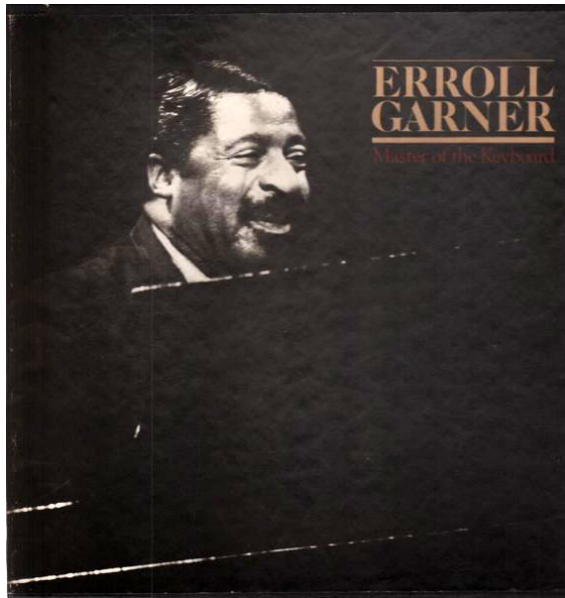


# Erroll Garner, Master of the Keyboard 1981

Dan Morgenstern Grammy Award for Best Album Notes  
1981 Book of the Month Records BOMR 81-5403



## Erroll Garner, An Appreciation

by Dan Morgenstern

Erroll Garner was a phenomenon. He didn't sing, dance or tell jokes. He never said a word when he performed. All he did was play the piano. Yet he captured the hearts and minds of millions of listeners all over the world, becoming the most popular solo jazz instrumentalist of his time—a feat even more remarkable because his was a time when jazz was dwarfed in popularity by the gigantic media event called rock 'n' roll.

What was Garner's secret? Above all, he was able to communicate his joy in making music with an immediacy that transcended all differences of age, nationality, race, education and musical background. Wherever and whenever he performed, in concert halls as a soloist or with symphony orchestras or in a wide variety of nightclubs, he reached out to each member of the audience, creating the illusion that he was playing just for that person.

"I don't know what I do or how I do it;" he once said, "but with me it's the relaxation and the feeling. I relive my life at the piano. I just like to look at people and play and smile, and get them on my side."

Garner was a natural. He was born into a musical family—in Pittsburgh, on June 15, 1923—and by the age of three he was playing the piano. His father had been an occasional musician, and his three older sisters and older brother all played the piano. Linton Garner, the brother who played the piano with Dizzy Gillespie's big band and for Billy Eckstine, is still active as a musician.

At seven Erroll was playing at neighborhood parties and church socials and on station KDKA. His mother thought the boy should have some formal training and engaged a music

teacher. After a few lessons the teacher discovered that Erroll was simply memorizing what he heard, not even trying to read notes. That ended Erroll's music lessons. He never did learn to read music, but when he was 15 and had been playing professionally for about a year he knew about 1000 tunes.

Working with high-school dance bands on excursion boats on the Allegheny river and playing solo on a local radio station and in local nightclubs, Garner picked up all the experience he could in his home town. By 1944 he felt ready to make the move to New York, then as now the Mecca of jazz. He found work on 52nd Street, where the greatest assemblage of jazz talent was concentrated within a few blocks, and soon was making records. In fact, he was so prolific that Mitch Miller called him "the youthful iron man of the recording industry." Within a five-year period his work appeared on about 30 record labels, some reputable, most not. Many of the songs that he recorded were his own compositions—which, unfortunately, were copyrighted by others before Garner was aware of such protective measures. Eventually, in 1950, he signed his first exclusive recording contract with Columbia Records. By then Garner was already a household name and his original style was instantly recognizable.

This was the era of bebop, and most musicians of Garner's vintage played in the bop style. But although Garner greatly admired Bud Powell, the leading light of pianistic bop, he was first of all a melodist. While the boppers took delight in disguising a melodic line, Garner always exposed it, never leaving a listener mystified. He was a true improviser and never played anything the same way twice. His conception of the piano was in orchestral terms, and he drew from the instrument its fullest sonic potentials, while pianists of the Powell school specialized in a linear approach derived from single-note instruments like the trumpet or the saxophone.

