

# Art Tatum

by Dick Katz

*Although Dick Katz clearly wanted to discuss Tatum, the task of getting him to sit down and write the review which follows was almost laborious. When he did write it, he came up with a definitive essay.*

**THE ART TATUM-BEN WEBSTER QUARTET, Verve MGV 8220.** Art Tatum, *piano*; Ben Webster, *tenor saxophone*; Red Callender, *bass*; Bill Douglass, *drums*.

*All the Things You Are; My One And Only Love; My Ideal; Gone With the Wind; Have You Met Miss Jones; Night and Day; Where or When.*

**THE ART TATUM-BUDDY DE FRANCO QUARTET, Verve MGV 8229.** Art Tatum, *piano*; Buddy DeFranco, *clarinet*; Red Callender, *bass*; Bill Douglass, *drums*.

*Deep Night; This Can't Be Love; Memories of You; Once In a While; A Foggy Day; Makin' Whoopee; You're Mine You; Lover Man.*

**TATUM-CARTER-BELLSON TRIO MAKIN' WHOOPÉE, Verve MGV 8227.** Art Tatum, *piano*; Benny Carter, *trumpet and saxophone*; Louis Bellson, *drums*.

*Blues in C; A Foggy Day; You're Mine You; Undecided; Under a Blanket of Blue; Makin' Whoopee.*

THE IDEA OF combining artists of the stature of Art Tatum and Ben Webster is not a new one but, in this instance, it creates unique problems—and solutions.

Those who are familiar with the nature of Tatum's unique gifts probably feel, as I do, that his kind of talent seemed to preclude his being an accompanist or group player. He was first and foremost a soloist. He enjoyed being the orchestra and soloists and rhythm section—all the time. For him to share any of these functions with other instrumentalists often appeared to the listener to be a major concession.

Through the years, Tatum devised a fantastic vocabulary of pianistic devices such as an endless variety of ascending and descending arpeggios, runs, octave slides, "dragged thumb" double thirds, etc. Many a pianist was carried away trying to master this phase of Tatum, but the passing years have taught us that these were probably the least of his artistic accomplishments. There was a certain fascination in watching his musical sonar and radar guide those dazzling runs right to the target, but it is a tribute to his greatness to note that he avoided the obvious horrors which many virtuosos confuse with music.

It is my opinion that Tatum's uniqueness was expressed not so much in the blinding, supersonic piano technique, but in a sublime harmonic and rhythmic imagination. He was not essentially an inventor of melodies like Teddy Wilson or Lester Young. However, his mastery of diatonic, chromatic, and impressionist harmony has yet to be equaled in jazz with the exception of Charlie Parker. His deft and imaginative voice-leading and handling of sudden key-shifts, modulation, etc. gave him a kind of freedom that often conveyed a feeling of "any key, no key, or all keys." He was a complete musical entity and his harmonic language has not yet been assimilated. Rhythmically, he could be unbelievably subtle. Many a so-called *ad lib* passage was really in strict tempo! He was also a master of *rubato* and cross-rhythm. Over, under, and around all this he would superimpose his carefully disciplined array of pianistic tricks and arpeggios. But this was merely the icing—and it is often necessary to tune it out in order to appreciate the substance.

Now, this complete musical independence and predilection for extravagance on Tatum's part has often made the prospect of others playing with him a dubious venture. In fact, this series of albums has a kind of "throw them to the lions" quality—the lions being Tatum's ten fingers. Most of Tatum's early recorded performances with horns had an almost comic quality, as if Art were completely unaware of their presence. (A notable exception was the *Esquire All-Star* session on *Commodore*.) His trio performances, however, while not quite so artistic as his solo ones, were nevertheless a remarkable

achievement. Moreover, they spawned the King Cole and, later, the Oscar Peterson trios and a whole generation of similar-sounding units. (Although the brilliant but short-lived Clarence Profit trio would figure prominently in any evaluation of the piano-bass-guitar combination.)

Of the three albums discussed here, the one with Ben Webster is vastly superior to the other two. It is the least self-conscious and the most creative and artistic.

