

Explorations Bill Evans Trio



Explorations

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Israel 6:11
(John Carisi) Beechwood Music-BMI | 8. Sweet and Lovely 5:53
(Arnheim-Tobias-Lemare) Anne-Rachel Music/Range Road Music/
Quartet Music/Harry Tobias Music-ASCAP |
| 2. Haunted Heart 3:27
(Schwartz-Dietz) Chappell & Co.-ASCAP | BONUS TRACKS |
| 3. Beautiful Love 5:06
(Gillespie-King-Van Alstyne-Young) Movietone Music/
Haven Gillespie Music-ASCAP | 9. The Boy Next Door 5:07
(Martin-Blane) EMI Feist Cat.-ASCAP |
| 4. Elsa 5:12
(Earl Zindars) Zindars Publ.-BMI | 10. Beautiful Love (take 1) 6:07
(Gillespie-King-Van Alstyne-Young) Movietone Music/
Haven Gillespie Music-ASCAP |
| 5. Nardis 5:51
(Miles Davis) Jazz Horn Music-BMI | * 11. How Deep Is the Ocean? (take 2) 3:48
(Irving Berlin) Irving Berlin Music-ASCAP |
| 6. How Deep Is the Ocean? 3:34
(Irving Berlin) Irving Berlin Music-ASCAP | * 12. I Wish I Knew (take 2) 5:08
(Warren-Gordon) WB Music-ASCAP |
| 7. I Wish I Knew 4:40
(Warren-Gordon) WB Music-ASCAP | * PREVIOUSLY UNRELEASED |

Modern jazz has a rich, much-considered history filled with intriguing “what-ifs”—questions that, as difficult as they are to answer, seem just as hard to resist asking.

How would Ellington’s band have sounded in the late ’40s had Miles Davis quit his *Birth of the Cool* project and accepted Duke’s offer of employment? Had Bird survived past 1954, would he have remained strict and true to the bebop style he invented, or felt the pull of soul jazz or some other postbop development? Would Coltrane’s Classic Quartet been as classic had they not picked up on the modal forms and flexible voicings Bill Evans pioneered in Miles’s sextet of 1958?

It was Evans’s innovations on piano—heavily inspired by French and Russian modernists in the classical music realm—that in 1959 helped endow Miles’s *Kind of Blue* with its sense of sustained mood and shadow. It was those same ideas that, from 1961-65, guided McCoy Tyner as the pianist developed alongside Coltrane’s long-winded intensity. Yet Evans himself pulled back from lengthy, modal explorations as the ’60s began, returning to the familiar, post-bop world of standards, blues, and original compositions that defined his path for the remainder of his life.

Why Evans would coldly set aside what he had pioneered, while Tyner and so many others enthusiastically adopted (and adapted) his open voicings and modal forms is another of those modern-jazz head-scratchers. Yet this one had a chance to be asked; saxophonist Dave Liebman recalls meeting Evans and getting an answer.

“[Pianist] Richie Beirach, whom I played with for years—we were playing opposite Bill in the ’70s at the University of Michigan [and] Richie says: ‘I gotta ask you this question Bill. Why did you, who came up with that voicing, really not explore it afterward? Because you really didn’t go in that direction.’

Bill said, ‘Wasn’t lyrical enough . . . wasn’t lyrical enough.’”

Evans’s melodic priority was but one of the musical qualities that came to define him after his arrival on the New York scene in 1954. As he grew in confidence and his name got around, he also became known for a sense of quiet introspection—a marked depth of feeling and expressiveness that acutely avoided the pull of cliché or cloying sentiment.

In four quick years, Evans’s career took him from the fringes of the jazz scene—working with experimental bandleaders like Tony Scott, Don Elliott, and George Russell—to the national spotlight. In early 1958, he joined Miles Davis’s famous sextet, an historic union that lasted but eight months. Off on his own again in early ’59,

Evans focused on leading his own group and exploring his own ideas—primary among them the concept of an integrated piano trio, an ensemble that could “grow in the direction of simultaneous improvisation rather than just one guy blowing followed by another guy blowing . . .”