The difference went beyond such technical details. Garner's music was joyous and positive. At fast tempos he generated a tremendous rhythmic drive reminiscent of a big swing band in full cry. When it came to slower tempos—what jazz people call "ballads"—Garner was unashamedly romantic and lush. A press agent described his ballads as "the greatest aid to romance since kissing," hinting at one of the reasons for his popularity. These attributes gave Garner's music more emotional impact than that of his contemporaries. Where they were often tense and troubled, he was serene and balanced. And like the jazz players of an earlier generation, he seemed genuinely interested in reaching his listeners, many of whom had become bewildered by the intricacies of the modernists. Yet his music was not anachronistic; it was distinctly contemporary and fresh.

Clearly Garner's music had a potential appeal beyond the confines of the shrinking jazz audience, and his record producers and his manager (Martha Glaser, who was associated with Garner from 1950 on) now set out to explore this potential. In this they were helped by another aspect of Garner's personality: his great energy and capacity for work. He never seemed to tire of playing, and by the early 1950s his artistry had reached a level of performance and consistency that was truly astonishing. He seemed incapable of giving an indifferent performance.

In 1953 his producer at Columbia, George Avakian, described a Garner session in these words: “None of my prior experience with recording artists had prepared me for what happened when Erroll came in. In a business where the hoped-for standard is to complete four three-minute sides in three hours, Erroll smashed precedent with a performance that can be compared only to running a hundred yards in eight seconds—and with perfect form. In other words: something that just can’t happen. But this time it did.”

What happened was that Garner recorded, in one three-hour session, more than 80 minutes of music, with no retakes, that was not merely usable but “could not have been improved upon.” and he did it in an atmosphere of relaxed exhilaration, with time for jokes and coffee breaks. That was to be the pattern for his record dates from then on, and his live performances were equally consistent.

From 1950 on there was no looking back for Garner. The era of coffee-and-cakes engagements was over; only the best and biggest nightclubs could expect to contract for his services. Beyond that, he began to concentrate on concert tours, becoming the first jazz artist to fully explore the possibilities of this format, both at home and abroad. In 1956 he became the first jazz artist to be booked by the famous impresario Sol Hurok, and in the following year he became the first jazz soloist to perform in concert with a major symphonic ensemble, the Cleveland Orchestra. It featured a program of his own compositions, conducted by Mitch Miller, with orchestrations scored under Garner’s supervision from his own tape-recorded piano sketches.

In that year, too, his album *Concert by the Sea*, which had been recorded live in 1955 in Carmel, California, headed the list of best-selling jazz LPs. It remained on the charts for three straight years; today it’s still in the catalogue and has passed the million mark. In 1959 his most famous composition, “Misty,” originally introduced by Garner as an instrumental in 1954 and later treated in 1955 with lyrics by Johnny Burke, became a tremendous hit for the young singer Johnny Mathis, whom it greatly helped to reach the top. “Misty” has become so popular that over 200 artists have recorded it.

There were other less public breakthroughs. Garner steadfastly refused, for instance, to perform before segregated audiences. His contracts gave him sole approval of the instruments that he was expected to play; the requirement was a seven- or nine-foot concert grand. He also set contractual standards for backstage facilities in nightclubs and concert locations—long a sore spot with jazz performers. Photographers were politely but firmly prevented from popping flashbulbs in Garner’s face while he was performing. In numerous ways Garner helped immeasurably to improve conditions for his profession.

He also achieved greater visibility for jazz and for black performers in general through his many appearances on major television programs and other breakthrough situations. In 1960 he formed his own production company and retained complete control over all his recordings, leasing them to various companies, without signing away his rights.

He was one of the first “crossover” artists in the recording industry, selling to jazz, pop, rhythm and blues, and classical markets without compromising his art. He was a top box-office attraction, in worldwide demand for some 30 years, until the time of his death.

Though he did not change or tamper with his unique style, he continued to grow within it. His command of the piano, his uncanny sense of timing, his repertoire, his composing skills all developed rapidly, and he showed no sign of losing his zest for performing or for spending most of his time on the road with his trusted accompanists—a bassist, a drummer and, in later years, a Latin percussionist.

At a typical concert or club appearance Garner would expend tons of energy. A stack of towels was part of his equipment, and he would make a complete change of clothes at intermission. After the concert he would sign autographs backstage, change clothes again and go out on the town. First he’d check on the musical activities, often sitting in with old or newly made friends in a small club. To catch Garner on such occasions was a memorable experience, revealing still further his amazing musicality and flexibility. Then he might get a bite to eat and socialize some more; he was a cook by avocation and had a great interest in and zest for food.

