

Oscar Peterson



Oscar Emmanuel Peterson (August 15, 1925 – December 23, 2007) was a Canadian jazz pianist and composer. He was called the "*Maharaja of the keyboard*" by Duke Ellington, but simply "O.P." by his friends. He released over 200 recordings, won eight Grammy Awards, and received numerous other awards and honors. He is considered to have been one of the greatest jazz pianists and played thousands of concerts worldwide in a career lasting more than 60 years.

Biography

Peterson was born to immigrants from the West Indies; his father worked as a porter for Canadian Pacific Railway. Peterson grew up in the neighborhood of Little Burgundy in Montreal, Quebec. It was in this predominantly black neighborhood that he found himself surrounded by the jazz culture that flourished in the early 20th century. At the age of five, Peterson began honing his skills with the trumpet and piano. However, a bout of tuberculosis when he was seven prevented him from playing the trumpet again, and so he directed all his attention to the piano. His father, Daniel Peterson, an amateur trumpeter and pianist, was one of his first music teachers, and his sister Daisy taught young Oscar classical piano. Young Oscar was persistent at practicing scales and classical études daily, and thanks to such arduous practice he developed his virtuosity.

As a child, Peterson also studied with Hungarian-born pianist Paul de Marky, a student of István Thomán, who was himself a pupil of Franz Liszt, so his training was predominantly based on classical piano. Meanwhile he was captivated by traditional jazz and learned several ragtime pieces and especially the boogie-woogie. At that time Peterson was called "the Brown Bomber of the Boogie-Woogie".

At the age of nine Peterson played piano with control that impressed professional musicians. For many years his piano studies included four to six hours of practice daily. Only in his later years did he decrease his daily practice to just one or two hours. In 1940, at fourteen years of age, Peterson won the national music competition organized by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. After that victory, he dropped out of school and became a professional pianist working for a weekly radio show, and playing at hotels and music halls.

Some of the artists who influenced Peterson's music during the earlier type of years were Teddy Wilson, Nat "King" Cole, James P. Johnson and Art Tatum, to whom many tried to compare Peterson in later years. One of his first exposures to Tatum's musical talents came early in his teen years when his father played a recording of Tatum's "Tiger Rag" for him, and Peterson was so intimidated by what he heard that he became disillusioned about his own playing, to the extent of refusing to play the piano at all for several weeks. In his own words, "Tatum scared me to death," and Peterson was "never cocky again" about his mastery at the piano. Tatum was a model for Peterson's musicianship during the 1940s and 1950s. Tatum and Peterson eventually became good friends, although Peterson was always shy about being compared with Tatum and rarely played the piano in Tatum's presence.

Peterson also credited his sister — a piano teacher in Montreal who also taught several other Canadian jazz musicians—with being an important teacher and influence on his career. Under his sister's tutelage, Peterson expanded into classical piano training and broadened his range while mastering the core classical pianism from scales to preludes and fugues by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Building on Tatum's pianism and aesthetics, Peterson also absorbed Tatum's musical influences, notably from piano concertos by Sergei Rachmaninoff. Rachmaninoff's harmonizations, as well as direct quotations from his 2nd Piano Concerto, are thrown in here and there in many recordings by Peterson, including his work with the most familiar formulation of the Oscar Peterson Trio, with bassist Ray Brown and guitarist Herb Ellis. During the 1960s and 1970s Peterson made numerous trio recordings highlighting his piano performances that reveal more of his eclectic style that absorbed influences from various genres of jazz, popular and classical music.

Norman Granz

An important step in Peterson's career was joining impresario Norman Granz's labels (especially Verve) and Granz's "Jazz at the Philharmonic" project. Granz discovered Peterson in a peculiar manner. As the impresario was being taken to Montreal airport by cab, the radio was playing a live broadcast of Peterson at a local night club. Granz was so smitten by what he heard that he ordered the driver to take him to the club so that he could meet the pianist. In 1949, Granz introduced Peterson at a Carnegie Hall Jazz at the Philharmonic show in New York.

So was born a lasting relationship and Granz remained Peterson's manager for most of his career. This was more than a managerial relationship; Peterson praised Granz for standing up for him and other black jazz musicians in the segregationist south of the 1950s and 1960s. For example, in the documentary video *Music in the Key of Oscar*, Peterson tells how Granz stood up to a gun-toting southern policeman who wanted to stop the trio from using "white-only" taxis.

