



Juan Tizol: His talents, his collaborators, his legacy

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ABSTRACT

Juan Tizol is often remembered as the famed trombonist who composed the jazz evergreens known as “Caravan” and “Perdido.” Few know that this enigmatic figure was a multifaceted talent who lived an extraordinary life in the world of music, and who was a native of Puerto Rico who divided his life into four broad segments, the first 20 years in his native homeland, the next several years in Washington, D.C., the third in New York City, and finally the fourth segment in Los Angeles. From these different venues, Tizol acquired an abundance of musical experiences that permitted him to make a contribution that has been described as one “whose Latin American touch changed the Duke Ellington Orchestra – and the history of jazz.” This article provides the reader with greater details of Juan Tizol’s contributions as a trombonist, composer, and music transcriber. [Key words: Jazz, LatinJazz, Juan Tizol, Puerto Rican music, music]

First photograph of Tizol (upper center with glasses playing the trombone) as a member of the Ellington Orchestra-circa 1929. The photograph is from a rare promotional brochure of a Duke Ellington film Black and Tan. Photograph courtesy of María Asunción “Sunchy” Tizol. Reprinted by permission.

In

past issues of *CENTRO Journal* there have been passing references to the legendary trombonist who was a long-time member of The Duke Ellington Orchestra, Juan Tizol. The references may have left many readers with an appetite to know more about this enigmatic figure, who also had extended tenures with Harry James and the Music Makers, the Nat King Cole band, and the Louie Bellson and Nelson Riddle Orchestras. Tizol also participated in numerous studio recordings and briefly organized his own band, an action that resulted in a set of interesting and lasting recordings. The limited space of this essay will focus on Tizol, the person and his accomplishments as a musician, composer, and trombonist.

Juan Tizol Martínez composed and recorded his most popular compositions while he was with the great Duke Ellington. His signature compositions are “Caravan” (1936) and “Perdido” (originally recorded in 1941). Other Tizol creations that were hits for the Ellington band also include “Jubilesta” (1937), “Pyramid” (1938), “Conga Brava” (1940), “Bakiff” (1941), and “Vagabonds” (1951).

For Tizol, the recording history with Ellington began with two compositions that were recorded on January 9, 1935: “Porto Rican Chaos” and “Admiration.” That year, Tizol used the term Porto Rican because he, as many Puerto Ricans, had grown accustomed to the tag that was imposed on the islanders with the Congressional approval of the 1900 Foraker Act. The name of the island remained Porto Rico for more than 30 years, when another Act of Congress reverted to the original spelling of Puerto Rico. As late as 1936, Tizol used the epithet Porto Rican to identify himself, as he did on his application for a Social Security system membership.¹

Tizol also used the term Porto Rican in working titles for other compositions such as “Porto Rican Girl” (dedicated to his half-sister Remedio). That title was subsequently changed to “Moon over Cuba” when it was recorded in 1941. His sister had moved to Cuba and thus inspired the name change. The title to “Porto Rican Chaos” was changed to “Moonlight Fiesta” when it was recorded after the original

version. Another working title was “Lovely Isle of Porto Rico”; it was never used on a recorded tune.² There is no clear explanation given for the elimination of the term Porto Rican from the titles of the compositions.

Among the great trombonist’s compositions, several titles were in his native Spanish language, including: “Carnaval,” “Chulita,” “Plazita,” “Mirage” (all from 1942), “Bagdad” (1943), “Cuidado” (1951), and “Fiesta” and “Sirena” (circa 1942).³ His use of the Spanish language was one of many manifestations of the nationalistic pride that he maintained throughout his life. The same pride was manifested when he spoke of his family and their accomplishments in the homeland.

Tizol was born in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico, on January 22, 1900. He first came to New York City, via Ellis Island, on October 8, 1917; however, he did not stay.⁴ In a 1978 interview by jazz historian Patricia Willard for the Jazz Oral History Project of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Tizol explained that he was overwhelmed by the big city during his initial sojourn (Tizol 1978). He returns to New York to stay in the States in 1920. Tizol was an adventurous young man and in late September he and friends bribed crew members of the British steamer *St. Paul*, which was bound for New York. He arrived in New York as a stowaway and was identified as a member of the crew by the Ellis Island authorities on September 21.⁵ In 1978 Tizol also confessed that because of gambling he was totally broke when he arrived; he had lost everything during the trip, including his trombone.



Juan Tizol (second from left) as a member of the Harry James and the Music Makers—circa 1944. Photograph courtesy of Hindsight Records. Reprinted by permission.

