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BILL EVANS—MAN OF MANY PARTS

The poll-winning pianist discusses jazz piano, explains his approach, and views the work of others

DON FRIEDMAN

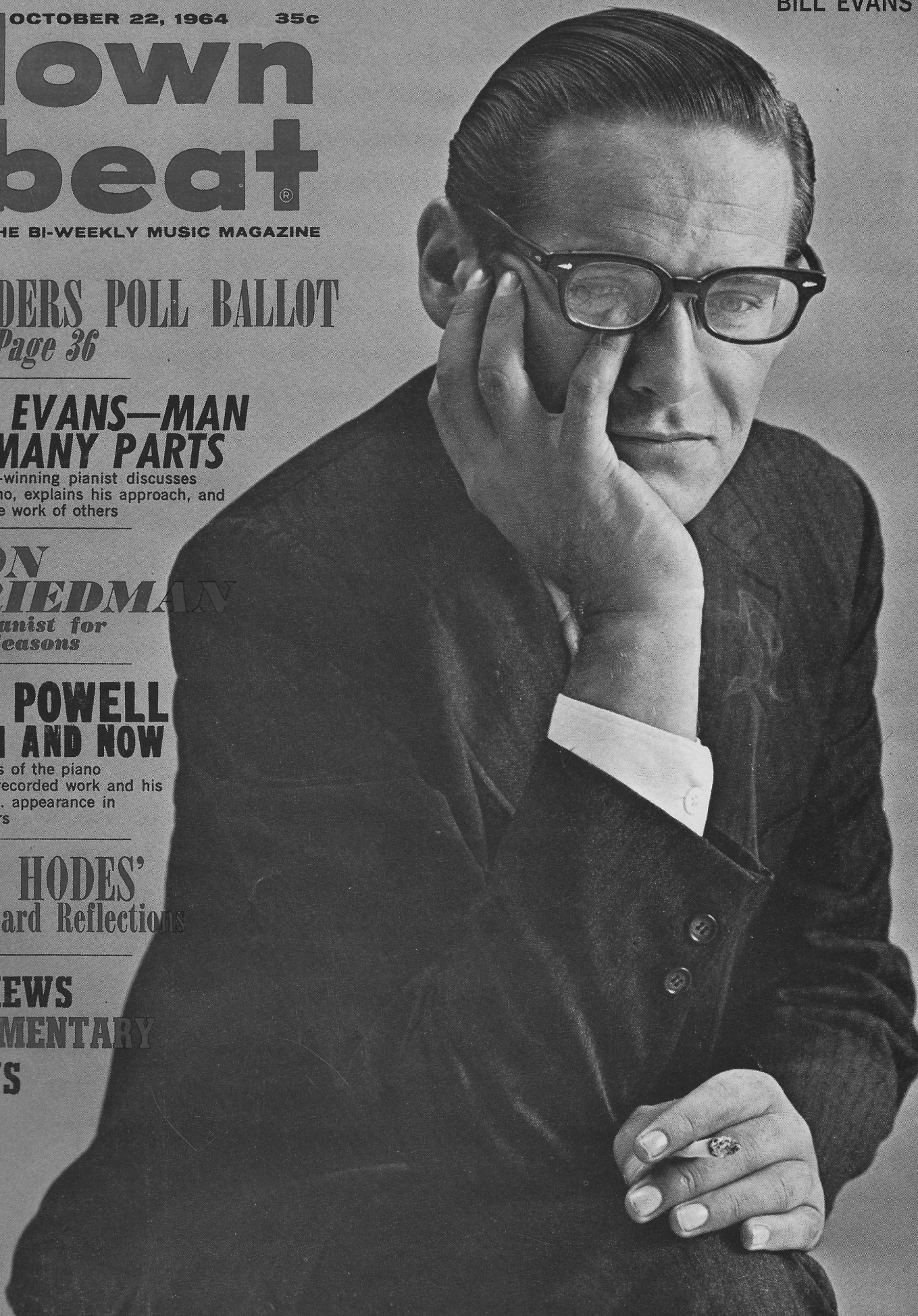
A Pianist for All Seasons

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THE ART C

By DAN MORGENSTERN

THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT that Bill Evans is one of the most influential pianists—if not to say one of the most influential musicians—in jazz today. His strikingly personal conception has not only touched younger players whose styles were formed after Evans became widely known through his tenure with the Miles Davis Sextet in 1958, but it also has affected many pianists with longer roots.

