

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



DAVE BRUBECK

[This is the fourth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Yeah! He's that hip and cerebral jazz cat from the 1950's who recorded "Take Five." Right? Sure. But he was so much more.

Born in Concord, California, on December 6, 1920, David Warren Brubeck began playing piano when he was 4 years old! He was the son of a cowboy and a piano teacher, and spent much of his youth on a ranch in Stockton, tending to cattle when he wasn't at the piano. His dad, a champion rodeo roper, wanted young Dave to follow in his footsteps. Bessie, his mother, foresaw his musical future and forbade him from using certain rope techniques that might injure his hands (speaking of which, for the piano-inclined, he had the unique ability to stretch his amply-sized hands to play an 11th chord; that's Middle "C" with the thumb and high "F" with his pinkie.

According to Fred Hall, his biographer, Brubeck's heavy, tortoise-rimmed glasses became his trademark. But there weren't just a stylish affectation. Dave was born with vision problems that made reading sheet music difficult for him, but he was able to hide the problem due to his sharp musical ear that enabled him to imitate other artists. Later on at The College of the Pacific, he was nearly thrown out when his profs realized he couldn't read music (although he did later). He was only allowed to graduate when he promised never to teach the piano.

Brubeck served in the U. S. Army in World War II in Europe as an infantryman and performed very close to enemy lines under the command of General George Patton during the Battle of the Bulge, as part of a racially-integrated jazz band known as the Wolf Pack. Some of his fellow musicians were soldiers, injured in combat, and were recruited for the band from their military hospital beds. BTW, appointed as the bandleader, Brubeck was only a PFC, outranked by many of the other members.

After the war, he formed the Dave Brubeck Octet and released several recordings, although they garnered little attention in the 40's. In 1949, he disbanded the octet and formed the Dave Brubeck Trio, later expanding into the Quartet in 1951 with the addition of one Paul Desmond (who played a very laid-back, cool Alto Sax). It was Paul who composed "Take Five," not Dave. Interestingly, upon his death in 1977, Desmond left the rights to royalties for his performances and compositions, including "Take Five," to the American Red Cross, which to date has since received combined royalties of about \$100,000 per year! Radio personality Les Davis reports that, in the early days before fame found them, they bought an used '49 Kaiser, pulled out the back seat and installed an air mattress, saving on hotels as they travelled, two driving and two sleeping.

Over his 70+ year career, Dave composed dozens of hits, many of which can be found on his "Time Out" album (I suggest Sony Legacy "Time Out – 50th Anniversary Edition: 2 CDs and 1 DVD – Amazon's **ASIN:** B001S6Y0AQ), in addition to a lot of classical music including ballet! He's famous for intricate time signatures: 5/4 time in "Take Five", and many others in 9/8 time; not your average waltz! His personal life was almost squeaky-clean; no drinking or drug problems and married to his wife, Iola, for 70 years.



A 1954 cover story in *Time Magazine* characterized Dave as "a wiggling cat with a far-out wail." But in fact, Brubeck had a refreshing humility about him. He learned about the cover story from non-other than his idol, Duke Ellington, who showed up at his hotel room with the issue of *Time*, which called Brubeck's trio as "some of the strangest and loveliest music ever played since jazz was born." Brubeck told a television interviewer "It was the worst and the best moment possible, all mixed up, because I didn't want to have my story come first. Duke was so much important than I was – he deserved to be first." (Duke got the cover a few years later).

Brubeck died this past December, one day short of his 92nd birthday. Perhaps as an epitaph, music professor Dr. Joe Gilman said it best. "Although Dave has passed from this life and into eternal life, his works and messages are clear for the rest of us to follow. Bring people together, build communities, challenge the accepted, and affect social change through music and creativity." Amen!

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.

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