

Do you recall your first jazz record?

I think the first real jazz record I listened to was an Oscar Peterson and Joe Pass duo album, one of those Pablo things. A friend of my father's bought it for me when I was eleven years old. Oscar was really the first guy I really listened to. That was the one.

What drew you to play the piano?

Well, I have been playing classical piano from the time I was about six years old, but sort of improvising a lot. Not really jazz, of course, because I had not been exposed to that, but I think when I heard Oscar, after hearing recordings of Horowitz and things like that of classical virtuosos, I could kind of relate to that, in the sense that his technique was so astounding. He was playing completely different kind of music. That kind of roped me in with jazz, to sort of know that that was possible to do that on the piano.

Do you have a favorite classical piece or a classical composer?

I am always listening to a lot of Brahms piano solo music. I would say that some of the Brahms is probably the stuff that's closest to my heart.

Who were your influences?

I heard a bunch of different players, around that time, who were all pretty diverse. It was just, sort of, what people gave me. About a year later, a friend of mine gave me Keith Jarrett's "Bremen and Lausanne" that solo, three record thing, for my birthday. Again, it was kind of like, discovering that that was possible on the piano, what he was doing. I think I could relate to it, coming from the classical side of things. When I was more like thirteen or fourteen, I really just started buying records, sort of a buying frenzy, listening to all sorts of different piano players and a lot of horn players too. I have probably been influenced by horn players and different instruments, just as much as piano.

Who were some of these horn players?

Definitely Miles, early on, and always for a sense of melody or phrasing, and Coltrane, for sure. Bird, when I really got the be-bop bug. Of course, I loved Bud Powell and Monk, the piano players in that time period, but it was Bird's solos that I was transcribing, trying to go to the source. I still get off on his music, almost like an addiction.

You were a member of Joshua Redman's quartet and crucial to its success. Did you feel pressure from the hype and expectation that surrounded Redman and the quartet? And did that aid in your development and outlook?

I think it was pretty cool, because the whole thing happened, really organically, and in a sense it was very natural. He just, sort of, put together that band and we didn't know whether it would be special or not. We knew that it was going to be good, but then it developed into a pretty special thing. I can still listen to that album and really enjoy it. I think it, kind of, holds up for time, hopefully, at least for me. And basically, with Josh, I probably learned a lot about leading a band, and as a bandleader, how to become satisfied creatively, and also how to keep it interesting for the other guys. He is always giving everybody else a chance. The way he writes his tunes and structures them form wise, everybody gets a chance to express their own thing. So it never felt like I was taking up space or being just a sideman.

You have drawn quite a few comparisons to Lennie Tristano and Bill Evans. Are those comparisons fair?

The Lennie Tristano, I have gotten that a lot, and it's always interesting because I really have not explored his music hardly at all. Although, what I have heard, I love it. And the Bill Evans, I kind of checked him out, but he doesn't really stand out, anymore then McCoy Tyner, or Herbie, or Wynton Kelly, or a whole host of others. Of course, it's a flattering comparison just because I love him. I love his music. I think it's more that maybe there's just sort of a overlap of a sensibility towards music in terms of an introspective quality that happens in the ballads a lot. Of course, there are surface comparisons, like being a trio and things like that, and playing standard songs. I think it's cool. It's flattering. At first it used to bug me a lot because I was constantly being compared to someone else, hopefully, you want to think that you have your own voice, but it's flattering.

How important is it to develop your own voice early?

I think it's crucial. I don't know if it is something that you have to willfully do early on. But, I think for me, it's been all about getting to that point and that's how I judge my growth creatively. I think with most jazz musicians in their developmental stages, you kind of, go through this period where you become entrenched with the history of the music and it's fun as hell. In college and in high school, that's what I did with friends, just listening and becoming obsessed with the chronology of the music, and who proceeded who, and what came out of what. I think that very important, but at a certain point, for me it was not a defining point, it was not like a catalyst moment, but you sort of internalize those influences and you're not thinking about them when your playing. That's what you want to get to, to when you're sitting down to play with anyone, you have all that inside of you, but it's not something you're consciously aware of when you're improvising.

Let talk about your new album *The Art of the Trio, Volume Two: Live at The Village Vanguard*. How did that project evolve?

I was not really sure what I wanted to do because there is always so many different options for a recording. The way it went down was playing at The Vanguard once before that with my own trio, I felt a special affinity for that place and a real inspiration that came from playing that room, because of the audiences that are there and the kind of intensity that they have when they're listening. The room itself, for the kind of music we play, and most people feel that way, acoustically, it is so wonderful, because you can hear everything perfectly. So there's all sorts of subtleties that get lost a lot when you play in other venues, like a festival or whatever. Of course, playing live is a totally different thing then trying to create something in the studio. I asked Matt Pierson, the producer, if I could record the whole week and put it out and he said yes. Then, I just knew I wanted to do it, just because I had the opportunity to. Because, for me, if I had the option, in a perfect world, I would make every album live and just put five or six songs on there. Those are my favorite albums, Miles Davis at the Plugged Nickel or Blackhawk or Coltrane at Birdland, where you hear them getting into that place they get when they're allowed to stretch out and there's no constraints. The music gets transcendental for me.

How long have you been playing with your trio?

Actively, probably about four years now.

In this day and age, with record executives opting for so called "all-star" bands, is it difficult to keep a band together?

There is a lot of that. That's a good point. That's something that never attracted me at all, to play with two people who are great musicians or whoever, but that you have never played with. For me it's all about rapport that you get with people, and also a certain level of trust that comes with playing with people over and over again, and giving each other leeway. Just a lot of things that happen, even on a personal side off the bandstand that definitely contributes to what you do when you're playing. So for me, more and more, I have really become cognoscente that this trio is really it for me, with Larry Grenadier, and Jorge Rossy specifically. Sometimes an interviewer will

ask, 'What would be your dream band? Billy Higgins, or Ron Carter, or Joe Henderson?' And I say, 'Well, really, this is it.' Because of the space that I can get into when I'm playing with them. It's the most fulfilling for me. I'm really aware of that and it's important for me to admit sticking to that. I'm just pretty confident in the process itself and it will continue to grow, because it always has. Every time we play together it just constantly evolving.

What is more important to you at this stage of your career, response from the audience or acclaim from the critics?

It would have to be response from the audience. I think more important than either of those things is when you go to bed at night, with you and the guy upstairs, or whatever it is, there's a satisfaction that I did something that you were going for. It's a very illusive thing. Sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not. Definitely, feeling like I am connecting with the audience is really vital. Feeling like I am connecting with them because I am expressing who I am in an honest way and not pandering to them or getting into a trick bag at all. Doing things that I know will work.

What is it that attracts you to the trio format? And is the quartet or larger ensemble something you would like to explore in the future?

The trio is still really compelling and stimulating. We made a decision to stick with it for a while, at least, and don't really have any definite plans to do anything else, at least with me as a leader. The nice thing about that is that I have been getting to work with Josh Redman recently. We're just finishing up his next recording here in New York, you know, as a sideman, and sort of returning to that after I stopped playing with him for a few years. To me that's equally satisfying in a different way. To be part of somebody else's musical vision, if it's a good vision, which it is with Josh. So it's nice to be able to do that as well.

Who else is in that band?

It's Brian Blade and Larry Grenadier is playing bass.

At the beginning of your career you lived in New York and now you are living in Los Angeles. Is there a difference in the two scenes, as most East Coast musicians would lead you to believe?

I think a lot of people from New York have a conception of Los Angeles specifically as sort of being dead jazz-wise, which for me, after living there for two years, is not really the case for me. In New York, you have a structured geography for sure. In New York, you have a definite jazz scene, Greenwich Village and the West Village, and all the arts are like that in New York, it's more of an old-fashioned approach. You have your classical scene up in Lincoln Center, theaters in Times Square, the publishing houses are up on the upper Westside, and that's kind of how it is. You can get sort of an in-bred thing within each community, sort of cliquey. That's been a turn off for me sometimes when I lived in New York. In Los Angeles, it's completely different, as far as musicians, you have people who are much more versatile because they're doing soundtracks projects. A lot of them are equally adept at scoring for films and writing for strings and comfortable in the more pop genre, but not cheesy pop, you know, creative pop music which I have been exposed to a lot of. I've gotten to do some great stuff more on the pop side of things. Since I've been out in LA doing some recording projects have been really fun and interesting and that's helped me grow a lot. I think people have to find out for themselves. People always ask, 'Should I go to New York?' I think that it's a real subjective thing. For me it definitely was, there was no question, that's what I wanted to do when I got out of high school, because I wanted to go where all my heroes were, still alive and playing the music. But now in LA it's sort of much more interesting just to learn about different things and to be involved with different kinds of genres.

What is the state of jazz today? What direction do you feel it should go in the future?

