ART TATUM GOD IS IN THE HOUSE

Dan Morgenstern Grammy Award for Best Album Notes 1973

This is the first in a series of albums culled from the Jerry Newman Collection—a unique archive of location recordings made in New York City in the early 1940s.

Jerry Newman was then a student at Columbia University, a dedicated jazz fan, and the proud owner of portable disc recording equipment. At first, he recorded only private sessions held at his home; then he began to take his recorder uptown to Harlem clubs and after-hour spots. He soon found that the musicians didn't object to his recording them—on the contrary, they were pleased to hear their spontaneous creations played back.

In time, Newman accumulated a fascinating treasury of "field recordings". He was in the right places at the right time, and what had begun as a lark turned out to be a momentous contribution to the recorded literature of jazz.

This series is dedicated to the memory of Jerry Newman and the musicians he recorded, and made possible by special arrangement with the Jerry Newman Estate and the estates of the artists.

Genius is inexplicable, but Art Tatum, when asked, usually cited Fats Waller as his main inspiration. "Fats, man. That's where I come from. And quite a place to come from," he once told an interviewer.

Waller, in turn idolized Tatum. Once, when Tatum entered a club where Fats was performing, he stopped the music and announced "Ladies and gentleman, I play piano, but God is in the house tonight!"

Tatum was a sort of deity to his fellow musicians—not just to pianists, but players of any instrument. No practitioner of the music called jazz had (or has) such perfect technical command, in the traditional sense, __ as did Art Tatum. But it wasn't just his astonishing facility that inspired awe in his colleagues. It was his phenomenal harmonic sense, his equally uncanny rhythmic gift, and _his boundless imagination. Technique was merely the vehicle through which he expressed himself. What others could imagine, Tatum could execute, and what he could Imagine went beyond the wildest dreams of mere musical mortals.

In almost everything that has been written about Tatum, the point is made that he played his best not in recording studios, night clubs or concert halls, but after hours.

After hours was a very special term in jazz parlance in the days when Tatum flourished. Sadly, one has to use it in the past tense today, for there is no real after hours scene anymore.

But in the '30s and '40s, after hours was a way of life for the creative jazz musician. An outgrowth of prohibition (when liquor became legal, many speakeasies turned into places serving it after the prescribed hours), after hours places sprung up especially in the black urban communities throughout the land. Kansas City under Pendergast was one long after-hours party, but Harlem was the place where jazz legends were made after Kansas City shut down.

After hours spots ran the gamut from big and fancy to small and plain. Most went into action after the legitimate clubs and bars closed, but others opened when the regular after hours spots closed (these were known as *after* after hours places). All of them had a piano, even if it was just an old upright with some keys, hammers or strings missing.

No jazzman with the spirit of the music didn't frequent after hours spots, but a few were specialists in the field. These included Roy Eldridge, Hot Lips Page and Art Tatum.

Tatum loved after hours. His very first jobs in his native Toledo were at house rent parties, where he would play solo, back all manner of singers, or visiting instrumentalists.

It was in such environments, perhaps, that Tatum developed his tolerance for modestly gifted or entirely untalented singers or players, whom he would supply with the most ravishing backdrops. But perhaps not—as Charlie Parker, Tatum was interested in everything he could hear, and he could hear everything ... a limited blues pianist, who might have a certain feeling; a third-rate cocktail lounge tickler, who might have a special run anything at all within the vast spectrum of music, popular or serious, was grist for his ears.

And Tatum relished competition. Working in a club might offer an occasional opportunity for combat, but that was rare. After hours, on the other hand, or on Monday nights, when musicians gathered somewhere to exchange ideas and socialize, such opportunities were almost unlimited. Tatum was conscious of his superiority yet had a need to sharpen his wits and chops against all comers.

This unique record reveals, for the first and only time, the after-hours Tatum, the relaxed, informal, completely at ease Tatum. (Yes, I know, there's a marvelous two-record set of stuff recorded at a private party in Hollywood in '56, but Hollywood parties aren't Harlem after hours, and '56 wasn't '41 ....)

