

**The Two Brothers
As I Knew Them
Harry and Bill Evans**

**As remembered by
Pat Evans, wife of Harry Evans
sister-in-law to Bill Evans**

My First Glimpse of the Two Brothers

What a strange pair, I thought. These two brothers, so opposite in looks and temperament. One tall, bespectacled, introspective, nasal voiced and slow moving. The other, short, muscular, convivial, rapid speaking, quick to laugh, and sauntering of movement.

I had come to Southeastern Louisiana University from New Orleans on a scholarship to be a teacher, the first in my family to go to college. They had come from New Jersey to study music, the first in their family to go to college. Our lives collided in this small southern town, Hammond, Louisiana.

The lanky one arrived first, a classically trained pianist, with a Russian mother and a Welch father, once removed from their family's country of origin. He wanted to learn to play jazz. A year or so later, he dragged his older brother Harry with him, on a return trip from a Christmas holiday. At the time, his older brother had been discharged from the Navy and was languishing in indecision about his next move in life. His father wanted him to manage a small, off-the-wall business of dubious profits, a driving range and miniature golf course, which evolved out of his father's love of golf, not out of his business acumen. The older brother knew this was not the future he envisioned.

Both brothers were not only accomplished musicians, but were gifted athletes, as well. Once the older brother came south to settle-in for college in the small southern town of Hammond, a stone's throw from New Orleans, the two resumed their life-long pattern of being virtually inseparable. One thinking for the other, laughing, protecting, risking for the other. They shared an old black Pontiac, ties, cuff links, and girls.

They stood out on campus with their heavy overcoats, fur-lined gloves, and bulky woolen sweaters. The younger one, Bill, immersed himself in the music, living in the music building, practicing in his every spare moment, not as an onus, but as a joyful way of discovery. The older one slept through classes, decided to try a new instrument, the french horn, played around with the piano, always looking for an easy way out. It soon became obvious that the younger brother was an extraordinary talent. Students began to sit in the hall outside the door of his practice room, just to hear him play.



The older brother was bothered that the campus jocks, from small insulated rural southern towns, disclaimed the music majors and taunted them as queers. He rallied the music majors, formed a football team, donned red jerseys, challenged the jocks and beat them hands down. All the while, being cheered on by the homeliest homecoming court they could assemble.

I first laid eyes on them at a school dance, a few days after my arrival on campus. The older one looked too ridiculous for words in a double breasted suit and wide tie. He looked like he had just gotten off the boat. In spite of his attire, he was a handsome man, short, but with the bluest of eyes, the fullest of lips, ears flat against his head and silky blond hair.

Since he had a hard time finding girls his size, I made the first cut, being only five feet tall, four or five inches shorter than he. This fraternity of music majors decided I was ripe for the picking for Harry Evans, brother of Bill Evans. This was to begin the next 30 years of my life's intricate involvement with these two brothers, because of my marriage to Harry, but as a witness to Bill's contribution to jazz, which was never far removed from my husband's mind.

If truth be known, I never meant to marry him and I couldn't say why I did. Passion? That had something to do with it. But that's too easy an answer. Maybe it was because he was gentle, non-judgmental and low maintenance. Never making demands. Or so it seemed at the time.

Two weeks after our marriage in the summer of 1950, we went to New Jersey. Plainfield to be exact, to work in the family business. The house on Greenbrook Road was saturated with music, dominated by a Ukrainian mother, one generation removed from the homeland, and a father of Welch heritage. He was prone to liquor, gambling and dandyism in his day. They had married late in life. Both of their fathers were coal miners, probably dying in the mines of Pennsylvania for all we know.

Mary Soroka Evans, mother of Harry and Bill, spent part of her childhood in an orphanage run by Russian Orthodox Priests. Being a caretaker and moralist came naturally to her. She was a gifted seamstress, always making costumes for the two boys. There was a period when she sold corsets door to door to keep bread on the table. Their father, Harry Senior, slept his life away, never learned to drive and primed for hours before he left the house.