In the course of his career, Peterson developed a reputation as a technically brilliant and melodically inventive jazz pianist and became a regular on Canadian radio from the 1940s. His name was already recognized in the United States. However, his 1949 debut at Carnegie Hall was uncredited; owing to union restrictions, his appearance could not be billed. Through Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic he was able to play with the major jazz artists of the time.

Duets

Peterson made numerous duo performances and recordings with bassists Ray Brown, Sam Jones, and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, guitarists Joe Pass, Irving Ashby, Herb Ellis, and Barney Kessel, pianists Count Basie, Herbie Hancock, Benny Green, Oliver Jones, and Keith Emerson, trumpeters Clark Terry and Louis Armstrong, and many other important jazz players. His 1950s duo recordings with Ray Brown mark the formation of one of the longest lasting partnerships in the history of jazz.

According to pianist/educator Mark Eisenman, some of Peterson's best playing was as an understated accompanist to singer Ella Fitzgerald and trumpeter Roy Eldridge.

Trio

Peterson redefined the jazz trio by bringing the musicianship of all three members to the highest level. The trio with Ray Brown and Herb Ellis was, in his own words, "the most stimulating" and productive setting for public performances as well as in studio recordings. In the early 1950s, Peterson began performing with Ray Brown and Charlie Smith as the Oscar Peterson Trio. Shortly afterward the drummer Smith was replaced by guitarist Irving Ashby, formerly of the Nat King Cole Trio. Ashby, who was a swing guitarist, was soon replaced by Kessel. Kessel tired of touring after a year, and was succeeded by Ellis. As Ellis was white, Peterson's trios were racially integrated, a controversial move at the time that was fraught with difficulties with segregationist whites and blacks.

Oscar Peterson at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival is widely regarded as the landmark album in Peterson's career, and one of the most influential trios in jazz. Their last recording, *On the Town* with the Oscar Peterson Trio, recorded live at the Town Tavern in Toronto, captured a remarkable degree of emotional as well as musical understanding between three players. All three musicians were equal contributors involved in a highly sophisticated improvisational interplay. When Ellis left the group in 1958, Peterson and Brown believed they could not adequately replace Ellis. Ellis was replaced by drummer Ed Thigpen in 1959. Brown and Thigpen worked with Peterson on his albums *Night Train* and *Canadiana Suite*. Brown and Thigpen left in 1965 and were replaced by bassist Sam Jones and drummer Louis Hayes (and later, drummer Bobby Durham). The trio performed together until 1970. In 1969 Peterson recorded *Motions and Emotions*, featuring orchestral arrangements of pop songs such as The Beatles' "Yesterday" and "Eleanor Rigby". In the fall of 1970, Peterson's trio released the album *Tristeza on Piano*. Jones and Durham left in 1970.

In the 1970s Peterson formed another trio with guitarist Pass and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen on bass. This trio emulated the success of the 1950s trio with Brown and Ellis, gave acclaimed performances at numerous festivals, and made best-selling recordings, most notably *The Trio*, which won the 1974 Grammy for Best Jazz Performance by a Group, and the 1978 double album recorded live in Paris. In 1974 Oscar added British drummer Martin Drew, and this quartet toured and recorded extensively worldwide. Pass said in a 1976 interview: "The only guys I've heard who come close to total mastery of their instruments are Art Tatum and Peterson."

Quartet

A quartet was a less permanent setting for Peterson, after the trio or duo, as it was hard to find equally powerful musicians available for a tightly knit arrangement with him. After the loss of Ellis his next trio eventually consisted of a drummer instead of a guitarist — first Gene Gammage for a brief time, then Thigpen. In this group Peterson became the dominant soloist. Later members of the group were Louis Hayes, Bobby Durham, Ray Price, Sam Jones, George Mraz, Martin Drew and Lorne Lofsky.

Peterson often formed a quartet by adding a fourth player to his existing trios. He was open to experimental collaborations with jazz stars, such as saxophonist Ben Webster, trumpeter Clark Terry, and vibraphonist Milt Jackson among others. In 1961, the Peterson trio with Jackson recorded the album *Very Tall*.

