

PASSIVE FORM

Don't be fooled by those pulse-slowing tunes: self-destructive jazz prodigy Chet Baker — the most stylish man ever to not give a hoot about clothing — was a man of sheer, energetic brass.

by **christian chensvold** style photography **sidney teo** fashion stylist **marie lee**

When Chet Baker set the jazz scene ablaze in 1953, he quickly came to represent all the contradictions of this often oversimplified decade. Publicly Brylcreemed and clean-cut, Baker was privately addicted to heroin. He achieved popular success, but earned it by playing the hip new style of West Coast jazz overlaid with languid, honeyed vocals. His crash and burn — drugs, prison and a savage beating in which he lost his front teeth, ruining his embouchure — only enhanced his legend. Today, he is widely thought of as one of those rare men who seem to embody their era.

It was Charlie Parker who gave Baker his first break, inviting him to play with him in a series of West Coast gigs in 1951, and the bebop pioneer later told East Coast musicians, “There’s a little white cat on the coast who’s gonna eat you up.” Parker obviously saw that Baker had more than mere jazz chops. This young man with a horn was blessed not only with an impeccable ear for music (he never did learn to read it very well), but with matinee-idol looks in an era when boyishly handsome but brooding personae of Montgomery Cliff and James Dean were deified.

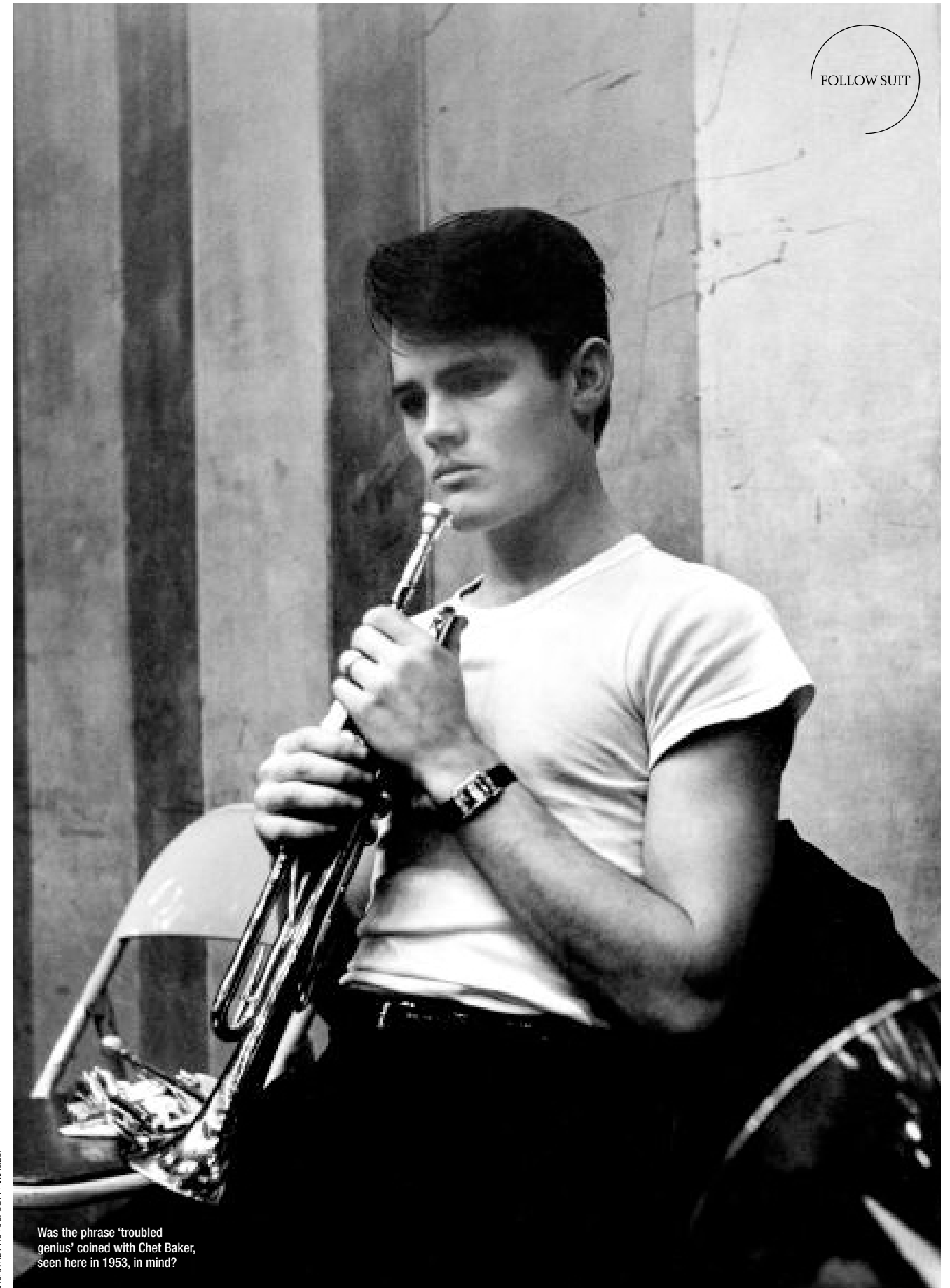
Clothes are merely a frame for the man wearing them and, like all handsome men, Baker looked terrific in anything he wore — which is convenient, since he had little interest in clothes. In 1952, while working on the Los Angeles jazz scene, Baker joined the Gerry Mulligan Quartet and achieved almost instant fame. When the band went east and landed at the legendary Boston jazz club Storyville, Baker met young jazz fan and Ivy League clothier Charlie Davidson (see page 116). “Later Chet came over to the shop,” Davidson recalls. “He knew nothing about clothes, but he had innate taste and everything looked great on him.” Baker was conservative by nature, so it didn’t take much coaxing to get him into a suit that “wasn’t Broadway or Hollywood”, as Davidson puts it. When not suited up for performances (see the checked sport-coat look, recreated by *The Rake’s* stylists on page 68), Baker favoured simple garments like crewneck sweaters and khakis. “He put on his girlfriend’s sweater once,” recalls Davidson, “and the goddamn thing looked great on him.”