During their teen years, Bill played at the New Jersey Shore. Harry stayed home to help with the family business. They talked of Polka bands, music lessons, pinball machines, which Bill loved to play – lost loves, pool, bullies. Bill the victim. Harry the rescuer.

I only knew their childhood from stories they told. And the tons of scrapbooks (now lost) that they kept. From college days in Louisiana till their deaths, I was a living witness to the extraordinary relationship these two brothers had. How the older one influenced the younger one, Bill Evans, who by all accounts, became one of the greatest jazz musicians of his day. How the younger one idolized the older one, Harry Evans, who by all accounts, became a great music teacher in Baton Rouge, his adopted home in the South.

Childhood and Family Lore

Their mother, Mary Soroka Evans, told endless stories about how different they were, yet how alike, how close. Close in age, close in their love of music, close in their love for each other. Bill idolized his older brother who protected him from bullies, and eventually led him into jazz.

Both studied piano from an early age, Harry first, Bill to follow. Music pervaded the house, mostly Russian. Their mother's family was from the Ukraine, peasants; their father had a Welch background. She was headed for thirty and still unmarried when she met him on a train. By all that is told, the marriage was stormy, brought on by his heavy drinking, gambling, and abuse. One Christmas when he threatened to tear down the Christmas tree, Harry physically grabbed him and warned him, "you will not."



Mary had memories of taking her sons to the Circus, Harry laughing till he fell apart. Bill crying at the complexity of the spectacle. She dressed them alike, making most of their clothes, took endless photos and labeled them: Harry, strong and handsome, Bill, smart and weak.

Uncle Michael, their mother's emotive brother, was a major figure in their lives. He took them to Yankee ball games in New York and spent endless time with them, as he had no children of his own. He would burst into their home with untrammelled energy, tell stories, shout Russian phrases, and cry about his plight in life. Mary, his sister, would not refrain from joining in, with her lament about how he brought this on himself.

Aunt Lizzie, from their father's side lived with them, as did Mary's mother, their grandmother. At other times, cousins Peter and Paul. Their Russian grandmother and Aunt Lizzie often fought. Grandmother accusing Aunt Lizzie of stealing feathers from her pillow. Their mother set the standards of behavior for everyone. Bill displayed some sympathy for his father, Harry for his mother, over this.

Mary Saroka Evans, mother to Harry and Bill Evans had a beautiful untrained Alto voice. Birthdays were more than singing "Happy Birthday." They were family choirs. As the brothers grew older, they played music in bands, often led by Harry who frequently went to New York to hear Sinatra. They developed divided alliances to baseball teams. Harry a Brooklyn Dodger's fan and Bill a New York Yankee's fan. Harry became the work horse around the family business while Bill went off to the New Jersey Shore every summer to play music.

At seventeen Harry had lost interest in school. With World War II coming to an end, he enlisted in the Navy. His Destroyer landed in Nagasaki, a city burned and blistered by an atomic bomb on August 9, 1945. Witnessing the immediate aftermath of Nagasaki ended his childhood.

College Days in Louisiana

Those college days in the early fifties were for me, a drastic change from the mean streets of New Orleans. Bill often said for him, they were some of the happiest days of his life. A time when he and his brother roomed together in a house they shared with other music majors, owned an old Pontiac, frequented Kelly's bar to shoot dice and dined in style at the Casa de Fresa Hotel.

They played in the College Orchestra, the Marching Band at football games and the College Jazz Band. The juke box in the student canteen, where hours were spent, played Billy Eckstine and Nat King Cole. It was a memorable event when they brought Tommy Dorsey to campus to play for a student dance.



Bill sailed through classes. Harry slept through his. Bill played for our simple sorority skits, even for tone-deaf me, as I sang "*Me and My Teddy Bear*" and "*All I Want for Christmas is my Two Front Teeth.*" Occasionally they strayed across the state line to play in Mississippi at a club called South of the Border, where it was said the owner placed chicken wire fencing across the band stand, to keep the musicians from being hit by beer bottles.

