



THE QUOTES:

"Universally admired as one of the most adventurous pianists to arrive on the jazz scene in years."
THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

"Inside the music of Brad Mehldau is a conflict among rock, jazz and classical personalities. Ultimately, though, the pianist has figured a way to integrate all three pretty seamlessly."
THE PHILADELPHIA ENQUIRER

"The elliptical lines, volatile rhythmic figures and unexpected bursts of color and dissonance... prove that Mehldau writes as cleverly as he plays."
THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

"Mehldau achieves an almost spiritual resonance, chords echoing like amens."
TIME MAGAZINE

Brad Mehldau

Jazz pianist **Brad Mehldau** has recorded and performed extensively since the early 1990s. Mehldau's most consistent output over the years has taken place in the trio format. Starting in 1996, his group released a series of five records on Warner Bros. entitled *The Art of the Trio*. Other Mehldau recordings include *Largo*, a collaborative effort with the innovative musician and producer **Jon Brion**, and *Anything Goes* - a trio outing with bassist **Larry Grenadier** and drummer **Jorge Rossy**.

His first record for Nonesuch, *Brad Mehldau Live in Tokyo*, was released in September 2004. After ten rewarding years with Rossy playing in Mehldau's regular trio, drummer **Jeff Ballard** joined the band in 2005. The label released its first album from the Brad Mehldau Trio - *Day is Done* - on September 27, 2005.

Mehldau has performed around the world at a steady pace since the mid-1990s, with his trio and as a solo pianist. His performances convey a wide range of expression. There is often an intellectual rigor to the continuous process of abstraction that may take place on a given tune, and a certain density of information. That could be followed by a stripped down, emotionally direct ballad. Mehldau favors juxtaposing extremes. He has attracted a sizeable following over the years, one that has grown to expect a singular, intense experience in his performance.

In addition to his trio and solo projects, Mehldau has worked with a number of great jazz musicians, including a rewarding gig with saxophonist **Joshua Redman's** band for two years, recordings and concerts with **Charlie Haden** and **Lee Konitz**, and recording as a sideman with the likes of **Wayne Shorter**, **John Scofield**, and **Charles Lloyd**. For more than a decade, he has collaborated with several musicians and peers whom he respects greatly, including the guitarists **Peter Bernstein** and **Kurt Rosenwinkel** and tenor saxophonist **Mark Turner**. His music has appeared in several movies, including **Stanley Kubrick's** *Eyes Wide Shut* and **Wim Wender's** *Million Dollar Hotel*. He also composed an original soundtrack for the French film, *Ma Femme Est Une Actrice*. Mehldau recently composed two new works commissioned by Carnegie Hall for voice and piano, *The Blue Estuaries* and *The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, which were performed in the spring of 2005 with the acclaimed classical soprano, **Renee Fleming**.

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BRAD MEHLDAU

Biography

2008

Jazz pianist Brad Mehldau has recorded and performed extensively since the early 1990s. Mehldau's most consistent output over the years has taken place in the trio format. Starting in 1996, his group released a series of five records on Warner Bros. entitled *The Art of the Trio*. Mehldau also has a solo piano recording entitled *Elegiac Cycle*, and a record called *Places* that includes both solo piano and trio songs. *Elegiac Cycle* and *Places* might be called "concept" albums. They are made up exclusively of original material and have central themes that hover over the compositions. Other Mehldau recordings include *Largo*, a collaborative effort with the innovative musician and producer Jon Brion, and *Anything Goes*—a trio outing with bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy.

His first record for Nonesuch, *Brad Mehldau Live in Tokyo*, was released in September 2004. After ten rewarding years with Rossy playing in Mehldau's regular trio, drummer Jeff Ballard joined the band in 2005. The label released its first album from the Brad Mehldau Trio—*Day is Done*—on September 27, 2005. An exciting double live trio recording entitled *Brad Mehldau Trio Live* was released on March 25th, 2008 (Nonesuch) to critical acclaim.

Mehldau's musical personality forms a dichotomy. He is first and foremost an improviser, and greatly cherishes the surprise and wonder that can occur from a spontaneous musical idea that is expressed directly, in real time. But he also has a deep fascination for the formal architecture of music, and it informs everything he plays. In his most inspired playing, the actual structure of his musical thought serves as an expressive device. As he plays, he listens to how ideas unwind, and the order in which they reveal themselves. Each tune has a strongly felt narrative arch, whether it expresses itself in a beginning, an end, or something left intentionally open-ended. The two sides of Mehldau's personality—the improviser and the formalist—play off each other, and the effect is often something like controlled chaos.

Mehldau has performed around the world at a steady pace since the mid-1990s, with his trio and as a solo pianist. His performances convey a wide range of expression. There is often an intellectual rigor to the continuous process of abstraction that may take place on a given tune, and a certain density of information. That could be followed by a stripped down, emotionally direct ballad. Mehldau favors juxtaposing extremes. He has attracted a sizeable following over the years, one that has grown to expect a singular, intense experience in his performance.

In addition to his trio and solo projects, Mehldau has worked with a number of great jazz musicians, including a rewarding gig with saxophonist Joshua Redman's band for two years, recordings and concerts with Pat Metheny, Charlie Haden and Lee Konitz, and recording as a sideman with the likes of Michael Brecker, Wayne Shorter, John Scofield, and Charles Lloyd. For more than a decade, he has collaborated with several musicians and peers whom he respects greatly, including the guitarists Peter Bernstein and Kurt Rosenwinkel and tenor saxophonist Mark Turner. Mehldau also has played on a number of recordings outside of the jazz idiom, like Willie Nelson's *Teatro* and singer-songwriter Joe Henry's *Scar*. His music has appeared in several movies, including Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* and Wim Wender's *Million Dollar Hotel*. He also composed an original soundtrack for the French film, *Ma Femme Est Une Actrice*. Mehldau recently composed two new works commissioned by Carnegie Hall for voice and piano, *The Blue Estuaries* and *The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, which were performed in the spring of 2005 with the acclaimed classical soprano, Renee Fleming. These songs were recorded with Fleming and released in 2006 on the Love Sublime record; simultaneously, Nonesuch released an album of Mehldau's jazz compositions for trio entitled *House on Hill*. In March 2007 Mehldau debuted the piano concerto "The Brady Bunch Variations for piano and orchestra" at Theatre du Chatelet in Paris with Orchestre national d'Ile-de-France. In early 2008 London's Wigmore Hall announced that Brad Mehldau will curate an annual four-concert jazz series at the prestigious hall during its 2009-10 and 2010-11 seasons, with Mehldau appearing in at least two of the four annual concerts.

