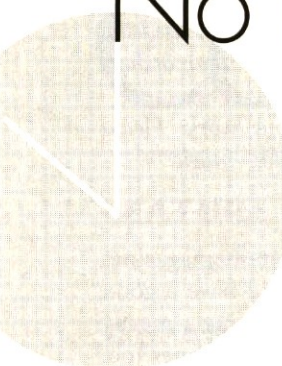


DAVE BRUBECK:

No Time To Take Five

BY JOHN SALMON



Dave Brubeck turns 88 on December sixth. Some would say he has earned the right to retire or take it easy. But this has been one of his busiest years yet, with dozens of concerts in the United States and Canada, recording sessions with his cellist son Matthew and Yo Yo Ma, and completion of a large-scale work for piano and orchestra inspired by the American photographer Ansel Adams. The guy doesn't seem to grasp the concept "relax."

But Dave's been working hard his whole life. From the age of twelve through his teenage years, he milked a cow twice a day (at dawn and dusk), hauled wood and well water, and herded cattle on the ranch his father managed near Ione, California. In his "spare" time, he sold apples, delivered newspapers, and did a variety of odd jobs, including, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, gigging with dance bands in such California metropolises as Sutter Creek, Placerville, and Angels Camp. Hitting the big time wasn't on his mind.

Depression-era discipline and toil were. Though his family never seemed to lack for food, the early 1930s zeitgeist never left Dave Brubeck. It isn't just for musical reasons that one of his favorite tunes is "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"—the 1931 hit that Brubeck has recorded several times. One easily gets the impression that Dave Brubeck's upbringing—the muddy boots, the calloused hands, the sore and saddle-worn backside—is constantly present. His 1946 piano set, *Reminiscences of the Cattle Country* and 1957 jazz tune, "Ode to a Cowboy" reflect that heritage, but so does his earnest and humble character.

Dave's father is the source for much of this. Although he didn't always appreciate Dave's innovative music ("the damnedest bunch of noise I've ever heard" in one of his estimations), Howard "Pete" Brubeck provided the backbone to much of his son Dave's character. Dave admired his father's "toughness, tenacity, honesty and humor," and has cited his father's "inner strength and self-reliance" as central to his own personal and professional success.

Sometimes it's tricky trying to reconcile what appear to be two conflicting sides of Dave's artistic persona: the dig-in-the-dirt cowboy turned gritty jazz pianist who locks into an unrelenting counter-groove with massive, bluesy chords—once thinks of his solo on "It's A Raggy Waltz" from the February 1963 Carnegie Hall performance—who also composes a dodecaphonic triple fugue more austere than anything Schoenberg



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ever wrote, as found in Brubeck's thirty-minute piano work, *Chromatic Fantasy Sonata*. Central Europe seems as much of a home as the rolling, dusty hills of northern California. Popular and "high" art reside in the same creative personality.

Of course, Dave's mother, the European-trained classical piano teacher, had something to do with the development of this musical hybrid. Elizabeth Ivey "Bessie" Brubeck had studied piano with Tobias Matthay and Dame Myra Hess and was Dave's introduction to Bach and Chopin. Bach's influence is just about ubiquitous in Brubeck's output, from the two-part invention-like lines he and alto saxophonist Paul Desmond used to weave spontaneously at the end of pieces (about six minutes into their 1953 recording of "Perdido," for example) to the substantial sacred choral works that have dominated his compositional life for the past forty years, such as the oratorio *The Light in the Wilderness*, the cantata *The Gates of Justice*, and the mass *To Hope! A Celebration*, among many others. Chopin is also present, as, for example, in the work conceived

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in Poland, *Dzi?kuj*, which became the song "There'll Be No Tomorrow" (how we miss Carmen McRae, who used to sing that with such eloquence) and also formed the basis for the eight-movement suite, *Points on Jazz*.

To the discussion of influence from Dave's family, one must also mention Dave's older brother Howard (1916-1993), a brilliant musician in his own right. His composition, *Dialogues for Jazz Combo and Orchestra*, recorded in 1959 by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic with the Dave Brubeck Quartet, is a masterful third-stream concerto grosso that paved the way for Dave's piece in the same medium, *Elementals*. One of the movements from *Dialogues* is "Theme for June," dedicated to Howard's wife, with one of the most profoundly moving melodies since Schumann.

And, while we're on the topic of composers inspired by their wives, Iola Brubeck, Dave's wife since 1942, has been the inspiration for at least four of Brubeck's compositions, all with tender melodies: "Lullaby," a four-part chorale-like work, in the ingenuous style of Edward MacDowell, written in 1942 to woo Iola (he succeeded); "Home Without Iola," a delicate, wistful, and chromatic bagatelle; "For Iola," a jazz ballad with lush harmonies and a melody that cries out for words; and "(I Still Am in Love With) A Girl Named Oli" (Oli being Dave's nickname for Iola), a giddy, swingy number with an easy stride feel. Iola is herself a supremely gifted lyricist, who has provided the words to many of Dave's vocal works, including the 1961 musical, *The Real Ambassadors*, which featured Louis Armstrong.