It was a startlingly new and risk-taking idea for the time, and it took Evans nearly a year to find the right combination of players with the necessary flexibility, interactive ability, and creative confidence. Drummer Paul Motian—blessed with a sense of crisp subtlety and imagination that continues to propel his career—had played alongside Evans in Scott and Elliott’s ensembles. Scott LaFaro was a virtuosic bassist—New Jersey-born like Evans and recently back from a stint in Los Angeles—whose agility and free-flowing improvisational ideas made him a prime candidate for the pianist’s three-way collective.

“What we tried to do was loosen up everybody’s role so that they were participating more, and with responsibility,” Evans later said. “It takes a really musical approach, an artistic approach, to know when to be really simple, and when you should break something up. That’s what I was looking for.”

Their first album together—*Portrait in Jazz*, recorded in December 1959—was a solid set of standards and a few originals that suggested the degree of musical empathy they would eventually achieve. *Explorations*, the trio’s next recording, followed a little over a year later. In the sense that it was the first recording to catch the trio as they gelled into a truly great and groundbreaking unit, each member intuitively in tune with each other, it can be considered one of the blueprints of the modern jazz piano trio.

Explorations was recorded at a point when Evans was still dividing time between his own band and various sessions for others. But what sessions: through the winter of ’60-’61, he was called on to contribute to now classic albums like *The Great Kai & J.J.* and *The Kai Winding Trombone Choir*, and Oliver Nelson’s groundbreaking exercise in substitute harmony, *Blues and The Abstract Truth*—all three for Creed Taylor’s Impulse Records. For Riverside, Evans’s home label, he appeared on Cannonball Adderley’s *Know What I Mean?*—the pianist’s “moody delicacy” a focal point on a reunion of two members of Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* sextet that, on the title track, revisited modal territory.

Though Evans underplayed his own flexibility (“I think it was a good thing I didn’t have a great aptitude for mimicry . . . because I had to build my own musical style,” he commented in 1960), he proved his ability to step outside his own style and ably handle a wide, musical range—especially on the Johnson-Winding album.

But when it came to his own group, Evans’s sound and approach was his own by ’61. His piano style had fully matured, as had the interplay of the trio. The road had helped. Evans had kept up a steady flow of work in and outside of New York City through the previous year. Upon entering Bell Sound’s studio on February 2, 1961, producer Orrin Keepnews immediately noted the three had “made giant strides towards the goal of becoming a three-voice unit rather than a piano player and his accompanists . . . [Bill’s] interweaving with Scotty and the freedom this truly unusual bassist was afforded were very much up front.”

Despite a couple of troublesome issues—a simmering argument between Evans and LaFaro, a lingering headache bothering Evans—the date went smoothly. The choice of material was typical of the pianist. He liked to balance old and new, with an “emphasis on the reworking of standard tunes,” Keepnews recalls.

Evans revived a few ballads that many might have dismissed as overplayed or trite—“How Deep Is the Ocean?,” “Sweet and Lovely”—revealing new harmonic and emotional possibilities in their oft-played themes. He favored vocal numbers popular during his teens and twenties—like “The Boy Next Door” and “Beautiful Love”—and introduced a melody not yet part of the modern jazz canon: “Haunted Heart.” He also turned to tunes from his personal circle, including Earl Zindars’s “Elsa” (which he also brought to Adderley’s *Know What I Mean?* project), Miles Davis’s “Nardis” (originally recorded on Adderley’s Riverside debut in 1958), and John Carisi’s blues number “Israel” (covered by Davis’s legendary *Birth of the Cool* ensemble in 1949.)

Looking back, Keepnews marvels at “the relaxed pace that predominates here.” The performances do, as a whole, share a laid-back energy, yet closer inspection reveals the approach to tempo to be subtly varied, often within the same performance. Energy rises and ebbs throughout. Motian crackles and with the deliberative feel of a painter’s strokes, defines both swing and structure. Evans reveals his growing reliance on, and adept use of block chords. Check out how LaFaro subtly shifts the mood when he steps forward on “Beautiful Love,” or shares the wheel with Evans on the giddily upbeat “Sweet and Lovely.” Or his extended solo on “Nardis,” an exemplar of full-range flexibility on bass—then check his long, *legato* notes that support Evans’s ensuing statement.