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BRAD MEHLDAU

Discography/Career Highlights

2008

As Leader

Brad Mehldau Trio Live (Nonesuch Records)
House On Hill (Nonesuch Records)
Day Is Done (Nonesuch Records)
Live in Tokyo (Nonesuch Records)
Anything Goes (Warner Bros. Records)
Largo (Warner Bros. Records)
Progression – Art of the Trio, Volume 5 (Warner Bros. Records 48005)
Places – (Warner Bros. Records 47693)
Art of the Trio 4 – Back at the Vanguard (Warner Bros. Records 47463)
Elegiac Cycle - (Warner Bros. Records 47357)
Art of the Trio Volume 3 - Songs (Warner Bros. Records 47051)
Art of the Trio Volume 2 - Live at the Village Vanguard (Warner Bros. Records 46848)
Art of the Trio Volume 1 (Warner Bros. Records 46260)
Introducing Brad Mehldau (Warner Bros. Records 45997)

As Co-Leader

Quartet (with Pat Metheny) (Nonesuch) 2007
Metheny Mehldau (Nonesuch) 2006
Love Sublime (with Renee Fleming) 2006
Close Enough for Love- Fleurine (EmArcy/Verve) 2000
NY Barcelona Crossing (Fresh Sound FSNT-031)
NY Barcelona Crossing #2 (Fresh Sound FSNT-037)
When I Fall In Love -Mehldau & Rossy Trio (Fresh Sound FSNT-007)

As Sideman

Pilgrimage – Michael Brecker (Heads Up/Telarc)
Timeless Tales - Joshua Redman Quartet (Warner Bros. 47052)
In This World - Mark Turner (Warner Bros. 47074)
Teatro - Willie Nelson (Island 314524548)
Moodswing - Joshua Redman Quartet (Warner Bros. 45643)
Alone Together - Lee Konitz/Charlie Haden (Blue Note 57150)
Warner Jams, Volume One (Warner Bros. 45919)
Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil Soundtrack (Warner Bros. 46829)
Warner Bros. Jazz Christmas Party (Warner Bros. 46793)
Something Blue – Lee Konitz/Charlie Haden (Blue Note)
Young at Heart – Jessie Davis (Concord CCD 45651)
Downtown Sounds – Grant Stewart (Criss-Cross Jazz 1085)
Ademuz – Perico Sambert + 10 (EGT 660)
Somethings Burnin’ – Peter Bernstein (Criss-Cross Jazz 1091)
Signs of Life – Peter Bernstein (Criss -Cross Jazz 1095)

Career Highlights:

- **2008 Top 20 Talents to Watch in 2008** – *The Daily Telegraph (UK)*
- **2007 Best Artist: Piano** – *Downbeat Reader's Poll*
- **2006 Miles Davis Award** – *Montreal Jazz Fest*
- **2004 Best Artist: Piano** - *Down Beat Readers Poll*
- **1999 Grammy Nominee – Best Jazz Instrumental** *Art of the Trio 4, Back at the Vanguard*
- **Top 10 Album of 1999 Time Magazine** – *Elegiac Cycle*
- **"Jazz Pianist of the Year" 1999, 2000 and 2002** *Down Beat Readers Poll*
- **Best Jazz Artist of 1999** *Musica Jazz Critics Poll (Italy)*
- **#1 Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition Acoustic Jazz Piano** - 1997, 1998 & 1999 *Down Beat Critics Poll*
- **#1 Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition Acoustic Jazz Group** - 1998 & 1999 *Down Beat Critics Poll*
- **"Choc" Award 1999** *Le Monde de la Musique - Elegiac Cycle*
- **New Star of 1998** - *Swing Journal Disc Award (Japan)*
- **Best Jazz Album of the Year 1998:** *Songs - Jazzman magazine (France)*
- **Best Foreign Musician of the Year** - *D'Jango d'Or 98 (France)*
- **The Best CD of 1997** - *Academie du Jazz (France)*
- **1997 Grammy Nominee** - *Best Jazz Instrumental Solo*
- **1997 UPI Top 10** – *Art Of The Trio, Vol. 1 - Jazz Album of the Year*
- **Best New Artist of 1997** - *Jazz Times Readers Poll*
- **Best New Talent of 1997** - *Musica Jazz Critics Poll (Italy)*
- **Debut Artist of the Year 1997** - *New York Jazz Awards*

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October 12, 2006

MUSIC REVIEW | 'BRAD MEHLDAU TRIO'

A Revised Trio Marches Along a Road to Its Own Distinctive Identity

By NATE CHINEN

Four months ago Nonesuch Records issued an entrancing album, “House on Hill,” that could be described as a posthumous release by the original Brad Mehldau Trio. That ensemble’s decade-long tenure ended late in 2004, when Jeff Ballard replaced Jorge Rossy on drums.

The new trio was essentially a different group — tougher, brighter, more bustling and assertive — even though Mr. Mehldau’s pianism was still the central focus. Its first album, “Day Is Done” (Nonesuch), implied a renewal of purpose. The group’s debut at the Village Vanguard last November gave the impression of a search for self-definition.

This week the trio is back at the Vanguard, bearing good news that the search, while continuing, has already produced results. Tuesday night’s opening set was a marvel of concentration and restraint. In a sense, it combined the meditative grace of “House on Hill” with the earthy insistence of “Day Is Done,” though the better argument would be that the group has found a way to generate its own kind of steam.

Much of the change can be credited to a refinement of the rapport between Mr. Mehldau and Mr. Ballard. What registered a year ago as a welcome turbulence has evened out just slightly, so that the momentum feels subtler, more like an undercurrent. Nothing has been sacrificed in this transformation, perhaps partly because of the stabilizing presence of the bassist Larry Grenadier.

On a brisk new original called “Ruby’s Rub,” the trio applied a simmering heat of the sort that once propelled [Miles Davis](#)’s mid-1960’s rhythm section, which featured [Herbie Hancock](#) on piano and Tony Williams on drums. Mr. Mehldau soloed judiciously, leaving plenty of space between one phrase and the next. Each opening was an opportunity for Mr. Ballard, whose responses indicated a thoughtful rigor.

The other new piece — “Buddha Realm,” an anagram of Mr. Mehldau’s name — had a similarly investigative quality. Mr. Grenadier provided its anchor, a one-note ostinato. Confident in this mooring, Mr. Mehldau opted for a floating sensibility in his solo, along with some unforced ambidexterity.

Mr. Mehldau has earned a reputation for reinterpreting Radiohead, and most of his performances include at least one popular cover. Here it was Soundgarden’s “Black Hole Sun,” and it worked well enough. What gave the piece its oomph were things incidental to the tune: an impressive double-time solo by Mr. Grenadier, followed by a tumultuous elaboration on the song’s closing riff.

The trio matched material and message more effectively on a pair of stately ballads that advanced two different perspectives on romance. “O que Será,” by the Brazilian singer Chico Buarque, conveyed the sense

of something unrequited, mounting in intensity but never breaking through. By contrast, the songbook standard “More Than You Know” conveyed as much emotional tension as a warm bath. And with its luxurious tempo and Mr. Mehldau’s eloquent inscription, it had the same effect as one.

The Brad Mehldau Trio continues through Sunday at the Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Avenue South, at 11th Street, West Village; (212) 255-4037, villagevanguard.com.

