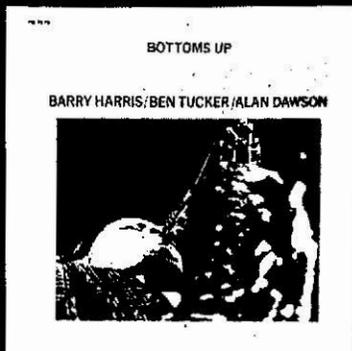


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VOTE see page 36 VOTE

monies were explored with a sense of surprise, but the shifts from one harmonic color to another soon become predictable.

Unfortunately the design of the album emphasizes Hancock's deficiencies. The tracks with horns feature opening and closing statements by the ensemble, sandwiched around Hancock's playing. There are no other solos, although the horns occasionally contribute a background figure.

Hancock's "bluesy" playing on *First Trip* sounds like updated Billy Taylor. On the two ballad-like pieces, *Speak Like a Child* and *Goodbye to Childhood*, the rhythmic impulse almost disappears, and the playing anticipates the Muzak of the 1970s.

Tyner is more successful. His music is almost as melodically barren as Hancock's, but he can achieve rhythmic variety by tying his phrases to the drummer's accents. On one of his best recorded solos, *Afro-Blue* (from *Coltrane Live at Birdland*), his phrasing is so inspired by Elvin Jones' rhythmic patterns that it almost sounds as if Jones is playing the piano as well as the drums.

Tyner plays best here when the tune or drummer Joe Chambers provide him with a fairly complex pattern of accents. When the time evens out, he can be as dull as Hancock. *Man from Tanganyika*, for example, alternates from 6/8 to 4/4 during the solos. Tyner's playing sparkles during the 6/8 sections and becomes bland each time the 4/4 pattern returns.

Tyner has done all the writing here. He seems to have divided the ensemble into high- and low-pitched instruments, without much regard for their individual timbres, an approach that works well on *Tanganyika* and *Utopia*.

*The High Priest* is a largely unsuccessful reflection of Thelonious Monk. Tyner imitates some of Monk's harmonic colors, but Monk's structural unity and use of harmonies to tell a story escape him. The melody of the bridge seems to have no particular relation to the rest of the composition, an error that Monk would never have made.

The other soloists range from fair to very good. Spaulding's work is consistently inventive on both alto and flute. His alto playing, which combines legato phrasing with an acrid, expressive tone, sounds like a weird cross between Benny Carter and Jackie McLean.

I've always liked Lee Morgan's rhythmic zest and humorous tonal effects, but he is too often content with decorative playing. His best work here is on *Utopia*, where he develops a solo that really flows from beginning to end. Julian Priester's virtues are similar to Morgan's, but his one solo, on *Tanganyika*, is not on a level with his best playing.

The album as a whole ranges from very good (*Tanganyika* and *Utopia*) to fair (*High Priest* and *All My Yesterdays*). The latter track has Tyner's version of 1970's Muzak. It is as dull and "pretty" as Hancock's.

While Hancock has been a fine accompanist in other contexts, and Tyner can produce good music when the rhythm inspires him, these albums give an over-all impression of good musicians who are

approaching a musical dead end. For the benefit of the musicians and the music as a whole, I hope I'm wrong. —Karl

### Harold Mabern

A FEW MILES FROM MEMPHIS—Prestige 7568: *A Few Miles from Memphis; Walkin' Back; A Treat for Bea; Syden Blue; There's a Kind of Hush; B & B; To Wane.*

Personnel: George Coleman, Buddy Terry, tenor saxophones; Mabern, piano; Bill Lee, bass; Walter Perkins, drums.

Rating: ★★½

Harold Mabern's first album as a leader is an unpretentious, blues-based date—three of the tunes are blues.

Mabern has done some clever writing for the two tenors. On *To Wane*, the effect of voicing the horns in parallel harmony and then having one tenor move away from his previous harmonic position while the other stays put is especially pleasing. The voicings on *A Treat for Bea*, however, are a little cute.

Coleman is the better of the two tenors and he is thoughtful and swinging throughout. Terry plays well on *To Wane*, but elsewhere he employs some effects that seem calculated.

Other than *To Wane*, on which everybody plays well, the best track is *B & B*, a pretty ballad dedicated to Clifford Brown and Booker Little. Mabern's playing here is openly romantic, and, while he becomes cloying in spots, he never loses the rhythmic flow. Lee's accompaniment to Mabern's solo is excellent.

The liner notes identify the tenor soloists on all tracks except *B & B*, where my ear tells me that Coleman takes the solo.

