



DAN BRUBECK

Biography

Who knows what forgotten treasures can be found when rummaging around in the basement? If you happen to belong to one of America's most illustrious musical families, there's gold aplenty. At least drummer **Dan Brubeck** hit the mother lode when he decided to research songs by his late parents, legendary jazz pianist **Dave Brubeck** and lyricist **Iola Brubeck**. The Dan Brubeck Quartet's two-disc *Celebrating the Music and Lyrics of Dave & Iola Brubeck* casts a penetrating light on a brilliant but little-known chapter in a creative connubial alliance that transformed the way jazz is presented and perceived. Essential for Brubeck fans and an invaluable resource for American Songbook aficionados looking for fresh material, *Celebrating ...* is a strong candidate for jazz vocal album of the year.

Dave Brubeck's fame was so far-reaching and long-lasting that uncovering an overlooked facet in his career might seem like a quixotic quest. But Dan, the second youngest of Dave and Iola's six children, had long wanted to explore some of the songs and textual settings that his parents collaborated on over the years. The opportunity arose unexpectedly with some of the finest jazz players in the Vancouver, BC area, including saxophonist **Steve Kaldestad**, pianist **Tony Foster**, and bassist/vocalist **Adam Thomas**. "These are the guys who had good chemistry and we stuck together," says Brubeck, 59, a longtime resident of British Columbia.

Several fellow musicians had mentioned that Dan should hear Thomas's voice, but the occasion didn't present itself until the quartet was on a gig playing Dave Brubeck's best-known tune, "**In Your Own Sweet Way**," and Thomas asked about singing it. Dan was duly impressed, and in many ways Thomas is the project's most delightful revelation. A startlingly soulful singer who puts a personal stamp on a wide array of material, he delivers the most impressive vocal debut in recent memory. Fittingly, "Sweet Way" is the track that opens the album, and like many of the pieces that follow, Iola wrote the lyrics specifically for a jazz legend (Carmen McRae). Iola, who died last year at the age of 90, wrote incisive insider commentary about the songs for the album's liner notes. Dave Brubeck passed in 2012 at the age of 91.

"I didn't know what to expect when Adam made that offer, but he sang it perfectly in tune and sounded so good," Brubeck says. "I knew I'd found the right person for this project. When the quartet had a gig we just set up mics in the Cellar, which is tiny and intimate. I was just amazed when I listened back to what we got."

Thomas's most impressive feat is the easygoing authority he brings to interpreting songs the Brubecks created with Louis Armstrong in mind. He swings joyfully on "**Since Love Had Its Way**," and wrings every wistful drop from the masterpiece

“**Summer Song**,” an intoxicating draught of song that has unaccountably remained uncovered until this year (both songs were introduced by Satchmo in the Brubecks’ politically astute jazz musical *The Real Ambassadors*). Adding to the aching poignancy of “Summer Song” is the fact that the chorus serves as Dave and Iola’s epitaph.

“I don’t think anyone’s done it besides Louis until now,” Dan says. “For them that song had a lot of special meaning. I think Carmen was supposed to sing it but Louis heard it and that was that. The lyrics and melody do seem tailor-made for him.”

The quartet doesn’t avoid the best-known numbers, offering memorable versions of the oft-interpreted “**Blue Rondo a la Turk**” and Paul Desmond and Iola Brubeck’s enduring hit “**Take Five**.” But digging deep into the catalog they come up with one unexpected gem after another. Thomas hits just the right plaintive tone on the minor blues “**Lord, Lord**,” a piece from Brubeck’s suite *The Gates of Justice*. And “**Strange Meadowlark**” is another superlative piece that, like “Summer Song,” could easily become a standard (it’s got a good start with recordings by Carmen McRae, Frederica von Stade, and Hilary Cole). The ballad “**The Desert and the Parched Land**,” a piece based on text from the *Book of Isaiah*, is another song that the quartet effectively translates into a jazz vehicle.

“Dave had some of the best classical people in the world singing these songs, but I have such a preference for a non-classical voice,” Dan says. “I was just dying to hear someone with soul singing them. We’re taking these songs that came out of religious-based works and turning them into jazz tunes. And the songs are unbelievable. I think when my dad wrote those things he was moved to write a certain kind of melody and he captured the essence of a teaching. My mom read the Biblical text and interpreted it.”

Born and raised on a ranch in then-rural Concord, California, **Dave Brubeck** emerged on San Francisco’s modern jazz scene in the years after World War II as a conservatory-trained pianist with an experimental bent. By 1953 he was leading a quartet with alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, and the group started gaining an avid following among college students via a series of campus concerts. With early recordings like *Jazz at Oberlin* and *Jazz at College of the Pacific* (both on Fantasy), the quartet laid the foundation of Brubeck’s enduring popularity, and Iola was the brains behind this unprecedented strategy. For Dan, *Celebrating ...* offers a welcome opportunity to shine a light on his mother’s invaluable creative contributions to Dave Brubeck’s music.

Despite an occasional landmark event at Carnegie Hall, jazz was still very much part of the demimonde in the early 1950s, and almost entirely absent from college campuses. A rising radio actress in Los Angeles, **Iola Whitlock** earned a scholarship to attend College of the Pacific in Stockton, and when Brubeck asked his best friend who was the smartest girl in the school they ended up on a date.

“They spent the night talking and by the next day they decided to get married,” Dan says. “She was 18 at the time. Even that early I think she genuinely believed that he had something really special to say. She got behind him, and used all of that intelligence to further his career. They started having kids and when she saw him struggling in jazz she came up with the whole idea of jazz goes to college. She started calling universities to set up the concerts. She called the campus radio station and suggested they record it, which was free publicity. They started going into places that were classical, like Oberlin.”

Born in Oakland on May 4, 1955, **Dan Brubeck** was a highly energetic child who found his calling at the trap set. Mentored by two consummate polyrhythmic masters, Joe Morello and Alan Dawson (at the Berklee College of Music), he was working professionally before he finished his teens. Over the years Dan was featured on nearly a dozen albums with his father, and toured widely with the Dave Brubeck Quartet, including many appearances with the world’s leading orchestras. He’s been an integral part of the various Brubeck bands, including the Darius Brubeck Ensemble, Two Generations of Brubeck, and the New Brubeck Quartet. He’s toured internationally and recorded three widely played albums with his electric jazz group, The Dolphins, and co-lead the Brubeck LaVerne Trio with his brother Chris and pianist Andy LaVerne. A stylistically catholic musician, he’s toured with acts ranging from The Band and David Benoit to Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond. Similarly, he’s recorded with jazz guitar legend Larry Coryell, singer/songwriter Livingston Taylor, jazz/pop singer Michael Franks, and pioneering blues guitarist Roy Buchanan.

Dan continues to perform and record with his siblings—Chris Brubeck, a bassist, trombonist, and noted composer, in the Brubeck Brothers Quartet, and pianist/composer Darius Brubeck in Brubecks Play Brubeck—when he’s not playing with his Vancouver band.

Celebrating the Music and Lyrics of Dave & Iola Brubeck is more than an act of filial love. It's a brilliantly realized statement about the capacity of even the best known artists to surprise. With Thomas's masterly vocals reintroducing the songs of Dave and Iola Brubeck, it seems unlikely they'll remain hidden much longer.

"I want people to cover these tunes," Dan says. "They've been buried, but once singers hear them, I think a lot of them are going to want to do them." •

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Web Site: www.danbrubeck.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/dan.brubeck.5

Media Contact:

Terri Hinte

510-234-8781

hudba@sbcglobal.net