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He lets his music speak for him

By Kevin L. Carter

For *The Inquirer* (Philadelphia) – 01.30.06

Inside the music of Brad Mehldau is a conflict among rock, jazz and classical personalities. Ultimately, though, the pianist, who played a solo set Friday night at the Kimmel Center, has figured a way to integrate all three pretty seamlessly.

Conducting himself in a businesslike manner, Mehldau ran through a quick, but satisfying set, bowing humbly and smiling after each tune, but saying nothing to his audience.

Mehldau's solo work was passionate and dense, bringing deliberately misdirectional, Monksque ideas to the evening. Despite his reserved demeanor, the pianist draws on deep wells of emotion.

His last tune, the intellectual English rocker Nick Drake's "River Man," which is becoming a standard, was typical of Mehldau's academic, but adventurous style. Slowing down the tempo of the tune with an unconventional time signature, Mehldau added figures and rhythms with his left hand, bringing some of the original's orchestral sensibilities to a pianistic exercise.

Vibist Gary Burton, who brought a quartet of young players, offered a bright, but equally forward-looking set during the second part of the show. With a performance that included several Latin-inflected tunes and an amiable, self-deprecating manner, he represented a contrast to the impressive but cold Mehldau.

Two of Burton's sidemen showed especially mature approaches to their work. Latin music forms are so prevalent in jazz now that they can be played as banal cliché. But Odessa-born pianist Vadim Neselovskyi felt free enough with the motifs on tunes such as "Early" that he interjected ideas that enhanced them greatly.

Scofield, Mehldau trios thrill Richmond jazz fans

BY DOUGLAS WATTS
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The jazz trio format was in the spotlight last night as two of the top threesomes in the business entertained a sold-out crowd at the University of Richmond Modlin Center. The Brad Mehldau and John Scofield Trios both performed in a nearly three-hour show.

Seeing either of these bands play alone would

MUSIC REVIEW

WHO: The John Scofield Trio and The Brad Mehldau Trio

WHERE: University of Richmond Modlin Center

WHEN: Last night

have been a treat. Getting to see both was a rare pleasure for live jazz in Richmond.

Mehldau kicked things off on the piano with "All the Things You Are" accompanied by Larry Grenadier on acoustic stand-up bass and Jeff Ballard on drums. Their uptempo treatment of this standard featured solos by all three players.

The pace was slowed down on the next tune with a simmering Salsa rhythm. Grenadier solidly kept the tempo while leaving open spaces for Mehldau to draw out the melody, allowing the song to slowly evolve.

"The Very Thought of You" got a slow, bluesy treatment with Mehldau providing deep, rich piano tones with his left hand chord comping. Contorting his body and cocking his head slightly to one side, he poured himself entirely into the music.

They finished their set with a Nick Drake song

entitled "Day Is Done." Here, Grenadier introduced the melody before leading into a funky, rhythmic solo. Ballard deceptively looked cool and calm while keeping a ferocious, lively beat as Mehldau stretched out for some improvising. This resulted in the first standing ovation of the evening.

John Scofield showed why he is considered one of the best guitarists in modern jazz. With longtime collaborators Steve Swallow on bass and Bill Stewart on drums, the trio played a set mostly comprised of songs from their recent live CD "En Route."

On "Green Tea," Scofield swayed back and forth to the music with his eyes closed, playing funky, angular lead lines over a percolating rhythm. His bright red, semi-hollow body guitar was played using a variety of effects, particularly echo and delay, giving him a rock-oriented sound at times.

Swallow played an unusual 5-string acoustic-electric bass on which he sometimes strummed chords with his fingers while using a pick to hit the root notes of the chords. He combined rapid-fire solos with walking bass line rhythms.

Scofield sounded his best on Burt Bacharach's "Alphie" and his own composition "Hammock Soliloquy." Alphie was slow with plenty of improvisation. "Hammock Soliloquy," which he said was named by his teenage son when he couldn't think of a title, featured numerous tempo changes and some throw-down wah-wah pedal lead guitar.

The evening ended with Mehldau joining Scofield's trio for an encore that they described as "jam band style." The crowd erupted with a loud standing ovation.

The Independent

London

Wednesday, November 24, 2004

Brad Mehldau/Brad Mehldau Trio, Wigmore Hall, London Jazz Festival

By Martin Longley

The classical environs of Wigmore Hall provided a perfect setting for Brad Mehldau's London Jazz Festival appearances. There is a sense of occasion to these sold-out concerts. On the first of two all-acoustic nights, this acclaimed US pianist played a solo set, in keeping with the repertoire of his recent *Live in Tokyo* album. That recording came about by accident. The promoter of a February 2003 gig recorded Mehldau's set, and sent him the DAT. He had just moved to the Nonesuch label, and suggested they release this well-captured concert.

Mehldau has been steadily increasing the frequency of his solo performances. This is an outlet that increases the tendency towards unpredictability; a format that hasn't built up a settled vocabulary. Mehldau doesn't allow his tunes to sprawl, keeping most of his readings down to a tight five minutes. Set free from the rhythmic responsibilities of his trio, Brad is able to unwind; varying tempo, articulation and melodic content in a roving, exploratory manner. His evolution is serpentine: Mehldau tends to maintain a constant rippling motion.

He's at once abstract and focused: delivering the straight tune, but with elaborate decoration. The repertoire encompasses Monk, McCartney and Mehldau himself, going back as far as Gershwin and forward into Radiohead. The latter's "Paranoid Android" is the evening's longest piece; a fitting climax, just before the encores start flowing.

Mehldau's first set was filled with greater invention; its second half becoming less focused. Midway, he found a rogue note, and took the unprecedented step of halting; heading backstage in search of the piano tuner who, it transpired, had left the building. Mehldau soldiered on, turning the closing run into a linear rush of rhythmically emphatic, bluesy expression.

Mehldau's princely reputation has been formed by the five-volume *Art of the Trio* album sequence. This setting is his home; his foundation. The following night, Mehldau's regular trio drew what looked like a jazzier kind of crowd. There are different aspects of freedom. Here, Brad has to respond to the bass and drum structures of Larry Grenadier and Jorge Rossy, but their presence allows him to play in a relaxed and spacious fashion. The volume balance between the threesome is perfectly judged, as Rossy skims his skins with lightness of touch.

Mehldau mixes Cole Porter with Lennon-McCartney, crossing the path from willowy ballads to jaunty steppers. His own compositions are generously interspersed, heading off through a labyrinth. Mehldau seems more personable than in the past, periodically introducing clusters of tunes to the audience. In the solo and trio realms, Mehldau's rich sound is embraced by the Wigmore acoustic, reminding his jazz audience how much a piano can be polluted by the often clumsy amplification of a PA system.

The Guardian

Saturday, November 20, 2004

Brad Mehldau London Jazz Festival

By John Fordham

Saturday, November 20, 2004

★★★★★

Whoever thought of putting the American piano virtuoso Brad Mehldau in the Wigmore Hall for two nights deserves a raise. The second show was an unamplified concert for the trio that has now released seven successful acoustic jazz albums since 1996 - a spectacular tribute to the power of original music-making over modishness. The quietly remorseless Mehldau has made virtually no concessions to the ostensibly obligatory palliatives of electronics, fusion or smooth-jazz singers - but as the age range and enthusiasm of the audience showed, his communicative powers are immense and the unplugged sound in the room made them more so.

