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Art Tatum

Genius in Retrospect

by Rex Stewart

At every dance that Fletcher Henderson's band played, there'd be someone boasting about hometown talent. Usually, the local talent was pretty bad, and we were reluctant to take the word of anyone but a darn-good musician, such as alto saxophonist Milton Senior of MiKinney's Cotton Pickers, who was touting a piano player.

"Out of this world," Milton said. We were persuaded to go to the club where this pianist was working.

The setting was not impressive; it was in an alley, in the middle of Toledo's Bohemian section. I'm not sure if the year was 1926 or 1927, but I am sure that my first impression of Art Tatum was a lasting one. As a matter of fact, the experience was almost traumatic for me, and for a brief spell afterward, I toyed with the idea of giving up my horn and returning to school.

Looking back, I can see why Tatum had this effect on me. Not only did he play all that piano, but, by doing so, he also reminded me of how inadequately I was filling Louis Armstrong's chair with the Henderson band.

To a man, we were astonished, gassed, and just couldn't believe our eyes and ears. How could this nearly blind young fellow extract so much beauty out of an old beat-up upright piano that looked like a relic from the Civil War? Our drummer, Kaiser Marshall, turned to Henderson and said it for all of us:

"Well, it just goes to show you can't judge a book by its cover. There's a beat-up old piano, and that kid makes it sound like a Steinway. Go ahead, Smack, let's see you sit down to that box. I bet it won't come out the same."

Fletcher just shrugged his shoulders and answered philosophically, "I am pretty sure that we are in the presence of one of the greatest talents that you or I will ever hear. So don't try to be funny."

Coleman Hawkins was so taken by Tatum's playing that he immediately started creating another style for himself, based on what he'd heard Tatum play that night—and forever after dropped his slap-tongue style.

To our surprise, this talented youngster was quite insecure and asked us humbly, "Do you think I can make it in the big city



Art Tatum,
publicity photo.

[meaning New York]?" We assured him that he would make it, that the entire world would be at his feet once he put Toledo behind him. Turning away, he sadly shook his head, saying, kind of to himself, "I ain't ready yet."

However, as far as we were concerned, he was half-past ready! I can see now that Tatum really thought he was too green and unequipped for the Apple, because he spent the next few years in another alley in another Ohio city—Cleveland—at a place called Val's.

It was probably at Val's that Paul Whiteman "discovered" him a year or so later, when Art was 19, and took him to New York to be featured with the Whiteman band. But insecurity and homesickness combined to make him miserable, and after a short time, he fled back to Toledo. This is a good example of a man being at the crossroads and taking the wrong turn.

After returning home, Tatum gradually became confident that he could hold his

own. When Don Redman was passing through Toledo a year or so later, Art told him, "Tell them New York cats to look out. Here comes Tatum! And I mean every living 'tub' with the exception of Fats Waller and Willie the Lion."

At that time, Art had never heard of Donald (the Beetle) Lambert, a famous young piano player around New York in the '20s, and he came into the picture too late to have heard Seminole, an American Indian guitar and piano player whose left hand was actually faster than most pianists' right hands. In any case, to Tatum, Fats was Mr. Piano.

The admiration was reciprocated. The story goes that Fats, the cheerful little earful, was in great form while appearing in the Panther Room of the Sherman Hotel in Chicago. Fats was in orbit that night, slaying the crowd, singing and wiggling his behind to his hit "Honeysuckle Rose."

Suddenly he jumped up like he'd been stung by a bee and, in one of those rapid

changes of character for which he was famous, announced in stentorian tones: "Ladies and gentlemen, God is in the house tonight. May I introduce the one and only Art Tatum."

I did not witness this scene, but so many people have related the incident that I am inclined to believe it. At any rate, before Tatum did much playing in New York, he spent a period of time with vocalist Adelaide Hall as part of a two-piano team, the other accompanist being Joe Turner (the pianist). Miss Hall, then big in the profession, took them with her on a European tour.

In appearance, Tatum was not especially noteworthy. His was not a face that one would pick out of a crowd. He was about 5 feet, 7 inches tall and of average build when he was young but grew somewhat portly over the years. Art was not only a rather heavy drinker but was also fond of home cooking and savored good food. As he became affluent, his favorite restaurant was Mike Lyman's in Hollywood, which used to be one of Los Angeles' best.

