

# An article on Bill Evans

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The professional life of pianist-composer Bill Evans spanned a period of twenty-five years, from 1955 to 1980, coinciding with the careers of many musicians who made major contributions to the art of American jazz: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Julian Adderly, Philly Joe Jones (the last three worked with Evans in Miles Davis' group), as well as Jim Hall, Scott La Faro, Phil Woods, and many others. Each left his personal mark on music, but there are aspects of Evans' work that may prove uniquely significant. He was a pathfinder while others, claiming to be the avant-garde, trod all too familiar ground. Clifford Brown influenced the sound of almost every jazz trumpeter who followed him. Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Sonny Rollins have had similar influence on their musical progeny. The full influence of Evans' music has not yet been felt.

General reaction to Evans' work has centered on easily recognizable idiosyncrasies, with much attention given to his voicings and the entirely mistaken idea that he was not playing in meter. Few have gone deeper into his work to find the underlying principles. Superficial imitation of Evans' obvious characteristics only results in the loss of identity of the imitator. In contrast, a search for the universally applicable principles in his music provides a broad avenue for the pursuit of personal jazz expression. His greatest contribution to the development of jazz lies beneath the surface of his style, in his creative use of traditional techniques. Evans was quick to recognize parallel cases to his own in which he could apply his extensive knowledge of the music. He did this by melding the appropriate device to the situation at hand, drawing from a wide range of musical background and history and putting old ideas to work in new ways.

Evans' view about rhythm was a combination of the swing of Bud Powell with the more varied cross rhythms of Bartok and Stravinsky; he carried this synthesis to great lengths, achieving a rare subtlety of placement and drive. He would start an idea with a short rhythmic motive, repeat and extend it with increasing complexity, and end it in a burst of notes that resolved those complexities. In this, he was not limited to the basic jazz unit of the eighth note and its typical subdivisions. He used complex relationships, adding to the swing that comes from the more usual duple/ triple conflict in jazz by layering other duples and triples over the more basic ones. He did this with a supreme clarity and unerring sense of his rhythmic goal, which often revealed itself in an exciting resolution many measures after the start of the phrase.

The development of these rhythmic techniques can be traced in a long line from Louis Armstrong's performance of "West End Blues" through Lester Young and Charlie Parker, to some of the work of Lennie Tristano and Lee Konitz. These men clearly influenced Evans' sense of rhythm, but none drew on as many sources at once as he did. The integrity of this variety in Evans' playing was remarkable. Nothing sounded pasted on or eclectic; ideas filtered through him and emerged with deep conviction and he rarely did anything superficial.

Every great jazz musician has a highly developed sense of rhythm, which operates independently of the other musicians around him. He does not need any external input in order to keep time. Evans' internal clock was so well controlled that he could risk considerable rhythmic freedom at the same time that other musicians playing with him took risks of their own. It was rare when such adventurousness resulted in what musicians graphically refer to as a "train wreck." The incidence of dropped beats was remarkably small in Evans' playing, considering the number of opportunities there were for such errors in his daredevil rhythmic style. He actually welcomed the interplay of his colleagues' rhythmic ideas and was empathetic to what they were doing.

Another remarkable aspect of Evans' playing was his command of tone color. With fingers like pistons, poised a scant millimeter over the keys, he dropped into the depths of the action as if propelled by steel springs, or he would caress the keys with the stroke of a loving mother touching her baby's cheek. All dynamic gradations short of bombastic pounding were at his command, and he used them to express delicate nuances of melody, and to separate and distinguish various voices of the harmonic texture. In some important ways, Evans' harmonies consisted less of chords than of piling up of contrapuntal lines in which the tension and release between the melody and the secondary voices was exquisitely shaded by his control of pianistic touch. His legato line was unsurpassed by any other pianist. No note was released before its fullest time, giving his playing a richness that resulted from the momentary clashes of overtones as successive tones overlapped in the sounding board.

Evans' superficial imitators mistook this sound for the wash that comes from standing on the sustaining pedal. Critics pointing to Evans' influence on young pianists often confused over-pedaling with complex finger-work. His sound was in his fingers and the subtle linear aspect of Evans' harmony was Chopinesque just as his textural interjections were often derived from Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Debussy. His bass lines were steeped in knowledge of Bach. The entire piano literature was open to his voracious pilferage. Yet everything was synthesized into an integrated style; wide open and broad enough for any musician to find references to his own particular sensibilities.

