Too Marvelous for Words

THE LIFE & GENIUS OF ART TATUM

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York • Oxford

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bombay
Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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Published in 1994 by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1995

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Lester, James.
Too marvelous for words : the life and genius of Art Tatum / James Lester.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–19–508365–2
ISBN 0–19–509640–1 (pbk.)
1. Tatum, Art, 1909–1956. 2. Jazz musicians—United States—Biography. I. Title.
ML417.T2L47 1994
786.2'165'092—dc20
[B] 93–4284

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to the hundreds of jazz musicians whose lives and contributions also deserve books but will probably never get them.

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK COULD not have been written if a large number of people had not been willing to rummage around in their memories and to take the time to share their memories with me. Many of the people I talked with went even beyond that and gave me critically important encouragement, of which I needed large dollops. Some spent hours talking to me, others briefly gave me leads to others I needed to contact. But all were important and significantly helped to make this book.

I want to list here the people who agreed to talk with me, partly for the record but mainly to let them know how grateful I am to them. And I would be just as grateful even had the book not been published, because I found talking with most of them a warm and fascinating experience, a window on a world I'm sorry I never knew intimately and a world which is for all practical purposes gone (an alarming number of this group died after I interviewed them, though not necessarily immediately). I have the strong feeling that I've received a rare gift from a select group of humans.

The order of the list is merely alphabetical:

Mrs. Ernestine Allen, Scott Alsop, Don Asher, Eddy Barefield, Harper Barnes, Louis Bellson, Keter Betts, Mrs. Dotty Bigard, Eddie Bonnemere, Harold Brown, Ray Brown, Tom Brownell, Weldon

Burnett, Joe Bushkin, Jacki Byard, Red Callender, Mrs. Olivia Calloway, Benny Carter, Al Casey, Fred Cate, Page Cavanaugh, Doc Cheatham, Mel Clement, John Cleveland, John Collins, Willis Conover, Stanley Cowell, Bill Cummerow, Alan Dale, Stanley Dance, Russ David, Bob Davis, Mrs. Olivia Davis, Barrett Deems, Buddy DeFranco, Dave Dexter, Jr., Kurt Dieterlie, Robert Doerschuk, Dorothy Donegon, Jim Doran, Bill Douglass, Frank Driggs, John Eaton, Art Edgerton, "Sweets" Edison, Herb Ellis, Leonard Feather, Bob Fitzpatrick, Diana Flanagan, Charlie Fox, Bud Freeman, Dave Frischberg, Billy Fuster, Milt Gabler, Leonard Gaskin, Jim Gavin, Mrs. Lois Gayle, Mrs. Virginia Gear, the Reverend John Gensel, Martha Glaser, Claire Gordon, Elwood Gray, Harry Gregory, Adelaide Hall-Hicks, Lionel Hampton, Jake and Denisa Hanna, Jon Hendricks, Al Hibbler, Milt and Mona Hinton, Mrs. Elizabeth Hochman, Malvin Hoffman, Major Holley, Joseph Howard, Felicity Howlett, Dick Hyman, Merle Jacobs, Deannette James, Jimmy Jones, Steve Jordan, Dick Katz, Harold Kaye, Orrin Keepnews, Brooks Kerr, Ellis Larkins, Steve Lasker, Bernice Lawson, Delbert Lee, Floyd Levin, Ernie Lewis, Nellie Lutcher, James Maher, Adam Makovich, David Mann, Ellis Marsalis, Tim Masters, Steven Mayer, Russell McCown, Marian McPartland, Charlie Meenes, Rusty Monroe, Max Morath, Dan Morgenstern, Mrs. Henry Morrison, Eli Newberger, Big Nick Nicholas, Gene Norman, Red Norvo, Les Paul, Mozart and Rudolph Perry, Mel Powell, William Randle, Dave Reed, Ben Rifkin, Norman Ross, Seymour Rothman, Jimmy Rowles, Marshall Royal, William Savory, Phil Schaap, Duncan Schiedt, Loren Schoenberg, Barbara Seiger, William Seraile, George Shearing, Dale Sheets, George Simon, Ilomay Sims, Johnny Smith, A. B. Spellman, Joe Springer, Royal Stokes, Sylvia Syms, Karl Tatum, Arline (Tatum) Taylor, Steve Taylor, Jack Towers, Jeannie Trevors, Bobby Tucker, Barry Ulanov, Earle Warren, George Wein, LeRoy "Snake" White, Kevin Whitehead, Gerry Wiggins, Martin Williams and Theo Wilson.

