

Bill Evans Interview

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Interview taped in advance at Bill Evans's Fort Lee, NJ apartment, not at radio studio

Interviewer: William Goldberg; shared with his written permission

2nd Interviewer: Eddie Karp (according to Ashley Kahn)

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Transcribed by Allan Chase, 3/24/19-5/8/19.

[Interjections “um,” “uh,” “you know,” and some repeated words omitted from transcription.]

[?] = unintelligible word(s)

[X:YZ] = minutes and seconds on audio recording

INTERVIEWER WILLIAM (BILL) GOLDBERG: And [in] this portion of the Miles Davis Festival, we're fortunate to have with us pianist-composer Bill Evans, and Bill was with Miles in the late fifties, and, well, he was on that classic recording *Kind of Blue*, which is still probably one of the best-selling jazz records. And, [it's] funny, yesterday, I was calling up these record stores, 'cause I'm doing this research on what was the best-selling things for this organization, NYC Jazz, and, other than the George Bensons and those...

BILL EVANS: Yeah, *Kind of Blue* is it, that's what I understand, yeah. It certainly has been a strong album, and an album I was very proud to be part of.

INTERVIEWER: In fact, 20 years ago, did you think it would become such a model...important, I mean.

BILL EVANS: No, I thought it's really, it had to be a good record with the personnel that was involved, and, also, I think that was perhaps the first time that Miles had ever recorded an album where it was largely his compositions, you know. And, there was a good feeling on the date, but I really had no idea, and I don't think anybody did, that it would have the influence or the duration that it did, because you just go and you do, you know, you do your thing. But of course the people involved were pretty gigantic when you stop and think of it. Miles and Cannonball and Coltrane and Paul Chambers, and Jimmy Cobb, and Wynton Kelly was on one track, which is a beautiful track, too. Like, uh, I love, I think Miles, yeah, I think Miles' blues solo on that track is one of my favorite solos of his. Uh, so y'know that would predictably make it somehow, but you can't really tell. I don't know what it was, really, y'know? It just seemed to click.

[1:56]

INTERVIEWER: A lot has been said about the use of modes [and less?] traditional chord changes...

BILL EVANS: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah, that may have had something to do with it: just the fact that there were new kind of challenges to play off of, and there was a simplicity about the charts that was remarkable, too. Like, "Freddie the Freeloader," "So What" and "All Blues," there was nothing written out on. On "So What," I think the introduction was written out single line, and Paul and I played it and added a little harmony to it. Other than that, the charts were just spoken, just saying like "play this figure," "you play this note, you play this note."

And I sketched out "Blue in Green," which was my tune, and I sketched out the melody and the changes to it for the guys, and "Flamenco Sketches" was something that Miles and I did together that morning before the date. I went by his apartment and he had liked "Peace Piece" that I did and he said he'd like to do that. I thought maybe instead of doing one ostinato, we could move through two or three or four or five different levels that would relate to each other and make a cycle, and he agreed, and we worked at it at the piano until we arrived at the five levels that we used. And I wrote those levels out for the guys, you know, that was all just little sketches, and, but other than that, it was a very simple thing that he came in with conceptually and sketch, you know, the little sketches I made, so that a lot — all, all of it was more or less created out of the musicians themselves, and all the things that were added, now, like on "All Blues" you know the little fluttering figure I played at the beginning is just something I throw in, just like, anybody will add as jazz players to it, to a thing. But Miles had that ability to create a kind of simple figure, like on "So What" or "All Blues," that still generates a complete and positive reference off of which you can play and still relate to something which is unique, see? And so even though "All Blues" is a blues, it's a particular kind of blues, it has a particular kind of structure, and it's all contained in the chart, really.

[4:32]

INTERVIEWER: Right. It's like, on "All Blues" it seems like there's certain simple ideas that Miles uses like particularly in his chorus at the end of the piece [unintelligible?] so simple, but so beautiful, so perfect just to have the idea to do that.

BILL EVANS: Yeah, that's a tremendous maturity, and yeah, it is, it certainly is. He can play just one note, a line which maybe, talking about [sings a simple rhythm: quarter notes on the beat with a repeated pitch].

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, exactly, that's it.

