An Excerpt from *A Dictionary for the Modern Pianist* by Stephen Siek
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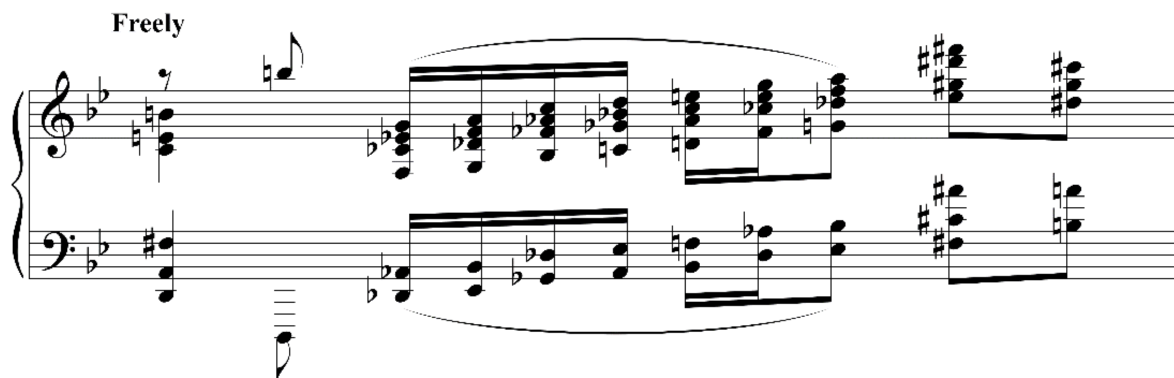
Tatum, Art [Arthur Jr.] (b. Toledo, Ohio, 1909; d. Los Angeles, 1956). American jazz pianist, considered by most jazz aficionados to be the greatest and most influential of the twentieth century. He was the oldest of three children, and his father, a mechanic, provided a modest, though comfortable, living for his family. Tatum suffered vision problems from an early age, and though his family members did not always agree about the exact nature of his illness, the likeliest cause was childhood cataracts in both eyes, for which he had undergone 13 operations by his early teens. For some years his vision was partially restored, although he often had to look downward to focus on objects in his path, which resulted in a characteristic backward tilting of his head. But in 1930, as he walked home from a club date in the early morning hours, he was robbed and beaten with a blackjack, causing permanent blindness in his right eye. Over the years his left eye got progressively worse, but even though he was given instruction in Braille at his junior high school—followed by a year of training at the Columbus School for the Blind—he was remarkably independent throughout his life, and as a youngster, even participated in sports with some regularity. When he returned from Columbus, he entered the Toledo School of Music, where he studied with Overton G. Rainey, who also taught Paul Whiteman's pianist (and Toledo native) Roy Bargy (1894-1974), an extraordinarily fine player who had originally sought a classical career. Bargy, 15 years Tatum's senior, later reported that Rainey discouraged an interest in jazz for all of his students, but that after he began to tour, he received reports from home about a remarkable blind pianist. After hearing Rainey's prodigy, he was careful to steer a number of well-known musicians to the Toledo speakeasies and other clubs where Tatum played—and most left in stunned amazement. Tatum's first break came in 1927 when he won a contest to perform on local radio station WSPD, and within two years his daily noontime program had been picked up by the NBC Blue Network, giving him national coverage by the time he was 20. Though many encouraged him to go to New York, he resisted for several years until singer Adelaide Hall came through town and hired him to accompany her on a national tour. They wound up in New York, where he joined her to record several sides for Brunswick in 1932, including a rendition of Harold Arlen's "You Gave Me Everything but Love." Although Tatum's solo flourishes are infrequent, his remarkable virtuosity was already

apparent, and for all intents and purposes, he was a finished pianist. But Hall was often inconsiderate and paid him poorly, and many encouraged him to leave her employ.

A pivotal turning point occurred that same year when he went to an after-hours bar in Harlem called Morgan's to participate in a "cutting contest" with **stride** pianists **James P. Johnson**, Willie "The Lion" Smith, and **"Fats" Waller**, all recognized as pace setters for the newer jazz styles. All present agreed that the newcomer won the contest easily when he outplayed each man on his own specialty, and when Tatum extemporized on standards like Vincent Youmans's "Tea for Two," they were left speechless. On March 21, 1933, he made his first solo recordings for the Brunswick label (many of his Brunswicks were later reissued by Decca, which bought the company in 1941), pairing Youmans's song with the Dixieland classic "Tiger Rag." His highly advanced harmonic language, as well as the astounding virtuosity found in his later style, were already in place. Although even in the 1920s, forward-looking jazz artists like Bix Beiderbecke had colored their piano arrangements with augmented eleventh chords—the language of Debussy and Ravel—scarcely anyone had used "walking elevenths" as smoothly and as effortlessly as Tatum rendered them in his fantasy-like introduction:



Measure 3 of an improvised arrangement of the jazz classic "Tiger Rag," taken from Art Tatum's 1933 Brunswick recording. "Tiger Rag" had first been recorded in 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jass Band. Tatum's hands were large enough that he could rapidly connect the filled ninth chords in his right hand in perfect legato fashion. On the fourth beat, his sequential pattern of augmented elevenths is crowned by an eighth-note couplet of augmented thirteenths on F-sharp and B.

