

# The Harmonic Language of Bill Evans: Introduction

by Bob Hinz

The harmonies and voicings of Bill Evans have been a major area of interest and inspiration for musicians who play and compose jazz. While many of the harmonic techniques and practices of Evans are recognized as common to all jazz musicians, particularly pianists, some of the more subtle and complex elements of his playing help to define his style and are, perhaps, the most useful to examine. Using transcriptions of ten different Bill Evans solos and group performances, I wish to inquire into the pianist's harmonies. This paper will include the following topics (with respect to the performances of Bill Evans):

1. Basic Harmonic Principles
2. Use of 6th, 9th, 11th, and 13th Chord Extensions
3. The Overtone Series and Chord Sonority
4. Use of Chords Voiced in Fourths
5. Tone Clusters
6. Linear Aspects of Harmonic Texture
7. Tonic and Dominant Chord Substitutions
8. Dim. Seventh Chord and Dim. Scale Harmonies
9. Diatonic Passing Chords
10. Parallelism
11. Pedal Tones
12. Dynamic Shading, Touch, and Harmonic Quality
13. Harmonization
14. Texture and Textural Contrasts
15. The Process of Transcribing

The following solo and group performances (in the form of transcriptions) will be discussed:

1. "Autumn Leaves" (Milestone M-47034)
2. "Spring Is Here" (Milestone M-47034)
3. "Someday My Prince Will Come" (Milestone M-47034)
4. "What is This Thing Called Love?" (Milestone M-47034)
5. "Make Someone Happy" (Verve UMV-2053)

6. "The Touch of Your Lips" (Fantasy 9542)
7. "What Kind of Fool Am I?" (Fantasy 9542)
8. "Here's That Rainy Day" (Verve 833-801-2)
9. "Turn Out the Stars" (Verve UMV-2106)

## Basic Harmonic Principles

Assuming the reader's basic understanding of the principles of jazz harmony, I wish to proceed to a discussion of how Bill Evans uses the harmonic language of jazz as it is evinced in his playing.

With respect to chord components (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13), there are certain consistent harmonic practices in Bill Evans' playing. Evans' harmonic method of incorporating the 3rd and 7th into most of his chords (while often leaving out the 5th) is consistent with common procedure in jazz harmony. For example, left-hand chordal accompaniments to his right hand improvised solos most commonly include 1,3, and 7; sometimes the root is left out yielding 3 and 7 only (often with 13). Other common left-hand chord voicings use 1,7, and 9, 1 and 3 (most commonly expressed as a 10th), and 1 and 7 (Ex. 1).

His arrangement of the tune within the head sections follows a less consistent harmonic practice, although most chords include the root, 3rd, and 7th, while the 5th is often missing. However, while it is possible to talk about commonly used chord voicings during improvised solos, his arrangements of the melody within head sections is more complex, and the idea of a chord voicing *per se* is less appropriate. In many of the performances at a slower ballad tempo, however, left-hand arpeggiation is often commonly comprised of 1-5-10, 1-7-10, 1-3-7, and 1-5-7.

## Use of 6th, 9th, 11th, and 13th Chord Extensions

Evans' chords within his harmonizations of tunes are often "weighted" so that they emphasize harmonic color; the more colorful components of chords such as 6, 7, 9, 11, and 13 are often doubled. While it is easy to observe this fact in many of the transcriptions, it is more difficult to get a sense of what determines Evans' remarkable genius for answering the subtle questions of harmonic color in his playing (in other words, what tones to double, how to space chords, etc.), and what descriptions, if any, provide us with insight into how the process of harmonization is approached.

## The Overtone Series and Chord Sonority

One element which I am convinced figures prominently in Bill Evans' harmonization process (and the harmonization process in general) is the remarkable sensitivity to the overtone series that Evans must have possessed. Since jazz is so fundamentally an *aural* phenomenon, the ability to hear harmonics within a tone is no different than the ability to hear tones within a chord. Specifically, because a given tone played on an instrument produces overtones (other less audible pitches heard along with the pitch which is clearly heard, (Ex. 2), doubling a lower harmonic of a sounded tone (such as an octave or 5th) is far less efficient (or "cost effective") than doublings of harmonics higher in the series. For this reason one seldom finds doublings of the root, or doublings of

the 3rd and 5th when the root is present in Evans' arrangements. The exception here is that the 3rd and 5th are commonly doubled or even tripled (Ex. 3) when they are melody tones or when the root is missing. It seems that Evans often plays with the contrast between a chord without a 5th and a chord heavily weighted on the 5th but often rootless. However, color tones such as the 6th, 7th, 9th, and 13th are commonly doubled within chords (Ex. 4; see also Ex. 3) emphasizing the harmonic color these tones create along with the root.

