

Bill Mays - **Biography**

Pianist, composer and arranger William Allen Mays (Bill Mays), born February 5, 1944, came from a musical family. In his northern California home, music was always present; his dad was a minister, and his mother, a homemaker.

"Gospel music was the first music I heard," Bill recalls. "Dad played the trombone, guitar and harmonica (at the same time!), piano and organ, and I have vivid memories of him playing the accordion while my mom sang. She had a beautiful, very natural, voice. Dad still plays an old, silver valve trombone. I loved that sound-it's probably the reason I took up the baritone horn and trumpet in Jr. high school."

Bill's first keyboard experience was on the family "spinet piano, a Baldwin Acrosonic, and I was at it from a very early age. I had some great teachers down through the years but the one who really set the stage, at around age 8, was Ethel Bush. She was a loving, supportive person who really ignited my passion for the instrument-and a love of practice, an awareness of tone production and sheer joy in just being at the piano. That was a great gift."

Bill's first exposure to jazz, at age 16, was a concert by Earl 'Fatha' Hines. "A friend took me to a jazz brunch and Fatha was playing solo piano," Bill remembers. "It was so new to my ears, and it was burning! His rhythmic drive, unusual melodic twists, two-handed independence and use of the whole keyboard thrilled and inspired me."

That was the beginning of a love affair that continues to this day because "shortly thereafter I heard Miles Davis' band at San Francisco's Black Hawk, and that was further inspiration. Later I discovered Tommy Flanagan, Hank Jones, Wynton Kelly, Jimmy Rowles, Horace Silver and Art Tatum--I was hooked!"

Bill's professional life began at age 17 as a bandsman in the U. S. Navy, when he spent a year at the Naval School of Music in Washington D.C. His "days were spent jamming in the band room and my nights at the Bohemian Caverns listening to the JFK Quintet," an influential early 60s D.C. based group featuring Andrew White.

After four years in the Navy, Mays joined Local 325 in San Diego, CA and started working with the Bill Green ensemble. "Green played sax, clarinet and vibes," Bill recalls. "We did club dates, county fairs, industrial shows, commercials, and a daily TV variety show. It was great experience--playing different styles, sight-reading, accompanying singers, and learning loads of new tunes."

At the same time, his interest in jazz flourished. "During that period, I listened a lot to pianist Mike Wofford, a marvelous pianist whom I also count as a big influence." Bill also co-led a group called Road Work Ahead with Peter Sprague, Jim Plank and Bob Magnusson where he began to exercise his composing chops. "Everyone wrote for the quartet," he explains. "We combined electronic and acoustic instruments and we worked quite a bit around L.A. and San Diego. It really furthered my development as a composer."

In 1969 Bill made the big move to Los Angeles. He continued his piano studies with Victor Aller and worked jazz gigs with LA's best players, including Buddy Collette, Harold Land, Shelly Manne, Bud Shank, Art Pepper, and the Kenton Jr. Neophonic Orchestra. He was a long-time member of the Bobby Shew Quintet, led a piano-bass-guitar trio featuring Danny Embrey, did some two-piano recordings with Alan Broadbent and had a working band that featured Ernie Watts & Abe Laboriel. Looking back on that collaboration, Bill enthusiastically recalls "exploring all kinds of music-funk & fusion things, odd time signatures, burning bebop. The book was so far-ranging that Ernie played English horn, oboe and flute in addition to the saxophones." Fusion was in its heyday and Mays worked some noteworthy gigs in that genre as well: Tom Scott's L.A. Express, Indian electric-violinist Dr. L Subramanian, Frank Zappa (a large ensemble in which he played clavinet), and believe it or not, he "even played straight out rock-and-roll at the Whiskey A-Go-Go with one of the first drag-queen groups, the Cycle Sluts!"

The momentum continued and Bill had many invigorating collaborations in L.A. and eventually became a fixture in the Hollywood recording studios. "I'd worked hard on my sight-reading," he recalls, "and on gaining familiarity with other keyboard instruments like harpsichord, organ, celeste and synthesizers. I started as a rehearsal pianist for TV shows, then Mike Lang, one of the major studio keyboard players in town, recommended me as a

sub. That's how I met the music contractors and started working in that end of the business."

He fondly recalls "working with some truly gifted film writers and playing with fantastic musicians. In fact, I first met J.J. Johnson and Benny Golson that way, not in a jazz setting, but playing for them in a Hollywood studio."

With such diverse experience and musical acumen, Bill became the consummate accompanist, LA's first-call pianist for singers. Although he worked with more singers than he can recall, one memory remains vivid, when Jimmy Rowles recommended him for the gig with Sarah Vaughan. "That was heaven, hearing that voice every night," he remembers, "and with Jimmy Cobb in the drum chair! Sarah was a ball and it was like family." Other singer gigs followed, from Dionne Warwick and Anita O'Day to Al Jarreau and Frank Sinatra.