Other tracks merit repeated listening: The refined bebop flavor and hip contours of “Israel”; small surprise it was chosen to open the album. The slowly unveiled melody of “Haunted Heart,” dazzling in its simplicity as Evans feels his way through it, avoiding needless embellishment or sentimentality. The way he jumps into his own inventions right at the start of “How Deep Is The Ocean?,” getting around to clearly stating the melody at the end.

Keepnews recalls that “Evans was full of openly expressed negative feelings during the date,” and admits “I felt equally negative . . . Although I kept insisting that the music sounded just fine, that was mostly pep talk.” Weeks later, when the two sat down to playback the tracks and plan the album, “we were equally surprised when later listening proved my words to have been accurate,” Keepnews adds.

Despite Evans’s initial misgivings, when released in spring of ’61 *Explorations* received immediate and positive reaction. It continued to build his audience and reputation, bringing him one step closer to a career of consistent work and opportunities—including the promise of more great recordings with LaFaro and Motian.

The trio’s next album—the now much revered live recording *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*—was recorded almost six months later in late June. Ten days after that Sunday, Evans, and the jazz world in general, were stunned by the news that LaFaro had been killed in a car accident in upstate New York. He was 25 years old.

Evans remembered: “When Scott was killed, it was not only a blow from the standpoint of a dear friend dying, it completely cut off my feeling of realizing a lifetime ambition of having a certain kind of trio, with the kind of musicians that could take the music someplace . . . I felt the next major talent on bass was Gary Peacock, but that wasn’t until about 1964.”

Two studio titles, and two live albums are the legacy of Bill Evans first trio (*Waltz for Debby* was the second release culled from the trio’s Village Vanguard recordings.) In that context, *Explorations* stands as the mid-point of a brief, historic narrative that ended too suddenly and tragically, and that generated yet another modern-jazz question: What if LaFaro had continued to develop alongside Evans and Motian?

One can but surmise, as one can only imagine how it must have been inside that intense, creative bubble—when the three were at the height of their powers, reinventing the piano trio, in the midst of their two-year run. One out of three remains to be asked. “Those two guys brought tears into my eyes,” is how Motian describes it.

—Ashley Kahn

January 2011

Ashley Kahn is the author of *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album*, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece*, and other titles. He is an adjunct professor teaching music history at New York University.

The appearance of a new album by Bill Evans is always a rare event. The word “rare” has several meanings, but the dictionary on my desk links together the first two of them in a way that tells the story exactly as we mean it to be understood: “(1) not frequently found; scarce; uncommon; unusual; *therefore*, (2) unusually good; remarkably fine; excellent.”

The excellence of this lyrical and probing young pianist and the great value of his explorations of the modern jazz idiom have gradually become among the more solidly accepted jazz facts of our times. Fellow musicians, as is usually the case, were the first to realize just how uncommon a talent Evans possesses. As an indication of the strength of his appeal, note that these musical Bill Evans fans are a most varied group. Bill has worked with Tony Scott and Don Elliott, and spent most of 1958 as a member of Miles Davis’s group; all are now strong and outspoken pro-Evans men. Avant-garde composer-bandleader George Russell has long been one of Bill’s most ardent supporters. When we sought signed tributes to underline our title claim (for a 1959 album) that *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*, we were surprised at how easy it was to find them. Not only men who had worked with Bill, like Cannonball Adderley and Miles Davis (whose “I sure learned a lot from Bill Evans” surely stands as one of the most direct compliments Miles has ever issued), but top-name pianists Ahmad Jamal and George Shearing were quick to provide praise. And the names cited here are but a fraction of the full list you could gather if you wanted a petition signed, for example, in favor of legislation making it illegal not to dig Evans.

The critics do not always fall into line with musicians’ opinions, as we all know, but I can think of no recognized writer in the field who has not solidly aligned himself in the Evans camp. The best single indication of overall critical opinion is undoubtedly the *Down Beat* “International Critics Poll.” In both 1958 and ’59, Evans was a clear choice as New Star pianist; in 1960, no longer eligible for the “new” category, he was ranked third among all pianists.

