

## ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twenty-fourth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

### **ERROLL GARNER**

Erroll began playing piano by the time he was three. Never had a lesson, totally self-taught, he played by ear his whole life. He never learned to read or write music, probably because it was never a necessity for him. He developed a style which used steady left hand chord rhythms, almost like the strumming of a guitar on every beat. Then he was free to improvise with his right hand, often playing the melody with his thumb and little finger, an octave apart. Listen to his composition, *Misty*, as an example.

By age seven, Erroll was appearing on Pittsburgh's radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh. By age 11, he was playing on the Allegheny riverboats. At 14 in 1937, he joined local saxophonist Leroy Brown's band.

Because of his inability to read music, the Pittsburgh musician's union initially refused Garner membership (the union eventually relented and made him an honorary member in 1956). Garner had excellent recall of music he heard. He once attended a concert by the Russian classical pianist Emil Gilels. It's reported that Erroll, upon returning to his apartment, was able to play most of the music he heard that day simply from memory.

Since Garner was barely five feet tall, he performed sitting on multiple telephone directories (except when playing in New York City, where just one Manhattan phone book would suffice). Like vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, he was also known for his vocalizations (often grunting, although he played effortlessly), which can be heard on many of his recordings. Because Garner could not write down his musical ideas, he used to record them on tape, to be later transcribed by others. Just as the title of Atticus Brady's documentary film proclaims: *Erroll Garner: No One Can Hear You Read*.

After he moved to New York in the early forties, Garner got noticed by the record labels and made his first recordings. By 1950, Garner had established himself an international reputation.

Although Erroll started out as a stride piano player, his style later changed to the guitar strumming left-hand style for which he became famous. But good news, bad news --the good news is that it made him famous. The bad news is that, according to his critics, the style that made him famous also restricted his genius.



When he appeared on "The Tonight Show", Johnny Carson asked Erroll what made his music so recognizable. Garner couldn't answer, so Carson asked his band's pianist, Ross Tomkins, who simply replied "Happiness." Although not strict musical terminology, that answer was quite appropriate for a musician who once released an album called "The Most Happy Piano." But as a consequence of his unusual style that really doesn't neatly fit into a particular jazz category, Garner, who was probably the most popular jazz pianist of the 1950s, is nearly forgotten today.

In 1954, the Erroll Garner Trio released the instrumental *Misty* via Garner's *Contrasts* album (EmArcy label, 1954). It never was a top hit, but one year later Johnny Burke penned the lyrics, creating the song we know today, when Johnny Mathis popularizing the vocal version with his million-selling recording in 1959. There are several variations of the origin of *Misty*. One says Erroll was sitting on an airplane waiting for take-off and looking out the window into the mist and observing a rainbow; another has him in the air flying from Chicago to New York; and a third simply says he was in a plane thinking about his wife. Regardless, as a musician who could neither read nor write music, he hummed the tune to himself repeatedly, while he hurried home to play his melody on the piano for later transcription.

Interestingly, Erroll had a feeling that the melody was not an original thought, but that he simply recollected the tune which he had heard elsewhere. But *Misty* turned out not to be an imitation as Garner feared it could be, but rather a source for imitation by others. Many others! The song has been performed by hundreds of instrumentalists and vocalists. *Misty* has become Garner's best-known composition. ASCAP named it as one of the 25

most performed standards of the 20th Century, and no other song published since 1954 has been recorded by more jazz artists except for Ellington's "Satin Doll" (1958), which also was originally recorded as an instrumental in 1953.

One of my favorite movies, the thriller *Play Misty for Me* (1971), has Clint Eastwood starring and making his directorial debut. Eastwood plays a late-night disc jockey that has a casual affair with one of his listeners, played by Jessica Walters. She in turn becomes his stalker, calling his request line several times each night, saying in her throaty voice, "Play *Misty* for me."

My favorite compilation is Garner's 1955 live album *Concert by the Sea* was a best-selling jazz album in its day. This recording of a performance at the Sunset Center, a former school in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, was made using relatively primitive sound equipment, but is still worth a good listen. It's available on Amazon as an audio CD (April 14, 1987) on the SBME label, ASIN: B003W77TPC.

Born June 15, 1921, Erroll Louis Garner succumbed to a coronary January 2, 1977 at only age 55. Fourteen years later, Garner's version of *Misty* was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1991, bringing his genius to a whole new generation of Jazz enthusiasts.

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