Once he reaches a steady tempo, he pushes his left-hand stride figurations well beyond the capacities of most pianists—averaging about 168 quarter notes per minute:

Measures 25 and 26 of an improvised arrangement of the jazz classic “Tiger Rag,” taken from Art Tatum’s 1933 Brunswick recording. Note that Tatum’s hands were so large that even at breakneck tempos, he could render his bass tones in filled tenths.

Though his popularity with the record-buying public was initially very limited, professionals responded immediately, and soon virtually everyone with a serious interest in jazz knew that a truly extraordinary talent had arrived. To the present day, many find his first “Tiger Rag” recording an iconic landmark, and **Oscar Peterson**, who first heard it as a teenager in his hometown of Montreal, later confessed that he gave up the piano for two months, “and I had crying fits at night.” Many professional pianists had similar reactions, and the stories are legion of musicians who felt totally vanquished by his overpowering command. In addition to an incomparable virtuosity, his rhythm was flawless, his tone production could be as delicate as it was boisterous, and his imagination seemed limitless, no doubt aided by a sense of pitch so acute that friends said he could tell the brand of a beer simply from hearing its container hit the trash. He began playing at various clubs in Harlem, and every pianist in New York soon discovered him, but the public’s reaction was less enthusiastic. For many, Tatum’s style was little more than a bewildering collection of notes, and they preferred the simpler dance music of the newer style many were now calling “Swing.” By 1934, he was working in Cleveland, returning to New York only for occasional recording sessions, which had dwindled to one by 1935—followed by none at all in 1936. However, one of his Cleveland appearances was carried on NBC radio, which led to a lengthy engagement at Chicago’s Three Deuces, where he was also asked to accompany a small group which included bassist Milt Hinton. Ensemble versus solo work was a recurring theme in Tatum’s career, since clubs and record companies found their audiences far more receptive to small groups than to solo piano, yet his mind and fingers often worked at such a pace that few could keep up with him. Years later, Hinton remembered, “It was hard to play with him. … I was just like standing still there, on those wonderful things he was playing.” In 1936, he went to California for the first time, where he made some

recordings the following year with clarinetist Marshall Royal, who recalled similar frustration. Royal also claimed that he escorted Tatum to **Paderewski**'s railroad car at Los Angeles's Union Station, where he performed for the famous pianist, who was then nearing the end of his long career.

In March of 1938, Tatum and his wife sailed for Europe on the *Queen Mary*, and he performed for three months in some of London's most fashionable night spots, thereby enhancing his international reputation. When he returned to the Three Deuces, his European acceptance had increased his cachet with upper-class audiences to the extent that his engagements now suggested the charisma of concert artist, rather than club pianist. One Chicago critic even wrote, "When he approached the piano, a hush fell over the capacity-jammed place. Not a murmur, not a cough." For the next five years, his New York club engagements were often termed "residencies," and the owner of the famed Café Society in Greenwich Village, New York's first integrated club, even insisted that no food or beverages be served while Tatum played. In February of 1940, he recorded some of his most famous Decca 78s, including the first version of his treatment of Clifford Burwell's "Sweet Lorraine," a disc that the teenaged **André Previn** relentlessly transcribed note-for-note four years later in Los Angeles. Far more iconic was his first recording of "Elegy," taken from Massenet's incidental music to the 1873 French verse drama *Les Érinnyes*, and his rendition of Dvořák's familiar "Humoresque." Both exemplified Tatum's penchant for creating jazz from atypical source material, and "Elegy" especially, demonstrates a pianistic wizardry so profound that the virtual impossibility of others remaining in synch with his inspirations is readily demonstrated. By 1942, his club fees even in Toledo were reported to be as high as $2,000 a week, but his record sales were unimpressive, since the pop music industry was still heavily dominated by swing bands and vocalists. His one best-seller from this period, a recording of "Wee Baby Blues" from January of 1941, reached sales of 500,000 only because he was backing popular blues singer Big Joe Turner. By 1943, he had given in to the popular preference for ensembles by forming the "Art Tatum Trio" with guitarist Tiny Grimes and bassist Slam Stewart, who later acknowledged that it was only his perfect pitch that enabled him to follow Tatum's complex patterns of modulation. But many a club owner relished an attraction as popular as the **Nat "King" Cole** Trio, and the Tatum Trio was an immediate success, albeit often with greatly simplified piano flourishes.

