



"I Love It All"

by David R. Adler

Sideman to Bill Evans and Chick Corea, respected but under-the-radar leader, master of the duo format: **Eddie Gomez** is a versatile jazz modernist with a bass sound that remains instantly identifiable

JUST IMAGINE: IT'S 1961, YOU'RE STILL IN high school, and you're playing bass in casual downtown New York sessions with an intriguing pianist and Juilliard student by the name of Chick Corea. That's a big part of how it all began for Eddie Gomez. Little did the Puerto Rican-born bassist know that Corea would become a jazz giant, and more important, a lifelong musical ally. Corea's new two-disc offering, *Further Explorations* (Concord Jazz), with Gomez on bass and Paul Motian on drums, is but the latest chapter in a story that goes way back.

Recorded in May 2010 during a two-week stint at the Blue Note in Manhattan, *Further Explorations* is nominally a Bill Evans tribute—the title a reference to Evans' 1961 classic *Explorations*, featuring Motian and bassist Scott LaFaro. It made plenty of sense to recruit Gomez for the Blue Note gig: Starting in 1966 and continuing for 11 years, Gomez played in the Bill Evans Trio and thereby made his first big mark in the jazz world. Appearing on such albums as *A Simple Matter of Conviction*, *The Tokyo Concert* and the Grammy-winning *Bill Evans at the Montreux Jazz Festival* (1968), Gomez lived and breathed Evans' trio aesthetic, with its deep lyricism, impressionistic harmony and flowing equal-partner dialogue.

Gomez also flourished in duo settings with Evans, as documented on the albums *Intuition*, *Montreux III* and a new set of previously unreleased (and beautifully recorded) Evans material, *The Sesjun Radio Shows*, out on the Dutch T2 label. Duos have proved an important part of Gomez's work—he's recorded in that format with flutist Jeremy Steig, pianists Carlos Franzetti, Cesarius Alvim and Mark Kramer, vocalist/pianist Tania Maria (on her new disc, *Tempo*) and others.

"Eddie is marvelous in that he has a very wide scope," said Bill Evans in a 1970 interview. "And as much as he fits me like a glove, you would almost think that this is the only way he could play because he does it so perfectly. But it's not true." Case in point: Gomez in his early years worked with avant-gardists such as Paul Bley, John Tchicai and Giuseppe Logan, but also with stalwarts from the pre-bop era including Benny Good-

man, Buck Clayton, Edmond Hall, Jimmy McPartland and Bobby Hackett.

"Later, when I was traveling with Bill," Gomez recalls, "on occasion I'd be in Copenhagen and I'd sit in with Ben Webster, some of these other great players. I was lucky. And these people were very good to me. It meant a lot. Dizzy [Gillespie] was like that—when I got to play with him he was serious but very good-natured, and it made you feel welcome. I didn't do well getting yelled at. Some people can handle it."

Gomez was also the original bassist in Mike Mainieri's supergroup Steps Ahead (initially Steps), along with Steve Gadd and Michael Brecker. His membership in the Gadd Gang, playing in-the-pocket soul and R&B (with the late Cornell Dupree and Richard Tee), shows that Gomez can make the leap from complex jazz modernism to the dirtiest of simple grooves. "It's like being an actor," Gomez remarks. "For different pieces you put on a different hat. I like that. I'm proud of the body of different stuff that I've done, because I love it all. I really do." Whatever the musical situation, Gomez has brought a stout timbre, prodigious soloing chops and sweeping, cinematic arco lines to the table. He remains one of jazz's most distinctive bassists.

And though he's best known for his Evans and Corea associations, Gomez has for many years led his own bands: most recently, the quintet heard on his alluring soon-to-be-released album *Per Sempre* (BFM), with flutist Matt Marvuglio and tenor/soprano saxophonist Marco Pignataro in the frontline. Gomez also maintains an association, 15 years running, with the fiery Swedish-born pianist Stefan Karlsson, working mainly in trio settings with drummers including Jimmy Cobb, Duduka Da Fonseca and lately Nasheet Waits.

As he heads into his late 60s, Gomez is following the example of Webster, Gillespie and other elder statesmen. He's become an affable mentor to younger players, a person with rare wisdom but also a disarming humility. "I was about 29 when I met [Eddie]," says Karlsson, who teaches full-time at the University of North Texas. "He's been almost like a father figure to me. When you grow up 15 or 16 years with somebody and travel a lot, you gain a lot of life values."

GOMEZ WAS BORN IN SANTURCE, A DISTRICT OF SAN Juan, in 1944, and came to New York as a child. He took up bass at age 11 and was gigging regularly in his teens. Like his slightly older friend Chick, he enrolled at Juilliard and furthered his classical studies, even as he built a reputation in jazz. (In 2005 Gomez came full circle and began an association with the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico, where he now serves as artistic director.)