BILL EVANS: Or, there are a couple of places on "Freddie the Freeloader" where just one note contains so much meaning that you just can hardly believe it. And that's what he got to, I guess, by this time. But that's kind of a picture of the date, and it was all

done in one afternoon as far as I can remember. And the other thing was that the first complete performance of each thing is what you're hearing, like the, Miles ran over the charts maybe a couple times, say "do this, do that," and then he laid out a structure, like you solo first or whatever. Sometimes during a take we wouldn't even know that. He would walk around behind and say to you [in a softer voice] "Take two choruses," or "You play next." Or, you know, whatever. And he would lay out a thing like on "All Blues," say like "Play the chart and then before each soloist, the figure will serve as the little vamp, to enter into the next soloist." And that's all, everybody hears and absorbs it, and once we had the chart straight, the rest was up for grabs, and then we would play it and the first time we'd played each thing through, that was the take that's on the record, so there are no complete outtakes. So it's kind of remarkable from that standpoint, too, and I think maybe that accounts for some of the real freshness. 'Cause first take feelings are generally, if they're anywhere near right, they're generally the best, and if you don't take that one, generally you take a dip emotionally. You go down, and then you have to start working your way up. It's really a professional, laborious process of bringing yourself back up, and you can often get to a superior take that way, but it becomes a lot of work, but if you can get that first fresh take and it's good enough, generally that's a real good one. And that may account for some of the success of this album, that all of those takes are the first takes.

[7:07]

INTERVIEWER: You had spoken in your liner notes about comparing those sessions to Japanese paintings in which you have to lightly draw or else it breaks through the parchment.

BILL EVANS: Yeah. I was comparing jazz in general, or the jazz discipline, to that kind of thing because you can't go back. And it's a remarkable discipline. For people that are considered to be the most unstable, undisciplined members of society, the fact is that they bring to bear a kind of a discipline on their work that is practically unparalleled. And you can't, like if you compose, you could sit down, if you don't feel like it today, come back tomorrow, and after six months you might have ten minutes of music. But in jazz, it's gotta be "bing" and that's it. So, I love the idea of it. I think it locks into a kind of a mental creative process that has implications far beyond the people that even are doing it are aware, because the longer you do it and the more you develop that art, the more you're locking into a process that is almost subconscious. It's speaking from some levels of yourself that you're not even aware of. Who knows? We don't have any idea really maybe what we're even saying. I think we're part of a even perhaps an artistic and social goal as members of a jazz tradition that we have no idea what it might be either. But I think one thing we do know is it's a good thing, because we intuitively committed to ourselves to it for that reason.

[8:56]

INTERVIEWER: When did you first hear Miles?

BILL EVANS: Oh, I first heard Miles on the very first records he made. You know, “Billie’s Bounce” and those things. And Miles is my favorite kind of artist. There’s a certain kind of people that are more or less late arrivers, you can – even though he was certainly on the scene and known and respected – you can hear him building his abilities from the beginning very consciously and very aware of every note he played, theoretically and motivically and everything. And it seems like those kind of people that have to really develop more analytically and consciously and dig into themselves and more or less the late arrivers, they don’t have the kind of facility – I know Miles has spoken about how he didn’t have the facility that a lot of trumpet players had, and fast tempos and all this stuff, and Bird would just tell him “Just get out there and do it,” but that kind of person, when they finally do arrive at their own expressive level, to me, seem to contain so much more. I find that Tony Bennett affects me the same way as a singer. He’s a guy that has always worked hard to dig deeper into himself and to look into music and he respects music a great deal and that same kind of thing happens. Now there are always a lot of early arrivers that have great facility. And these guys say “God, he’s only 15 and listen to that young guy play, man, he’s all over the horn and he seems to have it covered.” But often those people, and I’m saying this because maybe some people will be listening that have those feelings, and I certainly, myself, I’m kind of a late arriver. I knew a lot of people with those kind of facilities, and they don’t know what to do with it often. They don’t have the ability to discard and add, and what they really do is reflect the scene and it’s a marvelous talent that they have, and I love to hear them play, but as real contributors and so forth they don’t add up that much. So often the person that has to go through a more laborious, long, digging, analytical process finally arrives at something which is much more precious.

[11:27]

INTERVIEWER: Art Blakey said a few months ago that Miles was a stylist.

BILL EVANS: A stylist?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, he was describing him as that, rather than a technician.

BILL EVANS: Well, that’s a simple way to say it. I think that’s like downplaying it a little bit. If anybody that’s a stylist, if they’re truly a stylist, if they’re not just an eccentric. Some people try to be a stylist by being eccentric, and that’s not really being a stylist. But Miles is truly a stylist, but that’s mainly because he’s a strong, independent personality, and does things his own way, and always has, and just what we were talking about. So that is right, he is a stylist. But that’s kind of a touchy notion.

INTERVIEWER: That “stylist” almost seems to have like a rather limiting kind of quality to it.

