

Interview Brad Mehldau

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Coming week - from 11 to 14 November - the Brad Mehldau Trio will be in the Netherlands for 4 concerts. These concerts are part of the 36 shows the trio gives within 6 weeks during its European tour. Last September the album 'Day is Done' came on the market: an exceptionally good album with Larry Grenadier (b) and newcomer Jeff Ballard (d) as successor of drummer Jorge Rossy who started a career as a pianist. 'Day is Done' was released exactly 10 years after the pianist's debut album „Introducing“. An anniversary as 'a recording musician'. Reason enough for an interview. After exchanging a few e-mails (in Dutch!) with Mehldau, we agree to do the e-mail interview in English. Brad answers the list of questions while being in Switzerland, Austria and France.

E: Among other places you live in Amsterdam. How much time of a year do you spend in this city? What kind of things you like to do when you are around, do you like the place?

B: My wife is the Dutch singer, Fleurine. She has always kept her apartment in Amsterdam even though we live mostly in the States. We probably stay in Amsterdam an average of 3 months a year. I love the city, of course – how could you not? It's a major city in terms of culture and history, but it doesn't feel like a big city like New York or Paris – those bigger cities can sometimes become suffocating. There's room to breathe in Amsterdam.

In Amsterdam, we spend a lot of time with friends and Fleurine's family. We eat out a lot, go to the Vondelpark, ride bikes along the Amstel, go to the Artis zoo...normal Amsterdam stuff! I see a lot of concerts at the Concertgebouw, and go to the Bimhuis sometimes.

E: Do you play now and then in sessions in Amsterdam, or at any at all?

B: No. But that's not just in Amsterdam. I haven't played in jam sessions with any regularity in years. I had gigs in my early twenties in New York where I had to run a jam session. That's one of the hardest gigs – you have to negotiate between everyone's ego and insecurity. I like to occasionally peek my head into a session – in Amsterdam or anywhere else – and hear what's going on. Sometimes there's something exciting happening musically and I discover a musician I've never heard. That's always fun.

E: How do you prepare for a trioconcert, how for a soloconcert? Is there a difference in approach?

B: There's very little preparation for a trio performance – we'll play a little in the sound check. Occasionally we'll rehearse a tune, but most of the time we've done that already. In contrast, I practice and warm up for 20 or 30 minutes before a solo concert, sometimes more. The solo performance is more technically demanding, for one. There are also a few arrangements that I've worked out for the solo performance that I need to keep under my fingers by rehearsing them with some regularity.

I have never discovered a mental preparation for a performance that will somehow insure an

exciting, effective performance. I know that some people chant for a long time, some people meditate, some people smoke a joint, etc... My personal experience with those sorts of willful preparatory rituals is that even doing them, you still might go out and the music will suck. Or, the opposite can happen: Taking a plane flight, arriving straight at the gig and walking on the stage, tired and hungry – and it's one of the best gigs you've ever had.

I do not discount the role of preparation, but for me the whole process is more holistic: Merely studying music with regularity and remaining passionate about music is the best recipe for a creative performance.

I do try to do some meditative activity before performances, but it is not to attain a better performance – that to me seems an act of bad faith. The meditation is to accept the outcome of the performance, with grace, whatever the outcome is – more of a spiritual exercise.

E: Do you study a lot?

B: Yes, I practice and study music a lot. The only time that I don't practice the piano with regularity is when I'm on tour. When I'm on tour, it's all 'output.' I think a lot in terms of a distinction between 'input' and 'output.' Input is absorbing music: Studying a score, learning a written piece of music, listening to music, reading literature about music, reading any literature that might influence my conception of music, going to hear other musicians perform. Output is playing and performance: Everything that I've absorbed coming out and being expressed as a musical statement, in a performance.

My practice is not fixed to a specific routine, but there are some general characteristics. I'm usually working on at least one piece of music from the classical canon. Studying a written text, and learning how to play it, is rewarding on a few different levels. First, there's the obvious enjoyment to be derived from the music making itself. It is also a direct way of gaining a pianistic vocabulary, by observing the devices of a particular composer, and then absorbing them into my own style.

