



Bill Evans: How My Heart Sings

By Mr. Peter Pettinger, Peter Pettinger

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This enthralling book is the first biography in English of Bill Evans, one of the most influential of all jazz pianists. Peter Pettinger, himself a concert pianist, describes Evans's life (the personal tragedies and commercial successes), his musicmaking (technique, compositional methods, and approach to group playing), and his legacy. The book also includes a full discography and dozens of photographs.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Perhaps it was a white jazz musician's need to negate his very ordinary American boyhood, or maybe it was in the genes he inherited from his alcoholic father--no one can be quite sure--but Bill Evans, one of the most influential American jazz pianists ever, was a drug addict. He picked up his habit shortly after joining the Miles Davis Sextet in the 1950s, but it took Evans more than 20 years to be swallowed by the abyss of heroin, methadone, and cocaine. Sitting at the piano in the shadow of Davis, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Paul Chambers, and Philly Joe Jones--the era's paragons of cool--could not have been easy for the retiring musician who suffered harsh ribbing at the hands of both bandmates and fans. Ironically, as the drugs distorted Evans's body and soul, his fingers coaxed ever more sublime music from his keyboard. Biographer Peter Pettinger was himself a professional pianist and a longtime listener of Evans, so he is expert at articulating the nuances of the music. He is perceptive too in exploring the forces that imbued in one life so much beauty and so much pain. The result is a book that is both a memorial to a burdened man and an homage to his transcendent music.

From Publishers Weekly

If anyone deserves a good, accessible jazz biography, it's Bill Evans, the classically trained pianist who bridged the gap between bop and cool jazz and influenced a generation of ivory ticklers. Evans left an indelible stamp on the history of jazz piano, and as a white man in a world populated mostly by black musicians, he merits special consideration. Unfortunately, Pettinger's dessicated analytical biography doesn't do justice to Evan's tumultuous, often brilliant life. The main problem here is that the author, himself an internationally renowned British concert pianist, is more interested in the piano player than in the man. After hitting some of the standard biographical notes (Evans was born in Plainfield, N.J., in 1929; talent for the piano appeared early), Pettinger dispenses with personal insights to such a degree that his book becomes more critical discography than biography. Intimates of Evans aren't described physically or characterized emotionally but are simply wrung dry of their musical content then pushed offstage. Interviews with contemporaries do provide memories of Evans, but they are often banal. In relating a life filled with romantic disappointment, extreme drug abuse and assorted illnesses that contributed to his early death in 1980, Pettinger paints only a pallid portrait of the man behind the music. Yet Pettinger is eminently qualified to assay Evan's evolution as a pianist, and students of Evans's music will no doubt enjoy the author's references to Evans's scores and academic excursions: e.g., "These four-note scale groups move down in thirds (a typical feature of the pianist's right-hand style) and they go five times into each half of the middle eight." In the end, though, fans of Evans's music may be left cold. 40 b&w photos.

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From Library Journal

Pettinger, a concert pianist, offers a sympathetic biography of the seminal jazz pianist/composer Bill Evans (1929-80). Pettinger carefully explains the pianist's merging of classical structure with jazz improvisation for a distinctively understated, lyrical sound. Using secondary sources and material from a handful of interviews, Pettinger describes Evans's emergence as a fledging sideman in New York, his first album as a leader, and his contributions to modal jazz during stints with Miles Davis. Pettinger devotes the last half of the book to the quintessential Evans trio (with drummer Paul Motian and bassist Scott LaFaro), Evans's battles with heroin and cocaine, and his gigs and recording sessions with dozens of jazz luminaries until his premature death. Though seldom linking Evans with the larger social context in which jazz became popular during the 1950s and 1960s, Pettinger provides a portrait of Evans that will serve as a foundation for further investigation of this quiet jazz giant. Recommended for jazz fans and music buffs. ADavid P. Szatmary, Univ. of Washington, Seattle

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Terry Crabtree:

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