Photogenic to the nth degree, Baker inspired many lensmen, who found in him a faultless subject for portraiture. “Richard Avedon was with us one night,” remembers Davidson, “and said, ‘It’s impossible to take a bad photo of this guy.’” Later, in 1988, Baker served as the subject of photographer Bruce Weber’s documentary film *Let’s Get Lost*.

But it was a series of photos by jazz chronicler William Claxton that became the most iconic, revealing Baker in a white undershirt that emphasised the vulnerable intimacy of his whispered singing voice and dreamy looks. The shots reminded observers of a certain other T-shirted ’50s icon who had died in 1955, just when Baker was commencing his ascendance, at the age of 24. “He had those looks that made him the James Dean of jazz,” says Davidson. “He was more James Dean than James Dean.”

Although his death was not as premature as Dean’s, Baker also bowed out young — aged 59, when he fell from the window of an Amsterdam hotel in 1988. The mysterious death (officially ruled an accident) was a bleakly fitting finale to his troubled life, and cemented his legendary status. Stranger still, Baker somehow knew “that his legend would grow after his death”, according to sideman Bob Mover, a saxophonist who played with Baker during the 80s. “He created the perfect PR story with the drugs and prison time,” says Mover. “The best thing he could have done for his career was have a tragic life, and he did. Creation and destruction are closely aligned, and his self-destruction created his legend.”

That wasn’t so easy to live with in the early days. Fame came to Baker so fast it made him spoiled and self-centred, believes Mover. And yet at times the accolades left him sheepish. His inner conflict raged at this point. In the 1950s, Baker topped a series of readers’ polls in magazines such as *Down Beat*, *Metronome* and *Playboy*, beating out fellow trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Clifford Brown, who was Baker’s idol. Recalling this in 1981, Baker told Mover he had wanted to send them letters of apology. “He felt they were vastly superior to him at the time,” recalls



Was the phrase ‘troubled genius’ coined with Chet Baker, seen here in 1953, in mind?

Albums such as *Chet Baker Sings* are as indispensable make-out music for bachelor pads today as they were in the middle of the last century.

Blessed with abundant talent, a handsome mug and a tortured demeanour, Chet Baker was a natural-born lady magnet. Below right: his second wife Halema, backstage with him in Rochester, New York, in 1956.



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Mover. “But he also felt that he had managed to catch up to them as a musician, and yet now nobody wanted to acknowledge it.”

Though his reputation in jazz circles centres on his trumpet playing, Baker’s mystique owes much to that singing voice — intimate, unaffected and vulnerable (in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, Matt Damon’s character plays a Chet Baker vocal track and can’t tell if he’s listening to a man or a woman). It’s undoubtedly an acquired taste, but once listeners overcome the initially disorienting sound of his delicate delivery, they are rewarded with an approach to phrasing and verbal content that perfectly echoes Baker’s light and lyrical style of trumpet playing. Albums such as *Chet Baker Sings* (1956) are as indispensable make-out music for bachelor pads today as they were in the middle of the last century.

Baker’s drug addiction lasted all his adult life, and the resulting run-ins with the law sent him fleeing to Europe. There, the irresistible but possibly apocryphal tale of his encounter with Romano Mussolini was born. Having been warned that his new acquaintance was a little sensitive about his parentage, Baker, on being introduced, supposedly deadpanned: “Hey, I heard about

your dad, man. What a drag.” It was in Italy that, like Oedipus, in trying to escape his fate, Baker ran right into it: he spent over a year in an Italian prison for drug possession. “Chet Baker has the face of an angel and the heart of a demon,” exclaimed the prosecutor. “Trouble comes to anyone who touches him.”

Davidson “never, never, never” suggested that Chet get himself clean, saying it would have been horribly intrusive to address such a private matter (attitudes to drug intervention were clearly different at the time). “Chet was a very private guy,” he says, “and drugs were notoriously popular among jazz musicians at the time. They knew it was illegal, and they knew it was destructive.”



Left: Navy, blue and brown houndstooth wool single-breasted sport coat, **Camps de Luca**; blue cotton shirt and dark grey wool trousers, both **Paul Smith**; white and blue silk pocket square, **Ermenegildo Zegna**.

Below: Chet Baker performing live onstage at the Bimhuis concert hall in Amsterdam on 29 August 1986.

FASHION ASSISTANT: ANNA AVIKKA MARIN
 GROOMING: ANDY BAZZALUSING SHU UEMURA & LOREAL PROFESSIONAL
 MODEL: HENRIQUE RYANE



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The duality of Baker's legend — handsome dreamboat and talented musician turned heroin junkie in exile — overshadows what a great person and friend he could be, according to Davidson, whose memories include noting Baker's natural athleticism while tossing around a baseball. "He was charming, polite, courteous and unaffected by all the fame and adoration, and the almost mystical presence he had for others. He was a unique jazz singer and just as good a trumpet player. I think there were many people who thought they were in love with his music, but they were really in love with him." ❧