

## **“Sweet Georgia Brown,” #1941: Art Tatum The Forerunner**

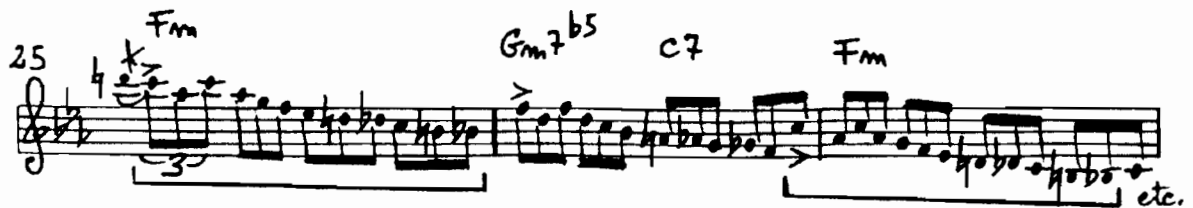
*“You know this? This is Art Tatum.  
More important than Charlie Parker.  
People today think Charlie Parker is more important,  
but Art Tatum was more important.”  
...Charles Mingus<sup>1</sup>*

According to many musicians’ reports, Tatum played his most imaginative, advanced, and experimental things during the “after hours” sessions he loved so much. On those events he very probably felt free of any commercial limitation and was also galvanized by the presence of other jazzmen. Luckily enough, some of the sessions were recorded by Jerry Newman and have been presently reissued on the indispensable “God Is In The House” CD (Onyx 205).

One of the most revealing among these surviving examples of the “after hours” Tatum is the first half of the second chorus of “Sweet Georgia Brown,” recorded on September 16, 1941 at the historically famous Clark Monroe’s Uptown House in Harlem with Frank Newton (trumpet) and Paul Ebenezzer (bass). This chorus—fully transcribed here—was a Tatum solo supported by Paul Ebenezzer’s string bass. As you can see, in the first part of this chorus (i.e. bars 1-16 of our transcription) Tatum practically does not use the left hand at all, his right hand playing exclusively some daringly advanced “outside” phrases.<sup>2</sup> Also, notice his use of silence, with long rests which are generally not found in his commercial recordings. Considering that this recording was made in 1941, the overall result is definitely astounding, halfway between bebop and Lenni Tristano’s works such as “Line Up” and “East Thirty-Second.”

Tatum seems indeed to have anticipated some aspects of later jazz styles throughout this episode, which also helps us to better understand Mingus’s assertion reported above. Many sources have reported that in 1938 the young Charlie Parker took a three-month job as a dishwasher at Jimmy’s Chicken Shack restaurant in Harlem just to have the chance to listen to Tatum, who was playing solo piano there (when Tatum left the job to go to Hollywood, Parker left his own job too). From other sources, we also know that the most important bebop pianist, Bud Powell, idolized Tatum (among other things, he once said: “When I play the ballads, Art Tatum guides my hands”).

In the second half of this chorus of “Sweet Georgia Brown” (bar 17 onwards), Tatum turns back to his more customary way of playing. Of particular interest here is the sparkling five-bar long run in triplets and single notes played in bars 25-29 on a I / ii7 / V7 / I (etc.) cadence in F minor. The pattern of this run can be transposed to other keys, too. Also, notice that the melodic fragment played on the F minor chord in bar 25 is repeated on the F minor chord in bar 27, but it is anticipated by an eighth note, thus creating a subtle and quite puzzling shift in the listener’s perception:



As a closing remark on the long run of bars 25-29, we might add that it seems almost banal when we see it notated down on paper, but it sounds truly fresh and impressive when listened to Tatum’s actual recording.

<sup>1</sup>Reported in: Lanieri, Roberto. Io, a lezione da Mingus, in: AA.VV. “Quaderni di Siena Jazz— Charles Mingus,” Gennaio-Giugno 1995, p. 109. Lanieri reports that Mingus said this while playing “I Can’t Get Started” at the piano during one of his lessons at the State University of New York at Buffalo, in the early Seventies.

<sup>2</sup>The chord symbols reported in bars 1-16 of our transcription just show the original chord changes of this song. In this Tatum improvisation we can appreciate his many considerable deviations from them.

# Sweet Georgia Brown

as recorded by Art Tatum on September 16, 1941

Words and Music by Ben Bernie, Maceo Pinkard and Kenneth Casey

Transcribed by Riccardo Scivales

Fast (♩ = c. 228)  
(F7)

(B<sup>b</sup>7)

(2nd chorus)

*l.h.*  
*f*

*string bass*

*even 8ths*

*deliberately*

6

(E<sup>b</sup>7)

10

(A<sup>b</sup>)

14

(G7) (C7) F7

swing 8ths

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18

gua

sf

9

3

3

3

21

B<sup>b</sup>7 F B<sup>b</sup>7 B<sup>b</sup>7sus4

24

B<sup>b</sup>7 Fm Gm7(b5) C7

27

Fm Gm7(b5) C7 A<sup>b</sup> G7

30

G<sup>b</sup>7 F7 B<sup>b</sup>7 A7 A<sup>b</sup> G<sup>b</sup> F7

(etc.)