I think it's in a pretty healthy state today. I think you have a thing that wasn't in a jazz before, which is a lot of media attention thrown on it, almost like how the media gets attracted to pop music. They grab on to someone, not as much for their music, but for their story or their image or whatever, and sort of run with that for a while. The problem with that kind of pop mentality is that there is a built in expiration date. A lot of people in jazz seem to sort of come and go. They get this big record contract and then sort of disappear after a few years. And that's kind of disconcerting. That has nothing to do with the actual level of musicianship. For me, it's just as great as it has ever been. There are so many great players who are getting to record their music and there's so many who just aren't in that situation now, right here in New York, but who are really incredible musicians. In terms of actual music, I don't think it is suffering at all. It is hard to say where it will go in the future. I think one thing that might happen is that you have this sort of renaissance that took place in jazz and a lot of the young musicians of my generation, myself included, sort of almost had an obsession with the history, going back and examining what's happened in the last century. That's all well and good, but I think one thing that might happen is people will start moving ahead and just being in the moment, playing music that doesn't have this sometimes sort of bad consciousness about it, just over aware of the history. If we can sort of get through that and be in the nineties here.

You have been out on the road so much this year, have you been able to practice? How important is practicing, at this stage of your career?

It's really important. It's one of the things that I have to take my lumps that I don't get to practice when I'm on the road and I've been on the road so much, particularly in the last year or so. I've done a lot of work with my trio for the first time. I just don't get to practice that much on the road. But when I am home, it's very important and I try to make time for it.

Do you have any favorite types of songs or any favorite standards?

BM: I love the real simple ones. Simple songs that have just a really strong melody. I'm really attracted to ballads a lot. Discovering new ballads, discovering old ballads.

If you were not playing jazz, what career path would you have taken?

I'm sure I'd be involved with music somehow. It would have to be, the thing that attracted me about jazz, and always did, before I heard jazz, the thing that was really fun for me that I can remember, when I was eight or nine years old, I would just sit down and improvise at the piano. And jazz, more than any other western music that I'm aware of, really makes improvisation sort of the thing and that's what gets me off. It's hard to say what I would be doing if it wasn't in the jazz format, but I think it would have to involve improvisation somehow.

Any musicians out there that you feel the public and record companies should be aware of?

There's a lot. Right here in New York, well, someone that will probably start getting a lot more attention, Mark Turner, he's an incredible tenor saxophonist. He's finally being discovered. He has his first album out on Warner Brothers. And a lot of musicians that he's played with, this guitar player named Kurt Rosenwinkel, who's absolutely phenomenal. It's a mystery to me why he doesn't have a record contract. His music's incredible and original. Some of the musicians that I play with, like Jeff Ballard, great drummer, and a whole host of great tenor players, a lot of the guys who play at Small's, here in New York. A bass player named Avishai Cohen who is from Israel and who has a very unique approach to his music. Just a whole host of musicians. One of my favorite musicians from my generation is Peter Bernstein, a great guitar player. He's not too well known.

What have you been listening to lately?

I'm not listening to too much jazz at the moment. Just whatever I sort of brought as I was leaving my apartment, a sort of grab bag. I really love this new album by this band, Radiohead called OK Computer. That's one that's been on heavy rotation. Another album that just came out that I'm on, actually, if I can give it a plug is a singer/songwriter named Scott Weiland (12 Bar Blues).

The old Stone Temple Pilots singer?

Yeah. I'm on his first solo album. It's really fun music. I've gotten to work with him in LA a little.

How much of a transition is it from playing jazz to playing rock?

The audience is definitely different, and it's really a trip. I've done a couple gigs with him in LA. One in particular was this Christmas K-ROQ, a big station there, Christmas Extravaganza or something (Acoustic Christmas). It was at Universal Amphitheater with thousands of people, and going out there, dressing up, the whole thing, and the audience sort of screaming and going nuts. It's a totally different kind of thing. It's a lot of pomp and circumstance and drama. It's not just about the music, it's very much about the image and package and personality of the band and the singer. I think it's something I used to turn my nose on when I got really into jazz. Truthfully, I shouldn't, because the music I really grew up listening to was rock and roll, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Grateful Dead, all that kind of stuff, Steely Dan. Before jazz and during jazz I listened to a lot of that music. I don't know if it would be just as satisfying to tour with a band like that, because you don't get to improvise. But if it's a good band, which this one was. Some other stuff, I just did a good record date with Willie Nelson that was really fun. He had a great band. There is a different kind of satisfaction you get; it's a very visceral, physical thing that happens. It's a really sort of gut, primal level. It's really satisfying. It's very different.

Most jazz purists frown on rock. They seem to be adverse to acid jazz or fusion. Do you find that kind of mentality is healthy for jazz or does it convey an elitist message?

You said it. It's elitist. The thing about jazz that I see, looking at it through history is that people consider it high art, in the sense that they only like Miles Davis 'Kind of Blue' or John Coltrane. There's a whole legacy of recordings. There's a whole canon that's going to stick with us forever. That's unquestionable, so why do we have to have such bad faith in it? Because historically what jazz has done is borrow from all sorts of genres and have an almost sacrilegious approach to what it takes. That's not unique in jazz. Classical music has done that, borrowing the minuet dance forms and making it the third movement in some of the greatest symphonies in the world. Taking folk songs and turning them into these beautiful lieder. The same with jazz, Dizzy Gillespie borrowing from the Cuban music, then borrowing from classical music, Art Tatum, going over Debussy. Jazz is always not been afraid to take from anything and then transfiguring it and really raise it up to another level. I think that's what can keep on happening now. That's what attracts me. You can take a pop song from any period and if it's a good song and it's got a good strong melody, you can express that melody and you get to improvise and sort of throw it away if you want and turn it inside out. There's no need to keep it inbred and away from everything else. It only alienates the audience. It's very elitist. It turns people off.

Do you have any future projects in mind?

I think I will continue to work with the trio. That's will definitely be the primary thing and recording with them again. More originals, I have got a lot of originals that I have been sitting on. The last album (The Art of the Trio, V. 2) was all standards. Working with Josh as well. Hopefully, at some point, I would like to do a solo record or something. I have shied from and have really just waited until I felt like I had something really strong to say, and I'm starting to get to that point. So maybe, in the next few years, doing a solo recording of original music.

All About Jazz: *Anything Goes* is your tenth recording for Warner Bros. Established pop acts don't have that kind of longevity.

Thank you. I've been lucky to be surrounded by a great group of people for a while. Larry Grenadier and Jorge Rossy are very important to me. I think the longevity comes about because we try to approach it as a band. If it's not a band - if it's just me out there in front with two people accompanying me - then those people are sort of expendable creatively; someone else could replace them. If it's a band though, which I think I have with Larry and Jorge, then their musical viewpoints are vital, and they have a personal stake in the music we make, a vital interest that keeps them around for the long haul. Although I'm the leader and it's my name out front, I try to shape the music around them as well, simply because that's always what's made it work; that's what's made it exciting and kept it spontaneous.

You empathize with ballads. On *Anything Goes*, "Nearness of You." How do you approach a ballad?

Often I'll have a version that I love. In the case of "Nearness of You," I've always been nuts over a recording of Bird playing it with the Woody Herman Band on a record I have called Bird With the Herd. More often, I know a version with a singer and listen to how he or she phrases the melody. I get a lot from vocalists that I love - Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Frank Sinatra - the way they phrase the melody. Often the mere attempt to make the piano phrase like a human voice can point you in an expressive direction: the impossibility of achieving vocal effects on the piano - a long sustain, vibrato, and the like - is a given, but if you have that as an ideal, you can communicate a certain longing in your phrasing.

***Anything Goes* features your trio, which has achieved a lasting collective endurance. Does it ever become old hat?**

It's become easier in some ways playing together. There's often less explanation necessary, verbally, when I bring something new in for us to play. It's also become more challenging in a way for all of us because we don't want to tread over old ground. Certain musical approaches have a life and an expiration date - there comes a point when they're not compelling anymore. Then you have to find something new, but you can't force something new to appear. So then you have to listen for the possibility of something and let it take shape, and stay out of the way of the process.

The ego could get in the way of such process. Is it a challenge to reign in pride and allow the music to develop?

Yeah, I've got an ego like everyone else unfortunately. The ego operates on fear, in this case fear that the creativity is drying up. That fear doesn't help anything, so having the awareness that it's no use worrying about how things go creatively is about the only temporary salve. And I'm not sure whether being at peace with yourself helps the creative process. Creativity has its own non-rules. Trying to map it, how it works, is always reductive. I mean, it's also reductive to say that you've got to be in flux in your life, maybe messed up emotionally or whatever, to be creative. Why would that follow?

What kinds of liberties does the trio afford you?

