

Billy Taylor's Biography

Billy Taylor arrived in New York City on a Friday evening in 1942. He headed for Minton's Playhouse in Harlem, where he was heard by one of his idols, tenor saxophonist, Ben Webster. The following Sunday Taylor began his professional career, playing with Webster's quartet at the Three Deuces alongside Webster, Big Sid Catlett and Charlie Drayton opposite the Art Tatum Trio. He immersed himself in the jazz scene over the next few years, playing with many jazz greats of the day, such as Slam Stewart, Eddie South, Stuff Smith, Coleman Hawkins, Jo Jones and Roy Eldridge.

During this time, Billy was Art Tatum's protege and Jo Jones was his "appointed guardian." Taylor worked with Machito's Afro-Cuban band, replaced Erroll Garner in the Slam Stewart Trio, and became a member of the Don Redman Orchestra, the first American jazz band to tour Europe after World War II (1946). He also played on Broadway in Billy Rose's "The Seven Lively Arts," opened for Billie Holiday in "Holiday on Broadway," and played in the pit band for "Blue Holiday," starring Ethel Waters, Mary Lou Williams and the Katherine Dunham dancers.

He played a lot of solo gigs along the northeast corridor - the Earle Theater in Philadelphia, The Royal Theater in Baltimore, the Howard Theater in DC and the Apollo in NYC. In 1949 he got a call to sub for Al Haig with Charlie Parker and Strings at Birdland. This was the beginning of his two-year stint as house pianist at that legendary jazz club. He played with everybody - Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Oscar Pettiford, Art Blakey, Milt Jackson, Zoot Sims, Roy Haynes, and Kenny Dorham among others. Often playing opposite such bands as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Stan Kenton and Lennie Tristano, his tenure at Birdland was one of Taylor's greatest learning experiences.

Billy made some recordings with his own group during the early 1950's for such labels as Prestige, Riverside, ABC Paramount, Impulse!, Sesac, Mercury and Capital Records. He also recorded albums with Quincy Jones, Sy Oliver, Mundell Lowe, Neal Hefti, Eddie 'Lockjaw Davis', Sonny Stitt, Lucky Thompson, Coleman Hawkins and Dinah Washington. He even started his own music publishing company, Duane Music, Inc.

Also about this time Taylor started writing about jazz and giving lectures/clinics to music teachers interested in teaching jazz. He began to witness first-hand, the serious lack of funding for the arts and humanities and began to focus on radio and television in order to gain better exposure for America's classical music. He helped to facilitate many local and national broadcasts featuring jazz artists in live performances. Some in broadcast studios, others in nightclubs, dance halls, and hotels. In 1958 he was named Musical Director of the first series ever produced about jazz, "The Subject Is Jazz" (NET). His house band for these 13 programs included Doc Severinsen, Tony Scott, Jimmy Cleveland, Mundell Lowe, Earl May, Eddie Safranski, Ed Thigpen and Osie Johnson. Guests included none other than Willie "The Lion" Smith, Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Jimmy Rushing, Bill Evans and Aaron Copeland among others.

During the 1960's Taylor was working regularly with his trio and hosting his own daily radio show on New York's WLIB. He was making guest shots on various TV shows and recording for Capital Records, when the Beatles began to nip at the heels of Taylor and other highly successful members of the Capital family like Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Peggy Lee. Rather than continue to be neglected, Taylor opted to forget about recordings for the time being and concentrate on radio and television. His success on WLIB led to a post at the popular WNEW, playing jazz for their affluent middle-of-the-road audience. He continued to perform as well during this period, usually with his trio and sometimes with larger ensembles.

