

# A Father's Pianistic Artistry, Rediscovered and Reborn

by Mark Walter, son of Cy Walter

**A**FTER A LONG BATTLE WITH CANCER, Cy Walter passed in 1968. He was, sadly, only 52. I also will reach that age this year; and am forever grateful that, for the first eleven years of my life, I was blessed with my loving father's presence. I was then unaware of Cy's giant musical stature—but, with a child's innocent yet astute perception, sensed that he was dearly beloved by all who knew him. It has now become my overarching purpose to ensure that Cy's amazing musical talent is not lost due to the passage of time; and to likewise make sure that his oeuvre, for too long relegated to relative obscurity, may be readily found by all who seek it.



Cy Walter

IN 2006, I RECEIVED A PHONE MESSAGE from Denmark. Lars Boye Jensen had found out how to reach me from Peter Mintun, a respected New York City pianist who had written the liner notes to the recent and first-ever CD release of Cy's playing ("*Cy Walter: The Park Avenue Tatum*", Shellwood Productions, 2006). "Could I possibly share with Lars *The Cy Walter Songbook* that I had created of my father's arrangements and compositions?" At the suggestion of Michael Feinstein, performer and preserver extraordinaire of the American Popular Songbook, I had recently filed these published and unpublished Cy Walter sheet music transcriptions with the Library of Congress. The Internet Age has meant that, through the Library's website, notice of my filing of this material has become easily accessible to all, worldwide.

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AND SO LARS, previously aware and enamored of Cy's music, had found out about this new trove—with one of the most happy results from that discovery being this excellent new CD. To hear this masterful pianist play Cy Walter's arrangements of composers like Rodgers, Gershwin, Porter, and Arlen, to name but a few, is for me a dream's joyous realization. My father's musical genius is here

born again, through the medium of this wonderful contemporary artist. Cy's brilliance was well-known to his contemporaries. For example, the composer Alec Wilder once wrote, in his liner notes for Cy's 1956 *Rodgers Revisited* album (also released on CD in 2008 by Atlantic's Collectables label), that "[Cy] creates so much beyond the call of duty that anyone who has heard his own songs played by Cy immediately has a greater respect for his own work". Fellow musicians would often come to the New York City Drake Hotel's Drake Room to hear Cy play (he was ensconced there for the better part of two decades, with the consequence that his name became synonymous with the room), many choosing to do so after having just finished their own nightly performances elsewhere. And Cy was, for many years from the 1930s through the 1950s, a regular radio presence, perhaps best known for his anchoring, as a duo pianist (along with Stan Freeman), ABC's popular *Piano Playhouse* program.

IN RESPONDING TO A QUERY as to Cy's musical stature, Michael Feinstein (who also was a child when Cy passed) observed: "[Cy] ... is unique. He played primarily in hotels and nightclubs, but he was no less talented than Tatum or Horowitz. So as far as I'm concerned, he ranks among the very best of any pianist of any order". Indeed, to Michael Feinstein I owe a great personal debt, for it was his outreach to my mother, Cam Walter LaGennusa, made over a decade ago, which became the catalyst for my rediscovery of my father's music. Eager to preserve what might still exist decades after Cy's passing, Michael queried Cam as to what music and memorabilia of Cy's she had retained; and, to the eternal gratitude of many, Cam had kept it all—sheet music, rare recordings, and a plethora of fascinating materials from Cy's four decades of performing and creating.

MICHAEL'S SUGGESTION TO CAM that she file Cy's published and unpublished sheet music with the Library of Congress did not bear immediate fruit: it was not until 2003 that she mentioned the conversation, and that she then shared with me what she had so presciently kept. Cam had, for decades, retained all of Cy's materials, moving them from residence to residence; and she astonished me by unearthing them from the closet over several months, each box revealing hitherto unknown facets of my father and his career. Many of these time-capsule treasures (photos, letters, publicity items, and other memorabilia of the New York music scene from the 1930s through the 1960s) we have presented for all to enjoy, with a detailed biography of Cy, at [www.cywalter.com](http://www.cywalter.com). Writer and Web Designer Richard Behrens, of Lambertville, New Jersey, first proposed and then created the Cy Walter website, for which he has the Walter family's eternal gratitude.

AND SO BEGAN my own personal foray of discovering, as an adult, my father's artistry. And an extraordinary, life-changing journey it has been, with new-found friends I would never have made, music I would never have enjoyed, and joyous shared experiences I would never have had. I feel doubly blessed, for through the gifts of both my mother and my father I have been provided with experiential windows into a world previously unknown to me. The ambassadors to this new world have been unfailingly generous, and include such talented people as Michael Feinstein; Peter Mintun; Falls Church, Virginia novelty pianist Alex Hassan; Sacramento, California pianist Richard Glazier; Eastman School of Music (Rochester, New York) Professor of Piano Tony Caramia; Brooklyn-based pianist Michael Kanan; Library of Congress musicologist Mark Eden Horowitz; NYC music theatre historian Dan Langan; audio restoration engineer Seth B. Winner; and countless others, all of whom share a common love and reverence for my father's work, and all of whom have striven, over the years, to share it and keep it alive.

HIGH AMONG those ambassadors is Lars Boye Jensen, who, along with his delightful and most musical family, I had the great pleasure of meeting in New York City in 2006. This happy occasion arose shortly after his initial outreach to me, and I treasure the friendship that has grown since that time. I am honored and thrilled to know that Lars, born in the same year as I, is now bringing his own considerable talent to merge with my father's in these beautiful performances of Cy's timeless arrangements. I applaud Lars' accomplishment, for, as Alec Wilder observed, "... were I to attempt one measure of [Cy's] more involved passages I'm certain I would end up with ten broken fingers". If Lars Boye Jensen's delightful explorations of Cy Walter's Great American Songbook arrangements bring you even a measure of the joy they have brought me, you will surely be saluting both Cy and Lars. Thanks, and happy listening!



Mark Walter (left) and Lars Boye Jensen

*Mark Walter*