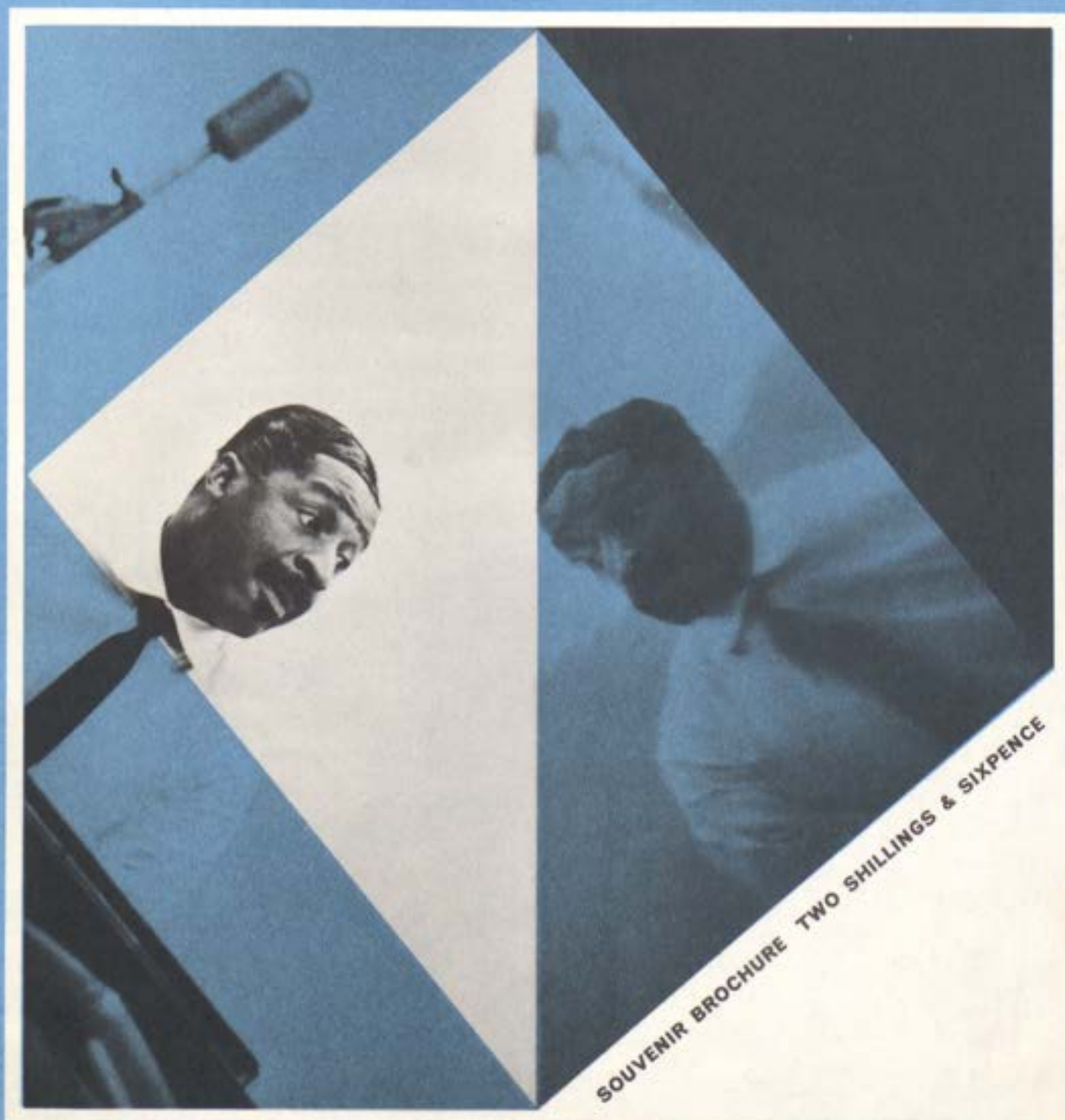


# ERROLL GARNER



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## **ERROLL GARNER**

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## I WHO IS ERROLL GARNER?

It remains one of the comforts of the age of reason that some things cannot be explained. Like the talents of Erroll Garner. Is it, you might well ask, fair?

Here is this man born, we read, into quite a conventional family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is like a super-Sheffield, full of steel, but with pretty strictly controlled smoke since they set about cleaning up the place. The family was bursting with piano-players. Father played; his elder brother played; his three sisters played. With that kind of family pressure, who could resist?

