

This Day in History... January 2, 1977

Death of Erroll Garner

Jazz pianist and composer Erroll Garner died on January 2, 1977, in Los Angeles, California. He's been called "one of the most distinctive of all pianists" and a "brilliant virtuoso."

Erroll Louis Garner was born June 15, 1921, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the youngest of six children and had a twin brother, Ernest. Blessed with a natural talent, he began playing the piano by ear at age three. Although he never received any formal training, and was never able to read or write music, Garner was able to play any song – even if he'd heard it only once!

At age seven, Garner was playing piano for a radio program, and by eleven, he was a piano player on the Allegheny riverboats. Garner started performing with local bands in 1937. He moved to New York City at age 23 and began playing clubs on 52nd Street, including the Three Deuces and Tondelayo's. His unique piano styling was featured on recordings by the Slam Stewart Trio before he recorded under his own name with a bassist and drummer. From 1945 to 1949, Garner made a number of records on a freelance basis before signing an exclusive contract with Columbia Records. In 1948 he performed at the Paris Jazz Festival. He also played with Charlie Parker on the 1947 *Cool Blues* session.

Garner's music appealed to non-jazz audiences, and he enjoyed great success in the late 1950s. His 1955 live album *Concert by the Sea* was a best-selling jazz album. He toured Europe in 1957 and '58. Garner was a frequent guest on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, and was reportedly the host's favorite jazz musician. His most famous song "Misty" was a big hit in 1959 and enjoyed a resurgence in 1971, when it became the theme song for the Clint Eastwood film *Play Misty For Me*. He is also remembered for the songs "It Gets Better Every Time," "Dreamy," "Nightwind," "La Petite Mambo," and "Equinox."



Garner's song "Misty" became a jazz standard, performed by Johnny Mathis, Bing Crosby, Aretha Franklin, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra, and many others over the years.

Even as an adult, Garner was short (5 feet, two inches) and played the piano sitting on several telephone books. Since he had small hands, his dazzling ability at rapid keyboarding was even more impressive. He frequently used a style known as "gas pedaling," in which he would play melodies with his right hand behind those played by his left, eventually speeding up the tempo to catch up to his left hand.

Garner was also known for his vocalizations while playing, and these can be heard on many recordings. Jazz writer Scott Yanow called Garner "one of the most distinctive of all pianists."

Garner suffered from emphysema and died of cardiac arrest on January 2, 1977, in Los Angeles, California. A film about his life, *No One Can Hear You Read*, was released in 2012. The film's title is a phrase Garner used to say when people asked why he never learned to read music



Garner stamp from the 1995 Jazz Musicians issue

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