

BILL EVANS 1929-1980

THERE WAS ONLY ONE Bill Evans, a fact that suddenly became clear a few weeks ago when we learned that he had died in New York at the age of 51. His unfailing lyrical virtuosity had been a part of the musical landscape for so long that perhaps he was taken too much for granted. He had few imitators but many admirers; as Marian McPartland put it, "Indirectly he inspired most of the piano-playing populace."

Evans had been the subject of a *CK* cover story as recently as this June, and readers who would like a more complete picture of the man and his artistry are invited to consult that story (or the previous Evans cover story in *CK*, March 1977). It seemed appropriate, however, to offer some special tribute, and so we asked the great jazz record producer Orrin Keepnews, who produced Evans' first two LPs as a leader and many of his other recordings over the years, to provide us with some reminiscences and reflections. Another viewpoint is offered by jazz journalist and *CK* columnist Leonard Feather.

The most important perspective, however, is that found in Evans' music itself. His personal problems were never reflected in his playing; and to the very end, though he was obviously ill, whenever he sat down at the piano his pain was transmuted to joy. Fortunately, he made a great many recordings during his lifetime, and it is the joy in his music that will live on.

— CK

Bill Evans: The Gentle Giant

By Leonard Feather

EXCERPT FROM the *Merv Griffin Show*, Sept. 23, 1980:

Griffin: Our next guest is considered one of the most influential piano soloists in the jazz world today, and his new album is called *We Will Meet Again*. Would you welcome the great Bill Evans!

Evans: I'm gonna change up on you. You know, directors always panic about what you're gonna play — "Don't play, anything slow." I don't get a chance to play on shows like this too often, where I teach this many people, and I've been writing songs they've been coming out lately like faying eggs. Every once in a while I'll go [imitates chicken squawking], and there's a new tune!

The last tune I wrote, I was calling for a while — because it was untitled "the diddly-ah tune." Finally I realized it's formed mostly of one idea, over and over, and goes in different places. It seemed to be making more and more of a statement, the more we played it. So I would like to do this, which I think is a little more serious, maybe, for your audience.

I won't improvise, just play two choruses of the melody, it's now called "Your Story."

* * * *

The above statement, unusually voluble by Bill Evans' almost taciturn standards, and the exquisite music that followed, would be less remarkable were it not for the fact that an audience of millions saw and heard it eight days after he died, at 51, in a New York hospital. One wonders whether, in referring to the rareness of a chance to be heard by a mass audience, he was aware that this might, in effect, become a posthumous performance.

All the obituaries referred to Bill Evans as a loner, and perhaps that was a consequence of the mood communicated by so much of his music. Yet he was in fact an articulate, often very talkative and witty man, capable of engaging in discussions on a seemingly limitless range of topics. There were times in his life when he was a happy family man; friends remember his joyous mood after his son Evan was born, five years ago. He also left an estranged wife and an adopted daughter. And he left too much unsaid, too many new expressions of beauty waiting to be stated. He and many others felt that his final trio, with LaBarbera and bassist Marc Johnson, was developing into the best he had ever led.

As I noted in my column in *CK* in January 1978, Bill Evans was born Aug. 16, 1929, in Plainfield, N.J. In his youth he studied violin and flute as well as piano. Mundell Lowe, the guitarist, recalls meeting him as early as 1945. "Bill was a flute major at Southeastern Louisiana College, playing piano on the side. Later that year I joined a band in New York, but after that, when Bill moved north, he and I had a trio, with Red Mitchell on bass. He was only about 18, but his piano style was already years ahead of its time."

After an Army hitch and a couple of jobs with minor bands, Evans began to attract some attention in jazz circles as a member of a quartet led by the

clarinetist Tony Scott. In 1956, Mundell Lowe played a tape recording of Evans over the telephone for record producer Orrin Keepnews. This unorthodox introduction led to Evans' first trio date for Riverside Records (one of the tunes taped, "Waltz For Debby," would become a standard and the best known of Evans' many inspired compositions).

The trio session marked the beginning of a long association with Keepnews, a sensitive man who never put pressure on Bill to "commercialize" his style. According to Helen Keane, some 60 of the 90 albums on which Evans played were for Keepnews; Keane produced the others, for various labels.

The full, definitive impact of Bill Evans on the world scene was his tour with the Miles Davis Sextet. He was with Davis for less than a year, but during that time took part in the seminal album *Kind Of Blue*, with Davis, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane.

The record symbolized a retrenchment not only from the hard bop that was then prevalent, but also from the cycle-of-fifths chord system and toward modality.

