

# ARS GRATIA TATUM

## *A Brief Biographical Sketch Of Art Tatum* *The Greatest Pianist In Jazz*



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This is an unexpurgated, uncorrected text of a 1978 paper.

I wrote this at a time when there was very little written about Tatum. Sadly that is still the case. There is one biography: James Lester's *Too Marvelous For Words* (1994, Oxford U.P.). But it is disappointing, too facile for my taste. Facts with insufficient insight.

Arnold Laubich and Ray Spencer's *Art Tatum: A Guide to His Recorded Music* (1982, Scarecrow Press/ Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers) gives an overview of the great pianist's life; but it is primarily a discography, albeit a wonderful one.

By far the greatest work on Tatum is Joseph A. Howard's Ph.D. 3-volume thesis *The Improvisational Techniques of Art Tatum* (1978, Dept. of Music - Case Western). However, his spectacular analysis is not commercially available, and its academic approach does clothe it with a certain opacity.

Beyond these three works there are a few books of transcriptions and some articles, but still far too little on this profoundly great musician.

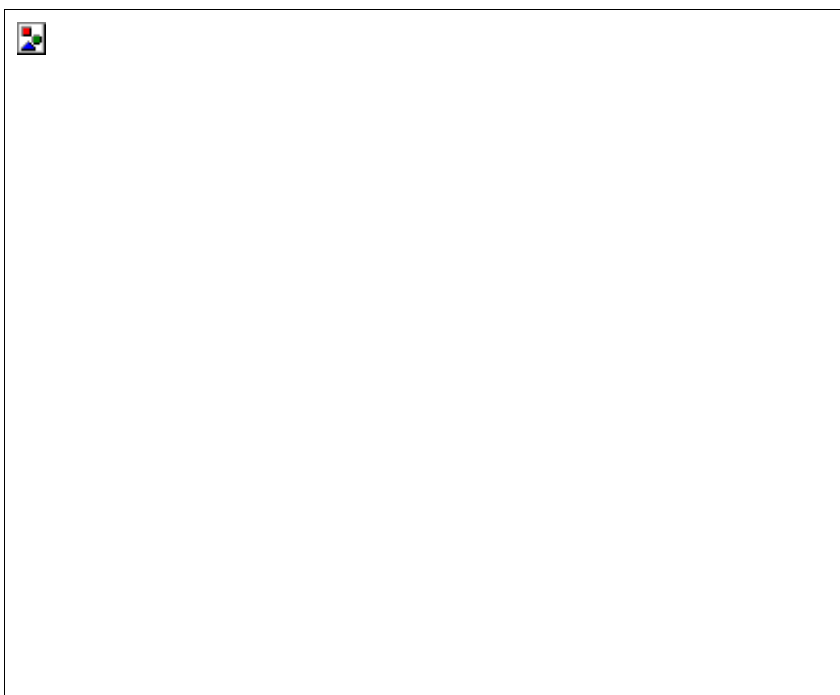
The objective of this paper was to give a biographical analysis of Art Tatum and I think it stands the test of time. Based only on secondary sources, this work does not fancy itself error-free. It is but the synthesis, through combination, elimination and deduction of everything written by 1978 on Tatum - well, almost everything. It incorporates none of the post-1978 sources.

I beg pardon for any errors in the paper. There is a selective bibliography at the end.

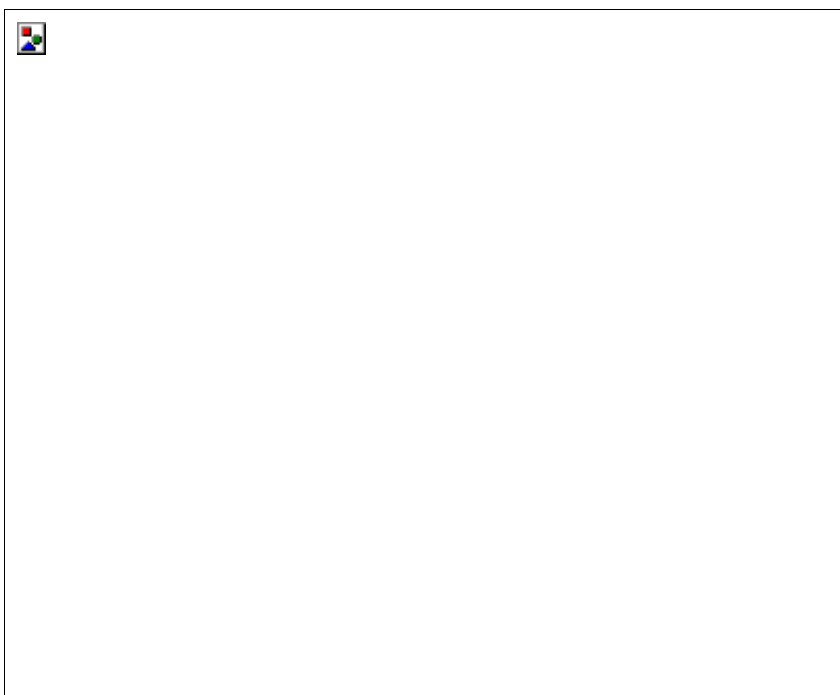
With this paper I want to bring to Art Tatum the tribute and honour I feel he deserves but rarely receives, the best *quid pro quo* I can offer for the enrichment through music he has brought to me.

