

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## PAUL DESMOND

[This is the thirtieth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Best known as the alto saxophonist in the Dave Brubeck Quartet, Paul actually had quite a life of his own. But as a “sideman,” one has to question the real significance of his career. Only a minor figure, popular because of his boss (Brubeck)? Or on par with the Jazz greats? You be the judge.

Born Paul Emil Breitenfeld in San Francisco in 1924, his intro to music was actually playing violin and clarinet in his high school band. He played clarinet in some of the local big bands, greatly influenced by the superstars of the day, such as Lester Young. In 1943, he switched to the alto sax and was drafted by the Army. Luckily, he got to play with an army band at The Presidio, where he first heard Brubeck (who tried to join the band, but was denied!). Paul was duly impressed, commenting that Brubeck “would be in 15 different keys in an ‘out-of-tune piano.’” They met later and played together in the 40s, eventually teaming up in 1951, along with drums and bass, as the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

Breitenfeld changed his surname to Desmond, claiming – with a straight face – that his real name sounded too “Irish.” Paul looked and acted quite “professorial,” but often displayed his dry wit, especially in his music. Per Brubeck, “We had some sort of ESP. A lot of funny things happened while we were playing that would amaze both of us,” such as the unplanned musical counterpoint that both were able to flawlessly generate. Brubeck remembered Paul’s witty musical humor “jumping from the high register and answering himself in the low register.” Desmond was a superb improviser, often blending parts of other popular tunes, even classical music, into his solos so effortlessly that you could easily miss what he just had done. Most of all, it was his *sound*, gentle but precise, which Paul called “like a dry martini.”

Yet Desmond was a moody man. When drummer Joe Morello joined the Quartet in 1956, Paul felt Joe’s style contained too much “grandstanding,” which their crowds loved, and didn’t speak to Morello for over a year. It’s said during Joe’s extended drum solo in “Take Five,” Paul would wander backstage and pretend to read a book. Eventually, however, they became friends, but it demonstrates to me how personally insecure and shy Paul really was.

And speaking of “Take Five,” it was one of seven songs (six written by Brubeck) for what turned out to be one of the most seminal Jazz works in history: *Time Out*. (By far my

favorite Brubeck album, it's available on Amazon as a remastered audio CD, on the Columbia / Legacy / BMG label, ASIN: B000002AGN). Whereas most jazz standards of the day were in 4/4 time, all seven tunes employed unconventional time signatures, including the afore-mentioned "Take Five" in 5/4 time, which Dave asked Paul to write. Desmond called the tune "a throwaway," almost deleting the famous bridge section of the song which ties the choruses together and made Morello's drum solo work. Over 50 years later, that one song can arguably be called the most successful Jazz single ever recorded. Desmond, in his will, left all the royalties for "Take Five" and others he penned to the American Red Cross, the total amount of said bequest now fast approaching \$5 million!



[l-r: Paul Desmond, Joe Morello, Eugene Wright, Dave Brubeck]

After the Quartet disbanded in 1967, Paul played with some greats of his time: guitarist Jim Hall, Gerry Mulligan, Chet Baker, even the Modern Jazz Quartet. It was only then that others experienced what Brubeck knew for nearly twenty years. Bassist Don Thompson, with whom Paul recorded several tunes, relates "He was great to play with. He was very easy, because harmonically there was a real clear logic in everything he played musically. The harmony was always right, the melodies were always right. His time [timing] was amazing".

Desmond's last concert was (fittingly) with Dave Brubeck in New York City in February, 1977, but Paul's deteriorating health was obvious. Although his drinking was legendary, it was his three pack-a-day habit that brought him down. Just before his death due to lung cancer at age 53 in May of that year, Desmond opined that his liver was fine, "Pristine, one of the great livers of all time. Awash in Dewar's and full of health." This and many other humorous and fascinating stories can be found in Doug Ramsey's biography, *Take Five: The Public and Private Lives of Paul Desmond*. The printed version is unfortunately out-of-print, but the e-book is still available on Amazon for \$15.

So .. Minor figure? Insignificant career? I think not! How about you?

*Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com). See them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic](http://www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic)*