Tizol was one of number of Puerto Rican musicians who were recruited from the island to play in the theater pit bands and jazz clubs that catered primarily to African American audiences in such places as Washington, D.C. and New York (Tizol 1978). During the years prior to and during World War I, many island musicians were recruited because of their musicianship and their ability to read music. Most municipalities on the island offered music programs to keep youngsters out of trouble, and these programs produced loads of very talented youth (Malavet 2002). Circa 1920, except for the leader, the entire pit orchestra of the legendary Howard Theater in Washington was composed of Puerto Rican musicians, and it included Tizol (Dance 1981: 63). The skills possessed by the musicians became known when the first US-based recording companies visited the island. James Reese Europe, an African American band leader who had been employed by a recording company, was instrumental in their initial recruitment. Researchers from the Memphis Archives have documented that Lieutenant James Reese Europe was also responsible for organizing the band for the Harlem Hellfighters. He is credited with introducing jazz to France and the rest of Europe with that band. The 1917 Hellfighters included at least 18 musicians from Puerto Rico, including Rafael and Jesús Hernández (Kay 1996). Later, Rafael Hernández developed into the island’s most prolific and successful composer. He wrote music of many genres, including those of his homeland.

In 1920 Tizol was recruited by recognized bassist Rafael “Ralph” Escudero (Tizol 1978). Escudero was recruiting on behalf of Andrew Thomas, who was managing the legendary Howard Theater in Washington (Aponte Ledée 1996: 31). A tuba player turned bassist, Escudero enjoyed a positive reputation in the early jazz scene. He had arrived in New York from Puerto Rico in 1912, as a result of obtaining a scholarship from the Harlem-based New Amsterdam Association (Chadbourne 2005: 1). He played with many of the leading orchestras, including Fletcher Henderson and the McKinley’s Cotton Pickers. Escudero was also a band-mate of Duke Ellington when they played with the Wilbur Sweatman band (Tucker 1991: 82). Escudero, along with others, eventually returned to the island (Chadbourne 2005).

Once in the States, Tizol played trombone for the Marie Lucas band at the Howard. Later he also worked for the Russell Wooding group, the White Brothers, Gertie Wells, Cliff Jackson, and Bobby Lee’s Cottonpickers (Dance 1981: 114; Dietrich 1995: 52).

An impressive contingent of musicians and other workers had settled in the New York and Washington of this period in time to participate in the marvelous cultural surge known as the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance. The Renaissance period produced an array of African American writers, artists, and musicians. This cultural surge unfolded throughout many African American communities on the mainland and beyond. Puerto Rican musicians such as Ralph and Bob Escudero, Rogelio “Ram” Ramírez, Ramón “Moncho” Usera, Francisco “Paco” Tizol, Oscar Madera, Rafael Duchesne, and other Boricuas such as Arturo Alfonso Schomburg and Elvera “Baby” Sánchez, were part of the Harlem Renaissance experience (Glasser 1995).⁶

Tizol was lucky in that he came into a prestigious if not a wealthy San Juan family, despite being born out of wedlock. The Tizols produced numerous leading musicians who were part of the best orchestras on the island. Several of them were also music teachers who devoted their time to educating the poorest children in such schools as the Asilo de Beneficiencia in Old San Juan (Tizol 1978).

There were Tizols who became medical doctors, and others who entered politics and became elected officials of the government of Puerto Rico. Their impact is remembered by the several streets, and other venues that carry the Tizol name. Fortunately, there are several articles that detail the many contributions of this illustrious family. In the world of music, Manuel Tizol was the most distinguished during the late 19th and 20th centuries (Huyke 1927: 181–5). Manolo Tizol, as he was best known, was the biological uncle and adopted father to young Juan Tizol; Juan Tizol senior died before his son was ten.

Juan and Manuel Tizol shared the same home in Old San Juan, where now a plaque commemorates the many accomplishments of the latter. Manuel Tizol was also Juan Tizol’s music teacher and taught him how to play the violin and the euphonium. He also taught the youngster how to read and write music (Tizol 1978). Several photographs are available that depict the youthful Tizol as a member of orchestras led by Manolo Tizol. One photograph shows Tizol at the age of 10 as a violinist. In another picture, taken circa 1915, Tizol is holding a valve “bombardino” (a baritone horn that resembles a miniature tuba), with which he experimented before moving to the valve trombone. In 1916, a snapshot was taken, in which Tizol is a member of a symphony composed of Puerto Rican and visiting German musicians. Tizol is captured holding what was probably his first valve trombone. The picture was taken at the historic, but no longer existent Old San Juan Teatro Apolo (Campos Parsi 1976). By the time Tizol leaves the island to permanently settle in the United States, he had composed

at least one Puerto Rican *danza*, which he called “Julita” (in tribute a girl that he knew) and which was performed by the Manuel Tizol orchestra (Aponte Ledée 1996: 35).⁷

Juan Tizol manifested tremendous respect for his uncle Manuel. Many of the personal qualities possessed by Juan Tizol were acquired from his uncle (Tizol 2005). The trombonist was known for his punctuality, honesty, commitment, and loyalty. Band leaders such as Ellington, Harry James, and Louie Bellson respected Tizol’s leadership (Bellson 2002). He was often asked to prepare the orchestras and new band-members before a performance. Juan Tizol was also known to be a practical joker although this was not attributed to his uncle. He was a devoted husband and companion who maintained a strong relationship with his wife for more than sixty years until she passed away in 1982. Tizol was also an excellent money manager who owned properties in Washington and Los Angeles. He also made an effort to maintain ownership of his compositions to ensure that he would receive royalties when they were reproduced. His estate continues to receive revenues for all his compositions that continue to be recorded (Tizol 2005).

