

Bill Evans

American jazz pianist and composer

A major contributor to the development of modern jazz, Evans is noted for his harmonic inventions in the context of jazz piano. He recorded more than fifty albums as a leader and received five Grammy Awards.

Born: August 16, 1929; Plainfield, New Jersey

Died: September 15, 1980; New York, New York

Also known as: William John Evans (full name)

Member of: The Bill Evans Trio

Principal recordings

ALBUMS: *New Jazz Conceptions*, 1956; *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*, 1958; *Kind of Blue*, 1959 (with Miles Davis and others); *On Green Dolphin Street*, 1959; *Portrait in Jazz*, 1959 (with the Bill Evans Trio); *Explorations*, 1961; *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*, 1961; *The Village Vanguard Sessions*, 1961; *Waltz for Debby*, 1961; *Empathy*, 1962; *How My Heart Sings!*, 1962; *Interplay*, 1962; *Loose Blues*, 1962; *Moon Beams*, 1962; *At Shelly's Manne-Hole*, 1963 (with the Bill Evans Trio); *Conversations with Myself*, 1963; *The Solo Sessions, Vol. 1*, 1963; *The Solo Sessions, Vol. 2*, 1963; *Time Remembered*, 1963; *Undercurrent*, 1963 (with Jim Hall); *Trio '64*, 1964; *Bill Evans Trio with Symphony Orchestra*, 1965; *Trio '65*, 1965; *Bill Evans at Town Hall*, 1966; *Intermodulation*, 1966 (with Hall); *A Simple Matter of Conviction*, 1966; *California, Here I Come*, 1967; *Further Conversations with Myself*, 1967; *Alone*, 1968; *What's New*, 1969; *From Left to Right*, 1970; *Quiet Now*, 1970; *The Bill Evans Album*, 1971; *Living Time*, 1972; *Serenity*, 1972; *Eloquence*, 1973; *My Foolish Heart*, 1973; *Blue in Green*, 1974; *But Beautiful*, 1974; *Intuition*, 1974; *Re: Person I Knew*, 1974; *Since We Met*, 1974; *Symbiosis*, 1974; *Alone (Again)*, 1975; *The Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album*, 1975; *Quintessence*, 1976; *Cross-Currents*, 1977; *I Will Say Goodbye*, 1977; *You Must Believe in Spring*, 1977; *Affinity*, 1978; *New Conversations*, 1978; *We Will Meet Again*, 1979; *Turn Out the Stars: Final Village*

Vanguard Recordings, 1980; *Alternative Man*, 1987; *The Last Waltz*, 2000.

The Life

William John Evans was born to Harry and Mary Evans in the middle-class suburban setting of Plainfield, New Jersey. His musical interests began at the age of three while listening to his older brother Harry's piano lessons. Before he reached the age of seven, Evans had started lessons of his own, later recalling, "From the age of six to thirteen, I acquired the ability to sight-read and to play classical music."

By the time he attended North Plainfield High School, Evans had established an unrivaled thirst for the contemporary Western European repertoire, namely the works of Darius Milhaud, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel. Around the same time, Evans was introduced to the big band recordings of Tommy Dorsey and Harry James. The freedom to improvise, as found in the jazz idiom, excited Evans; consequently, he turned his attention to performing in the technically complex piano style of boogie-woogie. His sight-reading skills led to his first professional performing opportunities. He began playing at weddings and dances while still in high school.

In September, 1946, Evans accepted a scholarship to Southeastern Louisiana University at Hammond, located fifty miles from the birthplace of jazz, New Orleans. In 1950 Evans graduated with bachelor's degrees in piano performance and music education and moved to New York City to pursue a performance career. One of his earliest experiences was with a trio led by guitarist Mundell Lowe, who subsequently brought Evans's playing to the attention of Orrin Keepnews of Riverside Records.

New Jazz Conceptions, Evans's first recording under his own name, was made on September 27, 1956. He was accompanied by Teddy Kotick on bass and Paul Motian on drums; this trio format of piano, bass, and drums would be one in which Evans would musically thrive. His later trios, especially with bassist Scott LaFaro and Motian, would ultimately transcend the prescribed role of merely keeping time to establish polyphonic, contrapuntal textures.

In April, 1958, Evans joined the sextet led by trumpeter Miles Davis. This experience provided

great exposure for the young pianist and consequently augmented his professional viability. The following year, while still with Davis, Evans participated in the seminal recording of Davis's *Kind of Blue*, one of the best selling jazz albums of all time. Exhausted from the Davis association, Evans left the band to launch his career as a leader.

Evans found in LaFaro and Motian musical companions who subscribed to his conception of a three-way musical dialogue. In 1959 they began their exploration in earnest. Sadly, this kinship would be torn by the accidental death of LaFaro in July, 1961 (just days after their groundbreaking live recording at the Village Vanguard).

The remainder of the 1960's consisted of triumphs and struggles for Evans. He managed to reform his trio with a new bassist, continued to record and compose original compositions, won the critics' poll in *Down Beat* magazine for pianist of the year, toured the world, and sank into heroin addiction.



