P&K INTERVIEW BY TED ROSENTHAL



A Jazz Journey. . . Taylor-Madle

Nat Hentoff calls him "a daring risk-taker who has absorbed the entire jazz tradition." And—lucky for us—he articulates that history with candor and verve. He deserves thanks, as well as applause. Billy Taylor is the model jazz polymath.

I n the jazz world, it is widely known that Billy Taylor wears many professional hats. But what struck me most when we discussed his formidable and wide-ranging achievements was his perspective on jazz piano and jazz history. Now that he is entering his 78th year, he has lived most of the history of jazz. His unique musical and historical perspective reveals how some of the grand masters of jazz piano have led us to where we are today.

Taylor was born in Greenville, North Carolina. Although he came from a musical family and took piano lessons early on, he enrolled as a sociology major at Virginia State College. After graduation, however, he went to New York to pursue music. Quickly he was immersed in the New York City jazz scene playing with Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins. Later he became house pianist at Birdland, where he played with Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and many other jazz stars. He went on to lead his own trio, something he has done for decades. He has written jazz tunes as well as large-scale works for symphony, including *Peaceful Warrior*, commissioned by the Atlanta Symphony and dedicated to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Taylor is also widely known for his long career as jazz broadcaster and educator. In the '70s he was musical director for "The David Frost Show." More recently, he continues as a regular arts correspondent on CBS's "Sunday Morning." Taylor has also been a frequent voice on National Public Radio, and he currently broadcasts "Billy Taylor's Jazz at the Kennedy Center." Since receiving his doctorate from the University of Massachusetts in the '70s, Taylor has become one of the pioneers in jazz education. He has published two books on jazz piano, and he is co-founder of Jazzmobile, an organization that has provided thousands of free concerts and clinics in the New York area.

New York City has been Taylor's base for more than 50 years, and our conversation took place at his home in Riverdale. It was a pleasure to interact with him. Like his radio and television audience, I knew that he would be extremely eloquent. He answered questions thoughtfully, in a relaxed and friendly manner. As we began to discuss jazz piano history, Taylor often jumped up to his Steinway B to demonstrate and exchange musical ideas. It was exhilarating.

Who were some of the important musicians you interacted with? I'm especially interested in your association with Art Tatum, your musical mentor.

Art Tatum was one of the most amazing people I've ever met. He was just a remarkable man. He loved sports, and he could remember baseball averages and who ran what relay race, at what time. Things like that. As a musician, his taste was so eclectic that sometimes he left me in the dust.

I remember working out in California. He would come to get me after the gig to go to these after-hours spots. There was this one really funky, raunchy place he liked, and a guy who played somewhere between rhythm and blues, and blues. In my opinion, he wasn't really very good. But Tatum wanted to hear him. After going a couple of nights in a row, I asked him, "What do you hear in that guy?" About two or three days later, I was over at his house, and he said, "Remember when we were listening to that pianist, and he did this?" He played something that I vaguely remembered the guy trying to do, although he was screwing it up. Tatum heard where he was trying to go, put it in his own vocabulary, and was using it his way.

He must have gotten a lot of that kind of information from people in places like Kansas City because he had a lot of blues ideas in his vocabulary. Listen to "Aunt Hagar's Blues," a great example of how he took some of the things he'd heard in blues and put clusters in, and did other things with it. He had an ear for listening to other

> Art Tatum loved classical music, and his touch had a great deal to do with his love for Chopin.

pianists and replicating what they played, personalizing it, and doing his own thing with it.

Were there actual lessons with Tatum?

It was never formal lessons. I asked him how he did certain things, and he'd show me. I had never seen anyone do a glissando in thirds. I said, "How do you do that?" He said, "Like this."(Taylor gestures.) And he did it!

It seems as if pianists from that generation had a lot of little tricks, and that doesn't seem as common any more. There were all kinds of right-hand runs and left-hand things.