Although Tizol was a smoker until he was almost 70, he was not a drinker. He was extremely religious and when not traveling attended church every day in the company of his wife.⁸ Two of his compositions, “Get Back on the Road” (1946) and “Lovely Lady Dressed in Blue” (1958), have profoundly religious lyrics prepared by him.

Tizol was sometimes described as the only “white” man in the Ellington orchestra (Gordon 2000). His Caribbean heritage was often overlooked. However, he was known for his antiracist positions. He often refused services that were not provided to his black fellow band members. He was raised in a racially mixed environment in San Juan and later was married to an African-American woman for more than sixty years. His experiences provided him with the background to deal with racism in the States. Ellington historian Patricia Willard (2003) said that “race and color were just not an issue with him,” even though he often dealt with racism. If you did not know Tizol, you may not understand this aspect of him. This was the case in a well-documented confrontation with pioneering bassist Charles Mingus. In early 1953, as a new member of the Ellington band, Mingus once attacked Tizol and later charged him with racism.

The Mingus incident

The confrontation with now-legendary bassist Charles Mingus is often cited when Juan Tizol’s name surfaces in jazz circles. The incident has had racially charged connotations because of the manner in which, years later, Charles Mingus elected to describe the event. The fact that Tizol was often perceived to be white and Mingus black also adds to the racial overtones.

Charles Mingus described this darker incident involving Juan Tizol in his atypical and controversial 1971 memoir *Beneath the Underdog*. According to Mingus, a disagreement with Tizol, complete with physical threats, a knife and racial epithets, led to the former’s dismissal from the Ellington band after only a three-day stay, from January 30th to February 2nd in 1953. Tizol’s recollection of the event was much different from that of Mingus, and seemed unaware of the racial twist that Mingus gave the story. The Mingus version in his biography has been received with some speculation by jazz historians.

Mingus had recently joined the band, as a substitute, for an engagement at the Bandbox in New York (Nicholson 1999: 295). The incident evolved when Tizol suggested that the younger Mingus did not comprehend a request made by Tizol

who was often asked by Ellington to rehearse the band. The new bass player, feeling that his musicianship had been criticized, grabbed a piece of heavy steel pipe that was found in the wings of the theater and advanced towards Tizol. As the curtain rose, Mingus reluctantly dropped his weapon. The instant the performance was over, Ellington gestured to his road manager, pointed to Mingus, and commanded, "Pay him his two weeks—now!" (Hentoff 1965: 64–6). Mingus was unceremoniously fired on February 2, 1953.

When Mingus biographer, Gene Santoro (2000), described the confrontation he depicts a less aggressive event. Santoro minimizes the dispute to a simple shouting match. Santoro may have purposefully minimized the confrontation in an attempt to reduce the impact of other well-documented Mingus confrontations with co-workers.

In 1971, almost twenty years after the altercation, Charles Mingus (1971) stated that the confrontation with Tizol occurred at the Apollo Theater in Harlem where the Ellington band had an engagement beginning February 20th 1953. Mingus was incorrect when identifying the date and location. He provided the following account:

Tizol wants you to play solo he has written where bowing is required. You raised the solo an octave, where the bass isn't too muddy. He doesn't like that, and comes to the room under the stage where you're practicing and comments you're like the rest of the niggers in the band, you can't read. You ask Juan how he's different from the niggers in the band and he states that one of the ways he's different is that HE IS WHITE. So you run his ass upstairs. You leave the rehearsal room, proceed toward the stage ... and [as] the curtain of the Apollo Theater goes up a yelling, whooping Tizol rushes out and lunges at you with a bolo knife. The rest you remember from Duke's own words in his dressing room as he changes after the show.

Juan Tizol (1978) provided the following recounting of the events of February 2, 1953 in a manner that is dramatically different from that given by Charles Mingus.

What really happened, this little piece of music I wrote for him. So I ask him about it, and he took his bass down, and I went down there and I showed him and said, 'Try to play this to see what it sound like on bass,' and he tried and so forth, and he wanted to raise it an octave higher. I said, 'I don't want that. If I wanted to write that for a cello, I would have wrote it for a cello! I want to hear this on bass.' So apparently, he got insulted or something. I said, 'Well, go ahead and do what you want. I'm going upstairs to my dressing room.' So he followed me upstairs to tell me, what's this that and the other and so forth; I don't know; he raised a lot of hell, so by this time it came for the show. I went downstairs and he was still hot and said he was going to kick me in the behind, you know? 'I should kick your behind.' I said, 'You gonna do what?' and repeated it. So I said, 'I tell you what I'm gonna do; I'm going

upstairs and when I come back I would like you to kick me right in the behind.' And I went upstairs and when I came down, he thought I had a knife. And he grabbed one of those big pieces of iron that holds curtains and he got it in his hand and I remember, Carney said, 'Watch out, Juan, he's got a piece of iron!' But he was still thinking I had a knife. Well I used to carry a knife with me. Because you can never tell, especially around Harlem or somewhere like that. But not this time. After the show he went upstairs and in my dressing room, and I was so nervous, I was crying. And he came up there and the manager was there at the door of my dressing room, he still wanted to keep arguing with me. And I didn't respond or anything. I stayed right like that in my dressing room, and Celley was there trying to hold him back. So Duke came over, I don't know how, but he told Celley [the road manager] to throw him out, to give him his two weeks notice and pay him off and let him go.

