

BILL EVANS — REFLECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

© By Ron Nethercutt

For the past two years, Southeastern Louisiana University has been gathering memorabilia on one of its most distinguished alumni, Bill Evans. It is a distinct pleasure for me to present some of this material to you at this time. Many of you will recall the song "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone." Since Bill's death many people have begun to talk about him. His recordings are being re-released with startling regularity; transcriptions and arrangements of his music and solos are still being released. In the academic world, Bill has become the topic of research for Master's and Doctoral dissertation. A recent discography by Peter H. Larsen published in Denmark is proving to be an invaluable tool for discovering (or, should I say, re-discovering) many of Bill's albums.

It is not my purpose, however, to present a "selected listing" of Bill's recordings or even a historical resume of his musical life—both of these are available from commercial sources. What I would like to share with you are comments about Bill Evans made by record producers, reviewers, fellow musicians, and even by Bill commenting on himself. These statements were gathered for the most part from Bill's albums and reviews, and comprise what I present as the first part of this paper: REFLECTIONS. The second part is entitled PERSPECTIVES and consists of interviews this writer conducted at the convention of the National Association of Jazz Educators in Columbus, Ohio, in 1984.

Yes, people are talking about Bill now that he is gone, perhaps more so now than before his untimely death. It is my hope that sharing these vignettes with you will enable you to gain insight into this remarkable jazz pianist.

PART I - REFLECTIONS

The following comments were gathered from magazines, liner notes, and jazz history texts. The remarks all tend to project the awe and great respect felt for Bill's contribution to the world of jazz.

BURT KORALL (Saturday Review of Literature): "His music, a matter of highly distilled clarity, emphasizing life's more special feelings, is the antithesis of mindless convulsion and violence . . . Evans rivets the listener with his delicious sound and choice of notes. He teases the mind with innuendo, tying gut level feeling to intellect . . . For all his obvious intellectuality, he is very much in touch with his feelings."

BRIAN PRIESTLY (London Times): "When Bill Evans is in town, one goes not to listen so much as to worship."

PETER KEEPNEWS (Milestone): "Evans' music might not have been technically simple, but it was simple in terms of its emotional directness. Its message went straight to the listener, unembellished by musical niceties. It hit home." NAT HENTOFF (Warner Brothers): "The spirit of jazz is free, coming out of hard dues. The same can be said for Bill Evans."

Praise and respect for Bill Evans was not limited to journalists and record producers, but included his fellow performers. Helen Keane and Herb Wong produced an album for Palo Alto records entitled BILL EVANS—A TRIBUTE, which featured pianists paying musical respects to the memory of Bill. Some of their comments are given below, along with some others.

JIMMY ROWLES: "To me, Bill Evans was the Chopin of jazz."

McCOY TYNER: "My memories of Bill, like his music, are beautiful. As a human being, he was a very sincere and gentle person. He was one of the greatest pianists, and his memory will live in the minds of people and his fellow musicians forever."

MARC JOHNSON (Bassist in Bill's last trio): "There is a hidden spiritual power emanating from Bill Evans, influencing and dominating others without their being aware of how it happens."

CHUCK

ISRAEL

S (Bill's bassist in the early 60's): "Bill's work has been called introspective with considerable justification, but it was also a channel for the deepest kind of communication he knew. Some of the power of music like Bill's lies in the way it builds on the intense energy of the listener's concentration."

