

## Bill Anschell: The hardest-working piano man in Seattle

By Hugo Kugiyu  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

Pianist Bill Anschell took on a unique challenge recently: some pro bono work arranging a song for a statewide music competition.

Why was this a challenge for the prolific and reliable arranger? Anschell's sixth-grade son wrote the song, and the band was his son's elementary-school orchestra in Shoreline. So Anschell had to keep it simple, remembering to use just the few notes the novice musicians have learned.

After a rewrite to alter the key, Anschell finished his latest arrangement.

Simple or elaborate, this is what Anschell does best. In any given year, his arrangements or compositions might be on any one of a dozen albums, most not his own. His music even made its way to the television shows "The West Wing" and "The Wire."

But for his latest album, "We Couldn't Agree More," released last month on Origin Records, Anschell didn't arrange a single note. Every song is a standard, unrehearsed, with few details discussed in advance, and in many cases recorded in one take. Anschell called the album, recorded with saxophonist Brent Jensen, his most spontaneous and intimate. The two musicians were the only ones present at the recording session in a friend's living room in Idaho. Anschell even mixed the album himself on his home computer.

It is the simplest project he's ever done and perhaps the most revealing of his musical personality. He plays very little walking bass or stride, a left-handed style typical of a piano when played without a bass and drums. Anschell and Jensen don't really take turns playing. Instead they constantly respond to each other, picking up on rhythmic riffs and turns of phrases.

"We just sat down and in the spur of the moment tried to see how creative we can be," Anschell said. "We didn't really talk about anything. One of us would just start playing and we'd listen to each other."

It seemed to be just the remedy for what Anschell, 50, called his "jazz midlife crisis," a feeling that he has reached the point of no improvement with the kind of music he has pursued for years, which he efficiently described as modern, small-group jazz, performing original compositions with unique rhythmic accents.

"I did it as well as I can do it on my previous CD," he said. "Now, I'm looking for other things."

Anschell might be the hardest-working piano player in Seattle, a musician who makes his living purely from playing and composing. Unlike many top-flight players, he does not teach. He said he doesn't have the patience it requires.

"I'm not good at acting excited," he said.

Not that he doesn't make some concessions to earn an income. But if he's going to, he'd rather play. For example, he plays background music three afternoons a week in the lobby of the Two Union Square office building.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Bill Anschell, here in his Shoreline studio, is known for his arrangements. But on his new album "We Couldn't Agree More," he didn't arrange a single note; every song is a standard, unrehearsed.

#### On the Internet

**Bill Anschell:** Hear his music at [www.billanschell.com](http://www.billanschell.com)

**Origin Records:** Anschell's music is available through the local label at [www.origin-records.com](http://www.origin-records.com).

#### Coming up

##### Bill Anschell

The pianist has some out-of-state gigs up next on his calendar, but he returns to the area at the end of the month. Check his Web site for more details: [www.billanschell.com](http://www.billanschell.com)

**June 26** — Jazz Live at Marine View, with the Susan Pascal Quartet at Marine View Church, 8469 Eastside Drive N.E., Tacoma, 5 p.m.

**July 8** — With the Chad McGillough Quintet at Tula's, 2214 Second Ave., Seattle, 8 p.m.; \$8.

**July 10** — With the Amanda Jantzen Quartet at Bake's Place, 4135 Providence Point Drive S.E., Bellevue, 7 p.m.; \$30.

**July 11** — With the Susan Pascal Quartet at Tula's, 2214 Second Ave., Seattle, 8 p.m.; \$15.

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"I never, ever allow myself to snooze," he said. "You have to make yourself try." To mix things up, he said, "I'll do tunes in all keys, or I'll try different time signatures. If you're on autopilot you're not doing yourself any good."

Take a look at this newspaper's music listings any given week, any given day, and you're almost sure to see Anshell's name somewhere. He leads two trios, one with bassist Jeff Johnson and drummer John Bishop, and another with drummer Jose Martinez and bassist Doug Miller. Anshell performs every Wednesday at the New Orleans Creole Restaurant as part of the Floyd Standifer Legacy Quartet (with Clarence Acox on drums, Phil Sparks on bass and a rotating horn player). Until recently, his trio with Miller and Martinez led the open jam at Tula's, where he still plays regularly with various musicians.

"He's a two-handed piano player in a way that many piano players are not," Miller observed. "He jabs and interjects things with his left hand based on rhythmic approaches he's using in his right hand. His left hand is comping on unexpected parts of the beat that to me are fairly unique."

A few weeks ago, Anshell performed at Dimitriou's Jazz Alley with touring trumpeter Dominic Farinacci. Anshell has performed in piano showrooms and a few months ago in someone's living room. He played the Bellevue Jazz Festival and in the coming months will play the KPLU Jazz Cruise (July 12) and Bumbershoot (Sept. 5-7). He even still tours with his former trio in Atlanta, where he lived for 13 years.

"Bill has managed to find several niches," said pianist Randy Halberstadt. "There are some unbelievably good players who aren't worth a dime when they accompany singers. Bill can play with both [singers and instrumentalists] equally well."

Anshell grew up on Mercer Island, playing saxophone in the high-school stage band. He took up piano at the relatively late age of 19, practicing six hours a day while he lived with his parents. (His first teacher was Halberstadt.)

Players who start late "can't rely on osmosis," said Halberstadt, who's a few years older than Anshell and a late bloomer himself. "You have to be a little more clever, maybe more analytical."

Anshell studied Indian music at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and earned a master's degree in arts administration from the University of Wisconsin. In between, he played every chance he got — on cruise ships, college bars, resorts. His graduate degree was his backup career and the reason he moved to Atlanta, where he worked as the jazz director for the Southern Arts Foundation.

But ultimately, Atlanta provided him with too much work as a musician to keep a day job. He was always more interested in his instrument's rhythmic possibilities than its harmonic possibilities, so the hard-swinging style of jazz he played in Atlanta, with heavy touches of blues and gospel, suited him. He led his own trio and worked as singer Nnenna Freelon's pianist.

He moved back to Seattle in 2002 with his wife and son in order to be close to extended family. An edgy player in Atlanta, he found himself to be more mainstream here, where the style tends to be "more interactive and cerebral," Anshell said. His versatility got him many jobs; having an agreeable personality and a sense of humor (Anshell has also self-published humorous essays on the subject of jazz) got him lots of repeat calls.

"When Bill moved back, it made a huge difference to a lot of people around here," said drummer Bishop. "The cool thing about Bill is that he can straddle all the things other players do, which is not to say the others are limited. Bill can straddle any situation, any personality, any style."

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