

“God is in the House”  
A Biography of Art Tatum



**“God is in the House”**

A Biography of

**ART TATUM**

Mark Lehmstedt

wolke

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"We were playing in Toledo, Ohio, and everybody's talking about this young piano player they have there, how great he is. After a while this young fellow comes up and asks if he can play a number. I moved off the piano stool, but stood nearby so that I could move back real quick if necessary. Well, I'm still standing there..."\* (Count Basie)

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\* Lyttleton 1981, p. 113.



## PROLOGUE

### “The Invisible Man of Jazz”

Asked which twelve records he would take with him to a desert island, Duke Ellington first listed three works by Maurice Ravel, Frederick Delius and Claude Debussy. Then followed the first jazz musician: “One of Art Tatum’s records—*any* one.”<sup>1</sup>

Jazz musicians rarely tend to make uniform judgments when it comes to their music. Their opinions are as individual as they are themselves, no wonder in a music genre whose primary essence is individuality—a good jazz musician has to find his or her own form of expression, his or her own melodic, harmonic and rhythmic language and a very individual form of phrasing. Instead of striving for a given sound ideal and reproducing given musical material, the jazz musician strives for individuality and distinctiveness. Under these circumstances the probability that a larger number of jazz musicians share agreement on a single musician is extremely small. Everyone has his or her favorite trumpeter, everyone prefers a different style, everyone feels most touched by a different singer. There is a handful of exceptions to this rule: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker beyond the reason of a doubt, and perhaps the verdict on Miles Davis and John Coltrane is still out. There is only one more name, however: Art Tatum.

Jazz has many honorary nobles in its ranks: several kings (Joe “King” Oliver, Nat “King” Cole, of course Louis Armstrong, the “King of Jazz”, and Benny Goodman, the “King of Swing”), an empress (Bessie Smith, the “Empress of the Blues”), counts (William “Count” Basie), dukes (Edward “Duke” Ellington), Sirs (“Sir” Charles Thompson) and Ladies (Billie Holiday, “Lady Day”, and Ella Fitzgerald, the “First Lady of Jazz”).

And then there was God himself: Art Tatum.

Bassist Red Callender reported: “His nickname was ‘God’, all the musicians called him God. Many cats were called King, Count, Sir, Lord, Duke, but to the musicians, Art Tatum was God.”<sup>2</sup> Fats Waller called Tatum the god of jazz piano back in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Nobody thought it was blasphemy or even an exaggeration.

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1 Miller 1943, p. 27; Goffin 1944, p. 234–235.

2 Callender/Cohen 1985, p. 126.

3 Stewart 1966, p. 18.

Timuel Black, an important representative of the black civil rights movement (and later its chronicler), grew up in Chicago and was well acquainted with many jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller or Billie Holiday already as a teenager. He was always amused by the fact that they were treated like gods in the jazz magazines: “Nobody around here talked about these people that way—unless you were talking about Art Tatum. We knew he *was* God.”<sup>4</sup> The great Ray Charles definitely said “Yeah, Tatum was God. And if God walked in the room, you stood up and paid your respects.”<sup>5</sup> According to Don Asher, Tatum was “the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to jazz pianists”.<sup>6</sup> Pianist George Ziskind made this confession: “I believe God, Country, and Art Tatum (not necessarily in that order).”<sup>7</sup>

The appreciation demonstrated of Art Tatum was overwhelmingly unanimous. Ever since he caught the attention of the first musicians who heard the teenager in his hometown of Toledo, Ohio, at the end of the 1920s, and even more so since his first solo recordings were released in 1933, it was obvious to everyone that a musician of the highest caliber was performing here. Jazz critic Dan Morgenstern once put it this way: “What others could imagine, Tatum could execute, and what he could imagine went beyond the wildest dreams of mere musical mortals.”<sup>8</sup> In 1951, British jazz critic Ralph Sharon probably was the first in a long line to remark, “Everything about him—his style of music and the way he plays it—is summed up in his Christian name—Art.”<sup>9</sup>

Tatum’s pianistic mastery is unquestioned. What is overlooked, however, is the immense influence he had on many musicians and the degree to which he influenced the development of jazz in general. Trumpeter Roy Eldridge, who met Tatum first in 1927 and took part in one of his last recordings in 1955, called him the “invisible man of jazz”, an astonishing, but extremely accurate formulation: “When I first heard him in 1927 he was thirty years ahead of his time; in fact, even by 1957 they still hadn’t caught on to all that he was doing. He was the ‘invisible man’ of jazz; guys might not realize it, but after they heard Art he was always with them, playing a part in the way they thought about improvising.”<sup>10</sup> No matter what instrument someone played, Tatum irrefutably demonstrated that musically and technically much more was possible, that there were no limits. As early as in 1939 Sharon Pease remarked: “Seeing and hearing Tatum play for the first time is no doubt indelibly impressed in the memory of every musician fortunate enough to

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4 Gennari 2006, p. 103.