It is from Bill himself, however, that perhaps one gains the most insight into this complex man. This writer continues to find remarkable depth in the personality of this exceptional individual. He was truly a student of life during his fifty-one years on earth. His sensitive approach to music is often referred to, but this should come as no surprise when one considers Bill's feelings toward others. The statements which follow express Bill's own ideas on numerous subjects:

"My creed for art in general is that it should enrich the soul; it should teach spiritually by showing a person a portion of himself that he would not discover otherwise. It's easy to rediscover a part of yourself, but through art you can be shown part of yourself you never knew existed. That's the real mission of art. The artist has to find something within himself that's universal, and which he can put into terms that are communicable to other people. The magic of it is that art can communicate this to a person without his realizing it. Enrichment, that's the function of music!" (from notes to THE COMPLETE RIVERSIDE COLLECTION)

"Jazz is a way of playing that is the purest tradition in music this country has had. It has never bent to commercial considerations, and so it has made music for its own sake. That's why I'm proud to be a part of it." (from the album NEW CONVERSATIONS)

"The art lies in developing enough facility to voice well any new thought. It's taken me twenty years of hard work and playing experience to do as well with it as I can. There's no short cut. It takes a lot of time and study." (from the album AS TIME GOES BY) (Note from JW- these—and many other—quotes of Bill's reflect his knowledge of the works of the philosopher G. I. Gurdjieff, especially regarding music and the meaning of work, study, and the magnetic center.)

PART II - PERSPECTIVES

One of the definitions given the word "perspective" by Webster is "a proper evaluation with proportional importance given to the component parts." The following perspectives were gathered from individuals that had three different relationships with Bill Evans: guitarist Mundell Lowe, author Mark Gridley, and bassist Chuck Israels.

Mundell Lowe knew Bill for the longest of any. Mundy's friendship started in December of 1945, when he first met Bill. Lowe was musical director for Merv Griffin when Bill appeared as soloist less than two weeks before he died. Their paths crossed musically and personally over those thirty-five years.

"I had just come back from World War II three years in the South Pacific and was with my wife and her brother Raymond who was going to Southeastern. Raymond (Hyde) said, 'There's a piano player out at the college you really ought to hear. I've heard a lot of good musicians but I think this guy's exceptional.' So after the holidays I go out to the school and sitting in one of the practice rooms was this young bright-faced, blue-eyed, bond-haired fellow with horn-rimmed glasses. We talked and talked for a long time and I said, 'Play something for me, I've been away for three years and I'm hungry to hear some kind of music.' So he played something that just absolutely killed me with the kind of sensitivity and complex harmonic things that were Bill's meat. We finally went to the cafeteria and had some coffee and I told him 'tomorrow I'm going to New York and join Ray McKinley's band, but when you get out of school down here come up to New York and call me because after I spend some time with Ray I want to form a group and I'd sure like for you to play piano in it.' About three years later he did show up in New York and I left McKinley and was working off my 802 card. We met at the old Cafe Society downtown and Bill brought along a young kid he had known from New Jersey; a bass player by the name of Red Mitchell. We then put a group together and it was booked by a guy named Val Irving who put us in Calumet City for two weeks in one of those places where they literally had chicken wire around the bandstand so they couldn't hit you with the beer bottles. We continued together for a while but had a rough time getting enough work, so we split and Bill went into the Army, which was breathing down his back at that time. Later he and I put together a group with Tony Scott on reeds, Kenny O'Brien, bass, and Irv Kluger on drums. We worked a little bit in Greenwich Village, you know, but who cared.

"Later I had been recording for Riverside Records for Orrin Keepnews and called up Orrin one day and played him a recording of Bill over the telephone. I had an old Webcor wire recorder that Bill had recorded some on in Tony Scott's and my apartment. Anyway, I played this for Orrin over the phone and Orrin says, 'He sounds pretty good, but he doesn't have a name.' So I said, 'Jesus, he's a wonderful piano player. I think you should do something with him.' And so he signed Bill for one album on Riverside and everyone started saying, 'Wow, who is this guy?'"

Dr. Mark Gridley is the author of "Jazz Styles: A History and Analysis" which devotes considerable space to Bill Evans and is most perceptive regarding Bill's influences. The remarks which follow are but a small part of two lengthy interviews this writer was given in 1984.

