

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twenty-first article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

OSCAR PETERSON

Peterson was born in Montreal to immigrants from the West Indies on August 15, 1925. At age 5, he honed his skills on trumpet and piano and; but for a bout with tuberculosis, he might have chosen the trumpet, denying us his superb piano talents.

At 14, Peterson won the national music competition organized by the CBC, dropped out of school and became a professional pianist. He practiced his art incessantly; telling one critic, "I practiced from nine to noon, took an hour for lunch, practiced from one to six, went to dinner, then went back to the piano about seven-thirty. I'd keep practicing until my mother would come in and drag me away from it so the family could get some sleep."

He studied with pianist Paul deMarky, who was a student of Istvan Thomas, who was a pupil of Franz Liszt. Talk about a pedigree! Oscar was called the "Maharaja of the keyboard" by Duke Ellington, but simply "O.P." by his friends. His big break came in 1949 when American jazz impresario Norman Granz heard Peterson. He asked the pianist to come to NYC with him as a surprise guest for his Jazz at the Philharmonic events at Carnegie Hall. There, Peterson shared the stage with the likes of Charlie Parker and Lester Young, setting in motion the young musician's international career. A lasting relationship was born, with Granz remaining Peterson's manager for most of his career.

One of the artists who influenced Peterson's music during the early years was Art Tatum, to whom Oscar is often compared. But Peterson was so intimidated by what he heard that he became disillusioned about his own playing, almost giving up the piano. In his own words, "Tatum scared me to death" and Peterson was "never cocky again" about his mastery at the piano. He rarely played the piano in Tatum's presence.

Studying with Peterson, pianist Bill King said "his hands could do things few piano players can do." Peterson was a large man, going about 6'3" and 280 pounds. Although he could stretch his hands over wide spans, his hands just appeared to dance over the keys – effortlessly!

Another pianist, Billy Green, told a reporter "that the first thing he does when he sits down at the piano is to gauge the key drop—how far the keys on an individual instrument need to be depressed before the hammer hits the strings. Oscar says— and he makes it sound so simple—that once he scopes that out, then he's in complete control of the piano. For the rest of us, of course, there are a lot more steps involved."

The quintessential Oscar Peterson to many fans (me included) remains his trio, formed in 1953, which featured bassist Ray Brown, guitarist Herb Ellis and NO drummer. Peterson's percussive style obviated that need. The trio's recordings together include 1955's *The Oscar Peterson Trio at Zardi's [Live]* and can be found on Amazon as a two-disc set featuring 30 of his finest tracks (released in 1994, ASIN: B000000XI9 on the Pablo label.) Another keeper, featuring this influential trio is 1956's *Oscar Peterson at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival* (Amazon, ASIN: B0000046LP, Label: Verve.)

Over a 60 year career, Peterson released over 200 recordings, received 8 Grammys, and numerous other awards and honors. He is considered to have been one of the greatest jazz pianists, and during his career of more than 60 years, played thousands of live concerts to audiences all over the world.



Oscar received many accolades over the years, but one stands out in my mind. Former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien recalled that Nelson Mandela glowed when meeting Peterson. "It was very emotional. They were both moved to meet each other. These were two men with humble beginnings who rose to very illustrious levels."

Peterson told a music critic that he knew one day, he'd make his final performance. "When that happens, there's going to be no fanfare," he related. "I'm just going to get up from the piano, take my bows, thank my group, and say, 'This is it.' Then I'll close the piano and that will be the last time I play publicly." And that's what he did. The last few years of his life found him in poor health, first a stroke, then kidney failure. He died two days before Christmas of 2007 at his home in Mississauga, Ontario, at age 82. This giant of a man truly left a giant mark in the annals of Jazz.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.