The incident was unfortunate and triggered by misunderstandings. If Mingus had better known the elderly statesman of the Ellington orchestra, the incident could have been avoided. Mingus did not know that Tizol confronted racists when with Ellington and James. He worked and lived among African Americans in Washington and Harlem for many, many years. As a newcomer to the Ellington organization, Mingus did know Tizol. In the following years Mingus, despite his success, had several violent confrontations and was sometimes called a madman.

Tizol the composer

In the United States, Juan Tizol composed music that can be classified into four genres: Exotica, Latin Jazz, Ballads, and Swing.

In jazz, he is best known for the creations dubbed "exotica" by jazz aficionados. Tizol, in fact, has been extolled for his "exotica" because of his immensely successful "Caravan" and other similar compositions (Spaceagepop 1997). The genre gets its name because the music takes the listener to distant, mythical, and mystical lands. The exotica music in jazz leaves one with the impression that it originates in the Middle East or Orient. In Tizol's case, it is a genre that has roots in Latin America, derived from the Moorish history of Spain, and came to Puerto Rico thanks to the Andalusian *décimas*. *Décimas* came to the Latin America from Spain; it's a ten-line poetic verse put to music. In Puerto Rico the *seis* serves as that musical vehicle. Since Tizol lived his first twenty years on the island, he was clearly the product of the island's culture and as such, the musical traits of his homeland influenced his compositional creations. Clearly, when Tizol was growing-up in San Juan, he listened to the incredible variety of music that came to the island from all parts of the world. Tizol was proud of the cosmopolitan nature of the music of his homeland. He often spoke about the variety of performances that made stops in Puerto Rico before anywhere else in the Americas (Tizol 1978). In a 1978 interview, Tizol indicates that the *Barber of Seville* made its debut in Puerto Rico before New York. Tizol also said that operas, operettas, and zarzuelas were produced on the island (Aponte Ledée 1978: 31). In addition, many island municipalities sponsored evening concerts known as *retretas* in the town plazas. Various churches also

organized bands to accompany a variety of church-related activities. That reality explains, in part, the origins of the rhythmic ideas contained in his creations labeled *exotica*.

His most popular composition, “Caravan,” has been recorded by so many artists that a Californian radion station, KFIC, considered playing different versions for 24 hours straight (Dance and Morgenstern 1978: 42). Ellington biographer Stanley Dance said that even if Tizol had composed nothing else, he would doubtless remain immortal for having written “Caravan’... Widely recorded by other bands, it has become an evergreen...” (Dance and Morgenstern 1978: 42). The incredible success of “Caravan” motivated other composers of the period to create tunes in this unique genre. In addition to “Caravan,” other Tizol compositions that are also classified as *exotica* include “Bakiff,” “Pyramid,” “Bagdad,” “By the Shalimar” (1945), “Zanzibar” (1946), and “Keb-lah” (1946), among others.

“Bakiff” is another excellent example of *exotica*. When the Ellington Orchestra first performed at Carnegie Hall, an almost six-minute version of “Bakiff” was featured with Tizol as soloist. This composition was recently included in a jazz anthology devoted to essential recordings that feature the violin. Instrumentalist Jon

Hassell has also released a tribute composition titled “Destination Bakiff” that is largely based on Tizol’s work.

Two other *exotica* samples, “Pyramid” and “Bagdad,” have also been recorded by other artists. Two interesting versions of “Bagdad,” one by Boyd Reaburn (1944) and the other by Gunther Schuller (1980), were recorded confirming the attractiveness of the composition. In a 1980 interview, Tizol indicates that many people thought that he was an “Oriental man” because of his *exotica* creations (Tizol 1980). What is certain is that many do not realize that Middle Eastern traits are part of Puerto Rican culture even to this day, and this may best explain the origins of Tizol’s *exotica* compositions.

Tizol also stands out as composer of creations of another genre best known as jazz Latino or Latin Jazz. In fact Tizol has been described as the “progenitor” of Latin Jazz by music critics such as George

Kanzler (1998). Latin Jazz is often described as a mix of Latin rhythms with improvised jazz. Music historians have written that Tizol distinguishes himself as the first contemporary musician to focus on the integration of jazz and Latin music through compositions and arrangements that have been recorded by numerous artists. It is important to note, however, that Tizol never called his tunes Latin jazz; instead, he simply referred to his Latin compositions as “Spanish melodies” during interviews. In the 1978 interview by Patricia Willard on behalf of the NEA Oral History Project, he stated that it was Duke Ellington who allowed him to play his “Spanish melodies” (several of which were recorded).

