

Ruby's Boys & Mamie Lee

AT THE PIANO

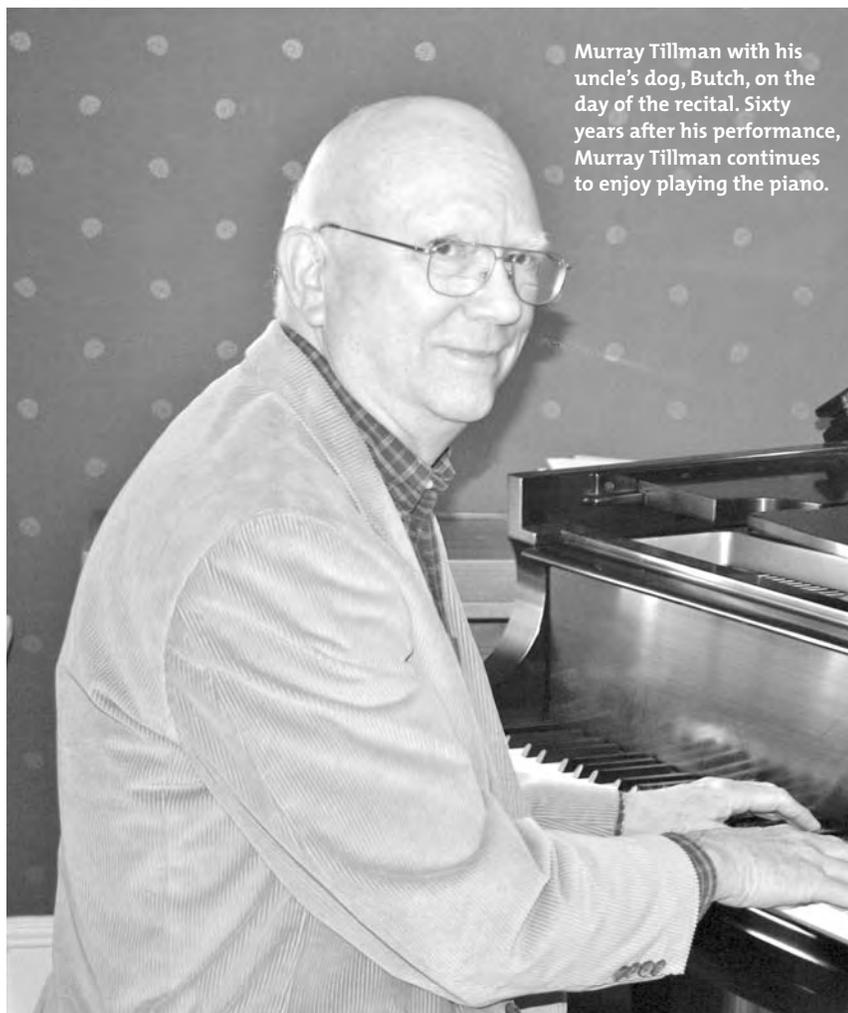
MURRAY TILLMAN

By 1940, the year I was born, the piano had lost its once dominant place as the entertainment center in most American households. Innovations such as the automobile, movies, radio, and phonograph had opened up new possibilities for social gatherings and family fun. That is, it had in many families but not in ours. All of our relatives, even the poorest of the poor, owned an upright piano even if no one could play it, which was rare. My aunt in Americus, Georgia, was the only exception, and I always felt sorry for her for that reason. If you didn't have a piano, something was missing from your life. She did, however, have a sewing machine.

We had an upright piano that I apparently learned to scale before I learned the scales. The family story goes that as a toddler I couldn't be left alone with the piano. I would climb to the top of the upright and toss sheet music everywhere. The story would end with a shake of the head and some line like: "He's been into music since he was a baby." Or, "He always loved to stomp out a tune."

Of course, I have no memories whatever of such an event. My earliest memories from Albany, Georgia, during the World War II years are indeed filled with music. Between my mother (Ruby) and older brother (Eddie), our upright piano stayed pretty busy. Mama would come home from seeing a movie, sit down at the keyboard, tinker around a bit, and then suddenly new sounds would take wing and soar from the piano. I especially remember her playing "Shine on Harvest Moon" while helping Eddie and me sing along with her playing.

