BILL EVANS

A Step-by-Step Breakdown of the Piano Styles and Techniques of a Jazz Legend

by Brent Edstrom
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INTRODUCTION

If one had to make a list of the most influential jazz pianists, there is no question that Bill Evans would rank amongst the top. His many notable contributions to jazz include his refined touch and control, remarkable lyricism, amazing voicings, and harmonic and rhythmic innovation, to name a few. In addition to his many contributions as a pianist, Evans wrote a number of well-known jazz standards, including “Waltz for Debby” and “Peri’s Scope.”

Bill Evans had the ability to sculpt a standard tune or original composition into a work of art. Although his style is unmistakable—you can often tell in a few bars that Evans is the pianist—his performances were always fresh and imaginative.

It is not a big stretch to think that Evans was capable of so much; he worked hard at his music. Like John Coltrane and other jazz greats, Bill Evans practiced his craft with intensity. He also immersed himself in the music of many jazz innovators. You hear so many influences in his style, including the locked hands of Milt Buckner and Nat Cole, occasional left-hand patterns reminiscent of Red Garland and Erroll Garner, a touch of stride (listen to the third section of “Turn out the Stars”), and a right hand that is, at once, a tribute to the vocabulary of Bud Powell and Lee Konitz and a glimpse into the future of jazz.

I hope you enjoy working through the book as much as I enjoyed preparing it.

—Brent Edstrom

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent Edstrom teaches at Whitworth College, where he coordinates the music theory and composition program. Edstrom has published numerous books with Hal Leonard Corporation, including The Art Tatum Collection, Art Tatum Solo Book, and The Kenny Barron Collection. He recently wrote Making Music With Your Computer, revised edition for EMBooks/artistspro.com and is currently working on a book on the topic of computer notation algorithms in C++. An active performer and composer, Eastrom has performed throughout the United States. His compositions and arrangements have been featured by such ensembles as the Spokane Symphony Orchestra, Spokane Jazz Orchestra, and the Eastman Jazz Ensemble.

THE RECORDING

Selections in this Signature Licks volume were recorded three ways:

1) As a full demo with the piano panned to the right and the rhythm section to the left; the piano parts can be panned out completely or isolated for close study.
2) Slow demos of notable piano excerpts.
3) A full mix with just bass and drums (and piano cues, where necessary).

Brent Edstrom, piano
Clipped Anderson, bass
Mark Ives, drums

Trio selections recorded by David Lange at David Lange studios.
PERI'S SCOPE
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on Bill Evans, Montreux II

Figure 1-Intro, Head, and Solo

This version of “Peri’s Scope” comes from Evans’s Montreux II recording. The original recording is rather frenetic—the trio starts fast and gets faster—almost to the point of being too fast to play. We took our version a touch slower for teaching purposes.

One of the most striking features of the head is the cross-rhythm in measures 15–18. It is important to try to feel across the barlines in this section. Throughout the head and much of the solo chorus, Evans uses close-position voicings in the left hand. Sometimes he would leave a note out in what classical theorists would call a chord of omission. These structures are an unmistakable part of Evans’s piano style. It is interesting to note that, while he often uses a 9th on the ii chord (Dm7), he avoids the 9th on the iii chord. The addition of a 9th on an Em7 chord (F♯) is not found in the key. You will find that this is typical for Bill Evans—he is sensitive to the strength of the key. Chromatic chord tones are most often used in “functional” applications (i.e., a tonizing chord such as an altered dominant or applied dominant).

One of the most important elements of the solo is the vertical approach Evans uses in many places. The solo break in measures 25–28, for example, outlines a Cmaj9 chord (the D% and G% function as chromatic passing or approach tones). In addition to chord outlines and chromatic embellishments, Evans uses some interesting upper-structure chords. A notable example occurs in measure 46; here Evans outlines a descending A♮-m6 chord over the G7 altered harmony. An Am6, or Am(maj7), is found in a common chord-scale relationship: A♮ melodic minor (ascending) over G7—one of the common “altered” scales. A highlight of this solo occurs in measures 57–58, where Evans uses ascending augmented chords in the right hand. These chords (C+, D+, E+, and F♯+) come from the E whole tone scale.
QUIET NOW
Music by Denny Zeitlin
As Played on The Paris Concert! Edition One

