

Bill Evans Complete Village Vanguard Recordings

New Liner Notes by Producer Orring Keepnews

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I guess I am entitled to say, with regard to this now-immortal series of live recordings, that I was the very first one there. My mind was at work long before the trio arrived for the Sunday matinee, before the engineer began to set up his primitive barely 1960s recording equipment, even before Max Gordon (original owner and operator of the unique triangular arena that became world-famous as the Village Vanguard) had agreed to Riverside Records request to record Bill Evans, their contract artist and for two weeks his featured attraction, on the afternoon and evening of June 25, 1961.

It actually was the culmination of a thought process that had begun more than four years earlier. I had first entered a studio with Bill Evans, a bassist, and a drummer in the fall of 1956, and had succeeded in recording a remarkable (although only very slowly appreciated) debut album. Not many months later, I began to become aware of how difficult it would be to get Bill to repeat the process of turning on the unique faucet of his creativity. At first it seemed relatively normal although not really usual artistic diffidence. Most young musicians are quite aggressive about recording, but Evans, when asked about preparing a second album, in-

formed me that he really didn't have anything new to say. For a while he stayed with that story. Then, at the start of 1958, lightning struck. In ways I have never entirely understood, the great Miles Davis, then as always a man who made his own decisions (and if you didn't approve, f--- you), had become aware of Bill and promptly hired him to replace Red Garland, long a fixture as Miles's pianist in what soon became an incredibly creative and influential group—the legendary sextet, also including John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley, that eventually recorded the classic *Kind of Blue* album.

It was the very end of 1958, shortly after Evans had left Miles and 26 months after his debut album, that he made his second LP. Shortly thereafter he began working in the format he would (with few exceptions) maintain until his death in 1980—as leader of his own trio. After a couple of false starts, Bill's chosen sidemen were Paul Motian, a frequent early associate and the drummer on his first Riverside session, and the startlingly original young bassist, Scott LaFaro. Although I did manage to make two studio albums with this unit in December of 1959 and February of 1961. I felt constantly in danger of having this marvelous source of creativity and imagination

slip away from me. Bill and Scott and Paul were exploring and beginning to command areas of trio collaboration and interplay that were unique to them. But Evans and LaFaro did not always have the smoothest of working relationships. Scott was particularly , and not too subtly, uncomfortable with Bills growing drug problem. The second studio session had been especially nerve-wracking although Explorations was an album that the pianist later felt very positive about. So when shortly thereafter I learned that the trio was being booked into the Vanguard for two weeks in June, I ignored how short a time it would be between dates and began planning to record them on the job.

Somewhat unexpectedly, I had no problem getting Evans to agree he was entirely aware of what this trio was creating, and undoubtedly even more worried than I about how fragile their unity might be. It was realistic to plan to work on Sunday; the Vanguard routinely scheduled two matinee sets that day in addition to a standard evening program. I was not concerned about working on the very last day of the engagement; apparently I was not even disturbed by the unavailability of our staff engineer, Ray Fowler, since I find that I dont even remember why he was not on hand. (Unfortunately, I will never be able to ask him Ray died within the past year following a sudden heart attack but I suspect it was something as routine but important as an already-scheduled vacation; Ray had a large family.) In his place we brought in Dave Jones, originally known to us as an Ohio-based traditional jazz enthusiast, who had recorded and then sold to Riverside an LP by the intriguingly-named Dixieland Rhythm Kings of Dayton, Ohio. Davey actually was

more broad-based than that: he had engineered several dates for Jac Holzmans pioneering pop-folk Elektra label.

I will admit that I was concerned right at the start of the first afternoon set, when we suddenly realized that all recording power was gone. But within barely a minute, before we had time to really panic, the electricity was back, and the equipment functioned without a hint of trouble for the rest of that long and memorable day. As was customary in those early days, our approach to live nightclub recording involved a single Ampex portable tape machine. In the cozy confines of the Vanguard, we elected to set up on a table quite close to the bandstand, maintaining visual contact rather than hiding back in the kitchen.

Almost from the very first moments of recording, it was impossible to ignore the importance of these performances. And that, in itself, was rather unexpected. Bill Evans, as a human being, was always just about as introverted as he sounded. He was not yet sufficiently widely popular to provide substantial attendance at the two Sunday matinee sets of or the last one that night, and was not yet likely to interact dramatically with an audience of any size. There are times during these recorded sets when you hear glasses clicking and almost feel you are overhearing conversations at the tables. Paul Motian was among those interviewed when Adam Gopnik of the New Yorker acknowledged the 40th anniversary of these recordings with a feature article; he attributed to those sounds some of the strong feelings of immediacy and reality that still surround this material. Perhaps Paul was just putting a best-possible face on what at the time was merely a pretty annoying lack of at-

tendance. Nevertheless, my memory tells me much the same things as his, and I intend to continue to think back on this day as anticipating its own eventual immortality.

Physically, this complete version differs only a seemingly small ways from the other issues. There has been a certain amount of reinstating of room sound, ambience, and final audience reactions. There is the only available previously unheard performance the flawed opening take of *Glorias Step*.

The first take of *My Mans Gone Now* was originally passed over and remained at the head of Master Reel #2. The other three complete numbers on that reel were initially chosen for release and removed. The recording card tells us that only this one selection and a touch of Bills set-ending them were left on the reel. So when this one tape was later permanently mislaid in transit, these became the dates only lost items.

Everything is presented in the original recorded sequence but this had also been done on the boxed set that previously presented all Bill Evans *Riverside* material deemed usable. And as part of the package, you get the see the recording cards that I kept on this occasion and many others. Here they show you comments, timings, and various other bits of data originally intended to be helpful to me in completing production work on the album. It has previously been noted that we had always planned to record too much material considering it creatively preferable to choose perhaps a half-dozen selections for future release rather than devoting the entire day and evening to frequent repetition of a pre-selected one-LP repertoire. (We quickly changed this decision after recording, deciding that it would

be indeed wasteful not to use every selection and, eventually, every take. But among the bonuses provided by my recording sheets is an easy guide to how promptly Bill felt satisfied with a particular performance so much so that he found it unnecessary to return to that composition in later sets. (Thus early numbers like *My Foolish Heart*, *My Romance*, and *Some Other Time* were played once during the matinee and never returned to, with that first take being, in effect, accepted on the spot for release.)

I was not involved in the new approach to this material, and when I first learned of it was frankly quite uncertain as to whether I approved. After all, a now-classic album like this one was originally regarded by me as being something like a member of my family. But, having listened and enjoyed, I am now prepared to inform whoever might care that the original producer does indeed heartily approve of this particular experiment in reconstruction.

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