But it was brother Howard who was Dave's link to composer Darius Milhaud. Howard was Milhaud's assistant at Mills College before Dave enrolled there in 1946. There is no question that Milhaud was an important, perhaps *the* most important teacher for Dave. It was Milhaud who gave Dave the ultimate encouragement to pursue composition professionally. Milhaud's music also profoundly influenced Dave's own style. And, in a six degrees of separation kind of way, this was Dave's connection to Stravinsky as well, since Milhaud hobnobbed with Stravinsky in Paris and later in California. Polymeters and polytonality certainly entered Brubeck from that lineage, regardless of how one regards the messy topic of just how much Stravinsky actually influenced Milhaud or whether Dave had studied Stravinsky before meeting Milhaud. The "Petrouchka chord" shows up in several of Dave's compositions, as do changing meters, charging rhythms, and pandiatonicism.

One hears both Milhaud and Stravinsky in Dave's ballet, *Glances*. Fats Waller and James P. Johnson are also there. Imagine all four sitting at two pianos: "Igor, what key are we in?" "I don't know, Fats, but can you teach me how to move my left hand back and forth like that?" "Guys, where are the barlines? The Charleston needs a steady beat!" "Vive le jazz!" Welcome to Brubeck's world...

...sometimes. Some critics are surprised and confounded when they hear one of Brubeck's classical works—say, the vaguely atonal "Regret" for a capella chorus (as recorded by Choral Arts of Chattanooga), that has no vestige of the jazz idiom. Sometimes there is no fusion of jazz and classical styles, but only what could be categorized as classical music. Brubeck does not conform to the expectation that his compositions must be jazzy, third stream, or whatever. He is as free-spirited and determined as any of those wild, bucking horses he rode on his father's ranch in the 1930s.

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A CONVERSATION WITH DAVE AND IOLA

On the occasion of a recent recital by John Salmon in the Brubeck Room of the Wilton, Connecticut public library, Dave Brubeck, his wife Iola, John Salmon and *Piano Today* editor Stuart Isacoff sat down together to talk about the Brubeck-Milhaud connection and related matters. Here are some quotes from the conversation.

JS: Can you talk about the importance of Madeleine Milhaud to both of you?

DB: "Inspiration" is the word that comes to mind. I always said that Iola patterned herself after Madeleine.

IB: It's true. I felt that she embodied all the things that I wished I could be. She had more talent than I do—she could play piano, and sight-read, and she was a great actress and hostess. But observing how she supported Darius gave me hints of what I should be doing as the wife of an artist. By the way, she was an incredible chef, but when she was finished cooking the place would be an impossible mess. We were at Mills College when Milhaud wrote *Piano Pieces for the Household Muse*—the piece was about Madeleine rattling the pots and pans in the kitchen.

SI: Hearing about Madeleine's pots and pans reminds me of something that Dave once said about being influenced toward odd meters by the sounds he heard growing up on a ranch.

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Courtesy of the Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library.

Dave Brubeck in 1954, photographed by Carl Van Vechten.

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The author was privileged to witness the aforementioned Ansel Adams-inspired work as it was being composed. The as-yet untitled composition is the result of a collaboration between Dave and son Chris, to be premiered in 2009 by the Stockton Symphony. The work has explicit references to Chopin and Bach—painfully exquisite melodies, followed by four-voice chorales—next to bitonal stride passages and galloping triplet figures. While there is no jazz improvisation or conventional swing, the music is pure Brubeck—a rollicking musical journey across the rugged northern-California terrain, European concert halls, and a Harlem rent party with Igor, Fats, et al. engaged in a hot cutting contest.

Don't expect to be able to listen to this work and relax. As noted earlier, "relax" isn't in Brubeck's vocabulary. "Intensity"

is. As the father and son hammered out orchestration, examined passages, and compared versions, Dave would occasionally call out, "Now try that bar a half step higher," followed by a question from Chris: "Wouldn't this make more sense in 3/8 than 5/4?" All of this took place in a session that went virtually uninterrupted for four hours. Dave sipped a chocolate nutrition drink while working, his only concession to corporeal necessity. He did not let up. He may be approaching eighty-eight. But Dave Brubeck does not take five.

Pianist John Salmon is on the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He has recorded 3 CDs of Dave Brubeck's piano music.

See John Salmon's Master Class on the never-before-published Dave Brubeck piece, Remembrance of Madeleine Milhaud, in this issue, as well as other music by Dave Brubeck and Howard Brubeck.

Researchers can avail themselves of The Brubeck Collection at the University of the Pacific Library [<http://library.uop.edu/ha/brubeck/index.asp>].

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVE AND IOLA, *continued*

DB: When you're on a 45,000 acre ranch and your father sends you to fix a fence or start an engine, you are alone. The sound of those little gas engines—Chu Chu Chu! Gitcha! Gitcha! Bu Ah Uh!—you never knew what they were going to do next. And when the horse would bring me somewhere, there was no one to talk to. So I became aware of the gait of the horse.

And then, I heard a recording made by the Denis-Roosevelt expedition in the Belgian Congo. And these rhythms were so complicated! I thought the sound was unbelievable. And I felt that jazz should reflect its African roots. But at first most of the jazz musicians objected to what I was doing with unusual meters.

JS: What did Darius Milhaud mean to you, Dave?

DB: Almost everything at the time. That he would accept me as a student meant a lot. My brother Howard was his assistant. But I couldn't read music. I don't think any other teacher would have taken me on. Milhaud encouraged me. He said, "Dave, you'll never get a European background, it's too late. But don't give up jazz." I wanted to give up my jazz playing and become a composer. He told me I should bring jazz into my compositions.

JS: Your brother once told me, "Milhaud saved Dave."

DB: I don't think that was an overstatement.