Take Five – Paul Desmond and Dave Brubeck – piano solo (with sheet music)

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Paul Desmond biography

Born Paul Emil Breitenfeld; November 25, 1924, in San Francisco, CA; died May 30, 1977, New York City; father was an
organist in movie theaters and an arranger and accompanist for vaudeville acts.

In the minds and hearts of music listeners, Paul Desmond and the Dave Brubeck Quartet are virtually inseparable. These innovators experienced an almost immediate mutual attraction. The underlying concept that melded them into this smooth, sometimes surprising, swinging unit began when they played together casually after being discharged from World War II service.

Through seventeen ground-breaking years Desmond and Brubeck were the driving force behind the most commercially successful jazz group of its day, perhaps of any era. The quartet’s bassists and drummers changed, but the vital, unique interplay between the altoist Desmond and the leader-pianist Brubeck were the constant key elements that drove the success of the group.

Desmond always claimed that he changed his name from Breitenfeld “because it sounds too Irish,” and that he picked Desmond out of the phone book. His German father was an accomplished organist, playing in movie theaters and as a vaudeville accompanist. Into the 1960s, he was still doing arrangements for bands. When Paul’s Irish mother became ill in about 1929 he moved to New Rochelle, New York, to live with relatives.

He liked to tell of his grammar school experience there in which he played his first improvised solo (on vibes or chimes): “I was supposed to play one of those grisly semiclassical things…. I figured if I just went out and made up something as I went along, it couldn’t be any worse. So that’s what I did and it was a gas. It was the first thing I’d enjoyed doing. I didn’t realize until about fifteen years later that you could make a living doing this.”

After returning to San Francisco in 1936, Desmond later began
playing the clarinet at Polytechnic High School, where he edited the school newspaper as well as playing in the band. After some casual gigging on clarinet, Desmond took up the alto in 1943, the same year he entered the Army and was assigned to the 253rd AGF band. As he told pianist/radio host/writer Marion McPartland, “It was a great way to spend the war. We expected to get shipped out every month, but it never happened. Somewhere in Washington our file must be on the floor under a desk somewhere.”

Stationed in San Francisco, he met tenorman/arranger Dave Van Kreidt, who in turn introduced Desmond to Brubeck for just a short session in their band room. Desmond’s reaction to this first meeting has been reported using various “Desmondisms,” the altoist’s clever, off-beat observations.

At the very least, Desmond was impressed by the pianist’s far-out approach. The two did not meet again until after they were discharge from service when Brubeck was playing in saxophonist Darryl Cutler’s trio at San Francisco’s Geary Cellar. As Desmond recalled: “I went down and sat in, and the musical rapport was very evident and kind of scary. A lot of the things we’ve done since, we did then immediately—a lot of the counterpoint things, and it really impressed me. If you think Dave plays far out now, you should have heard him then. He made Cecil Taylor sound like Lester Lanin.”

Quartet is Launched

Soon Desmond hired leader Cutler’s pianist and bassist Norman Bates away from him, becoming the leader of his own group, playing near Stanford. “A lot of the things we did later with the quartet began there…. I have a memory of several nights that seemed fantastic, and I don’t feel that way too often.”

Nevertheless, Desmond became disabused of the idea of being the leader. He entered San Francisco State College, aspiring to be a writer. He also joined the experimental Dave Brubeck
Octet, mostly a rehearsal group. By June, 1950, related Paul, he had decided that writing could be learned but not taught. “My only jobs had been two concerts with the octet and a Mexican wedding,” so he joined the band of Jack Fina, ending a tour in New York.

At about this time Brubeck, with assistance from disc jockey/promoter Jimmy Lyons, started his trio and established his own record company. Desmond returned to San Francisco and, in 1951, the Dave Brubeck Quartet was born. The earlier-evidenced rapport between them blossomed and the group began to draw the interest of a cadre of fans and critics.

First Dave’s trio recorded with Fantasy, followed by the full quartet, with Ron Crotty on bass and Cal Tjader on drums and vibraphone. In October of 1952 the quartet recorded a memorable set at George Wein’s Storyville club in Boston, with Lloyd Davis now on drums. The group was making inroads with college audiences and in 1953 they recorded two concerts, Jazz at Oberlin and the equally sensational Jazz at the College of the Pacific, with Joe Dodge now the drummer. This signaled the beginning of a series of college concerts that culminated in a contract with Columbia Records.