"In the early seventies I contacted Bill Evans when he was playing in Cleveland because I was confused about some of the things he said when he wrote the liner notes for 'Kind of Blue,' and they were technical things that didn't have enough detail in them. Essentially what I did was pin him down to exactly how the session came about and how much organization really was there. 'Kind of Blue' is an extraordinarily important album, and I wanted to have no uncertainty about what was improvised and what was preset. It turns out almost all of it was improvised. Bill said Miles came over to his house the afternoon before the session and he had some sketches in mind. He had some real loose ideas, but Bill made them workable in terms

of chord voicings and the only piece on the album that was prewritten was 'Blue in Green.' This is a piece that mistakenly was credited to Miles but Bill had brought it along because Miles had said, 'Why don't you bring something with you?' and that was what Bill brought.

"It's really true what he said on the liner notes. Almost everything really was a first take. Miles sort of explained to the guys what he wanted and laid out the modes and when it came to 'So What,' Miles just told Paul Chambers, 'Just play something, make up something.' And it turns out that what Paul made up was the figure: A, D, E, F, G, A, and then Cannonball and Trane worked out the horn part for what Bill had done in the voicings on the chords of the response.

"One of my questions was 'How did the indications occur with respect to augmentation and diminution of 'Blue in Green' as one big turn around?' That's sort of what he meant by a circular form. It's a ten bar tune in circular form and each soloist was allowed the freedom to play it in time or double time or in half-time. Essentially, that's what augmentation and diminution of the time values meant and the indication of whether he was gonna do it in time, in double time, or in half-time was totally spontaneous. The signals were musical signals; they weren't hand signals, they weren't pre-arranged with respect to words or anything.

"The difference between Bill Evans' 'Peace Piece' and Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue' version of what was originally supposed to be called 'All Blues' was the fact that the mode used on 'Peace Piece' was only the first mode, the bass pattern for 'All Blues.' He went on to go through four other modes and this shows the tremendous influence on the recording session that Bill Evans had. I think that, historically, no one should overlook the fact that Bill was the key force in this very significant landmark session in 1959, just as Gil Evans was the key force in 'The Birth of the Cool' and Joe Zawinul was the key force in the 'Bitches Brew' session. These are the three landmark sessions in the history of modern jazz that were associated with Miles. No one should overlook that it was Bill Evans who had created the voicings, and the tone of the entire proceedings rested on Bill's voicings."

Later in the interview Mark reflected on Bill Evans' style and continued by saying:

"Now that I have thought a lot about his overall musical concepts, I think it is no coincidence that the two other instruments he played were violin and flute. For someone who likes to play pretty and likes waltzes, I think it makes some sense having chosen two other instruments which are instruments that are not capable of high loudness levels or really raucous sounds. Most early critics totally misunderstood him, and to this day I have a lot of good friends who are very good jazz historians but they cannot handle Bill Evans at all. The way in which he swings is just not obvious enough for them."

Of all the people it has been my pleasure to meet during the collection of Bill Evans memorabilia, Chuck Israels certainly comes to mind as one of the most knowledgeable. His information regarding Bill's musical characteristics and his complex personal life have proven to be invaluable. Israels played with Bill for over five years, during a vital developmental period which took him to Europe several times and began his universal appeal. Bill worked briefly with Chuck after 1966, making two appearances with The National Jazz Ensemble in 1973 and 1975, which was being led by Chuck Israels at that time. The comments which follow deal with his early days with Bill immediately following Scotty LaFaro's death in an automobile accident.

In reflecting on how he got the job playing with Bill Evans,”

Israels said:

“I was in Europe with Jerome Robbins’ Ballet USA with a group of jazz musicians working the pit. I was in Spoleto in 1961, sitting at a cafe outdoors having received a letter from Paula Robeson, the flutist. I was feeling good about this letter until I opened it up and it said ‘Scotty’s been killed.’ I felt completely in an emotional turmoil because it was all of a sudden I knew I was gonna get the job I wanted. There wasn’t anybody else around that he (Bill) knew. There happened to be a couple of other guys, but they weren’t on the scene where he could have known about them. Albert Stinson and Steve Swallow were both developing in the same kind of way that I was, but I knew Bill didn’t know about them. I just thought, ‘I’m gonna have that job,’ and part of me was glad and I was sad to lose my friend and horrified at myself for being glad he was dead. I went back and there was a telephone call that said, ‘Call Bill.’ Actually, I’m not sure that it wasn’t ‘Call Paul (Motian)’ because Bill had a hard time with things in general, not to mention Scotty’s death.

