

Remembering Brubeck

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue

When jazz legend Dave Brubeck died on December 5, his profound impact on the world of jazz was noted by front-page announcements of his death in newspapers all over the world. Along with millions of others, I was a devoted Dave Brubeck fan ever since I first heard his music in the 1950s.

Brubeck changed jazz by producing his “cool” sound in collaboration with alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, who played counterpoint to Brubeck’s piano. Their innovative use of unusual rhythms captured the imagination of a generation of college students in the ’50s and ’60s. His 33 rpm record *Time Out* became the first jazz album to sell more than a million copies. After a tour of India and the Middle East, Brubeck began to experiment with rhythmic structures. In his signature piece, “Take Five,” perhaps the most popular jazz single ever, five-beat measures alternate with four-beat measures. He also composed a lively Christmas piece, “God’s Love Made Visible,” in 5/4 time.

Brubeck’s father was an avowed atheist, while his mother, a Christian Scientist, directed the choir at a Presbyterian church. Brubeck’s first job was playing the organ at a reformatory chapel at the age of 14. He remembered the inmates singing “Just as I Am” and “The Old Rugged Cross.”

In the middle of his critically acclaimed career as a jazz musician and composer, religious themes and motifs began to appear in his music. While composing the mass *To Hope: A Celebration*, he was so struck by the beauty and power of the liturgy that he joined the Roman Catholic Church and regularly worshiped in his parish church in Wilton, Connecticut. His funeral was celebrated in that church on December 12 and included performance of his compositions “The Desert and the Parched Land,” “Psalm 23” and the “Gloria” from his mass.

I met Brubeck when he and his quartet played a magnificent concert of jazz and sacred music at Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian Church. He returned to play several times. During one of those visits he had a heart-related illness and was admitted to the hospital. Russell Gloyd, Brubeck’s manager and conductor, assured me that a

visit would be welcomed.

With some trepidation—as I was a bit in awe of the great artist—I went to see him. He was gracious and seemingly grateful for the visit. We talked about music and faith, and when I asked him if I could pray with him, he immediately agreed. After that he called me his pastor. Every time he played in Chicago, my wife and I were invited to attend as his guests and to visit backstage. Without fail he would greet me with a lively “It’s my pastor!” One of our dearest memories is of sharing lunch with Brubeck and his wife, Lola. In addition to being the mother of their six children, Lola was a trusted business consultant and the author of many of the lyrics to his sacred music.

At the end of my term as moderator of the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I asked Brubeck if his quartet would play for the 209th General Assembly meeting. To my delight, he came to Syracuse and, with a local choral group, performed “All My Hope,” “God’s Love Made Visible” from *La Fiesta de la Posada* and the powerful “The Peace of Jerusalem” from *The Gates of Justice*. It was an evening for which I’ll be forever grateful.

In every age, religion and the arts have been partners and collaborators in the great vocation of expressing human wonder and awe at the mystery of human existence and giving voice to adoration, praise and gratitude to God. Those artists include the ancient poet who wrote Psalm 96:

Sing to the Lord, bless his name . . .
let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar . . .
let the field exult . . .
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

Those artists include J. S. Bach (some of whose “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” occasionally emerges in the middle of a Brubeck improvisation) and Brubeck himself, who is now part of the music department, instrumental division, in the great company of heaven.

Correction: Two inaccuracies were later discovered in the above column. First, “Take Five” is officially attributed to Paul Desmond, Brubeck’s longtime alto saxophonist, and not to Brubeck, although it was the product of a collaboration.

Second, "Take Five" is written entirely in 5/4; the meter does not alternate with 4/4.