



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Dave Brubeck Quartet

Dave Brubeck and the Dave Brubeck Quartet

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Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Jazz pianist and composer Dave Brubeck died December 5 of this year. He was 91 years old. For the readers of these reports who are of my generation and who like jazz, his passing made us pause. For this pause, I reflected: *There goes part of my life.*

I had become accustomed to this man's presence in my day-to-day musical meanderings. He was often in concert on stage. Other times, he was doing 60 Minutes-type shows. The TV programs displayed the talents of a musical genius. He was older in the later shows, as seen in the photo below, but he had been part of my musical landscape since the early 1960s. No more. He is gone. His music is history, only available in electronic archives.



Nonetheless, his ability to go outside a 3/4 musical score envelope, will remain in history as one of his legacies. His sheet scores will stay with us until other sheets are pulled over our faces.

And as long as those sheets stay at the foot of my bed, I

will continue to listen to the album *Time Out* (the album cover is shown above) with combined sensations of joy and puzzlement...explained later.

The music on this album was considered experimental. Not by the Dave Brubeck group alone, but by the industry and the average music listener. It was not ordained for success. But going against the grain, they gave it a go. They came up with an artistic and financial winner.

In an interview Mr. Brubeck said he borrowed some of his ideas for the music from drummer Joe Morello's playing a 5/4 time, a beat that varied from the common time conventions of 4/4 or 3/4.¹

According to Mr. Brubeck, the sax player, Paul Desmond was skeptical about doing something different. The bass player, Gene (Eugene) Wright said, "How am I going to hold this together?"

¹ Available at <http://vimeo.com/20686055> (and the source for the photos in this report).



Hold it together *he* did. Hold it together *they* did. The Dave Brubeck Quartet released *Time Out* in 1959, and their melodious, unique sound captured the ears of the world's music listeners. All compositions---including "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo à la Turk"--- were original scores. Before long the album went platinum.

The picture above shows the four musicians listening to sound tracks they had recently recorded (right to left: Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond, Gene Wright, and Joe Morello).

I came across *Time Out* in 1960 while attending the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque. I don't recall listening to this music earlier in my life. My tastes ran to Hank Williams and Patsy Cline. My fraternity brother and friend Jack Norris took me under his wing and introduced me to a new world: modern jazz. It was a difficult learning curve. I thought most jazz music was un-rhythmic and cacophonous.

My transitions to this world were aided by the Dave Brubeck Quartet (along with J.J. Johnson and the Modern Jazz Quartet, stories for another time).

Sidebar: Joy and Puzzlement.

My country and western (C&W) music background resulted in my brain being wired to prefer music composed in what is known as a conventional *time signature*. This term describes how many beats are in a measure and which note value in the measure constitutes one beat.

For example, the simple signature of a waltz has this rhythmic feel: **one** two three (with the bold number representing an emphasized note).

Hank and Patsy sang in 4/4 time. Dave and company composed most of the music in *Time Out* in 5/4 time.

This signature, in concert with the melodies in the album, captured my fancy. I had no idea why I liked it, as it seemed so strange. But I knew I liked it.

In the early 1960s, this quartet played a concert at UNM's Johnson Gym. By then, I was hooked on modern jazz. I could even get through Thelonious Monk while experiencing a modicum of satisfaction. Still, on more than one occasion, I posed this question about Monk's piano assaults: *What was that?!* If I happened to be asked the same question, I usually responded, *I dunno, so it must be good.*

Anyway, for the Dave Brubeck Quartet performance that night, I was one of the first in line at the gym's ticket office. I was not disappointed. It was a magical assemblage of harmony and *syncopated* cacophony, all done to a beat that captured my musical soul. The piece, "Take Five" is a work of beauty and subtlety. Brubeck's almost continuous six keys on the piano are

interspersed with the best piano/drum combination I have ever heard. Desmond comes in twice for a two more piano/sax pairings. I am listening to it now. Fantastic.

My next recollection of the quartet, and one I have had to corroborate with my Sigma Chi



fraternity brothers, was the group coming over to our house after this concert. As I recall, they played well into the night. My recollections were that Mr. Brubeck himself did not make the scene. But Paul Desmond did. Shown in a photo to the left, he had become one of my musical icons, even replacing Eddie Arnold. His part in “Take Five” still brings chills to my spine. So, after over forty years had elapsed, might I have inserted a fantasy into my memory bank? It’s been known to happen.

At this advanced stage of my life, I realize I recall experiences that *are* what I wish they could have been and not what they *were*. Schopenhauer puts it more elegantly, “The memory of an old man gets clearer, the further it goes back.”²

So, with my meager Your on the Street Reporter reputation possibly at stake, I sent an e-mail to my brothers about my recollection. Was I correct about this jam session?

Most responses were, “I can’t remember.” One comment from one of my college pals was close to the mark for all of us, “I have trouble remembering where I left my keysDave who?” But some of the Sigs did remember:

You are correct. I was there. They jammed well into the night. A brother, can't remember his name played jazz trumpet. ... It was a fun evening.

... Dave did not come, but Desmond came. John Hendricks from Lambert Hendricks and Ross sang while McKinnon [one of our brothers] played the drums and Billy May's band members jammed also. Those were great times.

My favorite work from this man is titled, “Strange Meadowlark.” It can be played by going to



YouTube and entering the name of the piece. The photo on the left shows Mr. Brubeck playing this simple yet complex---and stunningly lovely---work of art.

Let’s thank the musical and visual gods who somehow have figured out a way for us mortals to capture this image of Dave Brubeck playing “Strange Meadowlark” and the song itself. Don’t miss it.

² Author Schopenhauer, “Religion and other Essays: Psychological Observations,” in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 502.



And for my fraternity brothers and me, we thank those who somehow guided the Dave Brubeck Quartet musical marvels to our place on the UNM campus (the entrance to our house is shown in the photo on the left).

There, in the living room, they created the memory I am sharing with you in this report.

I mentioned my fraternity brothers wrote me about the Dave Brubeck Quartet Minus One playing at the Sig house. I also mentioned they said, “It was a fun evening.”... “Those were great times.”

Yes, it was. Yes, they were.

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