The boys of New Jersey were joined by the boys of New Orleans, all coming to study music. It seemed as though they were all smokers. But nobody could match the two brothers, who were incredible chain smokers. One cigarette lighting after another. Matches

were irrelevant. All that was essential was burning and smoke and ash trays on the piano, filled with endless burnt out butts.

The talk was about sight reading and who had perfect pitch. It was about Bill sneaking into the auditorium to play at the piano on stage. Soon the word got out and dozens sat, enraptured as he played "*Take Me Out to the Ball Game.*"

"Peace Piece" was composed during those college days. He played Beethoven for his senior recital. Harry gave him an engraved cigarette lighter as a gift.

Was Bill going to be a teacher or a jazz musician? He had prepared for both, as had his brother. He graduated with honors and headed for the jazz world. Harry followed, not with honors, and headed for teaching.

Summers in New Jersey

Harry's teaching ceased in the summer, which allowed us to spend countless summers at his family home in Plainfield. This then allowed me to spend endless hours with Bill, living at home at the time, in the throes of getting his New York City union card, his was 802.

The study, which was sound proofed by his father at his request, was off-limits to anybody but Bill. It was constantly occupied by him, only coming out when his mother insisted it was time to eat. It was a piano heaven.

When he was not hunched over the piano, he was hunched over a book. The Greek philosophers, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Rollo May. "Know Thy Self," the Greek philosophers seem to say to Bill. He seemed to absorb from William James the perplexity of never knowing things for certain. Even though there are no absolute answers and never will be, one has to act anyway. We say in effect "Let this be the reality for me." 'Be it so', is James leap. It is his statement of commitment. He knew that in an act of will a person was doing something more than meets the eye. He was creating, forming something which had never existed before.

But it was Rollo May, the scholar and psychoanalyst of his day that appeared to influence Bill's thinking the most. So much so, that on Christmas 1955 he gave a copy of May's earlier work Man's Search for Himself to his parents. The inscription read, "*To Mom and Dad – In hopes that you'll agree that a little more knowledge is a little less of a dangerous thing. Love, Bill – Christmas 55.*"

One can't help but wonder how Rollo May's book The Courage to Create affected Bill. May saw courage as a prime essential for the creative act. Creativity "requires a nimbleness, a fine-honed sensitivity if we are to be able to let ourselves be the vehicle of the new vision trying to emerge." He also saw the tragic side of creativity.



Bill was reading these prophetic words long before the patterns of pure impervious tragedy had stepped into his and his brother's everyday lives. The summers in New Jersey were still days of innocence: Playing pool in the cellar with their father, paying attention to Debby, my young daughter, dropping Bill off at the bus stop to return to New York, where he was establishing residence in order to join the union, going to the shore, watching the McCarthy hearings and Broadway Open House on the tiny television, and sharing meals together, where Bill fussed over the food. Christmas at the family home could find him wrapping presents with Debby.

Miles



I know little about his relationship with Miles, but what I've read and occasional remarks Bill made on his visits to Baton Rouge where Harry and I settled. Especially memorable is a trip he made after he left Miles group. I know he idolized Miles, as did Harry. My first trip to New York, after I married Harry in 1950, was to hear Miles at Birdland, standing behind a palm tree with his horn jutting out between its leaves. This was not New Orleans jazz as I knew it. But I digress. I have every reason to believe that Miles had a close friendship with Bill. He often called him up in the middle of the night to go bowling or some such thing.

The ravings about *Kind of Blue*? People more schooled than I can comment. But to me, it has Bill Evans written all over it. He is saturatingly present in the creation of this defining jazz masterpiece. The pull to discover is his pull. "Deep callenth into deep," as the Psalmist puts it. When we use the term humble to describe Bill, it is not the pseudo-humility of submission. Musically, he was a generous person, who accepted the given in his own creative efforts, always pointing toward a direction rather than an achievement.

