

Bud Powell Then And Now
by Harvey Pekar and Dan Morgenstern
10/22/1964

Bud Powell Then...

By Harvey Pekar

Though few knowledgeable observers would deny that Bud Powell ranks as one of the greatest and most influential jazz pianists, only a fraction of his career and recorded output has been discussed intensively.

Powell's style has evolved in a manner unlike that of any other jazzman. Two giants contemporary with Powell, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie (who almost could be said to belong to the musical generation immediately preceding Powell), didn't alter their approaches significantly after about 1946. But a person comparing a Powell solo from that period with one recorded about a decade later would find it hard to believe that both were played by the same man.

The pianist's career can be seen in rather distinct periods.

During the first, which lasted from 1943 to about 1945, he played with trumpeter Cootie Williams, absorbing and synthesizing the approaches of various musicians.

The second, 1946 to 1953, found Powell at the top of his game, and on the basis of his work during this period, his reputation as one of the titans of modern jazz was established.

It is the period since 1954, during which Powell's work has been extremely inconsistent, his playing quality and style sometimes varying from record to record, that bears closer examination now. Many of these records have been dismissed by critics, but as a body of work, they constitute a fascinating and high-quality output. But to see them in proper light, one must consider what came before them.

Powell learned from several pre-bop pianists. Earl Hines was an influence, directly and/or through his disciples Billy Kyle and Nat Cole. The simple, repeated left-hand figure that Powell used to establish a groove was similar to one used by Cole, as were some of his left-hand voicings. Art Tatum also influenced Powell, particularly in his approach to ballads.

The mark of these swing-era pianists is evident in Powell's first record session with trumpeter Williams in January 1944. On *Sweet Lorraine* his solo is reminiscent of both Tatum and Hines. His spot on *My Old Flame* has an impressionistic quality. Throughout the record he plays Tatumish runs, using them as might an accompanist, to add lushness to the performance. On Frank Socolow's *Reverse the Charges*, also cut in the mid-'40s, he improvises in a Cole-out-of-Hines style.

Parker, however, had the greatest influence on Powell, who adapted some of the altoist's language for piano. Parker's stamp on Powell is apparent on the Williams' August 1944 recording of *Blue Garden Blues*. The pianist's spot is an example of almost fully evolved bebop.

During his stay with Williams, Powell's style was in transition, but by 1946 at the latest, it had crystallized, and he'd moved completely into the bopper's camp. He participated as a sideman on a number of all-star combo dates around this time, contributing excellent solos on *Royal Roost* (RCA), and *Boppin' A Riff*, *Fat Boy*, and *Webb City* (Savoy). Trumpeters Fats Navarro and Kenny Dorham and saxophonist Sonny Stitt were among those who played with Powell on records.

The melodic content of Powell's spots is meaty and his attack powerful. He constructs intelligently, building deliberately, swinging easily.

Also recommended is his work on J.J. Johnson's *Jay Bird*, *Coppin' the Bop*, and *Jay Jay* (Savoy).

Good as Powell was with combos featuring a horn front line, his greatest recorded achievements were to come as an unaccompanied soloist or leader of a trio. Featured this way, he had more room in which to stretch out and display his enormous gifts.

Easily one of his best albums is *The Genius of Bud Powell* (Verve). One side of the LP is devoted to Powell's playing his own compositions unaccompanied. These distinctive pieces include the beautiful *Parisienne Thorofare*, which employs a scale in the A section; *Oblivion*, a graceful melody; the brooding *Dusk In Sandi*; and *Hallucinations* (also called *Budo*) and *The Fruit*, both of which convey a briskly cheerful feeling.

On the *Genius* album's other side—bassist Ray Brown and drummer Buddy Rich join the pianist on two selections—Powell's use of substitute chords on *Tea for Two* makes it his composition as much as Vincent Youmans'.

Aside from *Sandi*, where he is pensive, Powell displays fantastic drive. He double-times often, and some of the tempos aren't just fast—they're breakneck. Ideas pour from him in a torrent, and his solos have remarkable continuity. He generally uses his left hand often and effectively. Sometimes he employs the Nat Coleish repeated figures referred to earlier; on *The Last Time I Saw Paris* he employs stride figures humorously. He applies his left hand sparingly on much of *Just One of Those Things*, creating a sort of stop-time effect with it.

Bud Powell: Jazz Giant (Verve) is another incredible LP containing a number of up-tempo masterpieces: *Tempus Fugue-It*, *Cherokee*, *All God's Chillun Got Rhythm*, *Get Happy*, and *Sweet Georgia Brown*. Here again Powell exhibits great inventiveness, playing long, rich lines. His improvisation on the medium-tempo tunes *Celia*, *Strictly Confidential*, *Sometimes I'm Happy*, and *So Sorry Please* is many-noted but lyrical and well paced.