The endorsement by Davis (His comment that "Bill Evans plays the piano the way I like to hear it played" was widely quoted over the years) led to Evans' gradual acceptance as a major new force in piano jazz. Students around the world became aware of this quiet, introverted man who, at a time when so many others were attacking the keyboard, only caressed it. The calm, reflective nature of his work was the very element that focussed attention on him. He had something in common with the gifted actor who, irritated by too much coughing in the audience, begins to speak his lines so softly that the audience is virtually obliged to subside into respectful silence.

After leaving Davis, Evans formed a fulltime trio, and despite a number of ventures with augmented groups it was in that setting that he made most of his records and gained a personal image for the rest of his life. The most memorable trio, for many, was the one that recorded in June of 1961 with Paul (Motian on drums and the extraordinarily subtle Scott LaFaro, who was almost an Evans counterpart, on bass. But weeks later LaFaro, 25, was killed in an automobile crash. It took a while for Evans to recover from the shock and assemble a comparable unit. His associations and rapport with bassists were quintessential to the

success of every performance. Eddie Gomez, who was with him for a decade beginning in the mid-1960s, was perhaps closest to LaFaro in terms of his empathy with Evans.

Ironically, Bill's first major success in terms of popular impact was recorded with neither bass nor drums. The album *Conversations With Myself*, on Verve, for which he overdubbed a second and third piano part, earned him a Grammy award in 1963.

In a typically articulate statement in the liner notes, Bill commented; "There is a viewpoint which holds that any recorded music which cannot also be reproduced in natural live performance is a 'gimmick' and therefore should not be considered as a pure musical effort. I have a firm belief in the integrity of the idea upon which this album was conceived. . . . In my opinion the only solid and interesting question that the music-making here presents is . . . whether this should be regarded as a group or solo musical performance. I remember that in recording the selections, as I listened to the first track while playing the second, and the first two while playing the third, the process involved was an artificial duplication of simultaneous performance, in that each track represented a musical mind responding to another musical mind or minds.

"The functions of each track are different, and as one in speech feels a different state of mind [in] making statements than in responding to statements, or commenting on the exchange involved in the first two, so I feel that the music here has more of the quality of a 'trio' than a solo effort."

Inevitably, attempts were made to persuade Bill to commercialize his style, especially during his tenure with Columbia Records, where one executive referred to him as "an old-fashioned pianist." Of course, he never gave in, and if his career didn't reach the heights of the economic ladder, his conscience was clear and his income nevertheless consistent.

Several books of his original compositions and transcriptions of his solos have been published by The Richmond Organization [10 Columbus Circle, New York, NY 10019]. Some of his later music has been, and more is due to be, published by the company he shared with Helen Keane, Teneten Music [49 E. 96th St., New York, NY 10028],

Evans' appearance on the Griffin show was not his only posthumous contribution. According to Keane, an album he recorded a couple of years ago with Gomez on bass and Elliott Zigmund on drums will be released by Warner Bros. in January. Later, the same company will issue a set recorded live last summer at New York's Village Vanguard, featuring his last trio, with Marc Johnson and Joe LaBarbera. There may also be some suitable unreleased material

recorded for Keepnews under Evans' previous contract with Fantasy.

Undoubtedly the Evans memorial tributes will continue, just as the albums, old and recent, will be with us, while Evans students all over the world will continue to mirror his influence. "He was a pure, beautiful soul," said Helen Keane. "Even when he was in the worst private torment, he kept on giving beauty to the world right up to the end. That's how we should remember him."

Bill Evans: The Early Recordings

By Orrin Keepnews

I FIRST HEARD Bill Evans almost 25 years ago, and in a most unlikely way: Mundell Lowe, who as a very professional guitarist should have known better, insisted on playing a homemade demo tape for my partner and myself *over the telephone!* We at least had the excuse of being almost amateurs in the jazz record business — we had begun the Riverside label on a small scale a couple of years before, but about the only thing of consequence we had done by 1956 was to sign Thelonious Monk.

But we did have the good taste to hear, despite the roughness of that tape and the very special distortion that the telephone always adds, that Mundell's young friend did indeed have something. As I recall, I then listened to Bill just a couple of times in clubs — he was playing the usual small and seedy New York bars, mostly in a quartet led by a clarinetist named Tony Scott — before signing him to a very mild exclusive recording contract. (In those days we used the printed form provided by the A.F.M. and paid only union scale — which was possibly a bit more than the average impoverished young independent jazz label did at the time.) So young musician met fledgling record company, and to begin with it did not seem like any sort of earth-shaking event. Which may show that you shouldn't judge by early appearances, because by the time Evans and Riverside parted company, nearly seven years later, we had brought into being some ten albums — most of them of real importance in the history of current jazz piano — and Evans had long been accepted as the major artist he was.