Just speaking selfishly, Larry and Jorge give me this elastic, churning foundation that I can jump off of. But ideally, they're jumping off as well, from me, from each other. Although it sounds redundant and maybe touchy-feely, there's an intense satisfaction in playing jazz, when you know that you're giving someone else the breadth they want and need creatively in any given moment. It's an altruistic act, but it's satisfying to your own self worth to know that you have the ability to set someone else free. There's a certain truth factor that's necessary for the whole thing to work

with everyone together: if you play selfishly and usurp someone else's buzz, you're just screwing yourself over in the by short term of whatever tune you're playing together right then, and in the long term, in terms of your credibility with those players in the future. You don't get points too much for the future - people are critical by nature, and tend to remember if they're slighted in a creative situation. That's as it should be I think; it keeps everyone in check. Freedom is there but it's conditional on a deep mutual respect for the people you're playing with.

You've spawned instrumentalists doing Radiohead covers. Has Radiohead sent you a fruit basket?

"Cover" is an unfortunate word - I guess it works pragmatically to describe an interpretation of a tune that hasn't been around long enough to be deemed a "standard." But "cover" also means just playing the tune - like you're a wedding band and the bride says, "Can you guys play 'We've Only Just Begun?'" and you cover it for them. You have to do something more with the tune if you want to transcend just doing a "cover" in that narrow definition of the word, and with us it's through the interpretation of the melody and harmony, our rhythmic approach, and most importantly, the collective improvisation that ensues.

How formidable is it to try to give a standard or an indie rock song its own identity?

The song has an identity already. The nature of its identity is what determines whether it's a good vehicle to interpret and improvise on. What sort of form does it have? Simple is usually better. What sort of harmonic movement? Is the harmony quirky - too quirky or idiosyncratic to the original version maybe? What is the melody like on a piano for me? It may be beautiful, but almost unplayable on piano. That happens with a lot of rock tunes.

Romanticism implies nostalgia for damaged goods.

It has to do with my understanding of life and the redemptive power of something like music, which is probably a mix of Freud, Harold Bloom, and a little Gnosticism thrown in. You have these early experiences in life that are intensely pleasurable, followed by this disconnection from that pleasure. What leaves a mark on you, what seeps into your memory forever, is the pain that comes from the disconnection from that pleasure, I think, more than the actual pleasure itself. Pleasure depends on its temporal, fleeting quality for its existence; it can only be defined in opposition to the inevitability of its lack, which is felt as pain. So you try to make sense of that pain because you're always confronting it. You develop a love for the pain out of necessity. Romantic works are informed by that troubled love, but you can probably see why I've moved away from using "romantic" to describe that phenomenon because this description could work for anything from Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit", Shakespeare's Hamlet, or even something like the blues. In any case, those kinds of works don't give us a representation of the prelapsarian, untroubled pleasure before the first disconnection. They show us the moment when the "glass shattered." There's a nostalgia implied there, because they're perpetually trying to capture the first time the glass shattered in our early memories, and that early experience takes on an emblematic, legendary quality, seen through rose colored glasses. There is a folly in that, because we are willfully engaging in a misperception of something painful. So there's a quality of irony if all that gets played out in an artwork, where one can be aware of that self-deception and simultaneously engage in self-deceit anyways.

What helps you sleep well at night?

I have my own bullshit meter, which is always on and operates independently of outside successes. If I have a good gig, I sleep well at night. If I have a less good gig, I sleep less well. I'm a little better at rolling with the peaks and valleys than I was a few years ago, but I definitely don't have some Olympian calm about my status as a musician. I want to continue to grow, and I am driven by a fear that I will stop growing; it's that simple. Freud was right - it's the fear of death that keeps us running around the hamster wheel. I'm okay with that actually in a creative sense.

It doesn't strike me as morbid; it's just the way it works, for me at least.

Fear of standing on success. That yearning to push your own envelope can get cumbersome.

The yearning does get cumbersome; that's an astute question, because you're pointing out a by-product of the process of growth. You're pushing yourself so as to ward off a creeping banality - the banality of the expected, the safe, the tried and tested, the pedestrian. And then the process of pushing, indeed, can suddenly become banal. What do you do? Keep pushing; push through that. Or, change your musical surroundings radically. I've done that a few times over the years.

Having left the bright lights, big city, do you miss Hollywood?

I have nostalgia for Hollywood, my old neighborhood around Franklin Avenue, and miss the scene there, miss the regular Friday nights at Largo to see Jon Brion, miss some friends. But I get back there a few times a year, fortunately. Los Angeles is, quite simply, one of the weirdest places on earth and will always be so for me. I wouldn't change it one bit. I love the freaks, the wannabes, the creative misfits, the car-culture, the rock 'n' roll, the slight feeling of danger at all times.

Has family life changed you?

As an artist it's hard to say how being married and having a child has changed me - too early to tell. As a man, I've definitely matured from the experience, and I'm grateful for that.

When we last spoke, I remarked on how elitist the jazz guard had become and you referred to jazz's need to inbred and keep away from everything else. Since, you've torn down some of those preconceived borders. There is a satisfaction that comes with knowing you are bringing a new audience.

Yes, that's satisfying.

What is it about you or your music that makes sense to Gen X?

It's hard to say. I think any vital music should be able to reach people of all ages. It's very gratifying, though, to see people my age and younger at our shows.

Have writers finally quit comparing you and your music to Bill Evans or Lennie Tristano?

No, but it's all-good. Harold Bloom, a great critic and commentator, has written, "Critics love continuities." They love to connect the dots, he meant. I take that to mean that they construct their own narratives by connecting the dots through history, which can be interesting and illuminating in the right hands. But if someone lacks scholarship and imagination, they will inevitably construct narratives that are independent of reality, which can be entertaining I suppose, but are usually reductive and simplistic. It's part of the sound byte culture we live in: say something really fast and simple that grabs attention.

[Jazz.com](http://jazz.com)

In Conversation with Brad Mehldau, Ted Panken, Jazz.com, Published: 5th June, 2008

You met Jorge Rossy, the drummer in your working trio between 1995 to 2003, in the early '90s, perhaps when he arrived in New York from Boston.

Yes. Jorge already had a lot of musical relationships with people that I met after him for instance, Kurt Rosenwinkel and Mark Turner, Larry Grenadier as well, Joshua Redman, Chris Cheek, Bill McHenry. A lot of people who you hear about now as fully developed, with their own voices, at

that time were also growing up together. As a lot of people still do, they went to Boston first, and then came to New York. I met them all when they came here.

You, on the other hand, decided to jump into the shark pit right away.

I came straight here.

I recall someone saying that they asked you what it was like at the New School, and you responded that it was a good reason to be in New York!

Yes. [laughs]

Reflecting back, how would you evaluate that early experience, newly arrived at 18? You're from Connecticut, so presumably you knew something about New York at the time.

A little bit. I knew that I wanted to come here because it was everything that the suburbs wasn't. I was a white, upper-middle-class kid who lived in a pretty homogenized environment. Yet, I was with a couple of other people, like Joel Frahm, the tenor saxophonist, who went to the same high school as me. A group of us were trying to expose ourselves to jazz. So New York for us was something that was sort of the Other, yet it wasn't too far away—a 2-hour-and-15-minute car or bus ride. What really cemented me wanting to go to New York was when I came here with my folks during my senior year of high school, and we went one night to Bradley's, and heard the Hank Jones-Red Mitchell duo. That blew me away, seeing someone play jazz piano like that, about six feet from you. The next night I heard Cedar Walton's...well, the collective Timeless All-Stars formation, which was with Bobby Hutcherson, Billy Higgins, Ron Carter, and Harold Land, small ensemble jazz. The immediacy of hearing Billy Higgins' ride cymbal and seeing Cedar Walton comping, after hearing it for three years on all those great Blue Note records I had. That was it. I knew I had to come here, just from an actual visceral need to get more of THAT as a listener.

When you arrived at the New School, how did things progress? How fully formed were your ideas at the time?

I was pretty formed. Not to sound pompous, but I was more developed as a musician than maybe half of the students there. But a few students there were a little ahead of me, and also two or three years older, which was perfect, because in addition to the teachers who were there, they acted as mentors and also friends. One was Peter Bernstein, the guitarist, another was Jesse Davis, the alto saxophonist. Larry Goldings was there, playing piano mostly he was just starting to play an organ setup. Those guys were immediately very strong influences on me. I have a little gripe in the way we tell the narrative of jazz history, or the history of influence. People often are influenced by their peers, because they're so close to them, and that was certainly the case for me. Peter and Larry had a huge influence on everything I did playing in bands at that time. That's pretty much what I was doing. I wasn't trying to develop my own band. I was just being a sideman and soaking everything up.

If I'm not mistaken, your first record was in 1990, with Peter Bernstein and Jimmy Cobb. Jimmy Cobb had a little group at the Village Gate maybe at the time?

Yes, Jimmy Cobb had a group that was loosely called Cobb's Mob with Peter and [bassist] John Webber. He still has it in different incarnations. It's a quartet, most of the time with Pete playing guitar. Jimmy Cobb taught at the New School, and his class was basically play with Jimmy Cobb for 2' hours once a week. For me, that was worth the price of the whole thing.