Further career

From the late 1950s, when Peterson gained worldwide recognition as one of the leading pianists in jazz, he played in a variety of settings: solo, duo, trio, quartet, small bands, and big bands. However, his solo piano recitals, as well as his solo piano recordings were rare, until he chose to make a series of solo albums titled *Exclusively for My Friends*. These solo piano sessions, made for the Musik Produktion Schwarzwald (MPS) label, were Peterson's response to the emergence of such stars as Bill Evans and McCoy Tyner.

Some cognoscenti assert that Peterson's best recordings were made for MPS in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For some years subsequently he recorded for Granz's Pablo Records after the label was founded in 1973. In the 1990s and 2000s he recorded several albums accompanied by a combo for Telarc.

In the 1980s he played successfully in a duo with pianist Herbie Hancock. In the late 1980s and 1990s, after a stroke, Peterson made performances and recordings with his protégé Benny Green.

Composer and teacher

Peterson wrote pieces for piano, for trio, for quartet and for big band. He also wrote several songs, and made recordings as a singer. Probably his best-known compositions are "Canadiana Suite" and "Hymn to Freedom", the latter composed in the 1960s and inspired by the U.S. civil rights movement.

Peterson taught piano and improvisation in Canada, mainly in Toronto. With associates, he started and headed the Advanced School of Contemporary Music in Toronto for five years during the 1960s, but it closed because concert touring called him and his associates away, and it did not have government funding. Later, he mentored the York University jazz program and was the Chancellor of the entire university for several years in the early 1990s. He also published his original jazz piano etudes for practice. However, he asked his students to study the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, especially *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Goldberg Variations, and *The Art of Fugue*, considering these piano pieces essential for every serious pianist. Pianists Benny Green and Oliver Jones were among his students.

Stroke, later years and death

Peterson had arthritis since his youth, and in later years could hardly button his shirt. Never slender, his weight increased to 125 kg (276 lb), hindering his mobility. He had hip replacement surgery in the early 1990s. Although the surgery was successful, his mobility was still inhibited. Somewhat later, in 1993, Peterson suffered a serious stroke that weakened his left side and sidelined him for two years. Also in 1993 incoming Prime Minister and longtime Peterson fan and friend Jean Chrétien offered Peterson the position of Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, but according to Chrétien he declined, citing the health problems from his recent stroke.

After the stroke, Peterson recuperated for about two years. He gradually regained mobility and some control of his left hand. However, his virtuosity was never restored to the original level, and his playing after his stroke relied principally on his right hand. In 1995 he returned to public performances on a limited basis, and also made several live and studio recordings for Telarc. In 1997 he received a Grammy for Lifetime Achievement and an International Jazz Hall of Fame Award. Canadian politician, friend, and amateur pianist Bob Rae contends that "a one-handed Oscar was better than just about anyone with two hands".

In 2003, Peterson recorded the DVD *A Night in Vienna* for Verve, with Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen (NHØP), [REDACTED] and Martin Drew. He continued to tour the U.S. and Europe, though maximally one month a year, with a couple of days' rest between concerts to recover his strength. His accompanists consisted of [REDACTED] Wakenius (guitar), NHØP or David Young (bass) and Alvin Queen (drums).

Peterson's health declined rapidly in 2007. He had to cancel his performance at the 2007 Toronto Jazz Festival and his attendance at a June 8, 2007, Carnegie Hall all-star performance in his honor, owing to illness. On December 23, 2007, Peterson died of kidney failure at his home in Mississauga, Ontario. He left seven children, his fourth wife Kelly, and their daughter, Celine (born 1991).

Awards and Recognition

Musical awards and recognition

Begone Dull Care is an abstract film presentation of Peterson's music, directed by Norman McLaren and Evelyn Lambart, and released in 1949 by the National Film Board of Canada.

His work earned him eight Grammy awards over the years and he was elected to the Canadian Music Hall of Fame in 1978. He also belongs to the Juno Awards Hall of Fame and the Canadian Jazz and Blues Hall of Fame.

