Bill Dilks

Chasing the Sound: A Lifetime with the Hammond B3

Bill at his 1958 Hammond B3, 2023 True Blue Jazz Festival, Rehoboth Beach DE

Hammond B3

Bill Dilks

The Hammond B3

An Orchestra, a Jazz Voice, and a Force of Nature

For more than 60 years, Hammond organist Bill Dilks has pursued one musical mission. That mission is to reveal the full power, emotion, and versatility of the Hammond organ.

To Bill, the Hammond B3 has always represented two equally important ideas:

- It is an **orchestra**, capable of creating the sound, dynamics, power and spirit of an entire ensemble through one musician.
- It is a **powerful voice of jazz**, an instrument with its own personality, rhythmic drive, harmonic depth, and emotional expression.

Inspired by Earl Grant's ability to approach the Hammond with the spirit of the Count Basie orchestra, and later influenced by the great jazz Hammond tradition, Bill developed a unique approach that combines orchestral thinking, jazz improvisation, and the unmistakable power of the Hammond sound. His lifelong goal has been simple. And that is to **make the Hammond breathe.**

Where it all started one Christmas around age 7

The Beginning: Learning Music and Discovering the Sound

Hammond L100

Bill's musical journey began with traditional instrumental training. After receiving his 6-button toy organ he began trumpet in third grade and four years later switched to baritone horn. Through junior high and high school, he performed in marching band, developing the foundation of ensemble musicianship of:

- listening,
- phrasing & dynamics
- timing,
- and understanding how individual parts fit into a larger musical ensemble.

Those early experiences would become central to the way he approached the family's first Hammond organ, a small L100 organ consisting of 2 short spinet keyboards and a single pedal octave.

During 1968 and 1969, Bill entered a defining period of musical growth. As he was discovering the Hammond sound that would shape his life, he studied with Paul Richardson, a gifted organist who later became the Philadelphia Phillies' organist from around 1970 up to the early years of Citizens Bank Park.

Richardson provided Bill with the musical foundation he felt he was missing. These were scales, harmonic understanding, the circle of fourths, general theory and the language needed to understand music beyond just basic single note right-hand playing with chords and long pedal notes.

At about this same time, Bill discovered Earl Grant. And what he heard was not just an organ. He heard an orchestra. Grant approached the Hammond as if he were bringing the Count Basie's orchestra through one instrument, the swing, the space, the dynamics, and the personality. That sound changed Bill's life. As Bill says, "It hit me where I live". With that, he knew he had to learn how to create that feeling.

Developing the Hammond as an Orchestra

Hammond B3 with Leslie 122 speaker

Bill acquired his 1958 Hammond B3 and Lelie 122 speaker in 1971. This instrument would become his lifelong musical partner. Yet rather than viewing the Hammond as simply a keyboard instrument, Bill developed an orchestral concept.

How could one musician create the power and interaction of a complete ensemble? A major part of that development was his mastery of pedal bass, on what Hammond Organ Company touted as his “bass-player-like left foot”. Without initially knowing Jimmy Smith's famous approach to left-hand bass, Bill developed his own method of using the pedals to cover the left hand “walking” bass as an extension of his musical versatility and vision. By creating the string bass foundation with his feet, he freed both hands completely to travel the keyboards.

The result, his roving feet became the bass section, allowing both hands to travel the keyboard. The Hammond became more than a keyboard. It became MORE than an orchestra, with an *incredible 387,420,489 different sounds per rack of 9 drawbars* (9 drawbars each with volume 0 thru 8 = 9^9).

The Hammond as a Powerful Jazz Voice

While the orchestral concept has always been central to Bill's playing, he also came to understand the Hammond as one of the most expressive and powerful jazz instruments ever created. The Hammond has a voice of its own. Through drawbars, percussion, expression, and the Leslie speaker, the instrument can move from subtle and lyrical to explosive and commanding. It can carry:

- the warmth of a piano,
- the attack of a horn section,
- the drive of a rhythm section,
- and the emotion of a great jazz soloist.

Bill's playing combines the large-scale thinking of an arranger with the spontaneity and interaction of swing feel, jazz feel and improvisation.

SS Statendam circa 1974-1975

The Golden Era of Live Performance

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Bill experienced the golden era of pop clubs, casinos, and cruise ship performance. He performed full-time, extensively, five or six nights per week — developing the instincts that come only through constant interaction with audiences.

Those years shaped his ability to:

- read a room,
- build energy,
- communicate emotionally,
- and create a musical experience rather than simply play notes.

His musical world included jazz, soul, rock, and popular music, reflecting the broad influence of the Hammond during that era. Also around this time, Bill began developing his left-hand bass chops to continue the organ-drums pocket playing that only be accomplished on the Hammond.

- Earl Grant,
- jazz organ traditions,
- Santana,
- Blood, Sweat & Tears,
- Chicago,

- and other jazz, pop and Hammond-driven artists.