Well, Erroll Garner did. He wanted to be a baseball, not a piano-player. And though they pushed him at a teacher, he just wouldn't *learn*. Not *learn*, that is, in the usual sense of one-finger exercises, Piano Tutors, 'Chopsticks' and all that. Teachers apparently made little impression on him.

So what happens? By the age of seven he can play the piano well enough to hold his place in a group

called the Candy Kids, on radio. (They hadn't, presumably, got to the stage—now happily embalmed by Tom Wolfe—when they would have been called the Kandy Kids.) Not many years later he is playing on a riverboat. He winds up being the most technically astonishing of all jazz-and-popular pianists, a virtuoso of complete and inviolate idiosyncrasy, uncopied, in any real sense, because he is uncopiable: an immense artist. He doesn't, of course, read a note of music, yet he is also a composer of very good tunes, over a hundred of them, of which *Misty* is perhaps the summit. He puts them fresh on to a tape-recorder, and they're then transcribed.

All this is neither fair (in the view of a non-pianist who cannot begin to conceive how you achieve such command of the eighty-eight keys *naturally*) nor explicable. It is also, since I don't believe in fairy-tales either, almost too good to be true. But that, I fear, is the way it is. And the age of reason and science can do nothing to dispute or dissect it. It can only accept it. Erroll Garner is a mystery: a great talent who just happens to have happened.

The other thing you must accept about Erroll Garner is that he is Erroll Garner. That's not quite as cryptic as it sounds. I mean simply that he plays as he feels *he* wants to play, not as a regiment of latter-day pigeon-holers want him to play.

The situation has arisen thus. Garner first sprang to the attention of the world in the middle 1940s, playing very good jazz piano. Even then the individuality of his style was very marked. There may be those classic bop sides, *Cool Blues* and *Bird's Nest*, on which he and Charlie Parker appear together, but he was certainly not a *bop* pianist in the understood sense. His style, rooted in the Harlem 'stride' piano school of the 1920s, compounded so many elements that it was truly unique. Since those early days he has enriched and widened his approach so much that though his roots remain in jazz, it is quite inadequate to call him a brilliant jazz pianist. He is simply a brilliant pianist. Full stop.

Garner today is chameleon-like. He may swing like a steam-hammer through a version of a tune which everyone would say is jazz. (We can't *define* jazz, but we can recognise it, which is one of the great enigmas of our day and age.) But he will, during a concert, also indulge in rhapsodic passages which are more like Debussy than jazz. He will crack sly musical jokes on the keys. He will do all manner of things which jazz pianists pure and simple won't indulge in.

There is a body of opinion which says all this is sad; that Garner would be better being solely a jazz pianist; that he has accreted to himself too many moods and

messages. These are the pigeon-holers, who want their men labelled, immobile and stuck for ever in their appropriate slot. In the morgue, maybe?

About this particular controversy you must let the evidence of your own ears decide, but I have a few observations on the subject.

First, is a 'jazz pianist' to be allowed to be nothing other than a jazz pianist? Garner is now, more than ever, a tremendous *performer* in his own right. Few other pianists in the world of popular music can command an audience, virtually alone, for a full concert. He gives immense *pleasure*, whatever people want to label his music.

Second, it is perhaps as well for the health of jazz music that there are men like Garner whose most burning ambition is to *communicate* with the people to whom they play. I suspect that whole legions have been led to a love of jazz by way of Erroll Garner, and others of his kind. If he puts into his music elements which purists dismiss as non-jazz, then I will not object provided the artist is true to his own talent and his own musical persona. This—and it must be a matter of one's own judgment, since it is not susceptible of proof—I believe Erroll Garner to be.

Third, and last, in any critical approach to Garner we run up against that familiar brick wall of popularity and perfection. It seems at times that with some of the vinegar brigade it is almost a crime for a man to be too popular for too long. The legend of the misunderstood jazz genius dies hard. If Garner is popular, makes money, pulls audiences, the argument goes, isn't something wrong somewhere? It *can* be wrong, of course, but with Garner the answer is simply that he is very good indeed, that he goes on being very good, and that, praise heaven, public taste has in his case been enlightened enough to confirm his rating for almost twenty years. What, moreover, do you do when you've achieved a kind of perfection, as Garner has? You can only go on proving that you have—which makes some people say that one Garner concert is much like another. Which means, more or less, perfect. That, in my submission, we should be glad about, not mad about. It is only the ungreats who go plunging about in search of their identity. Garner has found his. And it is as near perfect as most listeners of open minds could wish for: pleasurable, individual, rich and many-faceted. Even I, an admirer, could sometimes dispense with his complex, bewildering introduction to tunes. But talent must be allowed its foibles. This is Erroll Garner, a superb musician, and his introductions are, as it were, his signature—a rather extravagant signature, full of flourishes. Take him or leave him. I take him. And enough of argument.