At another stage in the development of jazz, there might be nothing very surprising about this, for Evans' music—lucid, lyrical, melodic, and infused with a sense of, and search for, beauty and balance—is firmly grounded in an astonishing command and organization of the musical materials in the mainstream of the jazz tradition. And his approach to his instrument reflects a firm commitment to the heritage of Western keyboard music that began with Bach and perhaps reached its final splendor in Debussy.

Such an orientation is not exactly typical of the trend in contemporary jazz, sometimes called the “new thing,” sometimes “avant garde,” and which seems more concerned with discarding tradition than with building on its foundations. The watchword of this school is “freedom”—a word open to many definitions.

Evans, too, is concerned with freedom in music. But he said recently, “The only way I can work is to have some kind of restraint involved—the challenge of a certain craft or form—and then to find the freedom in that, which is one hell of a job. I think a lot of guys either want to circumvent that kind of labor, or else they don't realize the rewards that exist in one single area if you use enough restraint and do enough searching.

“I have allowed myself the other kind of freedom occasionally. Paul Bley and I did a two-piano improvisation on a George Russell record [*Music for the Space Age*] which was completely unpremeditated. It was fun to do, but there was no direction involved. To do something that hadn't been rehearsed successfully, just like that, almost shows the lack of challenge involved in that type of freedom.”

Just turned 35, spiritually and physically refreshed after a troubled interlude in his life, Evans spoke softly but firmly, the even flow of his words reflecting not glibness but long and careful thought about his art and craft. The pianist recently returned from a rewarding European tour at the helm of a revitalized trio and seems poised on a new peak in his career.

“I'm extremely happy with the group,” he said. “Larry Bunker is a marvelous musician. [Drummer Bunker recently gave up a lucrative studio practice in Los Angeles to go with Evans.] He plays excellent vibes as well as being an all-round percussionist, and being so musical he just does the right thing because he's listening. He really knows music, feels music—and he is a superlative drummer. . . . I hope you can get to hear him at his better moments, which depend, I guess, a lot on me, because if I'm in the least falling apart, they're always so sympathetic to what I'm doing that it's hard for them to come out if I'm not. [Bassist Chuck Israels is the third member of the group.]

“We probably make a stronger emotional projection than at almost any time in the past. Maybe one criticism of

the group that could have been valid is that we didn't reach out to the people who weren't interested enough to come in, and I would like to get out to people and grab them a little. That's something that has to happen or not happen, but I think it's happening more and more.”

EVANS' DESIRE to reach out to his audience may come as a surprise to those who have overemphasized the introspective qualities of his work. His music also has been characterized as intellectual, and critic Whitney Balliett once wrote that “no musician relies less on intuition than Bill Evans.” The pianist said he was aware of Balliett's statement.

“I was very surprised at that,” Evans said. “I don't consider that I rely any less or more on something like intuition than any other jazz player, because the plain process of playing jazz is as universal among the people who play jazz correctly—that is, those who approach the art with certain restrictions and certain freedoms—as, for instance, the thought processes involved in ordinary, everyday conversation.

“Everybody has to learn certain things, but when you play, the intellectual process no longer has anything to do with it. It shouldn't, anyhow. You have your craft behind you then, and you try to think within the area that you have mastered to a certain extent. In that way, I am relying entirely on intuition then. I have no idea of what's coming next, and if I did, I would be a nervous wreck. Who could keep up with it?

“Naturally, there are certain things that we play, like opening choruses, that become expected. But even there, changes occur all the time, and after that, when you're just playing, everything is up for grabs. We never know what's coming next. Nobody could think that fast . . . not even a computer. What Balliett hears, I think, is the result of a lot of work, which means that it is pretty clear. I know this: everything that I play I know about, in a theoretical way, according to my own organization of certain musical facts. And it's a very elementary, basic-type thing. I don't profess to be advanced in theory, but within this area, I do try to work very clearly, because that is the only way I can work.

“When I started out, I worked very simply, but I always knew what I was doing, as related to my own theory. Therefore, what Balliett hears is probably the long-term result of the intellectual process of developing my own vocabulary—or the vocabulary that I use—and he may relate that to being intellectual, or not relying on intuition. But that's not true.”