Peterson received the first Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award from Black Theatre Workshop (1986), Roy Thomson Award (1987), a Toronto Arts Award for lifetime achievement (1991), the Governor General's Performing Arts Award (1992), the Glenn Gould Prize (1993), the award of the International Society for Performing Artists (1995), the Loyola Medal of Concordia University (1997), the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (1997), the Praemium Imperiale World Art Award (1999), the UNESCO Music Prize (2000), the Toronto Musicians' Association Musician of the Year award (2001), and an honorary LLD from the University of the West Indies (2006).

In 1999, Concordia University in Montreal renamed their Loyola-campus concert hall Oscar Peterson Concert Hall in his honor.

In 2005, Peterson celebrated his 80th birthday at the HMV flagship store in Toronto, where a crowd of about 200 gathered to celebrate with him. Longtime admirer and fellow Canadian Diana Krall sang "Happy Birthday" to him and also performed a vocal version of one of Peterson's songs, "When Summer Comes". The lyrics for this version were written by Elvis Costello, Krall's husband. Canada Post unveiled a commemorative postage stamp in Peterson's honor. The event was covered by a live radio broadcast by Toronto jazz station JAZZ.FM.

Peterson received the BBC-Radio Lifetime Achievement Award, London, England.

"Technique is something you use to make your ideas listenable", he once told jazz writer Len Lyons. "You learn to play the instrument so you have a musical vocabulary, and you practice to get your technique to the point you need to express yourself, depending on how heavy your ideas are."

"Some may criticize Peterson for not advancing, for finding his niche and staying with it for an entire career, but while he may not be the most revolutionary artist in jazz, the documentary *Music in the Key of Oscar* demonstrates that breaking down barriers can be accomplished in more ways than one." "He was a crystallizer, rather than an innovator."

"His hands could do things few piano players can do", said pianist Bill King, who studied with Peterson at his music school. Because Peterson was a big man — six feet three inches — he could stretch his hands over a keyboard in a way few musicians can match.

Ray Charles, in *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues - Piano Blues* (2003), commented that Peterson was the only other piano player who could come close to the technical skills of Art Tatum, praising his abilities with "Oscar could play like a motherfucker!"

Recognition in Canada

While Peterson was recognized as a great jazz pianist both at home in Canada and internationally, he was also regarded in Canada as a distinguished public figure. His notable personage is evident in the acclaim and awards he received, particularly in the latter two decades of his life.

He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada (the country's highest civilian state order for talent and service) in 1972, and promoted to Companion of the order (the highest degree of merit and humanity), in 1984. He was also a member of the Order of Ontario, a Chevalier of the National Order of Quebec, and an officer of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France.

From 1991 to 1994, Peterson was chancellor of York University in Toronto. The chancellor is the titular head of the university. Weeks after his death, the Province of Ontario announced a C\$4 million scholarship for the "Oscar Peterson Chair" for Jazz Performance at York University with an additional C\$1 million to be awarded annually in music scholarships to underprivileged York students in tribute to Peterson.

Peterson's niece, television journalist Sylvia Sweeney, produced a documentary film, *In the Key of Oscar*, about Peterson in 1992.

Unlike most other jazz musicians, Peterson was networked with Canadian elites in the later years of his life. For example, former Ontario premier Bob Rae recalled that in 2007, himself, Ontario Chief Justice Roy McMurtry, and former Ontario premier Bill Davis celebrated McMurtry's retirement with Peterson, his wife, and their wives.

Peterson received honorary doctorates from many Canadian universities: Carleton University, Queen's University, Concordia University, McMaster University, Mount Allison University, the University of Victoria, the University of Western Ontario, York University, the University of Toronto, and the Université Laval, as well as from Northwestern University and Niagara University in the United States. Concordia University's main concert hall and performing arts venue is named after Peterson.

In 2004, the City of Toronto named the courtyard of the Toronto-Dominion Centre Oscar Peterson Square.

In 2005, the Peel District School Board in suburban Toronto opened the Oscar Peterson School in Mississauga, Ontario, two miles from his home. Peterson said, "This is a most unexpected and moving tribute." He visited the school several times and donated electronic musical equipment to it. Soon after Peterson's death, the University of Toronto Mississauga opened a major student residence in March 2008 as "Oscar Peterson Hall". He won the Civic Award of Merit, the City of Mississauga's highest honor, in 2003. He moved to Mississauga c. 1971.