Mama rented rooms in our big house on Pine Avenue to young women, or "girls" as she and Daddy called them, and



Murray Tillman with his uncle's dog, Butch, on the day of the recital. Sixty years after his performance, Murray Tillman continues to enjoy playing the piano.



To listen to his 1949 recital recording on the web, visit www.georgiabackroads.com. Click on the "Ruby's Boys" article link under Sample Articles and look there for the link to the recordings.

the girls, who seemed to come from lots of different places, called her “Mama.” On many occasions, our living room became party central for Mama and the girls, some of whom had invited their boyfriends. Eddie and I were sent to bed just as Mama and the piano were getting warmed up. Singing and laughter filled our bedroom next door so Eddie and I could hardly sleep. I remember one such night when Eddie procured a flashlight and a jar of hard candy. We slipped under the covers with the flashlight on and tried to unscrew the lid off of the candy jar. No luck.

When Mama’s older sister Aunt Mamie Lee visited us, she descended from what was said to be “up there.” I did not know where “up there” was. Even if they had said “Ohio,” I still would not have known. I could only guess that “up there” was some sort of skyward direction. But if you heard her play the piano, you could imagine that she was either from “up there,” an angel, or from “down there,” a demon. Either way, she was a terrific if not terrifying woman when she turned herself loose on the keyboard.

Actually, Aunt Mamie Lee was a happy, jovial woman and the musical star of our family. She used to play the piano in movie houses to accompany silent movies. In the early days, pianos were needed to mask the sounds of the not so “silent” movie projectors. Play anything but play it loudly was the order of the day. But when Aunt Mamie Lee began playing in movie theaters sometime after World War I, pianists were given a menu of dramatic expressions that was supposed to inspire them to conjure or select the appropriate musical accompaniment to match the action on the screen.

And could she conjure! Her playing contrasted many different moods, calm to stormy, slow to fast, soft flowing melodic lines to sudden bass tremolos, then arpeggios that raced up and down the keys. You just never knew what was next. When she started playing, nothing ended; it just kept on flowing like a musical river, one piece into another. When she finally quit, it was probably time to eat.

Eddie was busy with piano lessons and his playing could be heard throughout the house. Some of it was repetitive and dull, but some of it was sweet and pleasing to hear. He once showed me the music score to a new piece he was studying. The notes hung like clusters of grapes from the staves. He said it was a hard piece. I later learned that this piece was the

Rachmaninoff Prelude in C# minor, a very popular piece at the time and a challenge for any nine-year-old to play at all.

I also attended nighttime piano concerts with Mama and one or two of the girls from our house. In those days, itinerant concert pianists could actually make a living playing in small as well as large towns. By intermission, I was busy working on one of the girls to take me home, pleading that I was tired, sleepy, and bored, and, if the young woman was in a similar frame of mind, I succeeded. Today, I shudder when I see a parent with a small child coming into a recital hall. I feel the unease, the need for escape, and know too well the coming plea: “Mama, can we go home now?”

Lessons at the Birmingham Conservatory of Music

When we moved from Albany, Georgia, to Birmingham, Alabama, after World War II, Mama began to hint that I should start music lessons. I had managed to pick out “Reveille” on the keyboard, and it became my “signature” piece, but that was hardly a statement that I wanted to take lessons.

So as long as I had a choice, I resisted. I saw Eddie practicing long hours, and he wasn't smiling.

Eddie, moreover, had designs to make me smile less. He said, in words I will always remember, “My music teacher is the most beautiful woman in the world.” He described the joy of being in her presence. And she smelled good, too.

I challenged all that, but he stuck to his guns. Soon I began to have a disturbing thought: what if she was the most beautiful woman in the world? Eddie was seeing her for 30 minutes, sometimes an hour, each week. No, that didn't seem fair.

Finally, I negotiated with Mama to take one lesson with the stipulation that if Miss Murchison was not the most beautiful woman in the world, I would not have to continue. She agreed. (She would not, by the way, either confirm or deny Eddie's claim. Today, I see signs of a conspiracy.)

There was no denying it: Miss Murchison was the most beautiful woman in the world, and I had to keep on with piano lessons forever because of it. What a burden to shoulder at the age of six.