Pat and Paul Kaplan took care of me on trips to New York, and Ruth Sward offered me West Coast lodgings when I needed them. I want to give special thanks to Jim Doran who encouraged me in the

strongest way when I was thinking of giving it up; to Jim Maher who introduced me to Sheldon Meyer at Oxford University Press; and to my wife Valerie who, as her reward for suggesting the idea to me, has had to live with this book for five years.

Annapolis, MD J. L.
14 May 1993

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"The true genius is not helpfully communicative. . . . In reality, he lacks the key to verbal communication of his inner motivations, except within his art. . . . He does not seek self-knowledge, gives no account of himself, neglects and consumes himself. . . . He burns up, but does not defy the burning: rather, he ignores it. He does not see himself in relation to the world. He doesn't see himself at all."

HILDESHEIMER, *MOZART* (on the difference between the true genius and the would-be genius)

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Introduction

". . . a creature who, for all his fame, still stands in need of a little understanding."

LYTTON STRACHEY (referring to Shelley)

ART TATUM'S NAME is now a secure part of American popular culture, and almost everyone understands that to put someone on Tatum's level is to bestow the highest praise. A play reviewer can write: "Stoppard handles words the way that Art Tatum used to handle a keyboard," and the compliment is widely understood, even by people who never heard Art play the piano. More than thirty-five years after his death, his name is still a metaphor for excellence, and not just in America but the world over. I recently met a young jazz pianist and her mother, both from Azerbaijan in the former Soviet Union, and they were offended that I thought they might not know who Art Tatum was.

But who was Art Tatum?

In 1988 I set out to find a good biography of Tatum. I wanted to learn something about where such a giant had come from, who his own idols had been, what experiences had made him the figure I knew, what sort of a person he was, what sort of life he had when he

wasn't playing. It astonished me to discover that no biography of Tatum has yet been published. No fellow pianist, no jazz writer, no family member, in the thirty-seven years since his death, has yet undertaken a written record of his life. No wonder that if he exists at all for lovers of jazz he exists as a distant, an almost abstract figure, a black eminence waving his hands over the keyboard and thundering through the jazz world.

Art Tatum has not been forgotten, certainly not by the experts. Billy Taylor's 1983 book, *Jazz Piano,* has more entries in the index for Art Tatum than for any other name, and Gunther Schuller, in his 1989 book, *The Swing Era,* Volume 2, gives more pages to Tatum than to any other soloist. The Smithsonian collection of recordings *Jazz Piano,* released in 1989, has more tracks of Tatum's playing than of any other pianist. There are currently several concert pianists (for example, Steven Mayer) who pay their respects to Tatum by frequently playing transcriptions of his recordings in their programs, along with the standard classical piano repertoire. I recently attended a performance by Stanley Cowell, a significant post-Tatum jazz pianist, who devoted his whole concert to playing Art Tatum arrangements. Unfortunately there were far more of us in the audience over fifty than under forty; Cowell was preaching to the converted. (Cowell has gone on, incidentally, to compose a piano concerto dedicated to the memory of Art.)

But nothing has come along to tell us who he was. My aim has been to write the book I was unable to find in 1988, to do my best to answer the question of where he came from, and to put into a coherent narrative all the fragments of information about his life that now exist only in isolated sources and in personal memories. My intent has not been to provide a reference work, documenting his career, the chronology of his public appearances, the dates and places of his recordings. I wanted to get the musician into focus as a person.

I regret that I didn't start sooner. There is some excellent material about Tatum, the musician, already in print. There is an admirable discography (Laubich and Spencer) and three technical analyses of his performance style (Howard, Howlett, and Schuller). Even the dedicated searcher, however, will turn up little about the people and

events in Tatum's life. Several brief biographical sketches, most of which cover the same ground, can be found in chapter or magazine article form, and there are short paragraphs buried in other narratives. But each of these comprises only a few fragments of his story, and when I had read through them all I longed to find out how they really fit together.

Tatum, I soon realized, was more a worthy than a promising subject for a biography. I was particularly interested in personal interviews with people who had known him or worked with him, of course, but 1988 was a very late date on which to start collecting living memories about Art Tatum. His contemporaries, those who were still with us, were in the general vicinity of eighty years old and were showing a marked tendency to shuffle off this mortal coil, all too often before I could reach them. One of his two living relatives and his widow, for reasons which I could never persuade them to reveal to me, were uncooperative.