While it’s important to recognize Tizol’s contribution to the development of Latin jazz in more recent history, it is also critical to understand that the mix of Latin rhythms and jazz is phenomenon that begins in the very cradle of jazz, the city of New Orleans. This genre was the product of “Spanish Tinge,” a term that has been credited to the great pianist Ferdinand La Menthe, who was best known as Jelly Roll Morton and is often cited as an initial exponent. The very talented Jelly Roll Morton was a Louisiana Creole of mixed African-American and French-Cajun descent. He was very proud of his Latin roots and his French heritage, which he believed influenced his music. The influence of Latin music can be appreciated in the compositions with a “Spanish tinge,” which were recorded during the incipient period of jazz.

William Tyers is another pioneering Creole who also receives recognition for his fusion of Latin music with jazz. His compositions of the early 20th century such as “Panamá,” “Maori,” and “Admiration” are examples of Latin jazz in its very earliest forms. Tyers’ version of “Admiration” was recorded circa 1916. Duke Ellington recorded that composition by Tyers in 1930. The Tyers version is sometimes confused with the “Admiration” composed by Tizol that Ellington recorded in 1935. The beautiful Tizolian creation, however, does not feature Latin rhythmic characteristics.

According to musicologist and Frank Sinatra biographer, Will Friedwald (1998: 4), Tizol “was, in fact, the first composer for a prominent orchestra to meld Latin American music and big band jazz.” Friedwald does not go as far as previously mentioned George Kanzler, who identified Tizol as the progenitor of Latin jazz. However, he highlights Tizol’s role as a composer of Latin jazz tunes. The first recorded Tizol composition in this genre was his 1935 “Porto Rican Chaos.” This was followed by “Jubilesta,” “Conga Brava,” “Moon over Cuba,” and “She” (1951), among others. There are many students of jazz who also consider “Caravan” as an exceptional example, not only of *exotica*, but also of early Latin jazz. This is especially true for the original 1936 version that was recorded by a small group composed of Ellington band members who called themselves Barney Bigard and his Jazzopaters. The 1936 “Caravan” maintains a Latin tempo while developing a mystical theme of the exotic.

After Ellington recorded “Porto Rican Chaos.” it was subsequently recorded under its new title, “Moonlight Fiesta,” by Harry James on three occasions. It was also recorded by Louie Bellson, and others. “Jubilesta” was most recently recorded by trombonist Dan Barrett and the band. It was the title recording of the CD collection. It has also been recorded by the legendary Charlie Barnet. “Moon over Cuba” was recorded by Ellington. Years later, the famed Mexican actor Jorge Negrete, who started as a lyricist, developed lyrics in Spanish, and it was recorded in Cuba as “Luna de Cuba.”

In the years that followed, the popularity of “Caravan,” “Moonlight Fiesta,” and “Jubilesta,” among others, began to earn Tizol the recognition in Latin jazz that he deserves. Today, the popularity of Latin jazz has grown tremendously and features a variety of strains, including Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, and Afro-Boricua to name a few.



Juan Tizol and his wife, Rosebud Browne, aboard the SS Olympic during the Ellington Orchestra first European tour (1933). Photograph courtesy of María Asunción “Suncky” Tizol. Reprinted by permission.

Tizol was also known for composing wonderfully romantic ballads. He fell deeply in love when he was only 20 years of age with Rosebud Browne; an attractive young lady from Washington, D.C. The passion and happiness that Tizol felt for Rosebud was the apparent inspiration of his romantic compositions. They met in 1920 and remained loyal companions until 1982, when Rosebud, who preferred to be called Rose, passed away. Their letters, photographs, and various compositions serve as testimony to a love affair that extended for more than six decades. He named two compositions in her honor; “Rosebud” (1942), copyright with Billy Strayhorn; and “Rosie” (1960), copyright with Jerry Gladstone. The letters written by Tizol after Rosebud’s passing confirm that he died of a broken heart less than two years later (Tizol 2005).

Among the recorded compositions of the romantic genre, the following stand out: “Have a Heart” (1938), “A Gypsy without a Song” (1938), “Pyramid,” “She,” “Rainbow” (1952), and “Escapade” (1957). In 1978, Tizol indicated that his wife’s favorite composition was “A Gypsy without a Song.” The 1957 “Escapade” is a fine example of a contemporary instrumental ballad with a modern arrangement recorded by the Louie Bellson orchestra. In a 1998 tribute concert of the music of Tizol, which was held in New York City’s Merken Concert Hall, “Have a Heart,” a piece whose title changed to “Lost in Meditation” when lyrics were added, was among the featured compositions. The tribute concert was produced by the Duke Ellington Society of New York. Steve Turre played the trombone; Mongo Santamaría played congas; Andy González was the bassist; the former Ellington sideman Britt Woodman was the other trombonist; Byron Stripling was the trumpeter; Victor Lewis played the drums; Frank Wess played the alto sax; and Stanley Cowell was on the piano. Violinist Regina Carter joined the band for their interpretation of “Bakiff.” The singer was Akua Dixon.