High among his gifts is the ability to apparently abandon the bar-breaks and chord-turns of the song structure while sustaining constant echoes of the tune. His long improvisations thus suggest extended forms more in common with classical music than with jazz's traditional miniaturism, while still cherishing melody, spontaneity and swing.

Grenada, the opening piece, was underpinned by a typical Mehldau prop, the quietly rocking two-chord mid-tempo vamp; bassist Larry Grenadier's countermelodies and Jorge Rossey's shimmering cymbal sound

and occasional diversions into hand-drumming propelling it. Mehldau's second solo took the piece to another level of long-lined phrasing, double-time, and distance from the theme, another of his favourite variation styles.

The second half's All the Things You Are began with a right-hand improvisation instead of a theme, the song only hinted at by Mehldau's sporadic harrying at the bass notes. Radiohead's Everything In Its Right Place explored the trio's evocation of a kind of trancelike funk, More Than You Know and Lennon and McCartney's She's Leaving Home found Mehldau at his most unsentimentally romantic, with an encore on Spring Fever highlighting his minimalist, rhythm-based fondness for drumlike repeat notes and unpredictable use of space. Delicious.

Brad Mehldau

National Concert Hall, Dublin

The Irish Times 17 Nov 2004

By Ray Comiskey

The word "jazz" had a low profile, at least visually, when Brad Mehldau played at the National Concert Hall on Monday. So it was particularly satisfying to see a near-capacity audience, few of whom seemed likely to go near anything described as jazz, demand three encores and give the pianist a standing ovation at the end.

He deserved it. In an impressive display of technique, rigorous intellectual application and emotional warmth he underlined just why he is regarded as one of the world's foremost jazz pianists, a field abundantly populated with brilliant performers.

What was also evident was his increasingly lyrical approach to solo performance, and, while marriage and fatherhood may have a part in that, it also seems simply evidence of the growing artistic maturity of an extraordinary musician.

He seems less inclined to dwell obsessively on some aspects of performance, for example, especially when dealing with material by artists such as Radiohead; on *Night Out* the use of a motif seemed less relentless and more inventive than in the past, and even though *Paranoid Android*, a piece he must have played hundreds of times, took him into denser textures (with a hint of autopilot) there was nothing like the almost 20-minute version on his recent *Live In Tokyo* CD.

That was one of four pieces from this new CD, and it was also notable that, as on this release, he seems to arrive more quickly at the core of the material's improvisational possibilities. The brief, delightful opener, Paul McCartney's *Junk*, was typical of this; even Thelonious Monk's *Think Of One* and *Monk's Mood* didn't tempt him into verbosity, nor did the juxtaposition of Jobim's *Zingaro* followed by his own *Paris* in a dazzling example of interplay between both hands.

Perhaps inevitably, it was the most familiar material that gave the greatest insight into his imaginative vocabulary and the economy with which he used it. A lovely *On The Street Where You Live* was a prelude to some breathtaking responses to standards later in the programme. Cole Porter is obviously a favourite; a dramatic reading of *I Concentrate On You* and a brilliantly orchestral *From This Moment On* - almost a miniature fantasia - showed his affinity with the composer's work.

But perhaps the finest examples of his sensitive insight into standards were two Gershwin pieces. An utterly beautiful, rigorous recasting of *Someone To Watch Over Me*, with an astonishing coda, was matched by his final encore, *How Long Has This Been Going On?* - just three choruses, with a hint of "I gets weary" in an oblique quote from *Old Man River* in the coda. Whether or not the audience got the joke, they loved it. As well they might. Mehldau provided what was expected: a night to remember and treasure.

MONDAY, AUGUST 12, 2002

Brad Mehldau takes a less-traveled jazz path

By Tom Moon
Inquirer Staff Writer

The young jazz musicians who began recording in the '80s and '90s had only a few paths available: They could follow Wynton Marsalis and play polite variations on entrenched traditions, develop radical improvisational settings that virtually guaranteed obscurity, or strive for the commercial riches bestowed on smooth-jazz snake-charmers.

Pianist Brad Mehldau has pursued a far lonelier course. Since his debut in 1995, he has focused on an element largely missing in current jazz: melody. Through thoughtful CDs that mix standards, contemporary pop and originals, he argues that there's a place in improvised music for beauty — for pastel chords and rippling interactions, understated moments when the theme is more important than virtuosic variations.

"It shouldn't be that the only people who care about... melody are pop singers," Mehldau said last week from France, where he's doing the festivals.

Mehldau's latest, *Largo* (Warner Bros. ***1/2), reaches stores Tuesday. It was produced by Jon Brion (who has worked with Fiona Apple and Badly Drawn Boy), and its plainspoken originals and interpretations of Radiohead and the Beatles are his most radically lyrical work yet.

"For me, it doesn't matter whether we're playing an old chestnut or some kind of pop tune," said Mehldau, 32. "Once you have the thread of a melody, the music can open up in all kinds of ways. It can be different every night."

Largo showcases Mehldau, who has been derided as a clone of the impressionistic jazz master Bill Evans, courting and distorting his melodies, teasing tiny truths from them. Though it rarely swings in the traditional sense, it's hardly another bait-and-switch in which the "jazz" is disguised beneath layers of production.

Instead, Mehldau drops himself completely into other musical territories. *Largo* opens with the hymnlike "When It Rains," then ventures into spare funk, lumbering anthem rock (a gorgeous examination of Radiohead's "Paranoid Android"), and a percolating Afro-Cuban rhythm. A treatment of Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Wave" is built around the choppy electronica pulse known as drum-and-bass.

After Mehldau and his supporting musicians — his regular trio, guest drummers Jim Keltner and Matt Chamberlain, plus strings and woodwinds — establish those atmospheres, the exploring starts. The pianist delves into a tense drone ("Franklin Ave.," with its recurring vibraphone pulse and distorted, rock-influenced piano) and a chamber-orchestra meditation ("I Do"). Even when the ideas are complex, his phrases have the confiding tone of information conveyed in a whisper.

He peppers the first chorus of "When It Rains" with church chords and loosely connected melodic fragments, but devotes most of the second to furtive phrases that hint at alternate orbits as they flirt with outright dissonance. It's a jazz solo through and through, but in an entirely different context.

"The magic happens when we get into that heavy grooving rock element, or whatever, and then along comes a bit of a solo that starts from there but goes places, too," Mehldau said. He credits Brion with helping him manage this delicate feat. "He gets the whole idea of letting you do your thing. Even though he produced more than anyone I've worked with, it was... improvisatory in spirit."

The project got Mehldau thinking about the relationship between jazz musicians and standards. "The reason people get stuck playing a batch of tunes that were written from 1920 to 1950 isn't because they can't find new tunes. It's that they have a certain comfort level with the standards — there's a stockpile of bebop and hard-bop phrases that works on those tunes...." "I didn't want to do that, but I also didn't want it to be, 'Oh, look, he's doing a pop tune'... I haven't made it my mission to cover those tunes: I'm using them to get at new approaches to playing."

