

The Complete Village Vanguard Recordings—Bill Evans Trio (1961)

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Essay by Evan H. Nass, Esq. (guest post)*



*Bill Evans***

The commercial success of the Bill Evans Trio's "Sunday at the Village Vanguard," released in 1961, led to Evan's reputation as a preeminent improviser, and the recording became a defining moment in modern jazz. The recordings of these sessions, as released, were far from complete, and it wasn't until some four decades later that the complete sessions of that day were made available commercially. The complete recordings give the listener a far better appreciation of the importance of the performances that took place that day, as well as Evans' role as the pianist who defined modern improvisational jazz. Steeped in classical music, Evans did not consider himself naturally gifted at improvising.

Evans was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, on August 16, 1929. At a young age, he became known for his intuition for sight-read music. He quickly absorbed the opera and classical music he was exposed to. Instead of toys for Christmas, Evans would request Petrushka 78s. As a teen, it was clear that Evans was an immensely gifted multi-instrumentalist, but the standard music education of the day left him uninspired and stifled by the restrictions of its classical focus.

At this point, jazz, a foundationally improvisational music, had firmly planted its roots in the North and in particular, the suburbs of New York City. In the early 50s, Harry Evans, Bill's older brother, introduced him to jazz and its improvisational nature, widening Bill's aural landscape with exposure to the ever-growing jazz and Bop scenes around him. However, Evans was fully aware of his inability to improvise or veer from the written note. He used to say that he could play Mozart by sight but couldn't improvise "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

Evans developed his piano improvisational technique when he got an opportunity to play Erskin Hawkins' "Tuxedo Junction" during his high school band rehearsals. For Evans, the ability to

play around the notes transcribed was life altering and he decided to devote his life to improvisational music. He graduated Southeastern Louisiana University with a Bachelor's in Piano and began performing with big names, including a three-month stint with Billie Holiday. Shortly after, Evans received his draft notice and began playing piano in the Fifth US Army band. When he returned from the Army, players took note and his music career flourished. Bill Evans began performing and recording with Miles Davis's sextet. He was the pianist on Davis's "Kind of Blue" album, itself an inductee in the National Registry in 2002.

By 1961, Evans had his own trio--including drummer Paul Motian (who had already been recorded with jazz greats like Thelonious Monk) and a newcomer to the scene, bassist Scott LaFaro--playing regular gigs at the Village Vanguard, New York City's legendary jazz club. One Sunday, on June 25, 1961, the trio sat down for yet another long gig--five sets, which spanned an entire day--and performed what would become a benchmark recording. "Sunday at the Village Vanguard" was released in the US in October 1961 as a one-album collection of tracks. The album quickly became recognized as a masterpiece.

The opening track, a LaFaro composition titled "Gloria's Step," sounds as if it begins mid-track. Evans continuously spurs the track forward by interpreting standard seventh-chords as ninths and sharp-elevenths progressing on the first beat of each measure to create momentum in the harmony. LaFaro's and Evans's solos contrast to drummer Motian's steady brush work (with no solo taken) to reveal a more complex musical relationship between Evans and LaFaro and expresses just how musically intertwined they had become. The bass solo gets busier, while Evans's sparse piano work lends a hand simply to buttress the harmony and continue the motion set from the start. The end of the bass solo teases out a perfectly unified and tempered piano playing with the trio in place to recreate the head, revealing a confident and intentional performance. The other tracks selected for inclusion in the album "Sunday at the Village Vanguard" reflect the range of and depth of the relationship between the LaFaro and Motian.

The album achieved legendary status and became part of the live jazz cannon which ultimately led to the entirety being released in Japan in 2002. In 2005, Riverside Records released the entire five-set day (recorded by Orrin Keepnews in conjunction with audio engineer David Jones) in the US as a trifecta of discs called "The Complete Village Vanguard Recordings."

At first listen, it may seem obvious why the whole recording was not initially released. There were many audible shortcomings--an electrical short stopped the recording a minute into the first track, vocal introductions can barely be heard, and people chatting, laughter, as well as nearby clicking sounds, are all caught on tape; the portable recorder was an Ampex two-track reel-to-reel, positioned on an empty table in front of the stage. Many of these audible imperfections were intentionally minimized in the original 1961 release. What became clear, despite its flaws, was that these sessions captured a moment in time of an immensely powerful trio that would very soon no longer exist. This opportunity is precisely what producer Orrin Keepnews successfully captured on the full set of recordings, memorializing for all time, what was to prove an ephemeral musical event--one that could never be duplicated for the reasons described below. It is as if the listener is transported to that seminal Sunday evening at the Vanguard. The recording comes complete with all the in-person distractions predictable at a Sunday evening jazz performance; one can almost smell the smoke lingering in the air from the jazzniks' self-

rolled cigarettes and feel and hear the servers glissading between the tightly-packed tables as the carefully curated interplay of “Waltz for Debbie” is performed.

Legends like Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett stand in the shadows of this master. Thanks to that iconic 1961 performance at the Vanguard, all live jazz performance recordings will forever have a barometer with which to compare their intimacy and impact.

Approximately ten days after this performance, 25-year-old Scott LaFaro died in a fatal car crash. Evans sunk deep into depression and musical dormancy, ignoring the piano for months. Some close to him say he never recovered. And, in 1979, his older brother, who had introduced him to jazz all those years ago, committed suicide. Between Evan’s underlying medical conditions and dependency on drugs, he became gravely ill and passed away on September 15, 1980. His close friend and music critic, Gene Lees, described Evans’s demise as “the longest suicide in history.”

Although his life in years was relatively short, his legacy as a jazz master is enshrined, a title he is praised for and so deserving of, and one this recording certainly helped cement.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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