After his recording debut as a leader (a quintet LP and a duo project with bassist Red Mitchell), Bill finally moved to the Jazz Mecca, New York, in 1984. "I wanted to broaden my scope, work with some of the people I'd always admired," he explains. "And, continue to grow as a writer and player." In addition to leading his own bands his resume includes the most important musicians of the era: Ron Carter, Al Cohn, Eddie Daniels, Ray Drummond, Benny Golson, Mel Lewis, Charles McPherson, Bob Mintzer, Gerry Mulligan, Rufus Reid, Maria Schneider Orchestra, Marvin Stamm, Clark Terry, Toots Thielemans, Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Paul Winter and Phil Woods. He has played such notable New York venues as Birdland, the Blue Note, Bradley's, Carnegie Hall, Guggenheim Museum, Iridium, Jazz Standard, Lincoln Center, MOMA, Smoke, Steinway Pianos, the Village Gate and the Village Vanguard.

After recording several projects for Discovery, DMP and Concord Jazz, Bill began his current affiliation with Palmetto Records in 1999. "That has been a major move for me artistically," he believes. "I've found a connection with my current trio (drummer Matt Wilson and bassist Martin Wind) like no other. They bring so much to the table from their vast playing experiences; the technical concerns are out of the way and the interplay with them is uncanny. The music seems to be coming from one head! And I greatly value their contributions as composers."

Bill's initial Palmetto recording, *Summer Sketches*, featured songs of summer and pieces by the trio members, and garnered glowing reviews and sustained airplay. The just-released *Going Home* features several of his originals and a surprise vocal.

In addition to his reputation as a jazz pianist noted as both a first-rate accompanist, and soloist, Bill Mays is well-known for his compositional and arranging talents. He has contributed music to the libraries of a wide array of artists: Aureole chamber ensemble, Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, Percy Faith Orchestra, Woody Herman Orchestra, Morgana King, Shelly Manne, Mark Murphy, Bud Shank, Marvin Stamm, Lew Tabackin, Turtle Creek Chorale and Phil Woods.

Bill's published works include pieces for solo piano, suites for contrabass and piano and for flute and piano, saxophone quartets, charts for big band and symphony orchestra, a jazz woodwind version of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, music for Robert DeNiro's *Tribeca*, and incidental music for the film, *Hamlet*.

"I've been composing for as long as I can remember," Bill explains. "Half the time I write just for pleasure; the other half is for specific, commissioned projects." He finds that "deadlines are great inspirations! I don't have much formal, scholastic training; I studied briefly in the 60s with David Ward-Steinman in San Diego, and in New York at the BMI writers workshop with Bob Brookmeyer and Manny Albam--and lots of great orchestration books by Henry Mancini, Kent Kennan and Ray Wright. I would say some of my major inspirations have been Gil Evans, Maurice Ravel, Thad Jones, Horace Silver. It's most rewarding to hear something in your head, or voice it on the piano, and then hear it take shape and come to life with a band or orchestra."

Currently, Bill Mays tours and records in many varied configurations: solo piano, duo with trumpeter Marvin Stamm, his Trio, a Quartet with his Trio and a Sextet. A recent endeavor has been his classical/jazz crossover concerts with the Toronto Chamber Jazz Septet.

Bill Mays has been the recipient of the following Awards and Honors:

Arranger/pianist/producer on the Grammy-nominated LP "Bop For Kerouac" by Mark Murphy

on /Muse Records; Pianist on Gold Album Paradise Café by Barry Manilow on Arista Records;
Talent Deserving Of Wider Recognition in the Piano category, Downbeat Magazine;
Nominated for "Most Valuable Player" Award, Los Angeles
International Society of Bassists: "Friend Of The Bass." He has also been the recipient of
performance grants from Meet The Composer, Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, National
Endowment for the Arts, PennPAT.

Jazz society/festival appearances: Addison JF, Ancona JF, A Place For Jazz, Brecon JF,
Calgary JF, Chivas JF, C.O.T.A., Delaware Valley Arts Alliance, Duke Ellington Society, Earshot
JF, Frei JF, Gold Coast JS, Halifax JF, Hawaii JF, Highlights in Jazz, Holland America Jazz
Cruise, Jazz Baltica, JVC JF, Litchfield JF, Lake Luzerne Music Festival, Mainly Mozart,
Manchester Craftsman's Guild, Marciac JF, Montreal JF, Mt. Hood JF, Northsea JF, Oslo JF,
Ottawa JF, Otter Crest, Pittsburgh JS, Portland JS., Ravinia Festival, Salishan, San Francisco
JF, Saskatoon JF, Seven Springs JF, Steinway Society, Taipei, JF, Topeka Jazz Party, Tucson
JS., Toronto JF, Vancouver JF, Windham Chamber Festival, Wooster JS, Yellowstone JF and
92nd St. "Y" Jazz in July.

University/clinic appearances: Berklee College of Music, Brigham Young University,
Binghamton University, Bud Shank Jazz Camp, Chatham College, Claremont College, Duke
Univ., Humber College, IAJE, Indiana University, Ithaca College, Manhattan School of Music,
University of Memphis, Univ. of Nevada, Univ. of New Hampshire, New York University, Univ.
of North Texas, Northwestern Connecticut Community College, Univ. of Oregon (Eugene),
Pace Univ., Rockefeller Univ., San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Univ. of Southern Calif.,
Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Wisconsin, William Paterson, Yale University.

Charitable work: Hospital Audiences, Big Brothers, Aids Names Project

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