Getting acquainted with people who knew Art personally, from early schoolmates to those who spent his last days with him, has been far and away the most enjoyable part of writing this book. Of course, there is often no hard evidence against which to evaluate personal accounts of incidents, and one either finds the account plausible or one does not. As an audience for many stories, I've found myself involved in a lot of what may be sifting fiction from fiction. If they were good stories, and not outrageously improbable, I have included them.

It is especially frustrating that there is no almost no record of the man's own report of himself, in his own words. No one I've talked to ever received a letter from Tatum, and his very limited vision makes it plausible that there may be no letters (although I can't be sure that his relatives don't possess some). Many potential interviewers saw him as a bit aloof and unapproachable—and never approached him. Barry Ulanov knew and interviewed a large proportion of top jazz figures in Tatum's era, but told me that he "gave up as fruitless any attempt to get a long narrative from him," as he would have liked to. The 1930s and '40s abounded with jazz greats who were more than willing to talk, and the reluctant or retiring ones got passed over. The

few published interviews with Tatum have a curious quality; in them, he sounds genial and cooperative but gives almost no information in reply to the interviewer's questions. Without some expression of his own attitudes it is almost impossible to imagine his inner world, the place from which he emerged from time to time to astound us. Musically, we don't need to know about that, but having it would let us feel much closer to the man.

WHEN I SPOKE about Art with Ellis Marsalis, a jazz pianist and teacher, and father of (among others) Wynton and Branford Marsalis, he remarked that no one could write about Tatum properly who hadn't "gigged," or worked as a jazz musician himself. I want to say here, at the beginning, something about my credentials for writing a biography of a jazz pianist.

The last time I wrote about jazz was in 1941. I was in the eighth grade and wrote a prize-winning essay on the "comeback" of Louis Armstrong. (Little did I realize that the comeback of which I wrote was to be only the first of several—it was in fact impossible to keep Louis down.) For my prize I chose a biography of W. C. Handy, composer of, among other things, the "St. Louis Blues" (St. Louis is my home town). I tell you this to make it clear that I am not a jazz academic, not a jazz critic, not even an occasional contributor of articles on jazz in any form. My connection with jazz has been as an avid listener and as a moonlighting performer, on both piano and trombone.

Music in our household was determined by my mother's taste which ran to Wayne King and Guy Lombardo, the simplest and most pre-digested music of its time. I was a child during the Depression, and the radio in our house was generally tuned to those "sweet bands" that seemed to console America in that often sad era. Somehow I found my way to the right stuff by the time I was on the brink of being a teenager. I was buying (and I now confess to the world occasionally stealing) 78 rpm recordings of the jazz bands of Will Hudson, Jimmie Lunceford, Count Basie, and other hot bands of the late 1930s, and listening secretly after bedtime to radio station WIL for the best jazz program on the air in St. Louis. Having started piano

lessons at around age eight or nine, at my own instigation, I had found the world of "Pine Top" Smith, Meade Lux Lewis, Fats Waller, Teddy Wilson, and of course Tatum, by the time I was thirteen (not, I admit, without pausing briefly to pay attention to such society pianists as Eddy Duchin and Carmen Cavallero—blame it on my youth).

I have been playing semi-professionally since 1941. I think my first paid appearance as a performer was at a block party in the Italian section of St. Louis. I was on piano and the band was on a six-foot high platform in the middle of the street. We played with such vigor that my fingers bled under the nails (not for the last time). I learned boogie-woogie and it made me very popular at parties, but as time went on it was Teddy Wilson whom I tried more and more to sound like. I loved Wilson's crisp and polished style, the clarity and sparkle of his melodic lines, the variety and interest of his left hand, the tenths constantly in motion, and those crystalline runs that sounded so spontaneous and yet inevitable at the same time. His sophistication and rich musicality, and maybe also his introverted character, appealed to my own personality much more than did "getting into the gorilla bag" (the phrase is Oscar Peterson's) with boogie-woogie. Finally, there was the fact that Wilson sounded accessible to me. I could hear what he was doing, and with enough work it seemed it might just be within reach. Tatum, of course, never was within reach, and I turned to him purely for musical experiences and not for a model. Tatum was there to define the limits of the possible, as he still is.

Since then I have held union cards in six major cities, as a pianist and a trombonist. In an Army Special Services unit in 1946 I played lead trombone in the big band, piano in a small group featuring the tenor player Warne Marsh, and wrote the book of arrangements for the band. I did several arrangements for the George Hudson band in St. Louis, the pride of the black community there, and was introduced by Hudson as a potential arranger to Lionel Hampton. In more recent years I've played hundreds of dances and private parties, in big bands and in smaller groups. My unknowing mentor Teddy Wilson once heard me play and commented (so I'm told) , "He really seems

to know what he's doing"—faint praise, perhaps, but from such a source it meant worlds to me. (There is a line in a novel that describes how I sometimes feel about my own playing, in which one of the characters says about another: "He seems to know what he's doing even if he can't do it.")

