

Charlie Christian

Charlie Christian (29 July 1916 - 2 March 1942) was an American jazz guitarist and an innovator in the field of electric guitar. Charles Henry Christian was born in Bonham, Texas into a musically talented family. His mother, Willie Mae, played the piano; his father, Clarence, sang and played the trumpet and guitar; his brother, Clarence Jr., played the violin and the mandolin; and his oldest brother, Edward, played the string bass. His parents wrote accompaniments for silent movies professionally.



The family moved to Oklahoma City when Charlie was two years old, and by the age of twelve, Charlie had created a makeshift guitar from a cigar box. His father and brothers formed a quartet and Charlie, by this time playing a real instrument, was the group's featured guitarist. Influenced by his own training on the trumpet, and by other horn players such as Lester Young, Charlie began to develop a unique style of single-note soloing on the guitar.

After meeting and playing with fellow Texan Eddie Durham, who is widely credited with being the first jazz musician to record with an amplified guitar, Christian began to experiment with the new technology. Amplification provided new artistic opportunities, so in addition to his unique style of soloing, Christian expanded his sound to include the volume, sustain, and tonal flexibility provided by amplification.

At the age of twenty-one he was playing electric guitar and leading a jump band in Oklahoma City. In 1939, pianist Mary Lou Williams recommended Charlie to talent scout John Hammond, who was in Oklahoma City to attend Benny Goodman's first Columbia recording sessions. Hammond convinced Goodman to audition the unknown innovator, and the ensuing partnership became legendary.

Christian paved the way for the modern electric guitar sound that was followed by other pioneers, including T-Bone Walker, Les Paul, B.B. King and Jimi Hendrix. For this reason Christian was inducted in 1990 into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an "Early Influence." Christian was also an important developer of bebop jazz. Jamming at Minton's Playhouse in New York City, he added and absorbed influences which expanded jazz music into a new, sophisticated genre. This experimentalism is readily apparent in recordings Christian made with the Goodman Sextet, a small improvisational combo departure from more orchestrated swing music of Goodman's big band.

Charlie Christian died in 1942 at the age of 25. The contributions he made in his brief but brilliant career live on and continue to influence musicians to this day. Christian is buried in his hometown of Bonham, Texas