The earliest recordings here were made at Jerry Newman's apartment on November 11, 1940. Tatum liked the enthusiastic young fan and was intrigued by on-the-spot recording, so he allowed Newman to follow him on his tours of Harlem and set up his portable machine.

Many years ago, Newman played some of his Tatum material on a New York FM station, and I recall a few things he said about the circumstances. For instance, Reuben's at 242 W. 130th St. was a small place frequented by piano players, and the owner, Reuben Harris, liked to play along with them, discreetly, moving two whiskbrooms over a folded newspaper placed on

a chair. The piano, if I recall correctly, was not a full-keyboard instrument. But Tatum liked the place, and dropped in often.

The Gee-Haw Stables on W. 132nd St., so called because a sculpted horses' head graced the entrance, was an after-after hours place where the action started around 7 a.m. and would often go until noon the next day. Bassist Chocolate Williams, heard on some tracks here, had the house band.

Near the Gee-Haw was Clark Monroe's Uptown House (198 W. 34th St.,) a spot that rivaled Mintons in attracting major league jazzmen for after hours jamming. It was on the premises that had once held Barron Wilkens' Exclusive Club. In 1943, Monroe moved to 52nd St. where, as operator of The Spotlight, he became the Street's first black club owner.

Though all these were good-time spots where the noise of partying often got pretty loud, Newman seems to have had little trouble in persuading the customers to maintain a minimum of decorum but the occasional shouts or sighs of approbation that grace these tracks are a natural complement to the music.

There is no need here to go into detailed analysis of Tatum's style—for the best work in this genre, I recommend Dick Katz' essay on some Tatum records, published in **Jazz Panorama**, edited by Martin Williams—but it seems worthwhile to make a few points.

First, Tatum doesn't seem bothered or inhibited by the condition of the instruments he has to play here. In fact, he seems to adapt himself so well to their various shortcomings that one gets the feeling he enjoyed the challenge—circumventing dead keys or adapting himself to different kinds of out-of-tuneness might well have played a major role in sharpening his harmonic wits and manual dexterity. In any case, he was a wizard, and the relaxed convivial atmosphere no doubt made up for such handicaps.

Second, Tatum, who has been called the soloist par excellence, the man who needed no others to play with or for, seems inspired by the presence of audiences and other music-makers, be they singers or instrumentalists. Certainly, the level of inspiration he reaches on the two tracks with trumpeter Frank Newton and bassist Ebenezer Paul is as high if not higher than in any solo performance here (or elsewhere, for that matter). And the goodnatured jive of Chocolate Williams as well as the—singing of Ollie Potter brings forth some tremendous playing. Could it be that Tatum, sometimes criticized for not being a "real" jazz musician, in fact was very much that—so much so that he functioned best when he had company?

That may be exaggeration, but it certainly seems_ that he did function most completely when he had an audience he knew he liked. A performance such as the wonderful **Toledo Blues** would have been impossible in the concert hall. When Tatum was granted the too-rare privilege of playing there, he cast himself, quite logically, in the role of a concert artist—which he played better than any other jazzman, it must be said. And when he played nightclubs, he usually was too annoyed by the inattention of babbling drinkers-sightseers to really relax and enjoy himself. **Toledo Blues** was for his good friends, and we are privileged to partake of it. But we can also be

sure that this wasn't the first or only time that Tatum sang the blues, as witness his surprise chorus on **Knockin' Myself Out**.

Two of the three first tracks are little sketches—fascinating fragments. But the third, **Georgia On My Mind**, is a full-fledged on-the-spot interpretation of a standard, the kind of thing at which Tatum has no equals. And don't miss his breaks in the second chorus ... what equilibrium!