An only child, Tatum was born in Toledo on Oct. 13, 1910. He came into the world with milk cataracts in both eyes, which impaired his sight to the point of almost total blindness. After 13 operations, the doctors were able to restore a considerable amount of vision in one eye. Then Tatum had a great misfortune; he was assaulted by a holdup man, who, in the scuffle, hit Tatum in the good eye with a blackjack. The carefully restored vision was gone forever, and Tatum was left with the ability to see only large objects or smaller ones held very close to his "good" eye.

Art had several fancy stories to explain his blindness, and a favorite was to tell in great detail how a football injury caused his lack of sight. I've heard him go into the routine: he was playing halfback for his high school team on this rainy day; they were in the huddle; then lined up; the ball was snapped ... wait a minute—there's a fumble! Tatum recovers ... he's at the 45-yard line, the 35, the 25! Sprinting like mad, he is heading for a touchdown! Then, out of nowhere, a mountain falls on him and just before oblivion descends, Tatum realized he has been tackled by Two-Ton Tony, the biggest fellow on either team. He is carried off the field, a hero, but has had trouble with his eyes ever since.

The real stories about Art are so unusual that one could drag out the cliché about fact being stranger than fiction. When Art was three, his mother took him along to choir practice. After they returned home, she went into the kitchen to prepare dinner

and heard someone fumbling with a hymn on the piano. Assuming that a member of the church had dropped by and was waiting for her come out of the kitchen, she called out, "Who's there?" No one answered, so she entered the parlor, and there sat three-year-old Art, absorbed in playing the hymn.

He continued playing piano by ear, and he could play anything he heard. Curiously, there was once a counterpart of Tatum in a slave known as Blind Tom. Tom earned a fortune for his master, performing before amazed audiences the most difficult music of his time after a single hearing. But Tom couldn't improvise; he lacked the added gift that was Tatum's.

Tatum played piano several years before starting formal training. He learned to read notes in Braille. He would touch the Braille manuscript, play a few bars on the piano, touch the notation, play ... until he completed a tune. After that, he never "read" the song again; he knew it forever. He could play any music he had ever heard. One time, at a recording session, the singer asked if he knew a certain tune. Art answered, "Hum a few bars." As the singer hummed, Art was not more than a half-second behind, playing the song with chords and embellishments as if he had always known it, instead of hearing it then for the first time.

His mother, recognizing that he had an unusual ear, gave him four years of formal training in the classics. Then the day came when the teacher called a halt to the studies, saying, "That's as far as I can teach you. Now, you teach me."

Tatum carried his perception to the nth degree. Eddie Beal, one of Art's devoted disciples, recalls their first meeting, which happened at the old Breakfast Club on Los Angeles' Central Avenue at about 4 a.m. The news had spread that Tatum was in town and could be expected to make the scene that morning. Just as Tatum entered the room, as Beal tells it, "Whoever was playing the piano jumped up from the stool, causing an empty beer can to fall off the piano. Tatum greeted the cats all around, then said, 'Drop that can again. It's a Pabst can, and the note it sounded was a B-flat.'" Rozelle Gayle, one of Tatum's closest friends, tops this story by saying that Tatum could tell the key of any sound, including a flushing toilet.

Genius is an overworked word in this era of thunderous hyperbolic press agency. Still, when one considers Arthur Tatum, there is no other proper descriptive adjective for referring to his talents. I have purposely pluralized them, for Tatum possessed several gifts—most of which remained unknown to all but a few of his

best friends—his prodigious memory, his grasp of all sports statistics and his skill at playing cards.

Art was a formidable opponent in all types of card games, although bid whist was his favorite. There are a few bridge champions still around who recall the fun they had when Tatum played with them. According to one's reminiscence, Art would pick up his cards as dealt, hold them about one inch from the good eye, adjust them into suits and from then on, never looked at his hand again. He could actually recall every card that was played, when, and by whom. Furthermore, he played his own cards like a master.

He had an incredible memory not only for cards but also for voices as well. One account of his aptitude in catching voices has been told and retold. It seems that while playing London with Adelaide Hall back in the late '30s, he was introduced to a certain person and immediately swept along the receiving line. Six years later, when he was playing in Hollywood, the person came to see Tatum. He greeted him with, "Hello, Art. How are you? I'll bet you don't remember me." Tatum replied, "Sure I remember you. Gee, you're looking good. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to talk to you at that party in London. Your name is Lord So and So."