It’s been said that Juan Tizol’s trombone style was best suited for the jazz sub-genre known as “swing,” and this is arguably confirmed with several of his compositions for that genre. Swing music begins to take hold in the early 1930s (Levinson 1999: 34). Among its characteristics are the arrangements for big

bands with large brass sections. Tizol’s experience with large ensembles dates back to his days in Puerto Rico, when he played with large municipal bands and island-based symphonies. His best-known composition in the swing genre is “Perdido.” “Perdido,” along with “Caravan” are considered Tizol’s signature composition. Both are considered jazz standards and have been recorded by hundreds of artists worldwide.



With members of the Harry James band (circa 1945). From left: Juan Tizol, trombonist David Robbins and saxophonist Willie Smith. Photograph courtesy of María Asunción “Sunby” Tizol. Reprinted by permission.

“Perdido” gets its name from the legendary street in the Storyville section of New Orleans. According to Tizol (1978), the band was traveling through the city on their way to a club date on that street when he was in the middle of elaborating the melody for “Perdido.” When Tizol turned to a colleague to ask where they were, “Perdido” was the reply. Tizol then remarked that in his country the word Perdido meant lost. With that thought in mind, he dubbed his creation “Perdido.” Ironically, Perdido Street happens to be the cradle of legendary jazz icon Louis Armstrong, who is considered by many the finest exponent of the genre.

The big-band swing compositions written by Tizol that are true standouts include “Admiration,” “Lazy Bug” (1938), “Night Song” (1938), “Flaming Sword” (1940), “Joe Blow” (1944), “You Can’t Have Your Cake and Eat It Too” (1946), “The Sphinx” (1946), and “Cuidado” (also known as “Vagabonds”), among others. These compositions are designed to feature the complete orchestra while providing opportunities for featured soloists to improvise. For example, the outstanding soloist on “Night Song” is the legendary trumpeter Cootie Williams. The incomparable electric-guitarist Irving Ashby distinguishes himself in “The Sphinx.” Willie Smith, an exceptional alto saxophonist and vocalist is the outstanding soloist in “You Can’t Have Your Cake and Eat It Too.”

Tizol as soloist can be appreciated in “Flaming Sword,” which was a featured composition in a Jazz from Lincoln Center program that was devoted to the Duke Ellington-Tizol collaboration. The program used another Tizol composition for its title “Moon Over Cuba: The Latin Duke” when it was aired by National Public Radio (NPR) on September 8, 2000 (Hooper 2000).

Tizol: The unique valve trombonist

A composer of memorable recordings, Tizol may be best known as an extra-ordinary, trail-blazing valve trombonist. His use of the valve trombone as opposed to the slide made him more of a pioneering innovator on this unique brass instrument. Duke Ellington was among the first to recognize the potential of a valve trombonist when almost no trombonists played the valve version. It was also Duke Ellington who envisioned the use of the valve trombone together with the saxophones in a “duet” style that remains unique to this day (Dietrich 1995: 53). When listening to the pairing of the Tizol trombone with the saxophones, the average listener can have an impossible time distinguishing the two instruments. Ellington also realized and exploited the fact that the valve trombone allows for notes to be played with greater speed than the slide (Dietrich 1995: 53).

The valve trombone, unlike the slide, made it difficult to “fake” the notes. This was very important for Ellington, who, often times, was very fussy about playing a melody as it was written without smears to camouflage missed notes (Boyer 1944). Since Tizol there have been few valve trombonists that stand out. One of Tizol’s disciples was John Sanders, who had joined the Ellington orchestra in the early 1950s. Sanders learned to play the valve trombone and purchased such an instrument from Tizol, who had it made to his specifications. Bob Brookmeyer is a contemporary valve trombonist who has received substantial recognition, especially in Europe. Bob Enevoldsen was another valve trombonist who achieved prominence. Jazz specialist Steve Voce recently labeled him an icon of the trombone and ranked Enevoldsen third in hierarchy in that instrument, behind Tizol and Brookmeyer (Voce 2005: 1). The valve trombone remains an enigmatic instrument, and Tizol, arguably, continues to be its best recognized exponent among jazz aficionados.



Juan Tizol (left), his cousin Antonio Tizol (right) and his uncle Manuel Tizol (sitting), circa 1914. Photograph courtesy of María Asunción "Sunby" Tizol. Reprinted by permission.

Tizol achieved substantial acclaim as a soloist on the valve trombone with Duke Ellington. Later, Harry James, Louie Bellson, Nelson Riddle, and Nat King Cole would also give Tizol opportunities to solo in their respective orchestras. As a soloist, Tizol would often play the trombone in a style that was often described as "sweet" and "Italianesque," that is with great vibrato. Tizol did not often improvise; however, as Ellington specialist Dan Morgenstern writes, "Tizol demonstrates that he could improvise quite effectively when given the opportunity" (1978: 42).

