

# JAZZ

## *An Insouciant Sound*

THE pianist Marian McPartland likes to do a little writing on the side, and several years ago she gathered thirteen of her appreciations and published them in a book called "All in Good Time." One of the best chapters, written in 1960, is about the alto saxophonist Paul Desmond. It was a pioneering, restorative essay. Desmond, a member of the immensely popular Dave Brubeck Quartet since 1951 and a steady winner of the *Down Beat* readers' poll since 1955, had been temporarily eclipsed by a Charlie Parker soundalike, Cannonball Adderley, and by the avant-gardist Ornette Coleman, and no one had yet written about Desmond with any perception. McPartland made it clear that he was a writer manqué who had become a jazz musician almost by accident, that he was the only major alto saxophonist of his generation who had not modelled himself on Parker, and that he was witty, original, and elusive. The little there is on Desmond's early life in her chapter is about as much as he ever gave out. He was born Paul Emil Breitenfeld on November 25, 1924, in San Francisco (and died of cancer in 1977 in New York). He took his nom de saxophone from the telephone book. (He said Breitenfeld sounded "too Irish.") His father was German and played the

organ in movie theatres, and his mother was Irish and had a literary bent. He loved his father and tolerated his mother. When he was five, his mother became ill, and he was sent to relatives in New Rochelle. He played a solo on chimes at a school assembly, and, instead of following the notes in front of him, he improvised. "It was the first thing I'd enjoyed doing," he told Marian McPartland. "I was kind of a walking vegetable as a kid. Amiable but unfocused. I didn't realize until about fifteen years later that you could make a living doing this." He returned to San Francisco in 1936 and took up the clarinet and, several years later, the alto saxophone. He spent three years in an Army band in San Francisco during the war, and studied writing briefly at San Francisco State College. He and Dave Brubeck first played together in 1943, and Desmond claimed that this colloquy took place:

Desmond, after hearing Brubeck, who tended to play way out: "Man, like Wiggsville! You really grooved me with those nutty changes."

Brubeck: "White man speak with forked tongue."

Desmond and Brubeck met again after the war, in the Geary Cellar in San Francisco, and Desmond described their second encounter this way: "The

musical rapport was very evident and kind of scary. A lot of the things we've done since, we did then, *immediately*—a lot of the counterpoint things, and it really impressed me. If you think Dave plays far out now, you should have heard him then. He made Cecil Taylor sound like Lester Lanin." Brubeck worked briefly for Desmond (who concluded that he was not cut out to be a leader), Desmond worked briefly for Brubeck, and in 1951 they started the Quartet. They made three live recordings on a small label—"Jazz at Storyville," "Jazz at Oberlin," and "Jazz at the College of the Pacific"—and they caught fire. Columbia Records signed the Quartet in 1954, and it became the most commercially successful jazz group in history. (George Avakian, the jazz scholar and A. & R. man, was working for Columbia at the time, and in July of that year, during a bus ride from New York to the first Newport Jazz Festival, he told me that Columbia was trying to decide whether to sign the Brubeck Quartet or the equally new, though not yet successful, Modern Jazz Quartet. The golden remains of the Brubeck group were long ago cast up on the shores of jazz—it disbanded in 1967—while the M.J.Q., going on forty, continues on its subtle, classic, imperturbable way.)

In its final form—Brubeck, Desmond, Gene Wright on bass, and Joe Morello on drums—the Dave Brubeck Quartet was one of the curiosities of jazz. Brubeck and Desmond were opposites. Desmond had a light, ethereal tone, and his solos were lyrical and singing and beautifully constructed. Brubeck, who had studied with Darius Milhaud and had dreamed of fusing jazz and classical music, was a heavy, erratic, passionate player who depended on repetition and difficult harmony for his effects. He could build a frightening rhythmic momentum with figures of almost no musical interest. Desmond was a blue summer day; Brubeck was thunder and lightning. Yet each man insisted that he would never have got anywhere without the other. Brubeck said Desmond was the best saxophone player in the world, and Desmond said, "I still feel more kinship musically with Dave than with anyone else." The critics loved to jump up and down on Brubeck, and, assuming guilt by association, they tended to dismiss Desmond, too, or take him for granted. (He only once won a *Down Beat* critics' poll, though he won the



"I love the way you never mention love."



readers' poll eleven times—a rare instance of the public's having better ears than the professionals.) Although Desmond managed on occasion to free himself of Brubeck's rhythmic weight, his best recordings were made in duets with the guitarist Jim Hall or with the baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan. (Mosaic has reissued all the lilting and irresistible recordings Desmond and Hall made, and RCA has reissued Desmond and Mulligan's "Two of a Mind.")

