



## Irving A. Evans

October 27, 1927 - March 23, 2021

### Irving Ashley Evans

Irving Ashley Evans passed away peacefully, surrounded by his loving family, on Tuesday, March 23, 2021, at the age of 93. Born on October 27, 1927, he was the son of the late Nate and Ray Moskowitz Evans. He was preceded in death by his beloved wife, Phyllis Bloom Evans, and son Randall Martin "Randy" Evans. He leaves his sister, Evelyn Evans (Jerome) Makowsky, his children, Philip (Alyse) Evans, Vicki Evans Braslow, Raymond (Susan) Evans, Julie Evans, and Alan (Crystal Yocum) Evans, 21 grandchildren, 17 great-grandchildren, a host of nieces, nephews and cousins, and hordes of close and dear friends, many of whom are proud to be considered part of his "extended family".

Irving, a man of faith and family, was blessed follow in the footsteps of his parents to be a multi-talented musician, performer, composer, arranger, writer, director, showman, as well as a developer, contractor and pioneer in the greater Memphis community. At a young age, his parents along with his Grandmother, Rebecca Kaplan Evans Fodiman, started him with piano lessons from some of the finest music teachers of that time, and by his early teens, he was studying to be a concert pianist under the tutelage of Myron Meyers at the Southwestern (now Rhodes) College of Music. It was during this time that a chance opportunity changed the direction of his musical career forever.

Local trumpet player and bandleader, Colie Stoltz and his band had a 3-night gig, but his piano player had fallen ill and could not perform. Unable to find another available pianist, Colie asked his friend and musical colleague, Nate Evans, if he thought his son, Irving, now 14, was capable of playing the gig. He told him that he thought he probably could, but to just ask him. Colie, with music in hand, went to see Irving, and, with his self-confidence and drive to succeed, said he could. Upon completion of their performance on the 3rd night, Irving was so proud when he got paid and showed his father, and then said that if he could make that kind of money playing music, he'd stop the lessons and start performing on the piano regularly. Thus, this was the beginning of his long and illustrious musical career that spanned 79 years!

Irving performed with many orchestras in and around the Memphis area, and at age 17 joined the Ray Robbins orchestra which was performing *The Peabody Hotel*. While with the Robbins orchestra, he traveled the circuit with them playing in many locations between Chicago and Philadelphia. He later played with the Freddie Martin and Freddie Nagel orchestras at *The Peabody*, and also with the Dick Jurgens Orchestra at the Hollywood Casino in Tunica, Mississippi. On occasion, he had the privilege of playing under his father's baton as part of the pit orchestra at the Orpheum for a number of great artists and performers, such as the Clyde McCoy Orchestra. Through his father's connection with the Orpheum Theater and his later ownership of the W.C. Handy Theatre, Irving had the opportunity to meet and interact with a multitude of great performers, such as Lionel Hampton, who gave Irving vibraphone lessons, W.C. Handy, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Nat King Cole, Lucky Millinder, Louis Armstrong, Bob Hope, Danny Kaye and many others. On one occasion, while Sammy Davis, Jr. was in Memphis to perform at the Handy Theater as a member of the Will Mastin Trio, he, along with Irving, at the time both in their early 20's, made a home recording together.

During World War II, he played piano for and entertained servicemen at USO locations around the country. In Memphis, he played at the YWCA, the YMCA, the Millington Naval Air Base, and the Kennedy General Veterans Hospital, while also playing with various dance orchestras in and around the Memphis area. In the late 1940's, he put together a quartet that performed at the American Legion Club located in *The Gayoso Hotel* for over 5 years. While a freshman at Georgia Tech, he was put in charge of a large troupe that was assigned to entertain wounded servicemen at the Lawson General Hospital in Atlanta.

Irving entered the residential construction profession in 1949 upon his hiring as a General Superintendent for Margolin Brothers' Construction Company. During his tenure with them, he built approximately 3,500 housing units consisting of FHA section 608 type apartment projects, single family homes, and a 568 unit Wherry Housing Project for the United States Navy.

