

“Sweet Lorraine”—Art Tatum (1940)

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Essay by Imelda Hunt (guest post)*



Art Tatum

“Sweet Lorraine” is an up tempo jazz standard and show tune. The song “Sweet Lorraine” was first composed by Cliff Burwell, with lyrics by Mitchell Parish, in 1928. It was first heard on the radio, from Rudy Vallee, in 1928 and had been recorded by others during that same year. In 1940, a version of “Sweet Lorraine,” recorded by the King Cole Trio, introduced the radio audience to Nat King Cole as a singer.

Art Tatum’s 1940 recording of “Sweet Lorraine” was recorded first as 10-inch, then, later, as a 45 rpm, then a 12-inch LP and then a compact disc. On YouTube there is an entry where you can hear Art Tatum playing 21 versions of “Sweet Lorraine”; its recording time is 1:15:12. Since its 2015 posting on Youtube, there have been more than 27K views of it and 258 comments made. This entry also includes Tatum’s broadcast of “Sweet Lorraine” to soldiers fighting during WWII and Tatum’s television appearance on “The Steve Allen Show.”

Even today Tatum’s versions of “Sweet Lorraine” is still going strong.

Art Tatum (October 13, 1910-November 5, 1956), an African American, pianist was born partially blind due to cataracts. He lived in Toledo, Ohio, during his formative years where he attended a school for the blind and was trained by local music teachers and at a Cleveland conservatory in classical music. He was considered by many musicians to be a jazz virtuoso because of his contributions to the art of solo piano performance. His genius was, in layman’s term, “his ability to play so much piano.”

When trying to understand Tatum and his musicality, the cultural context of his music is important. Jazz music is an African American artform whose popularity in the United States created an appropriation of its style and artistic influences by American and European musicians. These musicians and other commercial entities coveted jazz and begin to call jazz “the original American music.” Critics of Tatum’s style essentially referred to him as an anomaly of the race. Tatum’s training in classical music was not able to flourish in his formative years because these same like-minded critics were not willing to accept a black musician in the genre. The mixing of

these styles was the genius of Tatum who refused to let his talent remain silent and stifled by discrimination and bigotry. “Sweet Lorraine’s” success is an example of Tatum’s genius.

Tatum’s music tells stories about African’s influence in America’s contemporary music. Tatum’s piano solo of “Sweet Lorraine” is more like the warmth of a patch work quilt than an acrylic blanket to the ear, the song weaves chords from ragtime, stride piano, parlor music, and the classics using Tatum’s infamous harmonies and improvisations. His style is like the giftedness of the griot. Tatum’s instrumental story of love and marriage invites the jovial spirit of the African trickster to flow through his tune. The popularity of storytelling which was part of the blues tradition made “Sweet Lorraine” even more inviting to an African American audience who knew the lyrics and loved a good overcomer’s story.

During Tatum’s childhood, a piano was a popular instrument to have in almost every black home. Tatum grew up playing for his family in his home, for friends as recreation, and for employment at a major department store and on local WSPD radio. It was in 1932 that he left Toledo to begin his career as a jazz musician. He toured with Adelaide Hall and performed in famous New York and European night clubs. His repertoire included the well-known and popular song “Sweet Lorraine.” Like most of Tatum’s repertoire, his renditions of “Sweet Lorraine” were entertaining and the song was perfect for his style of musicianship. His friends and other musicians who knew Tatum commented on his light heartedness, and friendly manner and his popularity with the ladies.

Tatum, known as a solo genius, also recorded “Sweet Lorraine” on the album “The Art Tatum Trio.” Commenting on the brilliance of Tatum’s playing, the song critic, Peter Watrous, said that “on tunes like ‘Sweet Lorraine,’ his swing makes the melody painfully evocative; anything but glib, he turns the sentimental into the emotional.” “Sweet Lorraine’s” romantic yet playful, upbeat lyrics made the song popular and was also well known to Tatum’s white audiences. Although Tatum’s 1940’s version was instrumental, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong and others sang jazz versions of the song. Burwell was said to have written the original “Sweet Lorraine” in 1928 for a musical show. In 2013, Norbert Leo Butz sang the song in the musical “Girls, Girls, Girls.” In the play, Butz envisions his future wife as a toy. His performance was a play on the feminist intentions of the song’s lyrics.

“Sweet Lorraine’s” timeless popularity with musicians, and other artists makes this song a standard. Art Tatum’s version of the song for the Registry was chosen for these same reasons-- its timeliness and Tatum’s popularity among other musicians, and as an example of the genius of his jazz piano performance. However, as an African American and native of Tatum’s hometown, Toledo, I knew very little about him. Since researching and writing the books, “The History of Art Tatum, 1910-1932,” and a collection of poems, “Does A Genius. . .?” I have become a fan. The following poem is a celebration of Tatum’s influence and his musicianship in Toledo:

The Price of a Ticket

Tiedtke’s was one of Tatum’s Toledo gigs
Segregated store where blacks

Could not eat
Nor work as clerks
Tatum made happy his muse
Striking each key perfectly
Screamed sightless solos
Songs like "Sweet Lorraine"
Some only he understood
in his solitude

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.