Mama as Teacher

I had noticed, of course, that Mama attended all of Eddie's music lessons and at home listened to him practice, critiqued his playing, and helped with difficult sections. She did the



The Tillman brothers (Murray, age seven, and Eddie, age twelve) on the day of their joint recital in Birmingham in May 1948.



The recital took place at the Birmingham Conservatory of Music, pictured here circa 1945.

same with me, which I found to be helpful and reassuring. She was gentle but firm, and always insisted that I practice one hour immediately after coming home from school. (This rule no doubt saved the life of many a crawfish in our neighborhood creek.)

She devoted herself to our playing, not that this was the only activity in her life. I sometimes hear of “tennis mothers” who demand too much of their young children, putting them under great stress to succeed. Although I might say that Eddie and I had a “piano mother,” I would not mean that she was overbearing or too demanding. She was enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and encouraging. She was our cheerleader as well as our teacher. In short, because she cared, we cared.

My First Recital: Everybody Plays

My first recital, held in 1947 when I was six, was probably no different than that of countless other piano students: all the students of your teacher play one piece, starting with the beginners and ending with those further along.

My moment in the sun, I would say, produced mixed reviews. My performance apparently went well, but my stage presence did not. I was told to “bow twice,” once before I played and once after I played. Somehow, I decided, just to be sure, I would bow twice before I played. My first bow, taken after a few steps onto the stage, produced polite applause. My second bow, taken closer to the piano, produced polite laughter. I was surprised by that. I wasn’t trying to be funny.

One eyewitness to this event (a friend of my mother known to me as “Aunt Bid” and who later became my stepmother) often told the story about how I sauntered out onto the stage, “... looking as though you didn’t have a bone in your body!” I

should always remember to hold my shoulders up, I was told. Aunt Bid went on to say, laughing as she did, “I was so embarrassed when you walked across that stage, I sank down in my seat about a foot.”

The 1948 Recital: Eddie and Murray Play

My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a mastectomy in 1945. Unfortunately, the cancer continued to gnaw its way through Mama’s body. I can only wonder at the questions she must have struggled with: How much time do I have left? What statement of my personal values, my greatest joys, can I share with family and friends? How can I be sure my boys won’t forget what we accomplished?

I believe she answered those three questions very directly: I must act now while I still have some strength; A piano recital by my boy; and record their music. In short, the 1948 recital was not just about two young boys playing piano music. It was a statement of happiness, accomplishment, and love.

Even though weakened by and enduring pain from the cancer, she planned the recital, the recording sessions (which came later), and guided Eddie and me towards those goals. (During those years, Eddie and I were fighting each other all the way.) In addition, she owned and ran a small beauty shop in our neighborhood. And, she kept in touch with Daddy who was running his business in Columbus, Georgia. To accomplish what she did, especially by herself, was remarkable. She lived a year and a half after the recital and about six months after the recording sessions.

Eddie played beautifully, although I never told him. He played the Mozart Sonata in G Major, a waltz and two preludes of Chopin, and some salon pieces by Grieg, Palmgren, and Ibert. My program included some short pieces by Bach, some easy pieces by John Thompson, and a few novelty songs. I didn’t mess up is about the best I would say for my playing. The program started with me playing a “set,” then Eddie, until the program ended with Eddie playing Ibert’s “Little White Donkey,” a translation of donkey rhythms into toe-tapping music.

The Recordings

The recording sessions took place in the spring of 1949. Eddie was twelve years old and I was eight. The 78 rpm recordings were made in a regular piano studio at the Conservatory. This required special timing because the Conservatory was usually a noisy place, piano music of all sorts swirling about inside and out like musical tornados.

The instructions I received were to make no noises before or after playing; just play each memorized piece from beginning to end like a regular recital. But this was not the usual recital. A microphone was positioned near the piano, and any sound you made would be recorded: coughs, squeaks, and wrong notes. This was the musical equivalent of writing in ink.

Before I was to play, my hands started to perspire in a very strange way: they felt sticky, but there was no moisture to wipe away. I mentioned this to my teacher, and she rubbed my

hands with her handkerchief, explaining that some pianists did this when they became real nervous. I don't know how Eddie approached the sessions.

The recording sessions started with a problem. And not just me. Somehow the recording equipment picked up a radio broadcast and recorded it along with the piano music. The problem was eventually overcome, and we recorded the planned selections over several days.