With Ellington one can appreciate Tizol as a soloist on the following recordings of his own creations: "Porto Rican Chaos and Moonlight Fiesta," "Lost in Meditation," "A Gypsy without a Song," "Moon Over Cuba," "Conga Brava," "Bakiff," "Bagdad," and "She," among others. Tizol, obviously, wrote himself in, as soloist, for many of his compositions. Other Ellington recordings that feature Tizol as soloist include: "KoKo," "Chelsea Bridge," "Lament of a Javanette," "Browne Suede," "If I Thought You Cared," "Watch the Birdie," "Rain Check," "Madame Will Drop Her Shawl," "Cocktails for Two," "Orson," and "Blue Jean Beguine," among others. In January 1943, the Ellington orchestra performed for the first time in the world famous Carnegie Hall. Ellington chose that venue to feature Tizol's trombone style throughout much of the concert but especially in Tizol's "Bakiff" and "Jazz Waltz."

With the Harry James and His Music Makers Orchestra, Tizol was a featured soloist in the following recordings of his own tunes: "Joe Blow," "Zambú," "By the Shalimar," "Perdido," "Keb-lah", and several recordings of "Moonlight Fiesta."

Tizol also provides solos on recordings from other composers recorded by James such as: "Carnival," "I'll Remember April," "Tenderly," "Cherry," "Don't Be That Way," "Jealousie," and "Sleepy Lagoon," among others.

With the Louie Bellson Orchestra, Tizol is a standout soloist in the following compositions of his own creation: "Rainbow," "Escapade," "Caravan," and various versions of "Moonlight Fiesta" and "Perdido." With Bellson, Tizol is also a soloist in: "Passion Flower," "Music," "Romance," and "Especially Love," and "The Best Days," among others.

Tizol was also fortunate to have played with Nelson Riddle, the legendary band leader. Riddle was a former trombonist before leading his orchestra when backing many great singers. The selection of Tizol by Nelson Riddle in 1955 is a genuine recognition of the former's abilities on the trombone. Tizol had opportunities to play and record with Nelson Riddle when his orchestra accompanied Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. Two outstanding examples of Tizol as soloist can be heard on the 1956 recordings, with Nat King Cole singing, "I Promise You," and "The Way I Love You."

Jonathan Schwartz, a Frank Sinatra biographer and radio program host, says that one of the finest albums ever recorded by the memorable crooner was *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*. Schwartz goes on to say that this album best reflects the unique and captivating style of Frank Sinatra (Schwartz 2004). Tizol had the good fortune of being part of the Nelson Riddle Orchestra when this historic LP was recorded. This was one of eleven LPs, among other opportunities that Tizol had to work with the often considered most popular singer to come from the United States. Tizol also accompanied Frank Sinatra when the singer had his own television program and when he recorded with the Billy May orchestra.

In 1956, Tizol was recruited to form part of a band organized by the great pianist and singer Nat King Cole. With Cole, Tizol had extended stays with the band that was used to broadcast the singer's television program. Nat King Cole was the first African American to have a full variety show transmitted to a national audience from 1956 to 1957. One of the more memorable moments for Tizol was a live recording of his "Caravan" for the show, which aired with him as soloist. That rendition of his "Caravan" is now available on a video documentary of the great singer's life and on a CD of his recordings. Other Tizol solos can be found on that CD of Cole, including: "Blame It on My Youth," "The Lonely One," and, "What Is There To Say" (Aponte Ledée 1996: 35). These three songs are often credited to Tizol as composer because his solos are impressive and dominate the recordings. Tizol was the invited trombone soloist for the *After Midnight* LP that was originally recorded in late 1956. He was one of four instrumentalists recruited that included trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison, alto saxophonist Willie Smith, and violinist Stuff Smith. Pictures of their instruments were placed on empty chairs for the photograph of the LP cover. Tizol's valve trombone was pictured, and a brief biographical sketch of him was included in the liner notes.

Tizol as transcriber par excellence

When Juan Tizol joined the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1929, he immediately assumed responsibilities as chief copyist (Collier 1987). He maintained that position until the early 1940s, when he was replaced by Tom Whaley; however, Tizol was known to continue to copy for Ellington on a more limited basis until the 1960s. The copyist is also known as the music transcriber or extractor. In this capacity, Tizol would transcribe the parts for each of the members of the band. This was an

extremely important role. Tizol said that he learned to write and therefore transcribe music while he was growing up in Puerto Rico (Dance 1981: 114). We must not underestimate the importance of Tizol's role, especially when one considers that jazz, the then incipient genre, was primarily improvised with a few melodies written as formal compositions (Schuller 1968). Former Ellington trumpeter, the great Rex Stewart (1991: 153–4), describes Tizol's important role in the following manner:

[Tizol] was truly an important cog in the Duke's wheel, because he did all the extractions of Duke's voluminous writing efforts. This was no easy chore, as oft times Duke would attempt to write things that couldn't be written! Then Juan would scribble a facsimile and spend hours interpreting what the boss intended.

In 1933, musicologist H.A. Overstreet followed the Duke Ellington Orchestra for several engagements. He documented his observations in *The Duke Ellington Reader*. The following are observations of Tizol as transcriber by Overstreet:

While the other sections are at work, Juan Tizol, the Puerto Rican valve trombonist; will have been busy with the score, taking down the arrangements as it is made for the other sections, sometimes writing down the trombone parts, sometimes indicating them sketchily, for elaboration later. This rough score serves many purposes; for the moment it is used for reference in settling arguments, for there are plenty of these until the entire arrangement is completed. These arguments would be politely termed exchanges of ideas, but they sound like arguments. Remarkable as the memories of the individual musicians are, Ellington's is even more remarkable, and he is able to detect any deviation from the parts as he [Tizol] outlines them (Overstreet 1933: 31, 52).