Finally, the advent of the Internet has made cruelly unseen video of Tatum available. In watching Tatum, we learn so much about his genius, and how he achieved a wealth of sound, with a relative economy of means. These two

clips are available through youtube.com. The first shows Tatum playing his stunning arrangement of Jerome Kern's *Yesterdays*:



The second clip is of Tatum's reworking of Dvorak's *Humoresque*:



Ron Davis



**When** Art Tatum died in 1956, nature defied one of its principal laws by leaving a vacuum unfilled. And so it remains. A pianist with the classifications Jazz: Swing, he was actually more from Jazz than of it; and furthermore, only on his very worst days did he fall into the Swing idiom. However, the Tatum enigma has yet to be solved: sizzling, awesome technique; harmonies and changes still "avant garde" after thirty years; long, sinewy lines drawn from his melody - subject. Art Tatum was an original the likes of which John Mehegan claims to know only two others - Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker<sup>1</sup>; Whitney Balliet would add Duke Ellington<sup>2</sup>; we might add John Coltrane. As in the cases of those greats, time has blurred the fact and the fiction concerning Tatum's life, about which little information exists anyway. Still, the basic story can be accurately told and it begins in Toledo, Ohio.

Born October 13, 1910, Arthur was the first of three children, and brother to Arlene and Karl Tatum. Doctors operated repeatedly on the milk cataracts in both eyes and, though one eye remained closed for life, they did provide him with near-total vision in the other; a mugger's blow during Tatum's early teens aggravated this delicate situation. Nonetheless, Art always had some degree of vision in the one eye and resented people calling him blind. He liked to show his independence and insisted on doing everything on his own with no help.

"My eyes were bad and I studied with the Braille system. However, I could see well enough to use glasses to see the notes just as other people do, too."<sup>3</sup>

Tatum first attended the Jefferson School for handicapped children in Toledo before moving on to the Cousino School for the Blind in Columbus. While he received his first formal instruction in music at Cousino, he had already had a great deal of informal training at home.

As the son of amateur musicians - his engineer father played guitar, his mother piano - Art grew up in a musical atmosphere which comprised both 'Classical' and Jazz. In the manner of the great pianists from Mozart to Horowitz via Hofmann, the four year-old Tatum began picking out tunes on the keyboard with devilish accuracy and ease; he had perfect pitch. At one point in his youth, probably in Columbus, Tatum began learning violin only to abandon it as he became more interested in and proficient at piano. Whether he did or did not play Classical is difficult to determine; but Tatum certainly had the intention of becoming a concert pianist in the early days of his education. Although he was no less partial to Jazz, the fact that his being Black robbed him of almost certain success in the longhair world left Art embittered until the day he died.

"Fats, man. That's where I come from. And quite a place to come from," he told Nat Cole<sup>4</sup>. Tatum made much use of the stride style exemplified by Fats Waller and even took it one step further. Goaded on by the boys who said he had no left hand, Tatum created superstride, maintaining the note-chord-oom-pah execution and introducing therein a richness of sound not to be found in even the greatest of striders' work. Furthermore, somewhere along the line, Tatum's left hand became independent in its own right capable not only of the standard comping, but of shaping and sustaining lines, melodies even.

Less Waller could be found in the right hand, though. The great American popular songs already lying under his fingers, Art was discovering the possibilities of the keyboard and breaking out of the confines of contemporary harmony. Obviously the ideas of Earl Hines and Lee Sims could be heard in the nascent Tatum style (light-years ahead of those two even in the early days); but, as Teddy Wilson said himself:

"He (Tatum) is the one musician whose origins you can't trace."<sup>5</sup>

And this from one of Tatum's best friends!