If you are looking for pleasant, danceable music with an occasional solo that will catch your ear, then Mabern is your man. —Karl

### Art Tatum

PIANO STARTS HERE—Columbia CS 9655: *Tea For Two; St. Louis Blues; Tiger Rag; Sophisticated Lady; How High the Moon; Humoresque; Someone to Watch Over Me; Yesterdays; I Know That You Know; Willow Weep for Me; Tatum Pole Boogie; The Kerry Dance; The Man I Love.*

Personnel: Tatum, piano.

Rating: ★★★★★

Jazz has produced a number of astonishing virtuosi. The majority of these invented new approaches to and techniques for their chosen instruments (trumpet, trombone, the saxophones, guitar, string and brass bass, and drums). Sometimes they even invented (or modified) the instrument itself (the amplified guitar; the jazz drum set).

Few, however, brought to jazz a virtuoso technique from an already established tradition, and the piano has the most elaborate virtuoso tradition of them all.

Art Tatum was a bona fide virtuoso in this tradition—the greatest jazz has produced. To conclude from this, as Leonard Feather does in his notes to this album, that Tatum "was the greatest soloist in jazz history, regardless of instrument," is to furnish grounds for debate. One could certainly argue the cases for Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker, but none (except, perhaps, the hyper-fastidious Andre Hodeir) could argue that Tatum was not the greatest virtuoso pianist in jazz history.

This is not to say that Tatum wasn't

more—much more—than a great technician. Had virtuosity been all he had to offer, he would most certainly have become a kind of Jose Iturbi, for even though he was black and almost sightless, his gifts were such that a career in the popular concert field would have been open to him. (Attempts, in fact, were made to steer him in this direction.)

But Tatum was a black man, and heard the music his people were making. Born in 1910, he was exposed in his formative years to a creative ferment, a musical revolution, and the path he chose was one of commitment to that revolution.

It was not an easy path, for jazz was first and foremost a collective music, and Tatum was first and foremost a soloist. Furthermore, his formal studies and phenomenal ear enabled him to imagine and execute musical ideas of a sophistication beyond the grasp of almost all his contemporaries. Even the most gifted and skilled among them were awed by his presence, and inhibited by his almost monstrous (and almost always pitiless) displays of brilliance.

Thus, Tatum had to go his own way, though he was the most sociable and competitive of musicians, and loved nothing better than cutting contests and jam sessions. He had to go his own way, too, in the world of commerce, for once he had committed himself to be a jazzman first, he had to carve a niche for his unusual and demanding art within the constricting framework of the jazz marketplace.

It is ironic and embittering that Tatum never made a concert tour as a solo attraction, that he played most of his engagements in nightclubs (where he would often have to suspend playing until a decent level of background noise had been established), and that his sole visit abroad was a brief one to England in 1938, where he played (like his idol, Fats Waller) in "variety", not in concert halls. It is no solace to suggest that this happened not because Tatum was black but because he was a jazz musician.

But Tatum in any circumstance was remarkable, and while it is not quite correct, as the *New Yorker* recently had it, that "all of Tatum" is on this record, there is a considerable part.

What there is becomes even more interesting because the only Tatum material available to Columbia stems from the pianist's first solo session in March, 1933 and from an outdoor concert in Los Angeles more than 16 years later. The album provides samples of a great artist at 22, when he was still working out his style, and at 38, when all aspects of that style had crystallized.

On both occasions we hear Tatum, the master stylist, playing pieces he had polished and mastered. Like all virtuosi, Tatum delighted in astonishing and dazzling his audiences, and like all virtuosi, he had many set pieces in his repertoire.

Tatum's bravura style exhibited an elegant surface (unlike other great jazz improvisers, he rarely departed totally from the theme, and he never failed to state it as a point of departure) beneath which broiled a fantastic imagination. It is underneath the surface and especially in its cracks and frequent suspensions (Tatum

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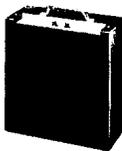
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loved breaks) that one hears the master of rhythm and harmony as well as the master of technique and melodic exposition. He was not unlike a great painter whose luminous, balanced compositions reveal, on closer scrutiny, a mysterious and apocalyptic inner vision.

Each track on this album contains staggering moments. Of the four early pieces, only *Tiger Rag* fully stands the test of comparison with later Tatum—perhaps because it is inspired by Armstrong's treatment of the tune, which makes it the piece least indebted to other pianists. Also, it brings to full bear Tatum's orchestral conception of the piano, and is taken at a frightening tempo (about a bar per second) sustained by a combination of rhythmic finesse and firmness of time that can only be described as incredible. One can imagine what a weapon such a piece must have been to Tatum in his beloved battles with other pianists—who would have dared to follow it!