Mehldau sought to make his *Largo* compositions similarly direct. "When I'm writing for my trio, the music is often very complex," he said. This time, "I wanted the songs to be heard as songs, and I had a little fear that as an improviser, my identity would change as I dug into them. It was actually a nice surprise when I listened at the end of the week we spent recording. In terms of my melodic vocabulary, it's pretty similar to everything else I've done. There's an identity there."

And that, more than anything, is the mark of a mature improviser, Mehldau believes. "The thing I respond to is what the players I love, like Charlie Haden or Pat Metheny, have — a strong voice that rips right through whatever context."

Reviews



Jeff Ballard, Brad Mehldau and Larry Grenadier

[Inside]

- 99 VOX
- 104 COUNTERCURRENTS
- 107 FUSED
- 110 BIG BANDS

BRAD MEHLDAU TRIO

Day Is Done (Nonesuch)

Brad Mehldau's first trio recording for Nonesuch is also his first without Jorge Rossy at the drums. Jeff Ballard, Rossy's replacement, is far from a stranger to Mehldau and bassist Larry Grenadier, and it isn't surprising that a drummer this brilliant should take to the trio like a fish to water. But that's not to say that *Day Is Done* lacks surprises.

The pianist gives us two new originals: "Artis," an uptempo swinger, and "Turtle Town," a lyrical bolero. But Mehldau continues to emphasize his personal take on the modern songbook, with new interpretations of his reigning favorites: Radiohead, Lennon and McCartney, Nick Drake and Paul Simon. With "Granada" he champions the writing of one of his most gifted peers, saxophonist Chris Cheek. With a short but scintillating "Alfie" he reasserts himself as an

eloquent, unfussy ballad player. And with "No Moon at All," a lesser-known standard, he goes out swinging. Note: If you plan to buy the album, go digital. The iTunes version includes two must-hear bonus tracks: "Viver de Amor," a Toninho Horta gem, and "You Do Something to Me," played fast, with a devious modulation (and, far more devious, a dropped measure) in the last eight bars of the form.

"Knives Out" brings Mehldau's tally of Radiohead covers to four. It's an inspired opener, with dark harmonies, irregular phrase lengths and the sort of rhythmic tension and speed that has long been a hallmark of this trio. "Martha My Dear," the first of two later-era Beatles songs, is a playful solo-piano turn. We also hear solo piano, employed as a textural departure, during "She's Leaving Home" and again during "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover." Mehldau's approach to the Paul Simon hit is complex: The feel is a funky 7/8, and the melody is stated only once (four minutes in). The solo choruses, in 18-bar A-B form, cycle through the keys of G flat, A flat and E (all minor). Amazingly, the result isn't at all overdone. Grenadier gets it rolling with an adroit solo, and Ballard's groove on the outro vamp is crushing.

"Day Is Done," Mehldau's third Nick Drake

cover, isn't much of a song, and the chord progression is trite. Mehldau opened last year's *Live in Tokyo* with "Things Behind the Sun," one of Drake's absolute best, making "Day Is Done" that much more of a letdown. Still, the trio somewhat redeems the weak tune: Grenadier handles the initial melody, Ballard strikes up a straight-rock feel and Mehldau modulates (again!) to start his first solo chorus. The improvising is crisp, and the key change reappears as a thematic element in the coda.

Chris Cheek's "Granada" is weightier stuff, with an interesting backstory: Mehldau played the piece on Fender Rhodes on *Vine*, Cheek's marvelous Fresh Sound New Talent disc of 2000. (Jorge Rossy played drums.) Here it's considerably slower, more luxurious. "No Moon at All" also has a history worth noting: A minor-key melody with a "Caravan"-like bridge, it was cowritten by David Mann, who also cowrote "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning." Joe Williams sang it with Basie in 1959. Karrin Allyson gave it a go in 1993. Randy Sandke played it fast on his 2003 release *Cliffhanger*, and Mulgrew Miller took the first solo. Mehldau's midtempo version evokes last call at the bar. It's got a timeless jazz feel, but it's free of stock licks. That seems to be Mehldau's goal writ large. **DAVID ADLER**

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THE KNIVES ARE OUT

BRAD MEHLDAU

NEW TRIO,
NEW ALBUM
EXCLUSIVE

JOHN COLTRANE

THE TRANE YOU'VE NEVER HEARD

CHARLIE HADEN

THIS IS NOT AMERICA

LIAM NOBLE

FISHING FOR
BUTTERFLIES

F-IRE COLLECTIVE

BURN THE
HOUSE DOWN

BILL FRISELL

COAST TO COAST

LARRY CORYELL

ALBUM INTERVIEW

CAROL GRIMES

TURNING POINT

JONATHAN GEE

THE PLAYER

THE UK'S BIGGEST CD



reshaping the mould

Brad Mehldau gets the kind of reverence from fans and fellow players only a few jazz musicians ever hope to achieve. Since making his debut in the 1990s his trio has toured the world and recorded a substantial amount of albums which have made Mehldau's name. His romantic, rhapsodic vision has now moved on to a new level as he brings in a new drummer to his longstanding group and releases an album which might just be seen as a milestone in his career. **INTERVIEW:: STUART NICHOLSON**

There's never been an opening to a Brad Mehldau album quite like *Day Is Done*. The Radiohead number 'Knives Out' bristles with a coiled spring energy that grabs your attention from the off. His trio sounds somehow different.

The reason is simple. *Day Is Done* announces the arrival of drummer Jeff Ballard in Mehldau's well ordered musical world, the first change in his line-up since 1995 when he debuted with *Introducing Brad Mehldau*. "On a couple of things Jeff brought this new kind of really exciting vibe to the material that really brought it to life, and 'Knives Out' was one!" Brad says.

Throughout the album Ballard makes sure this new musical chapter in Mehldau's musical odyssey does not go unnoticed. He vibrates the trio with new energy, whether it's on Mehldau's well crafted originals such as 'Arts' or 'Turtle Town', the standards 'No Moon At All' and 'Alfie', saxophonist Chris Cheek's original 'Granada' or something Mehldau was probably first among his generation of jazz musicians to do – re working pop songs from well beyond the jazz canon, as he does here with the opening Radiohead theme, Nick Drake's 'Day Is Done', Lennon and McCartney's 'Martha My Dear', or Paul Simon's '50 Ways To Leave Your Lover'.

Although the album was recorded in a studio rather than live, Mehldau notes, "One thing that is great about this record is we really did everything in one day, and everything is mostly first takes – it was really a pretty spontaneous, immediate vibe we got in the studio! Which was nice. We usually get that pretty quickly, we get to

'I think for me jazz has always been a hybrid, that's how it was born, as a hybrid music, I'm not going to tell anyone what they don't know – a mixture of European harmony and a lot of things from classical music'

— Brad Mehldau

something and it either works or it doesn't."

