

CENTENNIAL  
CELEBRATION

ORIGINAL  
*Jazz*  
CLASSICS®

# ART TATUM



## Art Tatum—piano

**1. JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS** 7:15  
(Cole Porter) Warner Bros. Music-ASCAP  
with Red Callender—bass; Jo Jones—drums. Recorded January 27, 1956. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 6* (Pablo PACD-2405-429).

**2. MOONGLOW** 2:56  
(Edgar Delange-Will Hudson-Irving Mills) EMI Mills Music/Scarsdale Music Corp-ASCAP  
Recorded January 19, 1955. From *The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces, Volume 1* (Pablo PACD-2405-432).

**3. IN A SENTIMENTAL MOOD** 5:04  
(Edward Kennedy Ellington-Irving Mills-Manny Kurtz) EMI Mills Music Inc./Sony ATV Harmony Music-ASCAP  
with Roy Eldridge—trumpet; John Simmons—bass; Alvin Stoller—drums. Recorded March 1955. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 2* (Pablo PACD-2405-425).

**4. TEA FOR TWO** 3:34  
(Irving Caesar-Vincent Youmans) Irving Caesar Music Corp. c/o WB Music Corp. c/o Warner Chappell Music, Inc.-ASCAP  
Recorded December 29, 1953. From *The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces, Volume 2* (Pablo PACD-2405-433).

**5. A FOGGY DAY** 5:29  
(George Gershwin-Ira Gershwin) George Gershwin Music c/o WB Music Corp./Ira Gershwin Music/ WB Music Corp c/o Warner Chappell Music Inc.-ASCAP  
with Benny Carter—alto saxophone; Louis Bellson—drums. Recorded June 25, 1954. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 1* (Pablo PACD-2405-424).

**6. SEPTEMBER SONG** 7:05  
(Maxwell Anderson-Kurt Weill) Chappell & Co., Inc. c/o Warner Chappell Music/Hampshire House Publishing-ASCAP  
with Lionel Hampton—vibes; Harry Edison—trumpet; Barney Kessel—guitar; Red Callender—bass; Buddy Rich—drums. Recorded September 7, 1955. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 5* (Pablo PACD-2405-428).

**7. IT'S ONLY A PAPER MOON** 2:40  
(Harold Arlen-E.Y. Harburg-Billy Rose) Anne-Rachel Music Corporation c/o Warner/Chappell Music Inc./Glocca Morra Music Corp. c/o Next Decade Entertainment Inc.-ASCAP  
Recorded January 19, 1955. From *The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces, Volume 1* (Pablo PACD-2405-432).

**8. WHERE OR WHEN** 6:27  
(Richard Rodgers-Lorenz Hart) Chappell & Co Inc. c/o Warner Chappell Music Inc./Williamson Music Co.-ASCAP  
with Ben Webster—tenor saxophone; Red Callender—bass; Bill Douglass—drums. Recorded September 11, 1956. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 8* (Pablo PACD-2405-431).

**9. YESTERDAYS** 3:29  
(Otto Harbach-Jerome Kern) Universal Polygram International-ASCAP  
Recorded December 28, 1953. From *The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces, Volume 3* (Pablo PACD-2405-434).

**10. THIS CAN'T BE LOVE** 4:38  
(Richard Rodgers-Lorenz Hart) Chappell & Co Inc. c/o Warner Chappell Music Inc./Williamson Music Co.-ASCAP  
with Buddy DeFranco—clarinet; Red Callender—bass; Bill Douglass—drums. Recorded February 6, 1956. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 7* (Pablo PACD-2405-430).

**11. OVER THE RAINBOW** 3:43  
(Harold Arlen-E.Y. Harburg) EMI Feist Catalog Inc. c/o EMI April Music Inc.-ASCAP  
Recorded December 28, 1953. From *The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces, Volume 6* (Pablo PACD-2405-437).

**12. HOW HIGH THE MOON** 5:06  
(Nancy Hamilton-William Lewis) Chappell & Co. c/o Warner Chappell Music-ASCAP  
with Lionel Hampton—vibes; Buddy Rich—drums. Recorded August 1, 1955. From *The Tatum Group Masterpieces, Volume 3* (Pablo PACD-2405-426).

Original recordings produced by Norman Granz.  
Recorded at Radio Recorders, Hollywood, CA (#2, 4, 7, 9, 11); other selections recorded in Los Angeles, CA.