In the early 1970's, Taylor was named Musical Director for the popular daily television show, The David Frost Show. Many feel he had the best jazz band on TV at that time. They played an hour jazz concert every night for the studio audience, and at least twice a week, Frost booked guests like Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, or Buddy Rich to play and be interviewed. Two recordings were made with Taylor's band on the Frost show before the show came to an end three and a half years later. Billy Taylor returned to WLIB, this time as program director of the station and began to build the largest jazz audience in New York City. Simultaneously he had his own local television program on New York's Channel 47. It was about this time that Taylor was offered an opportunity to enroll in the doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He had been an adjunct professor at C. W. Post College in New York and a visiting professor at Howard University, and felt the need to organize his teaching materials so that they might be more effectively used by others. After a few years of intense study, he earned his combined Masters and Doctorate in Music Education (1975). But he sorely missed playing and writing music. He had been appointed to the National Council for the Arts by President Nixon in 1970, and although this was a tremendous honor, the amount of time required to be an effective arts advocate took precious time away from practicing his music. Nonetheless, he tackled the task at hand, alongside his distinguished colleagues, Maurice Abravanel, Eudora Welty, Beverly Sills, and Nancy Hanks, who were doing so much to help make the arts available to everyone. It was a highly productive and rewarding period for Taylor, but not especially creative, musically.

Sometimes things work themselves out in mysterious ways. Maurice Abravanel commissioned Taylor to write "Suite For Jazz Piano and Orchestra"; T. J. Anderson commissioned him to write "Make A Joyful Noise"; the University of New Hampshire commissioned him to write a dance suite, "For Rachel"; the Kentucky Symphony asked him to write "Impromptu." And so, Taylor began to write jazz for ensembles that were larger than his trio. He composed the musical score and lyrics for an off-Broadway production of Wole Soyinka's "The Lion and The Jewel," and some dance music for the original production of "Your Arms Are Too Short To Box With God." (To date, Billy Taylor has over 350 songs to his credit, including the popular, "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free," which has been recorded by various artists and served as an anthem for the civil rights movement. His latest work, "Urban Griot," is detailed under the Soundpost section of his website.)

All the while, Billy Taylor continued his work in broadcasting, as Musical Director for Tony Brown's Black Journal Tonight (PBS); and from 1977-1982, as host of NPR's most listened to jazz program of its time, "Jazz Alive." By the end of the 1970's he was touring with his trio more than ever, but playing fewer and fewer jazz clubs, which had become crowded, overpriced and excluded young people. Realizing the need to bring his music to a broader audience, Taylor began to focus more on performing in larger venues such as concert halls and performing arts centers, which were a welcome change.

In the early 1980's, Taylor was tapped by Charles Kuralt to become arts correspondent for the popular television program, "CBS Sunday Morning." Still at that post today, he has profiled over 250 well-known and not-so-well-known members of the jazz community. (He received an Emmy Award for his profile on Quincy Jones.) It was during this time that Billy also decided to start his own record company (Taylor Made), but after producing five albums, he realized that it was the music he wanted to be involved in, not the business. He continued his work as a performer both on the bandstand and on television & radio as well. He hosted his own jazz piano show for Bravo, "Jazz Counterpoint," which featured such artists as George Shearing, Marian McPartland and Ramsey Lewis, along with two different NPR radio series, "Dizzy's Diamond." and "Taylor Made Piano," which traced the history of jazz using the piano to tell the story. Based upon Dr. Taylor's book, "Jazz Piano," "Taylor Made Piano" won a Peabody Award and generated more requests for tapes than any previous NPR program. As the 80's drew to a close, Billy Taylor signed with GRP/Impulse, making some of his most popular recordings, including the re-release

of *My Fair Lady Loves Jazz* (arranged by Quincy Jones), *It's A Matter of Pride*, *Dr. T* (featuring Gerry Mulligan) and *Homage* (featuring the Turtle Island String Quartet), which received a Grammy nomination in 1996.