I realize that nature has a way of compensating for any inaccuracy, but Tatum's abilities transcended ordinary compensation. With only a high school education, he was a storehouse of information. His favorite sports were baseball and football, followed by horseracing. Tatum could quote baseball pitchers' records, batting averages for almost all players in both big leagues, names and positions for almost all players, the game records any year, and so forth. Rozelle Gayle, one of Tatum's closest friends, recalls back in Art's Chicago days (the '30s) that all the musicians frequented the drugstore on the corner of 47th Street and South Park. Art became so respected as an authority on any subject (and that included population statistics) that the fellows would have him settle their arguments, instead of telephoning a newspaper.

Despite impaired vision, he was a very independent man. He had little methods to avoid being helped. For example, he always asked the bank to give all his money in new \$5 bills, which he put in a certain pocket. When he had to pay for something, he gave a 5 and then counted his change by fingering the \$1 bills and feeling the coins. The 1s then went into a certain pocket and the coins into another. He had a mind like

an adding machine and always knew exactly how much money he had.

One of the most significant aspects of Tatum's artistry stemmed from his constant self-change.

At the piano, Art seemingly delighted in creating impossible problems from the standpoint of harmonies and chord progressions. Then he would gleefully improvise sequence upon sequence until the phrase emerged as a complete entity within the structure of whatever composition he happened to be playing. Many is the time I have heard him speed blithely into what I feared was a musical cul-de-sac, only to hear the tying resolution come shining through. This required great knowledge, dexterity and daring. Tatum achieved much of this through constant practice, working hours every day on the exercises to keep his fingers nimble enough to obey that quick, creative mind. He did not run through variations of songs or work on new inventions to dazzle his audiences. Rather, he ran scales and ordinary practice exercises, and if one didn't know who was doing the laborious, monotonous piano routines, he would never guess that it was a jazzman working out.

Another form of practice was unique with Tatum. 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 from handling. When it came time to replace it, he would go to the market and feel nut after nut—a whole bin full, until he found one just the right size and shape for his exercises. Art's hands were of unusual formation, though just the normal size for a man of his height and build. But when he wanted to, he somehow could make his fingers span a 12th on the keyboard. The average male hand spans nine or 10 of the white notes, 11 is considered wizard, but 12 is out of this world. Perhaps the spread developed from that seeming complete relaxation of the fingers—they never rose far above the keyboard and looked almost double-jointed as he ran phenomenally rapid, complex runs. His lightning execution was the result of all that practice, along with the instant communication between his fingers and brain. His touch produced a sound no other pianist has been able to capture. The method he used was his secret, which he never revealed. The Steinway was his favorite piano, but sometimes he played in a club that had a miserable piano with broken ivories and sour notes. He would run his fingers over the keyboard to detect these. Then he would play that night in keys that

would avoid as much as possible the bad notes. Anything he could play, he could play in any key.

With all that talent, perhaps it is not strange the effect that Art had on other pianists. When he went where they were playing, his presence made them uncomfortable. Some would hunt for excuses to keep from playing in front of the master. Others would make all kinds of errors on things that, under other circumstances, they could play without even thinking about it. There was the case of the young fellow who played a great solo, not being aware that Tatum was in the house. When Art congratulated him later, he fainted.

This sort of adulation did not turn Tatum's head, and he continually sought reassurance after a performance. Any friend who was present would be asked, "How was it?" One couldn't ask for more humility from a king of his instrument.

A little-known fact is that Art also played the accordion. Back in Ohio, before he had gained success, he was offered a year's contract in a nightclub if he would double on accordion. He quickly mastered the instrument and fulfilled the engagement, but he never liked the accordion and after that gig, he never played it again.

Tatum always liked to hear other piano players, young or old, male or female. He could find something kind to say even about quite bad performers. Sometimes his companion would suggest leaving a club where the pianist could only play some clunky blues in one key. But Art would say, "No, I want to hear his story. Every piano player has a story to tell."

His intimates (two of whom—Eddie Beal and Rozelle Gayle—I thank for much of this information) agree that Tatum's favorites on the piano were Fat Waller, Willie (the Lion) Smith and Earl Hines. He also liked lots of the youngsters, including Nat Cole, Billy Taylor and Hank Jones.

In the clays when most musicians enjoyed hanging out with each other, Art and Meade Lux Lewis palled around; Two more dissimilar chums could hardly be imagined. Tatum was a rather brooding, bearlike figure of a man, and Meade Lux was a plumper, jolly little fellow. They kept a running joke going between themselves, Meade Lux cracking that Art was cheap, even if Tatum was paying the tab.

