

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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IN CONCERT: Jazz In His Own Sweet, and Smart Way - Santa Barbara remembers recently passed jazz musician, Dave Brubeck, who played a handful of memorable shows at the Lobero Theatre

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TOP : Jazz legend Dave Brubeck rehearses July 12, 2007, at Sirius Satellite Radio studios in New York.

January 4, 2013 12:19 PM

A cheerful Mr. Brubeck sits as his sons, from left, Chris, Danny and Darius, surround him during an intermission June 23, 1985, at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall
Associated Press file photos

When the jazz pianist Dave Brubeck passed away last month, at the ripe age of 92, the world mourned, and to a degree rarely seen for a jazz artist. Part of the buzz had to do with the fact that Mr. Brubeck managed to cut across the lines of insider jazz culture and popularity, appealing to a mass of listeners both of the diehard jazz fan variety and casual listener — his was a jazz for jazz lovers and the jazz indifferent alike. He wasn't always given critical props due, sometimes snubbed as a proponent of "collegiate jazz," "sweater jazz" and other friendly backhanded epithets. But a closer examination of Mr. Brubeck's 70-plus decades in the line of jazz reveal a kindly titan figure, pushing at boundaries and pleasing the troops as he went.

Like Hank Jones, Mr. Brubeck was one of those tirelessly creative and active artists who refused to go quietly into any good night, or to stop composing and performing. Meanwhile, the global interest in all things Mr. Brubeck had a very local angle in the fact that he had a vested personal and familial interest in Santa Barbara, where his brother Henry was an important school music teacher for many years, and where his mother and niece lived.

Santa Barbara was lucky to get a handful of memorable, intimate evenings with the still-thriving octogenarian Mr. Brubeck in the '00s, in the warming atmosphere of the Lobero Theatre. Often, he and his quartet would swing by the Lobero on the way to or from the Monterey Jazz Festival, as he did in a 2007 show, warming up for a special 50th anniversary festival gig where he would be a subject of a Clint Eastwood-produced documentary. As he told the packed house that night, "I took a chance with you, because you've always been a friendly audience. You would understand that we have to rehearse."

We understood, and appreciated the gesture. A different anniversary was in the air when Mr. Brubeck played the Lobero in 2009, when the Brubeck buzz had to do with the landmark 50th year after the release of his groundbreaking album "Time Out." In September of 2009, he was showing up after a Monterey festival where Eastwood, in mock academic robes, presented the pianist with an honorary degree from Berklee School of Music, and later Chick Corea joked from the Monterey arena stage, "I told Dave he's going to give seniors a bad name."

Each of Mr. Brubeck's Lobero concerts ended in his old sweet, crowd-pleasing way, with a finale of "Take Five." I asked if he ever considered skipping the chestnut on occasion. "Oh, well," he laughed, "I want to get out of there alive, don't I? When I have an audience hollering for it, you don't want to have to stay there for two and a half hours. That's a long time to play. You don't want to stretch it to three. If you don't play it, people aren't going to be satisfied. They keep asking for it."

While "Take Five" was and is Mr. Brubeck's "greatest hit," and a popular song often pointed to as an example of how to make an odd meter swing, my own favorite Brubeck original is his ballad "Your Own Sweet Way," which has a bittersweet way of spicing up its essentially lyrical melodic glow. Of that tune, Mr. Brubeck told me "you know, I don't know why everybody went for that. I didn't know that they were quirky turns. I just wrote it in a half an hour. So to me, it wasn't quirky. Except maybe that I'm quirky."

I asked him if he was just being true to himself.

"I didn't even think about it. I just wrote the tune. What do you think is quirky about it?"

There's that one unresolved chord at the end of the line in the "A" section. It cocks your ear a bit.

"On my recording, I go to an E flat, and Miles went to an E natural. When I asked him why he did it, he said 'why did you write it that way?' So I guess when I wrote it out for him, I wrote it with an E natural. That's the only way I can figure it out. That was his answer."

Back in 2001, Mr. Brubeck was one of the precious few living jazz legends who Ken Burns deigned to pay any attention to in his shamelessly incomplete and retro-glancing "Jazz" documentary. Of the controversial documentary, loathed by most jazz lovers and loved by many jazz loathers, Mr. Brubeck insisted in an interview that year, "Oh, it's really valuable. There's no doubt about that. As for the people that are unhappy, there's no law that says they can't go make a better one. Maybe that desire to do something that was left out of Ken Burns' (program) will stimulate a lot of research and doing something else (on the subject)."

So his view was that it's pretty much a win-win situation?

"Oh, I think it was excellent for jazz."

Whatever one's opinion, this pianist-bandleader-composer was certainly excellent for jazz.

Mr. Brubeck was also part of an elite demographic of jazz musicians on the world's main stage who brought his classical training to bear: he studied at Mills College, and his teachers included the great French composer Darius Milhaud. He went on to write orchestral works (including a score by himself and his son Chris for "Ansel Adams: America," performed by the Santa Barbara Symphony last year), oratorios expressing his Catholic faith, and music which dared cross the presumed line separating jazz and "concert music."

When I asked Mr. Brubeck about the European-influenced aspect of his music, Mr. Brubeck commented, "Sure, (there is) that, but also I listened to something called Denis Roosevelt's "Belgian Congo Records." I listened to that in 1946, and that sure gets into complex rhythms, and it's so African. You can't say it's just European-influenced. And then I went to India in '58, and I was also aware of Indian music before I went. And that's extremely complex, rhythmically."

At the end of our 2001 interview, I mentioned that he seemed to be forward-motion-oriented, and not one to rest on laurels. "I don't have time to do that. In fact, I should get back to the project I'm working on now. It's really been going well for the last couple of days. I've got so many things that just keep happening. Every time the mail comes, there's a request for some other kind of concert or project." He was aware of time, on many levels, and the importance of getting things done, living out his passion as an active musician to the end.

At the end of the 2009 Lobero show, after serving up meter-kneading tunes like "Kathy's Waltz," the 9/8 "Blue Rondo a la Turk" and the inevitable take on "Take Five," the quartet returned for a friendly encore, a simple and relaxed blues, but with a sprinkle of "Brahms Lullaby" as a coup de grace. He knew how to put on a show, with brains attached, and a generous overview of music intact.

His music lives on in recorded form and the wash of influence, of course, but we can personally mourn the official closure of the Mr. Brubeck-at-Lobero legacy, while thanking fate and Mr. Brubeck for the memories.