

Absolutely Irish ★★★

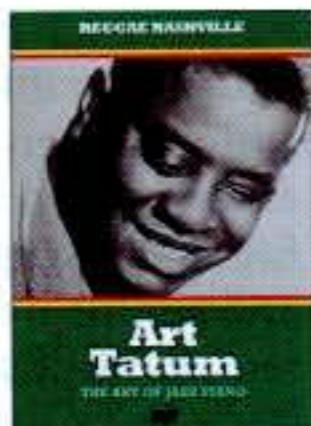
(2008) 70 min. DVD: \$19.95. WGBH Boston Video. PPR. Closed captioned. ISBN: 978-1-59375-827-1.



Filmed at the Irish Arts Center in New York's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, this public-television-aided concert film features a handful of performers—most of Irish descent and many from the old country itself—who gather to play traditional Celtic music. As New York University musicologist Mick Moloney puts it, "[They're] an all-star cast of people who've really played this music all their lives because they love it." Moloney, who arranged the show, doubles on banjo and vocals in this high-spirited program that incorporates jigs, reels, and airs, along with rehearsal footage and brief interviews. Players hail from groups like Immigrant Soul (fiddler player Eileen Ivers), Riverdance (fiddle player Athena Tergis), and Solas (flute and banjo player Seamus Egan), while their repertoire includes "King's Shilling" (sung by Karan Casey), "Fair London Town" (Susan McKeown), "The Flower of Kilkenny" (Robbie O'Connell), and "The Leaving of Liverpool" (featuring the entire ensemble). Dancers, such as Niall O'Leary, occasionally add their talents to the mix, most notably during a sand dance that provides a subtle percussive element. The performers span generations, and 80-year-old flute player Mike "The Mighty Raff" Rafferty and 85-year-old dancer Jo McNamara have no trouble keeping up with the younger participants. Filmed by JoJo Pennebaker and Nick Doob (of *Down from the Mountain* fame), *Absolutely Irish* bows on DVD with extras including eight bonus performances. Recommended. Aud: P. (K. Fennessy)

Art Tatum: The Art of Jazz Piano ★★★1/2

(2008) 60 min. DVD: \$14.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

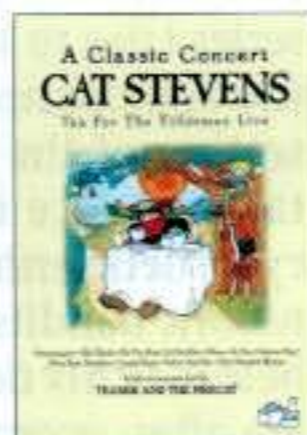


The history of jazz is filled with brilliant pianists—Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, Bud Powell, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Oscar Peterson, McCoy Tyner, and Thelonious Monk, to name a few—so labeling any one of them "the greatest" is risky business. But from a technical standpoint at least, Art Tatum (1909-56) was certainly that. Born blind in one eye, with very limited vision in the other, Ohio native Tatum's name is still uttered with reverence by musicians of all stripes. As the abundant musical (and some visual) evidence featured in this fascinating documentary reveals, Tatum's chops were simply astonishing. And since he employed a self-taught technique involving laying his fingers flat on the keyboard (as opposed to the bent-fingered style used by most others),

which made it look as if he was barely moving his hands, those who saw Tatum couldn't believe he was playing what they were hearing. His performances here on tunes like "St. Louis Blues," "Tiger Rag," "Sweet Lorraine," and many others, offer a showcase for his unique approach to rhythm and harmony; effortless use of glissandi, arpeggios, flowery runs, and other ornamentations; sheer speed; and seemingly boundless improvisational skills. Tatum was so good, in fact, that other musicians could hardly keep up, so the bulk of his most famous work was performed solo (a 1943 trio with bassist Slam Stewart and guitarist Tiny Grimes was an exception). A couple of bits of film, including a jam with the Dorsey Brothers band, are priceless, but the music clips, despite sounding a bit dated, are the real motherlode here, rounded out with comments from guitarist Les Paul (who gave up the piano after hearing Tatum play), pianist Hank Jones, Tatum's brother, and others. A treat for musicians and music lovers alike, this is highly recommended. Aud: P. (S. Graham)

A Classic Concert: Cat Stevens—Tea for the Tillerman Live ★★★1/2

(1971) 36 min. DVD: \$14.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).