Evans once said that he strove for the improvisational freedom to change direction at any moment. When you realize the rigorous and unflinching logic with which he followed that principle, the enormity of the challenge begins to become apparent. A motive-thirds or fourths, for example-would move upwards through the chord progression, then, in an instant, down, then up, then down, continuing through a series of chords without an error or harmonic miscalculation. The choice of sustaining or abandoning a direction was always made according to aesthetic and expressive principles and never for the convenience of technical limitations. This gave Evans his spontaneity and great flights of fancy, and the ability to accompany, to follow another's musical direction in conversational sympathy. He could listen and put his responses at the service of another musician's creative impulse, and he could do this while maintaining the identity of the accompaniment, adapting his own musical motives to the direction of the soloist.

A characteristic part of Evans' keyboard aesthetic lay in the way he separated the main line from the accompanying texture by tone and touch, as well as in the more conventional jazz technique of keeping the melody active in the right hand while the left hand was playing chords. He would sometimes play a darkly colored inner voice as counterpoint to the brighter line of the melody. The technique was certainly pianistic but it was also orchestral in its effect, suggesting French horns against trumpets, or violas against flutes. Evans' playing was colorful, not in the usual sense of flash and mercurial change, but in the sense that control of timbre was an integral part of his playing. This was simply the way he heard music and when he played a harpsichord, the result was the same; different colors for different voices without using the harpsichord's various stops or manuals.

This ability to give different color and weight to different voices gave Evans' playing a textural variety not found in the work of more conventional jazz pianists. Often, a single line served as accompaniment to the improvisation in the right hand, establishing a three-voice textural hierarchy. The right-hand melody carried the primary interest, with the bass player's line next in importance. Against this, the third voice appeared in Evans' left hand, clear and separate, shading the other lines, emphasizing a poignant harmony or nailing down a contrasting rhythm. Occasionally (in the blues, for instance) this was done with as few as five chromatic notes, extracted from the changes. The remarkable thing about this was the clarity it produced; by eliminating voices from the chords, Evans brought out the melodic character of the secondary lines, making them respond to, as well as guide, the progress of the improvisation. This also allowed for the possibility of increasing textural density by adding voices to the chords in order to build intensity from chorus to chorus. Another result of this simplified left-hand texture was the freedom to choose more varied colors in the melodic realization of the harmonic progression. If the thrust of melodic development called for chromatic alteration of the harmony, it would not be in conflict with a complete and specific left-hand chord. Motivic or serial development could then take precedence over the more limited interpretation of the harmony that a fully spelled out chord would require.

Evans' approach to arranging music was equally individualistic and exacting. The melody of each standard tune was subjected to intense scrutiny until every harmonic nuance was found. Accompaniments were fashioned from standard progressions which were then carefully adjusted and fine-tuned to the contours of each melody. This was done in so complete a way, that when the accompaniment was played without the melody, the notes that were most strongly evoked were always those of the original missing tune. These exacting progressions were repeated during the improvised choruses, so that the individual character of the piece was implicit in the solo. Obviously this is not the only way to integrate an improvised solo into a piece of music, but if followed to its logical conclusion, as it was by Evans, it can be a strong organizational element and a liberating one.

Another aspect of Evans' approach to phrasing and rhythm was not unique to him but was developed from the tradition epitomized by the work of Charlie Parker. The great majority of jazz forms are four square in nature; their phrase structure occurs in regular

multiples of twos or fours. The eight-measure phrase is such a commonplace occurrence that few musicians give it much thought once they have internalized it in their formative years. What makes jazz phrasing and rhythm interesting and inventive is how it plays off unpredictable irregularities against the regularity of the underlying forms. In this, Evans, like Parker, was a master. His phrases would start and end in ever-changing places, often crossing the boundaries between one section of a piece and another. In a thirty-two-measure form, for example, the last two measures are usually a kind of vacuum between choruses where the harmony cycles from the tonic to the dominant in order to be ready for the tonic that normally comes at the beginning of the next chorus. Jazz musicians call this a "turnaround." Many sophisticated improvisers save some of their best "licks" for such moments, partly because the harmonies fall into a limited number of patterns which recycle throughout the performance.

Evans' view of the turnaround was that it belonged to the following chorus, rather than to the one just ending. In practice this meant that a new idea introduced at the turnaround could be carried over into the next chorus. This simple conceit is hardly earth-shaking, but it had an electrifying effect on the ensembles. One could move from one chorus to the next with confidence, knowing whether a solo was continuing, building, or ending, by staying alert during the turnarounds. Evans made it a guiding principle to dovetail the joints of a song, making for smooth and interesting transitions. He was not alone in this practice, but he was a master of it and it made everyone who played with him feel comfortable.