It came out of the jam session according to Tatum, Eubie Blake, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and many of the older musicians I've talked to. Even Duke Ellington made reference to it. They all said, "Every pianist worth his salt has his own tricks." That meant you could sit down behind [after] anybody and do your thing—you could do something that he didn't do. Willie the Lion talked about it more than most guys, in relation to Monk and Ellington and other people that he [Willie] had influenced. He actually pointed out some specific things. "Those are my tricks. He got that from me."

If someone played something and you asked him, "Hey, what was that?" would they show you?

No. They kept it to themselves. It was usually something fast!

It also seems as if that generation had much more interest in developing the left hand.

They had to. In many cases, there was no bass. Especially in the stride style of piano, and even later in the swing style. When guys were walking tenths like Teddy Wilson, the piano was the rhythm. So, with no bass, you had to have a good left hand.

Even with all the rhythm that they could create without bass, there was a touch that I relate back to the sound of classical pianists of that era. Tatum's right hand, for instance, was especially smooth and virtuosic.

Tatum loved classical music, and his touch had a great deal to do with his love for Chopin. Bach was also in there somewhere. I think he was also highly influenced by Earl Hines. I didn't realize this until many years later when I was doing an article on some of his early Decca Records. Earl Hines was playing all counter melodies with his thumb. Tatum moved it on to another level, but the Hines influence was there. Although I don't recall Tatum ever saving anything about him.

Who would Tatum talk about?

He talked about Fats Waller and James P. Johnson. Those were the ones he really considered the hallmark of stride piano. [Pianist] Clarence Profit and Art had a way of jamming where they would take a tune like "Body and Soul" and play the melody over and over and reharmonize it. Profit was one of the Harlem stride pianists. He had a phenomenal left hand. I heard him on the radio, but I never saw him. He wrote "Lullaby in Rhythm."

That piece caused me the biggest or I should say the most effective—

spanking I ever got musically. I was in college, and I came to New York on my own for the first time. My Dad said, "I want you to check in with a friend of mine who is a manager of a night club." It was a club in Harlem called the Airman Club. So I went in and played "Lullaby in Rhythm." I was walking my tenths and thinking, "Yeah!" There was a trio working there, but at that particular moment they weren't playing. I hadn't noticed the by some of my older records where I haven't decided whether I'm going to play stride or swing or bebop, and I'm playing two bars of each—a little of this and a little of that. One of the first records I made—the very first trio record I made—was a tribute to Thelonious Monk. It's called "Mad (pianist) Denny Zeitlin when he was a kid. He had internalized my stuff so much that in his first record he had written something called "The Phoenix." When the Phoenix comes, he uses it as a blues. (Taylor plays a similar pattern.) That's when the Phoenix rises out of the flames. And



At the Kennedy Center, Billy Taylor is getting jazz composers to write for dance. In this photo Taylor is working with the David Parson Dance Company in 1990.

name of the trio. It was the Clarence Profit Trio! So I go on this guy's gig and play his tune!

When he came off, he said, "I've got some fellas that would like to hear you play." So we go around the corner into this brownstone, and there are four or five guys sitting around, playing cards and talking. He said, "I've got a piano player here, fellas." Now I've got an audience. I sit down, and I'm walking my tenths, and this elderly guy comes over. He says, "Let me see some of that, son," Then he started playing. It was Willie the Lion! That was the first time I had really heard Willie the Lion and that kind of stride left hand. I was up to tempo and moving, but he took it up a notch. Thelonious Monk was also there!

Do you think because of the way the rhythm section interacts today versus what was going on back then, it would be very difficult to do much stride within progressions?

It was also difficult then. As a matter of fact, I'm embarrassed and amused Monk" because Monk and I were good friends. Monk just killed me. He was doing the Tatum thing when I first met him. The older guys were dissuading it. He would play that way, and they would say, "Find your own thing." So he did.

Are there any recordings of Monk playing in a Tatum style?

No. By the time he started recording, he really had his style together. I'll tell you a funny story. I did a record on Atlantic of "Willow Weep For Me." (Taylor plays.) When I made the arrangement, I was very proud of it. It had little clusters in it, and I played it for Tatum. He said, "That's nice." A couple days later, he came back with (Taylor plays an embellished variation).