I think Larry Goldings said that during the first year, when the curriculum was pretty seat-of-the-pants.

Very loose! Arnie Lawrence would interrupt the harmony class, and say, 'Okay, Art Blakey is here for the next three hours,' and that would become what the class did.

But getting back to this notion of influences from your contemporaries, how did their interests augment the things that you already knew? I'd assume that by this time, you were already pretty well informed about all the modernist piano food groups, as it were.

A fair amount. I came here at 18 completely in a Wynton Kelly thing. Then it was early McCoy, then Red Garland thing, and then late '50s Bill Evans. I was jumping around stylistically and still absorbing stuff I hadn't heard maybe until four years in New York, and then I slowed down. It's that whole notion of input and output, where you get just so much, and then slow down to digest.

But in New York, I suppose you'd have to find ways to apply these ideas in real time.

Right.

I'm interested in the way that process happened, to allow you to start forming the ideas that people now associate with your tonal personality.

Definitely. When I came to New York I had sort of a vocabulary, but not much practical knowledge of how to apply that in a group setting, which to me is indispensable if you're a jazz musician. Part of my definition is playing with other people, and, if you're a piano player, comping. Comping in jazz is very difficult to teach in a lesson, because it's a social thing, an intuitive thing, something that you gain from experience of the seat of the pants. It also happens through osmosis, I watched players like Larry Goldings, Kevin Hays (who I was checking out a lot), and of course, people like Cedar Walton and Kenny Barron. Nothing can replace the experience of watching a piano player comp behind a soloist. If you watch closely and to see what works and what doesn't, that will rub off very quickly. I'd say doing that helped me become a more social musician, versus friends of mine who came to the city at the same time I did but stayed in their practice room the whole time. You don't develop in that same social way, which to me is indispensable as a jazz musician.

Did you have direct mentoring from any of the older pianists?

I had some very good lessons at the New School with Kenny Werner and Fred Hersch, and Junior Mance was my first teacher there. He was a little different than Fred and Kenny. Fred concentrated on getting a good sound out of the piano and playing solo piano a lot, which was great, because I hadn't gotten there yet. Perfect timing. Kenny showed me ways to construct lines and develop my solo vocabulary specific harmonic stuff. With Junior, it was more that thing I described of soaking it up by being around him. We would play on one piano, or, if we had a room with two pianos, we'd play on two. I said, 'I want to learn how to comp better. I listened to you on these Dizzy Gillespie records, and your comping is perfect. How do you do that?' He said, 'Well, let's do it.' So we sat down, and he would comp for me, and then I would comp for him and try to mimic him. Yeah, soak up what he was doing. Junior is a beautiful person. A lot of those guys to me still are models as people, for their generosity as human beings, and Junior is certainly one in that sense.

Did you graduate from the New School?

I did. It took me five years. I took a little break, because I already started touring a little with Christopher Holliday, an alto sax player. That was my first gig. But I did actually get some sort of degree from there.

But as you continued at the New School, the Boston crew starts to hit New York, and a lot of them are focused on some different rhythmic ideas than were applied in mainstream jazz of the time.

For sure.

I'm bringing this up because once you formed the trio, one thing you did that a lot of people paid attention to was play very comfortably in odd meters, 7/4 and so forth, and it's

now become a mainstream thing, whereas in 1991 this was a pretty exotic thing to do. How did you begin the process of developing the sound that we have come to associate with you?

I'm not sure. A lot of it certainly had to do with Jorge Rossy. To give credit where credit is due, those ideas were in the air with people like Jeff Watts, who was playing in different meters on the drums. But Jorge at that time was very studious, checking out a lot of different rhythms, not just odd-meter stuff. He was grabbing the gig with Paquito D'Rivera and playing a lot with Danilo Perez, absorbing South American and Afro-Cuban rhythms. I never studied those specifically, but by virtue of the fact that Jorge was playing those rhythms a lot and finding his own thing to do with them in the sessions we had, it found its way into my sound. We'd take a well-known standard like 'Stella by Starlight,' and try to play it in 7 and in 5 as a kind of exercise. Some of them actually led to arrangements, like 'I Didn't Know What Time It Was,' in 5, which is one of the first things we recorded in an odd meter. Then we moved on to 7, and got more comfortable with it. It was fun and exciting, and it seemed to happen naturally. But Jorge was ahead of me in terms of the comfort level. There was a lot of him playing in 7, holding it down while I'd get lost and then come around again.

How long did it take?

It took maybe six months or a year where I felt as comfortable in those meters as I was in 4. Then also, I started to crystallize this idea about phrasing. If you listen to Charlie Parker or to someone really authentic playing bebop, like Barry Harris, you notice that they are completely free with their rhythmic phrasing. It's swinging and it's free on this profound level, because it's very open. But when you hear people who take a little piece of bebop and condense it into something (they can also have a very strong style), it gets less interesting. One thing I've always loved about jazz phrasing is the way, when someone is inflecting a phrase rhythmically, it's really advanced and deep and beautiful, and also makes you want to dance. One thing I heard that perhaps we were trying to do was get that same freedom of floating over the barline in a 7/4 or 5/4 meter as you could find in 4/4, versus maybe... Not to dis fusion or whatever, but some of the things that people did with odd meters in the '70s had a more metronomic rhythmic feeling, more literal--- 'Hey, look, we're playing 7, and this is what it is.'

Another influence that filtered into the sound of your early trio was classical music, which seems as much a part of your tonal personality as the jazz influences. Were you playing classical music before jazz?

Yes. I started playing classical music as a kid, but I wasn't getting the profundity of a lot of what I was playing. I didn't like Bach, and I liked flashy Chopin stuff. I did already have an affinity for Brahms, though; he became sort of a mainstay. Then jazz took over. Fast forward. I was around 22, maybe four years in New York, and for whatever reason, I started rediscovering classical music with deep pleasure. What I did, what I'm still doing now, as I did with jazz for a long time, I absorbed-absorbed-absorbed. I went on a buying frenzy to absorb a lot of music. A lot of chamber music.

Records or scores?

Records and scores. A lot of records. A lot of listening. A lot of going to concerts here in New York. I guess it rubbed off a little. For one thing, it got me focusing more on my left hand. Around that time, I had been playing in a certain style of jazz, where your left hand accompanies the right hand playing melodies when you're soloing. That's great, but I had lost some of the facility in my left hand to the point where I was thinking, Wow, I probably had more dexterity in my left hand when I was 12 than I do now. So it was sort of an ego or vanity thing that bugged me a little, and it got me into playing some of this classical literature where the left hand is more proactive.

Were you composing music in the early 90s? After your first record, most of your dates feature original music. Around when did that start to become important to you? Was it an inner necessity? Did it have anything to do with having a record contract and having to find material to put on the records?

I've never actually thought of when I began writing tunes until you asked the question. I guess there were a few sporadic tunes from the time I arrived in New York until 1993, or 1994 even. I guess I was comparatively late as a writer in that I was an improviser and a player and a sideman before I was trying to write jazz tunes. Two of my early originals appeared on my first trio record with Jorge Rossy and his brother, Mario Rossy. On my next record, when I got signed to Warner Brothers, *Introducing Brad Mehldau*, there were a few more.

A lot of your titles at the time reflect a certain amount of Germanophilia.

At the time, for sure.

You wrote liner notes that referenced 19th century German philosophy, but applied the ideas to the moment in interesting ways. Can you speak to how this aesthetic inflected your notions of music and your own sense of mission?

What I was trying to do was bridge the gap between everything I loved musically, and there was this disparity for me between Brahms in 1865 and Wynton Kelly in 1958 all these things I loved. Looking back, at that age, I was very concerned with creating an identity that would somehow, if it was at all possible, mesh together this more European, particularly Germanic Romantic 19th Century sensibility (in some ways) with jazz, which is a more American, 20th century thing (in some ways). One connection that still remains between them is the song the art songs of Schubert or Schumann, these miniature, perfect 3- or 4-minute creations. To me, there is a real corollary between them and a great jazz performance that can tell a story Lester Young or Billie Holiday telling a story in a beautiful song. Also pop. Really nice Beatles tunes. All those song-oriented things are miniature, and inhabit a small portion of your life. You don't have to commit an hour-and-a-half to get through it. But really good songs leave you with a feeling of possibility and endlessness.

Not too long after your first record for Warner Brothers in 1995, which featured both your working trio and a trio with Christian McBride and Brian Blade, you began to break through to an international audience. You had a nice reputation in New York, but then overnight to receive this acclaim, where people pasted different attitudes onto what you were doing, whether it was relevant to your thoughts or not. Trying to develop your music and stay focused while your career is burgeoning in this way could have been a complicated proposition. Was it? Or were you somewhat blinkered?

