

Art Tatum

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One of the greatest improvisers in jazz history, Art Tatum also set the standard for technical dexterity with his classic 1933 recording of “Tea for Two.” Nearly blind, Tatum’s artistic vision and ability made him an icon of jazz piano, a musician whose impact will be felt for generations to come. While Tatum’s skills were undeniable, his style continues to stir controversy on whether or not he was an “official” jazz musician. Some jazz critics dismissed his playing as so much ornate window-dressing and the pianist himself as a novelty instead of a serious jazz artist; others saw him as the new and improved second coming of stride legend Fats Waller, one of Tatum’s idols.

What made Tatum’s music even more astonishing was watching his extremely calm demeanor as his nimble fingers raced up and down the ivories. According to a radio interview with “Voice of America” host Willis Conover, however, Tatum was never fully satisfied with his amazing deftness.

Born Arthur Tatum, Jr. on October 13, 1909 in Toledo, Ohio, the pianist had lost most of his sight by the age of four. He received some formal training on the piano at the Toledo School of Music, learning to read sheet music with the aid of glasses and then in Braille. But Tatum was primarily self-taught, cribbing from piano rolls, phonograph recordings, and radio broadcasts while learning what he could from musicians he encountered.

By 19, Tatum was playing with vocalist Jon Hendricks at Toledo’s Waiters & Bellman’s Club, a popular local jazz club that hosted national acts as well. A few of those national acts -- Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Andy Kirk among them -- took notice of the young house pianist, often stunned by his speed and dexterity. In 1932, Tatum traveled to New York with vocalist Adelaide Hall. His reputation had arrived earlier and some of New York’s finest jazz

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musicians were eagerly awaiting his arrival. The following year, Tatum cut his first sides, for the Brunswick label. The first song was aforementioned "Tea for Two," which became his signature tune.

Tatum's stay in New York was brief, and he returned to the Midwest, playing in Cleveland and Chicago for the mid-1930s. He made a triumphant return to New York in 1937, playing at several clubs and appearing on national radio shows.

The following year, Tatum toured England and he began appearing regularly in New York and Los Angeles in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Taking Nat "King" Cole's successful jazz trio as a model, Tatum founded his own influential trio with Slam Stewart (double bass) and Tiny Grimes (electric guitar) in 1943. Grimes left the following year, but Tatum continually returned to this format, playing with guitarist Everett Barksdale in particular.

Tatum was not only made a favorite among jazz musicians, but also European classical musicians like Conductor Leopold Stokowski, composer Sergei Rachmaninov and pianist Vladimir Horowitz. But as Tatum's virtuosity continued to awe his fellow musicians, many music critics vilified his playing as being overbearing.

Although Tatum was not considered a bebop jazz musician, he had a legion of bop followers like the alto saxophone icon Charlie Parker and pianist Bud Powell, and he became a mentor for pianists Billy Taylor and Oscar Peterson. His obsession with music didn't prevent him from indulging in his other favorite activities: sports and cards.

In 1953, Tatum tracked a record 124 solos for noted producer Norman Granz and while the sessions were hasty, they yielded material for 13 albums.

Soon after, Granz assembled an all-star group of jazz musicians like vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, drummer Buddy Rich, saxophonist Ben Webster, trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison and clarinetist Buddy DeFranco to record with Tatum. During these sessions many musicians were just as amazed at the amount of beer Tatum drank as they were about the amount of musical virtuosity continued to stream out of Tatum's hands. Although his excessive drinking didn't affect his playing, it did unfortunately affect his health. By 1952, Tatum began showing evidence of euremia, a toxic blood condition resulting from a severe kidney disease. On

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November 5, Tatum died at age 47, and although his career was relatively short, Tatum's brilliant playing still remains unparalleled and highly influential.