It's a dog eat dog world.

He took it as a blues, and that changed the way I played it. Now I play it more in a blues style. It hadn't occurred to me until I heard him do it. The other side of the coin is that I influenced I thought, "It goes both ways."

Yes, third generation. There's also that famous story of Art Tatum commenting on Bud Powell's left hand.

No, that never happened. I was there. I was house pianist at Birdland, and Tatum was the star that week. Bud and I were both big Tatum fans. Bud had been drinking a little too much that day. What Bud was trying to say

was that Art couldn't play bebop. I know Bud. He had too much respect for Art to say, "I can play better than you." What he did say was, "You can't do that." Which, in a sense, was a challenge. So Tatum responded, "Why don't you come in sober tomorrow, and maybe whatever you play with your right hand, I'll play with my left." Well, Bud didn't do that. It never happened. He got sober, and he wasn't about to do that.

The story I read went a little differently. Tatum was supposed to have said, "Bud's got no left hand." And the next night Bud came in and played a whole left-hand solo piano tune.

It depends on who is telling the story! Bud's original influences came from Fats Waller. So he could play stride. But stride, as you know, was not something you could jump on and off. So, even if he played all day, he would not have come in and challenged Tatum. Things get in the mythology, and somebody picks it up as gospel.

Let's talk about your association with Duke Ellington.

I didn't realize until this year, when we started talking about the 100th anniversary of his birth, how much influence he had on me. He was a good friend. He would come to visit me at the Hickory House, and one of the reasons for that was that I was such an open admirer. Like Tatum, he was bigger than life for me. My first job in New York was with [Ellington saxophonist] Ben Webster, and Ben introduced us. I sat in with the band the first time I was formally introduced to him.

You have to understand that I'm from Washington D.C., which is his home. As a kid I used to go to see all of the bands. I'd go to see Count Basie, Tiny Bradshaw, Jimmy Lunceford, Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy-all these bands would come to D.C. Every week the show would change, and I would try to catch all the bands I could. I was so impressed with what he did, as opposed to the other bands, because his programs were more dramatic. In retrospect, they were also more colorful. Instead of the whole band blasting at you, he'd have a trio of guys over here and a solo pin-spotted over there.

It was very dramatic to look at as well-just the way he was introduced. A very formal voice off-stage would say, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, the internationally famous Duke Ellington Orchestra." They wouldn't usually introduce Duke Ellington. A pin-spot light would hit Johnny Hodges, or hit a trio playing "Mood Indigo." It was always dramatic. The curtains would part, but you wouldn't see the musicians immediately. Then a scrim would part, and you would hear the music. The violet would come open and you would see everybody, and once the stage was bright and the music was up to full swing, Duke would come out, and he always looked great-in white tails, or something like that.

What was it about his piano playing that influenced you?



Taylor, with Duke Ellington, who was a good friend. For Taylor, Ellington was "bigger than life." This meeting, a Jazzmobile event, took place in Harlem in 1973.

The thing that I admired most about him was his harmonic concept. One of the first Ellington pieces I heard was "Sophisticated Lady." To modulate from the key of A-flat to G-I didn't know another tune that did that, so I was fascinated. I wondered how he would get back. I asked him about that one time. I said, "That is so unusual. When did you start thinking along those lines?" He said, "When I realized that C-sharp was not D-flat." It also made me very curious about other things that he did. I loved the idea of [harmonies using] common tones. It was probably one of the things that fascinated him about Billy Strayhorn.

What about your recent solo record? How did you choose the tunes and prepare for the recording?

I didn't prepare for it at all. I made that particular record by accident. I like to get to the recording session before the trio, just play the piano, feel like I'm relaxed, and feel like I've been there before. We were recording at the Emilan Theater up in Mamaroneck, New York, and it was really nice. There was no hassle, and I could really get warmed up. So Bob Karcy, who owns the record company, said, "Why don't we record a little of this? I'd really like to use some of that. Are you going to come in tomorrow and do some?" So I said, "Okay." I just sat and thought of things I'd like to play.

Before the trio came in?