It was complicated. I think I was sort of in the moment, so I don't know if I viewed it as such, but retrospectively, if you're addressing the attention factor from other people, I developed a sense of self-importance that maybe didn't have a really good self-check mechanism in it. If I could go back and do it all over again, some of the liner notes would be maybe a little shorter! Not completely gone.

You did write long liner notes.

Long liner notes. And I still do.

Using the language of German philosophy.

I still do, so I shouldn't even say it. But I suffered a bit from a lack of self-irony (for lack of a better word). I think I've pretty much grown out of it now an old geezer at 36.

People became accustomed to the sound of the first trio with Larry Grenadier and Jorge Rossy, and when you formed the new one, as an editor put it to me at the time, his friends in Europe were saying that they were afraid that now you wouldn't play as well, that the things that made you interesting would be subsumed by a more groove-oriented approach, or something like that. Speak a bit to the way the trio evolved into the one you currently use.

What you're alluding to is certainly true. A lot of people approached me directly and said, What are you doing, changing this thing you have that's so special? That was interesting. One way I can mark the progression is that at first Larry and Jorge and I had a lot more to say to each other about the music. As I mentioned, Jorge and I would have these sessions, and work specific things like playing in odd meters. All three of us would talk about whether or not something was working on a given night, what it was about, what we could do to make it better. Over the years, as it became easier to play together intuitively, we reached a point where we had less and less to say. It was either working or it wasn't. I don't want to say that we were resting on our laurels, but there was a slight sense that almost it was too easy. That even was Jorge's phrase. I think he was feeling that as a drummer, personally just as a drummer, independent of playing with us and wanted a new challenge playing a different instrument.

Then I heard Jeff Ballard in the trio Fly [editor's note: with Mark Turner and Larry Grenadier], and felt a sense of possibility in the way Larry was playing with him. Larry plays differently with different drummers he plays one way with, say Bill Stewart, and a different way with Jorge and me. In Fly, he plays in a way I'd describe as more organic and intuitive, and it surprised me. I almost felt sort of a jealousy. I thought, Wow, I never heard Larry play like this, and I'm playing with him all the time. It made me almost want to grab Jeff!

What was it about what he was doing? Was it a more groove-oriented approach?

I would say yes. A certain groove, and also, though it may sound strange, my trio has become more precise since Jeff joined. The way Jeff and Larry state the rhythm is very open-ended, but precise in the sense that I can play more precise rhythmic phrases, which adds a bit more detail to the whole canvas. You can see the details more clearly, let's say. Jorge was always very giving; he usually followed my lead in terms of how I'd build the shape of a tune. One thing that Jeff does that's different, which is sort of a classic drummer move (if you think of Tony Williams or Elvin or someone like that), is putting something unexpected in the music at a certain point. Say we're on the road, we've been playing one of my originals or arrangements for a month, and we do a big concert somewhere in front of two thousand people and he starts playing a completely different groove. At first, I had to get used to that if I don't change what I'm doing, it won't make sense. So I have to find something new. Then we're actually improvising again, developing a new form or canvas for the tune.

Talk about the balance between intuition and preparation, how it plays out on the bandstand.

I don't write really difficult road maps, as they call it. Maybe some of my stuff is a little hard, but most of it is not too difficult where you're going to have your face in the music. I like that, because then you start forgetting about the music, and it becomes more intuitive, which hopefully is the ideal. That's how it feels with the three of us. A lot of times with a band, you start playing a tune, an arrangement or your own original. You find certain things that work formally within the entire shape of the tune, places along the way, roughly, where you build to a climax, or a certain thing

that one of you gives to the other person, like a diving board that you spring from to go somewhere else formally. In that sense, the process becomes less improvised, because you get this structure that works, and it helps you generate excitement and interest.

A few years ago, maybe around 1999-2000, you began to look for new canvases by incorporating contemporary pop music into your repertoire, and on *Day Is Done* it comprises the preponderance of the recital.

Right.

That development coincided with your move to Los Angeles and associating with the producer Jon Brian, who it seems showed you creative ways to deal with pop aesthetics.

What I loved about him when I first heard him at this Los Angeles club, Largo, was that I felt like I was going to see a really creative jazz musician in a sense even more brazen than a lot of jazz musicians. Really completely improvising his material, the material itself, taking songs that maybe he had never played from requests from the audience, and then developing a completely unorthodox, strange arrangement in the heat of the moment, right there, for those kinds of songs, which were more contemporary Pop songs. Also Cole Porter and whatever, all over the map. Completely not constrained by anything stylistically. That was definitely an inspiration for me at that point.

As someone who's played a good chunk of the Songbook and as a one-time jazz snob, can you discern any generalities about the newer pop music of that time vis-a-vis older forms? You've said that you see the limitations of a form as a way of finding freedom, rather than the other way around.

Right. For me personally, not a judgment on other stuff. I need to have some sort of frame. I need to have a narrative flow. That's what makes it cool for me, if I'm taking a solo or whatever. With more contemporary pop tunes, pop tunes past the sort of golden era that some people call the American Songbook, all of a sudden there are no rules any more. That's the main thing. With people like Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, you can often hear similar structures, with verse, chorus, that kind of stuff. But in a lot of pop music and rock-and-roll, it's not that the forms are complicated, they aren't at all, but there is not a fixed orthodoxy. In the songs of Cole Porter songs and Rodgers and Hammerstein and or Jerome Kern, there's a verse and then the song itself, which is often in an AABA form, something within the bridge, and then that something again with the coda. These forms often keep you thinking in a certain way about what you're going to do when you're blowing on the music. When you get out of that, it becomes sort of a wide-open book, with often the possibility for a lack of form to take place. I try to take some of these more contemporary songs and somehow impose my own form on them in the improvisation. That's the challenge. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

Given that you've been a leader and highly visible for more than a decade, it seems to me you've tried hard to sustain relationships with the people you came up with and to keep yourself in the fray, as it were being a sideman on Criss-Cross dates and so on. Is it important for you to do that?

Someone like Keith Jarrett comes to mind as someone who is really in his own realm, who hasn't been a sideman. But I value the experience of connecting with other musicians who are outside of my band, and not being a leader. Not to sound self-righteous or whatever, but it does teach a certain humility when you go into a record date and you have to submit your own ego, to a certain extent, to someone else's music, and go with the musical decisions they want to make. The

challenge is to negotiate a balance between your own identity, which the person who called wants to hear, and the identity of their music, what they've written. To try to do justice to that is always fun and exciting, and I like that challenge.

Huffington Post

Interview With Brad Mehldau on the Art of Solo Piano, Joseph Vella, 15th February 2011

The core of your playing successfully balances jazz and classical influences. Can you describe how you negotiate between the two styles in your playing?

I draw on a lot of classical music, pop and rock music, music from Brazil, and other stuff. I listen to it for pleasure and enjoyment, and then a lot of it filters out in my playing. With classical music, there's a written canon there - you can study those scores. There's a good three centuries of stuff to check out - it's endless. Ultimately I think of myself as an improvising jazz musician at the end of the day, and one of my talents I guess is assimilating all of that written stuff and making it part of what I do.

Tell us about the challenge and thrill of playing solo?

The challenge and the thrill are one and the same - there is no net; there is absolute freedom. When jazz musicians improvise in a group setting, they are often following some sort of schema - often it's variations on the initial theme of whatever they are playing. When you are playing solo, you don't have to correspond to what someone else is doing. So you might take that approach, but you might decide to chuck it out at a certain point and go off on a tangent that doesn't formally adhere to what you've just been doing. That can be exciting and rewarding. The challenge there though is to make something with integrity - something that has a story to tell. One fun surprise of this concert was "My Favorite Things." It was not something I had played before - the Coltrane version is sacred to me. But I was going out for an encore and thought of it at the last moment, and it turned out to be for me anyways, one of the more compelling performances in the set - it had that story to it; it just kind of unfolded. Sometimes you find that and sometimes you don't; sometimes you find it with no preparation or context at all and those moments are always great for me. I suppose there is a broader context - there's the context of the Coltrane version that I heard when I was 13 for the first time and really changed my life; there's the context of the original from the movie, *The Sound of Music*, that I grew up watching as a kid. There's probably some sort of harkening back to childhood going on in my performance.

How do you approach selecting material to perform in a solo context?

I have several ideas before I go out on the stage, and I usually stick to around half of them. Some things that I thought I would play I don't when I get on stage because of what takes place when I get out there. For instance, if I play something that goes much longer than I originally intended, I will skip something else. I try for variety and often think of a multi-movement symphonic work or sonata as a model - you've usually got one movement that's more intellectual, one that's more simple direct, one that's fast, one that's slow, one that's in 3/4 time maybe, etc. - in other words, a variety of mood and texture. In all that, as I'm going along, there is some sort of abstract narrative that presents itself in a concert - I don't know how else to put it. Sometimes it will come in the form of themes that reappear in the different tunes I'm playing, or harmonic devices, or rhythmic motifs. That presents itself in the act of playing; it's not something that is planned out.