5 Charles/Ritz 2004, p. 38.

6 Asher 1992, p. 76.

7 <http://jazzprofiles.blogspot.com/2014/10/i-remember-tadd-by-george-ziskind.html> (retrieved on March 1, 2021).

8 Morgenstern 2004, p. 303.

9 Sharon 1951, p. 4.

10 Chilton 1990, p. 58.

have had the experience.”<sup>11</sup> “Art showed us how far we could go if we kept trying,” was the final conclusion of Scoops Carry.<sup>12</sup> According to Tom Piazza, Tatum “showed what it is like to live in a world where all doors are open.”<sup>13</sup> This feeling, apart from Tatum, was perhaps only conveyed by Charlie Parker.

In view of the special position that Art Tatum occupies in the history of jazz, it is surprising how little is known about him and how casually he is treated in the entire jazz literature. This is primarily due to the fact that Tatum does not fit into the established narrative patterns and evaluation categories. Tatum’s creative period coincided with the heyday of Swing, but Tatum never played in any of the big bands that gave Swing-fever its dominance in the music market of the 1930s; so he dwelled on the edge of the mainstream that was formed by the orchestras of Fletcher Henderson, Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, or Glenn Miller. Rhythmically, Tatum was a main representative of the Swing age, but harmonically he went far beyond that. When the avant-garde music of Bebop blossomed in the 1940s, almost all of its representatives—with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk at the helm—stood on Tatum’s shoulders, especially in the field of harmonics; but he himself never played Bebop. And while all the piano schools of jazz converged in Tatum, he himself did not establish a “school” of his own; yet there was almost no jazz musician of his time who did not explicitly state that he had been influenced by Tatum, not only pianists but musicians of all instruments including John Coltrane, whose “sheets of sound” would be unthinkable without Tatum’s pianistic virtuosity and his use of arpeggios and sixteenth- and thirty-second runs across the entire keyboard.

The decisive difference lies in Tatum’s soloism. Jazz is almost by definition collective music. It gives the individual musician greater freedom than European classical music has ever known, but this freedom of the individual is always embedded in the structure of a group—the essence of jazz consists of this tension at its innermost core. Tatum, however, was a soloist, even when he played with others—a solitaire that jazz historiography still can only deal with great difficulty.

Interestingly, there is at least one parallel to Tatum, another jazz musician who also forms a solitaire in his own right in a completely different way and with whom jazz historiography for a long time had comparable difficulties: Duke Ellington, the man of whom it has been said with only slight exaggeration that he does not play an instrument but an orchestra. Ellington’s music and Ellington as a person fit as little as Tatum into the simple narrative patterns that most jazz historians followed for decades, and it is therefore hardly surprising that Ellington was almost always treated separately—apparently because his work is so complex, but in fact

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11 Down Beat, January 1939, p.22.

12 Rothman 1970, p. 10.

13 Piazza 1996.

because it almost never fit the ready-made templates. Of course, Ellington could never be completely ignored. On the one hand, many of the best soloists of their time who could not be ignored at all played in his orchestra, and, on the other hand, many of the compositions written by Ellington (or his musicians) formed indispensable standards for all jazz musicians.

But Tatum was alone and never composed. Consequently he met the tragic fate that Ellington was luckily spared.

The musicians who almost unanimously adored Tatum solved the problem of assigning him an appropriate place in a highly pragmatic way. Teddy Wilson, who had been friends with Tatum since 1929, said in an interview in 1963: “Back in the old days, we put Tatum in a special category and did not discuss him as a jazz pianist—he was in a category by himself, and we then talked about all the others; those who played in bands.”<sup>14</sup>

Wilson did not mean, of course, that Tatum’s music was not jazz—only some (white) critics of the 1950s came up with this aberrant idea. What he meant, was that Tatum did not play within the group constellations—from combo to big band—that were natural to jazz, and when he did (within the framework of his own trio in particular), it was not in the traditional role of a member of the rhythm section, who occasionally was allowed to play a solo chorus, but then immediately retreated into the supporting background again.