Bill Evans. (AP/Wide World Photos)

In the 1970's Evans secured a recording contract with Columbia Records and, later, Fantasy Records. He continued to tour and seemed to be in something of a musical revival, invigorated by his musical companionship with such artists as bassist Marc Johnson and drummer Joe La Barbera, along with his newest addiction, cocaine. In 1980 his health rapidly declined, and in September Evans passed away, his death hastened by an unattended bleeding ulcer and acute liver disease.

The Music

Perhaps one of Evans's greatest contributions to the tradition of jazz was his unique approach to the conventional trio of piano, bass, and drums: He encouraged his accompanists to maintain a musical dialogue rather than simply propel the rhythm. Understanding Evans's trios leads to a true appreciation of his musical contribution.

Portrait in Jazz. Evans's first trio consisted of himself, bassist LaFaro, and drummer Motian. In

their first recording, *Portrait in Jazz*, Evans approached the piano in an uncharacteristically percussive fashion with florid melodic lines, complex harmonies, and a tense, swinging rhythm; LaFaro and Motian offset Evans's intensity with a combined pensiveness. This was most evident in the album's first track, "Come Rain or Come Shine." The record also featured two original compositions by Evans, "Blue in Green" (often wrongly attributed to Miles Davis) and "Peri's Scope," named after Evans's girlfriend Peri Cousins.

Sunday at the Village Vanguard. On June 25, 1961, the trio performed at the famed Village Vanguard and the material would be subsequently released as the album, *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*. This recording illustrated the trio's maturity and the increased freedom given to LaFaro. The performance, which opened with his composition "Gloria's Step," displayed the bassist's vast

creativity and command of his instrument as he juxtaposed melodic lines with Evans. The intense interplay continued throughout the set and perhaps reached its apex on the George Gershwin tune "My Man's Gone Now." An additional album of material from the Vanguard performance would be released as *Waltz for Debby*.

After the death of LaFaro, Evans faced the challenge of replicating the spontaneous collaboration with a new trio. Although he would find a competent instrumentalist in bassist Chuck Israels, a true sense of cohesion was not secured until the connection with bassist Eddie Gomez. This association would last from 1966 through 1977.

Conversations with Myself. Among the most innovative of Evans's career, this album found the pianist employing the technical advances of multi-track recording. The repertory was typical Evans fare, including the jazz standard "Stella by Starlight" and the Thelonious Monk composition "Round Midnight." The unconventional treatment of each tune was the ingenuity: Evans overdubbed himself three times, each take separated to a different channel—left, right, and center. This gave the pianist the opportunity to have a conversation with himself. His efforts were rewarded with a 1963 Grammy Award.

The Bill Evans Album. During the spring of 1971, Evans's second recording date under the Columbia Records label spawned *The Bill Evans Album*. Music mogul Clive Davis insisted that his jazz artists incorporate electric instruments into their playing, an attempt to make jazz more accessible and commercially viable. Although Evans would go on to suggest that the electric pianos, such as the Fender Rhodes, could never capture the nuance of an acoustic piano, the effort was not fruitless. The album went on to win two Grammy Awards and allowed Evans to experiment with the new timbres of the instrument. Additionally, Evans had the opportunity to augment his trio setting with string and woodwind sections.

The Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album. It was a rare occasion when Evans broke from the comfortable environment of the trio. During the summer of 1975, he joined vocalist Tony Bennett for their first duet recording. This album illustrates the pianist's tremendous versatility in artistically supporting the vocalist while remaining true to his creative vi-

sion. The set consisted of the likely ballads "My Foolish Heart" and "But Beautiful," along with the midtempo tune "When in Rome." Evans's "Waltz for Debby," traditionally an instrumental, was performed by Bennett with lyrics by Gene Lees.

Turn Out the Stars. Evans's last appearances at the Village Vanguard in June, 1980, and his penultimate recording date resulted in *Turn Out the Stars: Final Village Vanguard Recordings*, with Evans accompanied by the members of his final trio, Johnson and La Barbera. This unrivaled cohesive unit articulated a barrage of moods and textures and was the most uniquely collaborative since the trio of Evans, LaFaro, and Motian. On the album, Evans exudes a youthfully powerful approach on up-tempo tunes and his characteristically introspective playing on ballads such as "Polka Dots and Moonbeams."

The Last Waltz. Evans's final recordings were made from August 31 through September 7, 1980, just days before his death. Todd Barkan, the owner of Keystone Korner (the San Francisco jazz club that hosted Evans's last appearance), recorded on tape the weeklong engagement. Each set was a well-balanced collection of jazz standards and original Evans tunes. On many of the songs, there exists a sense of urgency—perhaps because of the pianist's comprehension of his physical deterioration. His left-hand passages are more florid and rhythmically complex than his earlier approach, yet he maintains a three-way dialogue with Johnson and La Barbera. The trio, acting as a single entity, displays great contrast during the slower jazz waltz "Gary's Theme."

Musical Legacy

Evans was one of the most influential jazz musicians of the post-bebop era. His exceptionally refined touch, advanced harmonic conception, and insistence on the equally expressive roles of his accompanists left an indelible mark on subsequent generations. Pianists such as Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Fred Hersch, and Brad Mehldau exhibit the influence of Evans in their playing. Like many jazz artists before him, Evans succumbed to a horrific struggle with drug addiction—cutting short his life and robbing the public of brilliance yet to come.

Michael Conklin