Throughout your career you have put your own spin on pop songs written by artists such as Elliott Smith, The Beatles, Nick Drake, Radiohead, James Taylor and many others. How do select what pop song to cover?

I only play songs I love - whether it's those ones you mention or Cole Porter or whoever. It's not because they're pop tunes, though - they're just what I think are good strong songs.

One of the highlights featured on *Live in Marciac* is the performance of your original composition "Resignation." On the DVD companion, there is a special feature offering the viewer the ability to see the notes you are playing in live time. Tell us about the concept behind the music scroll?

Philippe Andre is the musician who made this transcription, and it was really fun to view that. I had the idea of maybe presenting it in a scrolling format, as something that musicians, amateur or professional, might find interesting. Craig Anderson designed the music scroll and I'm very excited about it. This is the first scrolling score he made of my music, and since then, he has made one for the scores of two more recent efforts of mine: "Don't Be Sad" from my record *Highway Rider*, and "Dreams," a song that I wrote for piano and voice, that appears on *Love Songs*, a collaborative project with the fantastic singer, Anne Sofie von Otter. There are things that I don't like about all of the technological leaps that have been made in the last few decades, and one general one is that there is a kind of saturation of information which often has the effect of distracting us - we check out a little bit of this and a little bit of that but it's hard to stay with one thing. But there are also great things that have come out of the newer technology, and there was this opportunity to see and hear my music in a different way. When you get some creative guys like Craig, you can put that technology to use, it can be in the service of what you're expressing.

***Live in Marciac* is your third solo recording. Tell us how it compares to your two previous solo recordings, *Elegiac Cycle* and *Live in Tokyo*, both personally and musically.**

Each solo record has been kind of a turning point for me - an end of one thing, and a beginning of something else. *Live In Marciac* is the beginning of a freer approach, I would say, and maybe more ease and fluidity in a musical texture with several simultaneous voices. It is the most related to where I am now as a solo player.

London Jazz (French In Liberation)

Interview With Brad Mehldau, Bruno Pfeiffer, londonjazz.blogspot.co.nz, 29th April 2010

How do you combine the different influences -jazz, classical, pop?

I don't make a distinction between genres - I just write and play what I'm feeling. Music in itself doesn't have genres - it's just 12 different tones, and how you arrange them in a given point in time.

Your solos are perfectly constructed. Are you inspired by subjects other than jazz (philosophy, mathematics, logic?)

Narratives, in general - a novel, a play, a movie, a symphony. They all have structure when they tell us a story - even crazy modern works like Joyce's *Ulysses* are very involved in a form. There is a beginning somewhere and an end somewhere, and the story passes through time. We reflect on our own transient quality to some extent when we experience that story - whether it is through music or some other artistic medium.

What do you answer to those who say you are just a jazz musician?

No one has ever said that to me. What a strange question!

How do you define beauty in music?

Beauty is the quality that makes the listener lose his or her self-possession. The listener relinquishes his own will power for a moment, as he faces something that is greater and better than himself. Beauty - in music or anything - is always better than us, it is different and separate from us.

In "Highway Rider", (Nonesuch, 2010) which I like a lot, sometimes you are swinging, sometimes deeply classical: did you intend to provide a sample of your various worlds?

The record has a variety of texture, like you mention, and then it also has this continuity, that comes from the thematic unity - I use one idea to generate all the music. So there is a dichotomy between the textural variety and the thematic unity, I suppose.

Improvisations often end up in simple nice sentences. Is that premeditated on your part, in your mind when you start a solo?

There should be a story there, and stories often work well with sentences - and paragraphs, and chapters also. But again - if you look at Joyce - it is possible to forget about periods and commas and sentences and still tell a good story.

The more concentrated you are, the more astounding your concerts tend to be: how do you prepare?

Coffee.

What difference between playing in Salle Pleyel, for instance, and at a festival?

Every night, there is a different audience, every night, there is a new opportunity for something to happen that has not happened before.

What is the nature of your relationship with the public?

Absolute gratitude - my gratitude that they want to listen to me. This gratitude does not lessen as a get older - on the contrary, it grows. So I feel a responsibility to the listening public - I really don't want to waste their time.

How important is the influence of rock groups in your , RADIOHEAD for example??

Life would be more grey without rock'n'roll!

I found much tenderness in "Highway Rider" : is that how you are at the moment?

I can stay tender for about 5 minutes - then that's enough! :)

Did you compose with Joshua's playing in mind?

I definitely did compose with Joshua's playing, and his sound, in mind. Joshua is like my musical brother - I feel so close to him.

What instructions do you provide to your rhythm section?

I try to not give them too much instruction - we talk about specific things for a new piece of music when I bring it in, and after that, after we've rehearsed it, hopefully, we don't need to talk too much.

PBS

Jeffrey Brown, pbs.org, Published 9th April 2010

I was thinking as I listened to this of some short story collections I've read where the writer writes linked stories, you know, but it adds up to a whole picture. Is that a fair way

of thinking of what you've done? What did you set out to do here?

That's a nice kind of analogy. That would work for me. I guess I was thinking of some sort story but pretty vague. I've never yet had the experience of having a very specific storyline in my head, but this is about as specific as I've gotten. And it's kind of not even much of a plot there, but the idea of travel and sort of cyclical journey of starting out from home, leaving home, some of the feelings of homesickness that come from being away from home, and then also the feeling of being alone traveling, meeting other people and eventually coming home again and the way that feels to come home. And beyond that, you know, the protagonist might be myself, it might be someone else -- and again pretty open ended. You don't necessarily have to have that narrative in your head, but that's one that I did start to think about as I wrote the music. I'd say about half way in I thought, this feels like journey.

So you have a narrative, you have a theme, you have variations as in all jazz, I guess, and in this case part of the variation has to do with the different instruments and instrumentation, especially the use of a chamber orchestra.

That's right. So had this one theme that kind of sticks through the whole thing and that's the unifying factor, I guess, that hopefully you'd hear after a few listens or maybe right away there is this idea that's winding through the whole thing. And then within that, like you say, a lot of variety of texture in terms of the orchestration. From all the way down to just saxophone and piano duo, even some piano solo. Another kind of cool texture that I'm pretty excited about on this record is piano and saxophone and percussion with no bass. That's kind of a unique thing that you hear on "Capriccio" and "The Falcon Will Fly Again." And then in more traditional, which I think of as a jazz ensemble with Joshua [Redman] and Jeff Ballard and Larry Grenadier and myself, and then all the way up to, like you mentioned, with the full orchestra and everyone playing. So yeah, there is a pretty big variety of texture there.

Tell me a little more about working with a chamber orchestra. What do you try to achieve or what does it allow you do and how difficult is it? How do avoid making it sound, you know you put an orchestra there it can sound a little bit like just background, they are not really used the way a classical composer would use an orchestra.

Right, right for sure. It's true. There's a lot of pop records, even really cool pop records, that I like that nevertheless the orchestra was added on later. And right away that's a big thing that I was able to avoid just in practical terms by recording everyone at the same time and not overdubbing the orchestra. That's a big reason why I chose John Brion to produce it, because he's done a lot of that himself in some of his film work. He knows how to have a huge amount of tracks going on at the same time, tons of microphones, tons of people in a couple different rooms, recording at the same time. What I like about this record is that you can listen to it and you can get the feeling of a bunch of people in a big room playing and the space and the molecules flying around in the air, but you can also with a pretty nice degree of specificity and say that's a bassoon there, or that's a French horn there, and there's Brad playing something in his left hand there and there's Josh, you can hear everything real, real clear on the record.

Including things like handclapping.

Yeah, yeah. That's right.

So it was recorded live.

So we recorded everything live. There's a couple things I overdubbed myself, like I played some orchestra bells because, you know, we didn't have enough money to get a percussionist to do that. So one or two things like that. I overdubbed a little pump organ on one track, but the big thing was that we got to play with the orchestra live, and I wrote the music with that idea of the

orchestra more merging with the jazz players and everybody being intertwined, rather than what you mentioned, you know, the sort of orchestra as a sweetener to enhance what's already there. I really wanted it to be an integral part of the musical fabric, I guess you could say.

You've talked a lot and written a lot in the past about your eclectic tastes. You did study classical music as a kid right?

Right.

Have you written for orchestra before? Do you go back and listen to composers that you like to think about how to use an orchestra?

Exactly. You know, I'd say the main things I've listened for years and years since I've been listening to music are classical music, jazz and pop music, and sort of all those things at once are what keep my attention and what I listen to purely just for pleasure. And so with a lot of classical scores I've been listening to for years I go out and buy the score, and then when I'm on the road I like to read a score like other people read a book. I just sit there and read it and it's a great way to pass the time and it's also even kind of form of escapism. When you're reading a Brahms's symphony, you're sort of in this perfect world of order and righteousness of that music. And it's a great way to pass the time and also a great way to get inside those composers' heads and find out how they put all that together. So all of my knowledge as an orchestrator and in that vein, what I've tried to do here comes from that, just kind of doing it on my own.

