

Art Tatum, Jazz Pianist, Dies; Noted for Brilliant Techniques



Art Tatum

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LOS ANGELES, Nov. 5—Art Tatum, one of the world's great jazz pianists, died at the Queen of Angels Hospital today. He had been suffering from uremia. He was 46 years old.

Mr. Tatum, who was regarded as one of the jazz world's most unusual stylists, had appeared recently in local night clubs. His illness had forced him to cancel a network television performance scheduled for next Sunday.

Mr. Tatum leaves his wife, Geraldine with whom he had celebrated their first wedding anniversary ten days ago. He also leaves, by a former marriage, a son in the Army in Germany and his mother, a brother and sister in Toledo, Ohio.

Favorite of Musicians

Art Tatum was generally conceded to have the finest technique of any jazz pianist of his generation, and many considered his jazz technique the greatest within memory.

In addition to his technical brilliance, his highly individual musical style made him the favorite pianist of most jazz musicians of his time. Some critics felt that his style incorporated too much from Debussy and other “classical” composers. But his admirers maintained that whatever ingredients went into his playing, he always retained the essentials of true jazz.

Perhaps his most monumental achievement was the recording in 1954 of nearly 200 piano solo versions of songs of his own choosing, all of which were reported to have been crowded into two or three recording sessions. Eleven twelve-inch long-playing records already have been issued, and four or five more disks are said to be pending from these sessions alone.

The pianist, born in Toledo on Oct. 13, 1910, was blind in one eye and had very poor vision in the other. He was 13 when he began to study the violin. He soon exchanged the violin for the piano and at the age of 16 was earning money as a dance-band pianist.

Mr. Tatum’s first professional performance was over radio station WSPD in Toledo. In 1932, he came to New York as accompanist to Adelaide Hall. Within a year he had caused great excitement among jazz musicians here by his performances at the Onyx Club.

His first solo piano recordings were made in March, 1933, These spread his reputation so quickly that by the mid-Thirties he had become internationally known. In 1938 he appeared with success in London.

Although Mr. Tatum led his own band in Chicago for some seasons and made one of his most popular records (“Wee Baby Blues”) with a band and a blues singer, Joe Turner, his fame was based on his solo playing.

“A band hampers me,” he observed. This did not prevent him, however, from organizing a trio of his own with a guitarist, “Tiny” Grimes, and a double bass player, Slam Stewart. The combination of three instruments gave him more of the freedom he needed for his personal style. His partners changed in a succession of trios, but his own playing dominated the group in spirit even when he tried to hold his piano in the background.

Among Mr. Tatum’s best-known recordings are solo performances of “Tea for Two” and “Sweet Lorraine,” jazz versions of Massenet’s “Elegy” and Dvorak’s “Humoresque” and “Get Happy” and “9:20 Special.”