Filmed at L.A.'s KCET Studios before a small audience, this 1971 concert features Cat Stevens—the future Yusuf Islam—in a mostly unplugged acoustic set. Stevens, who plays guitar and piano, is joined by longtime bandmate guitarist Alun Davies with Larry Steele on bass and congas. Weighing in at roughly a half hour, *Tea for the Tillerman Live* serves up eight songs, seven of which hail from the titular LP: the smash hit "Wild World," as well as "On the Road to Find Out," "Miles From Nowhere," "Longer Boats," "Hard-Headed Woman," and audience favorites "Where Do the Children Play?" and "Father and Son." The opener, "Moonshadow," hails from Stevens' follow-up release *Teaser and the Firecat*, which is also featured at the close during an archival animated short. Presented in Dolby Digital stereo, with so-so looking video (trivia tidbit: the associate producer here is Taylor Hackford), this brief performance is a nostalgic blast from the past...as far as it goes. However, fans would be much better off with the far superior 20-song *Cat Stevens: Majikat—Earth Tour 1976 (VL-7/04)*, which includes most of the tunes presented here. Optional. Aud: C, P. (R. Pitman)

Die Lustige Witwe ★★★1/2

(2007) 145 min. In German w/English subtitles. DVD: \$32.98. EuroArts (dist. by Naxos of America).

Franz Lehár breathed new life into a fading genre with his tuneful confection *Die Lustige*

Witwe (The Merry Widow)—a "modern" piece with its lively war between the sexes and carefree moral code—which opened in Vienna in 1905 to instant success (and, shortly thereafter, international acclaim). This version, updated to reflect a new century's sensibilities, offers a fitting centennial celebration of a repertoire favorite, while keeping the story the same. Baron Mirko Zeta, an ambassador from the impoverished state of Pontevedro, hopes to keep the fortune of wealthy widow Hanna Glawari in the national treasury by marrying her off to his attaché, Count Danilo Danilowitsch. But Hanna has other ideas and fancies someone else. Of course, all ends well after many farcical assignations and even more classic musical moments. This smart and sassy production, recorded live at the Semperoper Dresden in 2007, boasts a clever and colorful set (featuring a painting with graphic frontal nudity), wonderful choreographic elements, and imaginative modern costuming (with partial nudity). Directed by Jérôme Savary and performed by Gunther Emmerlich as Zeta, Petra-Maria Schnitzer as Hanna, Lydia Teuscher as Valencienne (Zeta's wife) and Bo Skovhus as Danilo, performing with the Staatsoperchor Dresden and the Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden under Manfred Honeck, this is a spirited and enjoyable rendition. Presented in DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1 and stereo, this is highly recommended. Aud: C, P. (J. Reed)



Experience Hendrix ★★★

(2007) 99 min. DVD: \$19.98. Image Entertainment (avail. from most distributors).



Recorded mostly in Seattle (with three bonus tracks from San Diego), this noisy commingling of guitarists is billed as a tribute to the past, present, and future of Jimi Hendrix, the man still regarded as the greatest of them all, at least among rock artists. It's an apt description, and the concerts feature an interesting assortment of great older bluesmen (Buddy Guy and Hubert Sumlin), younger guns (Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Robert Randolph, and Jimmy D. Lane), veteran rockers (Mick Taylor, formally with the Rolling Stones, and singer Paul Rodgers), musicians who played and recorded with the master (Mitch Mitchell of the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Billy Cox and Buddy Miles of the Band of Gypsys), and some more unexpected participants (such as Mike McCready of Pearl Jam and Kenny Olson from Kid Rock's band)—many of whom are backed by Stevie Ray Vaughan's rhythm section (bassist Tommy Shannon and drummer Chris Layton). The song choices tilt heavily toward the bluesy end of Hendrix's repertoire—no