The early sessions with Corea ('61-'62) took place on North Moore Street. "We were jamming tunes," says the pianist in his



▲ Piano Trio Triumph:
Gomez at the Blue Note in May 2010, during the performances that became *Further Explorations*

Boston brogue. "Eddie was a real young fella; we were both young fellas. This building was really out of the way, three or four floors, and I had an apartment there with my wife and two kids, who were just tots. Upstairs was a drummer named Don Varella, who asked me to play in his trio, and Eddie showed up. There was an instant friendship because we shared so many similar pleasures and tastes." Gomez later included the Corea composition "North Moore St." on his 1992 album *Next Future*.

Corea adds: "When [Eddie and I] played together there was always this game that went on, one of the ultimate games in any kind of music: fully improvising and tossing ideas at one another and everybody making something of it. ... It's not like, 'OK, I'm going to play these next eight bars and then we'll get to the bridge.' It's like every note is another pearl or creation or jab or idea. We both love that way of interaction and we naturally go into it. That might describe some of the way Eddie played with Bill." The two took separate paths for a time: Gomez with Evans, Corea with Stan Getz and Miles

Davis. But they'd soon enough reunite.

"At the end of my third year at Juilliard," Gomez recounts, "I got a call from Gary McFarland to drive across the country with a small group. That was with Gabor Szabo and Sadao Watanabe. After that, I got asked to play in Gerry Mulligan's group with Art Farmer and Dave Bailey." It was a time, Gomez explains, when the Village Vanguard was featuring two bands per night. As fate would have it, the Mulligan band wound up getting booked alongside Bill Evans. "That's where Bill heard me," Gomez says. "So playing with Gerry was a big deal."

Drummers loom large in any bassist's career, of course. In Evans' trio, Gomez found himself paired with Shelly Manne, Marty Morell, Eliot Zigmund and others, including Philly Joe Jones and Jack De-

Johnette for brief periods. "Initially, with Bill on my right and Philly Joe on my left, I was just a kid," Gomez says. "I couldn't believe it." It was common, Gomez adds, for others to sit in with Evans at the Vanguard: Elvin Jones, Tony Williams and, not incidentally, Paul Motian, Evans' former full-time drummer.

Through Tony Williams, Gomez was given an opportunity to sub for Ron Carter in Miles Davis' historic second great quintet. "Ron was having health issues. This was around '67-'68, and he didn't want to travel," Gomez says. "Miles was calling different guys: Marshall Hawkins from D.C., Richard Davis, Gary Peacock, Buster Williams. One day I got a call from Tony and he said, 'Can you make this gig? We're leaving tonight.' It was that quick: 'Meet us at LaGuardia, we're going to Chicago.' So I did. We played the Plugged Nickel for a week. It was wild. I was definitely terrified."

The experience went beyond that one week. "I played with Miles in Boston, with Joe Henderson and Wayne, at Lennie's-on-the-Turnpike. We played Pep's in Philadel-

phia. We did a quartet gig without Miles in San Francisco at the Both/And. Quite a few gigs. I was always tippy-toeing, because it wasn't exactly in my comfort zone. Talk about 'further explorations.' I wish I could do that gig now—after all these years you have a perspective and understanding. Back then I was just trying to keep up. Miles didn't say much; he'd just sort of stand next to me. It seemed like I was OK."

Gomez's bond with DeJohnette proved enduring. "Jack was fresh on the scene, and he started off as a pianist," Gomez says. "He brought something out in Bill. I think they brought something out in each other. We did a whole month at Ronnie Scott's. I wish we had recorded that Montreux album after Ronnie Scott's, not before." ("I actually did record some of that [at Ronnie Scott's], with a portable recorder," DeJohnette reveals. "Bill was playing really great there.")

In 1969 Gomez appeared on *The DeJohnette Complex*, the drummer's debut. In 1978 he and DeJohnette backed Ralph Towner on his haunting ECM trio classic *Batik*, and DeJohnette hired Gomez for his left-of-center New Directions project, with Lester Bowie and John Abercrombie. "That was one of the highlight bands of my career," DeJohnette says. "And Eddie played differently in that group—there was a lot of space left open, a lot of conversations passed around"

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the universe, and then going from there,” Gomez quips. “I loved that. As much as I carry Bill’s sensibility inside my heart to this day, at that point I was looking [for something different].”

GOMEZ’S LEADER DISCOGRAPHY BEGINS WITH *DOWN* *Stretch* in 1976 and picks up speed in the ’80s with titles such as *Gomez*, *Mezgo* and *Street Smart*. In 1996 he formed his trio with pianist Karlsson. Their first drummer was the great Jimmy Cobb.