Figure 2—Solo Excerpt

As is typical for Evans, the solo on “Quiet Now” is economical—it’s almost as if he had written this down on paper first. In this solo we glimpse his mastery of motive and development. The opening phrase leads us to a simple descending line (alternating with a pedal point) in measure 4. Note how this motive (D–D♯–C–B–A) leads to a transposed repetition in measure 5 (G–G♯–F–E–D). Evans embellishes the motive with a turn in measure 6 and returns to the melodic pedal of B to finish with a final statement (D–D♯–C–B–A). It is also interesting to note that Evans uses rhythmic displacement for each of the statements of the motive: discounting the embellishments, you will see that he places the motive on beats 1, 2, 3, and 1, respectively. Sing or play this phrase several times, and you will see Evans’s mastery at work. If you look at the remainder of the solo excerpt, it becomes clear that this simple motive is a unifying device for the solo.
ONE FOR HELEN

Music by Bill Evans
As Played on Bill Evans at Town Hall

Figure 3 – Head to Bass Solo

"One for Helen" was one of the more challenging pieces to record for this volume. Although the piece is not overly fast, it is no easy task to mimic Evans's subtlety and control. Here we see his use of close-position left-hand structures as well as many chords of omission (measures 5, 8, 9, 10, 27, etc.).

As with many great jazz solos, chord tones play an important role. Note the use of descending augmented triads in measures 87–91: A++, G++, F++, and E++. Although it is simple to play, the figure is quite effective. A similar use of descending upper structure chords can be heard in measures 81–82.

One of the most striking features of this solo is the tremendous rhythmic variety. Evans uses swing eighths, triplet eighths, and tripled quarter notes, among other rhythms. This rhythmic energy culminates in the tricky passage in measures 123–130. My best advice here is to play the passage slowly until it becomes second nature.

Evans is very specific in his approach to tonic-minor chords in this piece. Although he plays a Cm6 in the left hand for each tonic chord in the piece, he uses Bb as an approach tone to the tonic note in the right hand and Bb as a melodic tone for any chord outlines.

Fig. 3

Fast Swing = 184

G7

Cm7

Am7b5

D7alt

Gm7b5

C7

Fm7

Fm7/Eb

D9

D7alt.

G7

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RE: PERSON I KNEW
Music by Bill Evans
As played on Moonbeams

Figure 4–Intro

“Re: Person I Knew” has a groove somewhat reminiscent of the Ahmad Jamal trio. Although there are many interesting components of Evans’s solo, one of the most interesting licks occurs in measure 65. Here, Evans uses descending scale-tone triads over Cmaj9, Gm(maj7), Gm7, and Fm7. For the Cmaj9 chord (meas. 65–66) he uses triads from the C major scale: D–B–G, C–A–F, B–G–E, A–F–D, G–E–C. Note that the chromatic tones are used as approach tones to embellish the scale-tone chords. Evans uses a similar approach in measures 67–69: a series of descending scale-tone triads preceded by a chromatic approach note. Of course, this passage also strikes the ear because of the interesting rhythm; Evans creates the effect of a cross-rhythm by grouping four adjacent tones from the triplet eighths. The effect is striking.

A similar passage can be found at measures 101–104. Although this passage sounds rather difficult, it consists simply of a series of eighth-note triplets. Art Tatum is another well-known pianist who often utilized these streams of eighth-note triplets. These types of figures tend to propel the music forward. In a sense, they sound more complicated than they really are.

Evans uses wonderful pacing on this solo. At first, we find short phrases punctuated by deliberate rests. As the solo progresses, he uses less frequent rests and more active rhythmic lines. Notice how he develops the half-step F–G motive in measures 90–95, which leads us, over the next phrase, to the penultimate lick in measure 101.

