





Bench Marks

Bill Charlap makes his living at a piano, but his career never stops moving

BY JOEL KELLER

Photos by Gregory Pallante

Ask Bill Charlap if there was any time during his professional career when he thought he wasn't going to make it, and he'll flat out tell you "no." Not that he thought he was going to be a major-label success or that he'd have the opportunity to play with his musical heroes; he just never had any thought of doing anything else but play piano for a living.

"I don't mean to sound melodramatic about it, but I think that to be a professional musician is strictly for those who do not have a choice," he says as he sips from a cup of double espresso. He is sitting on a public bench next to the Summit Train Station enjoying his drink from the local Starbucks. "If you're thinking, 'Well, maybe I'll be a dentist or maybe I'll be a musician,' you should be a dentist. Because [being a musician is] for those who don't have a choice. That's what you do."

For someone who supposedly didn't have a choice, though, there are few who can consider themselves more successful than Charlap. The 40-year-old jazz artist has been a professional musician for more than a quarter of a century, and during his long career he has played with the likes of Tony Bennett, Wynton Marsalis, Phil Woods, Gerry Mulligan and other jazz greats. On his own, he's released albums exploring the

AT THE PIANO Bill Charlap before a concert in The Algonquin Hotel's famed Oak Room.



works of Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin and many of his favorite composers of pop and jazz standards.

Charlap has also performed with his mother, singer Sandy Stewart. On their 2005 CD, *Love Is Here to Stay*, Charlap and Stewart show a warmth that can only seem to emanate between a mother and her son, a notion that was not lost on the Summit resident. "There's no voice quite like your mother's voice, whether your mother is a professional singer or not," he says. "I imagine there must be something psychically that is happening to me [while] hearing my mother's voice and playing with her. There's a shadowing of each other. It's in the DNA."

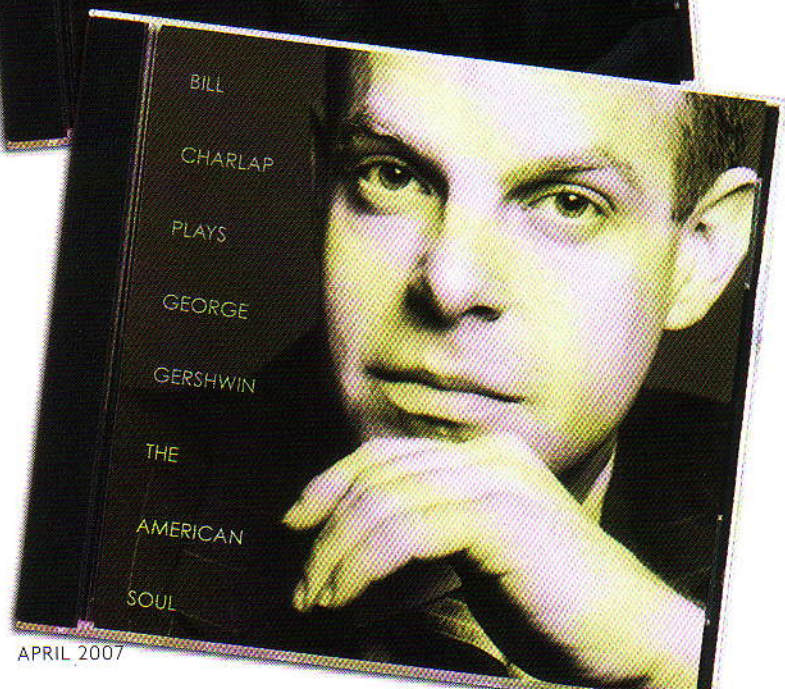
Music is definitely in the Charlap family DNA. Stewart's singing career spans more than 40 years; she performed with Benny Goodman's band, was a singer on *The Perry Como Show* and was nominated for a Grammy in 1965 for her rendition of "My Picture Book." Bill's father, Moose Charlap, composed scores for Broadway musicals, including *Peter Pan* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

Growing up in New York City, Charlap was surrounded by music, and he took to the piano quickly – "I don't ever remember a time that I didn't play the piano" is how he puts it – in an effort to emulate his father.

Moose Charlap died when Bill was seven, sending his mother out to sing for their supper. This only strengthened Bill's love of music, since she would collaborate with composers like the award-winning team of Alan and Marilyn Bergman and musicians like pianist Dick Hyman, who also happened to be a distant cousin of his dad's.

Charlap's first professional job was at 13, playing "silent movie pianist," as he calls it, for a comedy improv troupe in New York. He even played on a family album with his mother, stepfather (trumpeter Tom Triffon) and brother (bassist Tom Charlap) while he was still in college.

So it's understandable that he looks to composers of an earlier era for inspiration. He feels the great pop composers of the early 20th century – the Gershwins, Porters, Berlins and Kerns – were able to write "blueprints" for their songs that allowed for interpretation. This is something that he doesn't see with contemporary composers and songwriters such as Stevie Wonder, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, all of whom he holds in high regard. "I think the trick is, can we find a way to play one of their songs





THREE FOR THE ROAD Charlap with his trio members, Peter Washington, standing, and Kenny Washington.

that is equal to or better [than their own version]? I think it's really hard to do that when you have a complete finished product in terms of arranging, performance and recording," he says.

Charlap has been doing his part to interpret the greats. He's been recording CDs for more than a decade, signing onto the legendary Blue Note label in 2000. Aside from his recent project with his mother, he assembled a band of noted jazz musicians – bassist Peter Washington and drummer Kenny Washington (no relation), saxophonist Phil Woods and trombonist Slide Hampton, among others

– on the CD *Bill Charlap Plays George Gershwin – The American Soul*. He also backed longtime friend Tony Bennett, playing piano on the crooner's signature song, "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," for Bennett's *Duets* CD and television special, something Charlap felt "very honored" to do.

The start of 2007 was equally eventful. This past winter, he recorded a new CD with the Phil Woods Quintet, with whom he's toured and recorded for almost a decade, and a CD with the Bill Charlap Trio (himself and the two Washingtons) of songs from what he calls "great

American composers."

Charlap has lived in Summit for three years to stay close to his daughters Sophie, 9, and Vivian, 7. He'll be getting married for the second time in August, to Renee Rosnes, another noted jazz pianist, and plans on recording an album with her sometime this year.

As to what the distant future holds? Well, it all goes back to Charlap's confidence. "I didn't know what level of success [the trio] might have. And I don't know what level of success I'll have tomorrow, either. But I know I'm not going to stop playing." ■