



Bill Charlap
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CAREER BIO

For more than a decade, pianist/bandleader Bill Charlap has been forging a solo career characterized by hard-swinging brio, eloquence and a rigor-meets-romance musical sensibility. With his fine long-term working trio of bassist Peter Washington and drummer Kenny Washington, he has released four superb albums for Blue Note Records—CDs celebrating the American songbook tradition, the songs of Hoagy Carmichael, Leonard Bernstein, and George Gershwin—that have afforded him an increased visibility as one of jazz’s foremost pianists.

Unlike most artists who can trace their first explorations on a musical instrument to a certain age, the New York-born and bred Charlap says he can’t recall a time when he wasn’t playing a piano. The son of two accomplished artists, he grew up immersed in a household of song. “My relationship with music occurred naturally,” says Charlap, whose father, Broadway composer and songwriter Moose Charlap, and mother, cabaret/pop singer Sandy Stewart, entertained popular songwriters and musicians from the show world at their Upper East Side home. His father, who passed when his son was 7, wrote the score to *Peter Pan* (starring Mary Martin), as well as such musical theater performances as *The Conquering Hero*, *Whoop-up*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *Kelly*. Stewart sang with Benny Goodman, co-starred on TV’s *Perry Como Show* and scored a Grammy nomination for her hit single, “My Coloring Book” by the songwriting team of Kander and Ebb.

Charlap says that his mother’s singing has influenced him: “Her phrasing influences the way I play melody. In many ways I approach the song from a singer’s perspective, music and lyrics are of equal importance.” Mother and son often perform together. In 2004, they were honored with a top jazz duo Bistro Award for their engagement at the Algonquin in New York. The first recorded collaboration bows on Blue Note in the fall of 2005—a piano/voice duo session titled *Love Is Here To Stay*. The cd follows hot on the heels of his acclaimed tribute to the music of America’s greatest songwriters, *Bill Charlap Plays George Gershwin: The American Souí*. The Gershwin session finds Charlap arranging for horns for the first time and features a stellar ensemble. In addition to his regular rhythm cohorts, the horn session is made up of jazz legends Phil Woods, Frank Wess, and Slide Hampton as well as the incandescent trumpet of Nicholas Payton.

“My parents were both listeners to all the classic jazz singers and Broadway show music,” says Charlap. “My father was always on some deadline for composing songs

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and my mother often did the demo work for him. All sorts of musicians and songwriters and lyricists visited my house. There was always something going on."

Charlap attended the New York's High School for the Performing Arts. During that time he studied privately with jazz pianist Jack Reilly. Charlap also studied informally with the esteemed jazz pianist Dick Hyman, a distant cousin on his father's side. "He was an important influence," Charlap says. "I just hung around with him when he was working on a film score, doing a record date, performing a solo recital, rehearsing with vocalists or playing for choreographer Twyla Tharp. It wasn't a formal education. I just sat quietly and watched him do everything—and he did many things. He's such a master musician. We even sat down at two pianos and played together. He just shared what he was thinking when he played."

After attending SUNY-Purchase for two years, Charlap gave up formal studies in lieu of pursuing a career in jazz. "I found studying chamber music and vocal accompaniment valuable, but I didn't have enough time to study people like Bud Powell. So I dropped out to study harder."

Charlap then moved into a fifth-floor walk-up studio apartment, outfitted it with a rented Steinway grand piano, soundproofed the room and set out to woodshed for hours every day. "At night, I'd go out and see pianists such as Tommy Flanagan and Kenny Barron perform at places like Bradley's." At the same time, Charlap studied privately with concert pianist Eleanor Hancock.

In the late '80s at an Upper West Side street fair, Charlap introduced himself to pianist Bill Mays who was strolling down the street. Mays was performing in baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan's band at the time. "Bill invited me to his apartment where he had two pianos set up," Charlap recalls. "We played songs together, stuff like Horace Silver material. He became a good friend. One day he told me he was getting ready to leave Gerry's quartet and thought I should audition. I wasn't sure I was ready, but I went anyway and Gerry and I hit it off immediately." That jettisoned Charlap onto the world jazz circuit.

He continued to gig at home when he wasn't on the road. He worked with his own trio as well as a band of peers called Square Root (with saxophonist Allen Mezquida, bassist Sean Smith and drummer Leon Parker) and as an accompanist with such singers as Carole Sloane, Sheila Jordan and his mom. After he left Mulligan's employ, Charlap was chosen to be the musical director of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, A Celebration of Johnny Mercer* as a part of the JVC Jazz Festival in New York and later took the revue on the road. In 1995, he was invited to join the Phil Woods Quintet, a gig he continues to work in.

Charlap says, "I first heard that group when I was in high school—they'd been together since I was eight years old and had rarely changed any personnel—so you can imagine what a thrill it was to play with them. I learned so much about jazz and improvisation from Phil Woods." He adds, "It was the same with Gerry. He was a profound writer, arranger and musical thinker. I've learned from everybody I've worked with, especially Benny Carter, Clark Terry, Jim Hall, Frank Wess, Wynton Marsalis, and Tony Bennett."

After several early recordings, 1997's *All Through the Night* on Criss Cross Jazz Records marked the first collaboration with rhythm team of drummer Kenny Washington & bassist Peter Washington (no relation). "The first time we played, there was natural connection." Charlap adds, "I dislike it when people describe Peter and Kenny as 'accompanying' me, because it's really more of a three-way partnership. In a sense, we're all accompanying each other, we're partners."

After Blue Note President Bruce Lundvall caught Charlap performing at Joe's Pub in New York, he signed the pianist to the label. His Blue Note debut was 2000's *Written in the Stars*, a collection of Great American Songbook standards given a fresh jazz treatment. Charlap brought his own personality to the songs while also managing to render them with respect to the composer's original intent. Charlap followed his successful Blue Note premiere with 2002's *Stardust*, an album that celebrates the songs of Hoagy Carmichael. Guest performers included vocalists Tony Bennett and Shirley Horn, guitarist Jim Hall and saxophonist Frank Wess.

2004's *Somewhere* paid homage to the songs of Leonard Bernstein, the legendary conductor, composer and pianist who bridged the worlds of classical and popular music, and the album also earned Charlap a Grammy Award nomination for Best Jazz Instrumental Album. Charlap says, "Bernstein represents the theater, the classical establishment, America, and—more than anything else—New York." He adds, "His music speaks to me and to my generation because it was a part of our childhood...When you deal with Bernstein, you touch something that we have all grown up with. It's very powerful."

In addition to his two Blue Note releases in 1995, Charlap has also been named successor to Dick Hyman as Artistic Director of the long-running *Jazz In July* series at the 92nd St. Y's Tisch Center for the Arts in New York City. Bill's pianistic talents are much in demand. Aside from regular sessions friends Phil Woods, Harry Allen and Warren Vache, Bill has recorded and/or performed recently with Marian McPartland, Steely Dan, Tim Ries & The Stones Project, Paula West and Scott Hamilton. Of special interest, Bill plays on four tracks of a forthcoming Blue Note tribute to Billy Strayhorn including a version of "Bloodcount" in trio with Elvis Costello and label-mate Joe Lovano.

Regarding his tenure on Blue Note, Charlap says, "The label substantiates me. It's a great place to be in terms of allowing me to explore my musical expression."