BILL EVANS: Sometimes, some of these things like, style's an easy thing to get. Style's the hardest thing to get and it's not something you really strive for. I'm sure that Miles never really strived to be a stylist. He just strived to be himself, to learn, to develop, and to express a strong, independent personality. And at the end of it, it had identity and that's why he's a stylist. But somebody might say, "Wow, I could be a stylist by just reaching out and being strange," or reaching out and being different, or novel, and of course that's a mistake.

[12:55]

INTERVIEWER: I think one thing that, in listening to the music of Miles through the years, that comes through, is that like technically or just as a trumpeter he does so much, it's not; I mean like some people relate primarily to his muted style, and certain things that he was doing then. As he moved into the sixties, he started to really get, more of, move away from that a little bit and just smoke, in every sense of the word.

BILL EVANS: Technique we always think of as being a thing having to do with fastness, too, you know, and technique is, in its highest sense, is the ability to handle musical materials. In that sense, Miles is one of the all-time master technicians, in that he could play something which is an entirely original conception over something that's very ordinary. So, there are different ways to look at it, too. And actually, he is virtuosic, certainly, and in the best sense of the word. You could get to a point where if you played any more notes it would be funny. So, I mean, how far can you go in that direction? You understand what I'm talking about.

INTERVIEWER: Did Miles listen much other jazz or some of different styles in the late fifties?

BILL EVANS: Miles was very much an independent person, like, I know that when I was hanging out with him, he liked people as different as, well he was very influenced by Ahmad Jamal for a while. And he loved Blossom Dearie, who I love also. He would get things from people like that he could throw into his own work, and you would hardly know where it was coming from. And I don't know who all he listened to, but that's the way he would sort of pick up things, and I don't think; I think he certainly did listen. He's a guy that will turn his mind toward certain areas of music or certain people and decide that there's somebody or something or an area of music that he can learn from, and then he will. He's very shrewd in that sense, in that perceptive. And certainly some of his greatest talents are as a leader and as a person that can perceive talent and potential in people, which is proven out by all of the wonderful talents that have gone through his group. And I don't think we would have had Coltrane or known Coltrane's potential or the great contributions that he's made, except for Miles and Miles' belief in his potential. Because at the beginning — then, I was around when the group started — most people wondered why Miles had Coltrane in the group. He was more or less

withdrawn, plus sort of off to the side of the bandstand, sort of half, not fumbling exactly, but just sort of searching. And, but Miles really knew, somehow, the depth and the potential development that Coltrane had coming, and just gave him all the room, just gave him all the room, man. And that's the genius of his leadership in that he doesn't say very much, and he gets things done like that, he allows, puts certain talents together and allows them to work on each other and work on the music, and somehow Miles will occasionally just give you one little clue. Like he might come over to the piano and say "Right here, I want this sound." Now if you know music and all, you know a lot of the implications of what that means in the total structure. That's going to affect other things that happen. But it turns out to be a very key thing, something that changes the character of the whole thing. For instance, on "Green Dolphin Street," the vamp changes — on the original changes of course aren't that way — the vamp changes would be like a major 7th up a minor third, down a half tone, down a half tone. It's something he leaned over and said "I want this here." Now, of course that gives the total thing another character. And "Put Your Little Foot Right Out," which never got a lot of airplay, was on the *Jazz Track* album with "Green Dolphin Street." He showed me one change on that which gave that whole structure a different thing. Now those are two of perhaps four or five things that he ever said to me about [?] music, you know what I mean. [Laughs.] It wasn't one of those things where he's always saying "Play this, play that, do it this way, do it that way." But, that to me is a lot, a great deal of his genius. He's not just a stylist or a great jazz player, he's a great leader, and he's served a marvelous capacity to bring many outstanding talents out and gave them the confidence and brought them out, and they probably didn't even know that Miles was doing it. I wonder sometimes whether they really did.

[18:31]

INTERVIEWER: That sounds like, when we were coming over here, on the train, talking about charisma, the notion of, I think what you said almost defines that notion, being able to communicate like that without speaking, without telling anyone what to do.

BILL EVANS: Yeah, it's sort of like a magic thing. Miles is the kind of person that if you have a conversation with him, you tend to remember every word that's been said. It's true, he has a charisma. He's a very paradoxical and many-sided person, and if you were to take any number of things of his — acts or things he said out of context — you could be completely on the wrong track, because he could say one thing today and the opposite tomorrow, for reasons that have to do with momentary response, or defense mechanisms, or who knows what. So in some ways he's gotten a bad rap many times. For instance that whole thing about turning his back on the audience and everything. I just don't understand any of that at all. First of all, what do you want from a creative musician? He's up there giving you his soul and you want him to do the acrobatics, stand on his head and what?

