

MUSIC

Dave Brubeck's Pioneering Explorations of Rhythm

By John Salmon

FOR MILLIONS OF PEOPLE, and certainly for me, the name Dave Brubeck is virtually synonymous with jazz. He was a boyhood idol of mine from the moment I figured out, as a 5-year-old, how to play his album *Time Out* on my parents' stereo. I still have his kind response to a fan letter I wrote him when I was 16. We've kept in touch off and on ever since, and I have proofread several of his scores. When he asked me recently to record some of his piano compositions, I was delighted.

But I was also reminded of how, as a high-school jazz pianist in the 1960s and even as late as the '70s and '80s, I had to defend my interest in Brubeck. Although Brubeck was famous and commercially successful, he was sometimes dismissed by jazz purists as a "white boy's" musician. It occurred to me recently that his mixed reputation is a perfect example of the limits of arts criticism, which so often is shaped by cultural circumstances and personal prejudices.

On the West Coast in the late '40s and early '50s, Brubeck's experimental octet, trio, and quartet achieved fame by largely transcending or ignoring the then-fashionable bebop style of jazz. Instead they concocted harmonies, rhythms, and textures derived more from Duke Ellington and Darius Milhaud than from Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Brubeck's fame skyrocketed after he was featured in a 1954 cover story in *Time* magazine—an event perhaps difficult to appreciate in our media-saturated age, but extraordinary exposure in those days even for politicians and especially for a jazz musician.

World tours with his celebrated Dave Brubeck Quartet and many recordings followed, including *Time Out* and its singles "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo à la Turk," the first jazz recording to sell a million copies. For 17 years straight, Brubeck's group was the top seller in Columbia Records' jazz catalogue.

Brubeck was inducted into the first Playboy Jazz Hall of Fame, has his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and holds a truckload of *Downbeat* awards and honorary doctorates. Only a handful of jazz musicians have achieved this kind of recognition—Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and a few others.

Brubeck's musical influence has been widespread. Pianists of such diverse stripes as Chick Corea, Keith Emerson, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Billy Joel, and Cecil Taylor have cited Brubeck as a seminal influence. Much of the music we hear in the movies (remember the *Mission Impossible* theme with its syncopated 5/4 rhythm?) or on many local "action"

news television broadcasts (with a driving 7/4 theme) or in many an alternative band's mixing of meters and styles owes its existence to Brubeck's pioneering explorations of rhythm back when 95 per cent of all popular music was in 4/4 meter.

Why, then, did Brubeck receive such ambivalent or downright negative commentary from jazz critics in the past? Why is Brubeck omitted from the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* (a 1973 collection of recordings that purports to give an overview of jazz history), as well as several jazz-appreciation textbooks published in the early 1980s?

To the jazz historian, these are perplexing questions. Students of Brubeckiana can recite the standard objections (from critics, not fans) to Brubeck's music—that Brubeck "didn't swing," that he lacked the searing virtuosity of Bud Powell or the fleet-fingered nimbleness of Oscar Peterson, that his incorporation of classical music constituted a watering down or "intellectualization" of the African core of jazz. But this litany doesn't totally explain Brubeck's mixed reputation among critics and jazz historians.

It probably didn't help that Brubeck was known early on for two albums recorded on college campuses, *Jazz at Oberlin* (1953) and *Jazz Goes to College* (1954). In fact, Brubeck was the first jazz artist to break into the college market, expanding the audience for all jazz musicians but fueling criticism of him as a musician for whites. What went underreported was that Brubeck played for just as many black audiences in jazz clubs and concert halls and fought for integrated audiences in the '50s and '60s when many doors were still closed to black Americans. It is also not generally known that the Brubeck Quartet was popular among readers of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a prominent newspaper for blacks, as evidenced by several polls taken in the '50s, and that his group had a huge following of black fans, including fellow jazz luminaries Bud Powell, Charlie Mingus, and Duke Ellington.

BUT PUBLIC CRITICISM by Miles Davis, the other looming figure of 1950's jazz, didn't help Brubeck's reputation. Davis told an interviewer in 1955 that Brubeck didn't "know how" to swing. Davis wrote in his 1989 autobiography about his resentment (evidently festering for years) of all the "white critics [who] kept talking about all these white jazz musicians, imitators of us . . . Stan Getz, Dave Brubeck, Kai Winding . . . like they was gods or something." Davis was also, understandably, angered that Brubeck and other white jazz musi-

cians were paid more for performances than were black musicians.