Many of Desmond's closest friendships were made after the Brubeck group broke up and he settled in New York. (He had a one-bedroom penthouse on the northeast corner of Fifty-fifth Street and Sixth Avenue.) At the age of forty-three, he more or less retired. He made some festival appearances, went to a Brubeck reunion, and took sporadic jobs with Jim Hall in New York and with the guitarist Ed Bickert in Toronto. He was intelligent and social, and much of his time was spent, Scotch in hand, at Elaine's or Bradley's, talking and listening, and living a fine eighteenth-century life.

Jim Hall recently spoke about Desmond: "I met Paul in the fifties in Cleveland when I was still a student and he came through with Dave Brubeck. But I feel like I've known him all my life. When he was around so much in the sixties and seventies, he'd come over nearly every week to play Scrabble with my wife, Jane. They were so good I just watched. He also played chess, and the piano in his apartment was covered with chessboards. He liked long-standing comical situations. Every time he ate at the French Shack, around the corner from his apartment, he and one of the waiters would get into a thing about the pronunciation of 'vichyssoise.' He loved a paperback book called 'Tops in Pops.' It had stuff on Fabian and Chubby Checker and Elvis and Anita Bryant, and the writing was awful. He'd buy a dozen copies and give them to his friends, and he'd call up—'Hi, it's me, Desmond'—at all hours and read passages from the book and laugh. And, of course, he'd walk a mile for a pun, like the one he'd invented about all those models who eventually marry rich guys: 'This is the way the world ends,' he'd say. 'Not with a whim but a banker.' And he loved to josh people. He made several records with George



Avakian, who tended to do a lot of telephoning in the control booth. Once, he and I finished a take and looked up at the booth to see what Avakian's reaction was. He was on the telephone, so when he hung up Desmond went out in the hall and called him from a public telephone. 'Hi, George, it's Paul,' he said. 'How was the last take?' He always seemed to be around lively people—bright, sparkly people. He was a no-fooling good musician, who could improvise the most gorgeous melodies—some were better than the originals. He also played the piano, and he was pretty good. After he got sick, he had a roadie who came in and did some cooking and let people in and out. One afternoon, when he was sleeping off a chemotherapy session, Charlie Mingus came to see him. Mingus was big then, and he was wearing a black cloak and a big black hat, and he sat down in a chair in Paul's bedroom and waited for him to wake up. When he did, Paul said he looked over and saw this huge black form sitting there and thought, 'Oh, God. This is it. They've come for me.' He's heavily missed. The trouble is, he would have made a great older person."

Desmond became a regular at Elaine's, at Eighty-eighth Street and Second Avenue. He and the writer Jack Richardson were good friends. "I met Paul around 1968," Richardson said the other day. "We had dinner together a couple of times a week, generally at Elaine's or Bradley's or Casey's. He was a wonderful person to spend time with in a saloon. He loved language, and he got off great one-liners. His social life was spent more with writers and such than with musicians. You'd find him at Elaine's with Bruce Friedman or Frank Conroy or Gay Talese. Elaine's is a strange place. There can be a kind of superficiality there in the talk about writing and art. But everyone always agreed that Paul was one of the few true artists who hung out there. He was a magical presence. Paul implied that he had led a rather puritanical life with the Brubeck Quartet, and that he was going to make up time by indulging in every sort of depravity. He was a good drinker, but he sometimes drank too much and had to be helped home. And he used to dabble in cocaine, which he had come to late in life. He had countless

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women friends, but he never had a steady girl. I think women had a quasi-custodial relationship with him, nursing him through illnesses and bad hangovers. I felt he was very lonely, that he had a great deal of sadness in him.

