

Author's Note

I'd always wanted to write a children's book about growing up in Little Burgundy. The area means a great deal to me. It was where my mother and I settled after moving to Montreal from Nova Scotia. I attended the Montreal Day Nursery and later crossed the railway tracks every day to get to Royal Arthur School. Hot lunches were served at the Negro Community Centre (NCC) for ten cents a day. And then there was the Union United Church, a hub of social and religious activity for the neighborhood's diverse population of blacks from Canada, the Caribbean, and the US. It was a neighborhood of corner stores, steep spiraling staircases, stoops, and lines of washing—all hemmed in by two railway lines, the Canadian National Railway (CN) and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CP).

I'd been thinking a long time about Little Burgundy when I came up with the idea of writing about the boy who became the neighborhood's most well-known resident—Oscar Peterson. In Oscar's childhood, Little Burgundy was known as St-Henri. Decades before I lived there, Oscar crossed the same railway tracks to attend the same elementary school as I did. His father, like so many black men in the neighborhood, worked as a porter on those railways. Later, his sister Daisy taught piano at the NCC to countless young people.

In this story, I've tried to blend fiction with non-fiction. Millie is fictitious and so are some of the antics she and Oscar get up to. But her chronicles of Oscar's bout with tuberculosis, his selective mutism, his sense of loss over not being able to play the horn, and his ultimate deep appreciation of the piano are all true.

Oscar's whole family was musical. His mother, Kathleen, sang while his father, Daniel, played piano and encouraged all his children to be musicians. Oscar had four siblings. Fred played piano. Charles played piano and trumpet. May also played piano. Daisy, who played both trombone and piano, was one of Oscar's first piano teachers.

When Oscar was seven, he caught tuberculosis (TB), a frightening disease that infects the lungs, and for which, at that time, there was no real cure other than isolation and bed rest. Tuberculosis was so contagious that several members of the same family often caught it, which was the case in Oscar's family. His sister Daisy was hospitalized, as was his brother Fred, who eventually died from the disease. Oscar had to be hospitalized for more than a year until his lungs healed. Being away from his family must have been a scary, confusing time for little Oscar because, for a short while, he stopped talking. A gift of a toy tractor from a charity helped him find his voice again.

Although Oscar's illness weakened his lungs, it did not affect his perfect pitch. Oscar could recognize the musical notes of any sound. When he was in high school, Oscar won a piano contest at CBC Radio. He started playing piano in Montreal jazz clubs. Many of these clubs, such as the Alberta Lounge, were near his Little Burgundy neighborhood.

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Not long afterward, his musical career took off, and he traveled all over the world playing all kinds of music. He played classical music, which is played on instruments rather than sung and is listened to rather than danced to. He played boogie-woogie, which is a fast, thumping kind of music that makes you want to tap your toes and dance. And he played jazz. In jazz music, each musician takes a turn playing a tune his or her own way.

Oscar became so famous that he won scores of awards, including several Grammys, recognizing his great musical talent. Some of the musicians Oscar grew up listening to eventually became his friends and musical colleagues. He played with jazz greats such as Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, and Count Basie, and he often accompanied singers such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. In 1972, he received the Order of Canada. His photograph has appeared on a Canadian stamp, and Queen Elizabeth II unveiled a statue of him during her visit to Canada in 2010.

Oscar died on December 23, 2007. Although much of the neighborhood where he grew up is gone forever, demolished in the construction of the Ville-Marie Expressway in the 1970s, Oscar's legacy lives on in the students and jazz enthusiasts who have been influenced by his music, and in his role in putting Montreal and Little Burgundy on the map of jazz history.



Oscar at a piano with his sister Daisy.