Compilation produced by Nick Phillips  
Mastered by Joe Tarantino (Joe Tarantino Mastering, Berkeley, CA)

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CTSIMAGES.COM

"I'll go back and listen to Art Tatum's collection, that Pablo series..."

—McCoy Tyner, describing his listening habits in the mid-Eighties

**J**azz is not a place known for virtuosi. Innovators, yes. Visionaries, absolutely. But in a land where musical individuality and emotional veracity are among the most highly prized qualities, instrumental technique is often secondary. There have been a few masters—Charlie Parker and Jaco Pastorius for two random examples—whose technical prowess was instrumental (pun intended) in their development of distinctive and highly influential styles.

It is no stretch to state that Art Tatum was the jazz world's first, and arguably greatest virtuoso. His seemingly effortless abilities on the piano keyboard—at any tempo, in any key—plus a harmonic acuity and an impromptu inventiveness that never ran dry, all placed him far above the most accomplished of his contemporaries. But it was more than just how he played. "What makes Tatum great," Leonard Feather once opined in *Esquire*, "is not his technique; it's the incredible flow of brilliant rhythmic and harmonic ideas that his technique enables him to express."

Tatum had formed the basis of his signature style before his twentieth birthday, and refined it throughout a career that engendered awe more than reward. And often fear.

Stories abound of Tatum entering a bar, nightclub, private home—any place with a piano and audience—and other pianists pulling back in terror. Jazz impresario and producer Norman Granz, who recorded Tatum in the last years of the pianist's life, tells the story of a Los Angeles party with lots of musicians, liquor, and the pianists Nat Cole, Jimmy Rowles, Count Basie, and Tatum.

"I was in the kitchen with Basie. Nat played and Jimmy played. Then Art played. I said to Basie, 'Aren't you going to play?' He said, 'After Art? I'd rather die first.'"

**H**e was born Arthur Tatum, Jr. in 1909 to a musical family in Toledo, Ohio: his father an amateur guitarist and his mother a church pianist. Burdened with cataracts in his eyes from infancy, but blessed with perfect pitch, Tatum could replay melodies heard on the radio at the age of three. As a teenager, he was struck in a street mugging and lost vision in one eye. Almost sightless, he studied classical music at the Columbus School for the Blind.

Perhaps what is the most remarkable aspect of Tatum's beginning is that it is rather unremarkable. Despite being discouraged from playing jazz, he was drawn like so many of his generation to the leading pianists of the Twenties: James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, puneyors of the stride piano style, and the looser, more forward-looking ideas of Earl Hines. He also credited the lesser-known Midwest pianist Lee Sims known for a highly developed harmonic sense.

Tatum began to develop a unique approach filled with awe-inspiring arpeggios that favored 16th, 32nd and 64th notes, all played with uncanny accuracy and articulation. At age 17, he was leading bands around his hometown. By 19, he signed a contract to perform regularly on a local radio station and his fame soon spread. The biggest names in jazz—Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington—made a point while touring northern Ohio to stop in Toledo to hear the kid with the flawless technique and ambidextrous ability. At 21, he made his first trip to the East Coast, accompanying the singer Adelaide Hall. But Tatum's future was not to play a supporting role, and the spotlight found him almost immediately.

Tatum took New York City by storm, wowing musicians

and music fans downtown, uptown, and even in high society. Not long after his arrival, he took up residency at the Onyx Club on 52nd Street, the nerve center of the city's jazz scene. In a cutting contest in Harlem, he stood up to and bested New York's most prodigious piano professors of the day—like Waller and Willie "The Lion" Smith—with reworkings of "Tea for Two" and "Tiger Rag." At a downtown soiree hosted by George Gershwin, his playing drew adulation from classical heavyweights—Leopold Gotowski and Sergei Rachmaninoff to name two—not used to praising jazz musicians. And in early 1933, Tatum recorded his first sides for the Brunswick label, and popular recognition seemed assured.

Though Tatum's career would propel him to a number of heights over the next 15 years—visiting England, becoming the toast of New York and Los Angeles—he never achieved the commercial success commensurate with his talent. Many found fault with his rococo style; he "generally sounds as if he is using 20 fingers trying to play ten symphonies in five minutes" wrote one critic in 1936. Tatum remained a musician's musician—no hit records, no sold-out, headlining tours.