Yet even with the addition of Ballard's dynamic drumming, the basic scheme of the new album remains essentially unchanged from the approach of previous albums, famously defined through his five volumes of *Art of the Trio*. "This record is a little bit like some of my other trio records have been, which is a few originals, a few standards and a few newer versions of songs," he points out.

"In that sense it doesn't break the mould of my previous records too much. What I find is that I can get a lot of mileage out of old standards, especially if I've loved them for a long time. And that has mostly to do with me in a personal relationship I have developed for that song, usually by earlier being exposed to that song, whether it was through a version by a singer like

Frank Sinatra or Billie Holiday or someone like that, so I've had it in my head a long time. On this album there's only one ballad. We do Burt Bacharach's 'Alfie'."

Once again, Mehldau has cast his net wide in his search for fresh repertoire on *Day Is Done*, and his choice is characteristically diverse. "'Martha My Dear' I recorded solo the day after, and I thought it might turn into something, a record for the future. But that is the one solo track on the record, and that's kind of a solo. I hesitate to say, but yes, a sort of arrangement I've had for a while, a way of approaching that song and really sticking closely to the parameters of their statement 'Granada', this one is by Chris Cheek, the tenor saxophonist about my age, from a record called *Vine* from about five years ago on First Time records, and was one I grabbed! '50 Ways to Leave Your Lover' was one we had been playing for some time with Jorge [Rossy] and we put that in 7/4 and messed around with it in a different meter."

Mention of Jorge Rossy, Mehldau's former long serving drummer, prompts curiosity as to the reason for his departure. Along with current bassist Larry Grenadier, they were among a circle of musicians including Peter Bernstein, Jessie Davis, David Sanchez, Mark Turner, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Leon Parker, Avishai Cohen and Chris Potter with whom Mehldau worked when he first moved to New York in 1988. Since the formation of Mehldau's trio in 1994, they travelled the world together and produced a series of acclaimed albums. "Well it was a mutual decision between Jorge and I [that he leave the group]," explains Mehldau.



"Jorge the last couple of years has been playing more and more piano, and really the only gigs he was doing on drums was with us. So I kind of set him free, more or less, he's still playing a little drums, but he's really become a piano player, so talk about thinking outside the box! He changed instruments, at the age of 40, which is pretty cool. And Jeff is somebody I have enjoyed for years and years, loved his playing. Started really thinking about playing with him when [I heard] this collectively led trio they have called Fly with Mark Turner, Larry [Grenadier], and Jeff, and hearing them playing together, a bass player and a drummer, I really heard something that could take place with the three of us. So it's been great so far, we've done gigs, we did a tour this summer, played a little bit in the spring, it's really exciting!"

Day Is Done is Mehldau's first trio recording for his new record company Nonesuch after a long association with Warner Bros., who had nurtured his career on record for 10 years. It had been a unique relationship. Throughout his time with them he was free from marketable "projects" or star guests, they allowed him to repeat the same tunes on different albums and allowed him to write his own somewhat austere liner notes where he took on any detractors, real or imagined: "The constant comparison of this trio with the Bill Evans trio by critics has been a thorn in my side," begin the notes for one album. Yet under the wing of Warner Bros. He grew in stature as an artist, prompting *Stereophile* magazine to note: "Brad Mehldau doesn't merely conceptualise – he emotes with yearning melancholy and rapturous ecstasy. When he plays, embers glow, and burst into flames."

But after the release in early 2004 of

Anything Goes, Warner Bros. closed down their jazz operation and Mehldau moved to Nonesuch Records, a division of Warner Music, presided over by Bob Hurwitz. Ironically, it was just as *Anything Goes* was receiving rave reviews from the likes of *The New York Times* – "The best Mehldau record yet" – to the *LA Weekly* – "Mehldau turns old tunes into bright new lamps."

However, Hurwitz was delighted at the opportunity of signing Mehldau, who was now approaching artistic maturity, saying, "I have greatly admired Brad from a distance for years. When the opportunity arose for a chance to work with him, we immediately jumped at it." In turn, Mehldau was relieved to find a label that preserved the artistic independence he had enjoyed with Warner Bros. "Well, I guess I consider myself pretty lucky," he says.

"Nonesuch is really a haven in the sense that the guy who runs the label, Bob Hurwitz, it's such a cliché because it's said so much, says 'I'm really just about the music,' but this guy is. What happened was that the Warner Bros. jazz department just sort of collapsed overnight, sort of inevitable. Everybody saw the writing on the wall. I don't know too much about that, but most of this had to do with when this guy took over the whole company, and started – when somebody takes over a company they're just looking at numbers, 'OK, let's get rid of this and this,' and 2,000 people loose their jobs overnight, and that's kind of how that went, you know. 'Jazz department, we don't need that!' I think all these companies, none of them are necessarily going to be around very long. I think with what I do at least, I never had too much hope or have faith in the whole, in having a long relationship with a record company. At any time the whole thing

could go up in smoke, so you just gotta sort of make records when you can. But having said that, I feel really lucky because for the most part I have been able to make the records I want." Although it seems incredible that Warner Bros., the company that recorded jazz classics by the likes of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Lee Konitz and Lennie Tristano, no longer has a jazz department and is instead concentrating on back catalogue, they are not alone among the major record companies (EMI, Sony/BMG, Universal and Warner/AOL) who are now no longer signing jazz instrumentalists. Instead, most of the majors are now concentrating on jazzy singers instead. "I think the time is really right now for singers," says Mehldau.

"There's something people gravitate towards with a singer who can tell a story with their lyrics and can convey something that is less abstract, with Wayne Shorter going out and playing this brilliant stuff but its not as immediately tractable to someone. Some of that has to do with singers and a lot of those big success stories, whether it is Norah Jones or Jane Monheit. I think that someone like Diana Krall, for somebody who let's say has never heard Shirley Horn, who Diana Krall has definitely checked out, they hear Diana Krall and that's their first introduction to a jazz rhythm section and something that has to do with jazz and it immediately opens the door for them for an experience that is at least more subtle and interesting and nuanced, something that has to do with the text and a pretty subtle range of emotions that's a little deeper than a lot of other things – it could be worse, let's put it that way! And of course it probably also fulfills that background music/lifestyle thing, so it's probably



'different things for different people'.

But could the major record companies themselves, in sticking to a mainstream instrumental jazz style for over a decade, been the cause of falling sales that made them look to other styles? After all in 1998, when asked by *Keyboard* magazine what he thought of younger players sticking to a very mainstream style, while in contrast the young players of 30 years earlier seemed more probing, Mehldau responded: "So often when I go to hear music – I don't want to be a moralist or a cultural judge, but I find myself sort of bored. After I've heard the first five minutes, it's like I know what they're gonna do. There's no mystery involved. When I go to hear music, whether it's a pop band or a reading of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*, I like to have the feeling that there's some mystery. With jazz, the mystery comes in the improvisation."