In *Tea for Two*, we recognize two great influences: Fats Waller and Earl Hines—the former in the steady stride of the left hand and the rippling, calm arpeggios in the contrasting right, and the latter in the rhythmic suspensions and "strange" harmonies of the breaks in the second chorus. Interestingly, he does not yet swing as much as either of these men already did (though he outdoes both on *Tiger*).

*St. Louis Blues* is immature compared to the version recorded for Decca six years later. Tatum, from Toledo, Ohio, and inspired by eastern pianists, had apparently not yet discovered (or not yet fully absorbed) the essence of the blues, and his approach to it here is a surface one. Though his only other blues on this set is a display piece at breakneck tempo (*Tatum Pole Boogie*), it shows how much Tatum had learned about the blues. (For his lovely, deeply moving slow blues, one must look elsewhere, and to later and late Tatum especially.)

*Sophisticated Lady*, then a brand-new tune (Ellington's first version had been recorded only a month before), must have intrigued Tatum with its harmonic subtleties, which he handles masterfully. But there isn't much depth in his playing, except in the break that links the first and second chorus, and the remarkable harmonic inventions during the latter. Near the end, there is even that extreme rarity, a corny idea; i.e., the "chime" chords, for which he atones with a dazzling coda.

The 1949 *How High the Moon* that follows immediately illuminates drastically how Tatum had grown. First of all, there is his touch—by now a magic combination of gossamer and bessemer. In a dynamic spectrum that ranges from whisper to roar; each note is articulated with the clarity of a bell. There is a startling rhythmic freedom, allowing Tatum to play with time in the most astonishing manner. Even the out-of-tempo first choruses of which he was so fond suggest a beat, or rather several shifting beats, and he was an unequalled master at transitions from rubato to swing. His independence of hands was the envy and frustration of other pianists.

On *How High*, there are passages that strikingly prove Bud Powell's ancestry

(3rd chorus), while the employment of a wide variety of technical, rhythmic, and harmonic devices from Tatum's vocabulary suggest that he was using this as a warmup piece (he misses a few notes in a run; later in the concert he executes far more complex ones without dropping a stitch).

Dvorak's *Humoresque*, which Tatum loved to play, has caused certain critics to frown. Approaching Tatum with a European bias, they failed to understand his liking for this shopworn staple in the semi-classical repertoire, but how they could fail to appreciate his treatment of it, which combines just the right amounts of affection and liberty, is mystifying.

*Someone to Watch* is a fond and relaxed performance; Tatum and George Gershwin formed a mutual admiration society. He is taking a breather here, playing a melody he likes, ornamenting and embellishing rather than improvising. But watch those harmonic inventions that made him such an important influence on the incipient boppers.

*Yesterdays* is a masterpiece. This is serious Tatum, not merely decorating but transforming his material. The beguine pattern, the startlingly effective broken-chord passage, the octave unison fingering in fast tempo, the kaleidoscopic display of ideas, and their coherence and structure add up to a breath-taking musical experience.

*I Know That You Know* returns to pure display—but what a show! Experimenting with all kinds of time (straight, halved, doubled) and all kinds of rhythm, Tatum imbues what might have been merely gratuitous with a disarming lightness and joy—and does he swing!

*Willow Weep For Me*, a lovely piece, is not quite as perfect in this version as in the less florid Capitol recording from the same year.

*Kerry Dance* is a little throwaway employed by Tatum to beg off after several encores, full of wit and charm and of the briefest duration. It should have been placed last on the program.

*The Man I Love* is again a piece for which Tatum had genuine affection. His theme statement is lovely—in fact, the opening half-chorus is the high point of the rather reflective performance—and the final bridge is pure bop.

Listening to Tatum in depth temporarily spoils one for all other pianists. His like will not be heard again, for he was a phenomenon. Others have emulated his technique but lack both his excellence and his musicality. Surface elements of his style (the extensive rubato; the arpeggiated runs; the decorative embellishments) have been adopted by untalented lounge pianists all over the world, as well as by a few players more than that but far less than Tatum. The only pianist of stature who borrowed extensively from Tatum and emerged with his own intact style was Nat King Cole, whose textures could be amazingly Tatumesque. Bud Powell, of course, drank deeply at the well, and others used Tatum elements to creative advantage. But Tatum remains an inimitable, unsurpassable, and inexhaustible delight.

—Morgenstern