But when we went into a New York studio in September of '56 to make the first of those albums, I was mainly aware that this was an unusually unaggressive musician. It had taken me quite a while to persuade him to record. But that turned out to be nothing compared to what it took to get him back a second time: It was just short of 27 months between *New jazz Conceptions* and the session that produced

Everybody Digs Bill Evans. By that time, however, Bill had turned possibly the most important corner in his performing career. He had been discovered by Miles Davis, and had spent most of 1958 out on the road with the classic sextet that also included John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Paul Chambers, and Philly Joe Jones.

In the two-years-plus between albums, Evans had blossomed incredibly. Don't misunderstand: On that first occasion he had made a very strong debut that stirred up much critical acclaim, and he had already written the celebrated "Waltz For Debby" (which appears in brief, almost fragmentary solo form on that first album). But then he had been a shy, self-deprecating, bebop-influenced youngster. Actually, a lot of the shyness and the insistence on putting himself down never went away; but playing with Miles changed a lot of things. It was the only extensive period of time Bill was to spend working with horns (and what horns!), which encouraged his tendency to play long, hornlike lines and for a while gave his music an aggressiveness it rarely had again. The clear approval of his colleagues in that band not only improved his self-esteem but also made the professional jazz community (which is one of the most snobbish in the world) start really listening to and accepting him.

The second album was recorded very shortly after Bill left the Davis band, and its rather flamboyant title (my idea, which Bill really didn't care for) was not much of an exaggeration. Of course, everything else aside, that session deserves to be remembered because it saw the creation of "Peace Piece." The strange story of how that came about is quite accurate: Searching at the piano to work up an introduction to the Leonard Bernstein show tune "Some Other Time" (the album repertoire had been preset, but details like overall length and introductions and the like were in those days routinely left open until we were ready to roll tape), Bill found that he'd gotten into something he liked better than that song and went on to record his own reflective, probably immortal improvisation.

The next thing that happened musically to Evans was Scott LaFaro. I hadn't really been aware of this mercurial young bassist until we began putting together Bill's first date with his new working group. Scotty apparently had just sort of come along, being one of several bass players who sat in during a formative trio gig at a New York club and turning out to be the one Bill decided to hire permanently.

Bill has spoken of his aim with this trio (Paul Motian was the extremely compatible drummer) as being to put all three members on the same level — a unified voice, in deliberate distinction from the normal piano-with-accompaniment trio. I don't think

they ever quite fully succeeded, but they were getting closer to it (and Scott was becoming more and more brilliantly innovative) as they went along. It culminated in the Sunday afternoon and evening live recordings at the Village Vanguard on June 25, 1961, from which a version of each of the thirteen selections they played that day has been issued (I wasn't looking for two albums at the time, but there just wasn't anything you could throw away). Of course, with melodramatic timing worthy of a soap opera, that was the very last day that trio ever worked together: Less than two weeks later LaFaro was killed in a highway accident.

There were still two more years of recording Evans at Riverside in my life, but it's difficult not to think of the rest as faintly anti-climactic. Bill did very little playing, and most of that unaccompanied, for about a year, until the highly talented bassist Chuck Israels — then also a very

brash and rather abrasive young man — helped bully him into full-scale recording and working activity. There were also two very strong non-trio records: a rather outgoing quintet album called *Interplay* that included trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and guitarist Jim Hall, and a quite lovely quartet set under Cannonball Adderley's leadership with the collaboration of bassist Percy Heath and drummer Connie Kay of the Modern Jazz Quartet. There were also, in Bill's life in the early 1960s, severe personal problems that rarely diminished the music but often made it hell to be his friend and record producer at the same time. Eventually, under all sorts of pressures, including the fact that Riverside was doing some financial stumbling of its own, I surrendered him to the eagerly waiting Creed Taylor, who was then producing jazz at Verve Records.

That was in 1963. Bill and I remained friends over the years, and

at Fantasy in the early 1970s I even co-produced another Village Vanguard album by a Bill Evans trio, but by that time his recording career was being firmly and well handled by his longtime manager, Helen Keane. The earliest of Bill's records have almost all been available again for some time now (as reissues on the Milestone label, a project I am pleased to have been involved in), so that we can continue to have his work with us; there doesn't have to be any tasteless rushing out of "memorial" albums. And on a purely personal level, I'm glad to be able to concentrate on writing about the early days. It allows me to avoid for a while the reality of present-day loss, which is how I prefer it.

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