Another critic, Andre Hodeir, has stated that the musical materials used by most jazz players, such as the popular song and the blues, have been exhausted and that the greatest need for jazz is to develop new materials for improvisation. Evans said he is well acquainted with these views but does not share them.

“The need is not so much for a new form or new material but rather that we allow the song form as such to expand itself,” he explained. “And this can happen. I have experienced many times, in playing alone, that perhaps a phrase will extend itself for a couple of moments so that all of a sudden, after a bridge or something, there

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will be a little interlude. But it has to be a natural thing. I never attempt to do this in an intellectual way.

"In this way, I think the forms can change and can still basically come from the song form and be a true form—and offer everything that the song form offers. Possibly, this will not satisfy the intellectual needs of somebody like Hodeir, but as far as the materials involved in a song are concerned, I don't think they are restricting at all, if you really get into them. Just learning how to manipulate a line, the science of building a line, if you can call it a science, is enough to occupy somebody for 12 lifetimes. I don't find any lack of challenge there."

Along with this regard for the song form goes a commitment to tonality, Evans pointed out. It is not an abstract idea, he said, or one to which he is unyieldingly bound, but it is the result of playing experience and a concern for coherence.

"If you are a composer or are trying to improvise, and you make a form that is atonal, or some plan which has atonality as a base, you present a lot of problems of coherence," he said. "Most people who listen to music do listen tonally, and the things that give certain elements meaning are their relationships to a tonality—either of the phrase, or of the phrase to the larger period, or of that to the whole chorus or form, or perhaps even of that to the entire statement. So if you don't have that kind of reference for a listener, you have to have some other kind of plan or syntax for coherent musical thinking.

"It's a problem, and one that I have in a way solved for myself theoretically by studying melody and the construction of melody through all musics. I found that there is a limited amount of things that can happen to an idea, but in developing it, there are many, many ways that you can handle it. And if you master these, then you can begin to think just emotionally and let something grow. A musical idea could grow outside the realm of tonality. Now, if I could master that, then maybe I could make something coherent happen in an atonal area.

"But the problem of group performance is another thing. When I'm playing with a group, I can't do a lot of things that I can do when playing by myself because I can't expect the other person to know just when I'm going to all of a sudden maybe change the key or the tempo or do this or that. So there has to be some kind of common reference so that we can make a coherent thing."

Evans became emphatic.

"This doesn't lessen the freedom," he continued. "It *increases* it. That's the thing that everybody seems to miss. By giving ourselves a solid base on which to work, and by saying that this is accepted but our craft is such that we can manipulate this framework—which is only like, say, the steel girders in a building—then we can make any shapes we want, any lines we want. We can make any rhythms we want, that we can feel against this natural thing. And if we have the skill, we can just about do anything. Then we are really free.

"But if we were not to have any framework at all, we would be much more limited because we would be accommodating ourselves so much to the nothingness of each other's reference that we would not have room to breathe and to make music and to feel. So that's the problem.

JIM MARSHALL



Maybe, as a solo pianist, I could make atonal things or whatever. But group improvisation is another type of challenge, and until there is a development of a craft which covers that area, so that a group can say: 'Okay, now we improvise, now we are going to take this mode for so long, and then we take that mode with a different feeling for so long, and then we go over here' . . . and if I were to construct this plan so that it had no real tonal reference, only then could it be said that we were improvising atonally.

"What many people mean when they say 'atonal,' I think, is more a weird kind of dissonance or strange intervals and things like that. I don't know . . . I don't feel it. That isn't me. I can listen to master musicians like Bartok or Berg when they do things that people would consider atonal—although often they're not—and love and enjoy it, but here's someone just making an approximation of this music. It really shows just how little they appreciate the craft involved, because there's just so much to it. You can't just go and play by what I call 'the inch system.' You know, I could go up eight inches on the keyboard and then play a sound down six inches, and then go up a foot-and-a-half and play a cluster and go down nine-and-a-half and play something else. And that's atonality, the way some guys think of it. I don't know why people need it. If I could find something that satisfied me more there, I'd certainly be there, and I guess that's why there are people there. They must find something in it."

It was suggested to Evans that this was a charitable view, that, in fact, much of this kind of music reflects only frustration, and that the occasional moment of value was no adequate reward for the concentration and patience required to wade through all the noodling.

