
The Jazz Piano Genius of Oscar Peterson

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By Duane Shinn

From his early love of music to his last years, Oscar Peterson's life was full with accomplishments and support from his family. The decision to become a professional pianist led to a weekly radio show and many performances in hotels and music halls for Peterson.

Although his life ended at the age of 82, Oscar Peterson had an extremely productive musical career in jazz that ended too quickly. Named Oscar Emmanuel Peterson, he was born on August 15, 1925, in Canada. As a child growing up in Canada, he and his family lived in a predominantly black neighborhood called Little Burgundy in Montreal.

Because of his surroundings, Peterson was largely influenced by jazz music, which was extremely popular during this era. Peterson started playing and perfecting the art of the trumpet and piano at age five. However, tuberculosis caused him to stop playing the trumpet and focus primarily on his gift for piano playing. To develop his extraordinary skills, Peterson practiced scales and classical eludes every single day. His daily routine consisted of four to six hours of solid practice time a day.

Studying with pianist Paul de Markey helped further refine his talents. Peterson soon began to concentrate on jazz, ragtime and boogie-woogie music. Because of his newfound interest in emerging music types, he was nicknamed "The Brown Bomber of the Boogie Woogie."

By nine years old, Peterson's collaboration list was growing quickly. At fourteen years old, he won the national music competition hosted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. However, his next life-changing decision proved controversial yet life-changing. Peterson decided to drop out of school and to become a professional pianist. The decision to become a professional pianist led to a weekly radio show and many performances in hotels and music halls for Peterson.

Oscar Peterson listed many of his personal influences in the musical spectrum. These influences included Nat King Cole, Teddy Wilson, James P. Johnson and Art Tatum.

After being heard on a radio broadcast, Oscar Peterson joined Norman Granz's recording label called Verve. Quickly, Peterson was assigned to Granz's "Jazz at the Philharmonic" project. This project included work with major artists and musicians including Ray Brown, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Milt Jackson, Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, Ed Thigpen, Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen, Louis Armstrong, Stephane Grappelli, Ella Fitzgerald, Clark Terry, Joe Pass, Anita O'Day, Fred Astaire, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Getz.

From this point on, Oscar Peterson would be acclaimed for his genius work with his craft of jazz piano. His reputation grew, and he soon was a major celebrity in the spotlight. In the 1940's, Canadian Radio hosted Peterson as a regular on many jazz programs.

By the 1950's, Oscar Peterson was a household name all over the world. He was labeled one of the leading pianists in jazz music.

His greatest asset after his unique, exceptional playing technical ability was his versatility. Peterson played in numerous duets, quartets, solos, trios, small bands and big bands. In the 1950's, Peterson collaborated with Bill Evans and McCoy

Tyner. Duos with Herbie Hancock occurred in the 1980's. Performances in the 1980's through the 1990's often featured his protege Benny Green.

In 1993, Peterson suffered a stroke. Fortunately for the world, he recovered quickly. By 1995, Peterson returned to the world of musical performance.

In a tribute to his beloved friend and associate Norman Granz, Peterson named his dog Smedley two years before his untimely death. Smedley was Granz's nickname from Peterson.

Like the original Smedley, the dog Smedley had a great attachment and devotion to Peterson. Even at Peterson's death, the beloved and loving dog stayed at Peterson's side by his bed, refusing to leave him. Peterson died of renal failure on December 27, 2007, but his music lives on in countless jazz recordings.

Duane Shinn is the author of the popular online newsletter on piano chords, available free at "Exciting Piano Chords & Chord Progressions!"