

5 Ways To Play Like Bill Evans

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It's hard to believe it's been 30 years since the revolutionary jazz pianist Bill Evans left us at the all too young age of 51. Evans was, and still is, among the most influential jazz pianists of the past sixty years. His effect on modern jazz piano was so profound, he actually influenced pianists whose fame both followed his own (Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, and Brad Mehldau), and *preceded* it (Teddy Wilson, George Shearing, and Oscar Peterson). On both sides of this generational divide, pianists who heard Bill Evans altered their own playing as a result. There's no doubt that had Bill survived to his 81st birthday, he would have added many more ways to this "five ways" list. He left it to us to add to such lists ourselves. That's what he wanted, after all.



Audio examples hosted by [SoundCloud.com](https://www.soundcloud.com).

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Sheet music images coming soon. For now, see the January 2011 print issue of *Keyboard*.

1. Left-Hand Rootless Voicings

Bill Evans single-handedly changed the sound of jazz piano—literally, with his left hand! His four-note, rootless chord voicings consist of *guide* tones (thirds and sevenths), along with chord tones, color tones, extensions, and/or alterations. These compact voicings also have inherently smooth *voice leading*.

The image shows a musical score for a ii-V-I progression in the key of C. The top staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains three measures of chord voicings. Above the first measure is the label 'Dmin7', above the second is 'G7', and above the third is 'Cmaj7'. The voicings are: Dmin7 (F, A, Bb, D), G7 (B, D, F, G), and Cmaj7 (Eb, G, Bb, C). The bottom staff is also in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains three measures of root notes: D, G, and C. The notes are written as quarter notes.

Ex. 1a is a ii-V-I progression in the key of *C*. Play these voicings with your right hand while playing the roots with your left to get used to the root movement. Then play them with your left hand alone. To practice, transpose up in half steps to the key of *F*. This position is often referred to as the "A-form."

Example 1b shows two measures of music. The first measure contains two chords: G#min7 and D#7. The second measure contains one chord: F#maj7. The notation is in bass clef with a grand staff. The upper staff shows the chord voicings, and the lower staff shows the root notes: G# for G#min7, D# for D#7, and F# for F#maj7.

Ex.

1b shows the “B-form” of these voicings, and covers the keys of *F#* major through *B* major. These use the same notes as the A-form, but in a different configuration.

Example 1c shows three measures of music. The first measure contains two chords: Dmin7 \flat 5 and G7alt. The second measure contains one chord: Cmin/maj7. The notation is in bass clef with a grand staff. The upper staff shows the chord voicings, and the lower staff shows the root notes: D \flat for Dmin7 \flat 5, G# for G7alt, and C \flat for Cmin/maj7.

In **Ex. 1c**, we see the A-form of rootless voicings for a ii-V-i progression in minor. Notice the altered dominant voicings are the same as the unaltered dominant voicings: a tritone (or raised fourth) away, in the opposite form.

Example 1d shows three measures of music. The first measure contains two chords: G#min7 \flat 5 and D#7alt. The second measure contains one chord: F#min/maj7. The notation is in bass clef with a grand staff. The upper staff shows the chord voicings, and the lower staff shows the root notes: G# for G#min7 \flat 5, D# for D#7alt, and F# for F#min/maj7.

And in **Ex. 1d**, we see how to construct the B-form of rootless voicings for a ii-V-i in minor.

2. Right-Hand Devices

Evans' lyrical right-hand lines often ended up in the higher reaches of the keyboard as a result of the position of his left-hand voicings.

Ex. 2a illustrates a signature lick of Bill Evans over a ii-V-i progression in C minor. The right hand features a melodic line with triplets and grace notes. The left hand provides harmonic support with chords Dmin7b5, G7alt, and Cmin/maj7.

Ex. 2a illustrates how Bill often used the notes from his left-hand voicings in his right-hand lines. Here is a signature lick of his over a ii-V-i progression in C minor.

Ex. 2b illustrates Bill Evans' trademark scale tone and chromatic triad usage. The right hand features a melodic line with scale tone triads and chromatic triads. The left hand provides harmonic support with chords G7alt and Cmin6.

In Ex. 2b, we see his trademark *scale tone* and *chromatic triad* usage. Notice the triad pair of Eb major and Db major over the G7 altered (#9b13) chord. These triads are scale tone triads of the G altered scale (or Ab melodic minor). The E major triad is a *chromatic triad*. The triads over the Cmin6 chord are all scale tone triads taken from the C melodic minor scale.

3. Harmonic and Rhythmic Devices

Evans was a master of both harmonic and rhythmic innovation.

Ex. 3a is a series of ii-V progressions. The right hand features a melodic line with grace notes. The left hand provides harmonic support with chords Fmin7, B7, Bb7, E7, Bbmin7, E7alt, Eb7sus4, and Eb7b9#11.

Ex. 3a is a series of ii-V progressions. By adding dominant seventh *chromatic approach* chords, Evans could enhance and expand a common harmonic progression. Note his trademark, subtle use of the grace note of the fifth going to the #5 (or b13) in the Bb7 chord. His left-hand accompaniment often created a counter-melody to the right hand, and kept things moving.

Fmin7 B7 Bb7 E7 Bbmin7 E7alt Eb7sus4 Eb7b9#11

This musical notation shows a piano accompaniment for a II-V-III-VI turnaround progression. The chords are: Fmin7, B7, Bb7, E7, Bbmin7, E7alt, Eb7sus4, and Eb7b9#11. The bass line features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with rests, while the treble clef contains block chords.

Note how in **Ex. 3b**, Evans takes a typical II-V-III-VI turnaround progression and changes the V chord to a #II diminished chord. This subtle alteration creates unexpected harmonic interest.

4. Inner Voice Movement

Evans' introspective style gave rise to frequent *inner voice movement*, which infused a contrapuntal component into his playing.

Fmin7 Fmin7+5

Fmin6 Fmin7b6

This musical notation illustrates inner voice movement in a minor chord. The first system shows a transition from Fmin7 to Fmin7+5, with the right hand playing a chromatic line of intervals (5, #5, 6, b6, 5) over the bass line. The second system shows a transition from Fmin6 to Fmin7b6, also with the right hand playing a chromatic line of intervals. The bass line in both systems consists of sustained chords.

Ex. 4a illustrates a favorite Evans device for a minor chord. Here we see the inner voice movement of the fifth: 5, #5, 6, b6, and 5. His use of intervallic minor thirds ascending chromatically in the right hand let him play over any harmonic movement without playing the actual chord changes.

