



Inside The New Bill Evans Trio by Gene Lees

© Down Beat Magazine, November 22, 1962

"SOMEBODY SAID recently of Bill Evans, "It's as if a gray cloud followed him, haunting him."

There is a measure — but only a measure — of truth to this. Evans' fortunes this fall began to take a distinct turn for the better, but his career has been plagued by disappointments, ill health, financial problems, mishandling by some of the business people in jazz, and outright tragedy.

Despite it all, he has left along his route a sprinkling of albums that constitute what may prove the most important body of jazz piano recordings since Art Tatum. Those recordings have spread his influence throughout the world.

It is an approach that, once heard, is as easy to identify as it is hard to describe. One can call it exquisitely lyrical, superbly thoughtful, highly imaginative, rhythmically unique . . . but these terms don't fix for examination a kind of jazz piano playing which, for its admirers, has the flavor and emotionality of a personal letter.

Martin Williams has said, in a Down Beat record review, that Evans seems to have a communication problem. And perhaps he has. But obviously he gets through to all those people who care enough about jazz to listen genuinely, including Williams, whose review was highly favorable. Recently, checking through Bill's scrapbook, I was astonished to discover that he also had received rave reviews from Nat Hentoff, Frank Kofsky, Ralph Gleason, John S. Wilson, Don DeMicheal, and myself. I know of no other subject on which you could get all of us to agree.

Evans communicates equally well to musicians, one of whom is 23-year-old Chicago pianist Warren Bernhardt, who now lives in New York City. The young pianist offered this comment on Evans' playing:

"Everything he plays seems to be the distillation of the music. *In How Deep Is the Ocean?*, he never once states the melody. Yet his performance is the quintessence of it. On *My Foolish Heart*, on the other hand, he plays nothing but the melody — and you still receive that essence of the thing.

"Pianistically, he's beautiful. He never seems to be hung up in any way in doing anything he wants to do — either technically or harmonically. You can voice a given chord many different

ways, but he always seems to find the correct way. When he's confronted with a choice on the spur of the moment of improvisation, he doesn't have to wonder which voicing is best, he knows. And he is physically capable of executing it immediately. It's as if the line between his brain and his fingers were an unusually direct one.

"You see, a given voicing will have different effects in different registers, especially when you use semi-tones as much as he does. So he constantly shifts voicings, depending on the register. Yet he doesn't seem to have to think about it, because he's been thinking about it for years."

Evans' own comments corroborate and complement this view. Of chord voicings, he said recently:

"It's such an accumulated thing. The art lies in developing enough facility to voice well any new thought. It's taken me 20 years of hard work and playing experience to do as well with it as I can. There's no shortcut. It takes a lot of time and study."

Various observers have noted the apparent influence of certain classical composers in Evans' voicings, particularly Ravel, Debussy, and Chopin. Was the influence absorbed directly and deliberately? "No more than from jazz," he said. "It's whatever I've liked the sound of. I've built it by my own study, never consciously looking at a voicing in a score and saying, 'Gee, this would be nice to use.'"

However arrived at, Evans' voicings are an important part of his style. But there are other parts. For one thing, he has magnificent time. He thinks so far ahead of what he is doing that he phrases in whole choruses, and his phrases always come out right. His way of swinging is one of the most subtle in jazz. And the swing is so self-generated that he and guitarist Jim Hall, performing without rhythm section, were able to set upon astonishingly powerful pulse on the My Funny Valentine track of the United Artists album Undercurrents a few months ago. Many New York musicians think the track is a classic of jazz. (Ed. note: see this issue). Finally, there is his tone, one of the loveliest jazz piano has ever known. It can be hard and muscular, as on the Valentine track. But usually it is soft and round, so soft in the ballads that a TV director, hearing him for the first time, exclaimed, "Good God, the man must have fur-tipped fingers!"

Whatever they're tipped with, they are remarkable fingers and lately they are conveying to those who know Evans' music a rising morale and improving health. A year ago, they were communicating the pianist's despair over the death of bassist Scott LaFaro. The death of LaFaro left Evans so broken in spirit that he didn't play publicly for six months.

