

Bill O'Connell Biography

Bill O'Connell is a living example of what can happen when the old axiom "Good things come to those who wait" is put to the test. His professional career spans almost half a century and has earned him widespread acclaim for his virtuosic skills as an attention-grabbing keyboardist, composer, arranger, and bandleader. Over the decades, the multi-talented musician has produced countless demonstrations of his myriad talents.

On four separate occasions he has been honored by receipt of the coveted "Jazz Writer of the Year" award from SESAC (Society of European Stage Authors and Composers), a performing rights organization. In the fall of 2022 O'Connell received a Grammy nomination for Best Instrumental Arrangement for his clever retooling of the novelty piece "Chopsticks" as a Latin jazz infused romp for drummer Richard Baratta's album "The Reel Deal" (Savant). "It was very unexpected," O'Connell commented at the time, "but a very nice surprise!"

Lauded by *Downbeat Magazine* as "an inspired hybridizer of modernist jazz and Afrodiasporic idioms as an improviser and composer," O'Connell was born in New York City on August 22, 1953. Initially his focus as a fledgling piano student was on the established classical repertoire. He studied at Oberlin Conservatory of Music which served his initial goal of becoming a classical composer. But discovering jazz radically changed his career path. "Jazz combined the sophistication I was looking for in music with the earthy quality and the swing," he told *Downbeat* in a 2022 interview.

It wasn't long before both leading critics and jazz aficionados began to recognize O'Connell's distinctive keyboard personality. "The range of his artistic spectrum seems limitless," declared George Carroll in his review of *Latin Jazz Fantasy* (Random Chance), a groundbreaking 2004 recording that showcased O'Connell's writing and arranging for a string ensemble. "I suggest that my readers will be moved by this colossus of musical dignity and improvisational authority," Carroll surmised. Alex Henderson, writing for *AllMusic.com*, stated that "As a pianist he is known for a lyrical approach that owes something to Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans and Chick Corea, as well as Herbie Hancock."

O'Connell's debut recording as a leader was *Searching*, a trio date for Inner City Records in 1978. Over the following four decades, he would record 18 other sessions as a leader, highlighting his stylistic versatility on releases that include solo, duo, and trio formats and a bevy of sessions featuring various incarnations of his Latin Jazz All-Stars ensemble. Over the years he chalked up sideman roles with a stylistically eclectic group of major artists, from Astrud Gilberto, Sonny Rollins, and Chet Baker to John Lucien, Neanna Freelon, and Gato Barbieri.

Although he is commanding in any setting, from blues and ballads to bebop, bossa, and the free-flirting fare he explores on several tracks on his latest release, *Live in Montauk* (Savant), it's widely recognized that O'Connell's most influential work has been in the expansive idiom of Latin jazz styles.

His initiation into the fertile alternative universe that Latin jazz represents came when he was tapped in 1977 to join Cuban conga player Mongo Santamaria's popular group as keyboardist and de-facto music director. Working with the legendary *conguero* for two years afforded the young pianist the opportunity to hone the three skills he would emphasize throughout his career – composing, arranging, and playing. His time with Santamaria also resulted in the pianist's key participation on two trendsetting albums for the Vaya label, *Amanecer* and *Mongo ala Carte*.

“Not being a Latino, I came to the music from a humble place and with respect,” O’Connell states. “Most of my contemporaries didn’t go down this path,” he reflects, commenting on his experience with Santamaria and, in following decades, many other Latin jazz music greats. “But I saw the beauty in this music, and it touched me on both an emotional *and* intellectual level.”

After his stint with Santamaria, O’Connell embraced his next artistic challenge as keyboardist and music director for flutist Dave Valentín, one of the most popular Latin jazz artists of his time. O’Connell served in this privileged role for close to three decades, right up to the time of Valentín’s passing in 2017.

Other opportunities to cement his credentials as a master of Latin jazz idioms included performances with The Fort Apache Band, a fabled group fronted by trumpeter and percussionist Jerry Gonzalez noted for its progressive approach to the genre. O’Connell also served as an indispensable contributor on several of trombonist Conrad Herwig’s visionary *The Latin Side Of* series recordings – projects designed to explore the Latin leanings of such notable jazz composers as Horace Silver, Charles Mingus, and Joe Henderson.

One constant in O’Connell’s career has been the respect he has garnered from fellow musicians and music critics. Longtime *compadre* Dave Valentín pointed out that he had never seen his friend take a bad solo. “He’s also a wonderful comper,” the late flutist pointed out, taking note of the essential role rhythmically intense comping demands of keyboardists performing Latin music. “Some pianists are good in one area but weak in the other. Bill is a master of both.”

Writing in *JAZZIZ Magazine* for a review of O’Connell’s Savant release *Triple Play* Chris Heim observed that “The skill and chemistry of the players and the many small pleasures in arrangement and execution add up to a surprising high-scoring set.” Reflecting on the pleasures of the musician’s efforts on *Zócalo*, another date for the Savant label that featured O’Connell’s Latin Jazz All-Stars, critic Josef Woodard was impressed by the session’s “harmonic and rhythmic shifts [that] meet restless idiomatic moves, but in the most natural, vibrant and musically truthful way.”

For his part, O’Connell remains true to the simple philosophy that has shaped his artistic vision throughout his long career. “I want to give the listener something to think about,” he comments, adding “and, perhaps, to expand the horizons of Latin jazz.”