

Bill Evans Time Remembered

Birth of the Film

by Bruce Spiegel

There was a crystal moment when you knew for certain this Bill Evans movie was going to happen. And it was all due to drummer Paul Motian.

But let me digress for a moment. I have been listening to jazz since I was a kid, not knowing why but just listening. My father had a webcor portable record player and he had a small but mighty collection of brand new 33 rpm albums. There was Benny Goodman in hi fi, there was the Uptown Stars play Duke Ellington. Illinois Jacquet and Slam Stewart; then there was Fats Waller, and with **Honeysuckle Rose** and the flip side of the 45, **Your Feet's Too Big**. How I loved that song. "Up in Harlem there was 4 of us, me your two big feet, and you!"

At college level or maybe it was high school, it was Art Blakey and the Jazz messengers, *moaning* Horace silver, everything of his, and then the cavalcade began with Monk, Trane, and Miles. I bought an old fisher- amp, speaker and record player and got everything possible, all the way from Louis Armstrong to Jelly Roll Morton; from Teddy Wilson to Sonny Clark. For me it was a young thirst for the best in jazz, just a lifetime of searching for the best records, the *real* records. And making a collection of them. It was a life-long journey.

I had heard Bill Evans but it wasn't until I was older, much older that I was smitten; really hit hard with his music. The first one was **Moonbeams**. His **Polka Dots and Moonbeams** track on that album and I started to listen closely...It was so deep, so soulful. Then the watershed album, **Everybody Digs Bill Evans** and the great tune **Peace Piece**, and the solo on **Lucky to be Me**. That was it. I made it a point to get all the albums that had the soulful slow stuff, the stuff that made you think.

I then got his autobiography *How my Heart Sings* by Peter Pettinger, and read that. Good read, but in the end, I would study the pictures of Bill Evans, and then would have to admit, I just didn't really get a sense of Bill. The book was great, a lot of musical stuff in there, but I didn't feel that I got a good enough feel from the book. There was just too much missing.

So flip forward a year or two and I was toying around with making a movie about Bill. I was immediately discouraged. Making movies about people, about music people was tough. Hard music licensing agreements, publishers, and there was a family of people to deal with, legitimize people who were sensitive to Bill Evans. Who was I kidding? Also there was a film, a 1996 film that wasn't bad, made some points, but again it still didn't hit the mark. Who was this guy, with the horn rimmed glasses, who looked like an engineer, how did this guy make all this great music?

I then read something by Chuck Israel's, this is around 2006 or 2007 and it was heart felt and poetic. I saw that he was in town doing something at the college front of music and I just decided I would give him a call and see if he would talk to me. And Chuck was good enough to meet me. I just took the camera, a little SD camera a mike and went over there and we talked. Chuck was in his 70's intense, had a lot of stories but took his time telling them. He was very good on **Peace Piece** and how he was so shaken when Scott LaFaro died. Yes, Chuck was good about Bill's underbelly. He didn't get Bill Evans, telling the story of Bill and Ellaine shooting up before the gig. At this point Chuck was good, and there was a lot he didn't get, but I was just treading water, I was still thinking of making a movie about Bill Evans.

Well, I thought I better go down and see Paul Motian, Bill's great drummer and the 3rd part of Bill's classic trio with Scott LaFaro. I went down to the Village Vanguard, and saw him as he was playing. Maybe I had just enough balls etc., but I went back thru the corridor to the bath room, and saw him in between sets. I went in and said I would like to interview him about Bill Evans, "Yea, it's always about Bill" he said, "I always got to talk of Bill, call me after Christmas."

I was grateful and got his number. He was a tough nut, aggressive, explosive, and a musician friend told me he could get weird and unpredictable at times. But I was not going to be deterred. I called Motian, the 2nd week in January, "Oh yea it's fuckin you...stop pestering me with this shit." He said, "I'm really busy; call in another month in February." It was a brief conversation. I thought until he tells me no, I am still going to call.

In February I called again, "Yea, yea, okay, I'm playing at the Village Vanguard next Thursday night", he said, "be there at 6 o'clock, you got an hour of my time." Click, the phone goes dead.