By dawn he would be ready for bed. If he was up by afternoon he might indulge in one or the other of his favorite daytime activities—browsing in record stores or art galleries. Usually he bought something, though he seldom spent enough time at home to enjoy his huge record collection or his favorite paintings. He did find time, however, to do some painting. Garner was also a sports enthusiast and played golf when he had the time.

Garner was a short, compact man with broad shoulders, stubby but extremely flexible hands (he had a span of nearly two octaves) and an impish face. His rapid speech was peppered with deliberate malapropisms, frequent jokes and infectious laughter. He moved a lot when he talked, and his eyebrows, which were in constant motion, gave him a quizzical expression. When he played he uttered a steady stream of grunts and groans that formed a counterpoint to his music. At first, recording engineers tried to squelch these sounds, but they soon gave up, and Garner’s public came to expect this unique self-accompaniment. Some critics thought this habit was an affectation, but it was nothing of the kind. In fact, Garner was one of the most natural and unaffected of men. He was very generous—a soft touch, matched among jazzmen only by Louis Armstrong, whom he resembled in other ways.

To his friends and admirers Erroll Garner seemed indestructible. He shrugged off an occasional illness or infirmity—he recorded one of his best albums with an injured index finger—and almost never canceled a performance, no matter how exhausted he was from travel delays and other irritations. He always seemed in good humor and robust health. But he was a heavy cigarette smoker, and in early 1975, having ignored a severe cold that he contracted in San Francisco, he had to cancel a Chicago engagement after the third night and was hospitalized with pneumonia for several weeks. He was found to have advanced emphysema and other respiratory problems. Doctors imposed a strict regimen of convalescence, and for months he was not able to touch a piano. As Garner regained his strength, he began to make plans to

perform again (this was during the later months of 1976.) On New Year's Eve he spoke with his manager about a projected visit to New York and some recording plans. On January 2, 1977, Erroll Garner died, at the age of 53. He was one of a kind. His music lives on.

*Dan Morgenstern is the Director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University and former editor of "Down Beat" and other jazz magazines. He is the author of "Jazz People" (in collaboration with Ole Brask) and has received three Grammy Awards for Best Album Liner Notes.*

*On a personal note, he says, "In more than 20 years of attending Garner performances, in night clubs, in concert halls and in recording studios, I never caught Erroll Garner even slightly off form, and never failed to be amazed by something I hadn't heard before:"*

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## Introduction

by Dan Morgenstern

The 30 brilliant Garner performances in this set have been culled from his output during the years 1961 to 1970—as fertile a period as any in his career. Both live and studio recordings are represented.

Garner's repertoire was wide ranging, and the selections run the gamut from jazz classics and standards representing the golden age of American popular music to contemporary works that appealed to Garner's ear. Like all great jazz improvisers, he could mine gold from what seemed dross in lesser hands, and, like all artists in touch with their public, he knew the value of the familiar, to which he added the element of surprise. The set also contains some Garner originals, including a stellar version of his famous "Misty."

Several major elements of Garner's style bear mention. When he plays in tempo, his left hand produces a unique propulsive strum, somewhat in the manner of a rhythm guitar in the classic swing idiom, against which the right hand phrases first the melodic line, then his own inventions on it, lagging just behind the left's steady beat. This establishes a delightful tension; the technique has been emulated, but never with the same infallible, swinging sense of time. A number of pianists have tried to copy him; none have succeeded, though many show the Garner influence. Garner, incidentally, was ambidextrous—he could sign his name or sketch with either hand, which may be a clue to how he could manage this juggling of the beat so well.

Garner's use of dynamics was bolder than that of any other pianist. It ranged from a whisper to a roar, often juxtaposed in sudden, dramatic contrast. It's a key to the emotional impact of his music and to his ability to build to a climax or level off to a smooth landing after a stirring flight of fancy.

On ballads his use of arpeggios (chords broken into a rapid succession of notes) is striking, creating a shifting, shimmering pattern of harmony. Much has been made of Garner's inability

to read music, but he was no musical illiterate. He knew the laws of harmony and counterpoint as well as a schooled musician. Thus he was a master at modulation and contrasting key signatures, and he used all the tonal resources of the piano, often with reckless delight in the creation of great waves of sound.

