

Bill Mays on Mays At The Movies

I've always wanted to do a CD of songs from the movies. Thanks to Nils Winther and Steeplechase for the opportunity. Part of my career as a pianist has been spent playing on movie soundtracks. I worked 1970 through 1984 in the Hollywood studios, and since my time in New York (1984-present) have played on several more films (see www.billmays.net for complete list). I've had the pleasure of working for many great composers, among them (represented here) Johnny Mandel, Michel Legrand and Henry Mancini. The problem was choosing among so many great songs. I didn't pick these because of any inherent quality of the movie but only because I really like the songs. Having said that, a few remarks:

I've Never Been In Love Before ("Guys and Dolls")

— This has been done so many different ways that I decided to put it in 5/4 time and put each of the 4 sections of the tune (A-A-B-A) in different keys, each one climbing up a minor 3rd from the preceding one.

The Shadow Of Your Smile ("The Sandpiper")

— I loved the movie with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and also think Mandel's score one of the greatest ever written. The verse doesn't appear in the movie, but I included it because it's so beautiful.

Pure Imagination ("Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory")

— really poignant in the movie, and often a ballad, I chose instead a straight-ahead, up-tempo approach with some exciting trading amongst the trio members.

Love theme from "Spartacus"

— Many jazz musicians have recorded this, with varying degrees of accuracy. I went to Alex North's soundtrack recording and transcribed his melody, and chords, and found there was much more musical material than often is played.

Judy

— This piece, written originally for my wife, found its way into two movies ("Anamorph" and "Burn After Reading") and was used as "source music," i.e. music that's not part of the composed soundtrack but is heard coming from an outside source (radio, record player or off-camera band).

The Summer Knows ("Summer Of '42")

— I love the way Legrand goes back and forth between minor and major in this tune, and Peter's playing of the first melody.

There's A Small Hotel ("Pal Joey")

— I once stayed at the small hotel (Stockton Inn, in Stockton NJ) and saw the wishing well Larry Hart wrote about in the lyric. (Although another claimant to be the inspiration is the Montecito Inn, in Santa Barbara, California)

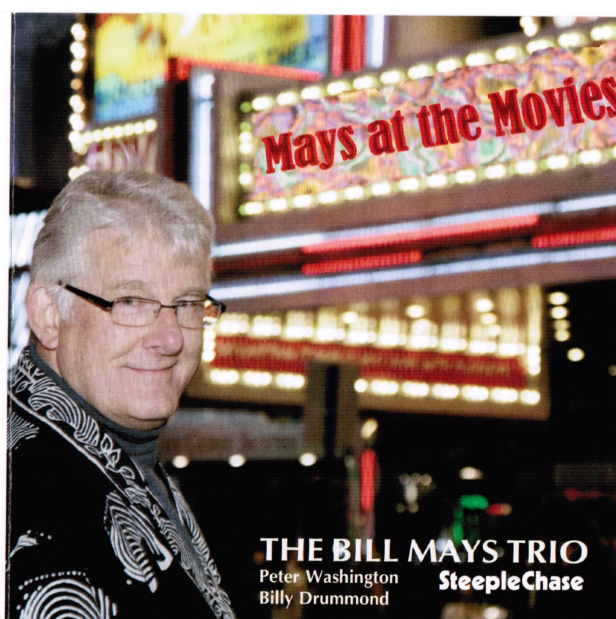
You Leave Me Breathless ("Cocoanut Grove")

— Having first heard Coltrane play this I further researched it and discovered a wonderful lyric, including a great verse. Singing instrumentalists Dave Frishberg, Red Mitchell and Jimmy Rowles gave me courage!

Charade ("Charade")

— Passing the melody around we turned this quiet waltz into a "burner."

