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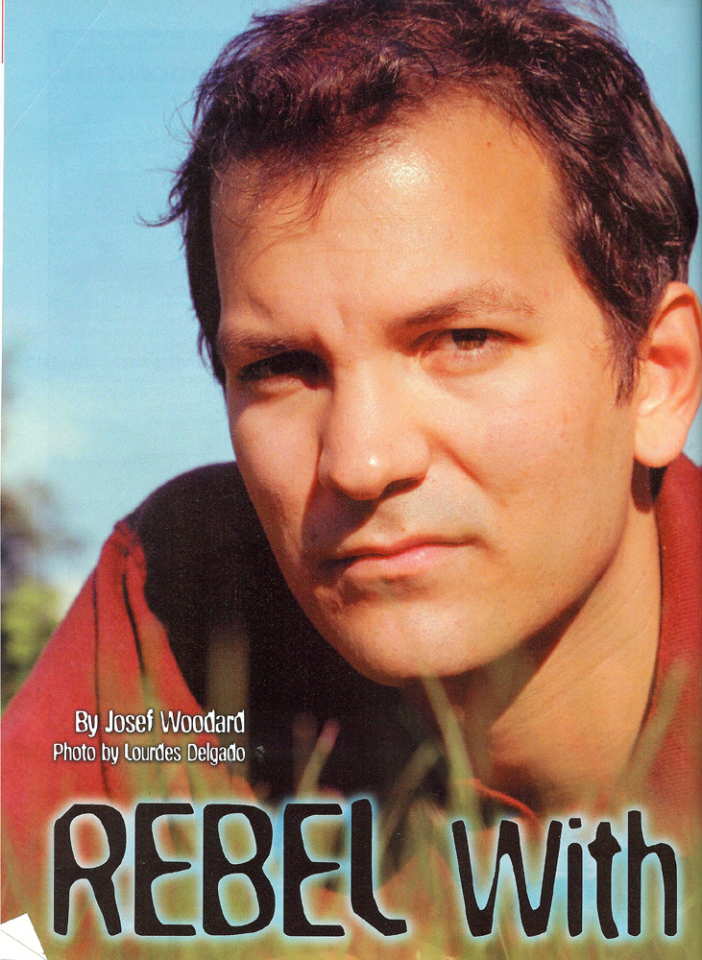
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By Josef Woodard
Photo by Lourdes Delgado

REBEL With

BRAD MEHLDAU Upsets and Expands Jazz's Status Quo

Barely five minutes into this summer's Montreal International Jazz Festival, Brad Mehldau made another one of his dazzling first impressions. In the fest's opening show, Mehldau and his empathetic trio—bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy—launched into a 5/4 rendition of Cole Porter's "Anything Goes." The pianist fused his restless creative voice and technical aplomb into the normally cheerful standard and then continued the revisionist trend, turning the declarative joy of Harold Arlen's "Get Happy" into an introspective joyride, full of emotional question marks and tricky 7/4 metric turns.

Covering Mehldau's European-sounding originals and a couple of tunes by his favorite rock band, Radiohead, the trio ended their second concert that night with another re-invented standard, "I Didn't Know What Time It Was," first heard on the 1997 album *The Art Of The Trio*. This version is in 5/4, but this group obviously knows what time it is, in a larger sense.

As heard in Montreal and on his new electro-acoustic album, *Largo*, Mehldau, 32, is becoming a prominent force in jazz. With *Largo*, given a creative spin through the help of producer Jon Brion, Mehldau provides the most lucid expression yet of his musical breadth, his rare blending of musical ideas borrowed from 19th century "art" music, jazz history and pop culture. He's a rebel with a pedigree.

In a way, *Largo* is an album Mehldau was destined to make. "If I'd met Jon earlier," Mehldau says, "and had the ability and the budget, I probably would have made the record sooner, because it seemed right up my alley.

"Hopefully, it's not even presented as, This is Coltrane and jazz, this is Led Zeppelin and classic rock, Radiohead and contemporary alternative. Real music fans listen to a broad base of things. That's the way it is for me."

One might detect a kind of prodigal son arc in the Mehldau saga thus far. He grew up in West Hartford, Conn., studying classically as a youth and then at the New School in Manhattan, where his teachers included pianist Fred Hersch. He made a strong first impression on his first big gig, in Joshua Redman's band, starting in 1993. In 1995, Mehldau, at friend Charlie Haden's behest, moved to Los Angeles for five years. While based there, he built his musical esthetic from the ground up.

