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### IN CONCERT: Two goes into one

By JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT



Pat Metheny, left, and Brad Mehldau perform with their quartet Sunday at Campbell Hall.

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Highly celebrated on their respective instruments, guitarist Pat Metheny and pianist Brad Mehldau come together for a fruitful collaboration, speaking easily across generations and genres.



A kind of blunt simplicity, visually and otherwise, was involved in last year's album called "Metheny Mehldau." Aside from the alliterative ring of the title, the names appeared in block capital letters, as if advertising a boxing match. Far from it, of course: these are powerful names in present musical culture, belonging to guitarist Pat Metheny and pianist Brad Mehldau, indisputably among the finest jazz players on their respective instruments.

Most importantly, that album -- and the newly released and also simply-titled "Metheny Mehldau Quartet," culled from the same sessions -- represents a long-awaited collaboration between the mutually-admiring players, and the results were artistically fruitful. Two of the more exciting and exploratory albums on the recent jazz scene, the albums represent a high ideal of musical empathy and adventure.

Now the pair will be joined by rhythm section players Larry Grenadier on bass and Jeff Ballard on drums (heard in Mehldau's Trio at the Lobero last year), in the process of taking this new "act" on the road. They'll stop at Campbell Hall on Sunday, in what promises to be a high point of this year's local jazz calendar.

Metheny was on the phone from his home in Manhattan recently, discussing his newest musical liaison. As he says, "there is the civilian version of making social connections and saying 'well, we should have dinner sometime.' Amongst musicians, the version of that same thing is 'we should get together and play.' Whenever Brad and I would say that to each other, we'd lock eyes and it was this serious 'we should really play together' (laughs). So we've been circling around this idea for awhile."

To seize the moment and the sense of possibility, Metheny finally wrangled some studio time in NYC, in December of 2005, with no plan other than to see how the relationship would work. "We didn't even want the pressure of any expectation, because we didn't really know what it would be like. It might have not gone well. Who knows?"

"But as it turned out, within 10 minutes of starting, we had a completed track. Between the two of us, we walked into the studio with 24 tunes, and we walked out with 24 tracks. Everything we tried, we could just get to. At the same time, there was that really rare and important quality that you hope for, of being engaged and inspired and finding new things. But at the same time, I think we were able to be who we are."

Collaborations between jazz players is common, but rare is the collaboration of this degree of synergistic power. But the stage was set. In his formative years, Mehldau, 36, greatly admired Metheny, as well as Keith Jarrett. Metheny, 53, has been a major Mehldau fan since he first heard the pianist with Joshua Redman's band in the early '90s.

Recalling his earliest exposure to Mehldau's playing, Metheny notes that the pianist "had great time, great ideas and an expansive harmonic sense. Especially, he had the rarest of the rare qualities, a sense of melodic development, of being able to take ideas and spin them not only to their full-blown conclusions, but thensome."

Many jazz diehards and critics have made comparisons between Metheny Mehltau and the famous 1963 album teaming up guitarist Jim Hall and pianist Bill Evans, "Undercurrent." The connection is tenuous, says Metheny, who notes that "it was revealed pretty early on to me, from Brad himself, that he has never actually heard the record. That was a pretty big record for me. But neither one of us is necessarily thinking in those terms. This collaboration wasn't so much about instrumentation as it was about orchestration."

Thankfully, Metheny, a famously eclectic guitarist given to project-hopping, has not been a stranger in Santa Barbara of late, following several years of steering tours around our town. A few years ago, his Pat Metheny Group raised the roof of Campbell Hall, with elegance and fire. Since then, he has appeared twice at the Lobero Theatre, first with his trio and then last year with the Gary Burton Quartet Revisited project, which found Metheny retracing roots to first important gig, in Burton's mid-'70s band.

It's not just a matter of lip service when Metheny expresses his newly-recharged admiration for playing in Santa Barbara. "Doing a gig there -- especially at the Lobero -- is a lot like the kinds of gigs that we do all the time in Europe," he says, "in the sense that it's not a big town, but it's got a very active community and a very hip audience, and people come. It feels part of the community, somehow, in a very hip, evolved kind of way. It's really heartening."

As for Metheny, this tour is one of many projects on his plate (or series of plates). He continues to pursue multiple projects, in search of a fuller musical expression.

"There are a lot of different stories to tell," he says, "and there are opportunities in each playing environment, to look at things that you've hopefully found to be important or true or valuable. If you're lucky, you can manifest them into a sound that people can hear. The context that that happens in is variable. Also, it's never anything you can count on.

"Even if you're on the road with the same band for a year, some nights are going to be better than others. And then there can be an occasion where you play with somebody you've never played with, and it can be unbelievable, and every shade in between. To a certain degree, I have come, over the years, to recognize the elusive nature of the whole thing."

Has he adjusted to the idea of an ever-shifting landscape, in life and music? "The ever-shifting landscape thing is a given for me," says Metheny. "That's pretty much the reality that I've lived for most of my life. Travel and moving around is something that's intrinsic to the whole deal. That seems to suit me."

That goes for shifting musical partners and matters of style, as well. The saga continues.

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PAT METHENY AND BRAD MEHLTAU

When: 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: Campbell Hall, UCSB

Cost: \$55 general, \$20 UCSB students

Tickets: 893-3535 or [www.artsandlectures.ucsb.edu](http://www.artsandlectures.ucsb.edu)