Tatum's leisure hours began when almost everyone else was asleep, at 4 a.m. or so. He liked to sit and talk, drink and play, after he finished work.

There was a serious and well-hidden side to the man. His secret ambition was to

become known as a classical composer, and somewhere there exist fragments of compositions he put on tape for orchestration at some later date.

Tatum also wanted, very definitely, to lie featured as a soloist accompanied by the Boston or New York symphony orchestras, which he considered among the world's best. As a matter of record, this admiration for the longer-haired musical forms was mirrored; he had numerous fans among classical players, who were astonished at his skill, technique and imagination. To them, his gifts were supernatural. Vladimir Horowitz, who frequently came to hear Art play, said that if Tatum had taken up classical piano, he'd have been outstanding in the field.

It's been said that Tatum forced today's one-hand style of piano into being because after he'd finished playing all over the instrument with both hands, the only way for the piano to go was back, until the people forgot how much Tatum played.

Another of Art's ambitions, also unrealized, was to be a blues singer! He loved to relax by playing and singing the blues. He knew he didn't have much of a voice, but when he was offstage, he'd sing the blues. He had a feeling for the form but kept that side of himself well hidden from the public. He really adored Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith and, especially, Big Joe Turner.

Most musicians could never guess what Art was going to play from one moment to the next, which made the group he had with guitarist Tiny Grimes and bassist Slam Stewart unquestionably the best combo he ever had. The trio played on New York's 52nd Street around 1945. These three communicated, anticipated and embellished each other as if one person were playing all three instruments. It was uncanny when it's considered that they never played it safe, never put in hours of rehearsal with each sequence pinpointed. On the contrary, every tune was an adventure, since nobody could predict where Art's mind would take them.

Tatum loved to go from one key to another without his left hand ever breaking the rhythm of his stride. Even in this, he was unpredictable, since he never went to the obvious transpositions, like a third above. No, Art would jump from B-flat to E-natural and make the listener love it.

While Art was alive, and as great as he was, there were still a few detractors. One such critic had been trained as a classical pianist but was trying desperately to apply his academic training to jazz. This fellow said, during one of Tatum's superb

performances, "Sure, Art's great, but he fingers the keys the wrong way."

How sour can grapes get?

Another compatriot who used to haunt every place that Art played, night after night, made the public statement: "Good God! This Tatum is the greatest! Thank God he's black—otherwise nobody's job would be safe." I suspect there was a lot of truth in that remark.

Art never seemed to let the inequities of his situation bother him. Still, in the early morning when he had consumed a few cans of beer and was surrounded by his personal camp followers, he would unburden himself, asking, "Did you hear so-and-so's latest record? What a waste of wax, for Christ's sake! There must be over 2,000 fellows who can play more than this cat. But you see who he's recording for? It will probably sell half a million copies while Willie the Lion just sits back smoking his cigar, without a gig. When will it end?"

Tatum was a great crusader against discrimination, but in his own quiet way. He used to cancel engagements if he found that the club excluded colored persons. Loyalty to his friends, even when it was not advantageous to his career, was another strong point. (I recall the time I went to catch him at a club called the Streets of Paris, in Los Angeles. After a period of superlative enjoyment, I went to the piano to pay my respects and leave. But just as Art said, "Hello, how long have you been in the joint?" Cesar Romero and Loretta Young walked up. So I stepped back to let Art converse with the movie royalty. Art aid, "Come on back here. I want to introduce you. Cesar, Lorella, I want you to meet Rex Stewart," and went on to build me up, undeservedly, till they asked for my autograph!)

Art was no glad-hander. He was polite, reserved, affable but not particularly communicative unless the conversation was

about one of his hobbies. A more self-effacing person would be hard to find, and he was generous to a fault with his friends. Yet he could summon up a tremendous amount of outraged dignity when it was called for.

Perhaps Art Tatum would have been assured a firmer place in musical history if he had not alienated too many of the self-righteous aficionados who preferred their piano sounds less embroidered, less imaginative and more orthodox. Therefore, it follows that Tatum would never be their favorite pianist. Posterity tends to prove that Art requires neither champion nor defense, since the proof of his genius remains intact and unblemished. The beauty within the framework of his music transcends the opinions of critics, aficionados, fans and musicians themselves. History is the arbiter. For the truly great, fame is not fleeting but everlasting.