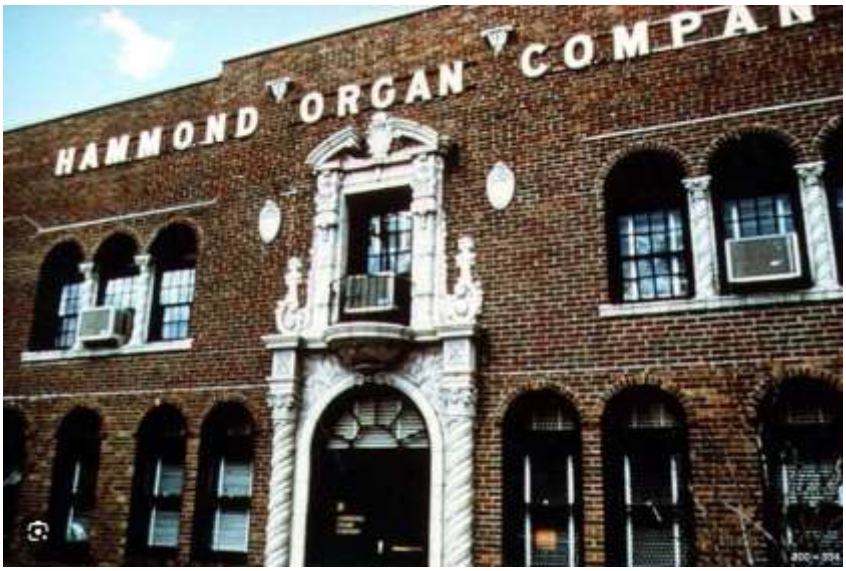
Berklee College of Music, circa 1975

The Berklee Years: Growth, Opportunity, and Maturity

While attending Berklee College of Music in the 1970s, Bill continued developing his musical understanding and Hammond approach, learning “why” he was structuring music his way. His knowledge of the instrument and his unique perspective and advanced harmonies led to opportunities to assist a trumpet-playing faculty instructor in teaching theory classes.

During this period, Bill also received an opportunity that reflected the level of his developing musicianship. In Boston, a friend with a world-renowned jazz orchestra had mentioned the orchestra was looking for a trained organist/pianist. As a young musician, it was a remarkable opportunity. However, Bill made a thoughtful decision to continue his development, recognizing that he needed additional growth in both musical and personal maturity before taking on that level of professional responsibility.

That decision reflected an important quality that has followed him throughout his career. That was and is a commitment not simply to perform, but to fully understand and honor the music.



Hammond Organ Company, Chicago, circa 1980

The Hammond Organ Company: Artist, Demonstrator, and Ambassador

In 1980, Bill joined the Hammond Organ Company during a pivotal period in its history.

For six months, he traveled throughout the country as a Hammond artist, performing concerts, demonstrations, and dealer events while helping Hammond sales representatives improve their presentation techniques.

His work included:

- dealer training,
- music store demonstrations,
- concert hall and mall performances,
- large public presentations.

Bill performed solo concerts featuring 1000 listeners and multiple levels of Hammond instruments, often with the room darkened and a spotlight focused on Bill and the instrument. These were not merely demonstrations. They were polished performances.

He improvised, interacted with audiences, walked among listeners, and created personal connections that helped people experience the emotional possibilities of the Hammond. On his first memorable mall performance, at the Mission Viejo Mall in California, the outing resulted in the sale of a top-of-the-line Hammond Elegante organ valued at $20,000. The lesson was clear to Bill that people do not fall in love with specifications. They fall in love with sound and its presentation.

A Connection to Hammond History

During his time with Hammond in Chicago, Bill had the extraordinary opportunity to meet the craftsmen who actually built his Hammond B3 22 years prior, the instrument that shaped his

life. He met the people responsible for creating components such as drawbar assemblies and cabinets, the craftsmen behind the classic Hammond instruments. At this point his own 1958 Hammond B3 was no longer just an instrument. It was a connection to a generation of builders, musicians, and listeners who created and preserved the Hammond legacy.

The Jazz Chapter

While jazz was always part of Bill's musical world, around 2001 he began a deeper and more focused exploration of jazz organ.

This chapter brought together everything that came before:

- the orchestral thinking inspired by Earl Grant and Count Basie,
- the technical foundation from Paul Richardson,
- decades of live performance experience,
- the clarity and musicality of Oscar Peterson, Charlie Parker, Sunny Stitt, and others,
- the Hammond tradition established by jazz masters,
- continued mastering the Hammond left-hand bass style.

Bill embraced the language of jazz while bringing his own history and perspective to the instrument. His approach honors the legacy of:

- Jimmy Smith,
- Jimmy McGriff,
- Joey DeFrancesco,

- Groove Holmes,
- and the generations of jazz musicians and others who established the Hammond as a defining voice of jazz.

Music Beyond Words

One of the most meaningful performances of Bill's life came near the end of Jimmy McGriff's life. While McGriff was living with ALS in Evesham Township, New Jersey, Bill brought his Hammond B3 and drummer Grant Macavoy to perform for him for an hour and a half.