Hail, Columbia!

Not surprisingly, Columbia’s first Brubeck Quartet release was 1954’s Jazz Goes to College. This blockbuster LP combined offerings from concerts at the University of Cincinnati, the University of Michigan and a return visit to Oberlin. Of Desmond’s work on this album, George Avakian wrote: “… Desmond indulges in a favorite practice of his: to play what seem to be duets with himself.

You will frequently hear Paul play passages in which he has two rapidly alternating melody lines in motion, which not only are independently valid, but which fit into one continuous line as well…. Desmond is nothing short of colossal in ‘The
Song is You”... A breathtaking flow of ideas carries the listener along from peak to peak, with a couple of exceptional examples of Paul’s duet technique along the way.”

In the early Columbia years Norman Bates and Bob Bates served as bassists; Joe Dodge continued on drums. The most memorable personnel lineup for the quartet began in 1956 when percussionist Joe Morello signed on for an eleven-year stint, with bassist Eugene Wright coming aboard in early 1958. Morello was an exceptionally gifted drummer, Wright a wonderful timekeeper and anchor for the rhythm section.

Though Desmond and Morello initially clashed, in time they became close, and it was the drummer’s versatility that allowed the quartet to experiment so successfully with several unusual time signatures. Desmond’s 1960 composition, “Take Five,’ in 5/4 time, became the most popular of all the Brubeck Quartet recordings and the first jazz recording to “go gold” when it appeared on their 1960 Time Out album. This meter may be the most difficult of all in which to make music swing, but this group managed it and this song, with a lyric added by Iola Brubeck, crossed over to pop and other categories.

**Styled for Success**

In some ways Desmond and Brubeck were an odd match. Brubeck tended toward massive, heavy chords, whereas Desmond utilized a light, airy, “dry martini” sound. Both approached a melody obliquely, however, seeking to stake out new interpretations whenever possible. Perhaps the most important element of their playing together was their uncanny improvised fugues.

Usually in the last chorus or more, one player would begin an invented phrase, only to have the other chime in with a perfectly matching counter phrase, in the manner of a perfectly conceived Bach fugue-swinging relentlessly. Desmond usually played in the upper range of his horn, beautiful of tone, always reaching. He was capable of playing extremely
long phrases on one breath, allowing him to construct solos and fugues with majestic, flowing lines.

Once established, the Quartet traveled the world many times over, often composing new songs based on their travels, as found in the album “Jazz Impressions of Eurasia.” Some of their concerts, such as those in Amsterdam and Copenhagen, were recorded. All the while they maintained a steady diet of performances in the United States-college concerts, concerts in halls such as Carnegie, club dates, studio recording, and jazz festivals such as Newport.

Having established that he was no leader, Desmond was content to let Brubeck handle the business end. A financial agreement that they reached early in the partnership assured the altoist adequate compensation for his sizeable contributions to the group’s success.

Brubeck and Desmond each credited the other with this success; they were both probably right. Jazz critics were not generally kindly disposed to Brubeck’s playing and, perhaps by default, they sometimes found reason to carp about Desmond’s. The New Yorker’s Whitney Balliett points out that Desmond won the Down Beat Critics’ Poll only once, while winning the Readers’ Poll many times—“a rare instance of the public’s having better ears than the professionals.”

Desmond had listened to three wonderful altoists when forming his taste, Pete Brown, Willie Smith and the incomparable Johnny Hodges, so long associated with Duke Ellington. Balliett wrote of Desmond’s 1969 appearance at the White House, honoring Duke’s seventieth birthday, in which Desmond “reproduced Johnny Hodges so perfectly during one of his solos that he startled the usually unflappable Ellington.”

**Stretched His Listeners**

In their solos Desmond and Brubeck each made generous use of “quotes”-phrases from other songs that fit into the chord
pattern of the song being played. Often the borrowed phrase was the title line of the tune and Paul and Dave would often communicate with one another through these exchanges. It is said that Brubeck could discern Desmond’s mood or his immediate concerns by deciphering the altoists quotes. To amuse themselves, attuned to one another as they were, sometimes the musicians would engage in whole conversations in this esoteric manner.