At about eighteen years of age, he began to work for Toledo radio station WSPD. An undated newspaper advertisement heralds:

Arthur Tatum - Toledo's blind pianist

If you haven't been listening to Ellen Kay's daily shopping chats over WSPD, you've missed something. If you don't start listening tomorrow, you'll be missing something more. Beginning tomorrow morning Toledo's famous blind pianist, Arthur Tatum, will sprinkle Ellen Kay's shopping talks with sparkling syncopations on the piano.<sup>6</sup>

As an NBC affiliate, WSPD also threw some national work Tatum's way which gave him very valuable exposure and experience; but this was not the only way the young pianist began to make a name for himself. Rumours were spreading in the Jazz world about a musical phenomenon in Toledo; important performers kept their eyes open for the wunderkind whenever they passed through. Duke Ellington heard Tatum in his early days<sup>7</sup>; so did Joe Turner the pianist<sup>8</sup>. Fletcher Henderson told of being asked one night during intermission by a young kid to listen to his piano-playing. The kid persisted and Henderson agreed, as he had probably done so many times in the past. Paying scant attention at first, the bandleader's hair began to stand on end as he heard the kind of sounds the child Tatum was milking from the piano. Henderson didn't have to be a prophet to realize he had stumbled on to something big<sup>9</sup>. When singer Adelaide Hall made the same discovery, she immediately engaged Tatum as her accompanist and by 1930 they were touring the country together.

It comes as no surprise to read Miss Hall's recollections of stopping in the middle of performances to listen to what Tatum was doing behind her; or of Tatum being wildly applauded for one of his solos. "But you know, he never really was an accompanist," she confessed<sup>10</sup>. Of course, only an audition of those long gone 1932 Hall-Tatum discs could bear out the singer's claim. However that may be, Adelaide Hall can take credit for not only introducing our man to recording studios, but for dragging the reluctant pianist out of Ohio and into New York, Jazz capital U.S.A., world, etc., which capital Tatum conquered in one 1931 evening.



The cutting session played an important role in Jazz piano circles while Fats, James P. Johnson and Willie the Lion Smith were around. Pianist after pianist would take his turn at trying to prove who was best, who could play the fastest, the cleanest, who could grind some tune out with the most inventive changes and runs. Of course, no one, with the major exception of Donald Lambert, ever cut the triumvirs. Until Tatum.

Playing the Lafayette Theatre with Miss Hall, this his first gig in the Apple, Art Tatum became the man to reckon with in two days flat. Fats, smelling blood, looked up his 21 year-old idolater and arranged for him to appear at one of the nocturnal sessions the following night.

Everybody showed up and the playing got under way. With all the tension in the air, the music was sounding better than it ever had before. One man sat down then made room for another who in turn got up for a third, each player successively topping the other as the electricity became stronger and stronger until only Waller, Johnson and the new kid were left. At Fats' insistence, Tatum finally sat down and pulled out his version of "Tea for Two". When he finished, the room remained silent while the dumbstruck musicians tried to catch their breath...

...then James P. figured that it was his turn. He got up quickly and lost no time in starting in on one of his own specialties. There was no relaxing now. He tried the old reliables (Carolina) "Shout" and "Keep Off the Grass" and he played his best. Fats followed with his "Handful of Keys" which drew a few cheers, but nothing could take away the feeling that Tatum had the edge. Art returned to the piano and played a version of "Tiger Rag" which left the audience limp....the locals had been cut and they knew it.

With no early phase, no transitional period, Art Tatum was on top and in the Jazz picture for good<sup>11</sup> .

Tatum left Adelaide Hall in late 1932 and began taking solo jobs in New York clubs and theatres, which eventually led to his first solo sides (four) on the Brunswick label in March, 1933<sup>12</sup>. Around this time, too, Art became a good friend of George Gershwin. The composer used to hold parties just to showcase Tatum's pianism, especially enjoying its application to his own tunes. (Gershwin having studied with the great ragtime/stride pianist Luckey Roberts, certainly had more than a superficial knowledge of Jazz.) since the Gershwin crowd included many of the great musician immigrants - Rachmaninov, Elman, and father-in-law Leopold Godowsky - Tatum was now exposed to their shrewd, frank criticism; but he seems to have stood his ground safely. Oscar Levant tells of Godowsky enjoying Tatum for the first twenty minutes but soon tiring of the same thing for two hours<sup>13</sup>; wouldn't anybody have the same reaction if he listened to two hours' worth of one composer's music without ever having heard any of it before? Levant also tells of Gershwin later finding Tatum in a Hollywood nightclub:

To George's great joy, Tatum played virtually the equivalent of Beethoven's thirty-two variations on his tune "Liza". Then George asked for more<sup>14</sup> .

Tatum left New York before New Year's 1935, going first to Cleveland and

then on to Chicago's famous Three Deuces club where he led his own band for two years. In 1938, following the examples of many other Jazz musicians of the day, Art decided to pack things up and cross the pond. Though he ended up staying in London only three months - playing at Ciro's Club with time off for a few Continental engagements - England must have been a revelation to Tatum as far as audiences went; and they certainly never went as far as American audiences did. Tatum had already developed the habit of keeping a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon at his side, taking a swig with his right hand while his left took over, and of hiding a bottle of whisky for intermissions. Nothing points to Tatum's ever having been an chronic alcoholic, though he did like to maintain the 'buzz'. Actually, even though Art had the unmatched ability to command club patrons' attention, there never lacked the offensive loudmouths to make life difficult for the pianist; where artistry failed, then, alcohol took over and it finally killed Tatum because he died of uraemic poisoning.

