

Art Tatum plays “Beguin The Beguine” (Cole Porter)

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Art Tatum Biography

Full name, Arthur Tatum, Jr.; born October 13, 1909, in Toledo, OH; died November 5, 1956, in Los Angeles, CA; father was a factory worker/mechanic and played some amateur piano; mother was an amateur pianist, violinist; son, Orlando, born 1933; married Ruby Arnold August 1, 1935; divorced, February, 1955; married Geraldine Williamson, November, 1955.



Much about the life of legendary pianist Art Tatum remains ambiguous: his birthdate; the cause of his blindness; the

musicality of his parents; his exact niche as a musician; his association with classical musicians; and his ability to play as a group member. However, upon listening to the recorded artistry of this genius, it seems clear that his immense talent has made him one of the greatest pianists ever heard.

Virtually every jazz pianist active today, whether knowingly or innocently, owes some debt to Tatum who, in the 1930s, transformed jazz piano's lexicon for all time. Indeed, major players of other instruments trace their development to having listened to the new concepts Tatum brought to the keyboard. Jazz critic/writer/producer Leonard Feather has called Tatum "the greatest soloist in jazz history, regardless of instrument."

The Tatum family in 1909's Toledo lived in a small, but tightly-knit black community. Accounts from friends, neighbors and even family members differ as to the degree of musicality of Arthur, Jr.'s parents. Yet, their support of his consuming interest and training is undoubtable. All agree that at a tender age the oldest Tatum child demonstrated a remarkable ability to listen to tunes heard in church or elsewhere and to pick them out on the well-maintained family piano. In all probability, basic lessons from his mother ensued, closely followed by formal training in specialized schools.

The cause of Tatum's visual handicap has never been clearly established. The pianist's major biographer, James Lester, in his *Too Marvelous for Words*, examines the facts and tales that have come from friends and family. Included are stories of normal birth, impairment due to early bouts of measles, scarlet fever and diphtheria, development of thick cataracts, and exposure of his eyes to bright sunlight by his mother. Lester is persuaded that the cataracts probably developed from the diseases and that, through a long series of operations, limited sight was restored by about age ten.

[Art Tatum's sheet music download here.](#)

Then, at about age 20, Tatum was mugged on the street, resulting in total loss of sight in one eye and perhaps 75 percent in the other. Tatum, who often joked about his eyes or made up stories of his athletic prowess, refused to allow these conditions to detract from the pursuit of his main interest. Furthermore, throughout his life he maintained an active interest in sports and card playing.

Tatum's phenomenal ear for melody and pitch served him well as he began his lifelong habit of listening intently to all forms of music. Along with his unerring ear, Tatum developed an acute memory that aided him not only in his musical progress, but in many practical ways. He attended Jefferson School in Toledo, where he studied Braille along with regular subjects through eighth grade. In 1925, instead of enrolling in Toledo's Woodward High School, he moved to the School for the Blind in Columbus, where he studied violin and guitar as well as piano and probably Braille music reading.

Throughout these school experiences the young Tatum performed whenever and wherever he could. Through diligent application, constant listening and playing, at school and neighborhood functions, in local Prohibition era speakeasies and clubs, Tatum's unusual skills attracted the attention and admiration of a growing number of musicians. Cornetist/writer Rex Stewart, in his *Jazz Masters of the Thirties*, partly explained Tatum's dexterity: "He constantly manipulated a filbert nut through his fingers, so quickly that if you tried to watch him, the vision blurred. He worked with one nut until it became sleek and shiny."

His dazzling speed and touch caused his private teacher, Overton G. Rainey, to urge Tatum to pursue a classical career. But jazz's sounds, particularly those of pianist Fats Waller,

captured Tatum. Moreover, a career on the concert stage for a young black musician was virtually beyond hope in the 1920s. In later years, however, Tatum's playing was much admired by such classical pianists as Leopold Godowski and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

Toledo's WSPD radio gave Tatum's reputation its major impetus beginning in 1927, when he filled in between bits of shopping information. Impressed with the youngster's skills, the management scheduled Tatum's own 15-minute daily broadcast for approximately the next two years. Already his style was becoming formed so that not only the brilliant runs and arpeggios caught listeners' attention, but Tatum exhibited a fertile creativeness that made full use of his ambidexterity.

This allowed him to depart from the popular stride time-keeping or simple chords with his left hand, while introducing far more complex rhythms and harmonies. Abetted by his classical training, his incessant listening to pianists and other players, his near-perfect aural memory, and his constant marathon playing sessions in after-hours clubs, Tatum's musicianship demanded a wider audience.