Afterward, Jimmy's wife Margaret, with a grateful tear in her eye, shared how deeply the experience affected Jimmy. There were moments during the performance that connected with Jimmy in a place beyond what ALS could take away, and Margaret caught that spark. For Bill, it confirmed something he had always believed, that music is not only sound, it is communication.

Philadelphia Clef Club

The Hammond Community and Musical Connections

Bill has remained deeply connected to the Hammond tradition through performances, festivals, and collaborations with some of the most respected names in jazz. He hosted a jazz organ festival at Philadelphia's Clef Club, where his own Hammond B3 shared the stage with one of Jimmy Smith's legendary organs—two instruments representing different chapters of Hammond history.

The festival was especially meaningful, made even more memorable by the presence of Margaret McGriff. In a lighthearted moment that day, Bill's daughter accidentally spilled a glass

of wine on Margaret, who responded with warmth, humor, and the grace of a true lady and professional—a reminder that class and character extend well beyond the music itself.

This is not about name-dropping, but about illustrating a lifetime immersed in a rich musical lineage. Bill has shared the stage and musical experiences with acclaimed artists including Joey DeFrancesco; Tony Monaco, saxophonist Ernie Watts; singer Clyde Terrell, and drummers Chris Columbo* and Wayne Morgan*, among others. Bill has also received memorable encouragement and recognition from other entertainers such as Sammy Davis Jr. and Don Rickles.

Through these experiences, Bill has maintained a personal connection to the lineage of jazz organ, honoring the traditions established by legends such as Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff, Groove Holmes, Count Basie, Wild Bill Davis, and Milt Buckner—artists who helped shape the sound and enduring spirit of the Hammond organ in its early days.

2026 Viscount Legend Soul 273

The Hammond B3 Experience

Today, Bill presents **The Hammond B3 Experience**, a 75-minute performance combining live music, history and demonstration. Performing with a new Viscount Legend Soul 273 organ paired with a genuine Leslie 122 speaker, Bill brings the Hammond tradition to modern audiences while preserving the character and emotion of the classic sound.

He describes the Viscount instrument as **"The B3 on Steroids**", having the exact layout of the Hammond B3 along with powerful additional features, and most importantly, reliability. Or, more importantly, the unreliability of house instruments. Joey DeFrancesco understood and had spoken of this concept many times.

The show explores:

- the history of the Hammond,
- drawbars, effects, and pedals,
- the magic of the Leslie speaker,
- the Hammond's role in jazz, soul, and rock,
- the orchestral approach inspired by Earl Grant and Count Basie,
- and the continuing power of the Hammond as one of music's most expressive jazz instruments.

After six decades, Bill Dilks continues to chase the sound that first captured him as a young musician, a sound that is…

an orchestra,
a jazz voice,
and a timeless force of nature.

William W Dilks Sr.
20 W Stephen Dr
Newark DE 19713
302.252.5654
show@billdilks.com

*** Footnote — Chris Columbo**

Chris Columbo (1908–2000) was one of the longest-tenured working musicians in jazz history, with a career that stretched from the early jazz era through the Atlantic City casino years. He received his first professional engagement in 1921 with Fletcher Henderson and went on to perform in some of the most important chapters of jazz history. Columbo held a residency at Harlem's legendary Savoy Ballroom, worked with Louis Jordan and Duke Ellington, toured internationally, and performed with artists including Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Wild Bill Davis, and many others.

Beyond his work on the national and international stage, Columbo became a defining figure in Atlantic City's music scene. He led the Club Harlem orchestra for 34 years and remained an active performer across the city's clubs and casino venues for decades. Known for his powerful swing, showmanship, and unmistakable stage presence, he represented a direct connection to the roots of the music.

Columbo was also the father of legendary drummer Sonny Payne, best known for his years with the Count Basie Orchestra. Through his own playing, mentorship, and decades of performing, Chris Columbo helped preserve and pass along the swing that shaped generations of musicians.

*** Footnote — Wayne Morgan**

Wayne Morgan, cousin of trumpeter Lee Morgan, is a Wilmington, Delaware drummer whose career is deeply intertwined with the legendary Philadelphia jazz organ tradition. A consummate swing drummer with a deep understanding of the Hammond B3 feel, Wayne worked extensively with all of the leading organists who shaped the Philadelphia sound.

His years on the bandstand placed him directly within the lineage that grew from the pioneering work of Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff, Groove Holmes, Don Patterson, Shirley Scott, and others who established Philadelphia as the center of the jazz organ movement. Wayne's playing embodies the essential qualities that defined those groups: a strong pocket, sophisticated swing feel, and the ability to support and elevate an organist's musical voice.

For Bill, working with Wayne is another connection to the authentic Hammond B3 tradition—not through recordings alone, but through the musicians who helped create and sustain that sound on the bandstand. As Bill states, "When I first met and heard Wayne play, I knew within 2 bars that he was a Hammond B3 drummer".

At times I refer to the Viscount Legend Soul 273 as "The B3 on Steroids". So I asked ChatGPT what that would look like. Well, it gave it to me…