Finally, there are the famous Garner introductions. Since he didn't speak to his audiences and never followed a prearranged program sequence, there was no way for his listeners to know what tune would come next. With his sense of theater, Garner capitalized on this element of surprise, teasing his listeners with fanciful introductions—often complete compositional structures in themselves which offered no hint of the song to follow. These musical cliffhangers often contained Garner's most audacious ideas, building suspense that was suddenly and almost offhandedly released as he dropped into tempo with the clearly stated theme. It's a pity that his labels give away the secret, but if you don't peek you can still enjoy the game.

Garner was a master of pacing, and these recordings have been carefully programmed with that in mind. The sequences of tunes come as close as possible to reconstructing a Garner performance with its characteristic contrasts of moods and tempos. I think he would have approved.

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*Mr. Morgenstern's program notes, including personnel, recording dates and other information are continued on pages 4-9:*

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## Contents Record Sequence

### Side One

#### **The Way You Look Tonight**

In this live performance, recorded at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, Garner takes the Jerome Kern classic for a smoothly swinging ride.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

#### **I'm in the Mood for Love**

Garner was very fond of this Jimmy McHugh standard and gives it his romantic best at a slow, insinuating tempo.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

#### **It Ain't Necessarily So**

The presence of bongo drums and guitar lends a different rhythmic flavor to Garner's treatment of this evergreen from George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, replete with well-placed grunts.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Wally Richardson, guitar; Herbie Lavelle, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/17/66, New York City.)*

### **Yesterday**

Garner added this Beatles hit to his repertoire after it had peaked; he never labored the obvious. He gets plenty of jazz mileage from it, abetted by a fine ad hoc rhythm team.

*Erroll Garner, piano; George Duvivier, bass; Charles Persip, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/7/69, New York City.)*

### **Like It Is**

A Garner original with a strong gospel flavor, great dynamics and plenty of musical humor.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Wally Richardson, guitar; Herbie Lavelle, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/17/66, New York City.)*

### Side Two

### **For Once in My Life**

After an unusually abstract introduction (shades of Thelonious Monk), Garner settles into a beguiling tempo, again giving a definitive jazz treatment to a pop vehicle of the day.

*Erroll Garner, piano; George Duvivier, bass; Charles Persip, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/7/69, New York City.)*

### **Autumn Leaves**

This French pop song turned jazz standard has been done to near death, but Garner tackles it with such joy that he makes you believe he's just discovered it. Shifting time signatures are a feature of this romping performance.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Wally Richardson, guitar; Herbie Lavelle, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/17/66, New York City.)*

### **My Silent Love**

Dana Suesse, a talented lady, wrote this pretty standard in the early '30s. Garner gives it loving slow, swing treatment, after the delicious introduction.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

### **St. Louis Blues**

This imaginative treatment of WC. Handy's famous tune is the album's longest performance, filled with surprises such as the passage in parallel octaves (rare for Garner) and the delightful breaks and elaborate fade ending. The rhythm team is on its toes.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

### **Dancing Tambourine**

By way of contrast, this is the shortest track in the set, a witty Garner treatment often used as a get-off encore in live performances.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

## Side Three

### **Misty**

A definitive treatment of Garner's all-time hit, his only original composition to become an evergreen (though others, given the right lyrics, have that potential). Garner thought this one up on a plane, inspired by the shifting cloud patterns and colors. It wears its fame well. *Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

### **More**

Garner gives this Italian trifle briskly unsentimental jazz treatment. A highlight: the wild unaccompanied segment.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Wally Richardson, guitar; Herbie Lavelle, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/17/66, New York City.)*

### **Stella by Starlight**

Victor Young's fine standard is presented without benefit of introduction, with gentle swing and with rippling arpeggios, warmly and well.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/25/64, New York City.)*

### **Mack the Knife**

This might be considered Garner's tribute to Louis Armstrong, who made a jazz standard of Kurt Weill's sardonic tune, and Ella Fitzgerald, who further solidified its hit status. The applause is well earned.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

### **All of Me**

Another tune introduced to jazz by Armstrong-back in 1931. The introduction is cute. Garner respects the melody, and the medium bounce tempo is infectious.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

## Side Four

### **You Do Something to Me**

This Cole Porter tune obviously did something to Garner, who invests it with a romping, happy feeling at a perfect tempo and winds up with a series of tags, topped by a half-time ending.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

### **As Time Goes By**

A lesson in what a great artist can do with just a single chorus of a fine Hupfeld tune shopworn by over-familiarity. This is a very relaxed performance, with just a hint of stride à la Waller, contrasting with the earlier single note lines and the later arpeggios.