INTERVIEWER: There's a film out where he plays "So What" and almost as intense as seeing a live concert, just watching him, he's so, he's thinking so hard about the solo, just watching him with the other members of the group solo.

BILL EVANS: Uh huh.

2nd INTERVIEWER, EDDIE KARP: It's really a, seeing him perform, I saw him perform at the Bottom Line I guess was about three years ago. It was one of his last performances with his group, before it kind of went into, before he stopped performing publicly. And my first reaction was that this music cannot be captured on record. It seemed like, the intensity, that he, his leadership on stage was so phenomenal, it was subtle but so strong, that it didn't seem like it could be captured on record.

[20:43]

BILL EVANS: Yes, true. [interjecting] Well, we all feel that way. Unfortunately, many of our best, yeah, performances are out there in the universe someplace, and you still as professionals have to go in at ten o'clock on Wednesday and make a record, and hope that every few records you might catch a really good day. And the rest of it is being professional, and certainly as professionals you do reach a high degree of performance in the area that you're trying to work, but those special times, you don't know when they're gonna happen, and unfortunately we don't get too many of them on record.

[21:23]

INTERVIEWER: I was talking to agent Helen Keane the other day. She mentioned that you had just talked to Miles.

BILL EVANS: Yeah, well, I had been talking to Philly Joe and the rumors go around. Philly had said he heard that Miles was dying, and these things come out once in a while. I didn't have Miles' number because he changes it quite frequently. And I know that I don't like anybody to come knocking on my door without calling, so I hadn't seen him in a long time for that reason. But what Philly said alarmed me, so Philly says, "I'll meet you over there." I said, "Great." So I went over there expecting Joe to be there already, but Joe hadn't arrived, and didn't during the time I was visiting. But I rang the bell and it was alright because Miles was up and was glad to hear from me, and Gil was there that day, and he just looked great and seemed in great spirits. So it was all just rumor. But he seemed to feel that he wasn't ready to come out and play, even though I somewhat prevailed upon him that the world was waiting for him and he didn't seem to have the inclination to come out and play. But I understand that Gil and he are involved in some kind of a project now to record, or to record and tour, or something. Now, whether or not it will happen, I don't know.

[22:53]

INTERVIEWER: I was told on Tuesday, just a rumor that's flying around, that Miles was in a studio.

BILL EVANS: Well, that's what I've been hearing too, and I think it may be true because, first of all, I don't; Miles is a player and I can't imagine him not playing. I mean, this may be just a long break, for what reason, I don't know. He may want to come back with something entirely new or entirely old, as far as I know. But I can't imagine him not playing 'cause I think that his soul is fed by playing and it may be that he was feeling a little unsatisfied in his soul with what was happening at some point or whatever; I don't know what his reasons are, but I'm sure he'll be back.

INTERVIEWER: Did he tell you any times about what he was looking for in his music, especially maybe in the late sixties when he was...

BILL EVANS: No, we never talked about things like that, and I don't think Miles talks about things like that with anybody. I think you just have to perceive it from what he's playing and what he's feeling and sense and know kind of where it's at somehow. I think it's all in the music anyhow. I think there was a point, in my own opinion, where he made a turn, reaching for a large audience, I don't know, or what, with the bands, and I have often wanted to speak to Miles about that period and find out how he felt about it, what he thought he possibly had developed or learned or whether that was a direction he'd like to go farther in or what. And he might talk to me about that kind of thing, but I've been curious about it because I didn't completely sympathize with some of the music he got into. But anyhow, that's, you can't second-guess Miles. He's always gonna surprise you and then prove himself right in the long run.

[25:09]

INTERVIEWER: Well, we know you're in a hurry, and we've been here and it's been a really fascinating, great conversation. I've really enjoyed it, and we've been talking to Bill Evans and before we let you off, is there anything else you'd like to say about Miles or any [?] of the unbelievable [?] in his career that [?]?

BILL EVANS: Well, I often have said this, but I'll say it again, that the most beneficial thing that happened to me in that association was that it confirmed my own identity to myself at a time when it would have been easy for me to go in certain directions that attracted a lot of critical and public attention, like sort of avant garde, and I was, at that time, more or less, in the avant garde, and could function in Third Stream and avant garde, and the kind of attention you got sometimes could almost turn your head and you start perhaps thinking, well, maybe this is the direction, but being with the band and the real honest personalities involved really helped confirm my own identity, and made me realize that being myself was the only place to be. That's about it.

INTERVIEWER: OK, well, thank you very much. [?]

[?] the scene and a lot of new information and really.

[26:21]