Moreover, depending on the way two or more tones (each with its own overtone series) interact, certain tones can be heard rather clearly, although these are not actually played by the performer, or written into the music. These occurrences make possible the production of full and complete chord sonorities at the piano, even when, for example, no tones are played in the middle of the keyboard. The example I cite most frequently is the one involving the last two chords of the *Ab Major Ballad Op.47* of Chopin (Ex. 5). Here the Eb dominant chord contains a seventh (the Db just above middle C) which would normally resolve downward to middle C in the tonic Ab major, but the middle C is not played. Nevertheless, the interaction between all the played tones in the tonic chord enables us to hear this middle C clearly, almost as if it were being played. Evans possesses the same sensitivity to the interaction of tones at the piano (and the "ghost" tones thus created) as did Chopin, Debussy, and many other great pianist composers. These "ghost" tones figure prominently in the approach the pianist takes to voicing chords: what notes are doubled, omitted, etc.

Another feature related to Evans voicing of chords is the sonority created by octave doublings of tones which are a 4th or a 5th apart. This harmonic practice is often found in the music of the impressionist composers, in particular in Debussy's *Preludes*. This approach to piano sonority is prevalent in Evans' arrangement of "What Kind of Fool Am I?". Moreover, these 4th and 5th doublings, expressed in various relationships to other tones, happen so frequently in a variety of different performances that they seem trademarks of Bill Evans' expression of harmonic color (Ex. 6).

#### Use of Chords Voiced in Fourths

Evans' chordal textures in general frequently make use of 4ths. For example, the entire introduction, and most of the head of "Here's That Rainy Day" make use of chords (particularly in the right hand) voiced in 4ths (Ex. 7). Melodic motion is often paralleled by perfect 4ths (and perfect 5ths, as well). Evans' performance of "The Touch of Your Lips" contains many examples of melodic motion paralleled with 4ths or 5ths (Ex. 8). One common harmonic device is the use of two perfect fourths a whole step apart consecutively to create a 9-5 and 3-13 relationship over a dominant chord (Ex. 9).

Left-hand chord voicings accompanying improvised solos also commonly appear as structures comprised of perfect 4ths or perfect 4ths and augmented 4ths (Ex. 10). These chord voicings occur much more frequently in the trio recordings than in the solo recordings, and they produce, in such a texture, of only three notes against a root in the bass, a strong harmonic color.

#### Tone Clusters

Although tone clusters are uncommon in Bill Evans' harmonic realizations, they do appear from time to time. The first chord of his performance of "Someday My Prince Will Come" is a cluster (Ex. 11). Clusters also appear briefly in the left hand accompaniment to Evans performance of "Autumn Leaves. Diminished scale harmonies (often extensions based on a dominant chord function), and 7sus4 chords often appear in a cluster arrangement. Evans music often makes use of textural contrasts: densely spaced chords (cluster-like) followed by widely spaced chords. And his chord voicings are, in general, are often arranged with minor and major 2nds forming a compact harmonic texture.

#### Linear Aspects of Harmonic Texture

While Evans' harmonic language is principally related to the vertical sonorities his chord voicings produce, the horizontal or linear aspects of his playing (voice leading) also play a role in his harmonic style. For example, the bass lines within his solo piano recordings often express linear or step-wise movement. Moreover, while Evans' textures could seldom be described as contrapuntal or polyphonic, he does occasionally introduce a secondary counter-melody to arouse interest (Ex. 4). A strong linear component comprises his solo piano introduction to "Turn Out The Stars" and "Make Someone Happy." Left-hand chordal accompaniments of improvised solos also tend to express a strong linear component.