Mystery is an essential element in any art form; take away the mystery and we are left with the everyday. The Victorian theatre critic Max Beerbohm once wrote a tribute to "the quality of mystery which is not essential to genius, but which is the safest insurance against its oblivion." Mehldau, of course, is well aware of this. In advance of the interview the record company make clear certain topics are off limits. It's all grist to the mill in creating an image of an unashamed romantic with a capital "r," indeed, he even calls his music publishing company Werther, after Goethe's melancholic hero of the same name. His love of Romanticism, ushered in by middle and late period Beethoven and the music of Schumann, Brahms, Schubert and Chopin represent special favourites from the classical canon. As he explained to *The Guardian*: "There's a lot written about styles

crossing over now," he said. "But I think with the piano it's always waiting to happen. It has this great body of literature and material built up for it, so how could you not want to explore four or five centuries of canonical stuff, and then after that get into Art Tatum and Herbie Hancock and Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett?"

Although there are some in jazz who want to deny the "European" element in jazz, classical music has always represented a huge knowledge database which musicians have drawn on throughout the music's history. Once, when he played his version of Radiohead's 'Exit Music (For a Film)' in Germany, fans congratulated him on his variations on Beethoven. As Mehldau observes: "I think for me jazz has always been a hybrid, that's how it was born, as a hybrid music, I'm not going to tell anyone what they don't know – a mixture of European harmony and a lot of things from classical music. That to me I can hear that in Duke Ellington, I hear that in everything, what's great about being a jazz musician for me is taking from whatever, and just adding it into the mix. Somebody else figures out whether it is jazz or not, after I've done it already!"

Mehldau, like many of his contemporaries, began his journey into music with classical training, long before he was exposed to jazz. He started experimenting with the piano when he was four, and started taking lessons when he was six, continuing until 14, when he was listening more to rock. He continued his musical education at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan as part of the Jazz and Contemporary Music Programme. There he studied with pianists such as Junior Mance, Kenny Werner and Fred Hersch, describing his

experiences with the latter to *Keyboard* magazine as, "Not much jazz stuff, but more piano stuff. Things about technique and the sound of a piano and approaching the piano more orchestrally. Thinking about the inner voicings of the chord and voice leading." He started recording as a sideman on Peter Bernstein's *Something's Burnin'*, Jesse Davis' *Young at Heart*, and Joshua Redman's *Moodswing*. It was with Redman's quartet that he gained his first international exposure, touring with the saxophonist through the US and Europe for a year and a half. In 1994 he formed a trio with Larry Grenadier and Jorge Rossy and made his debut as a leader on Warner Bros. a year later with *Introducing Brad Mehldau*, the *Chicago Tribune* enthusing, "Mehldau writes as cleverly as he plays. The originality of [his] compositions is startling to behold." The *Art of the Trio* series followed, along with *Largo*, an experiment with electronics in real time, and the solo album *Elegiac Cycle* released in the spring of 1999, where he says in the liner notes, "A myriad of ghosts hover over *Elegiac Cycle*, and most of them walked the earth in the music epoch we now refer to as Romanticism."

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that his vision of jazz is one that favours a return to internalist principles of unity and coherence, in essence a post-Romantic concept of thematic and organic unity. When he writes about jazz on the liner notes of his albums, he does so with rigour and clarity arguing the case for an essentially mainstream manifestation of jazz. When talking about these musical values he says: "I have to say there are several qualities for me as a listener – subjectively or whatever – that is jazz, that is to do with a certain rhythmic

The new trio: Jeff Ballard (left), Brad Mehldau and Larry Grenadier



feeling, for want of a better word has to do with swing, it has to do with a certain feeling of the blues. It doesn't mean it is the only music I want to hear, but when I'm hearing that music in a certain context I have a set of expectations and it maybe OK when I hear that, and its not the most original performance, and I can really enjoy it.

"The idea of being provocative in itself, is passé," he continues. "The sense that I have now is that being provocative does not really have a place in jazz culture, anymore than being normal and what is expected, anything is up for grabs, and it would be hard for me to trap the essence of what defines jazz right now. Anything, when you're talking about marketing and the way people are led to perceive something, anything now is so quickly reified into this cultural set of – all this information we're being inundated with, there's immediately a name for it we've all seen before, so if something comes out that seems provocative and 'other than,' like The Bad Plus, even that we've already seen because we've seen 'provocative' before as well! So it sort of evens out in a way because eventually, at the end of the day – and this is probably a little bit naïve, or unrealistic – eventually there is some justice that people respond to things from the music itself. I remember it was almost inevitable that somebody was going to write a piece about the Bad Plus [saying they were not jazz], because what [the Bad Plus was] doing was courting a patriotic response from the keepers of jazz. You just knew that somebody was going to write that piece eventually. I would be a little more forgiving of that [patriotic] tendency in jazz, because jazz has been a lot of times marginalised as a music, and didn't make all

those millions the rock and rollers made, so when you have this defensive posture that you get a lot with jazz, you say, 'Well this isn't the real jazz,' a lot of times it's coming from a place where there is a built in resentment – well they're getting theirs and we've been playing this music quietly in this small club and because we're not provocative, or whatever, we're not getting attention.'

"I mean there are certain things that are more palatable to people, that people respond to easier, and that has always been the case. There's never been a huge audience for Cecil Taylor or Albert Ayler or somebody like that, there are some things that are more niche orientated and there are some things, for whatever reason, become more populist and why that happens there's a number of factors, I don't know if I could find any one thing – a lot of the time it's who is talking the loudest, someone like Wynton Marsalis is making a lot of points about how tradition is so important and he talks about it a lot, it will be listened to and perceived as maybe a current, but in fact it's sort of an isolated phenomenon to his scene and his musicians that actually – it's not completely true. I know when I was first in New York he did affect a lot of musicians and a lot of people were influenced by that way of thought, but I wouldn't say that the whole trend is continuing and prevails over everything else."

As a musician who tours frequently in Europe, something made possible by the level of governmental funding jazz enjoys on the continent (his November 2002 tour of England was supported by the Arts Council of England, for example), you might suspect he would be an advocate of government funding for jazz in his homeland, not only to protect it from the

homogenizing effects of the marketplace but also to provide more jobs for musicians there.

"Was it George Orwell who said, 'Socialism makes bad art'?" he quips. "That's kind of where I swing a little to the right of things. Of course what you said about subsidising the festivals, that helps, but I wouldn't want to rely on a government dictating diversity to me. The question is how does that parlay or can we map into how this actually effects the quality of music that comes out of that, if it does at all, I don't know. It definitely has in Holland. If I'm truthful about my opinion there's a whole generation of players who play largely free jazz, guys who can't play their instruments, who have their rents paid by the government."