Balliett wrote of Desmond’s sound thus: “Desmond’s tone was off-white, gentle-almost transparent and almost weightless. It had a brand-new, untouched sound, he used very little vibrato…. Desmond’s solos thought; they had logic and clarity…. The quietness of Desmond’s attack was deceptive…. But he always moved along the outer edges of the chords he was improvising on, atonality in sight. His rhythmic attack was equally deceptive…. He played behind the beat, on the eat, and ahead of the beat…. Like his friend Jim Hall, Desmond was one of he handful of jazz improvisers who demand total concentration. If the listener falters, he is lost; if he remains rapt, he is blessed.”

From Notes to Quotes

After seventeen years of intensive travel the Dave Brubeck Quartet disbanded in 1967. Brubeck took some time to compose sacred words, but returned the following year with baritone saxist Gerry Mulligan as part of the Quartet. Desmond did some free-lancing and declared that he intended to return to his original goal by writing a book.

This has been the subject of much mystery and speculation as, in his typical teasing mode, Desmond has variously declared this to be a serious project or a convenient excuse for not playing. The non-book bears the working title How Many of You Are There in the Quartet?, allegedly inspired by the frequent question asked of him in his travels. One hilarious chapter
actually exists, having appeared in *Punch*. It was re-printed in the recent *Reading Jazz*, edited by Robert Gottlieb.

Desmond’s friends were fond of collecting his often self-effacing witticisms. He called himself the world’s slowest saxophonist and declared that when he played with unsupportive players he would “shrivel up like a lemoned clam.” Of his own fame, Desmond claimed, “I was unfashionable before anyone knew who I was.” He explained his failure to become a writer by stating, “I could only write at the beach, and I kept getting sand in my typewriter.”

He also purported to be discouraged by the fact that several of his fine writers whom he befriended and hung out with in the post-Brubeck days claimed that they were frustrated musicians.

**Phasing Out**

After 1967 Desmond concertized and recorded extensively with guitarists Jim Hall and Ed Bickert, both of whom were kindred musical souls. These pairings produced some notable recordings. He performed a Christmas Day concert with The Modern Jazz Quartet in 1971 at New York’s Town Hall which fortunately was recorded. He also took part in a few reunion concerts with Brubeck and in a silver anniversary tour of the Quartet, re-uniting with Morello and Wright and resulting in the final recording of the famous group in March 1976.

Much of Desmond’s semi-retirement was centered around his New York penthouse apartment, surrounded by books, and in the good company of musicians, writers, stylish women and friends. He ate and drank in congenial restaurants, notably Elaine’s and Bradley’s, where the talk and the Scotch were good.

He developed lung cancer and underwent extensive therapy, taking great pains to avoid being a burden to his friends. From the early agreement with Brubeck, and with his royalties, especially from “Take Five,” Desmond was financially comfortable. He donated these royalties from his compositions
and recordings to the American Red Cross. His attorney, Noel Silverman, estimated that this organization has received more than a million dollars from Desmond’s estate since 1977.

Desmond’s last appearance was with Brubeck at New York’s Lincoln Center on February 4, 1977. In an interview on National Public Radio the day after Desmond’s death, the pianist told of his partner propped in his familiar place at the crook of the piano, crafting his last duets before a full house. The altoist’s beautiful playing brought great ovations. The audience begged for an encore. Too weak to continue, Desmond begged off and bowed out.

Paul Desmond’s Career

Began studying clarinet in high school; switched to alto saxophone, 1943; after service entered San Francisco State College, majoring in writing; free-lanced as a musician, landing with Jack Fina’s touring band, ending in New York; returned to San Francisco, played with Dave Brubeck’s Octet and other groups; played with Dave Brubeck Quartet, 1951-67; played and recorded occasionally with own groups, often featuring saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, guitarists Jim Hall and Ed Bickert, 1967-77; final public appearance in February, 1977.

Paul Desmond’s Awards


Famous Works

- **Selected Discography**
  - The Dave Brubeck Quartet 25th Anniversary Reunion, A&M,
1976.
- *In Concert at Town Hall* (with the Modern Jazz Quartet), DRG, 1971.
- *Jazz at Oberlin*, Fantasy, 1953.

**Further Reading**

**Sources**

**Books**

**Periodicals**

**Other**
- (Liner notes) *Jazz at Oberlin*, notes by James Newman.
- (Liner notes) *Jazz Goes to College*, notes by George Avakian.