His ballad work on *Yesterdays* and *April in Paris* exhibits more than a touch of Tatum. He plays near the melody, ornamenting it and filling some of the rests with tricky runs. On the surface, his playing seems to be superior cocktail piano, but it is much more. What cocktail pianist could conceive harmonies as rich or as fresh as Powell's, or who could alter a theme as intelligently? Powell's ornamentation of the melody is done tastefully; sometimes it may be rather delicate, but it isn't overfrilly or exhibitionistic.

Powell's treatment of *Body and Soul* is somewhat different. He strays farther from the melody, improvising delicate lines. Whether he plays the piano heavily or caresses it, he achieves a full, lovely sonority.

Perhaps the most celebrated Powell LPs have been *The Amazing Bud Powell, Volumes I and II* (Blue Note), made in three sessions from 1949 to 1953. On most tracks he performs with bass and drums. Among the selections are three takes of *Un Poco Loco*, a striking theme reflecting an Afro-Latin influence. Powell's playing here is passionate but not well sustained; in general, his phrases are shorter than usual. He uses call-and-response patterns and a rumbling bass line.

Powell improvises very well on the moderate-tempo numbers, particularly *A Night in Tunisia* and *Ornithology*.

His debt to Tatum is again evident on the ballads. Notable are two versions of *It Could Happen to You* and *Over The Rainbow*. On the master of *Happen*, included in the Blue Note 1504 collection, he rips off several electrifying double-time phrases that contrast sharply and effectively with the otherwise reflective tone of performance. *Rainbow* abounds with brilliant little single-note lines that fall between the main phrases of the melody.

Sure Thing and *Glass Enclosure* are unusual performances almost on the order of chamber music. On both, bassist George Duvivier figures in an important melodic role, not functioning solely as timekeeper. Some of the passages he and Powell play on *Sure Thing* are Bach-flavored.

Enclosure is an extended-form piece, remarkable because it contains so many mood changes in so short a time and yet makes sense as a whole.

During the late '40s and early '50s Powell cut some outstanding records with small groups that included horns. Among them are the four 1949 pieces on Blue Note: *Dance of the Infidels*, *52nd Street Theme*, *Wail*, and *Bouncing with Bud*. Powell is joined here by the then little-known tenor man, Sonny Rollins, and by trumpeter Fats Navarro, a man whose gifts equaled Powell's. All three improvise brilliantly, making these tracks indispensable to bop collectors.

In 1949 and 1950, Powell performed on some Sonny Stitt quartet sides (Presige). Most of them are taken at a brisk tempo, and the pianist, playing in a nonstop manner, eats up the changes. Nevertheless, his work is not as forceful as on the aforementioned Verves. One

of the main reasons is that his left hand isn't used as effectively—his comping is relatively sedate.

Powell joined Parker, Gillespie, drummer Max Roach, and bassist Charlie Mingus in 1953 for an all-star concert at Toronto's Massey Hall (now available on Fantasy). His playing here is first rate; he easily holds his own with Parker and Gillespie. In addition to his solos, his accompaniment on *All the Things You Are* is quite interesting. At some points he executes a walking pattern of lush chords, greatly enriching the harmonic texture of the performance.

Powell also was recorded leading a trio at Massey Hall. These performances, as well as several others from the same period, are collected on Fantasy. This LP would disgrace no pianist, but Powell's playing is somewhat less fluent and forceful than usual. In addition, there are several atypical tracks. On *Jubilee (Hallelujah)* some of his eight-note runs recall Teddy Wilson, as does his left-hand work, at times. On *I Want to Be Happy* his phrasing isn't as smooth as usual, and he tries some odd, Thelonius Monk types of intervals. This track hints at later developments in his approach, as does a 10-inch trio album, issued on Roost and dating from 1953. His theme statements on the Roost LP are, in general, more jarringly percussive than before. Discordance becomes an important element in his playing, and he shoots out double-time lines unpredictably.

In 1954 Powell's evolution underwent a wrenching change of direction. He had been beset by emotional problems and, in that year, his playing began to reflect the culmination of these problems, as the 10-inch LP "Norgran 23" illustrates. (From this point, all records discussed, with the exception of the Dizzy Gillespie LP, feature Powell with bass and drums.) It consists of five standards and two originals. Powell's work on the standards is tremendously intense; he plays near the themes, employing dissonant chords and a brutal touch.

On *Buttercup* some of his passages indicate that he'd listened to Lennie Tristano. His up-tempo improvisation on *Fantasy in Blue* is exciting but again, atypical; he plays rather light, upper-register runs and uses rests unpredictably

An album made in late 1954 and early '55 but titled *Bud Powell '57* (Verve) is mindful of the famous *Lover Man* session Charlie Parker made shortly before his breakdown and subsequent admission to Camarillo State Hospital. Not long before this LP was cut, Powell rehearsed at the apartment of a friend of critic Ira Gitler, and Gitler recalls that Powell was withdrawn and uncommunicative. This music certainly indicates that all was not well with the pianist.