“I went back to the States and we had one rehearsal, which consisted of playing through a couple of tunes and my asking Bill to move his head or his body when he came to the end of pieces which were rubato so I could tell what was gonna happen since that had been my chamber music training. Bill said, ‘Don’t worry, you’ll know; just play, just listen. You’ll know how long to wait.’ We tried it and he was right. We went to work in Syracuse. He played on a white upright piano in a black club in the black ghetto of Syracuse in a hotel right next to the Greyhound bus station and kind of hid out while we developed some. After leaving there we went into the Hickory House for a long run and the Vanguard with the Modern Jazz Quartet. I mentioned one night to John Lewis how lucky I was to be working with Bill, and he said ‘Nobody does you any favors; if you weren’t ready you wouldn’t have the job.’ That made me feel good and I instantly felt rhythmically at home. I could hear the meter without iterating it. I didn’t have to play the downbeat to know where it was, and it’s interesting to me how many people still understand that as ‘playing without time’ when exactly it is the most playing with time you could possibly do.

“Bill’s rhythmic sense could predict his distance from the final cadence with unerring precision. He could know where he was with reference to any goal, both rhythmically and harmonically and just know what chord to start on so he would then play X number of chords and arrive at the right one at the final moment. He was a master of delaying the moment until he really wanted it to happen, and I learned a great deal from that later when I left him and really began to study the music”.

In conclusion ! would like to offer parts of two letters

written by Bill. The first was to one of his teachers at Southeastern Louisiana College (now University) written on July 23, 1959. Sent with the letter were his first two recordings with his own trio; “New Jazz Conceptions” and “Peace Piece and Other Pieces.” The second letter was written to the editor of *Downbeat* shortly before Bill’s death and appeared in the October (1980) issue. Both letters give the reader additional insight to the sensitivity of Bill Evans and perhaps an idea of how that personality was reflected in his piano.

In the first letter he asks forgiveness for not keeping in touch and continues by saying, “I cherish that time as the happiest of my life, so please forgive my poor habit of correspondence ... I have always looked on your teaching as that rare and wonderful contribution of exceptional knowledge, and the ability to bring it to life in the student’s heart and mind . . . The creative spirit which you awakened in me in much of my work for you still operates and inspires me today. If I have ambitions to discover still more of what can be found in myself musically, much of it goes back to the wonderful excitement I felt in those years.”

The excerpts from the next letter are even more touching and meaningful considering that they were written only weeks before his death. Bill’s trio had been invited to appear in Russia, but he decided to decline the invitation due to his political beliefs. The letter he addressed to the editor of *Downbeat* is summarized below:

“I am a jazz pianist of international reputation. My name, Evans, is obviously Welsh, but my mother’s name and heritage is Russian Consequently, I have always hoped to visit Russia, to feel at first hand the roots of this part of myself. Perhaps even without the catalyst of Afghanistan, I might have arrived at the following conclusion, for I had often lamented the tragedy of suffering, imprisonment and where an artist’s purest inspiration was expected to conform to outside criteria. The very denial of the essence of art today! ... I wrestled with the problem for a few days, and came to the firm decision that I must cancel the concerts. I hoped that by the grapevine, perhaps those fans who learned of my reason for not appearing would be aroused philosophically, and therefore energy might be created, opposed to the perpetuation of this oppressive government . . . My gesture will have little or no significance, but I follow my code and am at peace with myself.”

The letter was simply signed “Bill Evans.”

On September 15, and before the release of that issue, Bill Evans passed away at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. He was fifty-one.

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