Yes. But I would do that anyway. It wasn't as though I was challenging myself. I was getting ready to play with the trio. So I listened to some of the play-backs. I didn't listen to much until we finished the trio dates. We put them all on a loop and listened to them, picked out the ones that I liked, and put them out.

How many days were you recording?

About three days.

So in three days you made two records!

I wasn't thinking in terms of making a solo record. I was just thinking of things that I felt like playing on that particular day. As a matter of fact, I played "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams" quite differently from the way I normally play it. "In a Sentimental Mood" really came off well. I was very pleased with that. And "Joy Spring." Those are things I play from time to time. I have to go back and listen to them now, because I really like what I did on them, and the concept that unfolded on that particular day is something I want to work with.

"Early Bird" was terrific.

Thank you. That's something I wrote for Charlie Parker. I wrote two pieces for him. I'm not sure if he played this one. I know he played the blues, which is called "Bird Watching." If there's anybody out there who knows about these records, I would love to hear about it. They were all radio broadcasts, and they're surfacing now. I would love to have something with Bird playing it. He was such a phenomenal musician. He just looked at that tune and liked the way it went.

I'd also like to talk about your bigger compositional writing.

Eight pieces for orchestra. The first one was a piano concerto, *Suite for Jazz Piano*. It was commissioned by the Utah Symphony, and I was really delighted—but scared to death on the premiere. Maurice Abravanel premiered the piece. Mahler, Bartók, and Taylor. I thought, "Why did I show up?"

Not bad company! Was it with trio, or just piano?

It was just piano. I didn't know enough. That was the first large work I wrote for orchestra. I

thought, mistakenly, that I could use the percussion and the bass section as a big trio. Oh, man, that was a disaster. The original bass part was written out for the bass section, and the drum part was written out for the percussion section. It just didn't swingnothing happened. So, after the first rehearsal, I was lucky enough to get a bass player and a drummer in Utah who could play jazz. And we just made a trio. We brought them up in the "concerto grosso" position, and they played. That got us through the first performance, and from then on I brought my own trio.

[Composer/arranger] Manny Albam was immeasurably helpful to me, because he's such a great orchestrator. I had these ideas, and he said things like, "Why don't you give that to the French horn?" I told him what I wanted to do, and it worked out really well. The only one of my works in which I orchestrated every note was *Peaceful Warrior*, an oratorio dedicated to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King. It has three movements. Each movement has some kind of melodic thing that I want to say. I guess I'll always be a songwriter—I've written 300 or 400 songs. I just like to write melodies.

I did something with the National Symphony in June. My original idea was to show that jazz had been in the concert hall all of this century. I also wanted to show that it came from the



Taylor (here with former New York City mayor John Lindsay) co-founded Jazzmobile, an organization that has provided thousands of free concerts.

spiritual. So we started with Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, where it's obvious that he had that kind of singing in mind when he wrote this ragtime opera.

Did you know that James P. Johnson always wanted to write for symphony? He wrote *Yamacraw*, and some other things, too. They're really nice. They remind me of William Grant Still. We were going to play a couple of Still's pieces on this series. I wanted to use some Johnson, but we weren't able to find it. We also did some works by Fred Tillis, David Baker, David Amram, Bernstein, and others.

I tried to show music written by musicians who play jazz, guys steeped in the *playing* tradition of jazz. I'm sure that the music is different than if we played something by Copland or one of the impressionist composers. Because it's from the American, instead of the European, point of view. We used a piece of mine called *Conversation*. It featured Marin Alsop, who conducted, and who is also a jazz violinist. The rest of the soloists were from my trio and the orchestra.

You asked some of the orchestra members to improvise?

Yes. I approach it this way. Say it's a 32-bar section. I've written 32 bars of jazz, so if the guy feels like he can't improvise on the level that I want, he can play the written notes. If he thinks he can do better, he can go on for himself.

Would you like to see more mixing of the art forms? Do you think there should be more jazz with orchestra, and with dance and drama?