## II. WHAT IS ERROLL GARNER?

The man you will see before you is in his early forties. He is solidly built, only around 5 feet 2 inches. He props himself up on his piano stool with a pile of telephone directories. He has an almost Punch-and-Judy nose. He glows. Patent-leather hair, a smile that is rarely absent. He looks as if he's encouraging his audience to smile as well. He also seems at times, I think, to be having us on a touch. Well, I can take a joke. Garner's musical jokes are usually good ones.

'I see elderly people and kids and all types coming into the clubs, or wherever I play, and getting pleasure from my music,' he said once. 'I'm glad I stuck to my guns and didn't do it any other way.'

Or again, of his listeners: 'There's no sense taking them far out if you don't have any point of return. How can they tell when they've been "out" if they don't know where "in" is?'

This is part of the credo. But it's worth digging a little deeper into what makes up the Garner way of playing piano. I mentioned earlier that he has his roots in 'stride' piano: and this at once indicates two things about him. First, that the beat is primarily established in the bass by use of broad loping chords, and second that he is a two-handed player.

It's not surprising that the 'stride' men should have influenced him. Garner has said that his first ideas of piano-playing came from records. And players like Willie the Lion Smith, James P. Johnson and Fats Waller were very much the vogue around the time Garner was first finding his way into the piano. The world of the Lion was a world of rent-parties, long sessions in clubs, and pretty fierce competition in New York to establish oneself as the top piano man. If you slipped for a moment there was always someone else to take your place. Garner was not part of this world; Pittsburgh was some way from Harlem. But it was only to be expected that the influences should rub off.

Garner has, though, extended and expanded the 'stride' style pure and simple. His left hand, for instance, has come to be very distinctive. 'He has worked out a sound of his own, doing four beats in the left hand like a guitar,' as Mary Lou Williams, another fine pianist, said of his work in the 1940s. 'He often uses bass and drums, but can play alone and still promote a terrific beat.' Garner himself has explained that pumping left hand as dating back to early club work. 'Most places in Pittsburgh couldn't afford bass and



drums, so I played for all three of us.' He has also said: 'I was born left-handed. That may have something to do with the sound.'

His right hand does things which one doesn't expect in 'stride'. He may employ a scintillating single note style with it—a sound we have got very used to hearing in the modern school of jazz piano. The difference between Garner and the rather wearisomely similar single-finger school lies, however, in what his left hand is doing at the same time and also in what else he can do with his right hand.

He uses it for dazzling chorded sequences. He may peal his way through tremolo passages. He loves to use slow *rubato* for the opening of a ballad before nimbly swinging off into a thundering piece of jazz. He will leap-frog through octave chords. He sometimes tinkles repetitively in high register (not my favourite Garner habit). It is an incredible kind of display which uses the piano *orchestrally*, to its fullest range. 'There's those 88 keys,' he said. 'The guy who made the piano must have had something in mind and I've always felt it was to be as full as possible. If I had 13 fingers I'd be trying for more . . . always trying to get a band sound, that's what I'm working for.'

He is, as I said, a two-handed player—and sometimes it sounds like eight hands. He seems concerned to pour into his playing all that men have ever heard from the piano: boogie, blues, Johnson, Waller, Brahms, Monk, Tatum, Debussy. His moods, like the keys he plays in, are ever-changing. He will tinkle, poke, slap, punch, roll or rumble according to how he feels. He is a completely natural musician. No one taught him, he could teach no one, for he is himself.