Mehldau achieved another stellar first impression on track one of his 1995 Warner Bros. debut, *Introducing Brad Mehldau*, with a heroic solo on "It Might As Well Be Spring." It announced the arrival of a potent new voice in the post-Kenji Jarrett jazz piano world. He has since recorded several albums for Warner Bros. with his trio (including five under the rubric *The Art Of The Trio*) and a solo project, *Elegiac Cycle*. After a slow, steady entrenchment as a young jazz hero, he moved back to a town on the Hudson River—between Manhattan and West Hartford—with his own family in tow. He and his wife, the Dutch singer Fleurine, have a baby daughter, Eden, who they took around the Montreal Jazz Festival.

Mehldau also makes a formidable first impression on *Largo*, one of the freshest treats of the current jazz season. On it, he veers from his sweet, gospel-tinged melody on "When It Rains" into one of his signature improvisational journeys during the solo, weaving all around the tone center with cerebral intensity. *Largo*, given its deliciously harebrained yet serious-minded blend of avant-jazz-pop, electronica-improv, twisted piano jazz, lounge meets drum-'n'-bass (a cheeky medley of "Wave" and "Mother Nature's Son," with Mehldau on vibes), is unlike any of his eight other Warner Bros. albums. It also happens to be his most important recording to date, at least in terms of adding something new to jazz's evolution.

Blame it partly on coveted pop producer Brion, whose handiwork can be heard on albums by Fiona Apple, Rufus Wainwright,

A PEDIGREE

Aimee Mann and many others. More to the point, Brion, who started out as a studio musician and is an avid singer-songwriter, can also be found every Friday night at the compact, hip West Hollywood club Largo, which served as a second home-like haunt for Mehldau during his West Coast "wilderness years."

When a friend invited Mehldau to check out Brion's delightfully meandering, multi-instrumental one-man Friday night music club, the pianist became an instant fan. He remembers that, "[Jon] could play just about any instrument, not only serviceably but really well. I once saw him do a whole set of Beatles covers, just on vibes and singing. He has this incredible arranging and orchestration sense, where he can take any tune, break it down and play it on any instrument."

Although this was Brion's virgin voyage on a jazz project, he confesses, "I've wanted to make a jazz record for awhile, and I still may make one myself." He has been less than impressed, however, with much of the retro direction of jazz in recent years, which is partly what struck him about Mehldau's broader esthetic. "Jazz is supposed to have its sense of reinvention built in," Brion says. "All the people I loved clearly embraced that their entire lives, like Miles Davis. To say Brad Mehldau is a jazz pianist is correct, but that takes away a good piece of his Brad Mehldau-ness. I love everything about the guy and everything about the musician."

In Los Angeles, Mehldau regularly preferred to play at Largo, forging the usual jazz venues in town. Undoubtedly, it was partly a resistance to being typecast as a card-carrying jazzbo and also because he found a happy nest-like environment at Largo. He is happy to avoid predictability, even if it means being a man slightly out of his element.

Mehldau confesses, "I always thought of Largo as kind of the West Coast singer-songwriter equivalent of Small's in New York," referring to the tiny yet influential basement club in Greenwich Village where Mehldau played in his fledgling days. "There's something underground about it, and it's a fostering ground for a lot of people who then get a bigger name, playing all over. There's also that protectionist, prideful, patriotic feeling about the place with the people who go there all the time."

Even so, Mehldau notes, he was aware of his semi-outsider status at Largo, normally home to a "weird subculture of singer-songwriters. Some of them almost have an anti-jazz sensibility, a suspicion of jazz. That was refreshing, and interesting, to see a flipside. I was almost a gadfly of jazz there. The singer-songwriter esthetic is so contrary to jazz in a lot of ways, because it's all about making a three-minute tune that really gets to the heart of the matter. But, the guy who runs Largo, Mark Flanagan, is a real jazz fan."

Flanagan, it turns out, was the catalyst for the Brion-Mehldau project. Finally lining up logistics last year, Largo's recording process was relatively luxurious, by lean jazz standards. They spent seven tracking days in Capitol Records studios, and had nine days for mixing, affording for the extra sonic flavorings and detours in which Brion specializes. Swatches of brass and woodwind and various tinkering give the album a fresh sound. Musical worlds and scenes collided, in a happy way: Brion brought in musicians from outside the jazz firmament, including drummers Matt Chamberlain and Jim Keltner, and electric bassist Justin Meldal-Jonson and drummer Victor Indrizzo, from Beck's band. From Mehldau's world, the pianist brought in both his long-standing trio as well as

one of the finest bassists in Los Angeles, Darek Oies.