Fig. 4
WALTZ FOR DEBBY

Lyric by Gene Lees
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on Waltz for Debby

Figure 5—Solo

This piece represents the hard-swinging side of Bill Evans. It is interesting to note that, though the head is a waltz, Evans usually played the solo chorus in common time. One feature that works so well in his solo is his marvelous development of motive. Notice how the first section (meas. 1–8) can be divided into two complementary sections, each of which sticks to a basic idea. You can follow this deliberate development of motive through much of the solo. Of course, the melody of the tune is never very far away—compare, for example, his note choice in measures 25–32 with the original melody.

I once heard a professor talk about Bill Evans’s approach to rhythm as a series of rhythmic “streams.” Evans has a unique way of combining various rhythmic elements such as swing eighths, eighth-note triplets, quarter note triplets, and even double time (meas. 57). Where most performers might use these rhythms in a solo, Evans combines them in a way that is unique. Notice the variety of rhythms in measures 52–64. These “streams” really propel the music forward.

Fig. 5

Solo
Moderately ~ 165

Fmaj7 D7b9 Gm6 Cl3 Am1 D7#9 Gm7 C13

A7 Dm7 Gm9 C7 Fmaj7 Dm9 Gm9 Cl3

Fmaj7 D7b9 Gm9 Cl3 A7 D9 Gm9 Cl3 A7 Dm9

PEACE PIECE
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on Everybody Digs Bill Evans

Figure 6-Piano Solo

"Peace Piece" is as much a study of "legit" composition as it is jazz improvisation. It is also a testament to Bill Evans's abilities as an improviser that he could create such an amazing composition out of such simple elements.

"Peace Piece" is organized around a simple ostinato figure in the left hand. Evans does take a few liberties with the chords and rhythms of the ostinato, but these exceptions are mostly at cadence points.

The most intriguing section of "Peace Piece" occurs when he moves away from C major in measure 43. Here we hear a genius at work; Evans uses a free tonal approach that is reminiscent of some of Sergei Prokofiev's music. As with all great composers, Evans utilizes balance—the return to C major in measure 68 provides symmetry to the composition.

Fig. 6
Piano Solo
Gently, with rubato ∼ 50
TIME REMEMBERED
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on The Bill Evans Trio with Symphony Orchestra

Figure 7—Solo

Bill Evans recorded "Time Remembered" with a symphony orchestra. Notice how he develops the descending 4th motive starting in measure 5. As with many of his solos, he uses rhythmic variation to provide interest for this simple motive.

Evans uses a vertical approach for much of this solo. One of the most interesting examples occurs in measures 13–21. Here he uses chord-tone arpeggiations to great effect. Note that he uses extensions such as 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths in this passage.

Evans takes an almost playful approach in measures 33–38. The clipped-sounding left hand works against the lyrical right-hand line in this section. His use of steady rhythmic comping brings to mind the left-hand style of Erroll Garner, who typically used four quarter-note chords in his left hand against a melody or solo line in the right hand.
THE OPENER
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on I Will Say Goodbye

Figure 8—Intro and Solo

It was a joy to work on the luscious harmonies in the first part of “The Opener.” Here we see the refined side of Bill Evans as a master of harmony and touch. I once heard his playing described as “three handed”—that is to say that he would provide melody with the right hand, bass tones with the left, and both hands shared in the role of harmony in the “third” part. This is even evident when looking at the transcription—Evans didn’t just play a melody over a bunch of chords; he was a master of voice leading.

Evans uses many interesting approaches in this solo, employing scale-tone triads, chord outlines, and the like. In measure 65, Evans uses a touch of blues. The passage starts with an ascending A minor pentatonic scale followed by a blue note (E♭). We hear a similar hint of blues in measure 52 with his use of the flat 3rd (A♭) and again in measure 69.

Fig. 8

Intro

Rhythmic + 178
34 SKIDOO
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on Blue in Green

Figure 9-Intro

"34 Skidoo" is an interesting tune to play. The piece starts with a freewheeling rubato intro. The rhythmic notation on this figure is simply meant to give an approximation of Evans's introduction from the Blue in Green album. Bass and drums enter once Evans establishes the tempo prior to the waltz section. The B section consists of a series of chords over a bass pedal point. Although I have transcribed Evans's improvisation over the B section, you should improvise freely when you play the tune, as there is no "real" melody in this section.