Despite Miles Davis's pronouncements, Davis and Brubeck remained friends throughout their careers, until Davis's death in 1991. Davis actually held Brubeck in high esteem, eventually admitting to him that *he* (Brubeck) *did* swing, but that his band didn't, and recording Brubeck's "The Duke" and "In Your Own Sweet Way." Jazz critics, conditioned by bebop and eager to recognize Davis's genius, were probably disproportionately influenced by Davis's printed opinions.

If certain jazz critics disparaged Brubeck's straight jazz, they were positively mystified when Brubeck began writing large-scale works such as ballets, cantatas, oratorios, and other works in genres normally associated with classical music rather than with jazz. From the start of his career in music, Brubeck had as strong a desire to compose as to play jazz piano. He studied composition with Darius Milhaud at Mills College between 1946 and 1948, all the while writing provocative charts for an experimental jazz octet.

The eight musicians in that group, mainly Milhaud students, came out with works that blended European contrapuntal methods with modern jazz harmonies, Ellingtonian textures with Stravinskiesque tonal procedures. Imagine a Bach fugue made up of swinging jazz riffs, and you'll have an idea of the octet's music. (Leonard Bernstein's "Overture" to *West Side Story* has a similar sound.) Brubeck's jazz often borrowed from the world of Bach (as in "Two-Part Contention"), Chopin (as in "Dziękuję"), or other classical composers—a technique that made him even more suspect in the eyes of many jazz critics.

I knew I had my work cut out for me when Brubeck asked me in the summer of 1994 to record some of his piano compositions. His written scores, thick with running lines, massive chords, and driving rhythms, are not easy to manage. From afar, some of the music looks like hives of schizophrenic bumblebees, zigzagging in erratic and complex patterns. The works I recorded over the next several months—ultimately released in 1996—include transcriptions of two-piano works such as the ballet *Points on Jazz*, based on the same Chopinesque theme as "Dziękuję." The music for the ballet *Glances* is also a transcription from an original scoring for small chamber group, and sounds to me in places like Fats Waller meets Darius Milhaud.

Some of the works I recorded might best be described as character pieces cast in an "American idiom," sometimes recalling Aaron Copland or Charles Ives. To be sure, jazz refer-

ences crop up in all these compositions, but they are, by and large, not conceived in the language of jazz.

The enthusiastic reviews this recording has garnered so far encourage me to think that recognition of Brubeck's stature as a composer is growing. Indeed, I sense that the tide is turning in critical evaluation of Brubeck's place in both jazz and classical music. Younger critics, perhaps because they are distant from the controversies of the 1950s and '60s, are treating his work favorably. Two impressive biographies have appeared in recent years: Ilse Storb's and Klaus Fischer's *Dave Brubeck, Improvisations and Compositions: The Idea of Cultural Exchange* (Peter Lang, 1994) and Fred Hall's *It's About Time: The Dave Brubeck Story* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996). The latest edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary*, a standard reference work for classical music, devotes a third of its entry on Brubeck to a list of his ever-growing corpus of large-scale compositions. Ted Gioia included Brubeck in his book *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California* (Oxford University Press, 1992), perceptively evaluating him as "extraordinarily well known and, at the same time, quite badly understood."

I N my jazz-history classes and improvisation seminars at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I do my part to relay Brubeck's contributions. Just recently, a talented student drummer in a jazz trio I coach asked me for some ideas on unusual beat patterns; my answers that day—a series of dotted-quarter-note groupings over a 4/4 meter—derived from Brubeck recordings of 1950 in which such complicated rhythmic overlays were standard fare. The drummer, a ponytailed young man in his early 20s, seemed surprised that such a novel effect came from so long ago. True novelty must be timeless.

The changing estimation of Brubeck shows us that history is interpreted, not ordained. We must be wary, particularly in a field as young as jazz, of biases that taint our judgments. Of course, I recognize that my own lifelong involvement with Brubeck's music may be considered my own prejudice. But although a fan may overestimate the worth of his idol, the growing consensus about Brubeck emboldens me to believe that jazz historians of the future will recognize his towering talent and wide influence on decades of American music.

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