"He didn't like to talk music with non-musicians. I passed, because I played a little guitar. In fact, he was so distressed after he heard me play he sent me to Jim Hall for lessons. Paul knew his virtues and his limitations. He had never followed in Charlie Parker's footsteps, but I remember once when we looked at a transcription of some fantastic Parker solo, Paul said, 'My God! That's not human!' I asked him once why he had stayed with Brubeck so long, and he gave two reasons: that he had no head for money and Dave handled all the financial things, all the headaches about leading a group and carrying it around the world; and, second, that Brubeck, being so different, set him off, gave him a frame to stand out against. He felt that when he and Jim Hall played together they were so similar, so simpatico, they were in danger of evaporating. His cancer was diagnosed about a year before he died, and his main concern seemed to be that his illness not cause any embarrassment or dislocation among his friends. And it never did. He handled his affliction with grace and delicacy and unselfishness to the very end."

DESMOND's humor was slightly arch, self-deprecating (always the sign of a true sense of humor), punning, and full of hyperbole. Here are some samples:

When he was once asked about his delicate, dry tone, he replied, "Well, I had it in mind that I wanted to sound like a dry Martini."

He liked to call himself "the J. P. Marquand of the saxophone" and, because he detested fast tempos, "the world's slowest alto player."

When he played with unsympathetic musicians, he said, he tended to "shrivel up like a lemoned clam."

On his own reputation: "I was unfashionable before anyone knew who I was."

On Ornette Coleman, who arrived in New York in 1959 and turned the jazz world on its ear: listening to Coleman, whom he admired, was "like living in a house where everything's painted red."

## ON THE PENINSULA

Lit from below, the blue water  
flows to us on three sides.  
Yellow crabs scuttle across the sand  
and the moon sails over the mountains.  
The stars are set close and bright—  
it would take us a dozen human lifetimes,  
travelling at the speed of light,  
to reach the nearest one.  
To reach the seafloor  
takes less than a minute;  
lungs straining, we glimpse  
a million stars pinpointed  
in the eyes of the fish,  
schools of them hovering  
in the beams of our torches  
as the currents carry us from shore,  
away from the rustling grass  
and the deep orchard  
and the house where our bodies,  
locked fast, turn under a blue sheet.

—NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER

After he settled in the city: "Sometimes I get the feeling that there are orgies going on all over New York, and somebody says, 'Let's call Desmond,' and somebody else says, 'Why bother? He's probably home reading the Encyclopædia Britannica.'"

On why he never became a writer: "I could only write at the beach, and I kept getting sand in my typewriter."

But Desmond *could* write, as is clear in some of the liner notes he set down for his own albums and in the only chapter he completed of a book he planned to write about his life with the Brubeck Quartet. The book was to be called "How Many of You Are There in the Quartet?" and the chapter appeared in *Punch*. It deals with two concerts the group gave in one day at a state fair in Middletown, New Jersey, and it closes with these four paragraphs:

The main events of the fair have clearly been planned for months: a flaming auto wreck, followed by a flaming plane wreck, each to be dealt with instantly and efficiently by the Middletown Fire Dept. At one end of the oval is a precariously balanced car; at the other end, a truly impressive skeletal mock-up of a single-engine plane, tail up. Midway, at ground zero, is the Middletown Fire Truck, bristling with ladders and hoses and overflowing with volunteers.

A hush falls over the stands. At a signal given by the fire chief, the car is ignited. The truck reaches it in two or three seconds, by which time the fire is roughly equivalent to that created by dropping a cigarette on the back seat for two or three seconds. It is extinguished by many men with several hoses.

A murmur falls over the stands. The fire chief, painfully aware that his moment of the year is at hand, signals for the plane to be ignited, also instructing the truck to take it easy, so that the fire should be blazing briskly when it arrives. The truck starts, at about the pace of a cab looking for a fare. The plane goes WHOOSH!, like a flashbulb, and by the time the leisurely truck arrives, has shrunk to a lovely camp-fire, just large enough for roasting marshmallows.

Later, four pasty-faced, grim-eyed men pile into a station wagon and drive away. It may not be a bank-robbery, but it's a living.