I'm actually doing that. In the four years I've been at the Washington D.C. I'm very proud of that. The first thing I did was the Billy Taylor Show. I'll have a guest. I'll do the opening tune, and he or she plays first. Then we talk, and the audience gets to ask questions. The audience trusts me now. They know I'm not going to

make them look foolish. That's what the radio show is. It's the cornerstone of what we do.

In addition, I have another series called the Art Tatum Piano Panorama. It's piano soloists. We've got the Louis Armstrong Legacy, which is singers, his legacy as a jazz singer. I also use all these names because we're in the Kennedy Center, and I want the jazz names there along with Beethoven and Mozart and so forth. I have planned some things later on for other instruments.

The other thing I've been able to do is the Women's Jazz Festival. It's a three-day festival—Mary Lou Williams "Women in Jazz" Festival. We honor some of the legendary ladies that have been involved in jazz as players and producers. The only series not named after a person is the phrase I took from Duke Ellington, "Beyond Category." I did that because there were so many things that I wanted to use that I couldn't put into any existing category.

In terms of advocacy, what I'm trying to do there is to get them to think jazz. This year we've already started with a big grant from the Doris Duke foundation, and we have seven jazz composers who are writing for dance. I'm writing for Trisha Brown. The choreographers pick the composers. Randy Weston is doing something, and also Phil Woods.

In addition, we do a free concert every night of the year. About two years ago, the chairman of the Kennedy Center said, "We have this big hall, and we're so elitist. People pay at night, but during the day it's a presidential monument, yet they never hear any music. I want them to hear some music." So they started to have these free concerts from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. before the main concerts start. We've had over 4,000 performers.

Have you done projects using keyboards?

I'd really like to get those that play keyboards to speak out about the difference between electronic and acoustic keyboards. I have nothing against electronics. I've got two in the other room. But I want people to understand that there are certain things you can do with the acoustic [piano] that you cannot do with the electronic. One need not be thought of as a cancellation of the other. Instead, you can do something different. Electronic instruments have their own value. You can do a lot with them. You can be heard in places you can't be heard with a regular acoustic instrument.

As a matter of fact, some years ago, what made me such a supporter of electronic keyboards—back in the days of the Fender Rhodes, with that heavy suitcase speaker—is that I went on a State Department Tour, and it saved my life. The pianos were so bad in a couple of places that I played the whole concert on the Fender Rhodes. There is certainly a place for them. You can hold notes and do a lot of things you can't do on acoustic instruments.

As performers we all have to begin to think how we can expand our listening base. It's a very personal thing—how you do it, or how I do it. But maybe we're both going in the same direction, so they are actually transferable. I tell my students that when I was trying to put together a trio, it was just as hard. People bought "names," and if you weren't a big enough name, you didn't get the gig.

People have a fantasy that it was easier back then.

No. But we helped each other. There was a point when Marian Mc-Partland, Cy Coleman, and a couple of other pianists were alternating at the Embers and a couple of other rooms in New York. Marian would call me and say, "I'm going on the road for six weeks, and you'd better come in and say hello to John Popkin." Popkin owned the place. So I was forewarned, and I would get the

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gig. We figured you can't all play the piano at one time, and if I couldn't make it, I would turn it over to somebody that would keep people coming. So that when I get back, I don't have to win the audience over again. If you have a good group of pianists, it can work. It can work today.

Do you think there's less team spirit today?

I don't think people are thinking along those lines now. It's so much *me*, and I've got to get *my* group out there. What happens many times is that a piano player will play a club with a trio and do very well. Then they'll bring in someone else that will do something different, equally well, but it brings in a totally different audience. When the pianist comes back, that audience's heads are somewhere else. It's not that you want to shut anyone out, or not share what you've got, but in those days there were piano rooms like the old Embers or Hickory House. A lot of people played there. I played there, Mary Lou Williams, Eddie Heywood ...

There's a huge audience that still loves piano, so if someone opens a piano room, the idea is to make sure people come in and check out what's going on. That's what makes the Art Tatum Piano Panorama work. People don't necessarily know who the pianist is, but they know the series is about piano playing.

In the premiere clubs now, every week is something different.