Though the Trio made some recordings which sold well, critical reaction was always lukewarm, and on the advice of agents, he disbanded the ensemble in 1945. Once a major headliner in the jazz clubs on New York's 52nd Street, Tatum was gradually pushed into the background as Bebop musicians became more numerous, and he was

grateful to receive a series of offers from various promoters who presented him in concert halls for the rest of the decade. Like so many musicians from the previous generation, he benefitted greatly from the Norman Granz "Jazz at the Philharmonic" tours which began late in 1945, and he appeared throughout the country with Granz on at least 60 occasions, though regrettably, none of those appearances were recorded. However, in April 1949 he was presented in concert at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles by promoter Gene Norman, and the performance was later issued as an LP by Columbia. The Norman concert represents Tatum at his most rhapsodically virtuosic, as the Lisztian flourishes which open Jerome Kern's "Yesterdays" seem to morph at will into breathless stride, followed by raucous blues. The thunderous applause was then interrupted with a blistering account of Vincent Youmans's "I Know that You Know," a performance the *New Yorker*'s jazz critic Whitney Balliett compared to a "tidal-wave." Balliett also referenced his all-too-brief rendition of **Gershwin**'s "The Man I Love," punctuated by a continuous eight-bar stream of whirlwind scales and arpeggios (some with left hand) which he maintained, "no other pianist would dare because it is impossible." In the same year, Tatum signed with the newly formed Los Angeles-based Capitol label and recorded 26 titles for them, including Ann Ronell's "Willow Weep for Me," which by now had become one of his signature specialties. Composer and scholar Gunther Schuller, who was often critical of Tatum's unrestrained virtuosity, found "Willow" to be an expression of his growing maturity, lauding the performance as "Tatum at his most eloquent and concise."

Tatum did not record again until December 1953 when Norman Granz invited him into a Los Angeles studio to set down 124 selections—68 done in a two-day marathon—for his new Clef label. He then released 121 of them on 14 12" LPs for a series titled *The Genius of Art Tatum*, and though the set has been reviewed unevenly, many feel that despite some fairly ordinary renditions, the vast collection also documents some of his finest work. Many critics reacted with overwhelming enthusiasm as well when Tatum was voted most popular jazz pianist in the *Down Beat* polls of 1954, 1955, and 1956. Granz also conceived a plan for him to record with a bevy of jazz superstars for his new Verve label, including Lionel Hampton, Buddy Rich, Buddy DeFranco, and Roy Eldridge, and in August 1956 he arranged for many of these artists to perform before an audience of 19,000 at the Hollywood Bowl. Several weeks later, Tatum's most famous ensemble recording took place on September 11 when he played his last studio session with tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, a meeting singled out by jazz pianist Benny Green as "the most successful attempt of all time." Today many jazz musicians regard the Tatum-Webster collaborations as among the most iconic in the history of jazz, and Webster felt their recording of Cole Porter's "Night and Day" to be one of the finest he had ever made.

But sadly, Tatum had long been suffering from diabetes, and his late hours, combined with his prodigious beer consumption, undoubtedly contributed to the kidney disease from which he was then suffering. He died at 47, less than two months after his session with Webster. After his death, a number of additional recordings were released, including two private concerts recorded on April 16, 1950, and on July 3, 1955, at the home of Warner Brothers music director and pianist Ray Heindorf. Heindorf, who owned a **Steinway** B and studio-grade recording equipment, frequently had parties at his Hollywood home, and the 39 selections he captured (now available on CD) are believed to represent some of Tatum's most remarkable playing. For example, his hair-trigger harmonic modulations in Richard Whiting's "Too Marvelous for Words" from the 1950 session have been studied by countless pianists and arrangers. On both occasions, Tatum was totally unrestrained, and his intricate, florid elaborations on Richard Rodgers's "My Heart Stood Still" from the 1955 session seem tailored to the connoisseur audience Heindorf had assembled (which many believe included actor Jack Webb, a jazz fanatic who had just completed post-production on *Pete Kelly's Blues* for Warners). Sometimes called the "invisible man" of jazz, Tatum exerted an influence, even on instrumentalists like Charlie Parker, that is so extensive it cannot be easily chronicled, and in addition to Peterson and Previn, **Erroll Garner**, **Bud Powell**, **Thelonious Monk**, **George Shearing**, **Bill Evans**, **Billy Taylor**, **Herbie Hancock**, and **Chick Corea** are but a few of the countless pianists who found his work not simply influential, but transformative on their own development.