Despite the undoubtedly welcome respite, Tatum, like Coleman Hawkins, fully understood the implications of Hitler's ranting and returned to the U.S. he had been married and based in Hollywood, California with a son, Orlando, since at least 1936; but outside of this we know little about Tatum's first marriage, and for that little there is only Jay McShann, the great blues pianist and sometime bandleader, to thank<sup>15</sup>. McShann tells of making the after-hours scene in Hollywood with his good friend, whose wife seems to have been something of a nag. Art would announce that he was going out; Mrs. Tatum would bawl him out for always coming home in the wee hours of the night; Mr. Tatum in turn would vow to be back early and end up, of course, playing piano well into the next morning, keeping himself lubricated with drinks paid for by the listeners. Somehow, this marriage was still going strong in 1949 with the addition of two Dobermans, no less<sup>16</sup>.

If Tatum's domestic home was Hollywood, however, his professional home was and always would be New York; significantly, upon his return from England, Tatum made a beeline for the Apple and remained there until 1943. One of the city's attractions may have been Tatum's friend and admirer, Vladimir Horowitz.

Hazel Scott, the singer-pianist, claims to be the one who introduced the great Russian master to the music of Art Tatum and no one has ever gainsaid her story<sup>17</sup>. As she tells it, Scott, Horowitz and Artie Shaw, of all people, made their way one night to the downtown Cafe Society. Horowitz was dazzled, surprised beyond belief. The next night he brought his father-in-law to hear Tatum. Toscanini shook his head, amazed; he knew he had heard a Pianist. From here, Andre Previn provides the only other known insight into this vaguely understood friendship, so essential to the comprehension of Tatum<sup>18</sup>.

With Hofmann, Lhevinne and Godowsky still around, Horowitz had not quite yet reached the top of the pile, and so he took to making his own finger-wrenching transcriptions, using them as his finales. Audiences had already gone wild over the "Gypsy Theme from Carmen" and, especially, his "Stars and Stripes Forever"; Horowitz was in search now for a new, more effective theme. He chose Vincent Youman's "Tea for Two". Months and months of

work produced a virtuoso showpiece so knotty that it took Horowitz several months more to prepare and learn it for performance. Always the conscientious artist, he wanted first to have the opinions of those whom he respected before taking the transcription to the public; of course he asked Tatum.

Up in his apartment, Horowitz sat himself at the piano and began to play "Tea for Two" for his Jazz counterpart. Thunder and lightening, hail and brimstone, Horowitz finished the piece and looks up immediately at Tatum with an eager set of eyes.

"What do you think?" asks the Russian.

"Very good. I enjoyed it." comes the answer. Pause. Tatum continues: "Would you like to hear my version of 'Tea for Two'?"

"Certainly I would. Go ahead."

Tatum gets up and launches into the piece that has always been one of his specialties. Horowitz' mouth drops when he hears what he hears and as soon as the Jazzman finishes:

"My God! That was fantastic! Where did you get that transcription? You must give it to me!"

"Transcription?" answers Tatum, "That was no transcription. I was just improvising!"

Horowitz still likes to play "Tea for Two" for his own pleasure<sup>19</sup>; but to this very day, he has never played it in public.

These kind of rencontres were rare, however, since both artists had work on their minds. Among other places, Tatum landed a job at the stylish Harlem club with the unstylish name Jimmy's Chicken Shack. There, during intermissions, the pianist would grope his way through the dimly-lighted dining area into the kitchen and pull out his hidden bottle of bonded with only the dishwasher looking on. The year was 1938. Of course Charlie Parker only dared to look on and never once actually talked to Tatum; but he absorbed Tatum's ideas: the runs, the quodlibets, staggering harmonies, mighty technique - all that would characterize the mature Bird of six years later. Parker's stay at Jimmy's - the only non-musical job he would ever hold - began the same time as Tatum's and ended on the same day, three months later, that the pianist left. This fact alone should point to a more than slight connection between Tatum and Bop, but only Parker-biographer Ross Russel makes something of it<sup>20</sup>; actually, there exists an even stronger link between the two (i.e. Tatum-Bop).