Despite the appearance of electronic textures on *Largo*, it was achieved by mostly organic, non-digital means. Brion's trick bag included a "prepared piano" effect, using poster putty on the piano's bass strings to get a combination of harmonics and muting to create a cosmic marimba sound. "Jon's pretty anti-digital," Mehldau says. "I'm not a synth guy. I love a lot of records and music with synthesizers, like Lyle Mays and Zawinul. I also like a lot of what Herbie has done over the years. But it's just not my area of expertise. I'm most comfortable feeling the action of an acoustic piano. So, with the exception of the vibes, everything that I'm playing on there is the piano. And then it's just all the crazy shit Jon was doing to it along the way."

Brion's production touch might be comparable to the fresh ideas brought to jazz recording by producer Craig Street, who with Cassandra Wilson and others sidestepped the usual hands-off jazz production model. Talking about his approach toward the sessions, Brion asserts that, "in a lot of ways, the album was very collaborative in that I was being a situationist. A lot of the stuff has two or three drummers playing. Based on knowing those musicians, I might say, 'OK, so and so will supply the backbeat, so and so will provide color, and the third person will play very small things.' With Brad, we would maybe mix something differently, or treat one section of his piano, to create these environments. Then the musicians would do it all themselves."

As Brion also explains, despite any impressions to the contrary, "there are no overdubs of any kind on the record. It is a completely live record."

Mehldau is well-aware that *Largo* may put off listeners more attuned to his extension of the jazz piano trio tradition than experimental rock notions. "When I did *Elegiac Cycle*, it was in an opposite direction—just stripped down and with the most obvious influence of real specific classical references," he says. "There were some reviews I read where people were disenchanted or worried that I was getting away from jazz piano trio and going off into this sort of pseudo-classical music direction. By the same token, more people listened to me. I did some gigs in Germany and Switzerland at crossover classical-jazz festivals."

"The same thing might happen with this. People who are used to listening to rock and roll or just experimental jam band stuff but aren't as crazy about older acoustic jazz might get drawn into it."

Brion has his own ideas about the potential for this record to be misunderstood. "At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what people think about this record. Brad is our Miles Davis, as far as I'm concerned. Of his generation, he's the most gifted guy. This is where he was on that week. The way record company promotion works, people can be saying, 'That's what he's doing this year.' No. This was one week of a creative person's life."

Changing and challenging his own perceptions seems to be important to the pianist. To cite *Largo* as a rock-infused jazz album misses the point. For one thing, a certain 19th century fixation hovers over Mehldau's approach when he plays, whether he's waxing Brahms or Schumann on an improvisational interlude or in his generally Romantic perspective. It even shows up on the new album's version of the Radiohead song "Paranoid Android." The modular arrangement includes an almost Schubert-like statement of the melody on solo piano.

Mehldau became a big Radiohead fan after hearing the band's breakthrough album, *OK Computer*, and he finds in them a similar "unifying emotional" quality that he has appreciated in Pink Floyd. "There's a sense of expressing a real alienation with the world you're in, and they're uncanny at doing that. But at the same time, they're a little more hopeful than Pink Floyd."

Dualities rule for Mehldau, a complex character eager to introduce contemporary pop elements into the jazz landscape while clinging to his classical values. Easy-going on one level, but intellectually fervent, he's a voracious reader who leans toward literary allusions (his publishing company is called Werther, after Goethe's doomed hero). Apart from the music itself, his discography has included such seeming extremes as printing an elaborate and well-written essay debunking his presumed Bill Evans debt on *The Art Of The Trio, Vol. 4*, and a photo of the trio perched before urinals inside the album *Places*, their latter-day take on the famous *Who's Next* cover. The moral: The band that pisses together stays together.

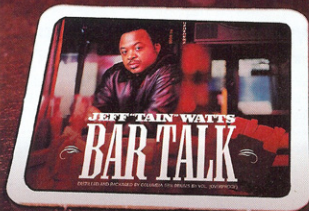
Five years ago at the Montreal Jazz Festival, Mehldau was still an emerging pianist suddenly tilting into a rapid rise. That year, he put in a duo concert with Haden, and also performed in a magical trio setting with Haden and Lee Konitz. That trio had come about almost accidentally, when Konitz booked a gig at the Jazz Bakery in Los Angeles and asked Haden to find a good pianist for the date. Haden immediately thought of Mehldau, and the result was a special trio that released two albums on Blue Note. At the 2001 San Sebastian Jazz Festival, Haden enthused about having just heard Mehldau at the North Sea Festival a week earlier, recalling his old days as part of the Jarrett trio in the '70s. "As I was listening to his trio," Haden said, "it reminded me of when the young Keith Jarrett trio was playing. It was a trio of three impatient musicians who couldn't wait to play something new and different, compulsive people concerned with the urgency of spontaneity and improvisation."