The three pieces from Reuben's (May 7, 1941) are utterly relaxed. **Sweet Lorraine**, was one of the pianist's favorites, and this version surpasses, I think, any others. The final chorus is a compendium of Tatum's improvisatory, harmonic, rhythmic and technical genius. **Fine and Dandy** is a masterpiece—how he sustains the swing of the fine medium tempo—and, good friend that he is, he gives Reuben a few little breaks at the end. **Begin the Beguine** is a set piece, and Tatum seems to want to play it pretty much as he did on the record. (This was the "arrangement" which Eddie Heywood simplified and became famous for.)

Mighty Lak A Rose (from the Gee-Haw) is the kind of piece serious critics didn't like Tatum to play—Coleman Hawkins played it, too. Maybe it is 19th Century "salon" (as opposed to saloon) music, and pretty shallow, but what Tatum does with it shows that he didn't exactly revere it. It's when he goes into tempo that things begin to happen—and what a tempo! What chops! The opening sounds to me as if Tatum is feeling out the piano to see where its deficiencies lie. He adapts himself to them almost instantly.

Lil Green's **Knockin' Myself Out** is a charming bit of period jive ... or maybe not so "period"—getting high on grass has hardly become passe. Chocolate Williams has nice time, and what Tatum does in the cracks shouldn't be legal. He sings a humorous chorus of his own, in that veiled voice we hear more clearly on **Toledo Blues**, and then, in response to Williams' "Tatum!", plays a chorus of inspired blues piano. (In his wrapup verse, Williams calls him *Mr.* Tatum.) **Body and Soul** was a piece Tatum played often; this version is very fanciful (the second bridge!) and full of little humorous touches—Tatum had fun when he played; he enjoyed his own virtuosity and enjoyed others enjoying it. This aspect of his art doesn't sit well with intellectual critics. **There'll Be Some Changes Made** also from the Gee-Haw shows Tatum's complete harmonic and rhythmic freedom, at a fine tempo. He accompanies the singer helpfully and backs the pleasant bass solo with some startling inventions.

The two final performances from Clark Monroe's Uptown House are sensational. Newton is up to playing with Tatum—his ear is sure enough not to be thrown by the unorthodox backing, especially on **Sweet Georgia Brown**. On **Lady Be Good**, Newton shows us where Sweets Edison comes from. A master of mutes (including the almost whispery one he plays here), he was one of the three great post-Armstrong trumpeters, along with Roy Eldridge and Lips Page. It's good to have these indications of his worth; he was under-recorded throughout his career.

The complexities of Tatum's accompaniments and solos are such that it is impossible to take these two performances in at even several hearings. You'll find yourself listening first to

Art, then to Frank, then to both, again and again. **Sweet Georgia Brown**, I humbly submit, is one of the most remarkable pieces of spontaneously improvised jazz music ever captured by a recording device.

Notes: Dan Morgenstern
Cover Photo: Courtesy Don Schlitten
Recording: Jerry Newman Remastering: Paul Goodman (RCA)
Produced by DON SCHLITTEN

ART TATUM, piano
(Recorded November 11, 1940)
Side A
1. GEORGIA ON MY MIND 2:15
2. BEAUTIFUL LOVE 1:43
3. LAUGHING AT LIFE 1:00
ART TATUM, piano; REUBEN HARRIS, whiskbrooms
(Recorded May 7, 1941)
4. SWEET LORRAINE 3:01
5. FINE AND DANDY 4:03
6. BEGIN THE BEGUINE 3:52
ART TATUM, piano, vocal;*
CHOCOLATE WILLIAMS, bass, vocal
(Recorded July 26, 1941)
MIGHTY LAK A ROSE 3:36
KNOCKIN' MYSELF OUT* 4:03
Side B
1. TOLEDO BLUES*..... 3:30
2. BODY AND SOUL 3:32
ART TATUM, piano; OLLIE POTTER, vocal;
CHOCOLATE WILLIAMS, bass
(Recorded July 27, 1941)
3. THERE'LL BE SOME CHANGES MADE 3:29
ART TATUM, piano; FRANK NEWTON, trumpet;
EBENEZER PAUL, bass
(Recorded Sept. 16, 1941)
4. LADY BE GOOD 4:30
5. SWEET GEORGIA BROWN 7:19