Around 1939-40, the 52nd Street clubs became the major after-hours centers in New York and, undisputedly, Tatum the major after-hours pianist. With Minton's as headquarters, the musicians would get together and, free to play what they pleased for as long as they pleased, would explore paths previously

closed to them by Public Popular Taste. Out of this arose Bebop. Now, it can only be inferred from the murky picture we have of those days and those places; but given Tatum's pre-eminent status then and there, his influence on Thelonious Monk and, especially, Bud Powell, does John Mehegan's Louis-Tatum-Bird<sup>21</sup> three-word history of Jazz seem so implausible?

A little more on this vague notion of after-hours. Having finished playing for the Whitefolk at about one o'clock a.m., the Jazzmen would all converge on a club or restaurant and get the real blowing underway, usually continuing into the early morning hours. The audiences consisted mostly of other musicians who urged the performers on; laymen sat quietly and listened and kept the musicians well-lit by buying them drinks. Tatum lived for after-hours. However, no record of this aspect of his playing existed until 1973, when Onyx Records released Jazz fanatic Jerry Newman's private acetate recordings of Tatum made in late-night Harlem nightspots during 1940-41; filling only a single LP-record, they were titled "God is in the House"<sup>22</sup>. About the disc, even the eloquent Whitney Balliet could only manage a flat: "What a miraculous record."<sup>23</sup> What Billy Taylor<sup>24</sup>, Carmen McRae<sup>25</sup> and everyone else had been saying all along came suddenly to be proved true: Art Tatum was even greater during after-hours. Relaxed, daring, with a raw bite to his Jazz that seemed to go against the grain of his more polished 'other' style, Tatum went far beyond Bop into realms not yet explored, at these nocturnal sessions; one listen to the "Sweet George Brown" on the Onyx album is enough to bear out even that heady claim. This side of Art Tatum cannot be overstressed; he would spend sleepless nights just to stay out at some joint and play all night, both solo and with others.

Around 1942, bassist Slam Stewart, with his patented con arco, con voce solos, began sitting in regularly with Tatum. They both had perfect pitch and superior musicianship and they both hit it off right from the start. Tatum at the time was learning the hard way about the public's fickleness: he was having trouble getting a job in spite of just having recorded his biggest hit ever - the 1941 "Wee Baby Blues" with singer Joe Turner. Of course Tatum loved playing and money or lack thereof could not stop him; but he did have bills to pay, and a change would have been very refreshing just then. So, in 1943, Stewart and Tatum, along with tyro guitarist Tiny Grimes formed the Art Tatum Trio.

The trio enjoyed a popularity and success which allowed it to stay together - with time off for individual work - until Tatum's death. Of course Art didn't need the rhythmic support; he said himself, "...a band hampers me."<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless he adapted and so gave for a swinging group that offered intricate harmonies and counter-melodies played with pinprick accuracy and logic. One has trouble believing that they never rehearsed, but Grimes and his replacement from 1952 on, Everett Barksdale, each make this claim<sup>27</sup>. This only renders their music all the more remarkable. Listening to their records of, for example, "Flying Home" (their theme) or "I Got Rhythm" one hears a solid yet spontaneous sound; the driving exuberance of Tatum with Stewart hot in pursuit, while Grimes's bloopy electric guitar, barely matching the others' rhythmic and conceptual pace, keeps things aswinging.

Why in the world did those guys keep *me*? I know I was the weakest thing in

there, but after we started working, I'd go downstairs during every intermission with my guitar and work and work on whatever song we'd been playing, trying to catch up with them. I did that every set....<sup>28</sup>

The records belie Grimes's modesty: he is a steady backup man and certainly a competent soloist. Tatum did not occupy himself with technique in music. Although he had it all, Art was more concerned with what a musician had to say and, whether it be one or one hundred notes, if what that musician had to say was worth hearing, then he won Tatum's respect. Grimes always had something to say and he said it sincerely.

Aside from his trio work, Tatum travelled around the country doing solo club dates and some solo concerts, among which concerts the 1947 Hollywood Bowl "Just Jazz" concert produced and recorded by Gene Norman<sup>29</sup>. When along on stage, Tatum played in overdrive and gave scintillating performances of extreme depth and beauty. The Norman recording gives evidence of a pianistic and, what is more, musical marvel; one listen to the exquisite "Yesterdays" or the crackling yet understated "How High the Moon" would suffice to silence the "all flash no music" inanity forever. Actually in 1947 Tatum reached his zenith; a perfect balance between the harmonies and the technique with all of the robust energy which would soon leave him. Still, despite having won the 1944 Esquire Medal as best Jazz pianist of the year, with the ensuing appearance as both soloist and accompanist in the Leonard Feather Metropolitan Opera House concert, Art Tatum was to go from 1947 until 1953 virtually unrecorded. He never lacked for work in this period, but posterity can hear too little of this mature, pre-decline Tatum.

