

Erroll Garner: Joyful Jazz, Sui Generis

In Episode Five, we will continue our effort to focus on music that is refreshing, upbeat, fun, and an escape from our relative confinement and (to borrow an apt term from the experimental compositions of John Cage) “indeterminacy.” Our subject today is Erroll Garner (1921 - 1977), whose piano style is unique to the point of being sui generis. No pianist could play “like Erroll Garner,” or “in the style of Garner” without being accused of outright imitation. He straddles the big band aesthetic — which he recreates on the keyboard with the antiphonal interplay of his two hands — and the sinewy lines and off-beat rhythms of bebop in his right hand. Garner conjures an unlikely but accessible brew that leaves listeners high on music.

The story of my discovering Garner begins in an upscale neighborhood of Albany, New York during my junior high school days. One of my favorite family trips was driving from our home in West Hartford, CT to my Uncle Frank's spacious and plushly furnished house on Marion Avenue in suburban Albany. We visited the Albany Lyons often. Their house sat on top of a grassy hill; my anticipation became palpable as we pulled into the driveway behind the windswept tail fins of my uncle's Cadillac.

Our cousins were part of the attraction at the house in Albany for me and my younger brother, a bad boy named Mitch. Our older cousin Ken, four years my senior, stood about 6-foot 4 and was a basketball star at the Albany Academy (and later on at Trinity college). The house was full of sports gear and trophies, and Ken was (and still is) a generous, affectionate guy who is everybody's friend and was happy to play ping-pong with me and Mitch or to take us to the country club for a swim. His sister Susie was an excitable teenager just my age, a time of life when boys and girls could begin to talk to each other without awkwardness. She loved animals of all types, and everyone thought she would be a veterinarian. As an adult, she lived in a rambling rural home with two Irish wolfhounds, several cats, goats, and a donkey — along with a husband and children. Uncle Frank and Aunt Helen were delighted to give us kids the run of their very large house. The family's slobbering boxer, Bo, followed us everywhere, always wanting to be included. What child could resist an environment like this one?

But my favorite spot in the house was up the stairs from the front door leading immediately into the capacious living room. A heavy wooden piece of furniture, standing about waist high, contained a record player and a hi-fi speaker behind ornate grill work. Next to the record player was a long shelf of the new Long Playing records (known as LPs) issued by the Columbia label, for whom my uncle was a wholesale distributor.

Columbia's impressive jazz catalog included the recordings of Dave Brubeck, Art Tatum, Duke Ellington and many more well-known artists, but the record on my uncle's shelf that thrilled me most of all was “Concert by the Sea,” a live recording by the pianist Erroll Garner, accompanied by Eddie Calhoun on bass and Denzil Best on drums. Recorded in Carmel, CA, the concert took place in a hall with poor acoustics on a second-rate piano. There had been no plan to record it but Garner's agent, Martha Glaser, found a tape recorder on the premises and decided to turn it on. The quality of

the playing, all of it spontaneously improvised, made this record the most important of his career.

Garner was a self-taught pianist with the talent of a prodigy. Had he been a white child of a well-to-do family, he might have been sent to a prestigious music school and had a totally different type of career. However, he did not even receive piano lessons but two of his older siblings did. Errol, as a young child, was able to play everything the piano teacher played after hearing it, without reading any music. In fact, his biographers claim, as did Garner himself, that he never learned to read music. In his biography, there is a report that he went to a classical concert by a Soviet pianist, Emil Gilels, and then came home and played portions of the what he had just heard from memory.

As a performer, Garner was unique in many ways. Standing only 5'2", he sat on one or more phone books in order to reach the keyboard. He would often make grunting guttural sounds while playing, which was really a kind of "singing long" with his playing, and he sometimes improvised lengthy (minutes long) introductions to the pieces he was going to play and led into the song itself in a way that makes the listener smile with delight. He seems to "strum" the piano with his left hand in an even four beats to the measure, as if he were playing a guitar. His right-hand melody line is so heavily syncopated with the left hand, it seems like there were two pianos involved. Despite the unusual context, his playing swings like an entire band, and his accents between melodic phrases punctuate his sound like the horn section of a big band. He is fond of thick, dissonant chords which sound smashed together, as songwriter Mose Allison put it in one of his lyrics, "like a busted fender."

Garner's improvised lines are often singable, fun, uplifting, happy, sometimes humorous, often quoting phrases from other songs or classical themes. He is such a fountain of melodic ideas, one would think he could write tunes in five or ten minutes, much like Fats Waller did. But he rarely went back to canonize them as compositions. One exception is his tune "Misty," which is a jazz standard but also a pop hit thanks to a recording by Johnny Mathis which introduced the song into mainstream culture.

Uncle Frank was thrilled that I was listening to his records, which I was convinced he rarely did. I was not surprised when he told me to take any of them I wanted back to West Hartford with me. I took some Dave Brubeck and Art Tatum disks, but "Concert by the Sea" was first on my list and the one I listened to the most. My enthusiasm for Garner's joyful jazz was not unique. "Concert by the Sea" was one of the earliest "crossover" records — one that appealed to jazz and popular audiences alike. Released in 1955, it sold a million copies by 1958 and guaranteed Erroll Garner a profitable career. His affable and idiosyncratic brand of music never changed, but not because he was clinging to commercial success; it was just the way he played piano.

See the following page for links to Erroll Garner's music.

Link 1: "I Get A Kick Out of You" (Cole Porter) from a live concert in Brussels in 1964.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPxsqXhIhrg>

Obviously, Garner gets a kick out of playing piano. What I admire so much is the inventive improvising, the impressive independence of his left and right hands, which seem to be playing in different time zones, and the humor and singable ideas he conjures with such ease. The way he looks over to his band mates with a relaxed smile says a lot about how much fun he is having. Listen to the punctuation of dense chords between phrases it is harmonic call-and-response to the melody capturing the big band style of orchestration.

Link 2: "Just One of Those Things" (1964) (Cole Porter)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU2PqA7dRo8>

This track, even better musically than Link 1, is from the same concert. It's a perfectly conceived improvisation, balanced, varied, and sprinkled with esoteric quotes, like the opening phrases of Ellington's "Don't get Around Much Any More," (1:47 - 1:50).

Link 3: "Lullaby of Birdland" (George Shearing)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1QUZV-O_oU

It's interesting to contrast Garner's version with the version by Shearing (its composer) which we heard in Episode 1 of One Track Mind. Garner injects a dissonance into the melody itself, giving the piece an entirely different character.

Link 4: "The Shadow of Your Smile," "I Can't Get Started," and "Blue Moon" (14 min.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9dAvbm8i8Y>

One of his lengthy and creative introductions leads into a Latin version of the tune accompanied by a conga player. Next in this 15-minute set is "I Can't Get Started," prefaced by an introduction that is a composition on its own.

Link 5: "Caravan" (Ellington) from Concert By the Sea (1955)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEN8pbFDMcE>

This track from "Concert by the Sea" will show you what all the excitement is about. The rhythmic pattern established by Garner's left-hand seems impossible to maintain with the very different fleetness of the right hand. His inventiveness is on full display and you can hear the live audience's enthusiasm. The full album is accessible beginning at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxVGzuopnow&list=PLd06FP4HjGQWM3aMic-OdKsMQ5Je5YDYW>