Bill Mays



October 6, 1927 - a momentous date that marked the New York release of "The Jazz Singer", the first full-length, "talking picture". It also brought music in synch to the screen. Although the word "jazz" was in the title, the film had no connection with that genre, but it did herald an 80-year love affair between the movies and jazz. Earlier in 1927, trumpet virtuoso Louis Armstrong first formed an alliance with pianist Earl Hines. In the month after "The Jazz Singer" burst on an unsuspecting world, Louis and Earl with drummer Zutty Singleton opened their own club at Warwick Hall, Chicago, and were soon recording together. Armstrong, among his copious jazz accomplishments would become a movie star. Hines, while a member of Louis's group, recorded his first unaccompanied piano solos in 1928.

What do these historic facts have to do with pianist Bill Mays and his trio interpretation of nine tunes drawn from different films? Just about everything, because Bill, born in "Lotus Land" (actually Sacramento, California, on February 5, 1944), has composed and played for films while maintaining simultaneously a career as a jazz soloist.

He spent 15 years in the Hollywood studios working on movie soundtracks, television shows and recording commercial jingles, but was also active in the Los Angeles clubs with the likes of Art Pepper, Howard Roberts, Bud Shank, Bobby Shriver, Shelly Manne, Sonny Stitt, Red Holloway, Red Mitchell, Teddy Edwards, Buddy Collette and Sarah Vaughan.

"I was doing six days a week of studio work and playing three nights a week in jazz clubs. That went on for 15 years, and without being disparaging about the money, in the end I wanted to get

back to playing more jazz. That meant going to New York to work with Mel Lewis, Al Cohn, Gerry Mulligan, Bob Brookmeyer, Clark Terry and Benny Golson. So from being involved in numerous Hollywood film soundtracks, in New York I probably did only four to six movies a year."

The connection with Earl Hines - one of Bill's favourite pianists - is that it was seeing Hines play solo piano on a bill at San Francisco's Black Hawk club, which also included the Miles Davis group as the other, attraction that converted him to the beauties and infinite possibilities of jazz. "Hearing those exceptional artists was a defining moment for me," Bill recalls.

He had started on piano at home at the age of five, encouraged by his father, an amateur musician, and mother, who was a singer. Between the ages of eight and 10 years, Bill had a great piano teacher. His musical education also covered playing trumpet and baritone horn. He played in a navy band from 1957 - 1961, and after that established his credentials as both a jazz player and studio musician during the 1970s and 1980s.

"I was lucky enough to work with some great writers who had made the transition from jazz to Hollywood - Johnny Mandel, Henry Mancini, Michel Legrand, and not forgetting Lalo Schiffrin, Benny Golson and J.J. Johnson. I first met Benny when he was conducting a soundtrack recording. It was years later that we worked together in his band."

"I never actually worked on movies with a jazz background, like "Man With The Golden Arm" or any of the bandleader biographies, but the jazz influence was in what those men composed, and there were frequently incidental jazz perform-

ances in the soundtrack. I've also written quite a bit for films and TV."

Since his move to New York in 1984, 25 years ago, Bill has worked with many bands, but these days is more frequently encountered at the head of his own trio or in duo. "I feel that a duo or trio set-up provides the greatest opportunity for interactive playing, and while I enjoy writing for quintets and sextets, I'm always drawn back to a more intimate context. I've made duo recordings with Billy Drummond, Marvin Stamm and the late Bud Shank, and I've led a couple of wonderful trios before this one. Over the years I have done a lot of solo playing, and the idea of making an unaccompanied CD is an attractive one."

Bill had been thinking of devoting a set wholly to movie tunes for three or four years. "I made lists of songs that I might do, but ultimately picked the ones I most enjoy playing and which are really great vehicles for improvisation." His selection covers five different decades. The 1930s is represented by **You Leave Me Breathless** (1938) and **There's A Small Hotel** (1936). "The 1930s was certainly a most fertile chapter in the American Popular Songbook." From the 1950s he chose **I've Never Been In Love Before** (1950), and the 1960s are represented by **Love Theme From "Spartacus"** (1960), **Charade** (1963) and **The Shadow Of Your Smile** (1965). Dipping into the 1970s, Bill came up with **Pure Imagination** and **The Summer Knows** (both 1971).