Adelaide Hall, a popular vocalist, heard Tatum in 1932, offered him a job as her second accompanist, and brought him to New York. (Here again we find conflicts in witnesses' stories of exactly when and how the two met.) The pianist was able to memorize her complicated scores instantly. Though this relationship must have been musically unrewarding for Tatum, he was given an increasing role in her show and remained with Hall for about two years.

Having waited to test his skills against the name players in New York, Tatum lost little time in finding the various after-hours clubs where piano challenges became monumental battles. He sought out the best players, revealing a combative streak and showing no mercy in demonstrating his superiority in session after cutting session. Customarily, he would wait

until the other pianists had shown their best, then proceed to outplay them, often quoting what he had just heard then embellishing it with his fast, fresh variations.

Biographer Lester tells of the “welcoming committee from hell” that greeted Tatum after his first 1932 New York appearance with Hall. The reigning kings of jazz piano, Fats Waller, Willie “the Lion” Smith and James P. Johnson, “invited” Tatum to a session the following night. By all accounts, the Toledo youngster ascended to the pinnacle that evening, never to be dethroned. As writer Robert Doerschuk reported mentor Waller’s words: “That Tatum, he was just too good... He had too much technique. When that man turns on the powerhouse, don’t no one play him down. He sounds like a brass band.”

This craving to play nightly for hours following his regular job, taking on all pretenders, remained a regular part of Tatum’s routine. Invariably, until near the end of his life, this gamesmanship was accompanied by heavy drinking. Many witnesses claim that Tatum’s best playing was done under these conditions, not in the recording studio or on the concert stage.

In spite of his combative tendency, however, the lore is replete with tales of Tatum’s generosity in helping younger players and even in his taking much time to work with other professionals who simply observed him or who asked for playing tips. Composer/pianist Mary Lou Williams told Whitney Balliett, “Tatum taught me how to hit my notes, how to control them without using pedals. And he showed me how to keep my fingers flat on the keys to get that clean tone.” The young Billy Taylor, pianist and renowned jazz educator/writer, was another beneficiary. He has stated, “Art Tatum was probably the most lasting influence on my development as a jazz pianist.”

For some months after leaving Hall, Tatum held forth at New York’s famous Onyx Club. In early 1935 Tatum returned to

performing in the Cleveland area, then was hired in September, 1935, to play at the Three Deuces club in Chicago for an extended period. Here he had contact with the great pianist Earl Hines and bassist Milt Hinton among others. In 1936 Tatum moved to Los Angeles where his reputation had preceded him. He played at the Paramount, the Trocadero, the Melody Grill and Central Avenue's Club Alabam, was welcomed by celebrities at private parties, and appeared on Bing Crosby's radio show.

After about a year in California, Tatum again played Chicago's Three Deuces for about six months, then set up residence at 52nd Street's Famous Door in New York. This began an irregular pattern for several years of traveling by train between Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. In March, 1938, he made his only trip abroad, to England. Much to his dismay, Tatum's American club audiences were often noisy, whereas those in England behaved like concert listeners, a reception the pianist tried to cultivate wherever he went. For about the next five years, Tatum centered his playing in New York's better restaurants such as Cafe Society and Kelly's Stables. These audiences were attuned to Tatum's wizardry and listened accordingly. In the long term, Tatum sprinkled in visits to a wide variety of cities, sometimes performing in his second favorite venue, the concert stage.

In 1943 the great soloist surprised the jazz world by forming his ground-breaking Art Tatum Trio, with guitarist Tiny Grimes and bassist Slam Stewart. This group began simply by jamming at Lovejoy's Chicken Shack in Los Angeles then toured and recorded together intermittently for several years with a variety of personnel. Everett Barksdale principally replaced Grimes, and Stewart moved in and out of the group. The Trio, though preceded by about four years by the Nat King Cole Trio, proved to be a model for the Oscar Peterson and Lenny Tristano trios. Unfortunately, from 1945 to 1952 Tatum recorded very little in the commercial studios. Moreover, playing opportunities in general were not plentiful. This barren

period coincided with the advent of bebop's popularity.

Even though Tatum had long-since pioneered in the utilization the chord substitutions, the long eighth- and sixteenth-note runs and the harmonies used in bop, he was regarded by the public and some musicians as old hat. However, the leading lights of bebop, such as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, altoist Charlie Parker and pianist Bud Powell are widely quoted as having had great respect for the master. As Lester quotes Gillespie: "First you speak of Art Tatum, then take a long deep breath, and you speak of the other pianists."

