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Before & After: Kevin Hays

"Am I being controversial enough?"

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Kevin Hays (photo by Kevin Gruetzner)

Known for his exceptional output as a leader and his modern-minded pianism in bands led by Nicholas Payton, Al Foster, Chris Potter and more, Kevin Hays has nothing if not a discerning ear. He's rooted and highly proficient in the postbop piano lineage but always game to branch out. On several releases, most recently the 2015 trio outing *New Day*, he has featured his mellow, pop-tinged singing voice. He's ventured into semi-classical terrain with the 2011 solo piano disc *Variations* and the two-piano collaboration *Modern Music* with Brad Mehldau and composer Patrick Zimmerli. *Shores Against Silence*, Zimmerli's new archival Songlines release, features a younger Hays on a set of extremely demanding and never-before-heard music from 1992. Between that and Hays' latest trio effort for the Sunnyside label, *North*, we get the measure of a complete and always evolving musician.

When we caught up with the pianist, 48, he was still getting settled in a new Brooklyn apartment after several years living upstate. No stereo yet, but we gathered around an adequate speaker and rapped about the following music.

1. Ethan Iverson
"Song for My Father" (from *The Purity of the Turf*, Criss Cross). Iverson, piano; Ron Carter, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums. Recorded in 2016.

BEFORE: It's "Song for My Father" [by Horace Silver], I know that. It's not Horace. [*hearing a dissonant phrase*] Whoo! It almost makes me want to say—I mean, it sounds like a very new recording, but could it be Horace?

[*hearing a sudden low bass note*] Whoa! Someone's got an extension. That was a low C. The bass has an extension. It doesn't sound like Ron [Carter], but then [this speaker] is kind of rumbly. I'll take a wild guess. At first I was thinking, "Could it be Jason [Moran]?" But I'll take a wild guess at Ethan.

Yes. With Ron Carter.

[*fist in the air*] Whoo! Whoo! That's bizarre. I guess I would have heard Ron's tone. I wish we had a better system.

Just really cool. You can hear the history and Ethan's connection to the tradition. He's done his homework. The creativity of the voice leading made me think of him a little bit, and then I started hearing tremolos and stuff that he was doing at the end. Just really in the pocket. I was thinking, "These guys know what came before, so maybe it's some lost '80s recording of Horace or something." But yeah, I really dig Ethan. You hear the nod to Horace not just in the tune choice but in the treatment. I mean, you hear some of the left hand that Horace was famous for—rhythmic, pulsing stuff.

2. Mulgrew Miller
"Yardbird Suite" (from *Solo*, Space Time). Miller, piano. Recorded in 2000.

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BEFORE: [*listens to entire track*] I was going to guess Mulgrew.

What led you in that direction?

Well, I heard his voice a little bit, and I thought, "That's Mulgrew." I just put two and two together. The right hand, man, it's incredible. A real loss. [Miller died in 2013.] Really beautiful cat and great musician.

Did you get to spend any time with him?

Not any significant time. Met him over the years. We used to hang out at Bradley's together, back in the '90s. I saw him play many times. Saw him play with Tony [Williams]. Really, a powerhouse.

3. Nat King Cole Trio

"How High the Moon" (from *The Best of the Nat King Cole Trio: The Instrumental Classics*, Capitol). Cole, piano; Oscar Moore, guitar; Johnny Miller, bass. Recorded in 1947.

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BEFORE: I would guess George [Shearing]. What would be the other guess? I figured it would be old. It's about the happiest "How the High Moon" I've ever heard. Gosh, who else would it be? I don't think it's Nat Cole…

AFTER: Is it? It's almost a little painful for me. I mean, I love Nat Cole. And to me that just was not one of the more swingin' Nat Coles. It was like, "What's he going for?" I just love him. But the touch, man, it just felt so kind of one-heavy. Lord, have mercy. He's one of my favorite musicians in the world. It's uncomfortable to not feel like I love whatever that was. Because Nat was an incredible pianist. I don't use the word "corny" lightly, but man, it didn't feel like Nat, like what he grew into. Certainly his touch is incredible—he's one of the guys for me, just in terms of sound, him and Hank Jones, in terms of how to touch the instrument. But that's not a recording I would put on. There you have it, folks.

4. Kikoski/Carpenter/Novak/Sheppard
"Tones for Joan's Bones" (from *From the Hip*, BFM). David Kikoski, piano; Dave Carpenter, bass; Gary Novak, drums; Bob Sheppard, saxophone. Recorded in 2006.

BEFORE: I was checking out the drummer for a minute there. My best guess would be [pianist] Joey Calderazzo. My second guess, and I don't think it's Kikoski. … Is it? It was going to be either Dave or Joey. I don't think it's Victor Lewis on drums.

