



My Top Favorite Jazz Piano Recordings

By Tom Larson

(In random order)

Miles Davis – *My Funny Valentine, Four and More* (Herbie Hancock)

These albums, recorded at the same concert in 1964, became a Bible for me, as Herbie Hancock gives a clinic in post-bebop soloing and comping. I transcribed most of these solos and learned a lot about what I know today from them. One of the best live jazz albums EVER.

Bill Evans – *Alone*

An underrated Evans album that shows off his considerable solo skills, and demonstrates ability to swing, reharmonize, play with great feel, and also in an orchestral rubato style.

Bill Evans – *Sunday at the Village Vanguard, Waltz for Debby*

Recorded at the last gig of Evans' legendary 1959 trio with Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian, these albums are "Desert Island" for any jazz pianist or fan of jazz piano.

Fred Hersch – *Dancing In the Dark*

This trio album is a thing of beauty. Fred Hersch is a wonderfully sensitive and lyrical player who plays in a very spontaneous fashion while never losing control of what he is doing. As a master at playing "across the bar line," Fred's solos are always interesting and surprising.

Return to Forever – *Light As a Feather*
Most jazz musicians can



point to one album that

turned their head around in their youth and made them want to be a jazz musician. This is mine. I didn't know exactly what these guys were doing when I first heard this – I just knew that I wanted to do it!

Bud Powell – Jazz Giant

Another must-have for any jazz pianist, Bud Powell's lines are always perfectly thought-out and executed. Modern jazz piano starts here.

Thelonious Monk – Alone in San Francisco

Recorded in 1959 at the height of Monk's career, this album displays his charming wit, impeccable rhythm, and gives some of the best examples of a few of his classic compositions.

Brad Mehldau – Art of the Trio Vol 1

This breakthrough LP won Mehldau a Grammy nomination and is the first of five in the Art of the Trio series. Mehldau is a stunningly creative and technically brilliant player who moves easily from simple lyricism to incredible complexity. His renditions of "Blame It On My Youth" and Paul McCartney's "Blackbird" are absolutely beautiful.

Keith Jarrett – Bye Bye Blackbird

Any one of Jarrett's trio recordings are textbooks in how a modern piano trio should sound; this just happens to be the one that got to me.

Weather Report – Heavy Weather (Josef Zawinul)

Another must-have album for every jazz musician's library. Joe Zawinul commands a virtual electronic big band of synthesizers and keyboards, and throws in a number of often-eclectic solos that captured the essence of 1970s fusion.



Miles Davis – *Kind of Blue* (Bill Evans, Wynton Kelly)

Of course, every jazz player or fan should have this album, but pianists are especially lucky that one of the greatest jazz LPs of all time has two masters at the keyboard. Although Evans does the majority of the work here, Wynton Kelly was one of the heavyweights of the hard bop era, and his solo on “Freddie Freeloader” is a must transcription for any jazz piano student.

Kenny Werner – *Live at Maybeck Recital Hall*

Kenny Werner outlines in his book *Effortless Mastery* how jazz musicians need to get into the moment and learn to shed their inhibitions. This live concert recording shows Werner doing just that. He told me personally that the opening cut “Roberta Moon” (dedicated to his mother-in-law), was composed spontaneously as he was performing it. It’s an amazing piece to listen to, as is “Guru.”

Lennie Tristano – *The New Tristano*

Tristano was inspirational to many musicians, including Bill Evans and even Frank Zappa. He had an amazing technique that resulted in long solo lines, and a deep mind that allowed him to get into complex reharmonizations.

Clare Fischer – *Just Me*

Clare Fischer. Great. Solo. Piano.

Bruce Barth – *East and West*

Bruce Barth is an underrated NYC pianist with a stellar resume of being an in-demand session player. His influences include Monk, Roland Hanna, Herbie Hancock, and Bud Powell. On this record he shows off his considerable skills as a soloist, supporting voice, and most importantly, as a composer.



Vijay Iyer – *Historicity*

Iyer is among the new breed of jazz pianists who is not afraid to grab inspiration from any source. On this album he covers songs by Andrew Hill, MIA, Stevie Wonder, and Leonard Bernstein, among others.

Cassandra Wilson – *Blue Skies* (Mulgrew Miller)

Any recording with either Cassandra Wilson or Mulgrew Miller is a treat, so this is an extra special one. Wilson gives Miller plenty of room to show off his Oscar Peterson-influenced soulfulness and technique, but I particularly like the tender moments, like “Sweet Lorraine.”

Stuff – *Stuff* (Richard Tee)

Richard Tee was a gospel master who moved into the limelight with this star-studded group in the 1970s. On this album you’ll hear him flawlessly integrate the church, rock, jazz, and soul.

Herbie Hancock – *Secrets*

One of Herbie’s overlooked gems from the 1970s, recorded with his “Headhunters” band. Check out his reworking of “Cantaloupe Island,” and the seductive groove of “People Music.”

Miles Davis Quintet – *Cookin’ with, Steamin’ with, Relaxin’ with, Workin’ with* (Red Garland)

These four albums, recorded in just two days in 1956, are quite simply four of the most exquisite jazz albums ever made. You want to learn how to comp, interact, play great solos that are lyrical, well phrased, and funky all at once? Listen to the master, Red Garland on any one (or better yet – all four) of these albums

