

Dave Brubeck, jazz giant and convert to Catholicism from "nothing"



Dave Brubeck, legendary jazz pianist and pioneer, died earlier today on the cusp of his 92nd birthday. Throughout his career, Brubeck defied conventions long imposed on jazz musicians. The tricky meters he played in “Take Five” and other works transcended standard conceptions of swing rhythm.?

His Musical Style

The New York Times has a lengthy obituary that highlights Brubeck's long, active, and prolific life as musician and composer:

In 1954 Mr. Brubeck was the first jazz musician to be featured on the cover of Time magazine. That same year he signed with Columbia Records, promising to deliver two albums a year, and built a house in Oakland.

For all his conceptualizing, Mr. Brubeck often seemed more guileless and stubborn country boy than intellectual. It is often noted that his piece “The Duke” — famously recorded by Miles Davis and Gil Evans in 1959 on their collaborative album “Miles Ahead” — runs through all 12 keys in the first eight bars. But Mr. Brubeck contended that he never realized that until a music professor told him.

Mr. Brubeck’s very personal musical language situated him far from the Bud Powell school of bebop rhythm and harmony; he relied much more on chords, lots and lots of them, than on sizzling, hornlike right-hand lines. (He may have come by this outsidership naturally, as a function of his background: jazz by way of rural isolation and modernist academia. He was, Ted Gioia wrote in his book “West Coast Jazz,” “inspired by the process of improvisation rather than by its history.”)

It took a little while for Mr. Brubeck to capitalize on the greater visibility his deal with Columbia gave him, and as he accommodated success a certain segment of the jazz audience began to turn against him. (The 1957 album “Dave Digs Disney,” on which he played songs from Walt Disney movies, didn’t help his credibility among critics and connoisseurs.) Still, by the end of the decade he had broken through with mainstream audiences in a bigger way than almost any jazz musician since World

War II.

In 1958, as part of a State Department program that brought jazz as an offer of good will during the cold war, his quartet traveled in the Middle East and India, and Mr. Brubeck became intrigued by musical languages that didn't stick to 4/4 time — what he called “march-style jazz,” the meter that had been the music's bedrock. The result was the album “Time Out,” recorded in 1959. With the hits “Take Five” (composed by Mr. Desmond in 5/4 meter and prominently featuring the quartet's gifted drummer, Joe Morello) and “Blue Rondo À la Turk” (composed by Mr. Brubeck in 9/8), the album propelled Mr. Brubeck onto the pop charts. ...

To Hope! A Celebration

As a composer, Mr. Brubeck used jazz to address religious themes and to bridge social and political divides. His cantata “The Gates of Justice,” from 1969, dealt with blacks and Jews in America; another cantata, “Truth Is Fallen” (1972), lamented the killing of student protesters at Kent State University in 1970, with a score including orchestra, electric guitars and police sirens. He played during the Reagan-Gorbachev summit meeting in 1988; he composed entrance music for Pope John Paul II's visit to Candlestick Park in San Francisco in 1987; he performed for eight presidents, from Kennedy to Clinton.

Much more about Brubeck's life and discography can be found on the All Music Guide site. As Deacon Greg Kandra points out (and I noted in this May 2011 post), Brubeck was also a convert, in 1980, to the Catholic Church. This 2009 article in St. Anthony Messenger states:

To Hope! A Celebration was Brubeck's first encounter with the Roman Catholic Mass, written at a time when he belonged to no denomination or faith community. It was commissioned by Our Sunday Visitor editor Ed Murray, who wanted a serious piece on the revised Roman ritual, not a pop or jazz Mass, but one that reflected the American Catholic experience.

The writing was to have a profound effect on Brubeck's life. A short time before its premiere in 1980 a priest asked why there was no Our Father section of the Mass. Brubeck recalls first inquiring, “What's the Our Father?” (he knew it as The Lord's Prayer) and saying, “They didn't ask me to do that.”

He resolved not to make the addition that, in his mind, would wreak havoc with the composition as he had created it. He told the priest, “No, I'm going on vacation and I've taken a lot of time from my wife and family. I want to be with them and not worry about music.”

“So the first night we were in the Caribbean, I dreamt the Our Father,” Brubeck says, recalling that he hopped out of bed to write down as much as he could remember from his dream state. At that moment he decided to add that piece to the Mass and to become a Catholic.

He has adamantly asserted for years that he is not a convert, saying to be a convert you needed to be something first. He continues to define himself as being “nothing” before being welcomed into the

Church.

His Mass has been performed throughout the world, including in the former Soviet Union in 1997 (when Russia was considering adopting a state religion) and for Pope John Paul II in San Francisco during the pontiff's 1987 pilgrimage to the United States. At the latter celebration, Brubeck was asked to write an additional processional piece for the pope's entrance into Candlestick Park.

Again, it was a dream that led him to accept a sacred music project that he initially refused as not workable. The dream "was more of a realizing that I could write what I wanted for the music," Brubeck says.

"They needed nine minutes and they gave me a sentence, 'Upon this rock I will build my Church and the jaws of hell cannot prevail against it.' So rather than dream musically, I dreamed practically that Bach would have taken one sentence in a chorale and fugue, as he often did, and that was the answer," he says. "So I decided that I would do that piece for the pope," which is known as "Upon This Rock."

If I might, here are some thoughts from a post I wrote last year on the "catholicity of jazz", with a reference to Brubeck:

Brubeck composed a piece, "To Hope! A Celebration Mass" in 1996 that seems to have a much more classical/European sound to it. Regardless, I've long said that I never want to hear jazz at Mass, now matter how well it is played or composed, for while jazz is very beautiful, powerful, and even spiritual (in the best sense of that word), it's very nature—improvisational, largely profane (in the correct sense of that word)—is not well-suited, in my judgment, to liturgical settings.

But I would also insist that outside of liturgical settings, good jazz is good music, which means it is an artistic expression in keeping with Catholicism, which prizes and recognizes all that is good, true, and beautiful. Personal tastes differ, it goes without saying, and I can only take a little bit of Ornette Coleman or Cecil Taylor before I turn to the Blue Note albums of the 1950s and '60s, or the trio albums of Keith Jarrett, or the recent works of Joshua Redman, Brad Mehldau, Roy Hargrove, and so forth. Great jazz, to my mind and ear, is a marvelous combination of structure and improvisation, where intelligent musical conversation takes place upon a chosen, mutual theme, revealing both the individual thoughts/voices of those participating, as well as the deeper meaning and heart of the piece they are playing. It is a music that recognizes and honors and draws upon tradition while speaking about and within that tradition in the here and now. In my mind, jazz bears a certain analogy to the human condition: we are creatures endowed with great freedom, but freedom is to be exercised in pursuing the good, recognizing and respecting the limits and boundaries of our nature and of creation as established by God the Creator.

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