You're on the road now, you can't take the orchestra with you but you are planning to do this with an orchestra several times?

Yeah, we have a concert organized in New York City and I think hopefully one here in Los Angeles and a few in Europe that we're working on, too, so hopefully a handful of concerts where we can do actually something I've never really done, which is more less play the record and then just play the music in that order with the orchestra and with the guys on the record.

The theme you started with, I just want to come back to because that theme of travel, of being on the road, you do live a lot of your life on the road right?

Yeah, that's for sure.

And does that get old? Or how do you manage that?

Well, you know, I'm so used to it that actually if I'm off the road, I get a little stir-crazy after a couple months, but if I'm on the road I get a little sick of it after a couple months. I've got a wife and three kids who are all very dear to me now. That's the toughest part of being on the road and I didn't have that before, it didn't matter as much, but now I go away and I really start to miss them after a while.

Barnes and Noble

Jazz Piano's Future, Now, Ted Panken, barnesandnoble.com, Retrieved 27th April 2012

You're very precise with words, and from having read a number of your liner notes, you appear not to use them lightly. Why have you named five of your CDs "The Art of the Trio"? Can you deconstruct the phrase a little?

[laughs] Yes. Matt Pierson, who signed me to Warner Brothers, came up with that name years ago. I was just starting to get that trio sort of as a regular entity, and we had some idea that there might be a future, hopefully with those particular guys, and that I'd like to record a series of records with them. So he wanted to think of one title that would work for a series, and he came

up with that one. I think it works pretty well. It's pretty literal. We're trying to make Art and we're a trio. I always feel awkward. I never know what to say, because I didn't think of it.

Miles Davis said Frank Sinatra and Orson Welles taught him about rhetoric and phrasing syntax. I'm wondering if there's a similar experience for you.

I think there's something sort of magical about being an instrumentalist, which is that you're never achieving what a vocalist could, but in the act of trying to be like the human voice, consciously or not, the very failure is really what makes lyricism happen. With someone like Miles, it's not that he sounds like Frank Sinatra or Billie Holiday. He sounds like a trumpet that's so lyrical that you can almost hear a voice trying to speak within there, but of course it's not a voice. It's just missing, because of course it's a trumpet and it's not going to denote actual words. That's where I think lyricism is. It's like a striving for a voice like quality. I think you can do that on a piano, too. Oftentimes piano players are thinking like horn players, but you can also be informed by vocalists. So for me, certainly someone like Billie Holiday or Dinah Washington, or the way Louis Armstrong sang, are vocalists whom I think of. But then, in turn, it goes both ways. You also have vocalists who are sounding like instruments. So it kind of goes both ways, I guess.

You've been a trio as such for about seven or eight years and recorded as such for six. To what extent is your tonal personality guided or shaped by the people with whom you're playing? For instance, if Jorge Rossy is playing drums or if Billy Higgins -- whom you encountered several times towards the end of his life -- is the drummer, how does that impact you as a player?

Someone like Billy -- or I just played recently with Dianne Reeves and had the same experience, or for instance, I got to play with [saxophonist] Junior Cook right before he died -- when you get a musician who has such a strong identity, it becomes more that you're sort of disappearing into their identity. "Identity" may not be the right word. With Billy and with Diane and with Junior Cook, it was just the actual strength of their rhythmic feeling that informed every phrase that they played. It really was being more pulled into that. It was either be pulled into it and don't fight it, or it just maybe wouldn't work. It's natural that you get pulled into that because it feels so good aesthetically. It just feels right physically. I guess playing with Larry and Jorge, it's not so much being pulled. It's a push-and-pull thing that we're all doing together. I guess I'm leading it, in a sense, just as far as I'm dictating what we're going to play, but beyond that, it's pretty even between the three of us -- the feel of it, the rhythmic feel. I think that's so important. When you're trying to talk about jazz combos, with groups, so much of it is always hinging on the feelings that people get together, which I guess is magical at a certain point, or hard to dictate at least.

What five or six CDs are most prominent in your current rotation? I know you're a bit of an omnivore.

Yes! [laughs] Actually, my drummer, Jorge Rossy, is studying piano (and he's getting pretty good actually; it's starting to get scary), and he discovered [Nat "King" Cole], whom I had never really checked out. He gave me a great triple-CD set that's a collection of the Nat "King" Cole Trio -- an overview. Two CDs are the trio with him singing and the other just instrumental. There are all these great songs that I know. But when I hear him sing "Sweet Lorraine" or "Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good to You," and some of the others, it makes me again start thinking about playing those songs.

Any classical?

A lot of classical stuff. I've been working on this Hindemith piece called "Ludas Tonalis," which is a crazy group of preludes and fugues and cycles around the circle of fifths. There's a great piano player called Edward Aldwell playing it. There's also three Fauré Nocturnes on that same CD, which are beautiful. So I've been checking out a lot of Fauré. Also Janáček. A great composer. I've

just discovered his piano music. It's a Deutsche Grammophon recording, and it translates in English as "On the Overgrown Path." It's a group of about 14 or 15 small piano pieces. I don't know if they're thematically tied or just by a feeling. Beautiful piano music. It's sort of between some of the Romanticism of maybe Schumann, and some of the kind of textures that he gets on piano, but already with a foot into some really different harmonic things, because I think it was written in the early 20th century.

Anything in the pop field that has your ear these days?

The new Radiohead record, *Amnesiac*. There's three or four songs on there that are really beautiful.

Waiting For Superman

The Brad Mehldau Interview, Ithaca Journal, Gannett, waitingforsupermanblog.com, 8th December 2011

You and Joshua Redman recorded together early in your careers. How is it to come back together now and perform?

It's been remarkably easy and fun, and I think that Josh and I undertook this sensing ahead, in time that it would be that way. The analogy of friendship works here. There are some friends that you don't have regular contact with for a number of years, and then when you meet again you are able to pick up right where you left off, but also not just dwell in the past. Josh and I have a real deep connection that's rooted in stuff we did together more than 15 years ago, but when we play together now, it's very much about our present day musical passions.

Any plans to record?

We've talked about it a bit and I think there's a good chance. I think that we're thinking, "Let's let this ripen more from playing live," tough for me at least it's been exciting from the first gig.

You were both in New York City in the early to mid-1990s during one of the City's jazz resurgences. What was this like?

It was a cool time in a lot of ways. There were several different groups of musicians, all developing some cool hybrid styles. There was the m-base thing with Steve Coleman and all those great musicians. There were the older greats like Joe Henderson and Shirley Horn who were getting long overdue recognition. There were players a bit older than us with strong styles that we were absorbing, that were playing all the time in town—Joe Lovano, Kenny Werner, guys like that. There was Wynton [Marsalis] and all those musicians bringing jazz uptown to a different crowd. And then Josh and I fit in there with a big group of people who had all arrived in New York around the same time. There was a lot of music then; it was a good time. It's still a good time; the cast of characters has changed and the venues have thinned out a bit, but there are other new ones that weren't there then.

You have become known, in part, for playing rock tunes by bands such as Radiohead. What attracts you to this?

The same thing that attracts me to any song, which is so subjective and particular to each song. I'm not big on the term "cover" though—cover is what I used to do at weddings. I'm trying to interpret other people's material and bring my own thing to it through the interplay with the other musicians and the improvisation.

You record for Nonesuch Records. It has become such a vital label, recording a really broad range of music. How has it worked being on Nonesuch, especially given the tremendous changes in the music industry that have occurred?

I feel very blessed to be there, no doubt. It's a real honor as well—there're some really creative people who have released music on Nonesuch from its inception right up until now.

You've recorded with a number of projects over the years, often crossing into other genres, such as classical. At the same time, you've maintained steady groups you've worked with. Of course, you've had your Trio. Can you talk about the differences in maintaining the steady groups versus the side projects?

I guess you always retain your own identity in no matter what context you're in, but to me the fun and interesting part is to what degree you assert it, and how. With Josh, for instance, in this context, I'm not a leader, but I'm not a sideman—it's a unique thing. Sometimes I really enjoy being an accompanist or sideman as well—it's a cool challenge to meld into someone else's identity and still keep your own.

Kirsten Mackenzie, Mackenzie, K. (2005). Moderations in Music 2005. New Zealand School of Music, Retrieved 18th March 2009

You mention in an interview that you were unconsciously playing something from a Brahms Capricci on "Young Werther" - I have been playing through some of the Capricci's trying to discover which one you were referring to: Was it the C# minor Opus 76 No.5?