The approval of the jazz public tends to be somewhat slower in expressing itself, but it too has come along. If you take polls as an index, Evans was ranked sixth among pianists in the *Down Beat* readers poll in ’59 and rose to fifth in ’60, and as high as second in the 1960 *Metronome* poll, outvoted in such cases only by such well-established favorites as Garner, Monk, Silver, Peterson. And on the club-going level, the Evans trio heard on this album played highly crowd-pulling engagements from New York to San Francisco early in 1960, was sidelined later in the year by a siege of illness that took Bill off the scene for a few months, and then began ’61 with a successful tour of the Midwest.

The other “rare” aspect of the pianist’s work is of course a matter of the relative infrequency of his visits to the recording studio. Bill’s first album was made for Riverside in September of 1956. His second was recorded some 27 months later. The reason was simply that Evans did not feel, during the intervening period, that he had anything new to say. (The fact that we and his various adherents disagreed violently with this negative opinion had no effect on him at all.) It took another full year to bring about a third album, and although by this time Evans was somewhat

agreeable to a more “normal” recording pace, circumstances helped bring about a time lag of slightly more than a year between *Portrait in Jazz* and the present LP. As we have commented before, this unhurried (and unhurriable) approach, in an era when many less substantially talented artists seem almost to have taken up residence in recording studios, is a really major rarity.

But once again an Evans album proves to be well worth having waited for. His highly sensitive analyses and reworkings of these eight varied selections are clearly the work of a significant, provocative, and most enjoyable artist. The 31-year-old, New Jersey-born musician remains a highly self-critical musician, but the severe standards he sets for himself generally lead (when he finally agrees, usually rather reluctantly, that he has made an acceptable “take” of a number) to rich rewards for his listeners.

Taking advantage of the closely-integrated support of his colleagues—Paul Motian and the strikingly imaginative Scott LaFaro—Bill indulges in two instances in one of his favorite challenges to himself, using tunes that have become almost hopelessly hackneyed through overfrequent playing (“How Deep Is the Ocean?,” “Sweet and Lovely”) and extracting remarkable and unsuspected freshness from them. He deals also with three other standards: a lovely, neglected Arthur Schwartz show tune, “Haunted Heart”; an intensive reshaping, in ballad tempo, of “I Wish I Knew”; and another of his surprising essays into unsuspected territory, a swinging version of the previously saccharine old-timer, “Beautiful Love” (in the *Portrait of Jazz* album, Bill did a comparable rescue operation on “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” from Disney’s *Snow White!*).

The nonstandard tunes include the debut of “Elsa,” a moody, tender composition by Earl Zindars; Johnny Carisi’s robust “Israel” (first recorded on Miles Davis’s late-Forties *Birth of the Cool* date and too infrequently attempted since then); and Miles’s own difficult and Oriental-flavored “Nardis.” The last tune was written for Cannonball Adderley’s first Riverside album; Bill played it then and has remained intrigued by it. As performed here, it also features an unusual LaFaro bass solo.

Throughout, Evans displays his distinctive and intriguing “trademarks”: the long, flowing lines of his solos, and his rich piano sound. These explorations bring to bear on this material the several major factors in Bill’s style: his intelligent, articulate approach to jazz; his capacity for great warmth and beauty (I doubt that anyone else today treats a ballad as well as Bill does—gently, but entirely without syrupiness); his well-schooled technique; and his never-failing ability to swing. It adds up to a combination that is indeed rare.

—Orrin Keepnews

These notes appeared on the original album liner.

Bill Evans—piano

Scott LaFaro—bass

Paul Motian—drums

Produced by **Orrin Keepnews**

Recorded by **Bill Stoddard** at Bell Sound Studios, New York City, February 2, 1961.