Mehldau has a sure sense of himself, and of the kind of music he likes. "The frame makes art for me," he wrote in the liner notes to *Back at the Vanguard*. "Playing 'free' of a form has never been compelling to me because it feels like there's nowhere to go. The very limitations of form imply the possibility of destination; without them there's no project." *Day Is Done* gives shape to this vision; the culmination of his previous 11 albums where he has been refining his art of drawing people into his music through a combination of harmonic development, control of dynamics and patiently developing a melody through several choruses. It's possibly his finest statement in the trio format yet. The earlier portraits-of-a-young-man-as-an-artist, where he railed in the liner notes at those who didn't understand what he was doing, or could not grasp the cleverness or the ideas behind the music, have given way to the more rounded vision of an artist at ease with himself and his music. You only have to listen to the wry humour on "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" to see that.

The Los Angeles Times

Jazz CD Review

Brad Mehldau Synthesizes

By HOWARD REICH

★ ★ ★ ★

BRAD MEHLDAU

"Largo"

Warner Bros. Records

Young jazz musicians increasingly have been trying to tap into the sounds of today's pop and avant-garde music, but few have done so as eloquently as pianist Mehldau on this stunning, genre-defying disc. At first glance, the prospect of a pianist such as Mehldau drawing on dance backbeats, cutting-edge electronics and novel sonic effects might seem like a gimmick. But Mehldau's meticulously conceived arrangements for acoustic and synthesized instruments prove revelatory, the pianist weaving his own carefully wrought melodic lines into brashly innovative, unexpected ensemble sounds. The grinding beat that drives "Dusty McNugget," for instance, might seem to be the antithesis of bona fide jazz rhythm. Yet Mehldau finesses drummer Matt Chamberlain's hard dance beats with extraordinarily sleek, delicately swinging piano lines, then interrupts the proceedings with unabashedly classical writing for a small horn section. The oscillating, head-tripping electronics of "Dropjes," the distorted-piano effects of "Sabbat," the blips and bleeps of "Free Willy," and the Samuel Barber-like chamber-music setting of "When It Rains" distinguish this as one of the most daring new recordings of the year, and one of the most successful.

“... one of the most daring new recordings of the year,
and one of the most successful.”

J A Z Z

Mehldau And Moran: Two Pianists For Today—And Tomorrow

BY JOE GOLDBERG

After a long period of stifling orthodoxy, during which jazz, a music predicated on individualism, was threatening to become a retrospective art, some true individuals are starting to appear again. Since the longest shadows in the music are still cast by Miles Davis and John Coltrane, it is perhaps not surprising that two of the brightest new stars are not horn players but pianists.

Brad Mehldau has been on the scene the longer of the two. Originally, he was touted as the second coming of Bill Evans, with album titles like *The Art of the Trio* and *Live at the Village Vanguard*, but Mehldau has always rejected the designation, and time has proved him right. He first came to notice in tenor saxophonist Joshua Redman's quartet and made his first CD in 1995. Now there are nine of them on Warner Bros. and three on the European label Fresh Sound, most fea-



Rising stars: Mehldau and Moran

turing his working trio with bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy. For most of the last several years, Mehldau was based in Los Angeles but now lives in upstate New York with his wife and daughter.

The comparisons to Evans stem largely from Mehldau's training, touch and fondness for romanticism. But where Evans favors the French, Mehldau leans toward the Germans, even naming his publishing company Werther Music, after Goethe's hero. He is currently writing a song cycle for the soprano Renee Fleming,

which he is to perform with her next year at Carnegie Hall. Originally to be based on Rilke poems, it now also includes some by the American Louise Bogan. There are more than enough originals and standards in the can for another trio album, but Mehldau has not yet made a final selection. He often writes his own liner notes, something he regards as "a supplement for the listener, if they're interested."

For an example of how classical touch and procedures inform his music, listen to his crystalline version of the Lennon-McCartney "Blackbird" on the first *Art of the Trio* album, or the startling improvisations on *Alone Together*, a live album with Lee Konitz and Charlie Haden released on Blue Note.

Mehldau, who is 32, continues to learn classical piano music. He is currently working on Fauré and Scriabin, as well as Chopin's last ballade in F minor, and Hin-

desmith's monumental "Ludus Tonalis." "Not to get them to performance level," he says. "I don't even know what that is. But, if I love something deeply, it's bound to come out a year or so later in the playing."

Jason Moran, 28, began studying the piano—playing the classics—as a young boy in Houston, but didn't begin to love it until he encountered Thelonious Monk. "The way he looked, with his hat and shades, the way he stood, the way he held his hands flat instead of curved, the way you're taught—he gave me a reason to play the instrument," says Moran.

Younger than the pianists influenced by Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett and McCoy Turner, Moran found other models—Cecil Taylor, Herbie Nichols, Muhal Richard Abrams and, primarily, Jaki Byard, a walking history of jazz piano who had played and recorded with Charles Mingus and Sam Rivers. Byard was Moran's teacher for four years at the Manhattan School of Music and would arrive

for their weekly lessons with two huge folders of score paper, which Moran now has. Byard would mix up genres and periods, improvising on music, like Scott Joplin's, which was written to be played straight, giving what Moran now calls "a reason for the treason—how to do it wrong."

Then Moran began playing with saxophonist Greg Osby, a leader of New York's downtown scene, and through him met the other members of the trio with whom he's been working for four or five years now—bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits.

"Most people think there were two bands in the '60s," Moran says, "the Miles Davis band and the other John Coltrane band. But, for some of us, there were other bands: the Charles Mingus band, Sam Rivers with Andrew Hill, Cecil Taylor." The orthodoxy based on that period, Moran says, has led to mediocrity and an atmosphere that makes it easier for mediocrity to get work.

Moran is a romantic, but not in the usual way. "I like a little dirt, a little sweat," he says. His influences range beyond the musical. He loves film, has scored short films and has recorded music from *Yojimbo* and *Godfather II*. "It's the total art form," he says. "Of course, I'd love to do one." And he learns from painters, ranging from Mark Rothko to Jean-

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PIANISTS

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Michael Basquia (whose scrawl of the word “gangsterism” in a painting wall called “Hollywood Africans” has inspired a series of pieces with “gangsterism” in the title), is writing music for the Studio Museum in Houston and a new theater at the Walker Museum in Minneapolis. And he is now artist in residence at the Manhattan School of Music. He is willing to “rob” from anyone. He has recorded Ravel, Schumann and, on his forthcoming album, Brahms, but remains acutely aware that the piano is a percussion instrument.

Moran’s first two albums were good, but his third, with 78-year-old saxophonist Sam Rivers joining the trio, was better than that. Then came the solo album, *Modernistic*, named for a James P. Johnson piece which the *New York Times* called the second-best jazz album of 2002.

And in September comes the best one yet—*Bandwagon*, the trio’s name, which, though it isn’t titled that, is Live at the Vanguard. Included are the Brahms, a Byard composition, “Body and Soul” (which Moran plays without the bridge), tunes from hip-hop and three pieces in which melodic and rhythmic patterns are based on taped voices, including Moran’s grandparents and a Chinese woman reading stock quotations—a technique used by Steve Reich in his piece for Kronos, “Different Trains,” which Moran hasn’t heard. What I haven’t heard, at least not this year, is a better jazz-trio record.

M&M—how sweet it is. After you’ve heard them, you won’t have to ask “Who’s the piano player?” ■