Tatum himself did not like being called a jazz pianist. “He said he was a *piano* player, a *musician*.”<sup>15</sup>

As a musician Tatum creates difficulties for those wanting to fit him into the great narrative of jazz historiography, and his personal behavior does not help either. As David Horn put it so precisely: “Had his biography been more dramatic, his behavior more unpredictable, his personality more charismatic—had he been one of those whom jazz historiography has seen as ‘spectacularly socially dysfunctional practitioners available for romanticisation’, it is possible, given the way that these things work, that his music would be thought to have signification on other levels.”<sup>16</sup> But Tatum’s life was quite unspectacular. Though almost blind, he was obviously a happy man; there were neither skyrocketing climaxes nor catastrophic defeats; at times he was one of the best-paid black jazz musicians, but measured by the sums that white Broadway and Hollywood stars received at the same time, he earned only a tip; he (almost) always appeared on time at his performances and (most times) treated his listeners with great courtesy; he neither broke the furniture nor made funny antics; he was not a clown and never carried a big cigar in the corner of his mouth during a performance; his records sold well at times, but not a single one ever came even close to reaching the charts; he did not have exciting

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14 Young 1963, p.23.

15 Keepnews 1988, p. 80.

16 Horn 2000, p.238.

affairs with mysterious women, and he was not homosexual; not even the only potentially “interesting” color, his extraordinary consumption of alcohol, made him special, because drinking was plentiful in Tatum’s circles anyway, but he neither rampaged around nor finally ended up in delirium.

Boringly, Tatum limited himself to playing the piano . . . and stuck to it!

The fact that he did play piano in an absolutely unique way was not a sufficient reason to analyze his work more closely, on the contrary, it led to the fact that one could not do anything with him. On closer inspection, Tatum was locked into the curiosity cabinet of jazz history. This is in keeping with the fact that Tatum was blind—as in the abnormality shows of the travelling circuses of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the general public was impressed by the fact that someone could play the piano “so well”, “even though” he couldn’t see the keys.

Writing a biography of someone who tried to keep his personality private as far as possible is not the easiest thing in the world to do. Only a very small number of interviews or reports that probably are based on interviews are available. In public Tatum never talked about his family, his childhood, his professional development, his feelings, nor his interests. Barry Ulanov, who interviewed many jazz musicians of the 1940s and 1950s, was discouraged by the “fruitless attempt to get a long narrative from him”.<sup>17</sup> When he passed away, the journalists were astonished that there was no information available about “Tatum the man” and almost none about “Tatum the musician”. Even the musicians he had worked with for years did not know very much about him, many had, for example, never heard that he was married.

To reconstruct the “life and matters” of the master pianist, this book is essentially based on three genres of sources.

Firstly, of course, there is the music of Art Tatum himself, insofar as it has survived and is tangible. No one has done more for the scholarly indexing and for the release of hidden Tatum recordings than Arnold Laubich (1929–2014), who in 1982, together with Ray Spencer, published the Tatum discography that is still helpful today, and who, from 2000 to 2008, made a large number of previously unreleased private recordings generally available with the help of Storyville Records in Denmark. Without Laubich’s ground-breaking work, a book like this would simply have been impossible.

In second place there are the recollections of those who had met Art Tatum, had worked with him, or had seen him perform. These accounts are mainly scattered in books that range from collections of anecdotes to memoirs (mostly written by ghostwriters) to more or less scholarly-based biographies for which the person in question himself and many others from his environment were interviewed. All these books share the fact that Art Tatum has always been treated as having been merely marginal. James Lester’s book about Art Tatum also falls in this category, because it is based almost completely on narrations of contemporaries.

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17 Lester 1994, p. 5.

Tatum's own recordings and the recollections of his contemporaries formed the basis for the first version of this book, which was published in German in 2009. What hardly existed at that time has now become possible and created an opportunity to completely re-write the book. Thanks to the digitization of vast archives and materials of newspapers and magazines, the two aforementioned source genres can now be supplemented by a third one—the huge amount of information of all kinds contained in American daily newspapers and in international jazz journals, material that until now remained literally buried. In this way, the biography is finally provided with a solid foundation into which the recollections of contemporaries can be inserted. The fact that one of the best-known stories in the early Charlie Parker biography can thus be relegated to the realm of mere legend is one of the unexpected side effects.

