



PLATFORM

Bill Evans, poet

Peter Pettinger pays homage to a great jazz pianist

Without question, Bill Evans, a poet of the piano, was one of the greatest musicians ever to inhabit this planet. Well-known, loved and revered for half-a-century in jazz circles, his art surely speaks to us all. Categories are irrelevant when sheer quality is under consideration. Classically trained on flute, violin, and piano, he nevertheless made jazz, and most specifically the jazz piano trio, the medium for his life's achievement. This is a plea for his wider recognition.

Aside from the considerable legacy of recordings, I cherish memories of 'live' sessions, obsessively attended into the small hours at the Village Vanguard, New York, and Ronnie Scott's, London. One might plead insanity in this regard, potentially invoking as I did, not only the bank-manager's wrath (I counted not the cumulative cost of a two-week engagement), but also 'invitations to a mugging' on nightly tramps home at 3am from Greenwich Village to my midtown hotel. For two miles or so, the stark New York streets proffered no assistance in the event of an encounter. What kind of a musician could inspire this fanaticism, this devotion? Only one possessing such engrossing beauty of purpose and fulfilment as Bill Evans.

The first time the 'Bill Evans sound' hit me was on a 1958 Miles Davis album known as *Jazz Track*, and I've been hooked ever since. Here, in the illustrious company of his own sextet, Miles squeezes out his spare, muted lines exquisitely. Bill, beautifully poised, complements with limpid tone. His touch here is immaculate, and the voicing of the chords superb. In this and the subsequent album *Kind of Blue*, the music is haunting and ageless.

Connoisseurs of Evans's playing have a way of jealously guarding it, imagining they are the only ones to have experienced an undiscovered treasure: and I claim no exception in this curious regard. It is a strange trait, and must have something to do with his seeming to communicate at a

very personal level. Perhaps it also stems from his character, which was quiet, introverted and modest. He was not a glamorous person. He didn't seem to be playing to the masses, but rather for himself. As an eavesdropper one seemed to commune at a privileged one-to-one level.

But how to define the magic of this playing? Well, the amalgam encompasses, for a start, the ability to sing on the piano, one of the greatest challenges to any sensitive pianist. Classical musicians are (usually, we hope) well known for this. Sadly, however, many a jazz pianist is more inclined to a kind of indiscriminate digital hit approach. Then there is Evans's peerless harmonic sense. On a purely technical level, he totally re-organized jazz harmony into sophisticated realms it had never known before. Exploratory top lines are shadowed by 'lock-handed' harmonies, within which the choice and tone of each composite note are judged to perfection, the whole block of sound suspended from and carried by the singing, leading voice. On the rhythmic side he developed a technique of displacement away from the beat, which may be likened to riding a roller coaster swimming against the tide. One could say that in these areas lay his most important theoretical contributions to jazz, but the motivation for such procedures was always purely emotional, instinctive poetry the name of the game.

Bill's choice of repertoire could be refreshingly off-beat. Now, some musicians like to sleep before a performance, others enjoy a good tea, whilst a particular colleague of mine is partial to losing himself with Cilla on 'Blind Date'. Bill, whenever possible, liked to catch his favourite TV show *MASH* backstage before his first set, and featured its theme tune in his later sessions. On similar lines, Burt Bacharach's 'Alfie' provided perfect material for his subtly concentrated ballad treatment (try *Montreux II* on CTI). At the other end of the repertoire scale, he chose intriguing and adventurous chord

sequences, and featured regularly, for instance, a composition of his own entitled *T.T.T.* This catchy twelve-tone tune first appeared on *The Bill Evans Album* in 1971. His best-known composition, *Waltz for Debby*, has become a jazz classic.

He was a generous musician, and thoroughly professional in adversity. I remember catching him at the Fairfield Halls, Croydon. The trio had just flown in very delayed from Italy. There was no time to test for balance, and the sound system sabotaged the carefully judged piano opening. So far, it was evidently not a good day. In typical American fashion he shrugged, 'Well, that's killed that one', and proceeded without hassle to the second number. Once at Ronnie's, the tuning of the (I think, at the time) Petrov piano was quite frightful. Ronnie was observed attempting a desperate touch-up himself, but eventually Bill settled for 'I'll get along with it'. Like the heckled sportsman, the artist must get on with the job.

This he did consistently throughout his creative life, concentrating on the chamber art of the jazz piano trio, a format he made very specially his own. Towards the end (1980), he played his heart out in a new surge of creativity. Witness, for example, the remarkable heights attained on 'Live in Buenos Aires, 1979' and 'Live at the Balboa Jazz Club', Madrid. He knew he was dying, but the choice of notes was there, ever-searching in a kind of joyful defiance.

There is a shallow American sentiment along the lines, 'We are the beautiful people'. At Bill's penultimate engagement at Keystone Korner (sic), San Francisco, however, the MC was both sincere and exact when he introduced him simply as '...the very beautiful Mr Bill Evans'.

Peter Pettinger is duo partner with Julian Lloyd Webber and Nigel Kennedy amongst others, and has recorded Elgar's complete piano music for Chandos. He writes about his musical enthusiasms whenever and wherever possible.