It isn't enough to say that his lines are angular or jerky on tracks like *How High the Moon*, *Thou Swell*, and *Deep Night*—they are shattered to bits. There are weird, delayed endings to *Moon* and *Night*, but perhaps the strangest moments occur on *That Old Black Magic*. At one point Powell slows down the movement of chords as he savagely pounds the keyboard.

In the mid-'50s, Powell made two LPs that clearly indicated the eclectic, eccentric path his career was to follow.

On *The Lonely One* (Verve), Powell—previously an amazing facile technician—seems to have lost his dexterity. For example, he takes *Hey, George* (based on *Sweet Georgia Brown*) at a fairly fast clip, but not nearly as fast as on an earlier version of *Georgia Brown*. His lines aren't cleanly articulated nor is his attack particularly vigorous.

His solos have become more economical, and his lines are fragmented unpredictably. Thelonius Monk's influence is clear in his work here. Of course, both pianists were on the scene together in the '40s, but aside from some Monkish devices that had become common property (for example, the way Monk utilizes thirds), Powell derived little from his contemporary at that time. However, about 1955, Monk's ideas finally began to have an effect on other musicians, Powell among them. His brand is most visible here on *Mediocre*, a strange piece on which Powell uses a stride left hand.

On the album *Strictly Powell* (RCA) Powell's solos are cleaner. His accent shifting and use of triplets again recall Tristano. His playing is easygoing for the most part, though some of his ideas are quite intricate rhythmically. He builds and releases tension with skill, reaching climaxes subtly.

Among the better selections are *Coscrane*, *Topsy Turvy*, *There'll Never Be Another You*, *Jump City*, and *Blues For Bessie*. The last track is noteworthy because Powell's playing had never been particularly funky; yet on this slow, afterhours type of piece, he elicits an earthy quality reminiscent of the Parker blues classic *Parker's Mood*.

Two other interesting Powell albums of the mid-'50s are *Piano Interpretations* (Verve) and *Blues In The Closet* (Verve).

On the former, his playing is restrained. On the first tracks, *Ladybird* and *Bean and the Boys* he cooks tastefully and is reasonably inventive. *Stairway to the Stars* receives a lush treatment, but he improvises spare melodic lines on the chords of another ballad, *Willow, Weep For Me*.

Powell runs into technical trouble on *Blues in the Closet*. For instance, the breakneck tempo of *I Know That You Know* hangs him up badly. In spite of this, the LP has many imaginative passages, particularly on *Elogie*, *Woody'n You*, and *My Heart Stood Still*. Powell was obviously inspired when he made these tracks; if he had retained his former dexterity, there's no telling how good they might have been.

The pianist renewed his relationship with Blue Note records in the late '50s, making three more LPs there. The first, *The Amazing Bud Powell, Volume III*, is quite good. He hasn't recovered the steady sense of time, facility, or drive he had in 1950, and his left hand isn't what it used to be, but his imagination is still working. His lines are sometimes jagged, and he loads his solos with a rich flow of ideas.

Some of the devices he uses are surprising. On *Some Soul*, a blues, he omits part of a chorus, connecting it to the next one in such a way that the listener is uncertain where one ends and the next begins. He employs stride figures on *Idaho*. His *Bud On Bach* begins with a finger-popping part called *Solfeggietto*—which Powell says he played as a child—and moves into a swinging section; his subtlety in making the transition between selections is notable.

Time Waits (Blue Note) is one of Powell's worst efforts. His solos are clumsy and usually build very little. For those familiar with Powell's best work, listening to his anonymous Latin-tinged style on *Buster Rides Again* or his heavy-handed, cliché-ridden playing on the funky blues *Dry Soul* can be a painful experience.

The fifth Powell Blue Note offering, *The Scene Changes*, to be released (although it was cut shortly before *Time Waits*) is characterized by freshness. Powell's articulation is much cleaner here than on *Time Waits*, and he swings repeatedly. He uses long lines; his solos have a good continuity. It's a pleasure to hear him sailing along on *Cleopatra's Dream* or *Crossing the Channel*. These two tracks don't compare with his best up-tempo work but are still very good.

A point of interest on the later Blue Note albums is the two-hand unison playing that adds variety and color to Powell's work.

In 1959, Powell settled in Paris. Several examples of his work in Europe are available, including a trio performance, *In Paris* (Reprise). He is more technically assured on this record than he ordinarily was in the late '50s, if not dazzlingly fluent. He plays well on some tracks, i.e., *I Can't Get Started* and *Dear Old Stockholm*, but the album is one of his least interesting because of his conservatism. His ideas, while not clichés, are, nonetheless, commonplace, and he conveys little intensity. His albums of the late '50s may often have been marred by imprecise articulation, but they were also graced by unusual turns of phrase and unexpected intervals.