He did, however, land a few minutes in Alfred Green's water-logged 1947 biopic "The Fabulous Dorseys". Tatum is made to suffer the ignominy of having the camera cut away from his solo - a rare original number - to Marjorie Main's engagement; and of being turned down to almost 'inaudible' during the tepid group work with Dorsey. All the same, this is Tatum's only screen appearance and there exists no other way to get a glimpse of his great pyriform body in motion; the closely-cropped bristle, baby teeth and porcine nose; chocolate smooth skin barely containing the pudgy child's-face. One observes that, despite his size, Tatum had a glowing, seraphic look to him, fitting for such a divine pianist.

As the 1950's opened up, Tatum's relentless lifestyle began to take its toll. By 1954 he had already given up drinking (overnight), and had begun to shed some of his excess ventral baggage. The fingers seemed to be in decline, too; but was this the case? Technique clearly subordinated conceptions in the thirties, chops first then musicianship; the forties found a Tatum who had struck a golden mean. Now he became almost overripe. The ideas bubbled over with such speed that Tatum's hands had trouble following his mind; not that he made many mistakes - perish the thought - for now Tatum had and was using more technique than ever. His new style was less smooth, more aggressively intellectual and now beautiful in a different way. Around this time Tatum also began to get his artistic due.

I've been working to get Tatum on record for years, and, well, it finally happened. I got him in a studio. This, I decided would be the definitive work on

Tatum. For once and for all.<sup>30</sup>

Norman Ganz could well afford to undertake such a project and to undertake it he did. The pioneer producer, who had made his fortune in JATP and the 'Verve' record label, released 98 tracks on 14 LP albums in the spring of 1954 with the title "The Genius of Art Tatum" on the Clef label. Tatum, having actually put over 120 tunes on tape in three sessions, was given free reign with these recordings, which mean no A&R man, no time limit and the best possible studio connections. Twenty years later, for their re-release in 1975, Granz added the originally unreleased sides to the original 98 Clef records and called them "The Tatum Solo Masterpieces"<sup>31</sup>; a telling change in titles. These discs show Tatum not at his after-hours best, rather, at his show club sterile best. To be sure, the music is no less than great: his unprepared modulation in "Getting Sentimental Over You" followed by his instant return to the home key would stun any listener; he never loses a beat, the flow is constant, the ideas retain their logic and as usual, his taste in tunes has betrayed no lapses. Those same comments could apply to almost any of the songs in the set, but... the intensity has disappeared; the vigour and the soul are gone. Sad to say, Granz engaged an Art Tatum who was not only declining physically, but who had reached a spiritual ebb as well.

Locked into a life of being the most respected Jazz pianist, yet the least sought after, Tatum had been robbed of his enthusiasm by years of ungratifying cocktail work. After-hours had quietly died in the late 'forties. Too, Tatum's divorce from his first wife must have taken place sometime during this period. Need one ask the reasons for Tatum's malheur de vivre? The pianist had not lost his friends, however. When Andre Hodeir implied that Granz had gone overboard with his use of the 'genius' epithet<sup>32</sup>, the whole Jazz world set out to have him drawn and quartered. Alas, in this case the Frenchman had made no mistake; Tatum certainly was a genius but this monumental set of recordings was not the "Genius of Tatum". Ironically, Granz's efforts were to mark the beginning of a final, all too brief period of happiness in the life of Art Tatum.

His name in the Jazz light again, Tatum began touring North America as soloist with JATP, on bills with Errol Garner - whom Tatum used to call "My little boy"<sup>33</sup> - Stan Kenton and the like, and on his own. Art also started winning Downbeat Jazz polls again ('54, '55, '56); they have always stood up as good measures of an artist's popularity. One more cause for Tatum's lighter spirits: in October, 1955 he took a new wife. He had met Geraldine ten years earlier in a New York nightclub only to rediscover her soon after in California. Preserving their friendship over the period of a decade, they finally decided to tie the knot. And so, Art Tatum was back where he belonged, on top.

Following the solo sides, Granz produced eight Tatum plus ensemble recordings between June, 1954 and September, 1956; released individually in the 'fifties, they were brought out as a package in 1975 under the title "The Tatum Group Masterpieces"<sup>34</sup>. Whatever was missing in the "Genius" set, can certainly be found here. Playing with, variously, Benny Carter, Buddy de Franco, Roy Eldridge, Lionel Hampton among others, Tatum shows all the fire and verve needed to make these sessions successful. His return to public

favour has obviously renewed his energy; he even seems to have almost marshalled his ideas, his 'new' style. While Tatum, whether soloing or comping, dominates all of these albums, he never suffocates any of his partners, so that the music may breathe; and certainly it does breathe: excitement, refinement, melody. One can safely say that this ensemble work contains some of the highlights of all recorded Jazz.