Another musician who Mehldau hooked up with while in Los Angeles was saxophonist Charles Lloyd. Because Mehldau's solo career was taking off at the time, they worked only sporadically, but did manage a series of recording sessions with the late drummer Billy Higgins, resulting in two ECM albums, *The Water Is Wide* and *Hyperion With Higgins*.

"I heard Brad playing these tender things, and I heard that he was driving with his headlights on," Lloyd says. "This guy was awake. He had the whole thing together. He was singing from a deep place, and that touched me. Brad is a tender poet. He's got this deep soul. He's a romantic of another order."

Playing in a trio with Grenadier and Rossy has been a critical aspect of Mehldau's evolution over the last several years. In thinking about the delicate balance of creative energies in an effective piano trio, he has listened to a variety of sources. "I was influenced by the Wynton Kelly trio with Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb," he says. "Also, I like what were rhythm sections rather than actual trios, like the one with Sam Jones, Louis Hayes and Bobby Timmons in Cannonball Adderley's band; and Mal Waldron, Richard Davis and Ed Blackwell. Of course, there was the band with Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams and Ron Carter; and McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones."

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Not surprisingly, given Mehldau's tendencies in phrasing and also his penchant for revisiting standards, Jarrett is a big hero. "I heard him before I started listening to straight-ahead jazz," he says. "When I was 13, a friend knew about Keith Jarrett and he bought me the *Köln Concert*. That's an ideal to aspire to—not to play like him, but to have the amount of creativity that he has and the ability to tap into it."

Of course, he listened to Bill Evans with Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian, but he asserts, "I don't think it influenced me too much. I've cringed when some critics say that I was obviously first and foremost influenced by Bill Evans. It's not true. I've started to feel like it's a conspiracy against me. All the critics mention Bill Evans as someone who I'm aspiring to be like."

The topic of critics is one about which Mehldau has thought significantly. He has had his share of critical arrows from detractors who point to what they perceive as the influences and forebears of his style. Has he developed thick skin in dealing with criticism? "I've tried," he muses. "It's definitely something to be cultivated. I guess they're necessary. The only danger is that you don't have any control over it. What can happen when they say these things is that people can listen to it and then get an idea in their head, before they even hear you."

"A lot of times, what they really want to do is to make you smaller. Maybe that's my own ego. Comparing you to someone else makes you less you and more this little thing that is connected to the jazz food chain."

But at the moment, Mehldau's trio is flying high on its own musical course, showing both a taste for adventure and solid grounding in the piano trio tradition. "It becomes more and more of a challenge to excite myself and not become placated," he says. "Often, someone will ask me about my plans for the future. For me, it's always just pretty much the near future. I'm just going to keep on playing with the trio because that's fun."

"I never could have guessed that we'd be together for so long. There's such a comfort level and the feeling of trust, musically, is there from the get-go. It's like a friendship, so we don't have to re-acquaint ourselves every time we get up there."

But Mehldau understands that bandstand familiarity must not lead to stagnation. Getting unstuck is the subplot of *Largo*. It remains to be seen whether the album will be an impetuous anomaly in Mehldau's discography, or a hint of ideas and hybrids to come. Its philosophical underpinnings suggest Mehldau's will to upset and expand jazz's status quo, to engage in the essential dialogue with what jazz is and can still become, all the while with taste intact. He's conscious of the duality of that mission, as a musician who remains allergic to complacency.

"There's something about jazz that you can't just write off immediately," he surmises, "Jazz has often been on the sidelines. There's something that I find cool about protectionism—not by the musicians, though, but by the fans. I'm all for that. That's why, if someone says, 'What the hell is he doing? It's a project and he's abandoning his jazz roots,' I would never feel the least bit of contempt or scorn for that person. In fact, I'd feel a weird empathy."

"Those are the people who keep the whole discourse going and keep on talking about specific reasons why hard-swinging jazz with a rhythm section will never go out of style. There needs to be room for everything."