I am saddened by the cutting remarks he took from Miles and other members of the group, which are well documented. William James reminds us that the expression "to be cut dead by social disapproval has much more truth than poetry in it."

He entered into a world, a white boy, where he had no community. In his humanity, did he become weary of being watched, rejected? Could it be he came to a place of wilting with Miles? Just a thought. But maybe.

Visits to Baton Rouge

Bill seemed to take comfort in these visits, bringing with him an idolized view of our family life, which defied reality. The two brothers would sit outside on the patio talking up a blue streak, or else they were at the piano, Bill playing and Harry listening.

Harry's pleas to show him a chord were soundly denied. "Har, I don't want to deprive you of the discovery process." I heard this more than once. Other times, they were listening to music, adult and kid music, from albums of French children's tunes, at a time when Bill was recording with Riverside. He'd play quizzically with the children, when prompted, and tape family conversations at the dinner table, as if to record something not at all ordinary, reveling in daily life.

During one visit, our neighbor an avid jazz fan had recently lost his teenage son, my son Matt's best friend. We invited him to come visit with Bill. They sat in the living room and talked for hours. In later visits, when he knew he was sick, Bill shared with Harry that he wanted a child. Harry tried to dissuade him. But to no avail. As the hour got late, I'd say good night. The two of them would head to town, on an excursion to who knows where. As the years went by and his life was consumed by drug abuse, the visits got less and less. As the children grew up, they hardly knew him.

An Encounter in New York



Fully engaged in his career as an educator, in the early sixties, Harry was off to New York to Columbia University to get his PhD in education. Years before Perri Cousins, Bill's former girl friend, had hinted that Bill was an addict. When Harry saw Bill, it left little doubt. Still recovering from his bass player, Scott LaFaro's death, his emaciated body was clothed in Scott's garments. In desperation, Harry went to his apartment, asked his companion Ellaine to leave and wailed "Are you taking drugs?" "No" he replied. Harry then pulled up the sleeve of Bill's shirt to expose needle marks on every inch of his arms and hands. Where could he find help in the sixties? A catholic priest? But no desire on Bill's part to stop using drugs.

Years later he made attempts to stop. Marie Nyswander, founder of the Methadone Maintenance Treatment, worked with him personally because of her love of his music. It had no lasting effect. Why? In earlier days he had told me he only had one thing to give – his music. Nothing could extinguish that gift, even if it meant obliterating the outside world, is how I see it. But who really knows! William Blake once said that an artist "must create a system (himself) or be enslaved by another man's." Bill did what was assigned to him, by him.

We kept up with him through Downbeat and sporadic letters. One last visit to Baton Rouge was with Ellaine, his live in companion. She cared for him as best she could. One attempt to kick the habit took him and Ellaine to Florida, where his parents had retired. He was gleefully proud of Ellaine for participating in a sit-in to integrate St. Augustine beach. She was jailed with other civil rights leaders. The habit was not kicked. He was immured in it.

Impervious Tragedy

As his health failed, the desire to have children consumed Bill. After years of being with Ellaine he knew she could not fulfill this desire. And there was the matter that he had met someone in California, Nanette, that he had fallen in love with.

He broke the news to Ellaine. I knew how heart broken she must have been. I called her and invited her to come spend a few days with us in Baton Rouge. Bill gave her money and suggested that she spend a few days in Las Vegas, as she loved to gamble.

Days went by. I didn't hear from her. The phone rang in my office. It was Bill. Most unusual. "I need to talk to Harry right away" he choked out. "Where can I find him?" "Ellaine is dead." She threw herself in front of a subway train. Who else could console him? His brother.

My memory is foggy about the days following Ellaine's violent death. But I thought about the rare visits she made with him to Baton Rouge and how he rejoiced that we were all together as a family. And the few times we visited them in New York. She cooked. We went to a Broadway play, but not before he went out to buy stockings for her, so she could dress up for the occasion.

