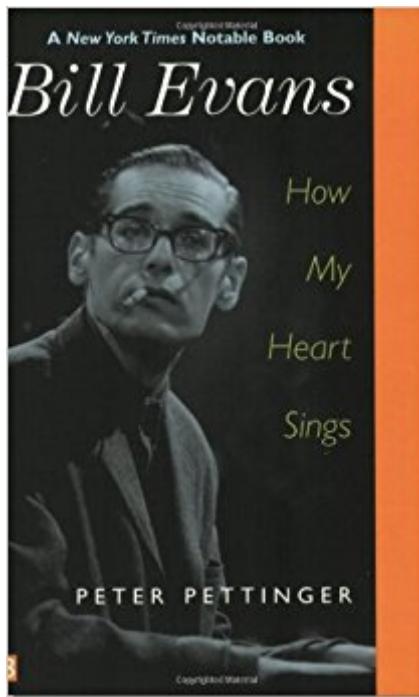


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Bill Evans: How My Heart Sings



Synopsis

A biography of the influential jazz pianist, Bill Evans. Peter Pettinger, himself a concert pianist, describes Evans's life, his personal tragedies and commercial successes, his music making, his technique and compositional methods, his approach to ensemble playing, and his legacy. The volume also includes a full discography and dozens of photographs.

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Customer Reviews

As a jazz pianist who has studied Evans' music for nearly 40 years, it always struck me how Bill Evans could start out his career with such musical curiosity, adventure and brilliance, only to settle into a long period of simply going through the motions. And while Bill Evans going through the motions is still a beautiful thing, now I know why. We all knew Bill Evans was a junkie, but somehow dealing with it on an everyday basis in this book puts it all into perspective. Bill Evans started out straight, so straight that he didn't turn to drugs until he was already in the spotlight in Miles Davis' group (in contrast to someone like Stan Getz who was into it from his earliest gigs). But unlike Davis and Getz, who had longer periods of sobriety to clean up their act and renew their approach to their craft, Bill Evans did not. The result is a flash of light that glows into the mid sixties, but then dies out in a sea of repetition, hemming in his style into a smaller and smaller box as he went along. We see the mind of an intelligent, educated man, drawing on his classical influences to create a unique voice; we see perhaps his initial exposure to drugs producing a shimmering impressionistic sound

that is forever recognizable, and then we see it all wear off into a self imposed life sentence, cutting off his imagination, if not all of his feelings. Bill Evans did not take care of himself, and for that we are all worse off. That he could die partially of malnutrition just underscores the very sad point. One does see a curiously ascetic individual-drug abuse notwithstanding-who simply doesn't seem to care about much other than his art (as he states in his video, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*). Someone almost religiously wedded to this calling, who cares only about his relationship with his craft, and let the chips fall where they may. This dedication in jazz musicians, often with scant financial reward, is always fascinating, and gives us all an understanding of what their commitment means. Pettinger does us all a great favor by chronicling his life, and his knowledge of classical music is of great assistance as he traces Evans' influences among European composers. But his lack of knowledge of jazz almost cancels that out, as he seems unable to interpret Evans' jazz technique at all. The fact that he never states that Evans' key innovation was to introduce the interval of the second (major and minor) into the jazz harmonic repertory-devising a new system of voicing with a unique sound-is a major omission. He refers to this throughout as the "scrunch" sound. The "scrunch" is a minor second, folks. To really tell the story of Bill Evans, you need to understand the influence of drugs on the artist's work; but here Pettinger has no clue. For instance, one can "hear" the heroin affecting his sound in the classic Sunday afternoon recordings: soft touch, liquid sound, fluid legato approach, even up tempo numbers have a delicate swing. Toward the end of his life, we "hear" cocaine-hard driving, more rhythmic, more aggressive. For someone like Evans, who it seems hardly ate at all, drugs had an important physical impact on his life, and certainly affected the direction of his art. But this is a blind spot for the classically oriented Pettinger. He also seems unable to distinguish between truly important and pedestrian performances; he's a bit too star struck for my taste. He also totally misreads the Gary Peacock trio (Trio '64) which, while very different from his others, is his best after the classic trio with Scott LaFaro. I can attest to this from two tables away from the piano at the Village Vanguard back in 1964. Peacock, with his prodigious imagination, technique and sound, was giving Evans exactly the creative impetus he needed as Evans reeled from depression after Scott LaFaro's tragic death. Peacock, had he not gone for a "diet and meditation trip" could have pushed the pianist into a new creative mode. But that was not to be, and Evans settled into comfortable repertory. Pettinger doesn't grasp the significance. Other works that don't get their due: The Bill Evans and Symphony Orchestra album, easily the best I've ever heard of the genre. But it's great not because Ogerman and Evans "do" the classics; rather it's great because they capture the feeling of these classics, something that serious musicians seldom do. And Evans is improvising on the changes, the way the