From a recently uncovered trial solo pressing of "Tiger Rag" in 1932 to a monumental series produced by Norman Granz, Tatum has left us ample recorded testimony of his greatness. The first released records with Tatum were those he made with Hall in August, 1932. His first solo recordings, "Tea for Two," "St. Louis Blues," "Tiger Rag" and "Sophisticated Lady," made in March, 1933, were greeted with awe by the music fraternity. From this point on, though with notable time lapses, Tatum was recorded in a wide variety of settings including with his own small combos and all-star groups, but primarily as a soloist.

Arnold Laubach and Ray Spencer's *Studies in Jazz*, No. 2 lists 629 issued performances on 224 different labels from 19 countries. The most memorable group of these was conceived by recording executive Norman Granz, originator of "Jazz at the Philharmonic" concerts and recordings, which began in December 1953.

Granz sequestered Tatum in a studio with a good piano, and in two days had produced 70 solo tunes, most of them on the first take. In the ensuing months of 1954-56, leading up to Tatum's death, the output reached 121 solo cuts. In addition, Granz arranged for some group sessions that realized 80 tunes by quartets featuring such stars as reedman Benny Carter, vibist Lionel Hampton, clarinetist Buddy DeFranco, tenor saxist Ben Webster, trumpeter Roy Eldridge, and drummers Buddy Rich and

Louis Bellson.

Of these recordings Schuller observed, "Even the least of these belong to Tatum's mature work, and the best of them may be numbered amongst his very finest life-long achievements... These late performances show that Tatum was growing musically to the very end." In the notes accompanying the issuance of these recordings, Granz wrote, "the most important and satisfying work I ever had was the Tatum project... I think, if I am ever remembered for any meaningful contribution to jazz it was presenting permanently for the future the incredible artistry of the greatest instrumental soloist in the history of jazz, Art Tatum." Granz was happy to have completed these before Tatum's death in Los Angeles of uremia, on November 5, 1956.

Critics are almost universal in their praise of Tatum through the years. Many have attempted to describe the Tatum style and sound. For example, Whitney Balliett describes his technique as "prodigious, even virtuosic ... an angelic touch: no pianist has got a better sound out of the instrument ... gargantuan arpeggios, oompah stride basses... No matter how fast he played or how intense and complex his harmonic inventions became, his attack kept its commanding clarity."

But it is his fellow pianists and other musicians who remain his staunchest admirers. These artists include Fats Waller, Jimmy Rowles, Dave Brubeck, Red Norvo, Marian McPartland, Oscar Peterson, Dick Hyman, Lenny Tristano, Bud Powell, and the elegant pianist Teddy Wilson, who observed, "Maybe this will explain Art Tatum. If you put a piano in a room, just a bare piano. Then you get all the finest jazz pianists in the world and let them play in the presence of Art Tatum. Then let Art Tatum play ... everyone there will sound like an amateur."

Art Tatum's Career

Began with lessons at home, followed by more formal studies at Jefferson School for the Handicapped in Toledo and School for the Blind in Columbus; later at Toledo School of Music and privately with Overton G. Rainey; played at church, neighborhood functions and local clubs, c. 1924-25; formed own small band, 1926; own WSPD radio program c. 1927; jobbed around Toledo, Detroit, Cleveland, 1928-32; went to New York as accompanist to vocalist Adelaide Hall, 1932; first recordings, 1932; established reputation in New York clubs and on recordings, 1932-35; in residence at Chicago's Three Deuces, 1935; moved to California, 1936; successful trip to London, 1938; formed famous trio, 1943; continued touring, recording, 1943-56.

Art Tatum's Awards

Esquire Gold Award, 1944; Silver, 1945; Metronome poll, 1945; Down Beat Critics poll, 1954, 1955, 1956.

Famous Works

- **Selective Works**
- An Art Tatum Concert, Columbia LP, 1949.
- Giants of Jazz: Art Tatum, Time-Life LP, 1982.
- Piano Starts Here, Columbia LP, ND.
- The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces; Volumes 1-8, Pablo CD, recorded 1953-55, released 1992.
- The Tatum Group Masterpieces; Volumes 1-8, Pablo CD, recorded 1954-56, released 1991.

Recent Updates

September 30, 2004: Tatum was inducted into the inaugural class of Lincoln Center's Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame. **Source:**

“Jazz At Lincoln Center To Induct Inaugural Class of Musicians into The Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame” (Press Release), September 30, 2004.