**Teddy Wilson**

Teddy Wilson is a jazz piano master. His career has produced recordings that exemplify expert playing, both live and in the studio.

He was born on 24 November 1912 in Austin, Texas. At the age of 6, he moved to Tuskegee, Alabama where he grew up. Wilson studied piano at the Tuskegee Institute and later studied at Talladega College. In 1929, he became a professional musician in Detroit to play in Speed Webb’s bands, and others’, in the Midwest. Here he met Roy Eldridge, a trumpet player that he would later go on to do collaborations with. In 1931, he settled in Chicago and worked for many jazz musicians.

He played for many great jazz musicians, most notable of which is Louis Armstrong. Wilson’s main break did not come from working for these jazz greats, but rather for playing with another jazz pianist, Art Tatum. They played piano duets, presenting an impressive display of coordination and rhythm. In 1933, he was found by John Hammond. Hammond was, among many other things, a talent scout for Black jazz musicians. He is credited with discovering greats such as Billie holiday, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. He advised Wilson to move to New York and play in Benny Carter’s band.

Later that year, Wilson moved to New York to play in Carter’s band, the Chocolate Dandies. He played with him for two years before being asked to form a trio with Benny Goodman, to be called the Benny Goodman Trio. During that time, he recorded with a number of people and groups such as Billie Holiday at Columbia records, and, with John Hammond’s help, Wilson’s own band at the time at Brunswick Records. This was when Wilson recorded with Roy Eldridge from his past groups on trumpet, Ben Webster on sax, Cozy Cole on drums, and Benny Goodman on clarinet. In 1936, he finally joined the Benny Goodman Trio, which soon after became the Quartet when Lionel Hampton joined on vibraphone. The Benny Goodman Quartet was the first integrated group to have a national audience. In 1938, they played at Carnegie Hall. This was the first time they played at Carnegie Hall and the first time any integrated group had played there as well. In 1939, he leaves the quartet to form his own big band.

Wilson’s big band failed and was disbanded shortly after. Wilson had a higher musical expectation from his players and a different idea for the future of the band then they did. He then formed a smaller sextet, to which he held to the same high standards, and this time Wilson’s sextet was successful. They went on to create some of the greatest jazz records of all time.

One of Wilson’s most famous covers are those of “Honeysuckle Rose” by Fats Waller. Wilson covered this song with many groups along his career. The 1956 recording of “Honeysuckle Rose” on *The Impeccable Mr. Wilson* shows his musical maturity and ingenuity. With only himself, Al Lucas on bass, and Jo Jones on drums, Wilson produced a recording of jazz that was incredibly complete for having only the most basic set of rhythmic and melodic instruments at his disposal. Nonetheless, the rendition is full and engaging.

The group featured on this chart is Teddy Wilson’s Trio. This is the trio that Wilson played lived shows with at the time. With Teddy Wilson at the piano, Wilson was able to control the style, movement, and nuances of the piece. It is a fantastic example of Wilson’s masterful skill. Al Lucas played bass, and with a style and control that held down the rhythm of the piece with incredible control. Jo Jones played drums for Wilson’s Trio and was incredibly skilled. He left to form his own trio that became successful as well.

Playing as a trio allowed Teddy Wilson to have the most artistic freedom he could ask for in a jazz standard. Wilson was able to take this piece and make it into a song that flowed smoothly and tastefully. He kept all the essence of the piece while tailoring it to the image he wanted to create. In the recording on *The Impeccable Mr. Wilson*, he keeps the dynamics rather constant, the tempo low, and the rhythmic complexity simple enough not to confuse the listener, but complex enough to engage them. In other recordings, such as the on *Your Tonight* or on *Plays Cole Porter and Fats Waller*, the tempo is much quicker and the rhythm is dense. In these kinds of recordings, the piano is used more as a solo instrument, creating ascending and descending lines that run off the melody. In the case of *Yours Tonight*, Wilson is much more a rhythmic instrument because of the edition of trumpet and sax by Benny Carter who lead the melodic component of the song. The biggest difference between the recording on *The Impeccable Mr. Wilson* and others is Wilson’s musical demeanor. It is controlled, precise, and smooth. He does not stray to much from the song itself that he creates something wholly new, but also does not play stagnant and uninspired. In contrast, other recordings don’t allow Wilson much time to express himself and only supports the harmony and rhythm of others who are controlling the style of the piece.