To UNDERSTAND why, it is necessary to consider the history of the Bill Evans Trio. Paul Motian, Evans' drummer almost from the beginning, recalled:

"After I got out of the Navy late in 1954, I entered the Manhattan School of Music. I completed a semester and a half. But by then I was working gigs about six nights a week, and I was falling behind in my studies, so I left. I started playing with different people, including George Wallington. That summer — the summer of 1956 — I worked in a sextet with Jerry Wald. The piano player was Bill Evans.

"After that, somehow, Bill and I seemed to work together in a lot of bands. We both worked for Tony Scott and Don Elliott. And we worked on a George Russell album together.

"Bill was living on 83rd St. at the time, and we used to play together a lot — almost every day, in fact. Then Bill went with Miles Davis, and I worked with various people, including Oscar Pettiford and Zoot Sims.

"After leaving Miles, Bill formed a trio. He had Kenny Dennis on drums and Jimmy Garrison on bass. That sort of petered out. In the latter part of 1959, he went into Basin Street East. He had a lot of trouble, and he changed rhythm sections several times. ... On drums, he had Philly Joe Jones for a few nights and Kenny Dennis for a few more and me. He must have gone through about eight bass players.

"Scott LaFaro was working at a club around the corner. I'd first heard him some time previously, when Chet Baker was forming a group. Chet called me and Bill, and we worked out. I wasn't too impressed by Scott's playing at that time. Anyway, Scott used to come

around to Basin Street East and sit in with Bill. And I was impressed.

"From Basin Street East, we went to the Showplace, with Scott. That was actually the beginning.

"It's hard to describe what Scott's death last year did to us. Bill telephoned me. I was sleeping. It seemed like a dream, what he told me, and I went back to sleep. When I woke up, I was convinced it was a dream. I called Bill back, and he told me it was true.

"When it began to sink in, we ... we didn't know what to do. We didn't know if we'd still have a trio. We'd reached such a peak with Scott, such freedom. It seemed that everything was becoming possible.

"We didn't work for six months — between the last two weeks of June, 1961, until Christmas. Then we went to Syracuse, N.Y., to work a gig. Chuck Israels went with us on bass.

"That must have been a difficult time for Chuck. It had taken us two years to get to the peak we had reached with Scott, and now we had to start all over."

Rapport between Israels and the other two members of the trio didn't happen overnight.

"Because everyone was looking at Chuck with Scott in mind," Evans said, "he was in a very sensitive position. He did admirably, but he had many things on his mind — things of a technical nature, concerning the musical means with which we work.

"I think that this, coupled with replacing a man of great talent who had taken part in the development of the group, was all happening during the engagement we played earlier this year at the Hickory House. And though there were many encouraging aspects of it, I had slight apprehension about whether his self-consciousness would prevail for a long period, obstructing or misdirecting the natural way the group could develop.

"About the time we left the Hickory House, Chuck had a big overhauling job done on his bass, and we didn't have a chance to find out what effect it would have on the sound of the group. But obviously, during the month-long layoff, many of the problems, musical and otherwise, must have settled or resolved themselves for Chuck.

"Opening night at the Vanguard last July, we felt. . . . Well, it's difficult to describe the amount of difference that we all immediately felt as a result of his ability to play within the group with such a natural flow. Now I have no apprehension about the ability of the group to develop in its own direction and no hesitation about performing for anyone anywhere."

Recalling that Vanguard opening, Motian said: "It started to jell. We could feel it immediately. I thought, 'Oh, oh, we've reached that point again.' I knew we could continue where we left off when Scott died."

To this Evans added: "Not that we're trying to duplicate the point of development we reached with Scott. Chuck is a strong, intelligent, and accomplished talent in himself. It's a different trio now.

"And I'll say this. This is the first time I've been genuinely excited about the trio since Scott's death. Not only about the prospects, but what we've already arrived at."

IN VIEW OF the rich textures Israels, Motian, and Evans are capable of weaving, it is probably not without significance that all three of them had childhood groundings in nonjazz musical cultures.