Tatum's and Webster's respective conceptions complement each other beautifully. Both are masters at paraphrasing a melody, and both lean heavily on the "variations on a theme" technique, rather than the "running the changes" style (Coleman Hawkins, for example). Besides, Tatum's style, stripped to essentials, reveals an ingenious kind of inner thematic development. Ben Webster is a truly functional player. He makes every note important and has that marvelous sense of drama, space, and note placement shared by other great jazz artists such as Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, Miles, and Monk.

This record is blessed with a feeling of complete assurance, security, and authority. Tatum and Webster reveal their very strong sense of identity throughout. Ben Webster, happily, is obviously familiar with the eccentricities of Art's style and, very intelligently, allows him complete freedom to stretch out. (This is one place where "stretch out" means just that.) Ben, in effect, plays an obligato or accompaniment to Art in many places in the album.

*All the Things You Are*, taken much slower than usual, opens, as many Tatum solos do, with a Liszt-like ad lib chorus. (This sort of thing probably caused many a pianist to reconsider.) Webster enters like an Othello and plays with such definition that Tatum's busy, lacy accompaniment sets up a kind of rhythmic counterpoint which actually is more like a continuation of his solo. The effect is somewhat like a thousand satellites whirling around a slower-moving planet; or, to put it another way, Webster, because of his uncluttered style, is like the central design in a complex mosaic. Also, there is a very satisfying kind of relaxation and poise that pervades all these performances.

*My One and Only Love* continues the reflective mood set by the preceding track. However, Tatum's insistence on playing the melody along with Webster is a little like an accompanist expecting the singer to forget the melody—certainly superfluous when Ben Webster is doing the "singing."

*My Ideal* is played slightly faster than the other two ballads and displays a more sensitive Tatum. He plays some fantastic things with Ben, and occasionally has an almost Erroll Garner-like feeling, but much more refined. Red Callender's bass and Bill Douglass' brushes accomplish the nearly impossible task of blending with Tatum and Webster while never hindering them.

Side 2 opens with a delicious version of *Gone With the Wind* played at a walking ballad tempo. Art's two opening choruses are extremely absorbing, featuring some interplay between left and right hands that far outdistances anything I've heard before or since in jazz piano. Ben Webster's dramatic entrance is like a beautiful surprise—what a sound—and what time!

*Have You Met Miss Jones* is quite different from any of the overjazzy versions I've heard others do. It is played as a ballad, much slower than usual. This allows Tatum and Webster to savor and make full use of the lovely chord changes in this Rodgers and Hart classic. When played too fast, it often takes on the quality of a musical obstacle course. Art makes it sound as if his way is the only way. Ben's role on this track is confined to one gorgeous statement of the melody.

*Night and Day* is Ben Webster's. Tatum opens the piece with a diffuse and overbusy chorus that is rhythmically a bit tense and stylistically stiff. Ben steps in and straightens everybody up by preaching his statements with a relaxed and elegant sense of time. *Night and Day* becomes almost like a loping blues (yet never becomes overfunky) due to Ben's blues-tinged line. Also drummer Bill Douglass uses sticks behind Ben and comes very close to sounding like a Sid Catlett or a Kenny Clarke, a tailor-made sound for Ben. The contrast (no sticks anywhere else in the album) is stunning. Art, however, sounds almost mechanical in his solos on this tune.

Art Tatum and Ben Webster represent to me a kind of romanticism in jazz which has now itself become classic. Theirs is an artistry rarely matched in any era of jazz. The kind of maturity and depth of their expression is much too scarce today.

The Art Tatum-Buddy DeFranco Quartet is another matter entirely. The only thing that DeFranco seems to have in common with Tatum (on this record, at least) is that he can play the clarinet almost as fast as Tatum can play the piano. Musically, this fact proves nearly fatal. Whereas Ben Webster and Tatum provided each other with a kind of rhythmic counterpoint (slow line against a fast line), DeFranco and Tatum get to sounding like a runaway alarm clock. Admittedly, *what* and even, *how* to play in the face of a musical avalanche like Tatum is no small problem, but technical competition is not the answer. DeFranco seems trapped by Tatum's virtuosity, and Tatum is affected by DeFranco's. What results is some brilliant technical improvising—but little melodic or rhythmic development. It's a little like watching two magicians expose all their tricks in public. And rabbits are coming out of hats on every tune.

The album opens with *Deep Night* and is quite pleasant until DeFranco and Tatum start practicing exercises together. Note Art's Garner-like left hand behind DeFranco.