Powell's brief solos with Dizzy Gillespie and the Double Six of Paris (Philips) are reasonably clean and much more exciting than the ones on the Reprise LP. In fact, they have some of the heat and rhythmic litheness of his work of 12 or 15 years ago.

Perhaps Powell's playing here heralds the beginning of a great new period in his career. If he can get himself together again, we may not have heard anything yet.

...Bud Powell Now

By Dan Morgenstern

Bud Powell—Caught In The Act

Birdland, New York City

Personnel: Powell, piano; John Ore, bass; Horace Arnold or J.C. Moses, drums.

When Bud Powell mounted the bandstand at Birdland for his first appearance in his homeland in more than six years, the packed house gave him a standing ovation. It was a spontaneous and moving vote of confidence in a musician who has had more than his share of trouble and whose eagerly awaited return had been accompanied by persistent rumors that this once-great player was now just a shadow of his former self.

As soon as Powell sat down to play, however, it became apparent that the expression of faith was justified. For, while it would not be fair to Powell or his admirers to say that this was "the old Bud," there can be no doubt that the Bud Powell of 1964 is still a creative jazzman and pianist of the first rank. If the fire and abandon of youth are no longer, one now finds in their place a deliberate and lucid crystallization of the chief elements in the piano style that has been so enormously influential since the mid-'40s.

As might be expected from a man only recently recovered from a long and severe illness (tuberculosis), there were moments when fingers would not do the bidding the mind, but after two weeks of steady playing, these moments had been reduced to occasional missed notes in up-tempo runs. On opening night, it was evident that the trio (with Arnold on drums) had not rehearsed long. Nor was the support given by the sidemen really adequate, though bassist Ore, who worked with Powell some years ago, was steady and firm.

Nevertheless, from the opening *The Best Thing for Me Would Be You* (with a beautifully voiced block-chord ending) through a rhapsodic *Like Someone in Love* (with unaccompanied opening and closing choruses played in a suggestion of 3/4 time) to a delightful, romping *John's Abbey*, there were moments of inspired music-making.

Not the least moments were Powell's readings of two selections from the Thelonius Monk canon: Monk's own *Epistrophy* and Denzil Best's and Monk's *Bemsha Swing*. Powell was among Monk's earliest admirers, and no other pianist except Monk himself can get to the marrow of Monk's music like Powell. This would seem especially true today, since Powell's approach to tempo has become more deliberate. During his third week at Birdland, when Moses had taken over the drum chair, Powell played Monk's *I Mean You* in absolutely masterly fashion, his inventions bolstered by Moses' expert phrasing and time. Powell's sense of humor (like all great players, he has one) was evident here.

On his own originals, of which there seemed to be fewer than in earlier days, Powell displayed some of the fireworks of yore, particularly on several versions of *Collard Greens and Blackeyed Peas* (otherwise known as *Blue in the Closet*). The famous horn-like right hand came to the fore, as Powell would improvise a string of blues choruses with a melodic inventiveness and swing that proved him still master of the "Bud Powell school." *Oblivion* (which sounded much gayer than its title) and the aforementioned *John's Abbey* were the only other Powell compositions heard by this reviewer.

The pianist's repertory, as always, included a number of standards. The aforementioned *Someone* seemed to be a particular favorite, the pianist obviously relishing the rhapsodic

flourishes in the rubato solo passages. There also were a Latin-flavored *Old Black Magic*, a fast and very exciting *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, and a charming *I Hear Music*. A bouncy and easy-going *Just You, Just Me* and a fine-tempoed *Hot House* brought back nostalgic memories of the bebop days, with Powell's improvisations on the latter recalling Charlie Parker's in approach and feeling.

At times, the trio achieved real integration, with the proper emphasis on support for the pianist. But too far often the sidemen indulged in lengthy solos, which, no matter how interesting, only served to disrupt the continuity of a given piece. An occasional solo of two or three choruses from bass or drums ought to suffice to keep the players happy, though it must be said that Ore here revealed himself to be a much more adventurous and inventive soloist than indicated during his long tenure with Monk. One longed for the kind of empathy Max Roach and George Duvivier might have given Powell, who was a model of patience and endurance during his sidemen's solos.

Despite these drawbacks and an understandable unevenness of inspiration, it is a gratifying experience to hear Powell play. His mere presence testifies to the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and suffering, but he needs no excuses or apologies. The purity of his conception, the joy he still can find in making music, the unmistakable identity of those horn-like melodic lines and those characteristic minor sevenths, the logic, the clarity, and sheer musicality of his ideas—these speak for themselves, and with moving eloquence.