That is what it is. But there can be rooms where people can say, "There's always a great pianist here. I was here last week and this person was great, and next week it's going to be so and so. Let's go check it out." It builds on itself. You've got a piano room, you've got good people, and it feeds on itself.

You were one of the originals out there looking for an audience for jazz in the concert hall. Are you happy with how the jazz concert scene has developed?

It's very nice, because when I first started to do this kind of thing, many of the musicians who were comfortable plaving in clubs were not comfortable playing on stage in the concert hall. What that whole generation missed was that in the earlier period we were talking about, you were in a band and you played shows, you played theaters. If you were playing a show and your solo didn't go over, you lost your solo. Everybody said, "Hey, man. I don't want to lose my solo." So they all had their little gimmicks, and they understood performing to people.

Are you saying that the musicians who came up in the bebop era didn't have the experience of playing in a large theater?

That's exactly what I'm saying. It was beginning to diminish at that time.

So you don't view it like bringing jazz to the concert hall for the first time you are bringing it back. as featured on NPR's All Things Considered, Amy White's latest release, Bittersweet, an American Romance



Beyond the wallpaper is another world

wbere genres converge

and works of beart

engage the soul

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Yes. Young people don't realize that Miles Davis was a very shrewd showman. When he turned his back on the audience, they always looked at him. Other guys tried to turn their backs, and the audience walked out. Nothing happened. Obviously, you have to figure out what works for you. How can I reach out to people and have them realize that I have this much to say in my music?

Look at Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. When Parker conducted the strings, he had his showbiz thing, but it wasn't comedy, like Dizzy. [Parker] acknowledged the fact that the people came to hear him, and he not only played more brilliantly when he was leading that kind of band, but he also announced his tunes and made some reference to what was going on. That was very important. Now, [there are] a whole bunch of pianists who have seen Bill Evans, and say that [Evans] didn't do it. You have to look at [Evans], and realize that was what people came to see. He was unique. Someone on the same bill couldn't get away with doing what he did.

You were a pioneer in so many things that now seem to be coming to fruition—jazz education in the colleges, and the jazz programs at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. How does it feel to look back on your work in this area over 30 or 40 years?

I feel very good about it because we've got a lot of young people that just take that for granted. They say, "We'll go play in a concert hall, that's what we'll do." Or major in it at college. I'm very pleased that we have more than 40,000 ensembles in schools around the country, and all over the world we've got people teaching the process of improvisation. When I was coming along, they said you couldn't do that. I wrote the first book on bebop, *Basic Bebop Instruction.* It was published by Charles Hanson in 1948.

What made you write it?

Because Dizzy and Bird wouldn't do it. You would go to a rehearsal and sit

around—it was like a masterclass. Dizzy would say, "I want you to play these changes, and look at this voicing here," and so on. Or Bird would say, "I want you to do this when I do this on the bass line. It's got this feel." These guys were giving masterclasses at the rehearsal.

I'd be sitting with the musicians, and at the table there would be someone from the Daily News or one of the daily papers, and they would ask, "Mr. Gillespie, what is this new bebop?" And Diz would do his jokes and his comedy. I asked him, "Why do you do that? You're very articulate. Why don't you just tell them what it is?" And he'd say, "They don't want to hear it. What they're going to do is write about my beret and my goatee. And they're going to tell some jokes. But if they tell jokes, they're going to tell my jokes." He'd figured it out. He was tired of being misquoted, and tired of their making something funny when he was serious about it. So he said, "You want funny? I'll give you funny."

Unfortunately, many musicians adopted that attitude. [They] just didn't choose to sit there and give Music 101 to some news reporter. [They were] making the music. Most guys were like that. They just didn't want to [explain it]. I thought it was important, so I tried to do it.

With all of your diverse activities performing, teaching, composing, broadcasting, and advocating for the arts—you must have to make some difficult choices in how you allocate your time. If you could do only one thing, what would it be?

Play the piano! 🔹

Billy Taylor Recent Releases

Music Keeps Us Young (Trio) Arkadia Jazz 71601

Ten Fingers, One Voice (Solo). Arkadia Jazz 71602