Remembering his initiation, Karlsson sounds uncannily like Gomez talking about Evans and Philly Joe: “It was a dream come true. I’d listened to Bill Evans since I was 14 and I remembered Eddie from those albums, and hearing Jimmy with Miles Davis of course. That trio covered so much history, and I’m there in the middle. I can go in any direction and it’s going to be taken care of.” The lineup with Cobb lasted until 2004, but the Gomez-Karlsson partnership continues. Representative efforts include *Dedication* and *What’s New at F* (both with Jeremy Steig), *Live in Mexico City* and *Palermo*.

It was with one of Hank Jones’ many incarnations of the Great Jazz Trio that Gomez and Cobb first connected. Gomez readily admits being “gun shy” at first: Cobb, after all, had made history in Miles Davis’ groups with one of Gomez’s chief role models, the mighty Paul Chambers. But Gomez was no stranger to pressure of this sort—in the late ’70s he had filled in for an ailing Charles Mingus on two Atlantic albums of Mingus’ music, *Me, Myself an Eye* and *Something Like a Bird*. Those projects involved close contact with Mingus drummer and confidante Dannie Richmond, who worked with Gomez in groups led by saxophonist Bennie Wallace as well.

By this point, Corea had come calling again. Gomez, along with future Steps colleague Steve Gadd, started appearing on Corea’s mid-’70s albums: *The Leprechaun*, *Friends* (with the Smurfs on the cover), *The Mad Hatter*. Then came the 1981 landmark *Three Quartets*. “We

staccato vocalizing during solos, which is usually audible on record. “My thinking has evolved to using more microphone, and pickup,” Gomez offers. “Lately I like my sound to be less trebly. I think back then it was a little too high-sounding for my taste. But it’s not so much that I’ve sat down and thought about it. At the end of the day, sound has to do with how you touch the instrument. It’s like the vocal sound that’s inside of you. It comes from within.”

On *The Sesjun Radio Shows*, the archival Bill Evans release, Gomez’s tone on the duo pieces is much more acoustic, which is to say more percussive. (There’s something about Evans’ “Twelve Tone Tune” that always seems to fire Gomez’s imagination.) On *Further Explorations*, with Corea and Motian, the bass sound is closer to *Sesjun* than to *Three Quartets*, even if the trio had no intention of recreating the Evans style.

Just a year and several months after the *Further Explorations* recording, Paul Motian died. Corea remembers Motian as “a walking, living, breathing work of art himself.” Gomez calls him “the navigator” and “guiding light” of those two weeks at the Blue Note: “What



▲ At top, Gomez with Bill Evans and Eliot Zigmund in 1975; below, images from the *Per Sempre* sessions in Italy, late 2009



might have been very special and beautiful, Paul took it way beyond that, into almost unclassifiable places. He was the force that took us there.” Save for a few brief turns sitting in at the Vanguard decades ago, Motian had never worked with Gomez, but their chemistry ended up being richly documented.

Thankfully, many came to recognize Motian’s legacy as a composer in the years prior to his death. His piece “Mode VI,” premiered by the Motian-Lovano-Frisell trio in 1991, appears on *Further Explorations* in a dark and entrancing version, with an otherworldly arco solo from Gomez

went out to L.A. for three days, we’d look at the music, play it a little bit and then turn the tape on,” Gomez recalls. “It was sort of like going out on a mission, like a SWAT team,” he adds with a laugh, “because it was fraught with the danger of playing this new music, which I think in a way was really cutting-edge.” *Three Quartets* would not have been the same without Gomez, who brought a thick, saturated, arguably quasi-electric sound to the date. His deft doubling of intricate lines, nuanced improvisation and all-around drive help make *Three Quartets* a standout in Corea’s oeuvre.

It might be misleading to speak of a change in Gomez’s sound since *Three Quartets*, a session where “a lot of engineering went on,” the bassist says. Certain characteristics remain: vibrato at the ends of phrases and a certain sponginess of timbre, not to mention Gomez’s

toward the end. “Paul had a lyrical sense,” Corea remarks, “and he wrote these lines and songs that were filled with holes—just real airy but with an emotion there. So what he did with those compositions was to invite what he loved, which was a lot of improvisation.” Gomez responds in precisely that spirit, filling out Corea’s harmonic threads, conversing with Motian’s abstruse rubato brushes and cymbals, never dictating the next move. It’s attuned listening like this that has endeared him to musicians across a broad spectrum.

Gomez isn’t one to shout his own career milestones from the rooftops, and his recognition as a bandleader is not what it could be. But the more one surveys his achievements and hears his tales, touching on facets of jazz history both celebrated and obscure, the more staggering it all seems. **JT**