great masters once did, in a truly inspired fashion. In this book, it's just another album. Similarly, the Symbiosis album is glossed over. Another Ogerman work, this time covering challenging modernistic terrain while still maintaining a high level of feeling, balancing Appolonian and Dionysian extremes brilliantly. The extended reed statement in the second movement, with complex, long lines that flirt in and out of tonality; the following improvisation using the most complex series of chords I've ever heard in a jazz piece, many with roots a minor second above or below the fundamental chord. It's breakthrough stuff, but only gets a quick take from Pettinger. We could have used some straight talk about the trios. Evans almost lost it after LaFaro's death, and his next trio was an effort at survival. But you have to admit that Chuck Israels left a lot to be desired in the early going, all the more noticeable in contrast to LaFaro. On How My Heart Sings, he just doesn't make the changes. He grew considerably over the years, and got to be a solid compliment to Evans. But we do see after LaFaro and Peacock a conscious shift toward a more dependable type of music, and a more dependable bass player. Eddie Gomez, viewed against LaFaro or Peacock is simply dependable. Talented? Yes. But dependable— not inspired. So Evans, hobbled by drugs, chooses to work his craft, dependably, for the rest of his career. And indeed, he produces many great moments. But we can't help but wonder whether he spent the rest of his life mourning that first, wonderful trio. And who could blame him? But we wish he could have gotten over it, that he could have had the courage to take some risks. Perhaps he would have found something that place again. We'll never know. But I'd like to have known a bit more about what Evans' choice of partners, and repertory meant. I'm also not a great fan of books that attempt to characterize endless discography in layman's terms. After a while, we need to know more than the fact that a solo was "shimmering" or "beautiful". Trudging through the discography, however, we see clumps of albums that Evans did just to support his habit, and the uneven results become more clear, as does the sometimes endless repetition of material. He did find new ways to do all those tunes; but he did stretch his repertory quite thin; and now we understand why. For all his problems with drugs, we see relatively little of the first hand impact of his dependence. This is very unlike "Stan Getz: A Life in Jazz" which chronicles Getz' frequent personal and emotional problems. These problems do illuminate the artist's approach to his craft, and unfortunately they are mostly missing here. In the end, Bill Evans is the guiding light of modern jazz piano, whose legacy extends to practically everyone who has played from 1960 on. But his output and life were quite uneven; a more realistic appraisal would have been helpful without detracting a bit from his legendary contributions. But with its shortcomings, the book is still an essential read for anyone interested in Evans, jazz piano, or modern jazz history. There ain't nothin' else on the subject as of yet, but hopefully with this, there will eventually be

more. Finally, books like this bring us to the influence of drugs on jazz-the music and musicians. We'd like to say now that jazz is free of the tyranny of drugs, but where does that leave us? We have a major star that is a Harvard MBA, we have commercial success at Lincoln Center, but where is the inspiration? Where is the innovation? Certainly an acceptable interval has passed since Miles, Bill Evans and John Coltrane were on the scene, but the torch has not been passed. Jazz, if free from the tyranny of drugs, needs to move to the next level-innovation and inspiration without drugs. Having mastered career and made inroads in the market, maybe now we can step back and focus on the music again,. the way masters like Bill Evans, Miles and Coltrane did. When we get there, we'll look back at these fallen idols and thank them for their inspiration, and for the bitter lessons that they taught us.

I have always been an admirer of Bill Evans work. I am a musician and have spent many hours at the Village Vanguard and Village Gate in NYC listening to his music. In 1979 I had the pleasure of interviewing him for a radio show I did in Stamford,Ct on WYRS. As a bassist I have learned from many of his recorded works and marveled and respected Scott LaFaro's work with his 'First Trio'. When I began reading the book I was both amazed and pleased that Mr. Pettinger was a musician and decided to approach the subject from both a personal and musical level. He has captured the essence of the music, the man and the mystique that we, as jazz musicians, have felt about Evans since our first hearing. It is quite uplifting to read a story and be able to see the entire spectrum of a persons work rather than a superficial writing of dates,cliches and hearsay. Mr. Pettinger has evoked all the emotions a writer can hope for in me for I have smiled, laughed, shook my head in disbelief, nodded in appreciation and even shed a tear when reading of the complete abandonment Evans felt at the loss of Scott LaFaro. To be able to share these private moments and also revel in the delight of so many of his peers, reviewers and band mates in his unique and superior talent is a real treat. I have read and re-read sections and shared many passages with friends. Now I will make sure I buy copies for all the musicians I can think of that may not have heard of this marvelous writing. Three cheers for Mr. Pettinger. I only wish that writers who wish to tell us about someone read this book and do as much research as he has. In my forty years as a professional musician and 30 years as a jazz educator, writer and broadcaster this is the best book written about the life of a musician I have ever read.

I've enjoyed Pettinger's unpretentious study of Evans' life and music as much as any comparable jazz title that comes to mind. The British author admits that he never met Bill Evans and has little to

offer in the way of exclusive, privileged information about a subject whose personal habits might tempt lesser writers to manufacture salacious prose along with much amateur psychoanalyzing. Having lowered the expectations, Pettinger proceeds to give a personal biography of the man and chronological account of the musical career that is ultimately a remarkably illuminating portrait of a jazz artist. Admittedly, the book is essential reading primarily for the listener who already counts himself among Evans' admirers and is aware of the pianist's artistry and influence. More than likely, such a reader will find many of his suspicions validated--from the pianist's rigorous classical training to his self-effacing personality to his discomfort as a member of Miles Davis' Quintet to his creative rejuvenation during the last year and months of his life. In addition, he will undoubtedly discover, on practically every page, something unexpected--Evans' affinity for Russian language and culture (clearly demonstrated on the pianist's brooding, darkly dramatic, extended introductions to "Nardis"), his curious attraction to garish '70's clothing styles, his strange personal and musical relationship with "speed" buddy Philly Joe Jones. Pettinger knows enough about music, pianos, and piano playing to insure that his discussion of the music is accessible and instructive without becoming erudite or pedantic. Although it would be, in my opinion, impossible to overstate the influence, sophistication, and singular beauty of Evans' music, Pettinger wisely does not try to do so. The definitive work on the extraordinary moment in music history for which Evans is responsible remains to be written. But Pettinger's book is certainly a worthy start. And the plentiful discography is clearly presented and annotated--in itself worth the price of the book to any collector of Evans' extraordinary recorded legacy.

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