His sense of swing, the rhythmic feel he engenders, is overpowering. A favourite trick is his 'lagging' style, where the melody that's coming from the right hand is a little behind the rhythm he's setting up with his left. Few other pianists (Thelonious Monk is one) have quite his gift for being able to displace the beat, setting up that kind of tingling tension which is one of the hallmarks of jazz. As a rhythmic player he is purely delightful. 'Okay,' he said, 'I can't read music, but there's one thing I can do. I can swing. Whatever I play, whatever tempo, you can tap your feet to it. The harmony I just hear and feel as my own. Things I see and hear every day, I combine in any music. The sound is the way I adjust myself to living in a particular city at a particular time.'

He is such a barnstorming swinger that accompanists might seem superfluous. But Garner has had Eddie Calhoun (bass) and Kelly Martin (drums) with him for a long time—well over a decade. 'If they're not on the ball, if they think they've got what I'm playing, I

suddenly change and they're lost. It tricks them into being on the ball.'

Garner treats his audiences rather like this too. It is a fact that he never plays to 'programme'. What you hear is rather unpremeditated. Tunes crop up as they come to him (he allegedly began one famous record session with a perfect take of a number he and his partners had never played together before) and he is one of the genuine jazz improvisers. Improvisation is his art. And within the tunes he chooses, he will perform a blinding series of acrobatics. First, perhaps, will come a dreamy floating introduction—these impressionistic sketches tend often to become compositions in their own right. Then will come a thumping in-tempo passage, the melody stated, explored, turned upside down and inside out. He may catch you with half a dozen false endings and, with the tension at its height, suddenly slap out a bass chord. Cut-off. Finish.

It is teasing, I agree. But it is also witty. Garner is a great and natural *lyrical* player, in one sense a sentimentalist. He stops that becoming a drag by the sheer humour and cheek he injects into his playing. It makes, to me, a pleasant unpredictable amalgam—even if some critics now say that the unpredictability has become predictable. Garner must sometimes feel he can't win.

What else is there about the style of this unorthodox, free-wheeling showman? A few more pointers illuminate the man. Listen to the *kind* of tunes he plays. He takes his material from the very best composers of popular music. A Garner programme is a blinding fantasia of Gershwin, Rodgers, Kern, Cole Porter and a few others, himself included. And whatever elaborations he may add to their tunes, the feeling and respect for the *melody* is always present. Garner believes in what one might call the enjoyability factor in music. Good tunes are good tunes, and he wants us to savour them.

Garner also plays only one concert a night. He has explained the reasoning behind this. 'I work hard on a concert. I perspire a lot. Ever seen Louis Armstrong perspire? Well, that's how I go. When I'm through, my shirt and my clothes are soggy. I can't do that twice a night. If an artist does this, against his better judgment, both shows are liable to be below par.'

Finally it is worth quoting something which he said about the *naturalness* of his gift—the point at which these notes started. 'I had nothing to do with it, at the beginning. It was a gift from God. That's the only way I can explain it. I've always taken that gift seriously. It isn't enough to be just blessed with a gift. You've got to take it and develop it. That's what I've tried to do.'



### III. WHERE WAS ERROLL GARNER?

The biography has already partly been filled in. Born June 15, 1923. Early days in Pittsburgh, where Dodo Marmarosa was a schoolmate at Westinghouse High School, at which emporium of culture Garner played tuba, organ and trumpet as well as piano. Local bands in his teens, then to New York City at the age of 18. There he began playing in clubs on 52nd Street, which was the place for jazz in the early 1940s. Recognition came to him neither particularly slowly nor particularly fast. Fairly early he got a rave review in *Down Beat*. 'The only two-handed player since Fats Waller,' said the headline. One thing he wouldn't do was to drop his own style and chase after the bop image. 'When you talk about greatness,' he has said, 'you talk about Art Tatum and Bud Powell. But I'm me. I'm just playing something that appeals to my ear and, I hope, to the public's too. Years ago, some of the guys would say to me, "Why don't you change your style, pick up the bop? With all your stuff, it would be crazy, man!"

But I couldn't do that. I got to feel what I'm playing.' By 1945 he had made his first 'official' recordings—early Garner recordings still seem to sell very well—and gradually he established himself. There was a two-year spell on the West Coast; a trip to Paris to play in the Jazz Festival there in 1949, followed by a short stay; the first solo concerts, including one at the Town Hall, New York, in 1950. And all the time he was recording prolifically on a free-lance basis with many companies. Perhaps too prolifically, in fact, and not always in the right environments for him to produce his best work. Later he was to learn to be more selective. He was, indeed, embattled for years during the 1950s in a suit with a major record company to establish his right to bar the issue of recorded material he considered unsatisfactory. Garner today is a wiser man and makes sure that he gives his O.K. before discs come out. His *Concert By The Sea* LP, issued in 1963, has topped the million in world sales. He was the first jazz musician to win a Gold Disc, which is the award for such million-sellers.

