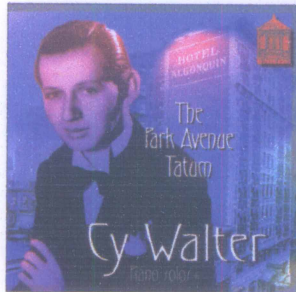


February 2007 DOWNBEAT



Cy Walter

The Park Avenue Tatum

SHELLWOOD 32

★★★★

Who was Cy Walter? Unless you used to drink at the posh Drake Hotel in the early 1960s, you probably don't know. However, a small group of devotees has kept his name alive, and they are why we have *The Park Avenue*

Tatum, a collection of his 1940s recordings. This is the first CD of Walter (1915-'68), and establishes him as one of the finest interpreters of the golden age of show music.

It's interesting to compare Walter and Art Tatum on "Begin The Beguine," which they both treated as a virtuoso showpiece. Walter tells the song's sophisticated story better than Tatum, who doesn't follow the composer's elaborate form. Tatum swings harder. I'd call the match-up a draw.

Jazz history has shamefully ignored Walter, but in his heyday he was well-known among Broadway's elite. Richard Rodgers preferred Walter to any jazz pianist, since Walter always honored the song. One of the finest things on *The Park Avenue Tatum* is Jerome Kern's "The Way You Look Tonight," which Walter plays as a hushed reverie. Suddenly you understand why Kern hated uptempo bebop versions of his music.

Walter is probably best understood not in the context of jazz or Broadway, but in the tradition of classical composer/pianists like Leopold Godowsky and Ignaz Friedman, who loved to transfigure Viennese waltzes and other light fare into complicated piano music. Walter's beautiful chorus of "All The Things You Are," with the melody singing chastely in the middle register, decorated on top and bottom with delicate slides and runs, sounds considerably like a Godowsky treatment of Franz Schubert.

—Ethan Iverson

Personnel: Cy Walter, piano.

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