This tantalizing brief announcement appeared in the April 11, 1956 edition of *Variety*:

Art Tatum, vet blind Jazz pianist is stepping into the longhair field with a tour to begin in the late summer... Dates already lined up are appearances with the Buffalo Philharmonic and two concerts at Stratford Shakespearean Festival, Ontario, Canada. Word is also awaited from the British Musicians Union as to whether it will give Tatum the greenlight to appear as guest artist at the Edinburgh Music Festival this summer.<sup>35</sup>

His streak of fortune was clearly far from running out. But Art Tatum died before this, the avowed dream of his life, materialized; the kind of tragedy that almost characterized Tatum's existence. Collapsing from a massive heart attack in the month of July, Tatum immediately cancelled all his concert dates for that summer. Oscar Peterson, by now Art's protege and best friend, jumped in to fill the open spot at Stratford; the famous concert recordings from that date show to what degree Peterson was inspired by the thought of his ailing idol. For Tatum, who earlier in the year had postponed a solo European tour arranged by Norman Granz, the disappointment must have been no less than great.

Still, by September 11 Art was up, around and in the studio recording an album with Ben Webster - the last Granz session he ever did, a beautiful effort which hints not at all at the pianist's imminent death. Tatum also took some club and party work, the bootlegged recordings of which serve as the only testimony of his playing in the final days.

The change must have come suddenly; for in mid-September, Tatum was playing as well as ever. By the week before his death, however, as the transcription of a club date bears out, his music had become mushy, almost garbled, he was dropping notes, his performance had a perfunctory quality to it. It was in the middle of one such engagement that Tatum just stopped playing, got up and phoned Geraldine to tell her that he intended to fly back home the next morning. Years of dieting and abstention could not rid his body of all the poisons that had built up inside. Tatum entered Queen of Angels hospital on November 5 after collapsing from what was diagnosed as uraemic poisoning. He died next morning at one o'clock, six days before a scheduled national television broadcast.

If the public wavered in their fondness for Tatum, the world of music certainly didn't. In early 1956, Leonard Feather asked 120 of Jazz's 'top' musicians to vote for their choice as 'Musician's Musician'. Tatum won not only this distinction hands down, but in passing also picked up the 'Pianist's Pianist' award. No less impressive is the number of people, masters all of their instruments and styles, who have spoken of their admiration for this truly

great artist in the most laudatory terms; a partial listing of whom would include:

Vladimir Horowitz; Arturo Toscanini; Phillippe Entremont; Samson Francois; Bill Evans; Herbie Hancock; McCoy Tyner<sup>36</sup> Paul Whiteman<sup>37</sup>; Dave Brubeck<sup>38</sup>; Lenny Breau<sup>39</sup>; John Lewis; Mel Powell<sup>40</sup>; Leopold Stokowski<sup>41</sup>; Benny Carter<sup>42</sup>; Sarah Vaughan<sup>43</sup>; Oscar Peterson<sup>44</sup>; Andre Watts<sup>45</sup>; Earl Hines<sup>46</sup>; Andre Previn<sup>47</sup>.

Such a list could certainly fill a volume and yet, despite such distinguished recognition from fellow musicians, Art Tatum's public acceptance has been slight. At a recent Carnegie Hall concert, when Herbie Hancock asked his young audience whom they most associated with the solo piano, its members quickly responded with shouts of "Keith Jarrett! Keith Jarrett!" Hancock simply grimaced and let the people know that he had meant Art Tatum<sup>48</sup>.

Critics, or at least those people whose profession consists of writing about Jazz, have done little to further the cause. Certainly Leonard Feather, the one critic who knows Jazz from both sides and backs up his work by producing concerts and albums, has been a lifelong champion of Art Tatum. On the other hand "writers" such as Frank Tirro come along. In his quasi-history of Jazz<sup>49</sup>, based wholly on secondary sources - and with examples of proper English few and far between - Tirro manages to desecrate the memory of Tatum and offend Jazz fans in a mere three paragraphs<sup>50</sup>. He speaks of Tatum as a strictly Swing musician and goes on to imply that one should substitute for 'musician' the term 'technician' - notions as unreasoned as they are absurd; Tirro claims that Arthur Rubinstein - which he spells Rubenstein - once went to visit Tatum in a club - pure fabrication; he describes Tatum's rhythm as "...not always rock-steady..." and so betrays an understanding of rhythm as profound as a puddle. Space prohibits any further anatomization of Tirro's twaddle but, suffice it to say that he is not alone in his misrepresentations of Art Tatum.

Theories abound as to Tatum's non-acceptance; and of course, for each theory there exists a counter-theory. These aside, one can only hope for a spectacular resurrection along the lines of Mendelssohn/Bach to bring Tatum back into the public eye. Gone but not forgotten, Art Tatum waits patiently for the posthumous celebrity he deserves.

