



ENCORES/NOTES



Brad Mehldau, March 1, 2003

Notes on the Program

By Larry Kelp

Startlingly original in his approach to music, international award-winning Brad Mehldau's San Francisco solo concert debut two years ago year was something of a revelation even to those who had followed the young pianist from his early years in saxophonist Joshua Redman's quartet, and on through an impressive stack of his own recordings leading one of contemporary jazz's most exciting trios, and being compared to Keith Jarrett and Glenn Gould.

Alone on the Herbst Theatre stage following the release of his first solo piano album, *Elegiac Cycle*, Mehldau ranged from jazz standards to smart pop and rock tunes by the likes of Neil Young, Fiona Apple, Nick Drake and his favorite rock band, Radiohead. Freed from a rhythm section, he performed with a classical precision, innovative improvisation, and a clear sense of why all those tunes belonged together in his concert.

Smart, popular (he was *Down Beat* magazine's September 2002 cover boy (headline: "Smashing Status Quo"), regular winner of jazz polls and other awards, and too restless to stay in one stylistic place once he's developed an audience for that music, Mehldau continues explore new territory. He recently released an experimental CD, *Largo*, that challenges even more jazz expectations, as he plays vibes and prepared piano on his new tunes, plus two Beatles songs, a bossa nova by Antonio Carlos Jobim, and "Paranoid Android" by his favorite rock band, Radiohead. In addition to his trio, he used other musicians, including Beck's rhythm section, and an unusual brass section of two trombones with two French horns. As heavily produced, layered and electronically altered as some of the tunes sound, they were all recorded live in the studio with no overdubs.

It's just that approach to music that brought the *Los Angeles Times* to rave that Mehldau is "universally admired as one of the most adventurous pianists to arrive on the jazz scene in years." In addition to appearing on recent recordings by Charles Lloyd (the heralded *The Water is Wide* and its sequel, *Hyperion with Higgins*) and Charlie Haden's new *American Dreams*, Mehldau is currently working on a Carnegie Hall commission of music for voice and piano. "It's for the soprano Renée Fleming, and I've very excited about it," Mehldau says. "I'm using, among other poets, poems by Rilke."

For his 2001 San Francisco Performances debut at Herbst Theater he admitted that the solo format was still new to him. Now, "I think I've developed my solo style a bit more. Nothing radical, no big shift in style," Mehdau says. "I'm more comfortable in that medium, though." What hasn't changed is his refusal to plan out a program. He picks the songs as the concert progresses. In a solo concert, "the focus is to start from one place, and let it take me into the song. Without a format, I begin playing, a melody suggests itself, and then I could be playing a Beatles or Gershwin song, and go from there. I want to be surprised. For me, as a listener, what makes a great jazz or even a great classical concert is when it feels that the performer is as surprised as you are by where they're going."

He has used much the same approach to his career: "I never think too much about where I'm heading; I just find out when I get there. Although the 'Largo' project was a specific thing that came about from my relationship with Jon Brion (pop producer for Aimee Mann, Rufus Wainwright, Fiona Apple and others), it was a great discovery of sorts - a real learning experience. I would love to do something like that again in the future, no doubt. I mean something with a bigger scope, broader variety of instrumentation, bigger sonic palette, all the things we utilized on that record."

In the past eight years Mehdau has been fortunate to go almost everywhere with his working trio-drummer Jorge Rossy and former Bay Area bassist Larry Grenadier-as they recorded a series of five live "Art of the Trio" CDs as well as several studio recordings (all for Warner Bros. Records), and appeared at the world's most prestigious jazz festivals. "I'm right where I want to be and grateful that I am," Mehdau said last year. "There are so many great and talented players who are wallowing in obscurity. I feel a responsibility to make this work, to get somewhere based on what I have to offer, which is one reason why I haven't done any all-star projects." Maybe not, but he has performed and recorded with such non-jazz stars as Willie Nelson and Stone Temple Pilots singer Scott Weiland, and on film soundtracks, including *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

Born 32 years ago in Jacksonville, Florida, Mehdau moved around the East Coast with his family until he was 10, when his doctor father set up practice in West Hartford, Connecticut. "From the time I was little I knew that music was it for me," Mehdau says. "It moved me more than anything else, and it was something that came naturally to me. There was a piano in the house, and I started picking out nursery rhymes, so I started lessons at 5, and began studying with a classical teacher when we moved to West Hartford."

By the time he entered high school he had dropped classical studies and was immersed in '70s rock and jazz-rock fusion. From there he began tracing those players' roots back to earlier jazz greats such as Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. He was accepted into New York's New School University, studying with pianists Fred Hersch (a San Francisco Performances mainstay), Kenny Werner and Junior Mance.

In 1995 he became the pianist in the first quartet led by young saxophonist Joshua Redman, a graduate of the Berkeley High School music program. It was a case of unknown but top-notch talent coming together and inspiring each other. Redman's label, Warner Bros., took note of the new pianist on the scene and signed him to a recording contract. Eventually Mehdau left to lead his own hand-picked trio that has appeared on most of his nine Warner Bros. albums.

"When I joined Joshua Redman's band I wasn't as confident of myself as I am now," Mehdau noted last year. "And I didn't plan my trio; it just happened that the three of us found each other out of a series of gigs I was doing at a club using different musicians while I was still with Joshua. We just jelled. At that time

I didn't think I was ready to do my own music. Now I've got the opposite problem. I come up with more ideas than I can get to." One idea long since discarded was an album of his interpretations of Beatles songs. But he did include a pair of Beatles songs on the new *Largo*. "Those particular Beatles tunes - 'Dear Prudence' and 'Mother Nature's Son' - are two that I've been playing for a while now, and they were ripe for recording." The whole *Largo* album, Mehdau says, "is kind of a project unto itself. It was a dream come true to work with Jon Brion in particular. It was something that culminated from years of talking together, playing together informally, and finally, talking about doing a record. It was a very specific wish of mine to work with him, and I'm glad I had the opportunity."

Mehdau met Brion during a several-year period when he lived in Los Angeles, where he also recorded two CDs for Blue Note Records with jazz greats Charlie Haden (bass) and Lee Konitz (alto sax). Today Mehdau lives in upstate New York with his wife, Fleurine, and their daughter Eden.

While in Los Angeles Mehdau played at Brion's regular hangout, the *Largo* club, and they came up with the concept for the album of that name. When it was released last fall, the original plan was to assemble the album's band for some concerts, but the nearest Mehdau came was bringing his regular trio to do those tunes not at a jazz club, but at San Francisco's alternative rock venue Justice League, in September, where he found the non-jazz audience "warm and responsive. It's a cool room to play in. I like the place."

Of all his recordings, the one that comes closest to the feel of tonight's concert (other than the solo pieces on *Places*) is his 1999 *Elegiac Cycle*, his only completely solo recording. It drew on the classical elegy form to tie together a series of original compositions that aren't classical or jazz. In explaining the project, Mehdau wrote, "Probably at around 10 or 11 years old improvisation entered into my piano time, in addition to classical practice, with increasing regularity. In retrospect what I was improvising was probably a reflection of the music I was submerged in at the time; a hodgepodge of Chopin and Brahms, piano-rocker hero Billy Joel, and bands like Styx, Rush, Supertramp and Yes. The irony is that almost 20 years later, when I listen back to the music presented on this CD, at times it sounds just like that: a hodgepodge of Chopin and Billy Joel, Brahms and Supertramp! So in some sense making this music was about getting back to something that I felt early on, something that has to do with what I've always loved about music, not what I love about jazz, classical music, or rock 'n' roll, independent of each other."

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger © 2003