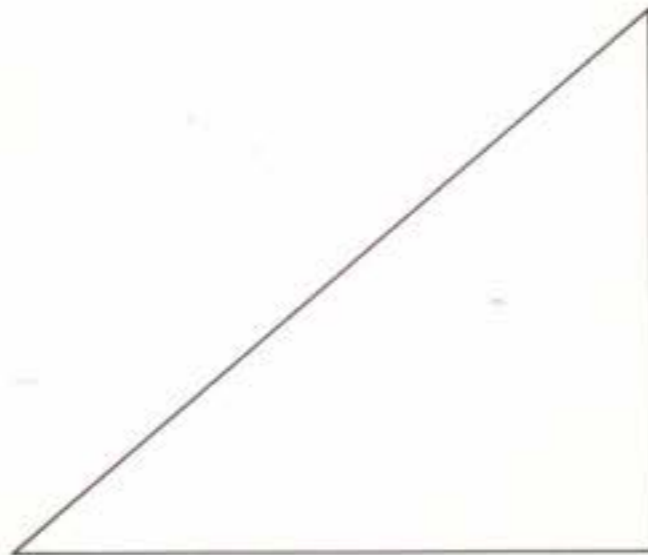
During the 1950s Garner developed as a concert performer to the point where this side of his work predominated. Sol Hurok, the impresario, signed him in 1956, aiming to promote the concert side still further; in 1957-58 he made his first European tour. He has been whirling round the world ever since. It is sad, perhaps, that we will probably never hear him in a club context in Britain. But that's show-business: the economics of show-business, anyway.

Garner stands today at the top, of course. And I have made great play in these notes of the stylistic idiosyncrasy of this born entertainer and natural musician. Perhaps this blurs the fact that his tastes are catholic indeed; that he listens with appreciation to the many directions jazz has been taking in the last few years. He goes his own way, but he knows it is not the only one. It seems a pleasant trait in a man that he is open-minded like this—as it is also pleasant to know that Garner is a car buff, that he likes his golf and dabbling in interior decorating and doing his own cooking, especially Creole style, and all the other personalia which there is no real space to set out here. Listen, as one example, to what he has to say about Ornette Coleman, a recent and controversial visitor to Britain:

'Coleman's sax knocks me out. It helps to brainwash me for different things' (which means, one gathers, that it helps him keep an open mind). 'But I'm like a loner. Not influenced by anyone else. That's what I don't do.'



#### IV. WHO LIKES ERROLL GARNER?



It has been my opinion largely that you've been listening to in these notes. But I don't ask simply that you should take my word for it. Garner has collected accolades from all over. The words of many people who have spoken about him are rather more important than mine. These are some of them:

'Most pianists play *at* the piano. Erroll Garner plays the piano.'—*Duke Ellington.*

'Erroll Garner has the greatest freedom of any pianist in contemporary music. He has the ability to go as far out as you can get and still get back.'—*Teddy Wilson.*

'Erroll is the only post-war pianist who has the feeling and the power of communication of the earlier greats.'—*Ben Webster.*

'Garner has great feeling. He is to the piano what Billie Holiday was to the vocal.'—*Mary Lou Williams.*

'I truly envy Garner. Mine is the art of interpretation or re-creation. Garner's is the art of improvisation.'—*Isaac Stern.*

'There are only a couple of pianists who can really swing without a rhythm section, which is the real test. Erroll Garner is one of those rare ones.'—*Earl Hines.*

That last comment is really the one for me. Because of all the *other* pianists, Hines is the one I would take as the man to swing like crazy without bass and drums, as he is also (like Garner) a truly *orchestral* piano-player, taking the instrument to its ultimate limits. So his words matter—very, very much.

In the end one grows tired of disputation. Some may prefer the Garner of the 1950s to the Garner of the 1960s, and vice-versa; maybe some people like him at his jazziest, others when he is more quirkily rhapsodic. But let it go. It must be a sour soul indeed who can't get enjoyment out of the magical, very personal music Garner creates. There is, surely, more than enough in the man who is playing tonight for everyone.

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