"Yes, it's more of an aid to a composer than a total musical product," he answered. "If you could take one of these gems and say, 'Ah, now I can sit down and make a piece. . . .' But it's the emotional content that is all one way. Naturally, frustration has a place in music at times, especially in dramatic music, but I think that other feelings are more important and that there is an obligation—or at least a responsibility—to present mostly the feelings which are my best feelings, which are not everyday feelings. Just to say that something is true because it is everyday and that, therefore, it is valid seems, to me, a poor basis for an artist to work on. I have no desire to listen to the bathroom noises of the artist. I want to hear something better, something that he has dedicated his life to preserve and to present to me. And if I hear somebody who can really move me, so that I can say 'ah, there's a real song'—I don't care if it's an atonal song or a dissonant song or whatever kind of song—that's still the basis of music to me. . . ."

What did Evans mean by song? Was it melody? "Essentially, what you might consider melody or a lyric feeling," he replied. "But more, an utterance in music of the human spirit, which has to do with the finer feelings of the person and which is a necessary utterance and something that must find its voice because there is a need for it and because it is worthwhile. It doesn't matter about the idiom or the style or anything else; as long as the feeling is behind it, it's going to move people."

But style can get in the way of hearing, it was pointed out.

"I remember discussing Brahms with Miles Davis once," the pianist commented. "He said that he couldn't enjoy it. And I said, 'If you can just get past the stylistic thing that puts you off, you'd find such a great treasure there.' I don't know if it had any effect or not; we never talked about it

again. But I think it's the same problem in jazz; if you can get past the style, the rhythm, the thing that puts you off—then it's all pretty much the same. Things don't change that much.

"That's why I feel that I don't really have to be *avant garde* or anything like that. It has no appeal for me, other than the fact that I always want to do something that is better than what I've been doing. If it leads in that direction, fine. And if it doesn't, it won't make a bit of difference to me, because quality has much more to do with it, as far as I'm concerned. If it stays right where it is at, and that's the best I can find, that's where it's going to have to be."

Evans paused and then added wistfully: "I hope it doesn't, though . . . I'd like it to change. I never forced it in the least, and so far I do think there have been some changes. Still, essentially, the thing is the same. It has followed a definite thread from the beginning: learning how to feel a form, a harmonic flow, and learning how to handle it and making certain refinements on the form and mastering more and more the ability to get inside the material and to handle it with more and more freedom. That's the way it has been going with me, and there's no end to that . . . no end to it.

"Whatever I move to, I want to be more firmly based in and better in than what I leave. What I want to do most is to be fresh and to find new things, and I'd like to discard everything that I use, if I could find something to replace it. But until I do, I can't. I'm really planning now how to set up my life so that I can have about half of it in privacy and seclusion and find new areas that are really valid. After the *Au Go Go* [the Greenwich Village club where Evans is currently playing] and maybe a week somewhere else, I hope to take off about a month. It will be the first time in two or three years that I will have devoted time to that."

IN THIS QUEST, Evans will be aided by what he describes as "one of the most thrilling things that have happened in my career"—a very special gift. At the Golden Circle in Stockholm, Evans performed on a piano built on new structural principles: a 10-foot concert grand designed and built by George Bolin, master cabinetmaker to the Royal Swedish Court.

"It was the first public performance on the new piano," Evans said. "One night, Mr. Bolin came in to hear me and expressed respect for my work, and before I knew it, my wife had negotiated with his representatives for me to be able to use the only such piano in the United States—it was on exhibit at the Swedish Embassy—for my engagement at the *Au Go Go*. It is one of only three, I think, in existence in the world right now. And after the engagement, the piano will be mine as a gift. Mr. Bolin dedicated it to me.

"It came at a perfect time, because I didn't have a piano of my own just then. It is a marvelous instrument—probably the first basic advance in piano building in some 150 years. The metal frame and strings are suspended and attached to the wooden frame by inverted screws, and the sound gets a kind of airy, free feeling that I haven't found in any other piano. Before this, Bolin was famous as a guitar maker—he made instruments for Segovia and people like that. To build an instrument like this, a man has to be as much of a genius as a great musician."

Such gifts are not given lightly and are an indication of the stature of the recipient as well as of the giver. Whatever music Bill Evans will make on his new piano, one can be certain that it will do honor to the highest standards of the art and craft of music.