Finally, Bill slipped in a tune of his own, **Judy**, dating from 2002, heard incidentally in two movies. This is Bill's third recorded version of the piece. He also made a duo version with Marvin Stamm, and a trio cut, from which samples figured in those

two films.

Mays had never played with bassist Peter Washington and drummer Billy Drummond as a unit, and they did not rehearse before the recording. "It was our first time in the studio together, but I had no anxieties because both musicians are excellent responders and readers. We did the whole thing in six hours, with quite a few first or second takes. We did maybe three versions of 'I've Never Been In Love Before' and four takes of 'Charade', and happily everything turned out pretty well."

Bill Mays is never idle. His year is taken up with a heavy programme of concert appearances, master classes, music clinics and trips to countries around the globe. Just back from Japan when he spoke, he was about to fly West to participate in a tribute concert to Bud Shank in Los Angeles, and right after that was booked to give 12 concerts over a hectic week in the mid-West.

Apart from Earl Hines, Bill's piano favourites encompass Sonny Clark, Clare Fischer, Shirley Horn and Jimmy Rowles. "Somewhere out of all those various stylists, I found my own way." This entry for SteepleChase finds Bill Mays reflecting on his Hollywood years and his quarter century on the New York jazz scene. While the movies paid well, jazz has brought him greater artistic satisfaction. And that truth shines through this music.

Mark Gardner

Contributor, Jazz Journal International since 1962)

PETER WASHINGTON bass
BILLY DRUMMOND drums

Recorded March 2009

- 1 I'VE NEVER BEEN IN LOVE BEFORE (Frank Loesser) 7:31
- 2 THE SHADOW OF YOUR SMILE (Johnny Mandel) 4:55
- 3 PURE IMAGINATION (Anthony Newley / Leslie Bricusse) 8:44
- 4 LOVE THEME FROM SPARTACUS (Alex North) 8:11
- 5 JUDY (Bill Mays) 6:33
- 6 THE SUMMER KNOWS (Michel Legrand) 6:48
- 7 THERE'S A SMALL HOTEL (Richard Rodgers) 6:54
- 8 YOU LEAVE ME BREATHLESS* (Frederick Hollander) 4:56
- 9 CHARADE (Henry Mancini) 8:23

Total Playing Time 63:24

Recording: Manfred Knoop
Mixing: Nils Winther
Cover photo: Judy Kirtley
Liner Notes: Mark Gardner
Produced by Nils Winther

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Recent Listening: Mays, Weidman, Drummond

Bill Mays, *Mays at the Movies* (Steeplechase). The pianist is a veteran of motion



picture sound stages, but in this stimulating trio session he's free from click tracks, conductors and scores. With bassist Peter Washington and drummer Billy Drummond, Mays interprets nine pieces from films as disparate as *Cocoanut Grove* (1938) and *Burn After Reading* (2008). Highlights: his thorough exploration of the love theme from 'Spartacus'; the dazzling succession of key changes on "I've Never Been in Love Before," in 5/4 time; the inventiveness in his multifaceted composition "Judy;" his interaction with Washington on "The Summer Knows;" Drummond's cymbal splashes in "Charade." Mays sings "You Leave Me Breathless" at least as well as Fred McMurray did in *Cocoanut Grove*, and personalizes the harmonic changes of that beautiful, neglected song.

Mays at the Movies

Bill Mays | SteepleChase Records (2010)

By Dr. Judith Schlesinger

 Discuss  

Bill Mays has spent much of his career as a first-call studio pianist in Hollywood, accompanying singers like Sarah Vaughan and **Al Jarreau**, and playing on movie soundtracks. Moreover, his most recent CDs have involved his innovative third-stream group, The Inventions Trio, with trumpeter **Marvin Stamm** and cellist Alisa Horn. As a result, Mays's profile may be a bit lower than some who spend more time in the jazz performance spotlight. But he's also one of the most intelligent, fluent, and interesting players around. Mays never mucks with a tune just for the sake of putting a personal stamp on it—there's always the sense that thoughtful creative choices have been made



For example, in the opening "I've Never Been in Love Before," Mays changes the chord center four times, which not only adds new dimensions to an overplayed tune, but musically captures the blissful disorientation of the first-time lover. Similarly, on the next warhorse, "The Shadow of Your Smile," Mays's elegant, succinct playing strips years of schmaltz from the song; with the addition of the verse, he helps highlight its original beauty. Mays's compositional gifts are also on display here with the spirited "Judy," the tribute to his wife that's been heard in two movies so far.