In 1993, Duke Ellington biographer John Hasse cited *Metronome* editor Doron K. Antrim, who provided this 1936 take on how Ellington transcriptions evolved. According to Antrim (Hasse 1993: 251–2):

If Duke Ellington has an idea for a tune, the men sit in with him until he finishes it, accepting criticism and suggestions from each. Ellington would go through a piece section by section—first the saxophone, then trumpets, next trombones, telling each player to play for four measures. Each player would play his notes and then the section would try it. Then an entire sixteen bars would be practiced in this manner before the whole band would try it. Ellington would have everyone repeat what they'd played a number of times so as to memorize it.

Meanwhile, Juan Tizol might be writing down notes of what everyone was playing, thereby creating a rough score. Ellington would take the score home and tinker and polish it.

Ellington and Tizol devised their own system to work out the developing transcriptions. According to the great trombonist (Tizol 1978):

He [Ellington] used to have a system that in the Cotton Club after we got through, we'd both go to Duke Ellington's house and while he was writing I would start extracting for the whole band. Like writing on the staff, he'd write for the four saxophones and three trumpets and three trombones I got to go there and I would extract them and transpose the whole thing for the band. And I would stay there sometimes until, gosh, eight or nine o'clock in the morning writing.

There is little doubt that Ellington knew what he was doing when he recruited Juan Tizol to serve as the orchestra's extractor. Ellington was very much aware of the fact that this was a very important role in a band, especially in the nascent period of jazz. This role clearly required someone with impeccable music skills, clear handwriting, honesty, and a willingness to protect the creations by Ellington or other members of the band. As an unplanned tribute to the talents of Tizol as transcriber, his work is now part of the Duke Ellington Collection of the Museum of American History, under the direction of the prestigious Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. Several transcriptions of Tizol compositions are also maintained by the Tizol family in Puerto Rico.

The many talents of Tizol as trombonist, soloist, composer, transcriber, and arranger afforded him many opportunities to work with many of the finest musicians and singers of his time. In addition to Ellington, James, Bellson, Cole, and Riddle, he was also recruited by several other leading artists. Tizol also recorded or performed with Woody Herman, Benny Carter, Rosemary Clooney, Bing Crosby, June Christy, Patti Dunham, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday, Ruby Keeler, Louie Prima, Peggy Lee, Sara Vaughn, Flo Ziegfeld, and Pearl Bailey, among others.

To appreciate the artistry of Tizol's trombone the following recordings are recommended. With Duke Ellington, Tizol participated in too many recordings to list here; nevertheless, a German compendium of 40 CDs with almost 800 recordings from 1924 to 1947 is available from The International Music Company. It incorporates many Tizol solos and compositions with Ellington. To appreciate Tizol with Harry James several CDs are available, including: *Harry James: The Best of the Big Bands*, *Trumpet Blues: Harry James & His Music Makers*, *Jazz Masters 55: Harry James*, *Always: 1943–46*, *Meadowbrook Memories*, among others. Tizol's collaboration with Nat King Cole can be heard on *Night Lights*, *The Piano Style of Nat King Cole*, and *Complete After Midnight Sessions*. With Louie Bellson, Tizol can be heard on the albums *The Just Jazz Allstars*, *Music, Romance and Especially Love*, *Drumorama*, and several others.



NOTES

- ¹ A copy of the application for Social Security membership was sent to author of this article.
- ² The Duke Ellington Collection at The Museum of American History (2005) The Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ellis Island Museum Archives, (2005). Ship Manifest for the SS Brazos. During this period passengers arriving from outside the US were processed through Ellis Island even when they were US citizens.
- ⁵ Ellis Island Museum Archives, Ship Manifest for the SS St. Paul.
- ⁶ Legendary bibliophile Schomburg, whose book collection became the basis of the center for research in Africana that bears his name, was also called the ‘documentor’ of the Harlem Renaissance (Sinette 1989). Elvera Sánchez, who is best known as Sammy Davis Jr.’s mother, was a dancer and a club manager.
- ⁷ The danza is considered a semiclassical composition that evolved primarily because of European influence. It is often cited as the national genre of the island.
- ⁸ Homily for Juan Tizol (1984). April 26, Church of The Transfiguration, Los Angeles.
- ⁹ The Mississippi River delta city of New Orleans has an interesting and colorful history. This unique southern city was a colony of Spain and France and as a result, remnants of the musical heritage of those two European countries survived up to the period when jazz was in its infancy and beyond. Colonial New Orleans was also the recipient of Spanish troops that arrived from Greater Antilles and elsewhere in the empire. As such, elements of the music that was native to the Caribbean and other parts of the empire could be heard in this metropolis (Collier 1987). The integration of the musical patterns derived from the heritage of Spain, France, black America, and the Caribbean occurred naturally during the emergence of jazz.

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