

## Initial Screenings of the film

### *Bill Evans Time Remembered*

by Bruce Spiegel

November 4<sup>th</sup> 2015, the sun was getting dark and there was anybody about on the campus of South Eastern University campus in Hammond Louisiana. I was really nervous. Tonight was going to be my first showing of my film *Bill Evans, Time Remembered* for the University. There would be two more on this my first Louisiana showings. On Friday, I was having a screening at the Jazz Foundation in New Orleans, and then on Sunday we would have a matinee at the Manship Theater in Baton Rouge. Three screenings in one week and I was nervous. I was worried that the projector wouldn't work. I was worried that there wouldn't be too many people there and maybe they wouldn't connect to the film. I was worried that my dvd's would glitch and they wouldn't play.

So I had a lot to worry about and I then I guess I should tell you a little something about me, so you get the whole picture. This past year as I was pushing 70 years old and I had a stroke that hit me in February. No brain damage or muscle stuff but I did suffer from aphasia....which is like somebody throw's a switch and your mind is completely electroshocked. 70 years of your life is whitewashed. When I was recovering, I couldn't even write my name. I had to learn the alphabet again. My e- mails were long and cumbersome generally missed the main point of the message. I was just coming back from that when in March I got hit with the second missile. A routine check showed a suspect heart. I needed a 2 bypass surgery to fix it. So without getting all the rehab on my stroke done I was back in the hospital for a heart surgery again! That took me the better part of March to September to recuperate. And now here I was. Nervous, my heart fluttering, and aphasia going strong, I was in Hammond, hoping that I all would go alright and I could do the right thing and pay my respects to the great artist Bill Evans. I was just worried that I wouldn't get any questions about the film straight. I just didn't want to muff it, and start to garble my words and generally not make myself understood.

We hit the Pottle music building; it had just celebrated its 90th birthday. ...I suddenly was stricken with how old, really old the building was. Walking down the aisles, looking thru the windows of a practice room, where each player would hone their skills. Suddenly it felt really old to me. I flashed back to my interview in the film with a fellow drummer of Bill's, Fred Terry:

“He would come into my room and said where are your brushes? I'd follow him down the hallway; go into a practice room and man he would just cook!”

That was Bill Evans, age 18 at Southeastern college on full scholarship, working on his jazz as he perfected his classical touch. Nobody at that point realized Bill Evans was going to have a big impact on the jazz world!

We finally made it into the classroom where Paul Frechou was conducting the marching band for the game on Saturday. As luck would have it, he was mentioning my name and my film, as I walked in. I don't remember what I said, but tried to encourage each and every one to come and see the film. As a tribute, the band played "my way" the tune picking up with the right amount of tension as it proceeded to the end. The band then did a tuba serenade for me. It was a nice gesture and made me feel welcomed down here in Hammond. I thought later, that this was a good place for Bill. Far from the maddening crowd of New Jersey and New York, he was down here with the wisteria's flapping in the wind; a few knowledgeable people all around, some great music teachers in Gretchen McGee and Luis Konnop. His wild and gregarious brother Harry around him, Bill playing gigs on weekends in New Orleans, the Rainbow Room, Club "Tangi" where Bill said, "it seems like everyone in the place was packing a weapon down there". Four years for Bill on scholarship. Good looking, introverted, nice looking with girls after him constantly. Bill said much later that life here in college was "the best years of his life."

Tick tick tick, it was getting ready to show the film. The sound techies were going to give me a dress rehearsal. The picture was great, but the sound was awful. Booming and bouncing off the ancient walls. The girl went up to the control room and no matter what we did to it, cut off the bass, add some tremble, it sounded awful. I was beside myself. The girl was nice but she was rolling her eyes at me, the 70 year old guy. She wasn't happy to be roped into doing this job in the first place. Finally we got it where you could hear it okay, but I was being deluded into thinking it was okay...and there wasn't any more time to mess with it now. I was the only one in the room who knew what it should have sounded like!

