



Art Tatum

THE DEFINITIVE ART TATUM—BLUE NOTE 7243 5 40225 2 4 www.bluenote.com
www.ververecords.com *The Shout; Sweet Emalina, My Gal; Elegie; Get Happy; Aunt Hagar's Blues; Nice Work If You Can Get It; It's The Talk of the Town; Makin' Whoopee; Goin' Home; Blue Skies; Someone to Watch Over Me; Mine; Yesterdays; Jitterbug Waltz; Mr. Freddie Blues; Indiana.*

PERSONNEL: Art Tatum, piano; Everett Barksdale, guitar; Slam Stewart, bass.

By Scott Gotschall

I once heard a movie quote that said, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture." When talking about the music of Art Tatum, it becomes even more futile. I can easily imagine that the last thing Blue Note, Verve, or Art Tatum's reputation needs is another reviewer saying, "Gosh, Art Tatum was *really* good."

Yet here we are. I imagine that is why one rarely talks about his music without also talking about his legend. It has been fifty years since Mr. Tatum's death, and his deified status ("Tonight, God is in the house.") remains well intact. There are as many stories and anecdotes about Art Tatum and his playing as one can imagine. Rarely, has one man been the inspiration for so many to take up his instrument, and also the reason so many give it up after being intimidated beyond the point of no return.

Perhaps my favorite story of Art Tatum comes from Vladimir Horowitz. Mr. Horowitz was a well-known classical pianist. He became famous for, among other things, playing virtuoso pieces by Chopin and Liszt faster and louder than anyone had ever played them before (or even *wanted* to play them before). He approached Art Tatum one night after a concert and proudly announced that he had learned how to play one of his solos. Quickly, Mr. Tatum responded, "Sure, you know how. But you don't know why." This is the depth of Art Tatum presented here, on *The Definitive Art Tatum*.

Mr. Tatum's technical prowess and harmonic and rhythmic genius are known to even those outside the jazz arena. Not as well-known is his empathetic blues playing and his re-working of classical masterpieces.

He shows off his blues talents on "Aunt Hagar's Blues" and "Mr. Freddie Blues". He evidences a clear understanding of the language of the bluesmen of the time. His playing consists of not only the technical prowess, but of humor and irony; traits that the blues depends on to be more than just a twelve-bar form or pentatonic riffs. Similarly, he shows great understanding on the classical pieces, "Elegie" and "Goin' Home", demonstrating his vast knowledge of classical harmonies and themes.

The usual classics are also here, including "Jitterbug Waltz", "Get Happy", and "Blue Skies". However, what makes this album unique is the collaboration between Verve and Blue Note. With these two companies working together, a large portion of Tatum's career is represented, making it a much broader and consequently much more valuable album than other single-disc releases. This provides a much better perspective of this man's considerable talents.

I have a friend who is a computer science geek and thus a technically minded person. When he was in college and taking a Music Appreciation course, they happened to show a film of Art Tatum. He was so impressed he asked if there must be a camera trick or special affect involved. The Professor assured him the only trick or affect was at the end of Art Tatum's agile fingers.

It is hard to believe that it has been nearly fifty years since Art Tatum stopped producing such glorious music. It is perhaps even more difficult when hearing how far ahead of his time he was. Even artists today have trouble keeping up with his contrapuntal lines, complex harmonies, and few even come close to his faculties as a technician. This album is a wonderful reminder of the magnificent music for which Art Tatum was responsible.