Al Lucas’ bass on “Honeysuckle Rose” is key to the character of the song. The lack of instruments introduces the issue of noticeable rhythmic differences. In big bands, it is easier to blend into the rest of the playing, especially if there is a strong rhythm section. In the case of a trio, and particularly this one where all the instruments are part of the quintessential rhythm section, a strong bass line is needed to keep the band on point. Another important aspect of the bass line is the lack of rhythmic variation. His steady, consistent, and almost monotonous playing is a foundation to the tight control evident in this song. Al Lucas’ play style is engaging, though, regardless of his consistency. It is light, bouncy, and full. Al Lucas’ bass playing holds this chart down. In the recording on *Yours Tonight*, Wilson did not use a bassist. Instead he played the bass line himself. This changed the character of the piece because the bass line blended with the piano creating a much looser, swing heavy rendition. The increased syncopation across the melodic lines can also be attributed to the lack of bass.

The last player in the trio is Jo Jones on drums. Jones’ was given a lot of rhythmic freedom in this recording. Rhythmically, he was given enough space to add his own character to the piece in the various drum solos he performed. These solos were in no was epic, but instead displayed a kind of masterful restraint. With the piano playing chords under, Jones’ solos were incredibly musical and engaging. They feel natural, as though the rhythm of the song is meant to become what Jones created. They are not, though, incredibly complicated. Mostly, his solos consisted of rhythmic variations on the snare and, although they aren’t full of ride and toms, fantastic grooves.

“Honeysuckle Rose” is a piece written with solos in mind. This song is structured A-A-B-A and is typically in the key F. The B section is where the solos tend to take place, though some recordings have the latter part of the second A section more open to interpretation. The chordal structure of this piece is simple and not unusual. “Honeysuckle Rose” uses ii-V7 or ii-V7-I most of the time. The tempo is moderately quick for a jazz piece and in no means feels speedy.

This recording does not use any special musical effects, such as skat or various percussive sounds. Some musical effects that are present, though, are hidden within the timbre of the instruments. How the musicians in Wilson’s trio play their instruments affects the feeling of the piece more than any other element. The old sound to this recording, with all the noise, grit, and even dynamics, makes it sound happy and carefree. This piece has little drama; this is something to relax to.

At first, this piece was hard to understand. It felt very unorganized. The lines Wilson plays were accented in places that felt irrelevant and speed at which he ascends and descends through them felt excessive. I also felt that the drums and bass were a bit boring, they didn’t have any flair. All in all, this piece sounded more like a lazy jam-session then three world-class jazz musicians.

As I listened more and more, I was able to hear the melodic motifs come through. From there, I began to understand the rhythmic choices of all three of the players. The bass was supporting the accents and the syncopation of the piano and the drums played into links of the different melodies. More importantly, I could see that the bass and the drums were playing as one unit. They acted as a rhythmic anchor beneath the piano as Teddy Wilson played his lines.

After about twenty listens, I started to pay more attention to the solo section of this piece. This section is split between the bass solo and the drum solo. I found the bass solo uninteresting at first; it seemed too bland. Then, once I started to listen to how the piano and drums played around it, I understood what I was hearing. The bass shapes the movement of the piece and it felt like the piece was striped to its bare roots. If the bass line was a map through the song, then the piano and drums were just destinations and stops along the way. I expanded this mindset to the rest of the song and it produced some results that surprised me.

I began to listen to how the bass and chords work under the piano lines and the piece opened up to me. I was able to completely follow the movement inside of “Honeysuckle Rose” and understand the direction Wilson took with his melodic expansion. I wanted to test if listening this way worked for other versions of “Honeysuckle Rose”, so I found recordings Teddy Wilson had done of it. The first recording was done in 1956 while the second one I found was recorded in 1935 with a bigger band, including a clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone. Amazingly (and I’m sure unsurprisingly), I was able to hear the same movement in the earlier recording, even though there were different lines and many more instruments.

In the second recording, I thoroughly enjoyed the solos by the saxophone. They were incredibly creative, especially in their control of tone. There are parts were the saxophones sound like they are humming and singing in a very Turkish tone. I was disappointed, though, to hear the rhythm section looser then the first recording. This element did add to the swing, but I like the sound of tight rhythm. This might be attributed to the fact that I personally work with much musical sequencing software that straightens rhythms to an inhuman point.

Teddy Wilson will live forever in jazz history. His piano playing was unique and matched by vary few. The charts he played and recorded are some of the greatest that have come from his era. The range of groups and styles that he played with has led him to be one of the most complete and experienced piano players to have lived.

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