Ron Davis, 1978

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### C. LINER NOTES

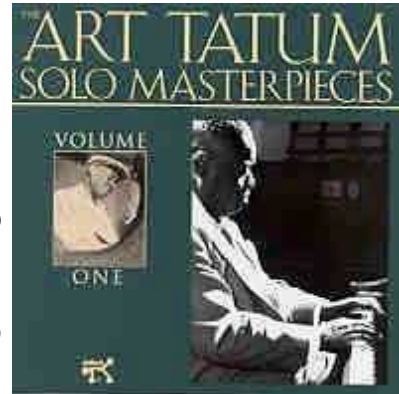
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### FOOTNOTES

[1] Mehegan, J. "In Memoriam", *Down Beat*, Dec. 12, 1956, pp.15 ff.

[2] Balliet, W. "Musical Events - Jazz Records", *New Yorker*, July 30, 1973, p.69

[3] Tatum quoted in: Spencer, R. "Art Tatum: an Appreciation", *Jazz Journal*, Aug. 1966, p.6

[4] Tatum quoted by Barry Ulanov who claims to have been there: "History of Jazz Pianists", *Metronome*, Aug. 1951, p.15

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[6] Reproduced in Spencer, op. cit.

[7] Ellington, E.K. Duke, *Music Is My Mistress*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973, p.169

[8] Turner, J. "Pianists in my Life", *Melody Maker*, Jan. 8, 1955, p.3.

[9] Spencer, op. cit. p.7

[10] Race, S. "Tatum", *Melody Maker*, Oct. 15, 1955, p.9

[11] This whole anecdote recounted in: Kirkeby, E., *Ain't Misbehavin'*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1966, pp.145-150

[12] These are available on *Piano Starts Here* (Columbia, CS 9655) along with Tatum's 1947 Hollywood concert; this was released in Europe as *An Art Tatum Concert* (CBS mono 62615) with only three of the Brunswick sides included.

[13] Levant, O. *A Smattering of Ignorance*, New York: Doubleday, 1940, pp.195-196

[14] Ibid.

[15] Jones, M. "Tatum World's Greatest Bluesman - McShann", *Melody Maker*, Apr. 3, 1971, p.38

[16] "Solo Man", *Time*, Dec. 5, 1949, p.56

[17] Quoted in the liner notes to *A Tatum Concert*, op. cit.

[18] Related in a January, 1977 P.B.S. television show with Oscar Peterson.

[19] As Horowitz himself made it clear in the Jan. 8, 1978 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, p.46.

[20] Russell, Ross *Bird Lives!*, New York: Chaterhouse, 1975, pp.99-102

[21] Op. cit.

[22] *God Is In The House*, Onyx 205

[23] Op. cit.

[24] Taylor, B. "Billy Taylor replies to Art Tatum Critic", *Down Beat*, Sept. 21, 1955, p.17

[25] Quoted in: Shapiro, N. and Hentoff, N. *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, New York: Dover, 1955, p.335

[26] Quoted in *Time*, op. cit.

[27] Grimes quoted in: Dance, S. *The World of Swing* (vol. 1), New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974, pp.360-366. Barksdale: Jones, M. "Tatum", *Melody Maker*, Aug. 11, 1956, p.3

[28] Dance, S. op. cit. p.364.

[29] *Piano Starts Here*, op. cit.

[30] Granz, N. "Tatum, the Story Behind the Records", *Melody Maker*, Jan. 8, 1955, p.3.

- [31] *The Tatum Solo Masterpieces*, 13LP set Pablo 2625 703
- [32] Hodeir, A. "The Genius of Art Tatum", *Down Beat*, Aug. 10, 1955, pp.9-10
- [33] Coss, B. "A Personal Glimpse of Erroll Garner", *Down Beat*, Oct. 25, 1962, p.22.
- [34] *Tatum Group Masterpieces*, 8LP set Pablo 2625-706.
- [35] *Variety*, April 11, 1956, p.45.
- [36] Quotations collected by Henri Renaud and reprinted on *An Art Tatum Concert* sleeve, op. cit.
- [37] *Time*, op. cit.
- [38] *Contemporary Keyboard*, Dec. 1977.
- [39] Private conversation.
- [40] *An Art Tatum Concert*, op. cit.
- [41] In a CBS Memorial concert broadcast Nov. 10, 1956. Reported in: *Down Beat*, Dec. 26, 1956, p.7.
- [42] Quoted in: "Tatum Death Brings Flood of Tributes from Jazzmen", *Down Beat*, Dec. 12, 1956, p.9.
- [43] CBS concert, op. cit.
- [44] Lyons, Len "Oscar Peterson", *Contemporary Keyboard*, Mar. 1978, p.33.
- [45] *Contemporary Keyboard*, Dec. 1977.
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