My vocation has been elsewhere, as a psychologist, but I have gigged. Those are my "credentials" and combined with my interest in Tatum they have given me the brashness to pursue the writing of this book. At least it seems brash to me; as an editor of *Down Beat* once remarked to a feature writer, "Tatum is a really big subject."

ART TATUM, COMING from out of nowhere (this is not a slight on Toledo, Ohio, but a comment on the disparity between his background and his accomplishment), set a precedent and a standard by which generations of jazz pianists could not escape judging themselves—even though by such a standard failure was almost guaranteed. Jimmy Knepper, the New York-based jazz trombonist, put this idea simply: "Tatum, Parker, and a few others got jazz out of the simple stage and now it's imperative to be a virtuoso."

Tatum was indeed a virtuoso, on several levels, and there is absolutely no dispute about his technical brilliance. It is the element of his playing that is easiest to assess, since his playing practically demands to be measured against the standards of the whole Western tradition of the concert piano, and to my mind at least Tatum is best understood in the light of that tradition. Consider some educated descriptions of his playing:

> . . . almost every one of Tatum's performances is from a pianistic-technical point of view a marvel of perfection . . . his playing must be heard to be believed, and in its technical perfection it is something beyond verbal description, at least this author's verbal capacities. The note-perfect clarity of Tatum's runs, the hardly believable leaps to the outer registers of the piano (he is not known ever to have missed one), his deep-in-the-keys full piano sonority, the tone and touch control in pyrotechnical passages clearly beyond the abilities of the vast majority of pianists

> to merely render the notes in some nominal way—these are miracles of performance which must be appreciated aurally." [Schuller, *Swing Era,* 482]

> Tatum's style was notable for its touch, its speed and accuracy, and its harmonic and rhythmic imagination. No pianist has ever hit notes more beautifully. Each one—no matter how fast the tempo—was light and complete and resonant, like the letters on a finely printed page. Vast lower-register chords were unblurred, and his highest notes were polished silver. . . . His speed and precision were almost shocking. Flawless sixteenth-note runs poured up and down the keyboard, each note perfectly accented, and the chords and figures in the left hand sometimes sounded two-handed. Such virtuosity can be an end in itself, and Tatum was delighted to let it be in his up-tempo flag-wavers, when he spectacularly became a high-wire artist, a scaler of Everests. Tatum's bedrock sense of rhythm enabled him to play out-of-tempo interludes or whole choruses that doubled the impact of the implied beat, and his harmonic sense—his strange, multiplied chords, still largely unmatched by his followers, his laying on of two and three and four melodic levels at once—was orchestral and even symphonic. [Balliett, *Ecstasy,* 113]

Listening to a really good pianist one might say, "I could never do that." But confronted with Tatum most musicians have said to themselves, "*Nobody* can do that!" "To have heard him play," one pianist wrote, "was as awe-inspiring as to have seen the Grand Canyon or Halley's comet. . . ." It seems to me, however, that Teddy Wilson, a contemporary, close friend, and first-class player himself, put the paean to Tatum in its clearest form:

> 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. Pianists with regular styles will sound like beginners. Art Tatum played with such superi-

> ority that he was above style. It is almost like a golfer who can hit a hole in one every time he picks up the iron. It was a special kind of ability he had. If I had to choose an all-'round instrumentalist, in a classical vein, or in a more modern vein, I'd choose Art Tatum.

The famous Tatum runs are certainly what first jump out at you; they are, someone said, like the arc left against the night sky by a Fourth of July sparkler. They can dominate your attention, and they have given generations of pianists a sense of inferiority. But it has to be said, and then underlined, that to stop there is to miss most of what is significant about Tatum. As one record reviewer put it: "Art Tatum's performances demand much of the listener. He is not easy and cannot be fully discovered with one or two surface listenings. Of course, you get the gloss, the flash, his elegant sound. But there is so much more." What can be missed by a casual listener is the tremendous structural complexity in what he did, and the very advanced (for jazz) harmonies that he used. (Chapter 7 includes a discussion of Tatum's performance style.)

