

A BOLD New Stride

By John Salmon

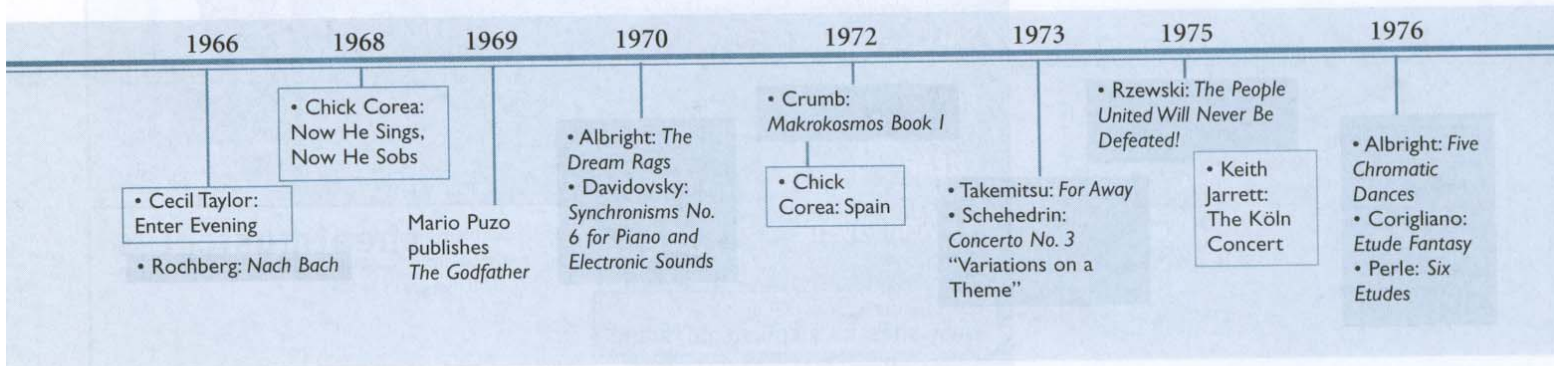
Jazz pianists explored styles of their own. The music they fashioned (and refashioned) captivated the public ear, then became a specialized genre. The unorthodox techniques and unique voices of jazz keyboard greats used the “88” in ways that strode new paths and suggested other textures. John Salmon surveys this improvising/creating world, and three artists who know this century’s jazz keyboard scene intimately reflect on who has influenced them.

Jazz belongs to the 20th century. While its immediate precursors—blues, ragtime, and minstrel songs—coincided with late Wagner, Franck, and Mahler, jazz emerged only when the seeds of modernism had begun to blossom. Jazz could have been born only when Model Ts were whizzing around Harlem, the mechanization of conveyor belts replaced unhurried artisanship, when city life offered more allure than rural stability—in short, when a new pace and a new irreverence were born.

The first jazz piano style was stride, an outgrowth of rag, but less rhythmically rigid than Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), more frenetically charged than W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” (1914). If rag is a civilized conversation, stride is a boisterous “shout” (another name for the style). Rag is a courtly bow, stride a swift kick in the backside. Stride, or “Harlem stride,” indicating its birthplace, was most masterfully practiced by James P. Johnson, sometimes called “the father of stride,” who could also be called the

first great jazz pianist. His left hand was a marvel, the true test of early jazz pianists, grouping bass notes and middle-register chords in irregular combinations. Johnson’s left hand would sometimes suggest a 3/4 rhythm superimposed over a 4/4 meter while his right hand would spin out swinging, bluesy riffs, as in his 1921 classic “Carolina Shout” (a piece Duke Ellington learned from the piano roll, watching the keys go down).

The virtuosic tradition of stride inched up a notch with Fats Waller,



Johnson's pupil and surely the sassiest jazz pianist ever to live. To be sure, Waller's consummate showmanship and wickedly witty lyrics ("Your Feet's Too Big") gave full flower to his irrepressibility and broadened his popular appeal. But his harmonic innovations and profound lyricism, coupled with pianistic dash (fully illustrated in the 1929 compositions "Smashing Thirds," "Handful of Keys," "Numb Fumbly," and "Valentine Stomp"), made him the most immediately obvious predecessor to the apotheosis of stride, Art Tatum.