Other linear qualities in his playing tend to be subtle but, are nevertheless, heard. For example, in jazz harmony, a voice which is heard linearly (whether chromatic or step-wise) is not necessarily *one particular voice*; it may be a voice created as a result of the interaction of the various tones played within consecutive chords. An example of this interaction can be found in two left-hand accompaniments taken from Evans' performance on "Someday My Prince Will Come": one accompanies an improvised solo (Ex. 11); the other provides a harmonic foundation for a repeated rhythmic figure which concludes the performance (Ex. 12). In the first example, the interaction of the voices results in the following descending chromatic line (Ex. 13). This "voice" moves from the highest tone in the first chord to the lowest tone in the last. The second example expresses the following resulting chromatic line (Ex. 14.), which also moves from the highest tone in the first chord to the lowest tone in the last. This chromatic line is what the ear grasps as a "voice" as the progression is heard, although on paper other voices may be observed and described. In summary, a voice is not necessarily a fixed entity expressed visually on paper; rather it is often the ear's response to the motion expressed within the entire relationship of tones through the movement of the chords.

The mind's ear sometimes completes the tendency of an individual voice within the music even though the voice may temporarily drop out. This is similar to the listener hearing the harmony of a chord as though it were actually present, when, in fact, it may have only sounded for a brief instant. Moreover, "ghost" tones may aid the listener in hearing lines which might not exist on paper. (*continued next page*)

## Tonic and Dominant Chord Substitutions

Tonic or (temporary tonic) chords rarely appear without color tones (6, 7, or 9), and these are often doubled. The third is occasionally omitted. Evans occasionally plays add9 chords, that is major or minor triads with only a 9th added (Ex. 15), but tonic chords more commonly include 6 and 7, 6 and 9, or 7 and 9. To create harmonic interest, tonic chords are often played in second inversion, often with the bass note acting as a pedal underneath the tonic and subsequent dominant chords (Ex. 16). In his rendition of "What Kind of Fool Am I?" Evans plays through the entire head without ever playing the tonic chord (Db Maj) in root position.

Dominant chords express so many different variations of color that it is almost impossible to reduce Evans' approach to the dominant chord, its extensions and substitutions, to a certain formula or generalization. Some common approaches can, however, be discussed. One practice found in many Evans' performances is that of building diminished 7th chords upon the diminished scale, beginning with the third of a dominant 7th chord (Ex. 17). Evans also commonly approaches dominant chords from a half step above, or a half step below. In general, there are almost always two or three different dominant-chord color extensions in succession before the dominant is resolved. Typically, the sequence might be sus4/13 to 3/b13, #9/b13 to b9/5 (see Ex. 7), or 9/13 to 1/b13 (Ex. 18). In addition, tritone substitutions occur frequently in Evans' harmonic realizations.

## Diatonic Passing Chords

Evans often uses diatonic passing chords in a variety of ways. The entire introduction to "The Touch of Your Lips" consists of diatonic passing chords against a bass pedal tone. Evans also uses such devices to modulate to different keys within tunes, frequently before solos (Ex. 19). Diatonic passing chords (usually triads) also appear in the right hand as improvisational material during solos.

## Parallelism and Pedal Tones

Parallelism is frequently prevalent in Bill Evans' harmonic approach. Evans often approaches a chord with a parallel chord from either a half step above or below, particularly when the melody moves in a similar way (see Ex. 4). The introduction to "What is This Thing Called Love" consists of repeated half step relationships between identical chord forms. Parallel minor chords in their different forms occur frequently in Evans' music (Ex. 20), and he often makes them more interesting by adding a separate line which moves against the direction of the rest of the chord (Ex. 21) unlike the most common form of the parallel minor which moves in the same direction as the melody. Parallel chord forms (often comprised of perfect 4ths) also frequently move against pedal tones. The pedal tone against which 4th chords move often appears in both the highest and lowest voice, particularly in cadences. In "What Kind of Fool Am I," Evans' treatment of the first two measures (basically a tonic chord in the original changes) emphasizes parallel 4ths (a half step apart) against an Ab pedal and parallel minor 7ths (a half step apart) against a repeated Db.

Overall, Evans frequently moves chords in a parallel manner against a pedal tone in the bass or some other pedal-like tone within the chord. Evans restates the head in a new key (F major) and again creates momentum with a pedal tone on V of the key (C).