However, there are limits to working with the digital sources which must be taken into account seriously by the reader. Firstly, many but by no means all American daily newspapers of the period of interest here have been digitized; for example, the *Toledo Blade*, so important for Tatum's early biography, is still missing. Other newspapers have been digitized, but are not accessible, at least for a historian working in Germany, because of insurmountably high financial hurdles. Secondly, most of the digitization is not based on the originals, but on microfilms made at earlier times. To make matters worse, the originals themselves were not always printed (or have not survived) in the best of quality. The quality of the digital images therefore is subject to great fluctuations. Without high image quality, however, optical character recognition (OCR) can only work with severely limited accuracy; of the magazine *Variety*, to name but one example, many issues were scanned so poorly that OCR fails completely. Therefore the results of a full text search must by its very nature be incomplete.

The situation is considerably better for the jazz periodicals made available by RIPM Jazz Periodicals. However, the financial restrictions on access are so extreme that no German university or research institution was able to provide me with access. Fortunately, during the first Covid 19 lockdown in the spring of 2020, the operator of the database decided to provide free access for a short time. It should be noted, however, that two of the most important American jazz journals, *Metronome* and *Down Beat*, were accessible in RIPM Jazz only up to 1961 and 1963, respectively, and that the British *Melody Maker* was not digitally available at all at the time of the research for this book in 2020/21.

Nevertheless, the material that has become available for the first time through the research in digital media is so overwhelmingly rich and varied that the scholar can only be full of gratitude for the blessings of modern times which offer completely new opportunities for writing history. It goes without saying that information derived from newspapers and periodicals must be treated and used with the same critical tools as any other source.

The combination of the above-mentioned three main sources—sound documents, memoirs, contemporary media texts—results in a volume of information that, in a sense, turns the reconstruction of Art Tatum’s life and work upside down. But for an all-encompassing presentation of the life of Art Tatum, one final source genre is unfortunately missing—his personal papers. Since Tatum was legally blind, there should be no letters, diaries or other private records of his life. When fans asked for an autograph, Tatum used a stamp with his signature—but he nevertheless signed photos and contracts by hand as well (see picture on page 126). However, there must have been a larger number of legally relevant documents—from the birth certificate to the documents on the two marriages and the divorce up to the settlement of his estate, from papers on the purchase of a car, a grand piano or the house in Los Angeles to the contracts that concerned his life as a musician, i. e. contracts with agents and record companies, contracts with the musicians of his trio, contracts with nightclub operators and concert promoters.

In 2008 it was reported “Tatum’s widow, Geraldine, who recently became ill, is putting their L.A. home up for sale. Zenph Studios has arranged to pack, transport and store a number of Tatum artifacts from the house including Tatum’s prized grand piano, a number of touring trunks filled with clothes and a locked piano bench filled with personal papers and sheet music. The Tatum artifacts will be donated to The Jazz Museum in Harlem and will be included in a forthcoming exhibit featuring legendary jazz greats.”<sup>18</sup> On June 3, 2008 the Harlem Jazz Museum proudly announced, that “we are honored to receive one of our most significant gifts to date: the piano and personal effects of Art Tatum. Through the good offices of Zenph Studios, the widow and family of Mr. Tatum is donating his own grand piano and other priceless Tatum memorabilia to the National Jazz Museum in Harlem at a special event at the Apollo Theater on Sunday, June 22<sup>nd</sup>.”<sup>19</sup> For unknown reasons, this agreement did not materialise. Ten years later several Tatum memorabilia were offered for sale at Guernsey’s auction on July 26, 2018 “African American Historic & Cultural Treasures”, among them Tatum’s piano—a Steinway & Sons Model B Grand Piano, ebony, serial number 346057. 6’ 10 1/2” long, offered at \$50,000—100,000<sup>20</sup> and sold at \$30,000.<sup>21</sup> What exactly was (and probably still is) contained in the “locked piano bench filled with personal papers and sheet music” remains a mystery up to the present day.

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18 <https://jazztimes.com/archives/art-tatum-celebrated-in-re-performance-cd-concert-and-book/> (retrieved March 1, 2021).

19 [http://www.jazzmuseuminharlem.org/oldsite/PR\\_060408.html](http://www.jazzmuseuminharlem.org/oldsite/PR_060408.html) (retrieved July 20, 2020).