DESMOND was tall and thin. He had a narrow face and receding dark hair, and he wore black-framed glasses with heavy temples. When he played, he stood motionless, his saxophone held straight up and down, as if he were carrying a flagpole. When he had finished a solo, he would (in his Brubeck days) lean against the crook of the piano, his hands folded over his saxophone (still held close to his chest), his expression bemused and pleasant. The A. & R. man John Snyder, who recorded Desmond, recently said, "Paul had a slow way of talking, an almost singsong way. He had a low-pitched voice, and he talked like he'd always had a drink, like he had a smoking jacket on. Everything he said was insightful. He laughed a lot—a bark, a smile, then the laugh. His playing was similar. He had a kind of languid way of playing. There's a slowness in the tone, in the notes themselves. It's an insouciant sound, and it has a timeless golden color. He staked out a lyrical



territory that was all his own. And he was a master of interpolation. He'd add bits and pieces of the countless songs he knew to his solos, putting them together in such a way that they commented on his surroundings or on an experience he had just had. And he did it in a cool way. He was never a showoff."

Despite his placidity, Desmond had a temper. The great drummer Joe Morello has recalled his own early days with the Quartet: "I joined the Quartet in October of 1956 and stayed until it broke up. I had been in Marian McPartland's trio at the Hickory House, on Fifty-second Street, and Dave and Paul would come in to hear me. I'd also been to hear them, and I had trouble with their rhythm section. Then I

got a call from Brubeck asking me if I'd like to join the Quartet, and would I meet him at the Park Sheraton to talk about it? I told him that I didn't play the way his drummer played, that I didn't know if I'd enjoy the group or they would enjoy me, that I might not last a week. But we agreed I'd try it, and we opened at the Blue Note, in Chicago. Before we went on, Dave told me he'd be glad to feature me. I did a little drum solo in the second set, and there was a big ovation, and Paul stamped off the stand. Afterward, he said, 'Morello goes or I go.' Dave calmed him down, but, what with the ovations I kept getting, Paul and I didn't talk much for the first year or so. We never came to blows, as the press said we did, but there were times when I think we felt like it. Paul would tell me that if I kept my left hand at my side and just played quarter notes with my right hand everything would be O.K. Or he'd tell Dave after a set, 'My last solo would have been perfect if Joe hadn't put that accent in the last bar.' Or he'd tell me that if I didn't stop setting such fast tempos he'd take a full-page ad in *Down Beat* saying 'Paul Desmond does not play fast tempos.' Then the discomfort ended, and we practically became a clique. I think it all changed after Paul wrote his big hit 'Take Five' and realized that the tune itself, not my drum solo, was getting the ovations.

"Of course, Paul would get upset with Dave, too. Sometimes Dave would get too busy behind Paul's solos, and Paul would ask him to lay out, and if he didn't Paul would walk off the stage. He always had books with him, and he

was a speed-reader. He liked to dramatize things. We were on a plane once to someplace like Afghanistan, and a dove got out of a crate and started flying around the plane. The next day, when he told the story, Paul had birds flying all over and goats running up and down the aisle. After work, we'd go to the nearest lounge or bar to have a drink and relax. But sometimes I went by myself, and the waiter would come to my table and say, 'The gentleman over there would like to buy you a Martini.' It would be Paul. I'd send him a Scotch in return, and we'd wave."

The critic and editor James T. Maher had dinner one night at Bradley's with Alec Wilder and Desmond. "The talk turned to improvisation," Maher said not

long ago. "There were two Alec Wilders when it came to improvisation. One was in complete awe of it, and the other got upset if a singer changed as much as a note of one of his songs. So Desmond said, 'Well, you know, the best chorus is the song itself.' That was a real shot in the arm for Alec. When I first heard Desmond, I said to myself, 'I wish that guy would play with more feeling.' Years later, I said to myself again, 'What did you mean by "feeling"?' He kept the song singing. He was a born singer. And it was all in those absolutely pure melodic lines."

