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# Oscar Peterson - Jazz Pianist Extraordinary

Contributed by Webmaster

By Duane Shinn

One of the most influential players of jazz that the world has known, Oscar Emmanuel Peterson was born on the 15th of August, 1925 in Little Burgundy, Montreal. His living environment was one imbued with jazz music since he lived in a locality where most of the people were African Americans. When just five years old, he was taught the piano and the trumpet. After being affected with tuberculosis a couple of years later, he dropped the trumpet and turned all his efforts towards the piano.

His main teacher these years, was his self taught father who was a porter working with Canadian Pacific Railways. He taught Oscar and his four brothers all that he garnered while playing the piano when he was in the merchant marine. His sister brought to his attention and taught him classical music.

Since starting to play the piano, Oscar made sure he got his basics right he would faithfully practice his scales and classical etudes daily - a habit which gave him a good grounding in the basics which in his later years contributed to a large part of his mastery over the piano. One of his piano teachers in his early years was Paul De Marky who also like his sister imparted lessons on classical piano playing to Oscar.

He started to catch onto traditional jazz recordings which prompted him to learn many ragtimes and boogie-woogie tunes of his time. This ability of his earned him the tag "The Brown Bomber of the Boogie-Woogie". By the time he was nine years old, his playing was as mature as any other professional. He spent anywhere between four and six hours every day perfecting himself at the piano - a habit he kept when he was long into his professional career.

When he was 14 years old, he took part in a nation-wide competition organized by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in which he emerged the winner. This marked the beginning of his professional career. His first permanent gig was playing for a once a week show on the radio. He also played at hotels and music halls.

The inspiration for his style of playing came from most of the jazz musicians whom any pianist at the time idolized - Nat King Cole, Teddy Wilson, James P Johnson and Art Tatum. The tables turned later in his career when Art Tatum was compared to him in his later years of success. His first hearing of an Art Tatum piece was when his father played Tiger Rag for him. After hearing it, he almost lost faith in his abilities to play the piano as well as he could. He admitted later that he was intimidated by Art Tatum's technique and that it made him decide to be humble at his own ability to play. Oscar Peterson ended up becoming good friends with Tatum eventually but he never let go of the awe he was in of the man. He rarely ever played the piano when Tatum was around.

Not only was he mesmerized by Tatum's music, he also looked up to the pianists that Tatum looked up to as he started playing. His work had a lot of inspiration and note for note picked up sections from some of Sergei Rachmaninoff's music. His work with his trio -the Oscar Patterson Trio - with Herb Ellis on guitar and Ellis Brown on bass had many such references.

His influences extend toward classical music which he has attributed to his sister Daisy Sweeney. The discipline that it involved was one of the key skills he picked up when he started learning piano from her.

Peterson found a good friend and collaborator in Norman Granz. Granz discovered him when he listening to Peterson playing at a club via a live radio broadcast. He was traveling in a taxi at the time. Upon hearing him play, he asked the driver to take him straight away to the club where Oscar Peterson was playing.

Granz got him a gig at Carnegie Hall as a part of his Jazz at the Philharmonic series. From then on, Granz served as his manager. Granz was behind Peterson in the fight against segregation. He stood in between the trio and a police who was trying to stop them from traveling in "white only" taxis.

Peterson was plagued with health problems throughout his life. He had arthritis to the extent that he could not button his own shirt. He was too heavy for his size which affected his mobility. But physical problems or not, history will certainly record Oscar Peterson as being one of the greatest jazz pianists of all time.

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