Tatum's virtuosity is not for everybody, however. His dazzling command of the keyboard has been a wedge that has divided opinion about him. There has been a minority of critics who find in him an unnecessary ornateness or even floridity, a shallowness, "an excess of hyperbole." One of the most polite expressions of this point of view was that "his tendency to display his accomplishments sometimes gets in the way of a performance." The cultivation of virtuoso skill has always exposed players to the same criticism: NO SOUL. Performers back to Franz Liszt and beyond have suffered this criticism: decoration, not substance; effect, not content. In the case of jazz musicians the complaint is that showy displays of musical athleticism take the place of musical thought and usurp the place of more significant improvisation. Jazz criticism is a murky, subjective thing, but one important criterion has always been originality; whenever skill seems to have replaced imagination, or prepared devices take the place of creativity, a reputation suffers. Because of his virtuosity, it has never been easy to judge Tatum by this particular criterion.

It is clear, though, that what Tatum did, as Knepper suggested, was considerably more than add one more to the variety of jazz piano styles. His harmonic and rhythmic innovations affected the whole context for jazz playing, and not just for pianists. In the scope of his influence he is comparable to Louis Armstrong before him, and to Charlie Parker who came after. He is, however, impossible to categorize as to style—he seemed to develop along a track of his own even though he was thoroughly aware of the action on all the adjacent tracks. And he is difficult to assess clearly because it's hard to know what standards to apply. Whitney Balliett with his reliable deftness of language summed him up in 1968, and captured a central truth about Tatum's career : "No one ever knew exactly what he was or what to do with him. He was said to be the greatest jazz pianist who ever lived and he was said to be not a jazz pianist at all. He was admired by classical pianists . . . by jazz musicians, and by dazzled, tin-eared laymen. People poked fun at his ornate style . . . and then wept at his next brilliance . . . nobody has decided yet what kind of a pianist he was" (Balliett, *Ecstasy,* 111). The clearest light can be thrown on Tatum, I think, if we see him as a displaced person, a kind of outsider, keeping alive an old tradition (piano virtuosity) in an alien country (jazz).

In the descriptions of many listeners, hearing Art Tatum for the first time was somewhat like living through an earthquake—it astonished, it alarmed, it could shake one's foundations. Inflated as that may sound in the 1990s, when performance expectations are vastly different from what they were in Tatum's era, it was overwhelmingly true in the 1930s and 40s. Musicians traveling from city to city were already telling each other in the late 1920s about the unbelievable piano playing they had heard in Toledo, and he was well on his way to becoming a living legend before he made his first solo recordings in 1933. The impact on his listeners was made all the greater by the knowledge that Art Tatum was nearly blind.

I liken Tatum to an earthquake advisedly. Earthquakes are not only impressive but they can be destructive. I never heard anyone say that Tatum inspired him or her to play the piano. A really accomplished musician *might* find encouragement. Mel Powell, who had

intensive classical training as a child and later won rave reviews as a teen-age pianist and arranger with Benny Goodman, told me his first experience with Tatum's playing was positive: "What it probably did was to encourage me to see that that kind of sheer instrumental virtuosity that I'd been cultivating in the other world of music not only had a place [in jazz] but was the summit." More than a few musicians, however, were anything but encouraged by him; Rex Stewart, who is best known for having become a star in Duke Ellington's trumpet section, reports that after his first encounter with Art Tatum he somehow felt he was inadequate at filling Louis Armstrong's shoes (with the Fletcher-Henderson band of 1928), and he "toyed with the idea of giving up the horn and going back to school" (Stewart). Bobby Short, who is best known as an entertainer rather than a jazz pianist but who is none the less talented for that, was once "stopped in his tracks" by Tatum:

> . . . one day Len [Short's manager] took me into Lyon and Healey's music store to listen to a Tatum record. His technique was like Horowitz's. He was a wizard, I listened to the recording and I was shocked to hell! When it was finished, the salesman said, "Do you play the piano, son?" Yes, I did. "Would you play for us?" I crossed over to the piano and sat down, and because I was so impressionable and depended on my ear for so much, found that I couldn't play the piano at all. Not a note. Tatum had undone me to that extent. I could not get my fingers to react to my mind, because my mind was suddenly overflowing. I'd been stopped in my tracks. [*Black and White Baby,* 157–58]

The pianist Lennie Tristano noticed this phenomenon in some of his listeners and called it "kinesthetic paralysis." Even Oscar Peterson had to go through this experience. In an interview (with André Previn) Peterson described his very first encounter with the Tatum technique. In his teens his father—perhaps thinking that Oscar was getting too big a head about his playing ("I thought I was pretty heavy at school, you know—I'd play in all the lunch hours with all