Pedal tones are commonly used by Evans to generate harmonic tension and expectation. They play significant roles in the introductions of all four solo piano performances discussed herein. Pedals are also used in left-hand chord voicings during solo sections, particularly within turn-around sections.

## Dynamic Shading (Touch) and Harmonic Quality

In speaking of the harmonic quality which a musical improvisation or composition expresses when performed on the piano, one must consider the sense of touch which the pianist brings to the instrument, this in addition to what notes are actually played. I can think of no other pianist for whom this idea is more important or relevant than Bill Evans. As a listener's familiarity with chords and harmony grows, he becomes more aware of how chord balance itself affects the harmonic impression it creates. Although the notes of a particular chord voicing may remain the same each time the voicing is played (within a composition or arrangement, for example), a subtle variation of the dynamic level of the chord tones will cause a different perception of harmonic color. A particular note (or group of notes) within the chord may be emphasized, and as the chord balance changes, the chord may sound substantially different. This subtlety in the expression of a chord often makes the process of transcription difficult for pianists, for it is difficult to tell whether a tone is actually played or is a ghost tone. The touch which Evans brings to his performances covers a wide range of dynamic shading, and it contributes significantly to the expressive range of Bill Evans' harmonies. In summary, Evans' palette enables him to make a single chord sound like many different ones, depending upon the tonal shading he brings to it.

Pianists often isolate the melody from the accompanying chords when creating an arrangement, but in Evans' harmonizations chord tones occasionally appear a half or whole step below melody tones. Evans' wide range of dynamic shading enables him to create the sonority caused by such a practice without losing the sense of melodic clarity his playing expresses. Furthermore, the support his voicings lend to the melody (such as tones a perfect 4th or 5th away from the melody, or tones doubling the melody an octave below) also contributes to the clarity with which they are heard.

## Harmonization

Evans' harmonizations of melodies gives evidence of a rich imagination. While some harmonizations stay remarkably close to the standard chord changes, the solo piano performances, in particular, move quite a bit away from the original harmonies. For example, the first two bars of "Here's That Rainy Day" in Evans' performance contain seven chords, while the original has only two (Ex. 21). His practice of moving to IV from I as a substitute for I is fairly common, and when II-V-I appears in the original changes, Evans often moves through the progression with diatonic passing

chords (II-I6-IV-V-I). Another common device in Evans' jazz harmony is his practice of deriving a tritone substitution from II (e.g. Dmin7-Ab7-G7 in the key of C), but then adding a II to the tritone substitution itself (e.g. Dmin7-Ebmin7-Ab7-G7 in the key of C) (Ex. 22).

Evans' harmonization of "What Kind of Fool Am I" strays quite a bit from the original changes. The first two measures of the original, which is basically a tonic chord in the standard harmonization (this would be Db Maj7 in the key of his performance), Evans reharmonizes with Abmin7-Ab6/9-A7(#5)-Absus. This contributes to the harmonic tension, as the listener expects to hear a tonic chord in these opening measures; moreover, a strong feeling of resolution is experienced at the end when the tonic chord is finally heard in root position.

Evans' solo piano arrangements never seem to be arrangements in the traditional sense. Listening to two or more different takes of the same tune shows that every performance is subtly different from the previous with respect to harmonization, chord voicing, length, and of course improvised solos. In general, when chord progressions or melodies repeat, there are always many alternations in the harmony, texture, rhythm, and even in the tune itself, while other components remain the same.

#### Texture and Textural Contrasts

Evans creates a variety of textures in his solo performances. Rhythmic momentum is often maintained at slow tempos with middle-register passages of 3rds, triads, and 7th chords commonly based on diatonic or diminished scale patterns. His performance of "Spring is Here" and Here's "That Rainy Day" contain many examples of such passages. In the first four measures of "Spring is Here," the entire left hand is comprised of passing 7th chords accompanying as a single melodic voice in the right hand. One middle-register voicing which appears frequently in "Spring is Here" is the 1-b2-3-5-8 triad/diminished chord hybrid (Ex. 23); Evans, in this case (and elsewhere) doubles the melodic line an octave below with the left hand in what is commonly referred to as a "block" voicing. In "Rainy Day," Evans supplies rhythmic motion to portions of the tune (where the melody lasts for a whole note or more) through the rhythmic interplay between a repeated voicing in the right hand and a moving bass line, a middle-register counter-melody, or a passage in 3rds. In "Make Someone Happy," Evans creates a variety of textures, including secondary lines moving against or in the same direction as the melody, inner diatonic and chromatic voices doubled at the octave, and a purely homophonic texture. The improvisational section begins with a single-note line accompanying his right hand solo (the bass and drums enter two bars later); during the rest of the solo, he alternates between this single-line voicing and chords.