The delightful *Willie Wonka* anthem, "Pure Imagination," has some temporal twists that bring out its lopsided structure (that nine-bar bridge, for instance), while this band digs deep into {Michel Legrand = 8674}'s "The Summer Knows"—usually played as a ballad—and swings it hard. Mays also does his homework, going back to Alex North's version of his "Love Theme from Spartacus" to restore what many other pianists, including **Bill Evans**, choose to cut from the piece.

Given the consistently excellent quality of this music, it's surprising that this group didn't rehearse—until you consider the caliber of bassist **Peter Washington** and drummer **Billy Drummond**, both busy, classy players who enhance any number of trio recordings. The artful delegation of their splendid solos adds color on tunes like "There's a Small Hotel" and "Charade," the burning closer, as does Mays' playful but subtle quoting. All told, *Mays at the Movies* is a thoroughly engaging CD, providing more evidence that Mays's position in the top tier of pianists remains secure.

Track listing: I've Never Been in Love Before; The Shadow of Your Smile; Pure Imagination; Love Theme from Spartacus; Judy; The Summer Knows; There's a Small Hotel; You Leave Me Breathless; Charade.

Personnel: Bill Mays: piano, vocal; Peter Washington: bass; Billy Drummond: drums.



HÖRKINO

Der hoch respektierte New Yorker Pianist Bill Mays gilt in der Jazzszene als musikalischer «Renaissance Man», als ein Generalist, der sich in praktisch allen Sparten seiner Musik kompetent einzubringen weiss: Komponist, Arrangeur, Bandleader, gesuchter Sideman, Studio-musiker für alle Gelegenheiten etc. In «Mays At The Movies» kehrt er zurück zu seinen Anfängen als viel beschäftigter Studio-musiker in Hollywood, wo er auf unzähligen Filmsoundtracks zu hören war. Unterstützt vom Bassisten Peter Washington und von Billy Drummond (dm), improvisiert Mays über die wunderbare Eigenkomposition «Judy» und acht weitere Filmmelodien, welche es zu Jazzstandards gebracht haben. Und die Magie des Mays Trios «in action» lässt beim Zuhörer sogleich einen akustischen Film entstehen: Kino für die Ohren!

JÜRIG SOMMER

Bill Mays Trio Mays At The Movies (Steeple Chase). Erhältlich via www.jpc.de, www.billmays.net ★★★★★

«Mittelland Zeitung» MZ & «Aargauer Zeitung» AZ, News dailies, Switzerland. June 6, 2010, by Jürg Sommer.

Movies for the Ears

Highly respected New York pianist Bill Mays is considered a true "Renaissance Man" on the jazz scene, i.e. Mays is respected as a master in all areas of his widely spread musical activities: composer, arranger, bandleader, studio musician for all styles of music etc. The current "Mays At The Movies" CD brings him back to square one of his impressive career that in his beginning led to a busy job as a studio musician in Hollywood where he was playing in countless movie soundtracks. Supported by bassist Peter Washington and Billy Drummond (dm) on this CD the Mays Trio improvises over the leader's fascinating original "Judy" as well as eight movie classics that became jazz standards. The Mays trio on this recording is no less than "magic in action" offering the listener a true acoustic movie: cinema for the ear!

Bill Mays Trio: Mays At The Movies (SteepleChase) (CD can be ordered at www.jpc.de, www.billmays.net) Rating 5 stars