

# “Sweet Lorraine”—Art Tatum (1940)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Morgan Taylor (guest post)\*



*Early label*

Art Tatum is known as one of the greatest pianists in the history of jazz. Often referred to as a “musician’s musician,” Tatum’s style has given many experts cause to question whether he was a “real” jazz musician at all. Whether Tatum’s work is outside the bounds of jazz, or not, he is arguably one of the greatest pianists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His recording of “Sweet Lorraine” is one of most popular versions of the song, but both Tatum and “Sweet Lorraine” had their own histories prior to coming together. By the time Tatum put his version of “Sweet Lorraine” to track in 1940, the song had already been well established as a jazz standard with recordings from a handful of other artists. However, what set Tatum’s version of the song apart is the same thing that set Tatum apart from all other musicians: his genre-bending virtuosity.

Tatum was born on October 13, 1909 to a conventional, working class family in Toledo, Ohio. At some point during his early childhood, Tatum lost complete vision in one eye and partial vision in the other. This limitation didn’t stop the young virtuoso from making his musical talent known at an early age and some experts even speculate it contributed to Tatum’s innate musical abilities. Although his first introduction to musicianship was through the violin, Tatum quickly transitioned to the piano. According to interviews with Tatum, he found that the piano offered more versatility than the violin. During Tatum’s upbringing, the piano was firmly established as a staple of entertainment and could be found in the parlor of many homes. The piano rolls of James P. Johnson have often been credited as an early influence on Tatum. While piano lessons provided some classical training, and he attended the Toledo School of Music as a teen, Tatum was largely self taught. His near perfect pitch made him naturally sensitive to intonation allowing him to learn by simply listening and repeating. That being said, Tatum could read music despite his impaired vision.

As Tatum grew up, the piano’s place in the household parlor was usurped by the radio and early forms of recorded sound. This provided Tatum with access to the recordings of jazz musicians like Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, and Teddy Wilson. But Tatum’s musical taste wasn’t all jazz, all the time. Tatum was also regularly exposed to other genres of music like 19<sup>th</sup> century classical, Protestant church songs, marches, ragtime, and popular classics, all of which show up in Tatum’s style. Like a chameleon, Tatum could imitate and embellish on virtually any and all musical styles and techniques.

By his teen years, Tatum had his own radio show and was playing regular gigs in Toledo nightclubs. As he grew into adulthood, Tatum made a name for himself in the jazz community, touring clubs in the US and Europe. While Tatum generally pleased live audiences, his talent really shined during “cutting sessions,” or after-hours competitions in which two or three pianists

would take turns attempting to out-do each other. Tatum often floored his competitors earning their respect and friendship. One such competitor was Fats Waller, who turned into a lifelong friend and source of inspiration. These interchanges with other musicians were critical to the ongoing development of Tatum's style. With the encouragement and egging on of his peers, Tatum honed his ability for embellishment and improvisation, incorporating bitonality, chord dissonance, sophisticated harmonies and chord progressions into all his work. Tatum was also fast. He played with mind-blowing speed, once being described as a hawk chasing its prey. This combination of genre blending, speed, and technical skill led some critics to describe Tatum's music as "too much." Some of the decisions Tatum makes while playing are barely audible to the untrained ear. This made his compositions hard to transcribe for sheet music. While Tatum's style resonated with fellow musicians, he sometimes struggled to appeal to the general public. Non-musicians just didn't understand it. In 1943, Tatum formed a trio with bassist Slam Stewart and guitarist Tiny Grimes. Grimes was later replaced by guitarist Everett Barksdale, but the trio format proved to be the most commercially successful endeavor of Tatum's career.

Despite all his talent, Tatum produced very few original compositions and mostly recorded the work of other musicians. However, every song Tatum touched was given new life under his hands. His approach to "Sweet Lorraine" is a wonderful example of this. Written in 1928 by Cliff Burwell and Mitchell Parish, "Sweet Lorraine" quickly became a popular jazz standard. In addition to Tatum, the song was recorded by many great artists such as Rudy Vallee, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, and Isham Jones. "Sweet Lorraine" takes on a simple A-A-B-A structure and was originally written in F major. This simplicity provides plenty of room for Tatum's improvisations and embellishments.

During the span of his career, Tatum must have played "Sweet Lorraine" hundreds of times for live audiences and between 1938 and 1956, he recorded the track a few dozen times. In the studio, Tatum often recorded his solo pieces in one take; all improvised and straight to master. As a result, no two recordings of "Sweet Lorraine" are alike. Perhaps the most recognizable version of Tatum's "Sweet Lorraine" was also his first commercially-available recording of the song, which he made for Decca Records in 1940. The version appeared on an album that consisted of three 78 discs titled "Decca Presents Art Tatum (In an Album of Piano Solos)." Unlike some of Tatum's later versions of the song, this recording takes a nice and easy approach. The song begins with a short, gentle prelude that then slides into the original structure of the song. While the track is just under three minutes long, it packs quite a punch and is marked with Tatum's signature blending of musical style and technique. He effortlessly layers sophisticated variations of the original harmony, re-shaped melodies, octave tremolos, and impressive arpeggios over the thumping base of a simple stride piano. This particular version caught the attention of world renowned pianist, Andre Previn, who credits it as the moment he first understood jazz.

As was common with the jazz musician's lifestyle, Tatum has his vices. A life lived in after-hours clubs, he developed an almost nocturnal lifestyle and an impressive love of beer. Those who were close to Tatum recounted that he could consume a case of beer and a few quarts of liquor in any given 24 hour period. Amazingly, this habit didn't seem to affect his playing, but it was hard on his health. Tatum passed away at the age of 47 due to advanced uremia in 1956.

Tatum is best described as an *explorer* of music. Armed with the natural ability to perceive and remember almost any technique with precision, Tatum traversed the spaces between genre and style to come up with a sound that was uniquely his own. This holistic approach to music inspired generations of jazz musicians for years to come. When it comes to the relationship between Tatum and "Sweet Lorraine," the marriage of these two heavy hitters is nothing short of "sweet."

*Morgan Taylor lives in Los Angeles, California, where she works as an archivist for IndieCollect. She holds a Master's of Library and Information Science from UCLA and is passionate about working with legacy audio and moving image formats. Through her work, Morgan hopes to improve wide-spread access to our nation's cultural heritage encoded on audiovisual materials.*

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