Often, the practice is more technical. I don't study pre-written exercises; I prefer to make up my own exercises. In this way, I address a specific technical issue that I may have stumbled on, something that, in the act of improvisation, I discovered that I could not effectively execute. The trick in that is that, as a jazz musician, who focuses on spontaneous improvisation as an ideal, you have to find a way to 'practice improvising.' The notion of practicing improvising is, to a certain extent, a contradiction in terms. What it means is a constant focus on what I am not able to do, and then, as soon as I can do it, moving on to something else, not getting stuck in an idea to the point that it becomes a worked out lick.

E: 'Introducing', your debut album dates from 1995, 'Day is Done' from 2005. So you are 'a recording musician' for 10 years. Congratulations!

B: Nou, dank je wel man!

E: How do you look back on these 10 years, how do you see your own musical progress, the most important points?

B: I think in terms of two progressions: One as a trio player, and one as a solo player. With the trio, the development is totally related to the musicians that I've played with primarily: the bassist Larry

Grenadier, the drummer Jorge Rossy, and more recently in the last year, the drummer Jeff Ballard. That is to say: my development as a musician, whatever personal style I have, has been influenced directly by those musicians. And I think that playing with me has influenced them as well. There is a wonderful give and take that takes place, to the point where my own identity connected with theirs.

The development of the trio really began about 10 years ago; my development as a solo player started a little later – really about 6 years ago. It is of course more self-referential. I feel that I've developed my own style as a solo player more recently, that is, a style that I want to present to the rest of the world, to the public.

E: 'Day is done' has been recorded in 1 day. Was this inspiring to you, something you would consider to do again? The 'first takes' sounds vitally; nice dynamics and nice groupsound.

B: Dank je voor je compliment. I wouldn't say that it's a rule that the first take is always the most inspired, but, one thing that happens with me a lot in the studio is this: You do a first take. It's very inspired and exciting, but there's a focus lacking in terms of the arc and shape of the tune, also there may be some sloppiness in the actual playing. You do a second take. The focus and precision are there, the performance has a shape and an integrity to it, but it has less excitement, usually on account of the fact that the inspiration has diminished from having already done one take – to be vulgar, it's a bit like trying to have sex again just after you've done it. It takes a little more effort; it's not as exciting.

But with the recording session for "Day is Done," something cool happened: We got a nice mixture of excitement and focus on the first take of most of the tunes; it all came together immediately. When we felt that synergy, we didn't bother to do a second take at all.

(On Mehdau's website Brad talks in detail about the process of the recording session. At the end of this interview you will find a link to his explanations. Therefore, we leave this matter aside).

E: Quite a few pianists I know are playing the piano as well the Fender Rhodes.

B: I've heard what a lot of those guys have done on Rhodes and I've enjoyed it. I've recorded Rhodes on two records, I think as a sideman, one with Mark Turner and one with Chris Cheek. I like the Fender Rhodes, and the Wurlitzer for that matter, because they're real instruments in the sense that they have strings and something similar to a piano like hammer-mechanism. The reason why I haven't done more on the Fender Rhodes isn't because I don't find the Rhodes interesting; it's more just the fact that I'm so engaged with the regular acoustic piano that it occupies most of my time and interest for now.

E: What is actually your favourite piano, and why?

B: Steinway. Steinway is not a faultless piano. There are always problems in the upper middle register of the instrument – you can almost guarantee it; it's because of the particular construction of the piano. But it has, in general, the most beautiful tone quality. That is subjective, of course. I prefer a darker tone, and a lot of jazz players like a brighter sounding instrument, and prefer a Yamaha, or a Bösendorfer. I also love Fazioli pianos, although the only opportunity I have to play them is at the Umbria festival in Italy.

E: You give 36 concerts in 6 weeks. Is there a lot of difference between the audience in the countries you visit?

B: I have never noticed a big difference between audiences in terms of individual countries. The difference is more from night to night: One night, you have a lively audience; the next night, the audience is more reserved – you never know.

- Brad Mehldau website: <http://www.bradmehldau.com/>
- Brad about 'Day is Done': <http://www.bradmehldau.com/mehldau/music/day.html>

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