Now tick tick tick, a few people came in. A guy from Houston Texas made the 4 hour trip to Hammond. A piano player from New Orleans, Matt Lemmler a big Bill Evans fan was there. I somehow felt so good when I saw him. It was like the first jazz piano player doing homage to one of his influences. It was like in the beginning of the film, when bill says to the audience:

"Jazz is the most important thing in my life....even if I have to do it in a closet and play for myself, it will be okay"

That's what I felt at that moment. Ultimately it didn't matter who was gonna see the film, tonight or any other night, I had worked 8 years, my life and my blood were in the film and it was about to take on its own life.....start its own existence, so nothing really matters . . . The film was going to have a life of its own.

Ron Nethercutt, a lifetime Bill Evans fan introduced me, and now I ambled up the big 90 year old stairs and looked out at the audience. There was a big ass spot light on me, and I couldn't see anybody out in the crowd....and it was pretty slim. The 80 or 90 people at the band rehearsal earlier had other things to do that night. There was no staff from the school, no teachers, no musicians. It was pretty lean, maybe about 50 or so people, but it didn't feel like that because the room was really big! I shaded my eyes and talked into the nothingness of the big room.

I began to tell them why the rehearsal room was important to Bill. I told them in 1946, Bill along with his two trio buddies, Fred and Connie Atkinson, had taken the big Studebaker roadster down the highways, with Connie's bass strapped to the trunk, raining to beat hell and drive to Hammond. When they finally got there Connie took down his bass, Fred got his drums out, and Bill hit the keyboards and jammed that night at the Pottle music building, ....That was 1946, in this auditorium 48 years ago, right here in his building . There was a big buzz about the music at the music building. North American Yankees had come down from Plainfield New Jersey and torn the roof off. Connie's wife Fey Atkinson had heard about it, Ann, Fred Terry's sister heard about the jam session. It was big news. Jazz was filling the air!

I told them that this was important to me. At Bill's college, there was a lot of pain and tragedy in Bill's life and Bill said later the college was that this was 'the happiest moment in his life.'

The movie started.....the sound was killing me. Big booming kind of stuff was hitting and pinking of the walls....Some of Bill's voice over was lost. Small piano stuff sounded off and was lost. The film was 1 hour and one half; it felt like it was 4 hours!

I tried to hide my disappointment. ..well fuck it, it's my first showing and I thought it is what it is.

A bunch of people sort of left mid-stream, including Anna, the wife of Felix Leiche a guy who said that "bill was popular and the girls loved him". Felix Leiche was past now. My film has a lot of people who are getting close to the end of their lives...All these former college classmates. Connie is gone, Felix gone, Paul gone, Bill gone, Pat gone, time moving on. I think of Pat Evans now. Her interview was key to try and understanding Bill. She spent hours with me, gave me good pictures of her life...she was now gone!

I looked over at the few kids in the audience. I asked them what they thought of the movie. Not one of them said anything. Nothing about what they had just seen. No mention of Miles Davis, Coltrane, Scott LaFaro, Tony Bennett, Billy Taylor, a virtual history of 1950's recorded music.....not a word from them.

Thanks god for Ron, and Matt and Harvey, they were really touched by the film, and in that moment I felt their energy and their respect for showing the film and giving of my time. I was out of gas. All the pressure was off and I could go home and relax, but I was worried that the sound was bad and maybe the next showing would not be so good.