They told the story of how they had met at a party. She went home with him that very night and stayed for over a dozen years. She, too, was an addict. She brought him drugs on the road, took care of the cats and provided unrelinquished care of him.

Time lapsed. He married Nanette at the Plaza Hotel in New York. In due time, they had a son. Harry was now music supervisor for the school system. Still playing music at night, and in between sleeping a lot and acting strange, talking to himself and wandering off. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

The marriage was collapsing. The children were scrambling for themselves. He wouldn't take his drugs. I had no understanding of his illness. I felt trapped in limited circumstances. I had enough. I'm leaving, I told him, but I doubt that it was more than a threat. At work, the next day I thought I'd better go check on him. I entered the house at noon to find him dead from a self-inflicted bullet wound to the head.

Find Bill! Find Bill! I found him in D.C. where he had an engagement. It was days before he could come down to bury his brother. He needed his supply of drugs. Before he left Baton Rouge, he found three scraps of paper and scribbled a warning to Debby, Matthew, and Erin about the dangers of drugs. Erin did not take heed. Years later she would become addicted to cocaine and take her own life in the desert of California.

After Harry's death, our communication was sparse. I knew Bill wouldn't last, a death foretold. Was that what prompted me to buy three plots in a Baton Rouge cemetery where Harry rests? I last saw Bill at a concert at Southeastern University in Hammond. He called to tell me about it. He seemed upbeat and content after the concert, glad to be on these familiar grounds of his youth.



On a mid September day in 1980, well past night fall, I was coming in from working with a family violence program. As I parked the car, I saw my neighbor walking up the darkened driveway. "Don't tell me" I said. "I know." "Bill is dead." "Yes, Debby's been trying to reach you."

A memorial was held in New York. Dancers danced, singers sang, musician's played, aficionados spoke. Erin my daughter, Seward a cousin, and I were there from his family of origin; the links back to his beloved brother.

As the jazz writer and friend of Bill, Gene Lees, said of Bill, "He was the longest suicide in history." At every playing, he left his own monument of a melancholy, meditative, enigmatic figure hugging the piano, coaxing from it music, he often said was born of pain and suffering.

His dying wish was to be buried next to his brother in Baton Rouge. I was walked to his grave by a small nondescript cemetery attendant, wearing a sailor cap, much like the one Harry used to wear in the Navy. I placed his ashes in the tomb next to his brother's. They were together again. Wish granted, Bill Evans.

"Human life can come into being only after life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story." Somebody's words, that I make my own.

Bill was only present in a world constructed by jazz. It became his only truth. He gave it his total self, all day and every day. He sacrificed his body and his last breath to it – to the tragic significance of jazz.

The white boy from Plainfield, New Jersey, going to New York in the 1950's to play jazz. Taking with him his whiteness and his desire for personal dignity. The inherent price to pay was not indestructible.

He brought with him a love of the music that saturated his boyhood and later life: Russian music – Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, the sad puppet who suffered the pain of everyman. Others were Debussy, Ravel, Satie, who expressed a desire to make music for everyday people, to strip it of its pretensions. A music that captures their own experiences.

When her dear friend and mentor Karl Jaspers died, Hannah Arendt, the philosopher spoke at Jaspers' funeral:

"We do not know when a man dies, what has come to pass. We know only he has left us. We depend upon his works, but we know that the works do not need us. They are what the one who dies leaves the world. The world that was there before he came and which remains when he has gone. What will become of that depends on the way of the world."

Perhaps the way of the world should take heed of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s word in his opening address to the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival that *"God has wrought many things out of oppression. He had endowed his creatures with the capacity to create, and from that capacity has flowed sweet songs of sorrow and joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment and many different situations. Jazz speaks for life. This is triumphant music."*



I share these thoughts with you, as I sit in my Creole Cottage in Treme, in my native city, New Orleans on March 31, 2011. Many say jazz began here. I listen to *Waltz for Debby*, which Bill wrote for my daughter when she was three. And I am hopeful that Isak Dinesen was right, *"All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them."*