Okay I have an hour! Thursday in February I arrive with my cameraman Gary at the Vanguard and we looked around to find a good place to do the interview. Luckily Lorraine Gordon the owner was not there, and the guys just let me go around and make myself at home. I took the opportunity to quietly shoot around the club. We set up a nice shot from when Paul came thru.

At about 6 o'clock, Paul Motion comes down the narrow staircase into the club. He's got an alligator coat, baldhead and dark sunglasses on. Totally hip. He takes a look at me, doesn't say much, nods and then goes into the back room. I look at Gary and Gary looks at me. And I thought not a good sign. This was going to be a "yes" "no" maybe interview, not much in the way of conversation. I was very nervous, like how I am before I got into the interview. Paul comes out, and asks where he wanted me to sit; kind of thing and we hook up the microphone and start. I have to stop and think about what happened and describe it right.

Maybe the first question was how did you first meet Bill... and he starts to weave the story of auditioning with Bill Evans with Jerry Wald's orchestra. Paul was a born storyteller. Everything was just cool and calm. He remembered the stuff like it was yesterday. His days in 1955,

scuffling, hanging out with Bill brought me to that moment in time. Bill and Paul were good friends, rehearsing in Bill's apartment, going to movies, shooting pool, going bowling. Bill was good at everything. It was two young musicians trying to get over and make a life in jazz. His remarks were always precise, hard-edged, and got to the point quickly. It felt like he was unburdening himself, the time of his life was important to him. He wanted me to know that it was a special time, that it was deep and precious to him. The flow about Paul and Bill's relationship got a bit deeper.

"You know," said Paul, "Bill didn't think that he was a good piano player, he didn't think he had much talent." "Bill I told him - you sound great to me man, I don't know what you are talking about." "Bill even went to a shrink" Paul said, "and had sessions with him to help him get over the problem." I then asked Paul about Bill meeting Scott LaFaro and their big relationship. Paul started talking and then suddenly stopped and said... "Wait a minute; forget all that stuff., Bill was doing some drugs when Paul and Scott were with him." Paul just suddenly decided to clear the air and talked about Bill and Scott fighting over Bill's Heroin habit. Scott hated the dope and couldn't understand Bill's addiction to it. Scott was even thinking of looking for another gig in the late fifties, when all this was happening.

With so many people that I interviewed, they were very happy to talk of Bill, and Paul wanted to tell me more. He then told me about the gig, the fateful gig of June 11, 1961, when Bill, Scott and Paul recorded live at the club "Sundays at the Village Vanguard." Something magical and truly beautiful happened that Sunday. Bill, Paul and Scott's vision of a different format for a trio recording was hitting its pinnacle. There was a different approach to the music, where each instrument had a total independence in their music. There was a new and fresher interdependence of the instruments in the trio taking place. The music reached a new chapter in its evolution. Paul said, "You know we played for two weeks straight at the Vanguard, and many nights the trio sounded fantastic during that gig. We were really hitting a new high on those nights. At the end of the recording session on that fateful Sunday, Bill, Paul and Scott were beaming after the gig was over. The sky was the limit to what was going to happen to the new trio format. Little did anyone know what was to happen a few weeks later.

The interview was just about over. Paul couldn't have been nicer. He even set me up with another date to come back and shoot some of his current band. I thanked him for being so generous with his time. I could tell he felt good about it. We packed up and left the club. I was on cloud nine. Walking down 7th Avenue, I told Gary, "Hey, I am going to make this movie. I am definitely going to make this movie." And that was the defining moment, when this movie had its jumping off point. Paul was the real deal, he took me back to his time with Bill and said things, which resonated with me, and was able to bring me back to that time almost 50 years ago! Paul did it effortlessly, like it was just yesterday.

I'll end with this: I was going to call this movie **Bill Evans: Everybody digs Bill Evans**. A good friend thought that was more "commercial" than **Bill Evans, Time Remembered**. *But, I thought again and said no man, its Bill Evans, Time Remembered*. This is the reason. Paul Motian, Chuck Israels and so many people who I interviewed gave me the **real remembrance** of their time with Bill. A lot of the guys were pretty old when I first talked to them and they wanted to make sure their memories of Bill Evans were good and heart felt. This is the story of a great American artist and they wanted to make sure they had it right the first time. But it was this interview with Paul Motian that got me inside Bill's story and made me want to tell it. Paul Motian died of cancer complications a few years after I talked to him in 2006.