It's Thursday, November 6<sup>th</sup>, flying down route 55 from Hammond to New Orleans, getting ready for our 2<sup>nd</sup> showing at the Jazz and Heritage Foundation in New Orleans. My son, Joey would be there for support, and I expected Debby Evans to be there also. It meant a lot to me to see her. She is Harry Evans, Bill's older brother's daughter. I interviewed her a long time ago. She was the first one who I spent time with and she filled me in a lot about Bill's early life. She is Debby from Bill's most immortal song," Waltz for Debby", and he will always be associated with that. Debby hipped me to Bill's early childhood, dad, the episodic drinker, mom the tough Russian woman who put up with anything. But most of all she told me of the Bill's love of music:

“He was lost in music as a child”

This was the way she put it. And most importantly, the real love and affection Bill felt for his brother, Harry Evans, bills older brother. When I saw Debby walk in I felt so much better. For me to have Bill’s cousin Debby there meant a lot to me. No matter what she could respond to the movie, and I was really helpful to see her there, a flesh and blood cousin there. I felt better already!

Suddenly I would think of Bill, spending endless times in the school’s practice rooms. I found a terrific rendition from 1947, “body and soul” and used it to show Bill’s early development. Did anybody every think this guy was going to make the big time, associate himself with the likes of Coltrane, Miles, Cannonball, Scott Lafaro and make a profound name for himself.

Wednesday night, I got a call from John Wirt a columnist for the Advocate in New Orleans. I started talking and never shut up. Things about my movie, about my work at CBS. Then on Friday morning, there was a big article about the upcoming movie that night at the jazz heritage foundation, with a big picture of Bill and it said “jazz genius” and I thought that’s right, he is a true **jazz genius!** The article was pretty good, telling of my journey thru Bill’s life and my work at CBS as an editor/producer.

I was so happy to see the article, sitting there eating breakfast on Canal street...man those grits were good! I was thinking there would be a good audience for this show, I somehow felt it.

We went over to see the director of the show, Jason, Thursday, before the show. I was determined that the sound quality of the show was going to be better. As soon as Jason plugged in the first note, I was relieved. The sound quality was there, all the nuances and brilliance of the voices and music was there in its splendor. Jason did one roll back of a bass equalizer and that made the sound very good and very clear. We looked the film and made sure it the volume was good and the picture was good. It was a big relief to know that the tracks were good. A word to the wise, there is a reason for a “sound check” before the gig!

The Jazz and Heritage Foundation is a unique place. It’s over on Ramparts street a few blocks from the Louis Armstrong Park. It used to be an old funeral home. George Wein, is one of his benefactors. Its now got a lot of funding, and has a musical development program for promising musicians, and puts on shows. Brad Mehldau was there a week before. The room was great, it had a wooden paneled walls and a great sound system placed strategically near the audience. Tick tick tick, getting closer to show time. My stomach was churning. I prayed that it would be good. As I was getting closer, I got more nervous with my aphasia kicking in. Maybe I would get tired and wouldn’t be able to say the right thing. Maybe I wouldn’t be sharp and miss the answers to a tough question in the q and a.

Tick tick tick.....It was getting closer to show time. Dark outside now. A few people started to show up. The outside of the place was dark and no sign saying there was a show. And on top of everything you had to make your way into the jazz and heritage foundation by using the side door and going around the back! Joey and I were nervous. We went outside and directed traffic to the side door and a way to get in. I looked over at Joey and he looked nervous, but I was kind of calm at this point. You did what you

did, you made a poster, and you got a nice thoughtful review in the New Orleans paper, what more could you do! Show the film man, just show the film!

Then magically things began to turn, about 10 minutes before show time the place started to fill up. Finally saw Debby, that made me feel good and her brother Matt. Bill's family was there and I felt really good about that. My piano player from New Orleans was there as well, and holly shit the place got filled really quickly. I knew the sound system was good and that Jason had it all together. I made my little short remarks, saying something about how Bill's roots run deep, how his brother was a life long resident of Baton Rouge and that Bill made this journey to see his family through his life. It was something like that. And then the film started.

The film played beautifully. For the first time I was able to hear the beauty of Bill's playing, the beauty of his approach to the art. The film went from interview to interview and wove a tapestry of his life. I didn't get bored. Everything was seamless. At one point, I looked out at the audience. They were about 80 people there. No one was rustling around, no one was checking on their e mails and going to the bathroom. It was a quiet, attentive audience. I sat thru a lot of screenings and I remember feeling the audience coming in and out of their attention. This was different. They were in the moment, feeling Bill's glorious achievements, and his glorious pain, it all resonated clearly. His drugs and the steady flow of the tragedy in his life that haunted him.