Fig. 9
Intro [A]
Freely
Dm/E  E7  Am
Solo piano

5
Dm/E  E7  Am

9
Dm/E  E7  Am

13
Dm/E  E7  Em/Eb
TURN OUT THE STARS

Lyric by Gene Lees
Music by Bill Evans
As Played on Bill Evans at Town Hall

Figure 10—Piano Solo

Bill Evans performed this solo piece as part of a three-part requiem in honor of his father. Evans provides an amazing breadth of emotion in his performance: poignancy, love, tenderness, reflection, anger, and sorrow. At first, I didn’t understand his frenetic approach to the third section of the piece but, as I listened, I realized that I was hearing a true artistic outpouring by a man in grief.

In the first section of “Turn Out the Stars,” Evans uses the “three-handed” technique discussed previously. He also utilizes chord outlining in the left hand that is found in much of the Romantic era piano music by composers such as Brahms and Chopin.

In the second section, we hear a left hand that comes out of the stride tradition. Most of the voicings in this section are typical of an earlier era during which “full-sounding” voicings such as 10ths were common. Evans alternates between fast and slow sections in much the same way that a classical composer might construct movements in a sonata.

The second slow section leads to a very difficult double-time section. It is interesting to note that he uses an almost uninterrupted series of triplets and sixteenth notes. As with the second section, Evans uses a left-hand style that is stride-like.

Perhaps the most striking part of “Turn Out the Stars” occurs in the last measure. The choice of a simple C# minor chord (with no extensions or alterations) is a touching contrast to the lush harmonies we hear up to that point.

Fig. 10
Solo Piano

Solo Piano

"Very Early" would be a good choice for a first Bill Evans transcription. The solo begins after two complete statements of the theme. It is not too long or difficult, yet we hear all of the quintessential Evans techniques: close-position left hand, chords of omission, left- and right-hand rhythmic doubling, metric development, and rhythm variety.

Evans uses an active left hand for much of this solo. Note how the left doubles many of the important rhythms in the solo line. As we have seen in many of these transcriptions, Evans uses vertical chord outlines to great effect. A good example occurs in measures 35–46, where he develops an interesting arpeggiated pattern.

Measures 41–44 provide a transcribing challenge. This passage transcends the bass line! Listen to the accompanying CD or Evans's original recording to get a clear idea of the phrasing for this passage.
"Five" was especially fun to record. As you can imagine, the rhythm of the melody chorus is challenging. Fortunately, Clipper Anderson and Mark Kester (bassist and drummer, respectively, on this Signature Licks recording) were easily up to the task. From a performance standpoint, the bridge provides the biggest challenge. Here, the drummer stays in 4/4 for eight measures while the piano and bass go through a series of 5/4 and 4/3 measures. I found it helpful to practice with a metronome (and Evans' recording, of course). If you can tap your foot and feel the underlying 4/4, you will have no trouble playing this piece.

In the solo section, we hear Evans as the consummate bop pianist. The chord changes are based on "I Got Rhythm." Unlike traditional "rhythm" changes, Evans uses a circle of fourths progression. In the first two A sections we have a circle progression starting on F7: F7→E7→A7→D7→G7→C7→F7→Bb. It is interesting to note that the last A section is different from the first. Here we have another circle progression, but in this instance, the progression is F7→Bb→E7→A7→D7→G7→C7→F7→Bb.

Evans takes advantage of the unique harmonic progression. He outlines chord tones in many sections of the solo (meas. 48, 55, 56, 57, 58, etc.). In addition to chord tones and scales, Evans uses many embellishments typical of bop solos, such as chromatic approach tones (meas. 60-61), turns (beats 1 and 2 of meas. 51), and changing tons (beat 4 of meas. 67). If you like this style of playing, I would encourage you to learn the vocabulary by practicing short melodic units in a variety of keys—rest assured that Bill Evans did the same thing!

Fig. 12

Medien Uptempo Swing \( J = 200 \)

Bass

Piano

\* Bass plays up through meas. 12.

[Music notation image]
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