The progress Tatum could not make with his career, he poured into his music. His sound became increasingly his own, filled with impromptu embellishments, melodic quotes, and 2- or 4-bar flurries that often shifted harmony and played with the rhythm; at times he would pause like a runner gasping for a breath. In a manner that predicted attributes of the modern piano style that would arrive as part of the bebop wave in the mid-Forties, his improvisations would only subtly reference the song being played, and at times disengage from the melody altogether.

Tatum's music was challenging and did not politely fade into the background at social functions. The fact that his music was best heard in a solo setting did not help Tatum's popular appeal either, nor did it make it easy to find the right sidemen. An extremely adept level of musicianship was necessary to figure out how to keep up with his eccentric style.

Tatum acquiesced and, using Nat Cole's trio as a model, formed a well-received group with guitarist Tiny Grimes and bassist Slam Stewart that landed steadier work than he could playing alone. Nonetheless, from the late Thirties and through the Forties, whether solo or with group, he could not escape what was then the basic milieu of jazz: noisy bars, clubs, and after-hour joints. It was a situation he never cottoned to, and of which he grew increasingly tired.

By the early Fifties, the middle-aged Tatum was still playing at the height of his powers; articles touting his genius had appeared in *Time* and *Newsweek*. He had appeared on television, playing for Steve Allen. But his discography was sadly scant; his renown had superseded the availability of his music. A few dates for Capitol Records in 1949 and '52—solo and trio—yielded arguably the best of what was available up to that point. Then a longtime Tatum devotee entered with a plan.

"I've been wanting to get Tatum on record for years and, well, finally it happened," Norman Granz told *Melody Maker* in 1955. "This, I decided, would be the definitive work on Tatum. For once and for all."

Granz had always been one to be guided by music first, social obligation second, with profit not far behind. He was still in his twenties when he first launched what became the groundbreaking Jazz at the Philharmonic concert series in 1944, first in Los Angeles, and then throughout the U.S. Commonly referred to by its initials, Granz's JATP events emphasized the jam session aspect of jazz: all-star soloists sitting in with a hand-picked rhythm section, playing standards and blues numbers.

Granz formed a number of record labels—Clef in 1946, followed by Norgren in '53—which he later consolidated into Verve in '56. He first released recordings of the JATP performances, and soon expanded into producing new music in the studio. Granz's commitment to giving musicians—especially black musicians—a fair shake earned him the loyalty of many jazz artists of many styles: Roy Eldridge, Ben Webster, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Oscar Peterson to name but a few.

Granz first brought Tatum into the Radio Recorders studio in Hollywood on December 28, 1953. "The [first] session was set for nine," Granz recalled. "Art walked in, sat down and switched on his radio. He sat there for about half an hour—drinking his beer and listening to a basketball game between UCLA and some other team. Then he switched it off and said, 'let's go.' Just like that."

The musical outpouring lasted for hours, Tatum playing one tune after another, never stopping for a playback ("I don't need to hear them," Tatum said to Granz. "I know when I hit a bum note.") The plethora of performances spoke both of a personal backlog of musical ideas and material, and of Tatum's encyclopedic retention of songs. Never a songwriter, he had an ability to store and recall at will an incredible number of melodies—the vast majority which had been popular when Tatum was in his teens and twenties, and had become standards in common jazz repertoire.

Granz released the solo performances on Clef as *The Genius of Tatum*—then viewed by many as a vainglorious title (an honorific later borrowed by Atlantic Records to describe their own piano powerhouse, Ray Charles).

There was more to come. On other dates in late 1953, 1954, and one in 1955, Tatum returned to the studio by himself, eventually recording a total of 124 solo tracks for Granz. Meanwhile, from 1954 through most of '56, Granz persuaded Tatum to also record with other musicians of top caliber, and kept raising the ante: Tatum first recorded as a trio with alto saxophonist Benny Carter and drummer Louie Bellson, and then in various lineups ranging from trio to sextet.

This particular collection, in celebration of the 100th anniversary of Tatum's birth, draws ten tracks from that timeless archive, filled with the hallmarks of Tatum's piano style in full flower, representing each of those historic sessions, presenting the maestro in every context Granz managed to arrange for him.