For the first time, I realized at that moment, that I had made a pretty damn good film, a good film with my love and passion for music woven inside it, and it would be hear, long after I am gone. It was a testimony to my great love of music that was working in this film. I couldn't help but think about all my life with music. Thinking all the way back as a kid, listening to Fats Waller's "You're Feet's too Big" and Benny Goldman's "Stomping at the Savoy". I felt that all the work all the film had come full circle in time. All the interviews, the travels, the editing work to make the film right, it was all there on the screen.

At the end, I introduced Bill Zavatsky and Debby Evans. Debby was so gracious in her remarks to me. "You hit a home run, my friend, you hit a masterful homerun." A few people were stunned at the film. People talked about the rhythm of the sound track, the sheer beauty of it, and how it basically was a complete sound track for the life of Bill Evans. People commented on the editing of the film, that they didn't get bored. As an editor that made me feel pretty good. There was a general feeling coming off the film. People were touched by it, and moved by it. Somebody asked me how and why I made the film and I told my Paul Motian story of my first interview with him and how that was the spark that got me really going.

Sunday morning about 11:00 a.m. at the Woodlawn Cemetery where Bill's stone lies next to his older brother Harry. It had been a long time since I was there, first with Annabelle Armstrong in 2002. Annabelle was an 83 year old whirlwind and tornado. A good writer and good talker, she had a life long friendship with both Bill and Harry when they were in college together at Southeastern. When I first talked to her she lined up all my interviews including two of Bill's best friends at school, drummer Fred Terry and good friend Felix Leiche. I don't think my section of Bill's college days, interviewing

Annabelle, Fred and Felix would have been so powerful without her. At the Cemetery, I re-fixed the flags on Bill's grave that had been blow apart by the wind and rain from yesterday. Turns out both Annabelle and Debby had visited the grave earlier that day. In the middle now between Bill and Harry was Pat Evans, now deceased who had given me such a powerful interview on Bill's life and his musical goals a year or so before she died.

The film showing at the Manship went off beautifully. The state of the art theater was big and the audience there was well attended with about 130 people. Debby was there as well as John Wirt the writer of the Advocate article. Annabelle was there, and I got a chance to talk to here. She was always distressing how her health was, but she looked very good for her age, I was impressed with that.

In the q and a, a guy asked me what did I learn that I didn't know before about Bill Evans. I remembered Bill's lack of confidence that was told to me by Paul Motian and Bobby Brookmeyer.

"Yea man", Paul said, "he didn't think he played good, man," I said," you played terrific Bill, really great, but he didn't think his playing was that good! Funny guy that bill Evans".

I think I had done my story some justice. The film showing was a big success. I know that a lot of people where happy they saw and experienced the film. I felt it in my bones; I had done the right thing. I know Bill would be smiling today, you brought the film to the right people, my friends, my family and my fellow players who knew me well. I hope the film has a good life that many people will see and hear of Bill's music: A great American artist that shouldn't be forgotten. I hope the film goes a long way to making that happen.

The film ***Bill Evans, Time Remembered*** took me 8 years to make. Eight years of tracking down anybody who knew Bill and who played with him, to try and find out as much as I could about the illusive and not easy to understand Bill Evans. I feel very honored to have had the chance to interview and get to know good guys that spent a lot of time with Bill: Billy Taylor, Gene Lees, Tony Bennett, Jack DeJohnette, Jon Hendricks, Jim Hall, Bobby Brookmeyer, Chuck Israels, Paul Motian, Gary Peacock, Joe LaBarbera. It was a once in a life time experience talking to these gifted talented guys about their time in jazz music, about their "***Time Remembered***" with Bill Evans.