In Evans' case, it was a double background. Of Welsh and Russian descent, he was surrounded with the traditional Welsh love of vocal music, and with Russian Orthodox church music. Though his mother was born in this country, she speaks Russian and is steeped in the music of the church. One uncle was a choral director, and so is Bill's cousin, Peter Wilhausky, who was a choral director for Arturo Toscanini and is now head of the New York Secondary School of Music. "I think what I got from that environment," Bill said, "was a true and humble love of music."

Israels' background is strikingly similar, though derived from another culture, Jewish. One of his uncles is a member of the music faculty at the University of California in Berkeley. His maternal grandfather was an amateur musician and an officer in the musicians union local in Yonkers. His stepfather, whom Israels said "had a monumental influence on the life of my family," is Mordecai Baum, a cantor and an influential figure in music education.

In Motian's case, the childhood musical influence was Armenian. "I heard a lot of Armenian

music at home," he said. "My parents had a lot of it on records, and I used to dance to the rhythms. I still like Armenian music very much. The rhythms are interesting and some of them swing along nicely. They have a lot of rhythms in 5/4 or 7/8 or 9/8."

It is interesting to speculate how much these "alien" musical influences may have contributed to the trio's musical freedom. Certainly the three men have shown a remarkable ease in handling material in time figures other than the traditional 4/4 of jazz. The group is notably able to dispense with forthright and heavy-handed statements of the underlying rhythmic pulse of a work, all three taking off in individual and yet beautifully interrelated directions without ever losing their bearings. The word "freedom" crops up constantly in their talk. Israels, who has dedicated himself to music only for the last two years (he has been a photographer, sound-equipment salesman and repairman, recording engineer, and an experimental engineer for a hi-fi components manufacturer), says that "only with Bill have I begun to realize my conception of music. It's a melancholy thing to say, but, in a way, if Scotty hadn't died, I'd be struggling still to find a situation in which I could play what I want to play. I like to make the bass sound good. If playing time in a deep and firm and flowing way sounds good, then that's the way I like to play. If playing more delicate counter lines and fill-ins sounds right in a situation, then I want the bass to sound light and clear."

"What's a groove about the trio is that there's never a hassle," Motian said. "It's never, 'Do this or do that.' It's just three people playing together."

Only once since Israels joined the trio — and this was immediately after he joined — has the trio held a formal rehearsal. New material is simply introduced and then allowed to evolve on the job. Consequently, the group is simply not a piano-accompanied-by-two-rhythm trio. Its music has a true conversational quality, each member contributing what he feels is appropriate. This is a remarkable thing, in view of the individuality of its leader's playing.

It is this newfound group strength, which dates back only to July, that is the main cause of Evans' brighter outlook. "He seems like his old self again," Motian said, "as witty as he used to be. He can be a very funny guy, you know."

All of which leads us right back to the communication problem noted by Martin Williams.

This isn't a problem I'd deal with directly," Evans said. "I find that when I'm feeling my best, spiritually and physically, I project. For example, I think the record on which I project most is the Everybody Digs album. I'd had hepatitis, and I went to stay with my parents in Florida to get over it. When 1 came back, I felt exceptionally rested and well. I made that album at that time. And I knew I was communicating the way I'd like to communicate.

"Right now, I'm starting to gain some weight that I'd lost, and I'm getting into a more secure financial period, and believe me, it's raising my morale 12,000 percent. "I think it's making a real difference. "Remember how Miles suddenly came out? The fact that musicians and critics had known about him for years didn't dispel the fact that he was saying, in effect, 'Here I am, I know what the quality of this work is, and if you want to know, you'll have to come and get it.' Yet eventually he succeeded in communicating.

"All of this is a social-personality question. It takes a profound personality evolution to affect it. I want to communicate, I want to give. But I'm not foolish enough to think I can go to a teacher to learn how to communicate." With that, one can only ask if Evans has any advice for aspiring young musicians.

"Well, there was a shipwreck, and the only man who survived was the bass player from the band. He floated on his bass for days, burned by the sun and half frozen at night, and at last he was sighted off Long Island. The press and TV people rushed down to the shore to interview him, and as he waded out of the water, dragging his waterlogged bass, they asked him, 'As the survivor of this terrible tragedy, do you have anything to say?' And the guy says, "Ooooh, m-a-an, later for the music business.' "

Edited by Rob Rijneke (www.billevans.nl)