Gary Novak. It's a co-led band with Dave Carpenter and Bob Sheppard.

Oh, cool. I almost thought it might be Chick [Corea].

It's Chick's tune.

OK, right. I know the tune—named for a person, was it, Chan? No, that's Herbie.

"Tones for Joan's Bones."

Oh, man. Well, I've known Dave [Kikoski] a long time. We came up—well, he's a little bit older than me—but we were playing with Eddie Henderson around the same time when I came to New York, and he played in Roy Haynes' band and I was subbing for him, and I did some gigs with Roy after that. Dave's an incredible musician, man. There's nothing he can't do. In fact, it's kind of legendary now: When he broke his hand, you'd go down to hear him with the Mingus band, and he had the right hand in a [cast], and then the left hand was even more incredible than the right hand. Amazing.

5. Charlie Haden & Hank Jones
"We Shall Overcome" (from *Steal Away*, Verve). Haden, bass; Jones, piano. Recorded in 1994.

BEFORE: [*listens to entire track*] Hank and Charlie. It's been a long time [since I heard that]. Those guys, those were the heroes. Hank was one of the early guys that I checked out. I remember seeing a video of him, before YouTube; it was part of some series, and it was Hank with Ben Webster or somebody. Great band. I got to see him play a number of times in New York. Just his touch, the way he touched the piano, never forced, always just so tasteful, the phrasing, nothing extraneous. It seems like almost a lost art. Really, really beautiful. Appropriate for our times.

6. Kris Davis
"Eronel" (from *Duopoly*, Pyroclastic). Davis, piano; Billy Drummond, drums. Recorded in 2015.

BEFORE: [*listens to entire track*] I'm trying to guess the pianist. I was going to say Jason, but not quite. I heard some Chick kind of stuff going on. It's Monk. It's a duo. Let me just think for a minute. … Might be Vijay [Iyer], but I don't think so. You got me.

AFTER: Oh, I don't know Kris' playing too much—really nice! Oh, and that was Billy Drummond? I've played a lot with Billy; I kind of thought [I heard him in] the snare drum. Cool! Really nice touch. I particularly liked the opening—it was like I was listening to Glenn Gould play some Krenek or something.

7. McCoy Tyner
"When Sunny Gets Blue" (from *Today and Tomorrow*, Impulse!). Tyner, piano; Jimmy Garrison, bass; Albert "Tootie" Heath, drums. Recorded in 1963.

BEFORE: [right before the bridge] Bass player's kind of not sure sometimes what's happening. [*listens straight through, occasionally singing the melody*] Obviously McCoy. "When Sunny Gets Blue." What a unique pianist. Has his own thing, man. Not afraid to go to the upper regions of the piano, or the lower.

What tipped you off?

The articulation. That's a Van Gelder recording, so the piano sounded the same no matter who played it, in terms of the tone. I got to record out there once, years ago—not on that piano, but I touched it. Anyway, the way McCoy played the melody, those kind of short notes. I'm familiar with this recording too, but it's been a while.

As much as he became known for being a hard player, he has such a light touch. We miss the fact that a lot of the older guys, I don't know, there was an understanding somehow that the piano is not something to be hammered, and that you could get a beautiful tone. Of course, with these records you're given some of the Van Gelder treatment when you're not necessarily going to hear the bright brittleness of today's recording techniques.

Was McCoy a big influence on you?

Not in terms of style, but he's in there. A lot of people tried to steal licks, or to codify the fourths voicing thing, but I don't hear him playing licks. You still hear improvising. Also, you hear the melody throughout; he's playing around with the melody, and that's something I really appreciate, and something I've been teaching over the past few years.

I always tell a story about when I first played with Sonny [Rollins], and he sent me a cassette tape of all the tunes that we were going to play, and it was all singers, every one of them. He sent me all vocal versions. [*mimics Rollins' voice*] "I want you to know what these tunes really sound like…"

So I thought, "If Sonny Rollins, one of the greatest improvisers on the planet, sends you music with very little improvisation, then that's what's important if you want to go far in your improvisation, to use the melody as a reference. If Sonny's roots are that deep into the melody…" That's what I learned from him—to be tethered to something, not just free from it. And you hear that love for the song [in McCoy's performance].

8. Frank Kimbrough
"Here Come the Honey Man" (from *Solstice*, Pirouet). Kimbrough, piano; Jay Anderson, bass; Jeff Hirshfield, drums. Recorded in 2016.

BEFORE: I don't know who the pianist is. I was going to guess Lynne Arriale. Bass player sounded really good. Gershwin, right? Beautiful song. Who could that be?

AFTER: Oh, it was Frank? With Tim Horner?

Jeff Hirshfield and Jay Anderson.

