

Bill Evans at York

Pianist believes jazz to regain popularity

By TED MUMFORD

Whether Bill Evans is the greatest jazz pianist of our time isn't important. What matters is that he has recorded over 30 albums of beautiful and introspective music. Evans' combination of taste and technique has won him six Downbeat Polls and two Grammys, and his sensitive and lyrical approach to the piano has led some critics to call him "the Chopin of jazz".

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Evans has kept a fine balance in his repertoire throughout his career. In his albums and concerts he has retained romantic material (Kern, Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers and Hart), classical pieces (Bach, Satie), his own compositions, and the works of other jazzmen.

Evans normally works in a piano-

bass-drums trio, but he has also experimented with other line-ups. He was the first to use a piano-guitar duo (on Intermodulation and Undercurrent with Jim Hall), and he was a leader in his experiments with trio and orchestra (Bill Evans Trio with Orchestra, and three other similar albums) and with solo piano (on Conversations with Myself he overdubbed three pianos). Evans has played with or for Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Oliver Nelson, Freddie Hubbard, Herbie Mann, Tony Williams, Ron Carter, Jeremy Steig, and a long list of others.

Evans' current sidemen are bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer Eliot Zigmund. Gomez, a native of Puerto Rico, has been with Evans since 1966, coming from sessions with Gerry Mulligan, Gary McFarland,

and Jim Hall.

Eliot Zigmund joined the trio in the last year, replacing Marty Morell, who had been in the band since 1968. Of replacing someone who had been in the band seven years, Evans says, "It was kind of traumatic. Millions of things were understood between us... but Eliot has come in very well." His other drummers have included Shelly Manne, Paul Motian, Grady Tate, and Jack deJohnette.

Evans came to York last Wednesday for a seminar and a concert, after which we talked about his career. Sporting a bright suit, a beard and longish hair, Evans often seems as introspective as his music.

Evans was noncommittal about the debate that is raging among jazz

pianists over the various merits of acoustic and electric pianos. While some pianists, like Keith Jarrett, have made it clear they have no use for electric pianos, others, like Herbie Hancock, have adopted them as their first instrument. Evans suggested that the value of the electric piano "has to do with the person playing it."

Evans agreed with the current belief that jazz is soon to become very popular. He thinks jazz has picked up in the last three or four years because members of the rock audience "have realised they're limiting themselves... jazz is the central tradition which everything else comes out of."

Evans was quick to dispel the myth of an active rivalry between himself and Oscar Peterson. The two pianists dominated the Downbeat Polls throughout the sixties.

"We're friends, although we've never hung around together. I respect him tremendously, and I hope he can find something in the things that I do that he likes... I'm greatly honoured to be compared with him." Evans added that the competition is something that exists only in the minds of some fans. "Competitive musicians are the exception. It's really sad to see someone trying to put someone else down."

He said his influences run from "Errol Garner to Bartok, Jarrett to Ravel." He started piano lessons at six and a half. When he was 12 he became interested in a cadet band through his elder brother, and soon

started playing in dance bands. Jazz appealed to him because "it was a type of music where every note didn't have to be written down." It was a love of jazz rather than a love of piano that brought Evans into his professional career.

One of his earliest jobs was with Miles Davis, with whom he recorded Kind of Blue. This album (which also featured Cannonball Adderly and John Coltrane) was a landmark in jazz history. The improvisations were based for the first time on scales and modes designated by Davis rather than chord progressions.

"Miles asked me to come by his apartment that morning. He wanted me to translate some things for the band... other things he did with cues." Evans said that they had never seen the songs before they entered the studio, and that all tracks were finished on the first take.

On his own albums Evans has used various frameworks: solo piano, trio, trio with a horn, guitar-piano duos, and trio with orchestra. His next two albums will be a duo effort with bassist Gomez called Intuition, and the symphonic Symbiosis. Of all these forms which does Evans enjoy the most? "The trio is a pure combination, central to me. It allows a lot of freedom... it's spatial and buoyant."

How does it feel to be one of the very few white jazz giants? "I try not to make racial distinctions," he replied. "Anyone can play music; it doesn't matter whether you're black, white or green."

Evans trio dragged by drummer

By IAN BALFOUR

Bill Evans is one of the foremost jazz pianists and the Performing Arts Series showed great wisdom in extending an invitation to his trio. Unfortunately, Burton Auditorium is not an ideal location for a jazz concert, and the Bill Evans trio seemed duly underwhelmed.

Evans himself is not terribly enamored of performing at the best of times. He prefers playing for himself. Burton Auditorium provides neither the intimate atmosphere nor the good acoustics of most jazz clubs. Aside from their encore, the trio seemed singularly uninspired throughout the concert.

Bill Evans is a rather unlikely figure for a popular jazz artist. His material is neither in the avant-garde nor jazz-rock idiom; he takes his material, rather, from old show tunes of the thirties and forties. Though Evans's material may be somewhat old-fashioned, his playing is far from it. He has long been regarded as a pioneer of sorts, particularly in his predilection for

scalar as opposed to chordal structure.

The performance of Evans's trio was, in a sense, low key. The tonal sheen was silken and the texture soft. Running through his repertoire of Gershwin and Cole Porter numbers, Evans never really let loose with any show of virtuosity. One only presumes he possesses it.

As the concert progressed, however, the piano cadences became increasingly familiar. His performance lacked the range of musical expression which his recordings so convincingly demonstrate. Evans, though, was quite interesting in his quiet background chording, particularly when complementing bassist Eddie Gomez.

Eddie Gomez is a very capable bassist who has played with Evans for years. Their close rapport was as evident as Gomez' fluidity in his solos. But because of acoustical difficulties, Gomez had to play an electrified bass. Reaching the listener through a mike and am-

plifier, the sound was tinny and the effect disconcerting.

The major problem with the trio lay in the drumming. In the past, Evans has worked with excellent drummers such as Marty Morell and Paul Motian. Evans's new drummer, Eliot Zigmund, was clearly not of equal calibre.

Though again part of the problem was an acoustical one, Zigmund did not seem capable of such rudimentary things as sustaining a beat. His drumming was jagged and awkward. He never picked up on the rhythmic progressions which Evans would suggest at the piano. The trio's sound often lacked coherence as a result.

They were not without their moments, however. From time to time, the diverse musical elements would combine to good effect. Their encore (Evans' own Waltz For Debby) was superb, satisfying in every respect. One only wished that all that preceded it had been of equal quality.

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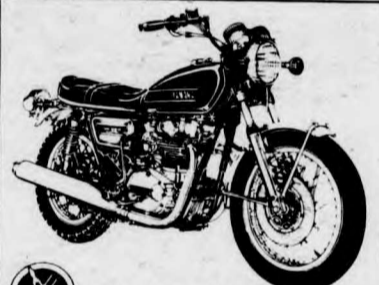
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