*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/25/64, New York City.)*

### **The Shadow of Your Smile**

Unlike the preceding tune, this one was written for a film rather than made famous by one after the fact. Johnny Mandel was a jazz musician before he found success in Hollywood, and he knows how to write a song that jazz musicians like to play. Garner lends it a fitting touch of the blues.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Wally Richardson, guitar; Herbie Lavelle, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/17/66, New York City.)*

### **The Best Things in Life Are Free**

A nice old tune, early Depression vintage. Garner treats it with affection and relaxed swing. A very warm performance.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

### **Sweet and Lovely**

If you anticipate a romantic approach to this sentimental standard, be forewarned! Garner attacks it with slashing vigor and relentless, two, fisted swing. A high point of this recital.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

## Side Five

### **You Made Me Love You**

Garner has fun with this old chestnut of Judy Garland and Harry James fame. The tempo is brightly up, the second chorus shows that Garner could get into bebop when he felt that way, and the key changes will take you by surprise. A little gem!

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/25/64, New York City.)*

### **Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joe**

Seldom done as an instrumental, this melodramatic song by Harold Arlen was Frances Wayne's feature with Woody Herman's First Herd, and Erroll shows that he remembers the arrangement.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

### **Lulu's Back in Town**

She certainly is, and seldom had it so good! Garner stretches out here, in a live performance at Purdue University before an enthusiastic audience of 6000—in the '60s, when rock was king! The introduction is sheer joy, and he builds to a terrific orchestral climax.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (3/23/62, Lafayette, Indiana.)*

### **Nervous Waltz**

A charming Garner original, not at all nervous, except perhaps in the “stuttering” phrasing of the theme.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Wally Richardson, guitar; Herbie Lavelle, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/17/66, New York City.)*

### **Strangers in the Night**

Of German origin, this song was made a hit by Frank Sinatra. Again, Garner gives a pop tune real jazz treatment, his clever rhythmic displacements lending the banal melody unexpected lustre. George Duvivier is one of the best bass players of all time, and proves it here.

*Erroll Garner, piano; George Duvivier, bass; Joe Cocuzzo, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (12/2/69, New York City.)*

## [Side Six](#)

### **Spinning Wheel**

Garner’s lively rhythmic imagination turns this rock hit from the glory days of Blood, Sweat & Tears inside out and upside down, as it so richly deserves. This is Garner’s comment on rock, gently yet sardonically humorous.

*Erroll Garner, piano; George Duvivier, bass; Charles Persip, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/7/69, New York City.)*

### **Just a Gigolo**

This early ‘30s German opus is another import originally adapted for jazz by Louis Armstrong. After the minor-keyed introduction, Garner treats it with the proper romantic ambiance. The ending is elaborate.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/25/64, New York City.)*

### **Some of These Days**

Yet another Armstrong-associated piece, this one was old when Louis took it for a recorded ride in 1929; Sophie Tucker introduced it way back in 1911. Garner treats it playfully, with a teasing introduction, a springy bounce as he hammers home the theme, and a cute ending.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (7/7/61, New York City.)*

### **The Look of Love**

Garner does wonders with this bit of nightclub melodrama by Burt Bacharach.

*Erroll Garner, piano; George Duvivier, bass; Charles Persip, drums; Jose Mangual, bongos. (11/7/69, New York City.)*

### **Lover Come Back to Me**

Sigmund Romberg just lived to see his 1928 smash operetta aria become a jazz standard in the hands of the bebop generation. Garner takes its demanding chord changes for a swinging, fanciful ride—a properly bright conclusion to a sterling program.

*Erroll Garner, piano; Eddie Calhoun, bass; Kelly Martin, drums. (8/22/62, Seattle.)*

*These tapes have been recorded with the Dolby B-Type noise reduction (NR) characteristic. During playback, set Dolby NR switch ON. Without Dolby NR, adjust treble control if necessary. The contents of each set of cassettes are identical to the companion boxed three-record set; only the sequence has been changed to properly fit the tape program.*

*The contents of each set of 8-track tapes are identical to the companion boxed three-record set; only the sequence has been changed to properly fit the tape program.*