If, as Alfred North Whitehead proclaimed early in this century, all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, surely all jazz piano is a footnote to Art Tatum. He had it all—an incredibly versatile and deft left hand that seemed to summarize everything Willie "the Lion" Smith and other stride players ever attempted; a right hand that could arpeggiate four octaves in a single breath (opposed to Earl Hines's two); a capacity to render dense, highly chromatic harmonic progressions, rivaling Ellington; a restless swing, as driving as boogie-woogieist Meade "Lux" Lewis; textures as varied as Jelly Roll Morton's compositions; and a daring and brio that make James P. Johnson sound tame by comparison.

Tatum is also the summit from which one views jazz of the '40s and '50s: his angular riffs, many conceived in double time, predict bebop while his blazing virtuosity surely inspired every jazz and classical musician who heard him (including Godowsky, Horowitz, and Rachmaninoff, but especially Oscar Peterson). One won-

So Much of Bill ...

One of my greatest influences was Duke Ellington. He's somebody I listened to when I was a teenager. He became a mentor to me when I was working at the Hickory House, and he always invited me to sit in with the band when he was at Birdland. I listened to Fats Waller (though not as much as Duke), [but] I never really got into stride piano. In a way, Fats was such an entertainer that it was hard to pin him down to being a jazz man ... but I certainly knew all of his tunes. Likewise, James P. Johnson.

Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton, with whom I later worked, influenced me, as did the pianists who worked for Benny—Mel Powell, Teddy Wilson, Jess Stacy. Then other people came into the picture, like Art Tatum. One of the first things of his I tried to play was his takeoff on Dvorák's "Humoresque." He played that as a jazz piece and did such marvelous things with it. I was lucky in having him as a friend, not so much a mentor, but certainly somebody I admired who came to hear me play ... which is pretty tough to take!

There are a lot of underappreciated pianists out there, too ... Red Richards, who worked with all the greats all over the world ... or Bobby Tucker, who was the pianist for Billie Holiday. Just because



a person isn't famous to the man in the street doesn't mean he didn't make a great contribution.

What has stayed with me [from the 1950s] is Bill Evans. There's still so much of Bill that seems to permeate through everything that is played today, even though in some areas he wouldn't be thought to be an influence. It's funny, because he has been an influence on every piano player I can think of—everybody! We were friends ... he was somebody I would go to hear every spare minute. In fact, to let you know where my head is at, I have a Bill Evans cassette in the car that I've been playing for days. I keep playing [it] over and over, and I don't get tired of it. It has all the good songs—"Someday My Prince Will Come," "How Deep Is the Ocean," "My Foolish Heart" ... I can't get away from it.