Original cover design—**Ken Deardoff**

REISSUE:

Produced by **Nick Phillips**

24-bit Remastering—**Joe Tarantino** (Joe Tarantino Mastering, Berkeley, CA)

Tape Research and Project Assistance—**Chris Clough**

Booklet Notes by **Ashley Kahn**

Editorial—**Rikka Arnold**

Project Assistance—**Abbey Anna, David Creel**



www.concordmusicgroup.com

- 1 **ISRAEL** 6:11
- 2 **HAUNTED HEART** 3:27
- 3 **BEAUTIFUL LOVE** 5:06
- 4 **ELSA** 5:12
- 5 **NARDIS** 5:51
- 6 **HOW DEEP IS THE OCEAN?** 3:34
- 7 **I WISH I KNEW** 4:40
- 8 **SWEET AND LOVELY** 5:53

BONUS TRACKS

- 9 **THE BOY NEXT DOOR** 5:07
- 10 **BEAUTIFUL LOVE (TAKE 1)** 6:07
- * 11 **HOW DEEP IS THE OCEAN? (TAKE 2)** 3:48
- * 12 **I WISH I KNEW (TAKE 2)** 5:08

* Previously Unreleased

BILL EVANS—piano
SCOTT LAFARO—bass
PAUL MOTIAN—drums

Produced by **Orrin Keepnews**

Recorded by **Bill Stoddard** at Bell Sound Studios, New York City; February 2, 1961.

Reissue:

Produced by **Nick Phillips**

24-bit Remastering—**Joe Tarantino** (Joe Tarantino Mastering, Berkeley, CA)

Booklet Notes by **Ashley Kahn**

The second album by the original Bill Evans group was recorded after the pianist, bassist Scott LaFaro, and drummer Paul Motian had spent a year working together and honing the telepathy that established a new standard for trio interaction. Featuring intimate readings of several standards, plus three compositions from the jazz world that became synonymous with the trio's sounds, and with ample space for LaFaro's virtuosity to shine, the album was cited by Evans years later as among his own favorite recordings. With an excellent performance of "The Boy Next Door" (omitted from the original release for lack of space), an alternate take of "Beautiful Love," plus two previously unreleased alternate takes ("How Deep Is the Ocean?" and "I Wish I Knew"), this Original Jazz Classics Remasters reissue of *Explorations* is the definitive edition of the album that captured one of jazz's seminal bands on its final visit to a recording studio.



www.concordmusicgroup.com

Explorations: BILL EVANS Trio

BILL EVANS, piano; SCOTT LA FARO, bass; PAUL MOTIAN, drums, New York City; February 2, 1961.

The appearance of a new album by BILL EVANS is always a rare event. The word "rare" has several meanings, but the dictionary on my desk links together the first two of them in a way that tells the story exactly as we mean it to be understood: "(1) not frequently found; scarce; uncommon; unusual; therefore, (2) unusually good; remarkably fine; excellent."

The excellence of this lyrical and probing young pianist and the great value of his explorations of the modern jazz idiom have gradually become among the more solidly accepted jazz facts of our times. Fellow musicians, as is usually the case, were the first to realize just how uncommon a talent Evans possesses. As an indication of the strength of his appeal, note that these musical Bill Evans fans are a most varied group. Bill has worked with Tony Scott and Don Elliott, and spent most of 1958 as a member of Miles Davis' group; all are now strong and outspoken pro-Evans men. Avant garde composer-bandleader George Russell has long been one of Bill's most ardent supporters. When we sought signed tributes to underline our title claim (for a 1959 album) that "Everybody Digs Bill Evans," we were surprised at how easy it was to find them. Not only men who had worked with Bill, like Cannonball Adderley and Miles Davis (whose "I sure learned a lot from Bill Evans" surely stands as one of the most direct compliments Miles has ever issued), but top name pianists Ahmad Jamal and George Shearing were quick to provide praise. And the names cited here are but a fraction of the full list you could gather if you wanted a petition signed, for example, making it illegal not to dig Evans.

The critics do not always fall into line with musicians' opinions, as we all know, but I can think of no recognized writer in the field who has not solidly aligned himself in the Evans camp. The best single indication of overall critical opinion is undoubtedly the Down Beat "International Critics Poll." In both 1958 and '59, Evans was a clear choice as New Star pianist; in 1960, no longer eligible for the "new" category, he was ranked third among all pianists.

The approval of the jazz public tends to be somewhat slower in expressing itself, but it too has come along. If you take polls as an index, Evans was ranked sixth among pianists in the Down Beat readers poll in '59 and rose to fifth in '60, and as high as second in the 1960 Metronome poll, out-voted in such cases only by such well-established favorites as Garner, Monk, Silver, Peterson. And on the club-going level, the Evans trio heard on this album played highly crowd-pulling engagements from New York to San Francisco early in 1960, was sidelined later in the year by a siege of illness that took Bill off the scene for a few months, and then began '61 with a successful tour of the Midwest.