And Jay! That's not the Newvelle recording [*Meantime*], right? No, that's still on vinyl. I was actually thinking it might be European. Really nice. I met Frank when I first moved to town, in the late '80s, ya know. He was friends with Jeff Williams, and I met all those guys. Frank's great. Nice unique version of that tune, very open. Am I being controversial enough? These are my boys.

9. Matt Mitchell

"Veins" (from *Fiction*, Pi). Mitchell, piano; Ches Smith, drums. Recorded in 2012.

BEFORE: I'm not sure who that is. It's the new school. I could maybe guess Vijay, but no. I was going to almost guess it's a drummer's record—this is really coming off wrong—because it makes me think of a lot of written music, and it doesn't feel very pianistic to me in some way. I was wondering if it was maybe Jacob Sacks with Dan Weiss or something. It's not Mark Guiliana.

AFTER: Don't know Matt. OK! Interesting.

He's working a lot with Tim Berne, Dave Douglas…

How do I put it … it had a mechanical quality that put me off a bit. It was like the parts trumped the musicality part for me, and that can happen sometimes, where the written stuff is priority. Bill Stewart made a comment once about "composer's music." In some ways you could say we're kind of purists that way. Labels suck anyway, but [I'm] just talking about jazz and the spirit of it; I'm not even talking about swing feel. That was just my feeling. I'd have to listen more to it, but it doesn't strike a bell in me.

10. Ben Wendel & Dan Tepfer
"Line Up" (from *Small Constructions*, Sunnyside). Wendel, saxophone; Tepfer, piano, Rhodes. Recorded in 2011.

BEFORE: [*listens to entire track*] Crazy, man. That's the Lennie Tristano solo, right? And I don't know what instrument—he's playing an electric pianet or digital piano … or I was thinking maybe he did the same technique [as Tristano] of speeding up the [tape]. Is that what he did?

Yes.

AFTER: Ah, Dan and Ben. I was going to guess Ben, just because of the smoothness of the dealin'. Yeah! Fun. I've played a little bit with Ben and he's fantastic. And I've heard Dan a bit; he's great.

Was Tristano an influence for you?

I didn't really check him out very much, but I really respect and admire what he did. What didn't reach me was the emotional content. But at the same time he's brilliant. He had a great feel, but there was something about the heavy intellectual processing that didn't really connect with me.

11. Sullivan Fortner
"You Are Special" (from Aria, *Impulse!*). Fortner, piano; Aidan Carroll, bass; Joe Dyson, drums. Recorded in 2014.

BEFORE: My best guess, I think it's Fred [Hersch]. But I could be wrong. I was thinking he's got some strong Hank—but that's my guess; I don't know who else it would be. From your lingering silence, I'm assuming it's not Fred.

It's very good. Whoever it is, it's somebody who knows the tradition. Beautiful touch, beautiful sound, great trio. I think it's someone older, for sure. The only other people I can think of from that camp really had kind of a Hank touch. Tommy [Flanagan]? The left-hand stuff made me think of Fred. A little bit of counterpoint.

AFTER: Oh, perfect. OK, that makes sense. I know he's a student of Fred's. He's a beautiful player. The touch—it's rare to find a young guy like Sullivan who can be that steeped in it. He knows what he's doing. You can tell. *Originally Published February 20, 2017*

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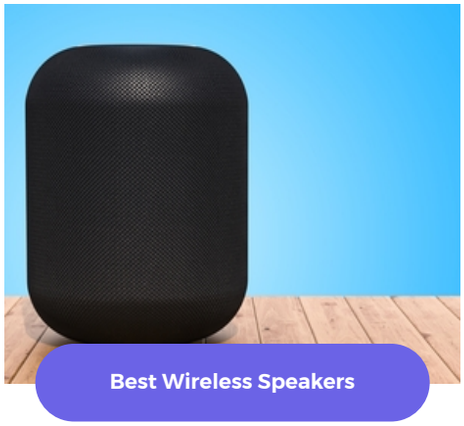

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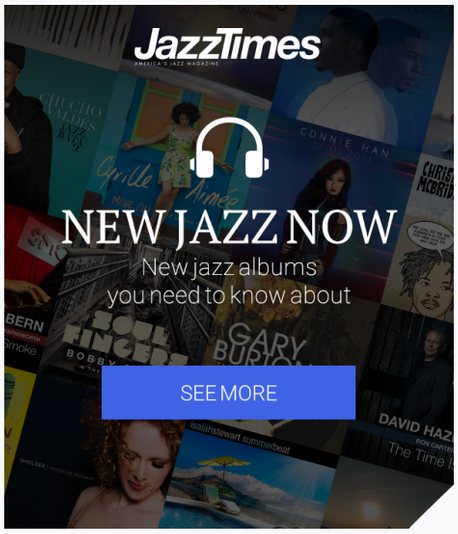

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