Former Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien wanted in 1993 to put Peterson forward to the Governor General of Canada for appointment to the post of Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, but Peterson felt that his health could not stand up to the many ceremonial duties that this position would require. "He was the most famous Canadian in the world", said Chrétien. Chrétien also said that Nelson Mandela glowed when

meeting Peterson. "It was very emotional. They were both moved to meet each other. These were two men with humble beginnings who rose to very illustrious levels."

A memorial concert, held on January 12, 2008, filled the 2500-seat Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto. People had queued for more than three hours to get in. Governor General Michaëlle Jean reported at the concert that "thousands" more could not get in. Among the performers were Grégory Charles, Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones, Phil Nimmons and singers Audrey Morris and Nancy Wilson. The "Oscar Peterson" quartet played key pieces; they were Monty Alexander, Jeff Hamilton, ██████████ and Dave Young. All toured with Peterson during his late "one-handed" period, except Alexander. The Nathaniel Dett Chorale, University of Toronto Gospel Choir and Sharon Riley & the Faith Chorale, under the direction of Andrew Craid along with opera soprano Measha Brueggergosman closed the show, singing an excerpt from Peterson's "Hymn to Freedom".

A movement was begun on Facebook to rename the Lionel-Groulx Metro station, a transfer station between Montreal's Green Line and Orange Line, in honor of Oscar Peterson. The Montreal Transit Corporation, however, refused to end its moratorium on renaming Metro stations. The city's policy on landmark tributes is to wait at least a year after a public figure's death.

An Ontario school named Oscar Peterson Public School was opened in Stouffville in the Regional Municipality of York on April 30, 2009 and commenced operation in the 2009–10 school year.

Grammy Awards

- 1974 Best Jazz Performance by a Group *The Trio* - Oscar Peterson, Joe Pass and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen
- 1977 Best Jazz Performance by a Soloist *The Giants* - Oscar Peterson
- 1978 Best Jazz Instrumental Performance, Soloist *Oscar Peterson Jam – Montreux '77*
- 1979 Best Jazz Instrumental Performance, Soloist *Oscar Peterson and The Trumpet Kings – Jousts* - Oscar Peterson
- 1990 Best Jazz Instrumental Performance, Group *The Legendary Oscar Peterson Trio Live at the Blue Note*
- 1990 Best Jazz Instrumental Performance, Soloist *The Legendary Oscar Peterson Trio Live at the Blue Note*
- 1991 Best Jazz Instrumental Performance, Group *Saturday Night at the Blue Note*
- 1997 Lifetime Achievement Award Instrumental Soloist Lifetime Achievement

Honorary degrees conferred

- 1973 Carleton University - Doctor of Laws
- 1976 Queen's University - Doctor of Laws
- 1979 Concordia University - Doctor of Laws
- 1980 Mount Alison, Sackville N.B. - Doctor of Music

- 1981 McMaster University - Doctor of Laws
- 1981 University of Victoria, B.C. - Doctor of Laws
- 1982 York University - Doctor of Letters
- 1983 Northwestern University, Illinois - Doctor of Fine Arts
- 1985 University of Toronto - Doctor of Laws
- 1985 Laval University - Doctor of Music
- 1991 York University: Installed as Chancellor by the Board of Governors
- 1994 York University: Chancellor Emeritus
- 1994 Western Ontario Conservatory of Music - Licentiate in Music Diploma
- 1994 University of British Columbia - Doctor of Laws
- 1996 Niagara University, New York - Doctor of Fine Arts
- 1999 University of Western Ontario - Doctor of Laws

Instruments

- Bösendorfer pianos - exclusively in the 1990s and 2000s
- Yamaha - Acoustic and Disklavier- 1998-2006 in Canada (Touring and Recording)
- Steinway & Sons Model A (Which currently resides at The Village Studios in Hollywood) - most performances from the 1940s through the 1980s, some recordings.
- Baldwin pianos - some performances in the USA, some recordings.
- C. Bechstein Pianofortefabrik pianos - some performances and recordings in Europe.
- Petrof pianos - some performances in Europe.
- Clavichord - on album *Porgy and Bess* with Joe Pass
- Fender Rhodes electric piano - several recordings.
- Synthesizer - several recordings.
- Hammond organ - some live performances and several recordings.
- Vocals - some live performances and several recordings.