Over the years, Irving wrote and directed many musical productions, including composing and arranging original music and lyrics, for numerous organizations in and around Memphis, such as the famous "Front and Center" shows produced by the Memphis Jewish Community Center, the "Chez Paree" shows for Fortas AZA of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, the Duration Club, the local "Gridiron" shows, known for lampooning local and area politicians, and many others. In addition, over the years Irving used his talent for composition and arranging to create many original songs for members of his

family and others for special occasions such as weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and birthdays.

In 1951, Irving, who had previously attended both Georgia Tech and the University of Tennessee, majoring in Civil Engineering, had an opportunity to enter into the grading and general contracting business by forming a partnership with his father, Nate Evans, founding Evans Grading and Construction Companies. General Contracting of streets, roads, sewer and drainage work became the prime business during the days, while continuing with his musical career in the evenings. At the same time, Irving was also working as a General Superintendent for Continental Land Company, and built approximately 500 single family homes for them.

From 1953 until 1956, he entered into a partnership with his lifelong, childhood friend, Jack Belz and Belz Enterprises, and together they built approximately 1,000 single family homes. Over the following 9 years Evans Grading Company developed and sold over 3,000 lots to builders in subdivisions known as Schoolfield Manor, Westwood Manor, Fox Meadows, and Poplar Estates.

At the same time, Irving served as the musical director for Front Street Theatre, a professional theater company in Memphis, for a host of famous Broadway musicals such as "The Boyfriend", "Guys and Dolls", "Gypsy", "Brigadoon", "Wonderful Town", "My Fair Lady", "The King and I", and "The Fantastics", to name but a few. During his tenure at Front Street Theater, Irving also played an integral part in helping launch the careers of Emmy Award winning actress/singer Dixie Carter of "Designing Women" and Tony Award winning actor/singer George Hearn ("La Cage Au Folles", "Sweeney Todd" and others) when they performed in their first leading roles in the beloved musical, "Carousel". It was also during his early tenure as Musical Director that he forged a lifelong friendship with Memphis Symphony Orchestra's first Maestro, Vincent DeFrank who prior to the formation of the Symphony played Cello in the pit orchestra with Irving for the musicals. Irving later served as the musical director for a production of "Mame" and for several "Way Off Broadway" fund-raising shows at and for Temple Israel.

During the course of his musical career, Irving had the privilege of performing with and for many great artists and celebrities. When Danny Thomas was producing the fundraising shows "The Shower of Stars", bringing the world's finest and most famous performers to Memphis to raise money for the creation and construction of St. Jude Hospital, Irving played for most of those shows with and for many of those performers, including Danny Thomas and members of his family. He performed twice as 2nd pianist for Liberace's concert performances in Memphis and played for Shirley Jones, Jimmy Demopolous, The Lawrence Welk show, Martin and Rossi, "Brother" Dave Gardner and Charlie Rich. In

addition, he also had the pleasure of accompanying his longtime friend and fellow Memphian, Marguerite Piazza, star of television and the Metropolitan opera, on a number of occasions.

Evans Construction Company designed and built The Hermitage Apartments in 1965, while Evans Realty Company successfully managed this property at nearly 100% occupancy. Evans Construction Company followed by the purchase of a one hundred acre tract of land in southeast Shelby County for development that was rezoned for commercial, multifamily and single family residential lots. Evans designed, developed and managed the multifamily track into what became known as the Meadowlake Apartment and Townhouse Community, a 838 apartment community overlooking a nine acre lake, with a full restaurant on site and a swimming pool in the shape of a grand piano. Irving and Meadowlake were recognized and featured in a number of national publications for its many unique and innovative design features, construction methods, techniques and amenities. Evans Construction Company entered into a joint venture to develop a small shopping center in the Medical Center area of Memphis known as Poplar-Pauline Shopping Center followed by a joint venture with one of the largest and most successful apartment developers in the United States, and together, they developed the 166-unit Perkins Woods Apartment Community.

Irving's talents were in high demand in the community and he played his music for audiences of virtually every type and every occasion or show that one can imagine. His quartet played five nights a week at the former Summit Club in Memphis and then twenty-five years later, he again played there with his "Summit Club Group", that he referred to as "The Irving Evans Trio plus One, featuring singer, Debbie Kines.