#### The Process of Transcription

As far as the process of transcription itself is concerned, accurately transcribing Evans is often difficult for a number of reasons. First, overtones generated by bass notes are often difficult to distinguish from tones which are actually played. Second, tones held from a previous chord (usually with the pedal) also tend to

"cloud up" the harmony, and it is difficult to tell whether or not these tones get played again. Third, since Evans' dynamic shading is so subtle, some notes get played, but they are so quiet that it is almost impossible to tell that they are actually there. A degree of guesswork enters the picture, but as more transcriptions of the artist get done, Bill Evans' harmonic approach becomes more obvious; the student begins to see how the master thinks, feels, and hears his instrument.

#### Summary

In summary, the harmonic language of Bill Evans is complex, and one can only attempt to approach it through the process of transcribing his performances, playing them at the piano, and analyzing them. Since his touch is such an integral part of his harmonic conception, it is also necessary to consult the recordings from time to time and perhaps to play along with them, once the transcriptions have been learned. Thus, the role played by Evans' dynamic shading, that is, the harmonic color that the listener derives from Bill Evans' recorded works, can be more thoroughly appreciated. Moreover, the rhythmic quality of Evans' performances can be more easily assimilated. —B.H.

## At the Keyboard

Below are the musical examples accompanying the Bob Hines article. I would suggest that readers make a tape of the tracks listed on page 12, in order. These tracks are among the most readily available of the Evans recordings. Then, take the tape, tape deck and this issue of *LFE* to the piano and plan to spend an enjoyable and revealing hour or so, discovering what Bill Evans is all about. (If you have a cassette deck with adjustable pitch/speed it can be very helpful here.) The "ghost" notes that Bob talks about may not be readily discernable to the ear, if your piano is out of tune or not "voiced" properly. Please excuse the poor resolution computerized music copy. A recent development and software acquisition portends future resolution enhancement to *LFE* musical examples. —Ed.

ex. 1

ex. 2

Musical notation for examples 1 and 2. Example 1 is on the left, showing a piano accompaniment with chords and single notes. Example 2 is on the right, showing a single melodic line in a treble clef.

ex. 3

Musical notation for example 3, consisting of two staves. The upper staff features complex chordal textures with some notes beamed together. The lower staff shows a melodic line with various rhythmic values and accidentals.

ex. 4

ex. 5

ex. 6

Musical notation for examples 4, 5, and 6. Example 4 is on the left, showing two staves with chords and a melodic line. Example 5 is in the middle, showing a single melodic line in a treble clef. Example 6 is on the right, showing two staves with chords.

ex. 7

Musical notation for example 7, consisting of two staves. The upper staff features complex chordal textures with some notes beamed together. The lower staff shows a melodic line with various rhythmic values and accidentals.

ex. 8a

3

ex. 8b

ex. 9 C13

ex. 10

ex. 11

ex. 12

ex. 13

ex. 14

ex. 15

ex. 16

ex. 17

ex. 18

ex. 19

Musical notation for exercises 18 and 19. Exercise 18 is in G major, 4/4 time, consisting of two measures. Exercise 19 is in G major, 4/4 time, consisting of four measures. The notation is written on a grand staff with treble and bass clefs.

(double time)

ex. 20

Musical notation for exercise 20. It is in G major, 5/4 time, and is marked "(double time)". It consists of two measures. The notation is written on a grand staff with treble and bass clefs.

ex. 21

ex. 22

Musical notation for exercises 21 and 22. Exercise 21 is in G major, 4/4 time, consisting of two measures. Exercise 22 is in G major, 4/4 time, consisting of two measures. The notation is written on a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. Both exercises feature triplets of eighth notes.

ex. 23

Musical notation for exercise 23. It is in G major, 4/4 time, consisting of two measures. The notation is written on a grand staff with treble and bass clefs.