



The Door (Chet Baker Series)



Listening (Chet Baker Series)

"Chet Baker sang with an innocent sweetness that made girls fall right out of their saddle oxfords."

- Rex Reed

It's to Baker's credit that he's the most widely debated vocalist since Al Jolson: to some...there are incredibly deep emotions stirring or about to be stirred when he sings, while to others, there's a whole lot of nothing going on, and to still others, that in itself is attractive - as Jim Hoberman says, it's like "being sweet-talked by the void."

- Will Friedwald

Being "sweet-talked by the void" may have been how many of the women involved with Chet Baker would have described their attraction to him. An American trumpet player and singer most popular during the 50's jazz era that included associations with Charlie Parker and Gerry Mulligan, Baker, a James Dean look-alike, was known equally for his charisma as for his infidelity. During the seventies and eighties, despite a life seriously hampered by drug abuse,

his career enjoyed a comeback. At this point, ravaged by his addictions and prematurely aged, he was not a pretty picture, yet, women were still drawn to him like moths to a flame. In general, it is said that, as an egoist, he shamelessly used and abused others and the women in his life, in particular, suffered his deceit. Drawn to him like magnets, they were easy targets and Baker was a willing (if not grateful) recipient of their offerings, be it love or shelter, money or drugs, or whatever else was needed to fill the moment that was his life. That moment ended in 1988, shortly following a concert in Hanover, Germany, when he fell from a second story window in Amsterdam to his death.

In the winter of 2000 I visited the Prins Hendrik Hotel in Amsterdam where a monument - a bronze relief - had been installed on the exterior wall to commemorate Baker's place of departure. Inside, I was led up to the room where Baker had spent his last evening. "**Chet Baker Room**" the sign on the door read, and then, the number 210. I entered. It was an unremarkable but functional room, neither seedy (as I'd expected it to be) nor in any way luxurious, yet, I walked away haunted by the strangeness of it - strange because it wasn't strange at all.

Had the door to room **210** never been opened I might have followed my imagination into its dark recesses to construct a room that would befit a jazz legend who was also a junkie, someone living so close to the edge that one night, inexplicably, he falls, jumps or is pushed from a second story window to his death. There is something very intriguing about a closed door or a door partially opened, inviting yet concealing all that is behind. In pondering this image, I realized then, where Baker's power lay and, thus, in which direction the Chet Baker Series might evolve.

Originally, I'd envisioned the *Chet Baker Series* as incorporating Baker's physical image from infatuating youth to captivating decay. I'd wanted to capture something of this person who was a complex integration of extraordinary musical talent and destructive susceptibility to addiction, the latter which may have governed a great part of his life - his role as father to his three children, his relationships with friends and colleagues and, ultimately, his intimate affairs with women. As I walked from Room 210 of the Prins Hendrik Hotel, however, and out into the cool air of a freshly rained upon street, my sense was that I had just experienced the intrigue of what Chet Baker might have represented as "*a man to a woman.*"

Thus began a series of paintings in which Chet Baker's physical image did not appear in any way at all. Rather, the image of a closed door or partially opened door, represented the man and Chet Baker became, simply, a metaphor for mystery.

The *Chet Baker Series* evolved around the images of doors and the women in these paintings are either **going in** or **coming out** or in a state of **wondering if they should enter**. In one painting entitled, *Listening* (see Available Works) the female figure leans with her back against a stairwell, her head tilted, her eyes closed, while in the hallway a partially open door discreetly beckons. One can only imagine what the woman in this painting listens to... what sounds emanate from behind that door? What music has transported her into an apparent state of ecstasy? What promise does that music hold?

This series is, of course, less about Chet Baker than it is about temptation, seduction and fascination. What lures us toward a "new door" - be that door representative of another human being, a new path in life, an unknown place (geographically or psychologically) - is the promise of what lies ahead. Generally, what lies ahead is the "x" in the equation; it is the unknown, the mystery which human nature craves to satisfy. In the case of Chet Baker, a man whose fascination transcended his music, the stories of women as simplified in the sparse compositions of this series, describe the seductive powers of the man.