In 1969, Nate Evans retired leaving the entire business to his son, Irving and daughter-in-law, Phyllis. Irving being a family man, was joined in business by their oldest son, Philip in 1973. In 1981, daughter Vicki Evans Braslow, joined the organization and in July, 1983, son Raymond joined the firm upon earning his degree from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. A year later son, Randy, entered the firm along with Irving's younger daughter, Julie. Irving's uncle, Dr. Harry Evans, joined the firm upon his retirement from the practice of General Dentistry.

In 1971, Evans Construction Company entered into a joint venture to develop another water-oriented apartment community known as "The Cascades", a unique 394-unit development where all units backed up to a "man-made" canal. Then, the Evans' acquired a 75-year leasehold interest in a 37-acre tract of land located adjacent to the Meadowlake

Apartment Development and subsequently negotiated it into a joint venture partnership with the owner of the property, Kemmons Wilson, founder of Holiday Inns, and long-time friend and partner of Evans father in 2 movie theaters. In 1978, Evans completed the development and total sell-out of a 61-acre tract located in the very heart of East Memphis consisting of 126 luxury single-family residential lots known as King Arms Subdivision. In 1979, the Evans' purchased a 62-acre tract of land East Memphis. A portion of the property was zoned for Office uses, a luxury condominium community known as Cherryhill and the balance of the property was subdivided into luxury single family home sites. In 1982, the Evans' ventured into the hospitality industry with the acquisition motels properties in Chattanooga and Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Subsequently, more hotels were acquired in St. Louis, Missouri, Birmingham, Alabama, and Louisville, Kentucky. The Evans' continued to plan & develop single family subdivisions in Memphis & Cordova. In joint ventures, they developed Walnut Run, a 230 acre mixed use development in Cordova followed by a 62 acre tract called Patmore subdivision. Others followed including Dexter Ridge and River Ridge where lots were pre-sold to builders prior to their development.

At age 70, Irving closed his offices and for several years thereafter he worked from his home office as a consultant/developer for friends and associates until he finally retired from Real Estate.

Irving continued to play piano and entertain all around town, literally for the rest of his life. His audiences loved listening to him sing, and hearing about his experiences as an entertainer. His fellow musicians loved performing with him and always looked forward to any opportunity to do so. He was a "musician's musician". In his later years, he became more of a solo act tickling the ivory and regularly entertained at many local senior homes and assisted living facilities, including The Parkview, Belmont Village, Trezevant Manor, Plough Towers, Jewish Community Center, Town Village, and others. About 18 months ago, he was asked to put together a full group of musicians to celebrate the 100th birthday of a resident at the Villages of Germantown, that had 200+ people on the dance floor and begging for him to stay after several hours of non-stop playing. He especially enjoyed playing for the residents of the Memphis Jewish Home for 35+ years, especially after he became a resident himself. Of course, Irving's favorite audience was always his very large, and still growing family which included his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and his multitude of nieces, nephews, cousins and extended family. He continued to entertain and play piano professionally until the Covid-19 pandemic caused a shutdown of all public gatherings in February 2020.

While keyboard is now silent, the memory of his passion for music, the pioneering of developments throughout his hometown of Memphis and the memories he made with his

family and friends will live on in their hearts forever.

The family requests that any memorials be sent to the Memphis Jewish Home & Rehab, Temple Israel, Anshei Sphard Beth El Emeth or to Baron Hirsch Synagogue or to the charity of the donor's choice.

# Cemetery

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## Baron Hirsch Cemetery

1523 S. Rozelle  
Memphis, TN, 38103

# Events

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**MAR 24** **Graveside Service** 02:30PM

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Baron Hirsch Cemetery  
1523 S. Rozelle, Memphis, TN, US, 38103

# Comments

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“ 1 file added to the album Memories



**Canale Funeral Directors** - April 30, 2021 at 03:13 PM

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“ 1 file added to the album Zoom recording



**Canale Funeral Directors** - April 15, 2021 at 10:36 AM