Mama gave copies of some of the recordings to a few relatives, and we kept a copy. When we moved to Columbus, Georgia, in June, 1950, after Mama died, the records went with us. Eddie took the recordings from Columbus in June of 1962 during a visit with his wife and children. I didn't know what happened to them after that.

Our Music after Mama Died

Mama died on November 3, 1949, four days before my ninth birthday. Eddie and I continued to take piano lessons up to the June 2, 1950 recital “for everyone.”

In February 1950, I played the Rondoletto by Beethoven for a jury of four faculty members. Their written evaluation noted that my tone was “superior,” technique was “greatly improved, excellent,” and dynamics were “very good, very clean.” And what about my old nemesis, stage presence? They reported that I was “very well poised.” So at last, I had learned to hold my shoulders up.

Eddie played at his highest level during those last months in Birmingham. When we moved to Columbus, we both stopped taking piano lessons. Eddie never resumed lessons or even played the pieces he had previously learned. He did occasionally play hymns and popular songs.

Music in Columbus

On February 12, 1953, when I was in seventh grade, my daddy died suddenly of a heart attack. Eddie, our new stepmother (the former Aunt Bid), and I forged a new life together in Columbus.

We still had our upright piano from the Albany and Birmingham days, and, while not taking lessons for three years, I had learned a few of the pieces that Eddie used to play. During the eighth grade, I began piano studies again with a kindly but uninspiring teacher. I shortly switched to my junior high music teacher, John Robert Poe, who had a great sense of humor and thorough knowledge of music. He let me borrow many of his piano records (especially the Beethoven piano sonatas).

Mr. Poe's piano studio was located in Rucker's Piano Shop on 38th Street, two miles from downtown. This distance from the downtown competition inspired the Ruckers to come up with the advertising slogan, “Two Miles from High Prices.” Shortly, however, the Ruckers joined the downtown competition, moving to a two-story wooden building at the corner of Third Avenue and 10th Street. This building was formerly known as the Chase Conservatory of Music, which operated



The Chase Conservatory of Music in Columbus, Georgia. *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* photo from *Images: A Pictorial History of Columbus, Georgia* by F. Clason Kyle, 1986. Used with permission of the Donning Company Publishers.

there from 1904 to 1942. A diploma from the conservatory was highly prized and recognized on a par with conservatories across the country.

Unfortunately, the building had deteriorated badly. The 400-seat auditorium was unusable because of holes in the stage, wooden seats warped and rotten, water stains down the walls, and bird droppings on the floor. Other parts of the building were not in such a state of decline. In the lobby area, the Ruckers displayed a variety of pianos and other musical instruments. Mr. Poe's studio was quite satisfactory.

My stepmother was very supportive of my musical interests. She purchased a new piano for me, a Fayette S. Cable spinet, as well as a library of piano music. Her only requirement was that I play whenever she asked, which was, in my time of teenage angst, almost unbearable. But I usually complied, even playing once for a trapped encyclopedia salesman.

Columbus had an active music-making community. The Columbus Music Teachers' Association sponsored recitals and other musical events. One event that I recall with some pain was the “sonic-wedge” concert, perhaps inspired by a televised broadcast in 1953 from Ed Sullivan's “Toast of the Town” in which ten concert grands were placed in an open circle, keyboards on the outside. Ten well-known pianists seated themselves and then pounded out Chopin's Polonaise in A Major.

In the 1955 Columbus version of this event, twelve small pianos were positioned on stage in an open “V” with the director at the closed end facing the audience, and two players seated at each piano.

Five hundred students participated, according to the Columbus Ledger in a brief write-up just across from the comics. Groups of performers, beginners first, would play one selection, exit the stage, then another group would be seated and so on. This was quite an undertaking backstage to line up the performers in order of appearance and to keep the peace. Girls, who were everywhere, wore full skirts that dragged the floor, especially on stairs, and I can only say for the historical

record that I did not mean to step on her dress.

The recital took place in the Columbus High School Auditorium and played to a full house in two performances that were very well received.

With so many pianos playing the same thing, I had never felt quite so unnecessary to a musical happening. I always thought the nice thing about playing a piano was that the audience had to listen to you.

