Hendrik Hotel in the early evening. Usually when he was in the area he stayed at the more posh Barbizon Palace or Victoria Hotel on the Damrak. But it was Ascension Day, the city was packed, and so he was probably content with less deluxe accommodations. He took a room on the third floor, number C-20.

(It's now called The Chet Baker Room, although the hotel has been rebuilt drastically, leaving only the façade intact. As a result, this third-floor room is now on the fourth floor, and the window sill, that used to be knee-high, is now at your feet. Well, it's the same window anyway.)

In the evening, he was expected at a concert hall in Laren, where he was scheduled to take part in a celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the radio program *Sesjun* along with tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp's band. Just before Chet left for Amsterdam, Peter Huijts had called in order to talk to him about the evening. Huijts wanted to have him picked up at seven o'clock at the Memphis Hotel near the Concertgebouw. There Wim Wigt, his manager, had reserved a room for him. Chet was barely responsive, and it was all Huijts could do just to convey this simple message. Huijts gave Baker his private number as well as the number of the hotel in case there were any problems.

When Wigt's assistant called at the Memphis Hotel that evening, there was no trace of Chet. The program later that evening went on without him. Since 1976, he had played on the show six times; always showing up on in time and providing great music.

That evening, Chet had taken the drugs that he needed so badly. At a some point, he apparently wanted to open the window. Presumably, he wanted a little fresh air. It was a warm night for the time of year. The sill was knee-high. The antique sash only went up after many attempts to open it. The wood was old and had been painted over innumerable times. The window would only go up about two feet. It seemed therefore impossible to sit on the sill comfortably. Although Chet might have been 'nodding out', as heroin addicts sometimes do; sitting bent forward, his head almost between his knees.

Criminal inspector Rob Bloos: „Baker fell or jumped around 3 in the morning. How did it happen? He was intoxicated from the drugs, of course. Heroin puts you into a kind of half-conscious state. Maybe he suddenly had the delusion he could fly.”

Finally: the ultimate revised, updated and expanded edition

Chet Baker was a star at 23 years old, winning the polls of America's leading magazines. But much of his later life was overshadowed by his drug use and problems with the law. 'Chet Baker / His life and music' was Baker's first biography, published a year after Baker's passing in 1988. It was available in five languages.

Now finally, here is Jeroen de Valk's thoroughly updated and expanded edition. De Valk spoke to Baker himself, his friends and colleagues, the police inspector who investigated his death and many others. He read virtually every relevant word that was ever published about Chet and listened to every recording; issued or unissued.

The result of all this is a book which clears up quite a few misunderstandings. For Chet was not the 'washed-up' musician as portrayed in the 'documentary' Let's Get Lost. His death was not that mysterious.

According to De Valk, Chet was first of all an incredible improviser; someone who could invent endless streams of melody. „He delivered these melodies with a highly individual, mellow sound. He turned his heart inside out, almost to the point of embarrassing his listeners.”

Jazz Times: „A solidly researched biography... a believable portrait of Baker... a number of enlightening interviews..”

Library Journal: „De Valk's sympathetic yet gritty rendering of Baker's life blends well with his account of Baker's recording career.”

Cadence: „A classic of modern jazz biography. De Valk's writing is so straightforward as to be stark, yet this is just what makes it so rich.”

Jazzwise: „... it's going to be definitive.”

Jeroen de Valk (1958) is a Dutch musician and journalist. He also authored an acclaimed biography about tenor saxophonist Ben Webster.

www.jeroendevalk.nl



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