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GenEc DVD Review

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Art Tatum: The Art of Jazz Piano

If I were the sort who believed extra-terrestrials come to Earth and walk among us, I could easily convince myself that Art Tatum was one of them, a benevolent being from a distant planet who was sent to this world to open up new musical possibilities for us. Pretty fanciful, right?

After all, no one but an ET could race through such rapid, harmonically lush piano runs, stop, change directions, and dash off again in dazzling profusion. No one else played like Art Tatum before Art Tatum came to Earth. Well, perhaps Luckey Roberts on a good night. But to my ear, Roberts - a product of an earlier era - had neither the imagination nor the advanced harmonic sense of an Art Tatum. What's more, we've come to think (rightly or wrongly) of Luckey Roberts as a sometimes-memorable composer, rather than an influential pianist. Tatum may not be remembered as a composer, but his intricate pianistic arabesques affected the course of jazz far more than Roberts' catchy rags.

Without Art Tatum to lead the way, there would have been no Oscar Peterson, not to mention any number of virtuoso Oscars manqué who dazzle us with a lot of flash, and little substance. But it doesn't stop there. While I confess I had never considered the point before, this documentary film makes an excellent case for Tatum being a major stepping-stone between Swing and Be-Bop. While Tatum may not have thought rhythmically in the same manner as Bird and Diz, Bud and Monk, his harmonic adventurousness took jazz away from its rag, blues, and pop roots into a brave new world of chromaticism and structural upheavals, opening up all manner of artistic possibilities for musicians to absorb and follow - if they could.

This film could serve as a model for other biographical music documentaries. It digs into the details of Tatum's life and career, it includes a wealth of intelligent commentary by a number of his musical associates and influencees (not the empty-headed ones, but the worthier ones, such as Hank Jones and Marian McPartland), it presents rare film clips of Tatum in action, and as a whole is highly compact and devoid of fluff. The film clips demonstrate that he was a surprisingly unemotional and non-visual player; perhaps the latter is related to his near-blindness?

There are no extras on this hour-long disc, but Tatum's playing is a "special feature" in and of itself. Highly recommended, not only to listeners who have yet to discover Art Tatum, but to long-time fans as well.

*Posted by Tom Bingham at [12:14 PM](#)
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