The solo tracks are especially revealing of the manner in which Tatum could discover a deeply hidden complexity in an otherwise simple melody, "Moonglow" or "It's Only a Paper Moon" for example. Or how Tatum's classical training was always within reach, as exemplified by his tour-de-force performance of "Yesterdays." Or how he could take the overly familiar—say, "Over the Rainbow"—and re-consider (and keep re-considering) the tune from an apparently never-ending succession of angles and moods.

Or how, as jazz writer Benny Green so astutely put it, the classic "Tea for Two" "opened the door ... on a whole world of chromatic speculation" for Tatum, who crafted it into one of his signature tunes.

The group performances resonate with a series of well-orchestrated meetings, Tatum's garrulousness either matched by Lionel Hampton's equally fluid and ebullient vibraphone style—as on "How High the Moon"—or providing stark contrast on "September Song" to Harry "Sweets" Edison's less-is-more feel on the trumpet. On "Where or When," tenor saxophonist Ben Webster simply stays out of Tatum's way altogether, awaiting his moment to blow a tasteful, raspy solo, and add to the song's finish.

There are also a few stunning examples of the catalytic effect of Tatum's masterful accompaniment: Jo Jones's brushwork on the extended take of "Just One of Those

Things" is a melodic marvel. A driving piano solo on "A Foggy Day," rife with chordal ideas and single-note runs, inspires a fleet, frisky solo from Benny Carter's alto saxophone. The muted trumpet of Roy Eldridge, who first performed with Tatum when the pianist was still a teenager, serves as a comforting melodic anchor on a laid back version of Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood." "This Can't Be Love" features the woefully forgotten Buddy DeFranco—the premier clarinetist of the post-bop period—showing off his rich tone and uptempo agility, trading fours with Tatum on "This Can't Be Love."

Tatum's last session—the one featuring Ben Webster—took place in September 1956. Less than two months later, the pianist passed away, a victim of uremic poisoning, a consequence of decades of heavy drinking. He was 47 years old.

Art Tatum lived and played beyond the pull of trends, creating music that denied categorization. "He did not pilot a single style as much as he piloted his musical genius through the available styles," pianist and teacher Felicity Howlett wrote in a dissertation on Tatum.

Many critics of his day resisted calling Tatum a jazz artist so unique was his approach; it's still a challenge to figure out how and where to place him in the jazz tradition. "He occupied his own country," Whitney Balliett observed. "Tatum did not fit comfortably into jazz, for his playing, which was largely orchestral, both encompassed it and overflowed it."

"Nobody's ever been able to touch him," said Roy Eldridge many years after Tatum's passing. "Art didn't belong in this scene."

—Ashley Kahn, June 2009

Ashley Kahn is the author of *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album*, *The House That Trane Built: The Story of Impulse Records*, and other jazz titles. He often contributes to National Public Radio's "Morning Edition."

*An addendum: Four years after Tatum's death, Norman Granz sold the Verve label—and all of its musical treasures—to the entertainment conglomerate MGM. But, by 1973, itching to hear new music by his favorite artists, Granz returned to the business. He founded Pablo Records with the intention of recording his old friends Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, and Joe Pass. And he remembered the piano master.*

*Since the sale of Verve in 1960, not much had been done with the Tatum tapes. "So I went to MGM and I talked to the A&R man, who was a rock-and-roller," remembers Granz. "I said, 'Look I'd like to buy some masters back from you... I'll pay you what I know it would cost if I was recording Art now, if he were alive. So we made a deal.'*

*It says a lot that of all of the classic recordings Granz produced during his years at Verve, he first focused on repurchasing the Tatum masters.*

*Gratitude and acknowledgment are due jazz researcher and Norman Granz biographer Tad Hershorn of Rutgers University's Institute for Jazz Studies.*

—A.K.

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## Art Tatum—piano

with Louis Bellson, Red Callender, Benny Carter, Buddy DeFranco, Bill Douglass, Harry Edison, Roy Eldridge, Lionel Hampton, Jo Jones, Barney Kessel, Buddy Rich, John Simmons, Alvin Stoller, and Ben Webster

Original recordings produced by Norman Granz.

Recorded at Radio Recorders, Hollywood, CA (#2, 4, 7, 9, 11); other selections recorded in Los Angeles, CA.

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Mastered by Joe Tarantino (Joe Tarantino Mastering, Berkeley, CA)

Contains previously released material recorded from 1953 to 1956.



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