The other "rare" aspect of the pianist's work is of course a matter of the relative infrequency of his visits to the recording studio. Bill's first album was made for Riverside in September of 1956. His second was recorded some 27 months later. The reason was simply that Evans did not feel, during the intervening period, that he had anything new to say. (The fact that we and his various adherents disagreed violently with this negative opinion had no affect on him at all.) It took another full year

SIDE 1

1. Israel (6:08) (John Carisi)
2. Haunted Heart (3:25) (Deitz-Schwartz)
3. Beautiful Love (5:03) (Gillespie-King-Van Alstyne-Young)
4. Elsa (5:05) (Earl Zindars)

SIDE 2

1. Nardis (5:48) (Miles Davis)
2. How Deep Is the Ocean? (3:30) (Irving Berlin)
3. I Wish I Knew (4:39) (Gordon-Warren)
4. Sweet and Lovely (5:50) (Arnheim-Tobias-Lemare)

to bring about a third album, and although by this time Evans was somewhat agreeable to a more "normal" recording pace, circumstances helped bring about a time lag of slightly more than a year between "Portrait in Jazz" and the present LP. As we have commented before, this unhurried (and unhurriable) approach, in an era when many less substantially talented artists seem almost to have taken up residence in recording studios, is a really major rarity.

But once again an Evans album proves to be well worth having waited for. His highly sensitive analyses and reworkings of these eight varied selections are clearly the work of a significant, provocative and most enjoyable artist. The thirty-one year old, New Jersey-born musician remains a highly self-critical musician, severe standards he sets for himself generally lead (when he finally agrees, usually rather reluctantly, that he has made an acceptable 'take' of a number) to rich rewards for his listeners.

Taking advantage of the closely-integrated support of his colleagues — Paul Motian and the strikingly imaginative Scott LaFaro — Bill indulges in two instances in one of his favorite challenges to himself, using tunes that have become almost hopelessly hackneyed through over-frequent playing (*How Deep Is the Ocean*; *Sweet and Lovely*) and extracting remarkable and unsuspected freshness from them. He deals also with three other standards: a lovely, neglected Arthur Schwartz show tune, *Haunted Heart*; an intensive reshaping, in ballad tempo, of *I Wish I Knew*; and another of his surprising essays into unsuspected territory, a swinging version of the previously saccharine old-timer, *Beautiful Love* (in the "Portrait in Jazz" album, Bill did a comparable rescue operation on *Some Day My Prince Will Come*, from Disney's "Snow White"!).

Produced and notes written by ORRIN KEEPNEWS. Cover designed by KEN DEARDOFF. Back-liner photograph by STEVE SCHAPIRO. Recording Engineer: BILL STODDARD (Bell Sound Studios).



The non-standard tunes include the debut of *Elsa*, a moody, tender composition by Earl Zindars; Johnny Carisi's robust *Israel* (first recorded on Miles Davis' late-'40s "Birth of the Cool" date and too infrequently attempted since then); and Miles' own difficult and Oriental-flavored *Nardis*. This last tune was written for Cannonball Adderley's first Riverside album; Bill played it then and has remained intrigued by it. As performed here, it also features an unusual LaFaro bass solo.

Throughout, Evans displays his distinctive and intriguing 'trademarks': the long, flowing lines of his solos, and his rich piano sound. These explorations bring to bear on this material the several major factors in Bill's style: his intelligent, articulate approach to jazz; his capacity for great warmth and beauty (I doubt that anyone else today treats a ballad as well as Bill does — gently, but entirely without syrupiness); his well-schooled technique; and his never-failing ability to swing. It adds up to a combination that is indeed rare.

Previous BILL EVANS albums are—
Portrait in Jazz (RLP 12-315; Stereo RLP 1162)
Everybody Digs Bill Evans (RLP 12-291; Stereo RLP 1129)

New Jazz Conceptions (RLP 12-223)

He is heard with CANNONBALL ADDERLEY on —
Portrait of Cannonball; with Bill Evans, Blue Mitchell (RLP 12-269)