

## Celebrating the boss of big-band jazz that is Gil Evans

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Parents can say the darndest things.

Take Margaret Julia McConnachy, whose only child, Gilmore Ian Ernest Green, was born May 13, 1912, in Toronto. She liked to tell her young son that the reason he'd never met his biological father was because he'd died before Gil was born. Seems dad had been a doctor in Toronto, perhaps at the hospital where Gil was born, perhaps not, but no matter: The hospital had burned down. On other occasions, the birth story would get more fantastic: McConnachy would say Gil, born to her in her late 40s, had been a kind of cosmic gift, found by her "on a beach where he'd fallen from a star."

Gil would later tell a biographer he pretty much accepted these yarns as gospel until around the age of 11. By then he was calling himself Gil Evans, after his stepfather John A. Evans, a peripatetic Canadian miner whom McConnachy had taken as her fifth (and last) husband, and with whom she and Gil travelled around Ontario, Saskatchewan, B.C., Washington, Idaho and Montana from one job to the next. Both the wandering and the marriage finally ended in the late-1920s in Stockton, Calif., population 20,000. There, in high school, Evans developed the preoccupation with music that, before his death in 1988, would result in such legendary collaborations with Miles Davis as *Porgy and Bess* and *Sketches of Spain*, friendships with the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Sting, and fame as one of the greatest orchestrators and bandleaders in jazz history, bested perhaps only by Duke Ellington.

Ryan Truesdell confesses that he "loves that story about Gil's birth." Speaking on the phone from Manhattan, his home since 2006, he says he finds it "so great, so ... hazy."

But then, at 35, Truesdell seems to love pretty much everything about Gil. A bandleader/arranger /composer himself, trained at the New England Conservatory, Truesdell in 2012 released *Centennial: Newly Discovered Works of Gil Evans*, a Grammy-winning, 10-track album of (mostly) previously unrecorded arrangements and compositions, the oldest dating to 1946, the newest to 1971. No less than 35 top-tier New York-based musicians were involved in that recording in the fall of 2011. The following May, many of them were onstage with Truesdell at New York's Jazz Standard club to celebrate the CD's debut and to inaugurate what has since become an annual tradition – a weeklong live engagement at the Standard under the rubric The Gil Evans Project.

A second Project disc, *Lines of Color*, recorded during last year's stand at the Standard, has just been released, and on March 28, a 21-piece iteration of Truesdell's band, including vocalist Wendy Gilles, will be playing selections from it and other impeccably executed Evans arrangements and compositions at Koerner Hall in Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music.

Truesdell has been immersed in the Evans oeuvre for the past several years, having been granted complete access to Evans's manuscripts by Gil's widow, Anita, and their two sons. He's also been in touch with some of the musicians who worked with Evans, or their children, to see what they have. The result has been a discovery and a recovery of works hitherto unknown or believed to have been lost. Today, Truesdell estimates his Evans project includes some 250 charts. (As these treasures piled up, Evans' own former copyist [and now esteemed band leader in her own right] Maria Schneider encouraged Truesdell, whom she'd used as a copyist and an album producer, to get crowd-source funding for what became the *Centennial* recording.)

Truesdell first encountered Evans in the late 1990s while flipping through the jazz racks in a Barnes and Noble in his hometown, Madison, Wis. He'd been turned on to jazz by his high school saxophone instructor, and at this time was passionate for anything and everything by the altoist Julian (Cannonball) Adderley. Coming upon the CD *Porgy and Bess*, Miles Davis's classic 1959 team-up with the Gil Evans Orchestra, he duly noted Adderley's name among the contributing musicians.

"So I got that and when I took it home to put it on, I was totally blown away with the sound I was hearing," Truesdell recalls. "I was listening to a lot of big bands and playing in big bands, but I'd never heard anything quite like that. So I listened to the whole record and it didn't dawn on me until after I heard the whole thing that I hadn't really heard Cannonball solo at all, the whole reason why I'd bought the record." The next day he was back at the store snapping up as many Davis/Evans collaborations as he could find. This was followed by a hunt for Evans solo excursions such as *Out of the Cool* (1961) and *The Individualism of Gil Evans* (1964).

What drew Truesdell to the former Canadian was what continues to earn Evans listeners – the unusual use (for contemporary jazz at least) of French horn, flute, harp and piccolo, the close chord voicings, the harmonic shiftiness, the timbres you get by pitting, say, high reeds against low brass, his dab hand with what Jelly Roll Morton famously called "the Latin tinge." And arrangements could be big-band bold one moment, slinky as "fog coming on little cat feet" the next. Largely self-taught, Evans just had the knack for "elevating accompaniment to the level of environment," former Globe and Mail jazz critic Mark Miller once observed.

Truesdell says he originally expected to devote maybe "a couple of years of my life to Gil, because I thought it was important. I mean, 2012 was the 100th anniversary of his birth and there seemed to be a resurgence of interest in him and his music. I figured I'd just do a record and maybe a few performances. Then all of a sudden, people seemed to like it."

As a result, Truesdell put on hold plans to record his own music. He hopes to begin to rectify the matter this summer by spending a lot of time writing new pieces. Yet he's unsure if this work will be cast for a large ensemble. "I'm not keen on writing for five saxophones, four trombones, whatever, but I have this problem where I love colour, this palette of sound," he says. "So I kinda want a ton of instruments even as I know I have to make the project practical. I guess what I'd like to have is a pseudo-Gil Evans kind of instrumentation ensemble."

Meanwhile, fans of his work on the Evans repertoire need not fear that that well is anywhere close to running dry. For last year's Gil Evans showcase alone, Truesdell and *Lines of Color* co-producer Dave Rivello recorded 30 or so tunes above and beyond the 11 that found a home on *Lines of Color* – enough, in short, for another CD or two should demand warrant.

He notes, too, that later this year he's likely going to be working as the producer and conductor of

a recording of work by a so-far unnamed “other prominent jazz musician.” Is Truesdell worried that he’ll be identified as a repertory guy mining the glories of jazz past rather than a so-called original artist?

“I guess technically the Gil band is a repertory band,” he replies. “But I don’t really look at it like that – my goal is not to play these charts exactly as Gil would have done in 1947.”

In fact, he says, laughing, if Evans were still alive, he’d likely be working with rappers, maybe even with – holy Tony Bennett! – Lady Gaga. “I’m looking at doing this as Gil would be doing it in the present day.” he adds. “He’d hire modern musicians, and he would want the charts to be a little bit modern.”

“I can’t really say what will happen if the public pegs me as a repertory musician once I start doing my own music; I don’t have much control over that,” he says. “People at this point likely do see me as a repertory artist, because that’s mostly what I’m known for. But I just turned 35; I like to think there’s time. Who knows what’ll happen? Maybe I’ll be known forever as ‘the Gil Evans guy.’ I guess as long as people are saying my name, it’s not a bad thing.”

*Ryan Truesdell/Gil Evans Project plays Koerner Hall at Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music  
Mar. 28, starting at 8 p.m.*

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