In 1956, when I was 15 years old, I participated in the National Piano-Playing Auditions and was awarded a certificate with a gold star. The certificate stated at the top: "Piano-playing is an ideal, all-weather, lifetime hobby or a profitable profession." All-weather? Profitable?

During my three years with Mr. Poe, I studied several Beethoven sonatas and the First Piano Concerto as well as the usual fare of Chopin etudes and Bach preludes and fugues. I enjoyed my conversations with Mr. Poe about music and the musical world, adding immensely to my study of technique. He loved music and what he was doing. He just scooped you up, and you became part of that world.

Near the end of my studies, hastened by my job as a check-out cashier at a grocery store (and my discovery that although girls were shaped funny, there was a reason), I wrote, unbeknownst to Mr. Poe, two short pieces "Thing 1" and "Thing 2" so that I would always have something to play if asked. Today, I am embarrassed to say that Thing 1 and 2 have occasionally masqueraded as being written by more esteemed composers than myself. Both pieces debuted at the Columbus Country Club as part of my after-dinner entertainment for a long-forgotten group.

Although music was the glue that held my life together, I had few acquaintances who were the least bit interested in music. I once bought a recording of a Brahms piano concerto for about \$5 while a friend and co-worker at the grocery store looked on in utter disbelief. (\$5 in the mid-1950s was equivalent to four or five hours of work at the grocery.) To me it was another musical adventure that I could happily anticipate; to my friend, it was incomprehensible. He, by the way, "owned" a loaded 1957 red Chevrolet convertible, which he is probably still making payments on.

Eddie was studying at Georgia Tech during these years. He came home one weekend bringing with him an LP recording of the Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto. He showed it to me with a big grin. He knew I loved that piece but had no recording of it. We played it again and again that weekend, just sitting and listening, forgetting about everything else; just us and the music.

He said to me once while the concerto was playing, "I hope you learn to play this some day." There was much longing in his voice. He knew that he never would but perhaps that I might. I was pleased that he thought my learning this difficult piece was in the realm of possibility.

Long live the music and the dream.

Coda

At the age of 26, my brother Eddie was killed in an airplane accident in September 1962 while serving in the U.S. Air Force. He and members of his B-52 crew were passengers on a KC-135 tanker when, in bad weather, the tanker plowed into Kit Carson Mountain in Washington killing all on board. He left behind a wife and three young children, the oldest of whom was two-and-a-half.

In order to make his children, now grown, aware of Eddie's musical accomplishments in his childhood and adolescent years, I initially made a cassette tape in 2003 consisting of some of the piano pieces that he had studied (performed, of course, by world-class pianists).

While making the tape and reminiscing about music in my childhood, I regretted more and more that the records Eddie and I made in 1949 at my mother's behest had been lost. Perhaps, I thought, a relative still might have a copy or two of these recordings. After all, I did know that my mother had shared the recordings with a brother and a sister.

But that was more than half a century ago so the chances of recovering a record were remote. Nonetheless, I inquired of two cousins, one in North Carolina whom I knew and considered close, and the other in Michigan, whom I had never met.

To make a long story short, I received one record in 2003 from the first cousin, and another in 2004 from the other. Then, a year later, six more arrived from Michigan. The "wild card" record in this last group was that of Aunt Mamie Lee playing the piano, recorded at the same time we did. I had completely forgotten about her recording.

Since the records were rediscovered at different times, the audio was transferred from the 78s to computer as the records became available. After the tracks were edited to reduce audible impairments, CDs were burned. Robb Holmes, classical music disc jockey in Athens, Georgia, did the restoration work on the first two records, and Roy Weinberg of Canine Studio in Phoenix, Arizona, did the others. In both cases, I was delighted with the results, yielding improved audio quality on all tracks and 25 minutes total playing time.

For our family, the discovery of this music has been a wonderful experience, demonstrating the importance that music has in connecting one generation with another and past with present.

Today, I no longer climb to the top of the piano and toss music about. We now have a baby grand so I just raise the lid and let 'er rip. Wheeee! ■

Murray Tillman is a professor emeritus at the University of Georgia and lives in Athens. He recently published his first novel, Meet Me on the Paisley Roof, a coming-of-age story set in Columbus, Georgia, in 1956. For more information visit www.meetmeonthepaisleyroof.com or email the author: murraytillman@bellsouth.net.