Possibly indirectly, because I love that one! What a wild piece of music, with all the two against three, and the kind of bluesy chromaticism. I play through most of Opus 76 quite often. I tried to master a few of them for some informal recitals a few years back, and recorded them for my own listening for the heck of it. But I find I'm always coming back to those pieces, along with several of the ones from Opus 116-119. I never get tired of that music. I have the Henle edition of Brahms' Klavierstücke permanently on the side of the piano; I don't even bother to put it away anymore. The one that 'Young Werther' borrowed from unconsciously was the first Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor from Opus 76 - the four note motif that is the main theme in the right hand: c-sharp, d, f-sharp, f-natural. It's almost the same interval-wise as the four note-motif of 'Young Werther' - a, b-flat, d-flat, c.

I have tried to transcribe and play 'Unrequited' - were you influenced at all by JS Bach or Brahms in that composition?

No doubt. I wasn't consciously trying to allude to their music, but I was playing a lot of it at the time, so it just came through from osmosis. That was kind of a turning point for me writing-wise. Along with a few other tunes, like one called 'Sehnsucht' that's from around the same period, 'Unrequited' was a new way (or you could say, a discovery of a much older way, actually) for me to deal with harmony in a jazz song that has improvisation in it. The way the harmony moves is more determined by the voices within the chords, moving often in simple step-wise motion. So, while the tonal center shifts a few times on 'Unrequited', it's a bit more of a 'classical' shift - determined by voice-leading, and less the kind of leap from chord to chord that you might expect in a jazz tune. That's been a process for me over the years, specifically finding a way to assimilate that into a jazz rhythmic and melodic environment.

Are there any preludes and fugues you particularly like?

Off the top of my head, from the Well-Tempered Clavier, the four-part fugue in A-minor from Book One I think, the mysterious F-Minor 4-part fugue from Book One with the chromatic theme,

the pastoral prelude in c-major that opens Book 11, the rock'n'roll-ish G-Minor fugue in Book 11. For fugues in general, I've just discovered Barber's piano Sonata, with the incredible fugue final movement. The fugue that ends Brahms' Handel variations is amazing.

How do you approach your left hand counterpoints during improvisations?

In the process of improvisation, it's pretty intuitive. I still feel that I have a long way to go with that. Sometimes I feel like it becomes sort of 'fake-fugue-ish' - a melody starts in the left hand and then trails off, not developing.

Which Beethoven sonatas do you particularly like?

The D-Minor middle period 'Tempest', of course the last one in C-Minor the little two movement gem F-Major, forget the number, it has the second movement that's this perpetual movement thing the third of his first three Haydn-esque Sonatas, in C-Major, with the beautiful slow movement in E-Major.

Are there any pieces from the 'classical' repertoire that you would recommend, (in addition to those you've already mentioned?)

I'm listening to Brahms' cello sonatas now. I love chamber music with piano - the Brahms piano quartets, trios and quintet. Faure's g-minor piano quartet is one of my favorite pieces of music, also the c-minor. Faure's a big one for *me* I think his harmonic world has seeped into my writing and playing more than a little. His piano nocturnes are incredible. I've been discovering Busoni's music recently. He wrote 6 Sonatinas that are far out - sort of neo-classical but not really. There's a great recording by a great pianist who unfortunately died young named Paul Jacobs, that also has Messiaen, Bartok, and early Stravinsky piano music, which is interesting. Hindemith's 'Ludus Tonalis' is a deep piano work I've been poking at for a year or so.

Your ability to play odd time signatures is legendary - is there any particular practice you'd recommend, other than playing a lot, to help 'feel' the 7/4 pulse for example, while soloing?

Usually, there's a subdivision implied - 4 and 3 with that bar. It's the same kind of thing as when 5/4 usually gets subdivided into 3 and 2. Why 4 and 3, or 3 and 2, are much more natural than 3 and 4, or 2 and 3, is an interesting question. There's a dance like quality to the subdivision when it's in 4 and 3. Once that's internalized, it feels natural, like 4/4 time, or a waltz. A lot of my comfort level has just built over the years from lots of playing with Jorge and Larry, my drummer and bass player, and becoming comfortable together through trial and error. One interesting thing to do practicing in 7 is to set the metronome to half notes, so it will alternate between the downbeat and upbeat every other bar.

How do you approach your left hand 'ambi' (ambiguous) chords – are they 'clusters' or pre thought out abstractions?

They're kind of 'clusters' - I like that word and use it myself. I often favor close intervals. A lot of the time, those cluster-ish voicings are a more typical left-handed jazz voicing that you might hear someone like Bill Evans, Red Garland or Wynton Kelly play, but then with a few added notes in there. Often what I'll do is add the root of the chord, but not in an obvious place - not the bottom or top of the chord. I'll put it in the middle of the voicing, and sometimes it makes everything I'm playing a little fuller, connecting the left hand with the right hand melody like a hinge. I haven't worked on left hand voicings specifically, it's more something that's just developed on its own.

Which solos did you transcribe as a student?

I did a fair amount of transcribing in high school and a little bit my first years in New York. I transcribed several Charlie Parker solos - those from 'She Rote' and 'Moose the Mooche' are two I remember. I transcribed Coltrane's solo, on 'Giant Steps'. A couple Bud Powell solos. I took pieces of McCoy Tyner's solos from the first records with Coltrane on Atlantic, particularly 'Coltrane Plays the Blues'.

Do you still transcribe?

No.

There's a lot of energy in your music – from where do you draw your inspiration?

I usually just think from music itself, but it's probably not that simple and self-enclosed. I think it's the kind of thing where it's the sum total of all my life experiences at the point in time that I'm playing; that is, the sum total, verses some particular experience that happened recently. Things take a while to gestate - I never have that thing where I'm having a bad day so I play more 'bluesy'. I don't think it works that way, not for me at least.

Did you consciously work on developing your own unique voice or was it an organic process?

I think it's a bit of both. You love the things you love, so you kind of want to play those things, out of a simple selfish need. That's organic. At a certain point, your loves turn more specific, and necessarily exclude lots of other things. Then there's kind of a honing down process, and that's probably a bit more conscious.

Chick Corea talks about 'the myth' of improvisation. What percentage of your solos are preconceived (approximately), what percentage is improvised?

Well, I'm not sure what he meant exactly. Maybe that improvisation is a myth, in the way that 'God' is a myth: something divine, because it suggests being able to create something out of thin air. I never pre-conceive my solos ahead of time. But of course there's a whole library of melodies, etc ... in my head that's stored away, and on a less inspired night, I'm more aware of that library; it's like, 'Oh yeah, there's that again.'

When you're playing with Larry and Jorge, are you the 'leader,' or is it a democratic process?

I'm the leader and it's democratic. Usually someone is a leader. It doesn't have to be that way, but with us it is. Still it's democratic in the sense that they have a certain amount of freedom. I've often wondered whether the 'democratic' analogy is good for jazz improvisation. Democracy suggests a set of principles that give people in a society a kind of personal liberty. But a society exists out of a kind of necessity - it's an essentially pragmatic construction to keep people from ripping their heads off. Music is less pragmatic - it doesn't serve an immediate function in the same way. The thing with music is that sometimes emotions, or aesthetics, dictate roles in certain situations, whereby someone relinquishes their freedom completely - quite happily. It's more kind of a religious thing sometimes you make a sacrifice, happily, not out of duty for your fellow citizen.

Would it be possible to have a photocopy of any exercises, sketches for tunes, rhythmic ideas you have written?

I can look for something, but I don't know how legible it would be ...

I understand there is a French documentary about you - is there anywhere I can access a copy of this from?

I don't know. I've heard they still show it in Europe sometimes, on the French station 'Arte.'

Have you been at all influenced by Stanley Cowell (or was he influenced by you!) or Schumann?

No, I don't really know Stanley Cowell's music. Schumann yes - his song cycles like *Dichterliebe* and his piano music - *Davidsbündlertänze* (I'm spelling that" .wrong). The whole idea of composing cyclically – that plays a big role in music and influenced me on something like 'Elegiac Cycle'.

Was 'Sign's of Life' with Peter Bernstein recorded before 'Introducing' and do you ever play with him now?

Yes, 'Signs of Life' was recorded in 1994. Pete's one of my favorite musicians period, and I've continued to play and record with him on his projects. I just finished a three night gig with him last night here in New York, his quartet with me, Larry Grenadier on bass and Bill Stewart on drums. That band is on a record that came out on the Criss-Cross label about 2 months ago, Pete's third one with me on it, called 'Heart's Content'.

Was the 'Elegiac Cycles' recording influenced by any particular composer?

Romantic composers who use cyclical forms, like Schumann and late Beethoven, song cycles of Schubert, harmony of Brahms, lots of Romantics!

Young Werther - Did you read Goethe's book, 'The Sufferings of Young Werther,' and were inspired to write this tune? In other words, did the book influence the way the tune came together?

It's kind of circuitous and weird. I read it indeed and loved it and was inspired by it. Then I found out Brahms loved the book as well and I love Brahms. 'Young Werther' takes a four-note motif from the first Brahms Capriccio Op. 76 in F#-Minor, almost exactly the same intervallically. So it's kind of a tribute to Brahms and Werther all at once.