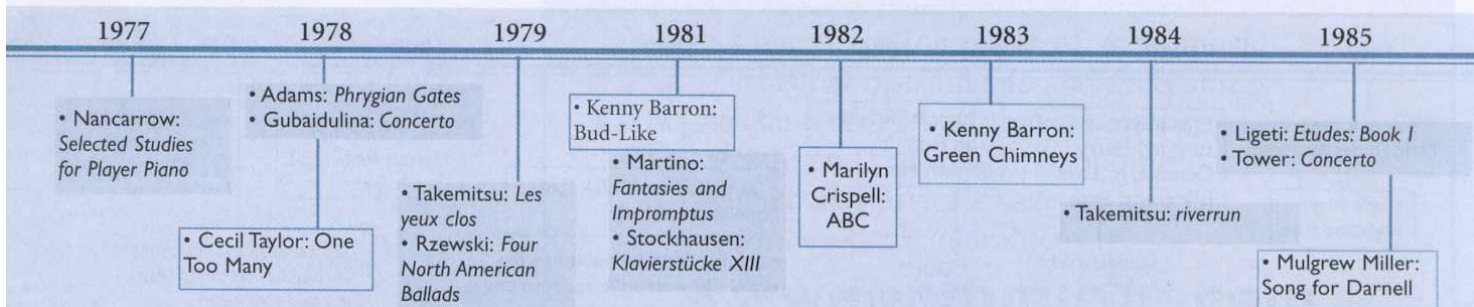
Marian McPartland

Photo courtesy of Baldwin Artists

ders how many pianists defenestrated themselves, not to mention changed careers, after hearing Tatum's blistering 1933 recordings of "Tea for Two" and "Tiger Rag."

For jazz pianists, things had to change after Tatum. He was the *ne plus ultra* of the stride tradition. Like symphonists after Beethoven, Tatum's successors had to devise a new esthetic, one not exclusively linked to stride's ebullience. In walked Bud—Bud Powell, that is, along with the other

bookend of pianistic bebop, Thelonious Monk. Together they helped fashion a new pianistic idiom, one that, even today, might be appropriately labeled "modern jazz." Powell changed the left hand's previously central role in jazz piano, allowing it to comp sporadically in the middle range of the keyboard or to provide skeletal harmonic support. Emphasis was placed on the right hand, creating linear improvisations that spanned the upper half of the keyboard, most of the



time at breakneck speed, as in “Tempus Fugue-It” and “Hallucinations.” The new piano style worked best in a group context, with a string bass to relieve the pianist’s left hand and a drummer to provide the rhythmic context for the quirkier and faster riffs.

Speaking of quirks, no more eccentric pianist ever lived than Thelonious Monk, who perhaps best helped to define the countercultural aspect of post-World War II jazz. Defiantly true to himself and eminently ill-equipped to compete technically against Powell or the still thriving stride pianists of the '40s, Monk made jazz piano conform to his peculiar vision of the world—upside down, abstract, intensely personal. If Powell were a painter, he'd have been John Singer Sargeant—vibrant, colorful, technically assured.



those days] what they called “race records,” which was simply the part of the record shop that had black American artists. Ellington and Charlie Parker records were the ones I remember picking out.

Duke Ellington was my biggest influence because I saw him so much when I was young. He made sure he made the rounds of this country in spite of the racial restrictions. There were never hotels available [for blacks], so he would rent a train car, which was quite luxurious. Plus he had lists of people who could cook, all friends of my mother, and I would hear them talking about him coming to town. I guess the excitement was contagious. All the musicians ate at [my mother's] house, so I got to meet a lot of

Monk is closer to Salvador Dalí, whose surrealistic landscapes reveal more about the artist’s psyche than about the outer world.

More than anyone mentioned so far, Monk created a true repertory of jazz classics. Along with Duke Ellington, Monk emancipated jazz from the world of pop. Up through Art Tatum, most jazz musicians drew their material from the realm of popular songs. Our most salient memories of an artist in those days may be Coleman Hawkins’s improvisation on the ballad “Body and Soul” or Art Tatum’s version of “Tea for Two,” not their own compositions. Monk’s “Brilliant Corners,” “Criss Cross,” “Evidence,” “Misterioso,” “Round Midnight,” “Ruby My Dear,” “Straight No Chaser,” and at least a dozen more are at the heart of Monk’s artistic persona, and remain pieces combo leaders are likely to call on jazz gigs, even in 1999.



John Firesheets

Thelonious Monk created a true repertoire of jazz classics, among them “Round About Midnight,” “Criss Cross,” and “Eronel.” The “wrong notes” of pieces such as “Gallop’s Gallop” earned him a reputation as being quirky and controversial, but his improvisations are inimitable.

ELLINGTON LED THE WAY

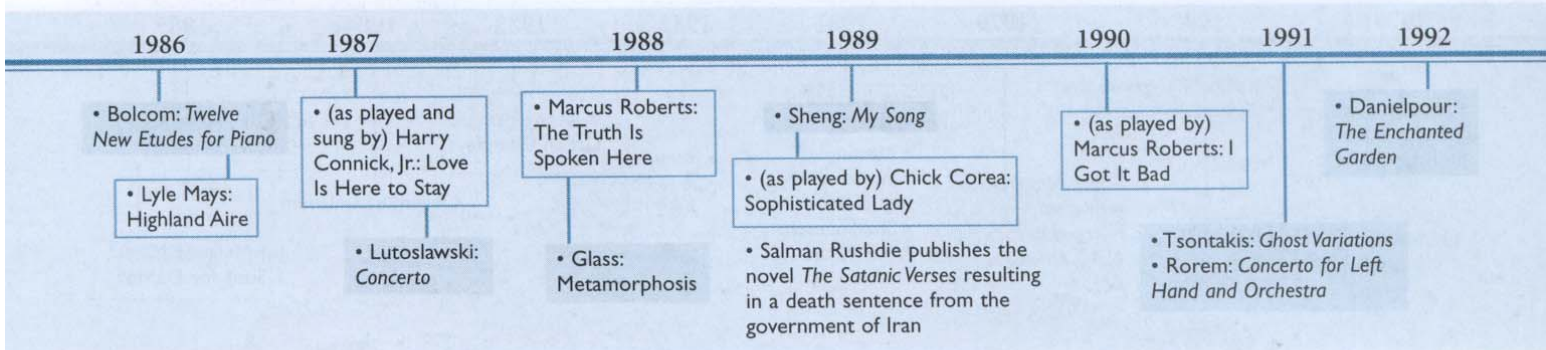
I came along in '34, so my perspective began around '44. I hadn't even heard any stride at this point since I was at the tail end of that movement. As I grew older, I heard recordings of the great Nat King Cole with enormous hits like “Straighten Up and Fly Right.” They had [in

them—Lena Horne, Billy Eckstine, Marian Anderson ...

I certainly love the younger players, but I still consider Miles Davis and John Coltrane the ultimate in modern playing. Miles utilized piano in a unique way. He required a certain excellence that very few trumpet players required—including Dizzy.

John [Coltrane], of course, was a virtuoso beyond belief! He spent more man hours and worked harder on the sax than anybody I knew—even after he was employed. He never stopped, not even for intermissions. One night at Birdland, Betty Carter asked me to go back and tell him to please stop playing. The closer I got to him, [the more] I realized how ridiculous it was. When I got back there, I said, “How’s the family?” There was no way I was going to tell that man to stop playing! He practiced incessantly. He would sometimes pass out from exhaustion with his horn across his chest—then he’d wake up and continue practicing. We would play at his house. And his wife at that time, Naima, would always encourage me to play more choruses because I was always shy. He would play about 100 [choruses]!”

Cedar Walton



Monk's compositions typically contain irregular rhythms, a strategic occurrence of unresolved dissonances ("wrong notes," according to some undiscerning critics), and stark, in-your-face textures. There is something honest and penetrating about Monk's music. While the pianists of a previous era played to please people, you never get the impression that Monk was playing to please an audience. First and foremost, he played for himself, to satisfy his raging originality. His pieces and his improvised solos have the feel of brash reality ("ugly beauty" was his term for this esthetic principle), sometimes startlingly so, as in "Off Minor."

Thus was born a new esthetic (one that fellow bebopper, alto saxophonist Charlie Parker helped to forge as well), reflective of a new, black consciousness: one could have never called Thelonious Monk an Uncle Tom, an epithet that, unfortunately, was sometimes flung at Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong. This was the context within which trumpeter Miles Davis formulated his bad-ass stage deportment a few years later—some might even call it contempt for the audience—and "cool" approach to performance. (In Davis's case, of course, a whole host of psychological reasons, not to mention purely musical predilections, lie at the heart of his unique contributions to jazz; nevertheless, social factors, like racism, have generally been understudied insofar as they influenced the esthetics of post-1945 jazz.)

Beboppers liberated jazz from the responsibility to appeal to a mass audience. During the 1930s, jazz, in the guise of swing music played by big

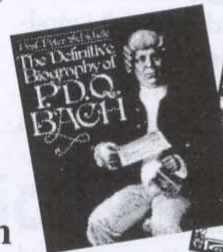
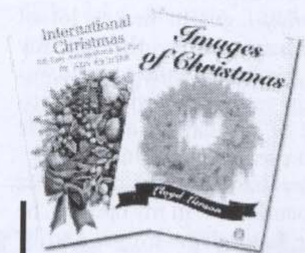
bands, was America's pop music. By the 1950s, jazz had attained elitist status. It had become the fine art of connoisseurs, and a new intelligentsia emerged that easily saw the connections between jazz and abstract art. Dave Brubeck's 1959 album *Time Out*, exploring unusual meters and formal principles associated with classical music, had a Joan Miró painting on the cover. Brubeck led one of the most successful quartets in jazz history, one that, ironically, appealed to the masses while engaging in the most sophisticated rhythmic experiments, like the exotic 9/8 "Blue Rondo a la Turk," and harmonic adventures, like the Milhaud/Ellington-influenced "The Duke."

Lennie Tristano also pushed the envelope of abstraction and, as a result,

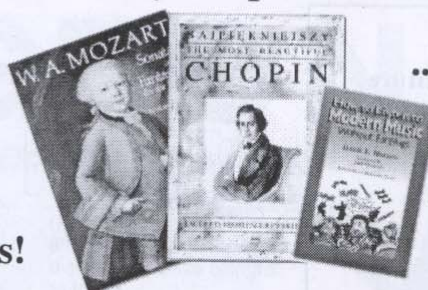


Bill Evans developed a lyrical and elegant style evident in compositions—such as "Waltz for Debby" and "Laurie"—that have become jazz standards. His refined and striking performances and arrangements have been enormously influential.

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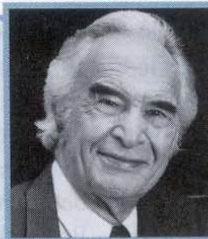
• (as played and sung by) Diana Krall:
This Can't Be Love

• Ligeti: *Etudes Book II*
• Welcher: *Concerto*
("Shiva's Drum")

was sometimes accused (by the same undiscerning critics, one supposes, who couldn't grasp Monk's "wrong notes") of overintellectualization and not being able to swing. Tristano explored a straighter swing concept, with more even eighth notes, that allowed his essentially linear improvisations to unfold with stark clarity and, like Brubeck, he experimented with polytonality, as in the 1949 recording of "Subconscious-Lee." John Lewis, founder of the Modern Jazz Quartet and a pianist noted for his delicacy, should also be mentioned in this group for his incorporation of classical forms and styles, as in his jazz fugue "Three Windows" (1957).

From the new freedom forged by beboppers, the 1950s spawned a tremendously rich array of styles. Not only were many of jazz's early practitioners still creating music much as they had decades earlier, but the moderns also opposed or complemented each other to create a rich musical tapestry that makes many jazz students today regard the '50s as a kind of "golden age" of jazz. Horace Silver, Tommy Flanagan, Barry Harris, Cedar Walton, and other black pianists are credited

Tatum Was Tops



Fats Waller was definitely one of my earlier influences. The first 78 records I ever bought in my entire life were Fats Waller playing and singing "There's Honey on the Moon Tonight" and "Let's Be Fair and Square in Love." Fats was very popular on radio and movies so I heard him fairly often. I also heard him playing boogie woogie at the time of that big piano craze. You can hear this influence in the tune I wrote and dedicated to him, "Mr. Fats." "One Moment Worth Years" is another of my tunes that is very reminiscent of Fats.

Teddy Wilson was also a big influence. He introduced an easier approach to stride by "crawling," that is, placing the root of the chord in the little finger [of the left hand] the fifth in the second finger, and the third in the thumb. As a young pianist, I got to hear a lot of Teddy Wilson with the Benny Goodman Trio because their music was played on the radio along with the popular music of the day. The Billy Kyle Trio was an even earlier influence.

But, more than any other pianist, Art Tatum influenced me. In my opinion, he could stride faster than anyone. And he was so advanced harmonically! His incredible technique has not been sur-

passed. I was unfortunate enough to play on the same nightclub gig with Tatum, but fortunate in that I had the opportunity to listen to him night after night. Tatum's version of "Tea for Two" really impressed me. My first 78 recording of "Tea for Two"

showed the Tatum influence by the way the first-bar theme kept modulating.

Non-pianists in jazz who have influenced me are Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden, Bix Beiderbecke (as trumpeter and composer), and—maybe most of all—Jack Jenny on trombone with that wonderful solo on "Stardust," as well as Coleman Hawkins on "Body and Soul." How have they impressed me? Parker as a total musical genius; Armstrong, the same; Teagarden, the same; Beiderbecke, the same; Coleman Hawkins, the same; Jenny, for him to say so much in a few short bars and for showing how a beautiful, lyrical melodic line can influence a generation of young players.

A big influence on me personally were the horn players in the [Brubeck] Octet—Paul Desmond, Dave van Kriedt, Bill Smith, Dick and Bob Collins, and also Cal Tjader. I also have to mention Stan Kenton's compositions and arrangements and the sound of the entire Kenton orchestra.

Dave Brubeck

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with ushering in hard bop, a movement of the mid '50s that was supposed to get back to jazz's black roots, with funky, repetitive riffs (recalling the call-and-response of early black churches) and a rediscovery of the centrality of the blues. Like most labels, however, it is simplistic to regard Flanagan, whose lyricism and harmonic subtlety are on a par with Ellington, and the others as exclusive exponents of hard bop.

At the same time, however, George Shearing, Marian McPartland, and Bill Evans continued to expand the non-bluesy side of jazz (though each was capable of belting out the earthiest blues), paying particular attention to every conceivable permutation of the ii-V7-I progression and writing tunes with complex chord changes. They also tended to emphasize elegance over drive, and lyricism over percussiveness. After Monk, Evans has probably contributed the greatest number of piano

pieces to enter the repertoire of jazz musicians, including a number of ballads like "Laurie" and "Waltz for Debby," tunes that, typically for Evans, start out ingenuously but then evolve gradually into hot swingers.

From his 1962 standout, "Watermelon Man," to the recent collaboration on Ravel's Concerto in G with the Orpheus Chamber orchestra, Herbie Hancock has traversed wide instrumental and stylistic territory. He has worked with acoustic and electronic sounds and explored the varied energies of fusion, rock, funk, and disco, as well as pure jazz and classical traditions. Many of his compositions, such as "Maiden Voyage" and "Speak Like a Child," have become jazz standards. In 1986 he won an Oscar for scoring "Round Midnight," a film in which he also acted and played.

By the 1960s, the jazz idiom, like society itself, seemed to be bursting at the seams. Avant-gardist Cecil Taylor often played the keyboard with his fists or elbows, producing clusters and effects that bore little

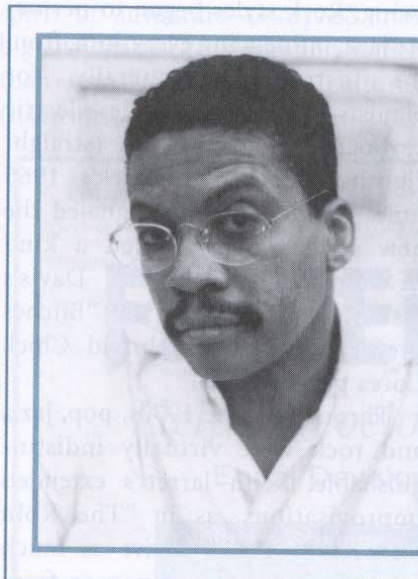


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Oscar Peterson is one of the greatest solo pianists in the history of jazz. Peterson toured regularly with the Jazz at the Philharmonic ensemble during the 1950s (having appeared with that group in Carnegie Hall in 1949), and has thereafter played with both jazz musicians and symphony orchestras. He has also produced an extensive, and impressive, discography.

Photo: Lee Tanner

resemblance to traditional jazz harmonies and conceived outside of

swing. Rock styles began to permeate jazz, influencing everything from the instrument (generally, for pianists, the Fender Rhodes electric keyboard) to the rhythm (straight eighths). Herbie Hancock's 1965 tune "Maiden Voyage" signaled the new style which reached a kind of culmination in Miles Davis's fusion experiment of 1969, "Bitches Brew" (on which firebrand Chick Corea participated).

Throughout the 1970s, pop, jazz, and rock were virtually indistinguishable. Keith Jarrett's extended improvisations, as in "The Köln Concert of 1975," derive as much from the language of pop as from jazz. Chick Corea's group, Return to Forever, resembled many rock groups of the day in its instrumentation, not to mention textures and decibel levels. In the 1980s, the decade that saw a return to conservative values with the birth of the Moral Majority and a Republican in

the White House, jazz virtually abandoned the free experiments of the '60s, and the jazz-rock of the '70s sometimes seemed as dated as bellbottoms.

It is now easier to understand Wynton Marsalis's reappropriation of 1950s styles in the 1980s, as if he were reclaiming the essence of jazz. In his new role as pedagogue and spokesperson, he is perhaps more interested in inculcating appreciation for past masters than forging new artistic ground. Marcus Roberts, one of Marsalis's first pianists, plays in a style that draws heavily from stride and boogie-woogie, as well as pure bop.

Nowadays, we still seem to live in an era that chooses to eclipse the '60s and '70s. (Has American culture still not come to grips with those turbulent decades?) To be sure, there are a few pianists, like Marilyn Crispell, with roots firmly planted in the free jazz experiments of the '60s, but by and large the music jazz pianists pro-

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With his sensational performances of "Tea for Two" and "Tiger Rag," the almost-blind Art Tatum took jazz piano playing to an altogether different level. His virtuosity impressed all those who heard him—including Godowsky, Rachmaninoff, Horowitz, and Oscar Peterson. That same virtuosity inspired other instrumentalists, such as Charlie Parker, to push their own performance boundaries.

duced in the 1990s shows direct links to the 1950s. The sensitivity of Kenny Werner's 1997 release, (*a delicate balance*) (note the parentheses and lower case, reminiscent of the understated manner in which Debussy titled his Preludes), reveals more than a passing influence from Bill Evans, as does Lynne Arriale's disc, *The Eyes Have It*.

Meanwhile, Jacky Terrasson, Brad Mehldau, Eliane Elias, Ted Rosenthal, Cyrus Chestnut, and dozens of other young lions build on bop, Afro-Cuban, and Brazilian styles as practiced 40 years ago. As the new millennium dawns, it is sobering to consider that this variegated art form is barely a century old. Will future scholars call both James P. Johnson and Cecil Taylor jazz pianists? Will the essential elements of jazz—swing, sophisticated harmonies, improvisation—give way to techno-rap, New Age diatonicism (which is not so new anymore), and computer generated effects? Have the elements which first spawned jazz—urban energy, the blending of cultures, a

spirit of adventure—morphed into big-city malaise, a separation rather than amalgamation of cultures (notwithstanding the superficially

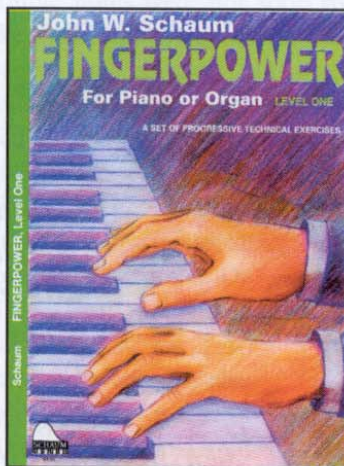
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