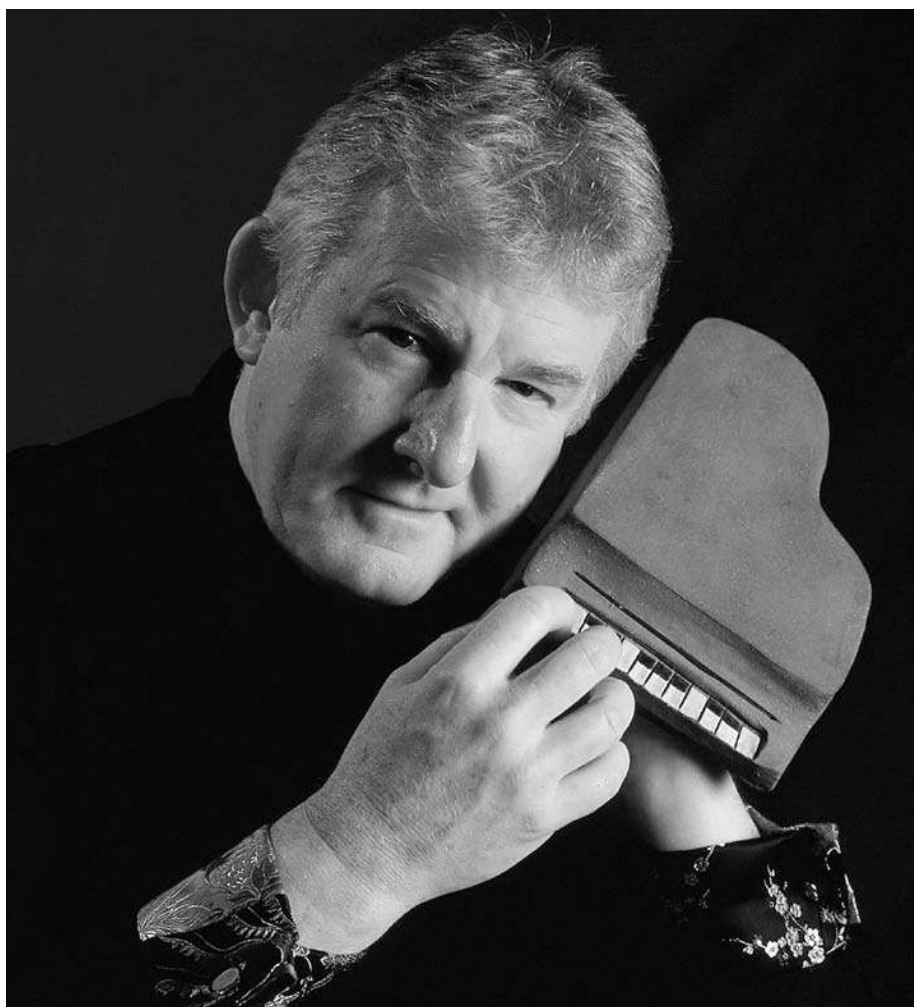


Mays ways

Working with leading West Coasters in the 60s, moving into the Hollywood studios and, the last 25 years, playing jazz on the East Coast – that's the story of pianist and arranger **BILL MAYS**, as told to Mark Gardner



The career of pianist Bill Mays has been divided into two distinct phases. For 15 years he was a busy studio musician in Hollywood; during the past 25 years he has been based on the East Coast, playing jazz exclusively. But even in the Los Angeles years he always found time to pursue his jazz interest during the evenings.

Born in Sacramento, California, on 5 February 1944, Bill started on piano at the age of five, switched to trumpet and baritone horn at 12 before returning to the keyboard during a stint with the US Navy band (1957-61). Subsequently, he played with a host of star names including Art Pepper, Bud Shank, Shelly Manne, Gerry Mulligan, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis, Al Cohn/Clark Terry, Teddy Edwards, Red Holloway and Benny Golson.

He has made more than 20 albums under his own name, and leads the Inventions Trio with the unusual instrumentation of trum-

pet, flute and piano. He appears on film in eight video/DVD productions with Sarah Vaughan, Gerry Mulligan, Mel Torme and Freddie Hubbard among others, and in his own live trio set, recorded by WVIA-TV. An accomplished stylist with a wealth of experience, Mays has also emerged as an excellent composer and arranger.

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'My mom sang and dad played the valve trombone. They were most encouraging of my early piano lessons, and got me very good childhood teachers. I'm most indebted to one in particular, Ethel Bush, for instilling a love of being at the piano. I started on piano, but later played trumpet and baritone horn for two or three years in junior high school.

'I heard no jazz until I was aged 15. That was an Earl Hines concert, solo on an old spinet

piano. His use of the whole keyboard, orchestral sense and effervescent spirit made a lasting impression. That same year I heard Miles Davis at the Blackhawk in San Francisco. Shortly thereafter I heard an LP by Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse All Stars that deeply impressed me, both for the arranging as well as the playing – it was my first introduction to Bud Shank, with whom I would collaborate many times decades later.

'At 17 I joined the navy as a musician and continued to teach myself, mainly through recordings and playing with other navy musicians. During that period I listened a lot to Horace Silver, McCoy Tyner, Bill Evans, Paul Desmond and Dave Brubeck. Don Shirley and Mike Wofford were also an influence. Later, Jimmy Rowles, Tommy Flanagan, Bud Powell, Hank Jones, Sonny Clark, the big bands of Basie and then Thad Jones-Mel Lewis, with whom I would later play in New York, all made an impact on me. I enjoyed a good 10 months of schooling in music (theory and harmony) and also gained early arranging experience.

'Work during my early days in Los Angeles was with Buddy Collette, Bobby Shew, Bud Shank, Shelly Manne and, in 1972-73, Sarah Vaughan. In fact with Sarah we played England once – a series of shows that the great Robert Farnon – another important arranging influence – arranged at the Talk of the Town. Tony Bennett was also on those shows. It was many years later that I again visited England with Gerry Mulligan's Quartet. I worked with Gerry for about six years in the 1980s and 90s. After that I worked in England under my own name with dates at Pizza Express in Dean Street, the Concorde Club and also played Peterborough and Chelmsford.

'I found that working with singers, especially my time with Sarah Vaughan, was most rewarding. I enjoyed short gigs with Irene Kral, Anita O'Day and Peggy Lee. I also did many concerts with Al Jarreau in my LA days. Later I played New York dates with Frank Sinatra, and made several recordings with Mark Murphy. I produced, arranged and played on Mark's 'Bop For Kerouac', 'Beauty And The Beast' and 'Kerouac Then And Now'.

'The Los Angeles studio years were quite enjoyable most of the time. A typical busy day might start with a three-hour TV show session at Universal, followed by a 50-minute commercial jingle recording, then a five-hour movie session at MGM. Some of the writers I most enjoyed working for were John Williams, Henry Mancini, Lalo Schifrin, Stu Phillips, Bruce Broughton, Peter Matz, Jack Elliott, Allyn Ferguson and Marty Paich.

'Strangely, the first time I met and played with J.J. Johnson and Benny Golson was in the TV studios. I later went on to record two LPs with Golson, right at the time he came out of "playing retirement" and took up the