On *This Can't Be Love*, the rhythm is not together, and there is a slight pull between Callender and Douglass. Good DeFranco—but his jazzy bop clichés don't fit too well in this context. The fours exchanged by clarinet and piano have a certain fascination, like watching a juggling act and waiting for someone to drop something—but of course no one ever does.

*Memories of You* is very stiff with innumerable clarinet and piano arpeggios and few melodies—none of which are memorable except the tune itself.

*Once in a While* is undistinguished except for some fairly settled Tatum statements and deft harmonic shifts. Side 2 opens with a nervous, foggy *Foggy Day* which does have some beautiful Tatum. The clarinet and piano on this track reminds

me of an old Decca 78 called *With Plenty of Money and You* which sported some pretty funny Marshall Royal clarinet and a fantastic spontaneous descending run in double thirds by Royal and Tatum. Of course, Art washed the whole band away on that one.

*Makin' Whoopee* is about the best collaboration on the album. It has a worked-out figure on the melody (a descending chromatic chord thing) that comes off very well. Also, De Franco plays more straightforwardly here and is less mechanical. And Tatum ate up the fast-moving changes on this piece.

*You're Mine You* is a relaxed but innocuous-sounding performance with a Muzak-like feel. Both Tatum and DeFranco concentrate on technical matters and communicate little. *Lover Man* is much better. DeFranco plays his most arresting solo on the album—it is almost entirely in the lower register and seems to blend better with the piano. Although his ideas are mostly "chord conscious," he plays with considerable feeling, and Tatum actually settles into some beautifully spaced accompaniment, proving he *could* subordinate himself when he felt like it. Art's solo following Buddy's is masterful. This album, however, is useful mainly as a display of impeccable instrumental technique and craftsmanship—which is, in itself, a kind of artistry.

The Tatum-Carter-Bellson trio is still another matter. The sound or timbre of alto sax, piano, and drums is difficult for me to enjoy no matter how good the players. In this case, I find Benny Carter's sound rather objectionable. I have been a long-time admirer of his imaginative and tasteful playing and writing, but on this record he creates a kind of romanticism that is not convincing. He brings to mind Johnny Hodges who, however, is so completely rhapsodic a player that he creates his own point of reference. But Carter has obviously been deeply affected by Charlie Parker, and thereby has added an eclectic quality to his own work. Specifically, his lush sound doesn't seem to match his sometimes sardonic melodic ideas. Hodges, however, remains beautifully intact—a true unabashed dramatic romantic—the "Lily Pons" (to quote Bird)

of the alto. I have always preferred Carter's trumpet playing to his alto.

*Blues in C*: Four magnificent choruses by Tatum start what promises to be a great record. Tatum proves here how masterful and towering a blues player he was, and reveals a lyricism and melodic gift that was too often buried under his barrage of technique. After Tatum's choruses, Bellson and Carter could have gone home because any further comment would have been redundant. Unfortunately, Carter breaks the spell with some very pale blues playing. Bellson switches from impeccable brushes to sticks which sound very plodding and metallic, due mostly to the absence of bass which, despite Tatum's all-time champion left hand, tends to make the drums sound isolated and noisy. The brushes, however, are effective throughout the album. Tatum saves Carter and Bellson from banality by returning with more great blues to finish a side that runs the gamut from mediocrity to greatness.

*A Foggy Day* doesn't compare with the DeFranco version but has good Carter and scintillating Tatum. *You're Mine You* is just too too sweet for me, and Carter's alto fairly drips with the nectar of something. Tatum's piano solo is different from the one with DeFranco—both are fine. Side 2 opens with an exciting *Undecided*. The first few choruses remind me of someone in a canoe fighting the rapids while being carried downstream to the falls—Carter is in the canoe and Tatum is the rapids. However, it sounds good and the interplay between the two is one of the high spots in the album. *Under a Blanket of Blue*, however, almost falls under a blanket of corn.

The album closes with *Makin' Whoopee*—great Tatum, but the alto-drums sound has worn me down to closing this review.

This series is an important one, though it is very inconsistent, and for recording Webster and Tatum together (to say nothing of the fantastic eleven LPs of solo Tatum) Norman Granz deserves our gratitude.

Norman Granz is to be congratulated for putting Art Tatum's name on all the album sleeves. It's always nice to know who the piano player is.