

The art of Oscar Peterson: legacy of a jazz piano virtuoso

John Andrews
4 January 2008

Accolades poured in after the Christmas Eve announcement of Oscar Peterson's death on December 23 from kidney failure at his home in Mississauga, a suburb of Toronto, at the age of 82.

For almost 60 years Peterson enjoyed a sterling international reputation for his incredible jazz piano technique, ceaseless melodic invention and relentless rhythmic swing. A huge man, physically and also artistically, Peterson was known for his erudition and culture as well as his personal grace and dignity during a heroic recovery from a debilitating stroke in 1993, which robbed his renowned left hand of much of its power.

Peterson continued to perform publicly until quite recently, despite arthritis that required the frequent use of a wheelchair.

Remarks posted on the web site maintained by Herbie Hancock, among the foremost of hard bop jazz pianists, were typical of those following his death: "Oscar Peterson redefined swing for modern jazz pianists for the latter half of the 20th century up until today. I consider him the major influence that formed my roots in jazz piano playing. He mastered the balance between technique, hard blues grooving, and tenderness. You'll find Oscar Peterson's influence in the generations that came after him. No one will ever be able to take his place."

Dave Brubeck, a modernist five years Peterson's senior, said in an email that after first hearing Peterson, "I was in awe. Every jazz pianist would soon know that Oscar was a master." And 89-year-old Hank Jones, one of the few surviving be-bop piano greats, added in a statement to the *Canadian Press*, "He had a beautiful approach to ballads, which a lot of pianists forget."

Marian McPartland, the fine British-born jazz pianist, whose remarkable National Public Radio show "Piano Jazz" has hosted virtually every significant jazz pianist over the past three decades, called Peterson "the finest technician that I have seen." (The exceptional episode

featuring Peterson is available in compact disc. For the Amazon.com link, [click here](#).)

Peterson is among the handful of jazz greats who resided outside the United States throughout his career. He was born August 15, 1925, in Montreal into a family of Jamaican heritage. By all accounts, Peterson owes much of his later success to encouragement by his father, Daniel, a railroad worker, amateur musician and strict taskmaster.

At age six, Peterson was already receiving formal training in classical music, but as he grew he wanted to play in the looser, more improvisational style of the great swing bands and their pianists, such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Teddy Wilson. Among his favorite pianists were Fats Waller, Albert Ammons and Nat King Cole.

Decades later Peterson would pay homage to Cole—the piano great turned pop star—by recording a piano album featuring vocals that sound remarkably like Cole himself.

Most dramatically, Peterson was spellbound by the blind pianist Art Tatum, who more than anyone else in jazz history combined virtuoso keyboard technique with artistic genius. (For readers unfamiliar with Tatum, I highly recommend this [youtube.com](#) example of his piano mastery on the Jerome Kern standard "Yesterdays." Peterson's initial exposure to Tatum was supposedly so confidence shaking that the young man ceased playing entirely for a period of several months. For the rest of his life Peterson would emulate—but never surpass—the genius of Tatum.

By his mid-teenage years, Peterson's prodigious performances led to talent show awards and almost legendary status with bands and in venues around Montreal and Toronto. Somewhat isolated from the artistic cauldron of New York City, where the basic tenets of jazz rhythm and harmony were undergoing critical reworking by musicians roughly his age (including the

brilliant pianist Bud Powell—1924-1966), Peterson assimilated and perfected a more traditional style based on boogie-woogie, stride and other four-to-the-bar techniques.

Although Peterson would later incorporate the more angular, aggressive and unpredictable motifs of modern jazz—then called bebop—into his improvised solos, this earlier isolation caused his style to remain significantly more traditional than virtually any other significant post-World War II jazz pianist. He also, perhaps not coincidentally, avoided the substance abuse issues that afflicted so many bebop masters.

Peterson catapulted to prominence in 1949, after impresario Norman Granz heard the 24-year-old local phenomenon on a live radio broadcast from a Toronto nightclub. Supposedly on his way to the airport, Granz was so impressed that he directed the cab to the Alberta Lounge, and immediately added Peterson to the lineup of Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP), Granz's highly successful concert series featuring mixtures of swing-era and be-bop stars in a contrived “jam session” setting.

Peterson's first JATP performance was at a 1949 Carnegie Hall concert, where—although added to the bill so late that he was not even advertised—he brought down the house with his amazing technique and energy.

Peterson remained with Granz for 40 years, appearing regularly with JATP and as a sideman backing the jazz giants in the Granz fold such as Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, Dizzy Gillespie, Ben Webster and Ella Fitzgerald. He even backed Fred Astaire on a series of vocal albums.

(For an excellent youtube.com example of Peterson backing Nat King Cole with a JATP style group featuring Coleman Hawkins, introduced by Granz himself, click [here](#).)

Peterson was particularly well known during the 1950s for his many trio albums, most of which featured the great bassist Ray Brown. Sometimes the trio was completed with a drummer, most frequently Ed Thigpen. On others, it was rounded out by a guitarist, usually either Herb Ellis or Barney Kessel, the instrumentation used by the Nat King Cole trio.

Peterson recorded hundreds of albums in every possible setting, ranging from solo piano to large symphony orchestras. Although not generally thought of as a songwriter or arranger, he composed the score for Woody Allen's 1972 film *Play It Again, Sam*.

Peterson was not without detractors, including

trumpeter Miles Davis, who—with typical hyperbole and viciousness—said Peterson “makes me sick because he copies everybody. He even had to *learn* how to play the blues.”

Peterson's remarkable artistic legacy is expressed by the sharp contradiction between those who worship his piano technique and those who condemn him for not doing more with it.

In numerous interviews, Peterson explained that he played music the way he thought it should sound. This evaluation is borne out by his extensive recorded output, which shows that, unlike Brubeck, for example, Peterson never used technique for flashy crowd-pleasing effects. And, unlike Davis, during the lean years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Peterson never attempted to pander to rock audiences or other popular tastes to achieve commercial success.

There is no question that Peterson has been a driving force in building the audience for straight-ahead jazz, but at the same time he has done relatively little to expand its artistic parameters. In comparing Peterson to other piano giants of post-war jazz such as Powell, Thelonious Monk and Bill Evans, one can appreciate not only the differences in taste, but also the tension between satisfying or challenging the listener—the cutting edge of artistic expression.

Peterson was himself somewhat critical of Powell, perhaps the most influential modern jazz pianist, calling his playing “uneven and unfinished.” Peterson was a perfectionist—there is not a mistake or bad measure in the thousands of hours he recorded—but at the same time there is a noticeable absence of those special moments that only someone willing to risk sounding “uneven” or “unfinished” can realize.

Genuine artistic expression takes varied forms. Without doubt Oscar Peterson's virtuosity and integrity exemplify one of those forms at its highest level. The world will miss him, but his recorded legacy will be enjoyed for generations.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact