4. Art Tatum at Val’s in the Alley

It was Art Tatum’s home away from home. He loved the old upright piano there. He developed much of his piano genius there and he returned time after time, even after he became world famous as the unchallenged champion of the jazz piano.

It was called Val’s in the Alley. It was an after-hours joint operated by a man named Milo Valentine and was located at the rear of several stores on the north side of Cedar Avenue near East 86th Street in Cleveland. Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Andy Anderson said, “It was a small spot. I guess it held about 50 or 60 people, had small aisles, a little bar for beer, a piano, and Art.”

Duke Ellington, in his autobiography Music is My Mistress, recalled going to Val’s, “off an alley that was off another alley” to hear Tatum play. Ellington said, “Val’s had a piano that was so old and beat-up that Tatum had to learn to play everything up toward the treble end. But it had a most compelling sound and the action was obviously just right because Tatum loved that piano.”

One time, while listening to Tatum play, Ellington said he was too overwhelmed to express his feelings.

Born in Toledo October 13, 1909, Tatum had developed a local reputation as an outstanding pianist while he was still a teenager. At the age of 18, he played on a radio program on Toledo’s WSPD. He came to Cleveland in 1928 at the age of 19 and soon began playing at the Prohibition Era after-hours joint.

Paul Whiteman, the misnamed “King of Jazz,” first heard Tatum at Val’s in the Alley in 1929 and was so impressed that he persuaded Tatum to go to New York, but, according to Rex Stewart (in the October 20, 1966 edition of DownBeat magazine), Tatum quickly became homesick and returned to Val’s in the Alley in Cleveland.

**Count Basie’s embarrassment**

“I never will forget what happened to me,” wrote Count Basie in his autobiography, Good Morning Blues.

Basie said it happened when he was touring with the Benny Moten band in the early 1930s. After playing a date in Cleveland, the band members stopped at Val’s for a drink.

“They had a good piano in there,” wrote Basie. “That’s the part I will never forget because I made the mistake of sitting down at that piano. That’s when I got my personal introduction to a keyboard monster by the name of Art Tatum.”

Basie said he didn’t know why he sat down at that piano. “The band had just stopped in to get a little taste and a little snack. The piano was there, just sitting there, not bothering anybody. I don’t know what made me do it. I went over there and started bothering that piano. I just started fooling around with it, and then I started playing. What did I do that for? That was just asking for trouble!”

That’s exactly what he got. Somebody went out and found Tatum. Basie said, “They brought him in there, and I can still see him and that way he had of walking on his toes with his head kind of tilted.”

Tatum sat down at the piano, like a gladiator protecting his turf, and musically vanquished the intruder. When Tatum started playing, Basie said he felt like a rank amateur. He suddenly realized this little bar in Cleveland was Tatum’s hangout, his place, his personal kingdom—not to be violated by some young count.

Basie said, “He was just off somewhere waiting for somebody to come in there and start messing with that piano, someone dumb enough to do something like that, somebody like Basie, in there showing off, because there were a couple of good-looking girls in the place.”

Basie said he felt like a boxer who looked up and suddenly saw heavyweight champion Joe Louis coming through the ropes at him. “I didn’t have any idea I was on Tatum’s stomping ground,” wrote Basie. To rub a little more salt into Basie’s already wounded ego, one of the girls at the bar said later, “I could have told you.”

There were two sequels to Basie’s embarrassing welcome to Cleveland.

In 1943 he married a girl from Cleveland, Katy Morgan. They remained devoted for 40 years until her death, and their only child, Diane, was born in Cleveland.

In the late 1940s, when Basie had become one of the most respected bandleaders and piano players in jazz, he was playing with his band in Los Angeles. Other
Art Tatum at Val’s in the Alley

musicians, including Buddy Rich and Tommy Dorsey, were sitting in. Basie recalled, “The joint was really jumping.” As he was playing, Basie felt someone tap him on the shoulder and say, “Hey, Base, what key you playin’ in?” It was Tatum. Basie said, “Don’t give a damn what key we’re playing in! You ain’t gonna play!” Basie ran Tatum off his stage, thinking to himself, “I wasn’t about to let that cat take over and disgrace me. He knew it. All he could do was laugh.” In a friendly way, Basie finally got even for that night years earlier when he was embarrassed by Tatum at Val’s in the Alley in Cleveland.

Goes to New York City

At the urging of the musicians who had heard him play in Cleveland, Tatum finally got up the nerve to return to New York in 1931. Popular singer Adelaide Hall heard him and hired him as her accompanist. The nearly blind pianist quickly memorized her complicated scores. After his first appearance with Hall, his amazing skill quickly became known to the best piano players in New York. The reigning kings, Fats Waller, Willie “The Lion” Smith and James P. Johnson, invited him to a jam session the following night. By all accounts, Tatum outclassed all of them. Waller was quoted as saying, “That Tatum, he was just too good! He had too much technique. When that man turns on the powerhouse, don’t no one play him down. He sounds like a brass band!”

When Tatum began playing at the Onyx Club on New York City’s 52nd Street, Waller greeted his arrival at the club by announcing, “Ladies and gentlemen, God has just come into the house!”

Tatum’s playing was characterized by an incessantly creative left hand, playing four different chords to the bar, subtle chords, unprecedented harmonic subtlety, and sixteenth-note runs at tempos that most pianists could not maintain with just eighth notes.

Respected jazz critic Leonard Feather later said Tatum’s “fantastic technique and original harmonic variations placed him incomparably far ahead of earlier artists.” Feather also said Tatum was “the greatest soloist in jazz history, regardless of instrument.”

Tatum made his first records in New York March 21, 1933. There were four piano solos: “Tea For Two,” “St. Louis Blues,” Ellington’s “Sophisticated Lady” and “Tiger Rag.”

Tatum returns to Val’s

In early 1935, Tatum returned to Cleveland and played at a variety of places here. “As famous as he became,” wrote Ellington, “he would always return to Val’s in the Alley to play that piano. When he was playing the RKO Palace in Cleveland, he would rush out and make a dash for Val’s after doing four or five shows a day. It was the same when he worked one of the plush hotels in Cleveland. He would end up sitting in Val’s and playing for kicks all night.” When he was doing network radio broadcasts from Cleveland’s WTAM, the station quickly learned that it was wise to send somebody out to Val’s to be sure the almost-blind Tatum got to the studio in time.

Veteran Cleveland pianist Chick Chaiken recalled all the Cleveland jazz musicians flocked to the Cedar Avenue after-hours joint to hear Tatum and to buy him beers as he played the old upright through the night.

Rex Stewart wrote, “Tatum’s leisure hours began when almost everyone else was asleep, at 4 a.m. or so. He liked to sit and talk, drink and play after he finished work.” Carmen McRae, in the book Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya, claimed Tatum played better after hours. James Lincoln Collier, in his book The Making of Jazz, wrote that “Tatum was at his best at the early-morning sessions.”

Red Callender sits in

Bassist Red Callender, who later played with just about everybody from Bunk Johnson to Charlie Parker and even Percy Faith, came to Cleveland in 1933 when he was 17 years old. In his autobiography, Unfinished Dream, Callender recalled it was trumpeter Roy Eldridge who first took him to hear Tatum at Val’s. Callender said every night there was a raft of excellent
piano players coming by, trying to cut Tatum. “Apparently they had no idea of his world-wide stature. They thought he was just a hometown piano player.”

Callender said he would take a tuba and sit in with Tatum. “I couldn’t believe my ears,” he said, “especially on ‘Tiger Rag.’ His hands were a blur. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing and seeing!”

Callender recalled one night when the very popular Teddy Wilson was in town with the Benny Goodman Orchestra to play at the Palace Theatre. According to Callender, Wilson told Coleman Hawkins, “I think I’ll go over and wipe out Tatum.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” warned Hawkins. “I think you better go listen first.”

Al Lerner remembers Tatum

Art Tatum

Al Lerner, a Clevelander who later played piano with the Harry James Orchestra, was there that night and said, “The place was jammed but Teddy didn’t want to play.” He was apparently heeding Hawkins’ advice. But, said Lerner, “Some people pushed Wilson over to the piano and he played beautifully. But, when Art played, Teddy just got up and walked out. He could not handle it! He could not handle it!”

A few nights later, young Lerner and Tatum were alone at the piano when Wilson walked in and asked meekly, “Do you mind if I sit here?” Lerner said, “I let him sit at the end of the piano bench where I was. He just sat there and listened to Tatum. He never moved, and didn’t play at all.”

Wilson later said Tatum was “not only the greatest jazz pianist; there have been very few concert artists who had his ability.”

Lerner was 16 years old in 1935 when he first met Tatum. The teenager was playing with a group at a club called Shadowland at East 65th and Carnegie. One night, after their gig, bass player Red Ryan took Lerner to Val’s. Lerner, who at the time had never heard of Tatum, later remembered, “I thought I was a pretty much of a hot shot piano player and I went with Red over to Cedar Avenue.”

“When we walked in,” said Lerner, “there was hardly anybody in the place. We sat at a table and ordered a beer.”

They spotted the upright piano in the corner. Ryan suggested, “Come on, Al, play something.” Lerner said, “I sat down and played ‘Rosetta’ and a couple of other things and went back to the table thinking I was pretty damned good.”

Then, he said, “This big hulking guy, who was standing at the bar drinking a beer, walked over to the piano and sat down. As soon as his hands hit the keys, I knew I had been had! This guy was like something I had never heard before! He played ‘Tea For Two’ as I had never heard it played before or since.”

Lerner said he started to cry and ran out of Val’s, down the alley to Cedar Avenue. Ryan chased after him and said, “Al, come back! Art wants to meet you.” Lerner said he went back inside sheepishly and shook hands “with this pianistic god.” According to Lerner, Tatum said, “I like your style, kid. Come in here as often as you can and sit in.”

Years later, Lerner recalled, “My heart leaped into my mouth. The shame I had felt just moments before was replaced by awe and a humility for greatness that I have never forgotten.”

After that, Lerner said he returned almost every night to hear Tatum play that old upright. The teenager and Tatum became good friends. They often had breakfast together and talked about playing.

“T’d say, ‘Art, what fingering do you use?’” He said, ‘Any finger.’ I asked him, ‘What if these two fingers got cut off or something, what would you do?’” Lerner said Tatum then demonstrated by using any two fingers on his hand and playing thirds “dramatically, just as fast.” According to Lerner, Tatum “had absolute finger independence. Each finger was independent. He could do anything. And, of course, no pianist had a left hand like his.”

Rex Stewart remembered one possible explanation for Tatum’s dexterity: “He constantly manipulated a filbert nut through his fingers, so quickly that if you tried to watch him, your vision blurred. He worked with one nut until it became sleek and shiny.”

Lerner also remembered meeting Tatum years later in New York. “He could see very little at that time. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘Hello, Art.’ He grabbed my hand and said, ‘Hello, Al.’ He knew my hands!”

Lerner also said Tatum “was a very bright man, very
well versed in just about everything including politics and sports. He could rattle off things. And he studied classical music for 13 years before playing jazz. He was a very, very bright man.”

“One night,” remembered Lerner, “I saw a woman come in with a piece of sheet music for Tatum to read. He wasn’t totally blind; he saw a little bit. She handed him this sheet music and he held it up to his face, right up to his nose, and scanned it up and down. He put the music aside and asked, ‘In what key?’”

Tatum was also much admired by classical pianists including Leopold Godowski and Sergei Rachmaninoff. According to Lerner, one of Tatum’s biggest fans was world-famous classical pianist Vladimir Horowitz. One time, Horowitz invited Tatum to his apartment in New York City and told the jazz pianist, “I’m working on an arrangement of ‘Tea For Two.’” Art sat down at Horowitz’ piano and completely dazzled Horowitz with an impromptu jazz version of “Tea For Two.” “How long have you played that arrangement,” asked Horowitz. Tatum replied, “Right now!”

Lerner also offered an insight to Tatum’s personality. “He had a thing about other pianists who had made it,” recalled Lerner, “and he was sometimes a little bitter. He would show his bitterness by just outclassing them completely.”

After playing with the Harry James, Charlie Barnet and Tommy Dorsey Orchestras and accompanying such singers as Dick Haymes and Frankie Laine, Lerner said, “Every pianist of any consequence I have ever come into contact with says he tried to pattern himself after Tatum. Nobody else could ever play like that! A person who isn’t a pianist would not know how impossible it is to do what he did. It was impossible!”

Other young Cleveland musicians were also attracted to Val’s. Trumpeter Bob Peck remembered going to Val’s with his friends to hear Tatum. Peck, who later played with the Glenn Miller, Billy Butterfield, Woody Herman and Claude Thornhill Orchestras, recalled, “It was quite a place, with sawdust on the floor and Tatum at the piano and various kinds of loose women around doing certain things to which I was exposed to early I guess.” With a smile, Peck said, “I once had the unmitigated gall to sit in with Tatum. When I look back on it, I think, ‘Oh, gosh, was I ever cheeky!’” Like almost everyone else who heard Tatum at Val’s in the Alley, Peck said he was “fractured” by Tatum’s piano playing.

Bobby Few, who grew up a few blocks from Val’s and later became a leading pianist in Europe, remembered he was too young to get in, but sat on the steps outside listening. “I was amazed,” said Few, “and hearing Art Tatum at Val’s really influenced me to continue in the path of jazz.”
couple of hours later, he said the guys were still playing – the same tune – with Tatum backing them up at full steam.

Mary Lou Williams and Tatum at Val’s

Jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, also quoted in Balliet’s book, recalled, “Whenever we were in Cleveland, I stayed close to Art Tatum, who worked there when he wasn’t in New York. When we had a day or two off, we played pinball machines in the afternoons and at night we went to Val’s, a little after-hours place, where we sometimes stayed until 11 in the morning.” She said, “Tatum played and they gave him $50.”

Williams said, “Tatum did everything the other pianists tried to do and couldn’t.” She added proudly, “He taught me how to hit my notes, how to control them without using pedals, and he showed me how to keep my fingers flat on the keys to get that clean tone. Of course, he didn’t show me anything; he just said, ‘Mary, you listen.’ But once I showed him something. Buck Washington of Buck and Bubbles had given me a little run in Pittsburgh which I used one night at Val’s. Tatum said, ‘What’s that run, Mary? Where’d you get that? Play it for me again please!’ I did. He developed that run. It covered just about the whole keyboard. He used it until the end of his life.”

A few years later, in 1942, Williams formed a group with fellow Pittsburgh native Art Blakey. It was the drummer’s first group as a leader after he left the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. The first gig for the Williams-Blakey group was at Benny Mason’s Farm, an African-American suburban retreat east of Cleveland. She later became a close friend of Cleveland pianist and composer Tadd Dameron.

Joe Howard’s memories of Tatum

Longtime Cleveland pianist Joe Howard was too young to hear Tatum play at Val’s in the Alley, but Howard was fascinated with Tatum’s playing when he was a teenager in the early 1940s. He later became a leading expert on Tatum’s technique.

After he graduated from John Adams High School in 1946, Howard went in the Army and was assigned to Fort Lee, New Jersey, close to New York City where his piano idol was astounding jazz musicians at clubs along Manhattan’s fabled 52nd Street. “He was playing in the Club Downbeat on 52nd Street,” recalled Howard. “Whenever I would get a night off, I would shoot down there and pay the admission charge and then, buy a beer like at nine o’clock in the evening and sip on the beer all night long just to hear him play.”

“One night,” said Howard, “I got up enough nerve to go get his autograph. I knew he was almost totally blind but I went up and introduced myself. I said, ‘May I have your autograph please, Mr. Tatum. I’m 19 years old.’ And he said, ‘Oh, yeah, baby!’ He pulled a stamp out of his pocket and an ink pad out of another pocket. And he went bam!! He had a stamp that said, ‘Art Tatum.’”

Rather than being insulted, Howard said, “I thought it was kind of neat and funny. I thought it showed maybe a humorous side of his genius.”

Years later, bassist Slam Stewart, who was playing with Tatum in New York, told Howard another story reflecting Tatum’s unusual personality. “He said they were sitting in a restaurant before a gig. They went to this restaurant all the time to eat before the job. There was a bad piano player there. Slam recalled, ‘I said to Art, “Why do we keep coming here and having dinner and listening to this bad piano player?” And he said, “Tatum got upset with me and said, “Don’t ever say that. He’s telling you the story of his life.”’

There was another story, told by the longtime music librarian at the NBC radio station in Cleveland. According to Howard, Freddy Wilson told him that Tatum, when he was young, auditioned for a job with the studio band at the station. But the station people listening couldn’t understand what he was doing. “They
were looking for someone at that time but they didn't care for the way he played. A few years later, the world-famous Tatum was playing piano solos for the NBC Radio Network from the WTAM studios.

In 1951, after Howard had gotten out of the Army, earned his bachelor of arts degree from Western Reserve University, and married Joan Baker, he and his then pregnant wife were sitting at the front table at Lindsay's Sky Bar at East 105th and Euclid in Cleveland where Tatum was playing. Howard said, Tatum "came in and started playing. He was going over the keys and ended a long run on the very top note of the piano. But, when he hit that note, there was a thud. The piano tuner had apparently removed the string. So what he did was make a whole symphony, if you will, utilizing that thud sound. It was fascinating to see how he just evolved it like that."

In the 1950s and '60s, Howard became one of Cleveland's most prolific and popular pianists - performing with a variety of jazz groups, on WTAM radio and Channel 5 television (WEWS-TV) and even soloing with the Cleveland Orchestra. In the late 1960s, Howard went back to school, got his masters degree from Kent State University, and became a professor of music at Cuyahoga Community College. In the 1970s, he got a doctorate from Case Western Reserve University. His dissertation topic was *The Improvisational Techniques of Art Tatum.* Howard said, "It was kind of an analysis of his style and his technique." Howard analyzed, in an academic manner, the creative genius of the music that flowed extemporaneously from Tatum's mind. "I listened to about 70-some percent of all of his recordings and did a chart on them. I evolved a way of addressing the various techniques. In the first part of the dissertation, I talked about his vocabulary, if you will, and kind of classified it. It was a labor of love."

Looking back, Howard agreed that you had to be a very good pianist to fully appreciate everything Tatum did at the piano. "Most pianists feel that he had this tremendous technical facility, the ability to move all over the keys, and there's a great deal of truth in that. But I found that his greatest contribution was his harmonic conception, substitute chords and extensions, ninths, thirteenths, elevenths, all cycles. And he was doing this in the '30s which, in a way, heralded what happened in the following period that we call the bebop period. They were picking up on all these harmonic directions and innovations. The difference is that Tatum played with the stride style; he didn't play with the bop conception of rhythm."

In February of 1992, Howard lectured during a celebration in Tatum's birth place, Toledo. Others taking part in the tribute included jazz critic Leonard Feather, broadcaster Hazen Schumacher, and jazz pianists Billy Taylor and Ramsey Lewis.
this side, from this wall all the way over. It was a makeshift bar made out of two-by-fours. He poured the beer from a keg. As he poured it, some would spill over onto a plate. He would drink that. That was his.”

Anderson remembered another employee of Val’s named “Scranch.” He served the beer and sometimes sang. Andy remembered one of the songs: “I can cross the ocean wide . . . I can cross the ocean wide,’ and when he went into his little dance, everybody would fall out.”

To the left of the bar, Andy pointed to the spot where Tatum’s piano sat. “It was an upright, one of those old-timers,” said Anderson, “but he liked the sound of it. He liked the tone.”

As we stood there visualizing Tatum playing, Andy could remember playing with Tatum. With almost a tear in his eye, Anderson said, “He was beautiful, unbelievable, so fast, just a natural.”

According to Anderson, Tatum never missed a note on that piano – even when someone else was playing it. “One time, he was sitting at the bar, playing cards and said, ‘That man (who was playing the piano) should use his third finger.’ After the man made a little run on the piano, Art looked up from his cards and announced, ‘He can’t use his third finger.’”

As we walked out the alley to Cedar Avenue, Andy remembered there was a bicycle shop nearby. He said, “When we’d leave here at about ten o’clock in the morning on a Sunday (after playing all night), we’d rent bicycles and ride them down Cedar Avenue.”

It must have been startling for passersby to see two grown men – one almost blind – riding bicycles down the street on a Sunday morning. But it was certainly not as startling as the surprise that many of the world’s greatest musicians got when they came to this little after-hours bootleg joint in an alley off Cleveland’s Cedar Avenue and first heard Tatum playing the piano.

A young neighbor remembers Val’s

John Mosely was one year old in 1934 when his family moved into the apartment building at 8607½ Cedar Avenue, virtually next door to Val’s in the Alley. He lived in the area until the early 1950s and remembered many details of his neighborhood.

Mosely recalled waking up in the morning and hearing the piano music from the after-hours joint that was one of at least six houses in the alley called Vienna Court.

“To enter Vienna Court,” he said, “you had to come in off of Cedar, on the little driveway. You went not too far into Vienna Court and then, you hung a left and the second house, entering Vienna Court, was where Val’s was.”

He said it was a small home where Milo Valentine sold beer after-hours and Tatum played the piano. As a young boy in the neighborhood, Mosely remembered going into Val’s from time to time. He said he remembered a pot-bellied, coal-fed stove. “The living room and dining room were one long room,” said Mosely. “I remember the two bedrooms and the kitchen were all to one side. The bar in the large room was against the wall on the right side.”

He remembered the piano that Tatum played. “It was an old upright, not like the grand pianos you see in the movies.”

As a boy playing in the neighborhood, Mosely heard Tatum’s piano frequently. “We used to play baseball up on the hill,” said Mosely, “and you could hear the music all over. You could hear the music out on Carnegie Avenue (a block away).”

Mosely also remembered seeing people driving their cars up that alley and then, as Ellington said in his autobiography, turn into another alley, Vienna Court, to get to the after-hours joint.

“Mr. Valentine,” said Mosely, “lived in a rooming house that was on Cedar right next to Bryant’s Gas Station. And he had a fascination for English Bulldogs. He had one that lived for a long time. The dog’s name was ‘Pal.’ He’d just waddle along and slobber all over everything. He was a typical English Bulldog, gentle. As a kid, you’d think, looking at that pug face, that he was mean. So you never bothered him. And Mr. Val had a huge solitaire diamond ring that he wore on his pinky
finger. And in later life, he got around with a cane.”

In the early 1940s, Mosely said Valentine closed Val’s in the Alley and opened a legitimate club called the Dawn Social Club out front on Cedar Avenue. “It was a big white-fronted building with red lettering – ‘Val’s Dawn Social Club.’ It had a long bar that went the length of the building.”

While he was running the Dawn Social Club, Mosely remembered Valentine bought himself a new car. “He never drove. He couldn’t drive. But he bought a blue 1950 Chrysler. I remember the big grill. And he had one of the men in the neighborhood, a fellow from down the street named Hershey, serve as his chauffeur. He drove him everywhere that he needed to go. But Val never did learn how to drive.”

As far as Mosely ever knew, Val never had any family in the area. After living in a rooming house down the street, he later moved into a suite of the apartment building where Mosely and his family lived and where Val’s new club was located.

“When he got cancer during his final days, he had no family to come and see him. When he died, the barmaid and the people in the neighborhood made arrangements for him.”

Mosely also recalled other landmarks nearby. A man nicknamed “Bama” owned the barbecue restaurant in a brick building on the north side of Cedar Avenue at East 86th. “And he got to be pretty good at it and moved into the apartment building next door where we lived.” According to Mosely, ‘Bama, who had moved to Cleveland from Alabama, and his family lived in a house that still stands in the alley. “Bama’s mother,” said Mosely, “was born a slave.”

When ‘Bama moved his barbecue, Mosely said men named Sims and Abbey opened the East End News in the brown brick building. “It was a very successful business,” said Mosely, “selling ice cream.” Next door, in the same building, “Mrs. Coleman had her religious music store.”

On the street level in the front of the apartment building next door (which was razed in the early 1960s) was a string of businesses: Bob Ellis’ Service Club, Norris’ Barbershop, Harry’s Pawn Shop and Christopher’s Grocery Store. In the next building, on the other side of the alley leading to Val’s in the Alley, were a poolroom, the Royal Tavern and Juanita’s Restaurant. Val’s house and most of the other houses in Vienna Court were torn down in the mid-1950s.

Tatum died at the age of 47 November 5, 1956 in Los Angeles. But the memories of his amazing playing continued for decades.

Because of those memories, Val’s in the Alley – Art Tatum’s home away from home – became Cleveland’s most legendary jazz spot.

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