When Desmond was coming up, he listened to such alto saxophonists as the huge, jumping Pete Brown; Willie Smith, of the Jimmie Lunceford and Harry James bands; and Duke Ellington's Johnny Hodges. Most true originals absorb their models so thoroughly they can flawlessly reproduce them, or even parody them. During the seventieth-birthday party the White House threw for Duke Ellington, in 1969, Desmond, a member of the all-star group that performed in the East Room, reproduced Johnny Hodges so perfectly during one of his solos that he startled the usually unflappable Ellington. Desmond's line about wanting to sound like a dry Martini was funny but inaccurate. A dry Martini has a sharp, edgy taste, and if it had a sound it would be hard and metallic. Desmond's tone was off-white, gentle—almost transparent and almost weightless. It had a brand-new, untouched sound, he used very little vibrato, and he tended to stay in the upper half of his range. There was nothing vocal in his playing, as there



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was in Charlie Parker's and Ben Webster's. He did not preach, or moan, or shout. Desmond's solos *thought*; they had logic and clarity. He improvised melodies that were straightforward but intricate; his phrases, never breathless, would sometimes go on for sixteen or more bars. The quietness of Desmond's attack was deceptive, and gave a conventional, even timid, air to what he played. But he always moved along the outer edges of the chords he was improvising on, atonality in sight. His rhythmic attack was equally deceptive. He gave the impression of sailing along endlessly in an easy four-four, but he continually altered his time. He played behind the beat, on the beat, and ahead of the beat. He halved the tempo and doubled it, or he floated, using no tempo at all. Like his friend Jim Hall, Desmond was one of the handful of jazz improvisers who demand total concentration. If the listener falters, he is lost; if he remains rapt, he is blessed.

**N**OEL SILVERMAN was Desmond's lawyer and business protector during the last two years of his life. "It took a while to get to know Paul and realize how complicated he was," Silverman said not long ago. "Paul had no paranoia, like so many musicians do. He regarded the music business as the way of the world, not something organized against him. He could be immensely personable when he wanted. He was not shy. He simply didn't go out of his way to get involved in social situations he wasn't sure of. He liked sociable people, and he liked his Dewar's. By and large, he was an excellent drinker. Liquor didn't often defeat him. It was a lubricant, a way to camaraderie. He never lacked for smart female company. I think he had been married once, when he was very young, but he never talked about it.

"I suggested to him three or four months before he died that he make a will. He had no parents, no brothers or sisters, no aunts or uncles. He did have some Breitenfeld cousins that he liked and saw once in a while. I asked him if he wanted to leave something to the Brubecks, and he laughed and said they should leave something to him. But he did leave his saxophone to Michael Brubeck, one of Dave's sons. I asked him if he wanted to establish a scholarship fund for musicians, and he said no, there were already enough bad saxophone players. I asked him what he

wanted to do with his piano. It's a nine-foot Baldwin. He and Dave Brubeck had each bought one years before. He said, 'Would it be possible for Bradley Cunningham to have it for his saloon?' Paul and Bradley had closed Bradley's on many, many nights, and Paul felt that the old upright Bradley had had there for years was demeaning to all the great pianists who had to play it. So there Paul's piano sits, in all its much appreciated grandeur. Then I asked him about the rest of his estate, the income from records and from songs like 'Take Five,' and he said, 'Give it to the Red Cross, they're a good outfit.' I don't have the exact figures before me, but I think the Red Cross has received over a million dollars since 1977. I'm beginning to think it's time, in fact, for it to make some sort of public recognition of Paul's generosity, instead of writing me little thank-you notes. Paul wasn't rich, but he was comfortable. I remember when he was in Mt. Sinai I took him a whole bunch of checks and we laid them out on his bed. We added them up, and they came to around a hundred thousand dollars. He laughed and said, 'Well, I don't have any financial problems.'"

When Marian McPartland finished her 1960 piece on Desmond, she showed it to him, and he said he liked it. "But, Marian, do you think it might be better to start it this way? Do you think we could take that story about Brubeck out, and put in this one?" And on, until it had become a kind of McPartland-Desmond piece. But they were always friends. "I used to ask Paul to sit in with me when I was playing in the Bemelmans Bar, in the Carlyle," she has said. "He promised that he would, but he never did. He'd just hang out and have a few drinks. The last time I saw him, he stopped by when he was quite far along with his chemo treatments. I was very pleased to see him about, but shocked at how thin he was. He had a drink, and after I had finished we went over to Elaine's. She had a piano way in the back, and I sat down and played all kinds of tunes that Paul loved. He was determined to keep his life as usual, and he just sat there serenely. He died alone in his apartment on the Memorial Day weekend of 1977. It seemed to me that he didn't want to upset his friends, and so he waited until they had all left town for the holiday weekend. His cleaning woman found him Monday morning."

—WHITNEY BALLIETT