During the 90's Dr. Taylor was named Artistic Advisor for Jazz to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Since 1994, under the umbrella of Jazz at the Kennedy Center, Taylor has developed one acclaimed concert series after another including the Art Tatum Pianorama, the Louis Armstrong Legacy series, the annual Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival, *Beyond Category*, *Betty Carter's Jazz Ahead* and the Jazz Ambassadors Program. His nationally broadcast NPR series, "Billy Taylor's Jazz at the Kennedy Center" is recorded live and features a mix of performances, audience Q & A, and conversations with musical guests. Billy pioneered this play a little, talk a little format in the early 80's, with his "Jazz Models & Mentors" series, presented four times a year at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Taylor performs regularly with his current trio (Chip Jackson/bass & Winard Harper/drums) as well as with his long time friend, pianist Ramsey Lewis. When he's not touring, composing or recording, he can be found in classrooms throughout the country, conducting master classes, workshops and lecture/demonstrations.

In 1996, View Video, an established and respected marketer of videos, formed Arkadia Records. The label boasted such divergent starts as Benny Golson, Dave Liebman and Billy Taylor. The trio – Chip Jackson and Steve Johns – worked at a theater in Mamaroneck, NY for three days, resulting in *Music Keeps us Young*.

The CD revisits Taylor favorites such as "Wouldn't It Be Lovely," originally explored via Quincy Jones arrangement on *My Fair Lady Loves Jazz*, "Body and Soul," "One For the Woofers" and "I Wish I Knew (How It Would Feel To Be Free)." It has been said of Billy's solo on the latter that he was at "his most joyous and you can tell he feels very free." As always, there are new compositions on *Music Keeps Us Young*, prominent among them "Arkadia Blues."

The second Arkadia CD was partially culled from solo piano pieces recorded at the *Young* sessions. They formed the nucleus of *Ten Fingers – One Voice*, which is comprised mainly of standards such as "Wrap Your Troubles In Dreams" and gems from the books of Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers and Johnny Mercer. But there are also some rare surprises such as "Easy Like," "Can You Tell By Looking At Me?" and "Tea For Two," which includes the too-often-ignored verse.

Upon his completion of his obligations at Arkadia, Billy formed his own recording company. Soundpost Records has since issued two CD's with the trio of Jackson, bass, and Winard Harper, drums.

Urban Griot – a Griot is traditionally an African historian-cum-musician-cum-storyteller – utilizes original music from the mind and pen of Billy Taylor, American griot: "Local Color/Can You Dig It?," "Gracias Chucho," "In Loving Memory" and "A Duke-ish Blues" among them.

Live at IAJE, New York is from a romping, fun-filled evening at the International Association for Jazz Education's annual convention in NYC in 2001. Billy and trio return to his standards "Impromptu," "Titoro," and "Cote d'Ivoire" (from his "Suite for Jazz Piano & Orchestra"), a new piece written for Jackson, "Conversion," plus a dazzling homage to his mentor Art Tatum, "Body & Soul."

In 2002, Billy suffered a mild stroke, which affected his right side. For one who has never seen Billy do a left-handed solo, this would have been of some concern. Not only has he completely recovered, he seems to have gained strength anew, moving one observer to comment that if you didn't know he had a stroke, you wouldn't know he had a stroke.

Not long thereafter Billy played a duet with Marian McPartland at her 85th Birthday bash at Birdland in NYC, sat in with his long-time friend Clark Terry, lectured at the opening of the 25th Anniversary season of Jazz Insights at New School University, hosted the opening of the Romare Bearden retrospective in Washington, emceed and played concerts, most notably at the 150th Anniversary of Steinway Pianos at Carnegie Hall, did myriad radio interviews and, in 2003, made his official return to public performance at NYC's Blue Note.

In 2003-4, Billy was called upon to host and play at tributes for Clark Terry, Toshiko Akiyoshi, and the opening of the newly land-marked Louis Armstrong House in Queens, NY where he's a board member. He continues to receive Honorary Degrees and, as his career unfolds, he plays and lectures in venues as diverse as the Temple of Dendur at NYC's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Columbia University Teacher's College.

Billy Taylor is indeed a griot in that he has lived the history he plays and tells about. Now in his 8th decade, he remains vigorously dedicated to nurturing jazz and creating new forums and opportunities for the artists who perform it. He encompasses that rare combination of creativity, intelligence, vision, commitment and leadership, all qualities that make him one of our most cherished national treasures.