Evans' compositions are each constructed around one main idea. "Re: Person I Knew" is built on a pedal point; "Walkin' Up," on major chords and disjunct melodic motion; "Blue in Green," on doubling and redoubling of the tempo; and "Time Remembered," on melodic connection of seemingly unrelated harmonic areas. Each piece is so committed to a central idea that a program of Evans' music is foolproof in its variety from composition to composition.

"Peace Piece" is an example of the depth of Evans' compositional technique. It is an ostinato piece, composed and recorded long before the more recent superficial synthesis of Indian and American music; in fact, it owes more to Satie and Debussy than to Ravi Shankar. The improvisation starts simply over a gentle ostinato, which quickly fades into the background. Evans allows the fantasy that evolves from the opening motive (an inversion of the descending fifth in the ostinato) more freedom than he would in an improvisation tied to a changing accompaniment. He takes advantage of the ostinato as a unifying element against which ideas flower, growing more lush and colorful as the piece unfolds. Polytonalities and cross rhythms increase in density as the ostinato undulates gently, providing a central rhythmic and tonal reference. The improvisation becomes increasingly complex against the unrelenting simplicity of the accompaniment, until, near the end, Evans gradually reconciles the two elements. This effective use of form to communicate abstract feelings and ideas is one of the strongest aspects of Evans' work, and one that separates him from most jazz improvisers. His interest in other music that contained this strength guided him intuitively even when his conscious attention was on

smaller details. Monk, Bud Powell, and Bela Bartok were equally masters of things Evans needed; he borrowed from them without regard to their source.

Evans had an uncanny capacity for concentration and profound expressivity. He considered his work to be "controlled romanticism," and he exercised this control with exquisite care. He knew when to give rein to his imagination and when not to risk losing his grip on the piece. Intellect and deep feeling co-existed in his music, giving the lie to the view that they are mutually exclusive. In this respect he was a perfect partner for Miles Davis, and their recorded collaborations remain monuments in the history of American music.

It is true that Evans worked in small forms. The thirty-two-measure song was his own back yard, and he never ceased to find new corners of it to explore. He played with a sense of discovery, even as he worked and reworked the most familiar territory. He had the great improviser's gift for creating spontaneous expressivity in the performance of a piece he had played hundreds of times. But Evans did achieve a high artistic goal; he raised the performance of the simplest song into a worthy experience in expressivity and communication. That he stayed inside the boundaries of the song form is more a reflection of how Evans saw himself than of his depth as a musician. He thought of himself as a man of ordinary gifts committed to honesty in his work. He shunned superficial embellishments he did not feel, and probed deeply into music he had learned well. To some, he sold his talent and his training short by not embracing greater projects, such as a symphony or an opera. When opportunities for large recording and writing projects presented themselves, he left them to others of lesser talent who rarely brought out his best performances. In that sense, he remained, to quote Gunther Schuller, a "cocktail pianist" all his life-in the same sense that Schubert was a "song writer."

Evans made two records in collaboration with guitarist Jim Hall, in which one performance in particular stands out as an example of the highest level of achievement in ensemble playing. Their improvisation on "My Funny Valentine" ranks among the great jazz duets, along with the classic Armstrong/Hines "Weatherbird." It has every quality of memorable chamber music. I cannot imagine a note or nuance that might be changed. It is as perfect, in its way, as a movement of a Bartok string quartet. But spontaneous and inspired as that performance is, it is clearly the result of careful preparation. The saving of the chromatic line for the second section of the tune, the pedal tone at the bridge, the exchange of roles in the opening and closing choruses, all indicate an agreement about details that could only come from thorough planning. This is a responsibility that Evans took upon himself, and once a musician has been exposed to his arrangement of a song, it is difficult to accept any other. He found the crevices in which to insert harmonic details that fit so beautifully that later hearings of the melody seem to call his harmonies to your ear. The effect is one of melody, bass line, and inner voices having a three-way magnetic attraction binding them to one another. Sometimes, as in "My Funny Valentine," Evans would leave something out for clarity, or bring it in at a more effective moment. By leaving the chromatic secondary line out of its usual place in the first and last sections of this song, he focused attention on its entrance in the second eight measures, and kept it from disappearing into a background drone.

The sphere of Bill Evans' influence is expanding but its ultimate growth depends on the further understanding of the many artistic truths in his music. Time, the exigent critic and generous healer, will dole out the legacy in judicious portions as we find ourselves better prepared to receive it.