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## LP REVIEW: Bill Evans – *The Bill Evans Album*



**Bill Evans – *The Bill Evans Album***  
(Speakers Corner/Columbia C 30855. LP review by Andrew Cartmel)

The **Bill Evans** trio triumphed twice at the Montreux Jazz festival, and the second time Evans was breaking in a new drummer — the formidable Jack DeJohnette having been replaced by **Marty Morrell**. Like his predecessor, Morrell had been introduced to Bill Evans by the trio's bass player **Eddie Gomez**. Gomez would prove to be Evans's most faithful collaborator, playing with him for eleven years. But Morrell was no flash in the pan, either, staying with the group for a seven year spell. *Montreux II* was this trio's triumphant debut. But *The Bill Evans Album* is their first studio record, and it's a Grammy winner... although it very nearly didn't happen.

Recording for the Columbia label had been a lifelong ambition of Evans's. But by the time this album was made, in May and June 1971, Columbia was no longer what it had once been. The company still operated superb recording facilities but Clive Davis, their president, was fixated on the notion of jazz rock — perhaps understandably, since Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* had been released a year earlier and, in Miles's own words, "sold more copies than any album in jazz history."

So Clive Davis decreed that Bill Evans would record a duo album, playing both acoustic and electric piano with Eddie Gomez, who in turn would play acoustic and electric bass. Things quite didn't work out that way, though. As Gomez describes it, "It was a disaster really, because of my playing... I feel responsible, just for having been such a god-awful electric bass player... That idea was deep-sixed... So anyway they switched it over to a trio album and we recorded *The Bill Evans*

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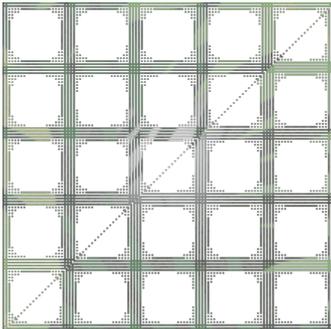
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Album.”

The title is not sheer megalomania. It refers to the fact that all seven cuts on the record are Evans’s own compositions — four of them never previously heard. The one notion that carried over from the duo debacle was that Evans would play both electric (Fender-Rhodes) and acoustic piano (Steinway) and at first the purist might feel some resistance to the Fender. Indeed, Evans himself said, “No electric instrument can begin to compare with the quality and resources of a good acoustic piano.” But even for a listener with his guard way up, the opening track *Funkallero* is something of a revelation. The initial ringing, chiming tones of the Fender might seem to confirm your worst fears — or prejudices. But such is the warmth, virtuosity and intoxicating rhythmic quality of Evans’s playing that within seconds we are simply absorbed into the music, the enjoyment and excitement of the piece obliterating any preconceptions. Gomez is a marvel (playing acoustic throughout, naturally), with his fat blooming tones blossoming around Evans, who swiftly moves to the Steinway to fashion delicate precision figures and then unleash dashing runs, while Morrell keeps impeccable time and plays brisk fills.

*The Two Lonely People* has a beautiful baroque feel with Morrell’s softly padded drumming and Gomez’s amazingly precise bass both following the leader so meticulously that it’s hard for the ear to unravel the players. *Sugar Plum* projects a hip, plangent tone with Evans caressing the keys and then leaping smoothly into a sweetly elaborate duet with Gomez. When Morrell joins them, smoothly measured, restrained and subtle, everything moves up a level. And then Evans shifts to electronic keyboards, demonstrating his own dictum, “I’ve been happy to use the Fender Rhodes to add a little colour.” These colours and textures take the piece in a new direction before he returns to the Steinway for an elegant conclusion. But perhaps the most moving moment is a revisiting of Evans’s song *Waltz for Debby*, with its tumbling lullaby lilt and cradle-rocking refrain. Here the Fender makes a breathtaking contribution, shining new light across the familiar contours of the tune. As throughout the LP, Evans is deft and shrewd in his use of the electronics, moving back to the Steinway before there’s any chance of fatigue, and relying on Gomez to cover the transitions with his richly engaging bass.

This album was a triumph on its release — it actually won *two* Grammys, one for ‘Best Jazz Instrumental Solo’ and one for ‘Best Jazz Performance by a Group’ — and it’s a pleasure to have it back in the catalogue as an audiophile LP. At a time when we’re experiencing an avalanche of vinyl reissues, many of them mediocre in their sound quality, Speakers Corner remain reliably excellent. A first rate Bill Evans album has been given the treatment it deserves.

**LINK: *The Bill Evans Album* at Speakers Corner Records**  
<http://www.speakerscornerrecords.com/products/details/30855/the-bill-evans-album>

On Thursday, December 01, 2016

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