20 [https://www.guernseys.com/v2/images/African-American/docs/African\\_American\\_Treasures\\_July25.pdf](https://www.guernseys.com/v2/images/African-American/docs/African_American_Treasures_July25.pdf) (retrieved July 20, 2020).

21 <https://www.barrons.com/articles/jazz-era-piano-tops-auction-of-african-american-historic-and-cultural-treasures-1532724042> (retrieved March 1, 2021).

Some readers will be surprised at the extent to which this book deals with people and places that are not normally found in the biography of a (jazz) musician, or that are at best mentioned once in passing. But as brilliant as Art Tatum was as a musician, he always practiced his art in certain spaces, under certain circumstances, dependent on other persons—and influencing them in turn. This primarily involves the great middlemen of music business—nightclub owners like Joe Helbock and Sam Beers, Len Litman and Ralph Watkins, record producers like Jack Kapp and Milt Gabler, music critics like Leonard Feather and Barry Ulanov, agents like Joe Marsolais and Bill Randle, radio- and TV personalities like Dave Garroway, Willis Conover, and Steve Allen, and finally impresarios like Gene Norman and Norman Granz, to name just a few, and this applies equally to the venues where Tatum (and countless other jazz musicians) could be heard, from the illegal Val's in the Alley in Cleveland to the Three Deuces in Chicago, the Onyx in New York, up to the Shrine Theatre in Los Angeles and the plush Metropolitan Opera House. I would like to hand them back some of their share in the making of jazz.

The book brings together a large number of contemporary accounts and subsequently written memoirs. Priority is always given to the early statements. The comparison of the recollections with the facts makes it clear that many of the recollections are astonishingly accurate, but that there are, of course, also a number of errors, some of which can now be corrected. Care must be taken with these corrections, because even improbable-sounding versions can turn out to be correct, especially when told independently by two persons. Conversely, however, one must always reckon with the fact that recollections, despite explicit assertions to the contrary, are not based on one's own experience at all, but on narratives of others which thus develop a strange life of their own much like Chinese whispers. Finally, there is the type of narrative, usually in the form of an anecdote, that is factually completely fictitious (Arthur Rubinstein never-ever cancelled a sold-out concert to hear Tatum play)—and yet contains truth in a deeper sense because it seeks to put a feeling into a story that can convince a third party.

I decided to often let the sources speak for themselves at length, rather than abbreviating them or reproducing them in my own words. Only in this way can the atmosphere of the event and the general spirit of the time in which Tatum played and affected others be preserved, at least approximately. Original formulations were not changed at any point, abridgements are indicated by ellipsis [...]. Sometimes I decided to print several versions of the same *story*, because this makes visible how *history* is constructed and charged with meaning.

Like most books this one, too is the result of a labour of love. But it was written by a historian who is interested not in ratings but in facts. This may sound naive in these times but to the best of my knowledge this is the only way historiographical writing escapes a short expiration date.



The first time that I met Art Tatum was about 1976. Tatum had been dead for twenty years, and I was fifteen years old. The West Berlin radio station Sender Freies Berlin (Radio Free Berlin) had a regular radio show every Sunday night at 10 p.m. with Messrs. Weiss and Lange presenting jazz. Since I was living in the eastern, “Communist” part of the city this was music coming from a world out of reach for the rest of my life. I was sitting glued to the radio with a microphone and a cheap tape recorder to preserve what most likely would never again in my lifetime cross my ears again. I recorded hours and hours of music. Weiss and Lange included a tune by Art Tatum in their show only once. It became the most worshipped of all tunes in my collection. I do not remember the title of the song, but it was different to everything else I had heard before whether jazz or whatever.

A year or two later I found out that the music department of the East Berlin City Library kept a copy of the Art Tatum Solo Performances 13 LP’s box set. It could not be borrowed but had to be listened to in a booth at the library itself. So I started spending hours and hours of listening to the thirteen LP’s. Since that time I have known for sure: art makes an impact. It is quite enough to simply reach one reader, one listener, one spectator. Borders of time and space can be crossed. That’s freedom. As simple as that. Even if you were the only one ever to listen to the box set of the Tatum recordings enshrined at East Berlin’s City Library, most likely the only set in the entire East Germany. “Hier konnte sonst niemand Einlass erhalten, denn dieser Eingang war nur für dich bestimmt.”<sup>24</sup> (Franz Kafka)



Artist’s card, James Kriegsmann, c. 1950

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24 „Here no one else could gain entry, since this entrance was reserved exclusively for you.“