INTRODUCING BILL EVANS

by Nat Hentoff

Bill Evans—along with Cecil Taylor—is one of the two most important younger jazz pianists. Last summer he taught piano at *The School of Jazz* in Lenox. He started a trio this fall.

"I want to be able to be free to go in my own direction without having to drag other people into my way of thinking. Ideally, I'd like to play solo piano, but from a practical standpoint, in terms of establishing a reputation and the kinds of rooms one can play, a trio makes more sense. And actually, there is almost as much freedom in a trio and certainly a stronger rhythm base."

"I'm hoping the trio will grow in the direction of simultaneous improvisation rather that just one guy blowing followed by another guy blowing. If the bass player, for example, hears an idea that he wants to answer, why should he just keep playing a 4/4 background? The men I'll work with have learned how to do the regular kind of playing, and so I think we how have the license to change it. After all, in a classical composition, you don't hear a part remain stagnant until it becomes a solo. There are transitional development passages—a voice begins to be heard more and more and finally breaks into prominence." "Especially," Evans continued, "I want my work—and the trio's if possible—to sing. I want to play what I like to hear. I'm not going to be strange or new just to be strange or new. If what I do grows that way naturally, that'll be O.K. But it must have that wonderful feeling of singing."

Evans went on to talk of the half of 1958 he spent with Miles Davis. "It was a personal as well as a musical experience, and probably brought me back to myself quite a lot.

I had felt the group to be composed of super-humans, and it helped my perspective to know how human they are and to experience the real and beautiful ways in which they deal with musical problems."

"There wasn't much said in Miles' band," Evans continued, "but things happened. I finally left because I was mixed up. Miles wanted me to stay, but my dad was sick, and I also wanted to try playing solo. Then too I felt, in a way, inadequate in the group. It's a feeling I've been hung with for a few years. One of the main things the group did for me in time was to help me lose my hesitancy and that lack of confidence. We never had a rehearsal. Everything was done on the job. On the record dates, half or all of the material might be all new and had never been rehearsed before. We'd talk it over, run through certain changes, and often we'd use the first take. Even though the performance might not have been perfect, it had something else. A beautiful thing about that band was how little was said about the music. That makes you rely on yourself; it makes you a person. It was a good social lesson and pointed up how good a way that is for a person to live." "About accompanying Coltrane," Evans answered a question, "he builds everything on the basic changes. In other words, like the others, he had agreed on a common ground that everyone has to consider in group improvisation. In accompanying him, therefore, you could play the basic changes and they'd fit. It's something like the situation in strict counterpoint where you have passing tones and even dissonances and they don't sound dissonant because they come between consonances. I felt though I could have complemented Coltrane

better. I kept looking for something else to do. As for Miles, he aims at the most direct simplicity. If you're thinking harmonically, you can clutter-up completely. If, however, you want to work to really free melody, you have to get back to beginnings again. For example, you can take one mode and stay in it. Then, when you do change, the change is very significant."

A reader had written a letter about Miles' comments in the December, 1958 issue of *The Jazz Review* on his preferences for building improvisations around scales. "I dig," wrote Joe Kaercher of St. Paul, "how Khachaturian uses different modal and oriental scales, but he also uses harmony. I also dig George Russell's method of writing lines with the Lydian mode, but he still uses changes. Could you get a fuller explanation from Miles on these points and specially how he plays 'My Funny Valentine' like with a scale all the way through."

An answer from Miles will be forthcoming, but Bill entered the discussion when told of the letter. "Miles sometimes gets away from chromatic harmonization and stays within the mode itself. 'My Funny Valentine' is based on a three-flat scale. He could make his whole melodic improvisation on that scale without any chromatic notes. In my accompaniment to him, however, I might play some chromatic notes but that wouldn't affect him if he wanted to stay within the scale only. Or take 'Young and Foolish.' The melody is all in the C scale—no chromatic notes in it. Yet you can harmonize it chromatically and the mode nonetheless remains the same, and you can stay within just that mode when improvising. Asked about influences on his playing, Bill said, "There are so many. You hear musicians all your life. Including 'unknowns.' I've been influenced by players in New Orleans, Chicago, St. Louis, and I don't know their names. Bud Powell was an important influence for me; the way Lennie Tristano and Lee Konitz started thinking structurally; all classical music; Woody Herman's big band. Actually, all musical experience enters into you."

Evans was next asked about the possibilities of atonality in jazz. "I don't know who can do it. If you experience music and develop naturally that way, I suppose it's possible, but if you want to go out and be atonal, where are you going to draw from? Unless you have that conception to begin with, how can you avoid past experience, past relations to tonality? And for group improvisation, where will you be able to find in atonality the common ground the members of an improvising group need? "Perhaps," Evans added, "I'm using the term 'atonality' too strictly. In my last *Riverside* album, I could have been said to have been playing atonally in 'Young and Foolish.' It's in C. A half chorus later, I went into D flat and wound up in E major. But it doesn't sound atonal to me because it's based on traditional harmonies."

About the impressive original, 'Peace Piece' in the same album (*Riverside* 12-291), Evans noted: "It's completely free form. I just had one figure that gave the piece a tonal reference and a rhythmic reference. Thereafter, everything could happen over that one solid thing. Except for that bass figure, it was complete improvisation. We did it in two takes. Because it was totally improvised, I so far haven't been able to do it again when I've been asked for it in clubs."

Twenty-six months passed between Evans' first album a s leader (*Riverside* 12-223) and his second. "I didn't feel I had anything particularly different to say that I hadn't done the first time.

And maybe the second wasn't all that different except that I do think some of the things were different in terms of feeling."

Bill doesn't expect twenty-six months more to elapse before his third which will probably be with his trio; nor should his next solo recording take that long to develop. He's growing fast—in confidence as well as musically— and as a leader actually working as such in clubs, his rate of growth should increase. At thirty, he's already arrived, but there are still major developments ahead.