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## Before & After With Ethan Iverson

Playing it straight

UPDATED FEBRUARY 11, 2020 - DAVID R. ADLER

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etween touring and recording in the Bad Plus, playing with living legends on the order of Ron Carter, Billy Hart and Albert "Tootie" Heath and writing about jazz with superior insight on his blog, Do the Math, Ethan Iverson has gained a reputation not only as a leading pianist but as one of the jazz scene's most acutely sensitive listeners. On the day before a big New York concert with the Bad Plus and guests (tackling the 1972 Ornette Coleman classic Science Fiction), Iverson sat in his Brooklyn apartment and offered thoughts on a wide range of piano music, always with an eye on the big picture. 1. Brad Mehldau Trio

#### "Brownie Speaks" (from Where Do You Start, Nonesuch). Mehldau, piano; Larry Grenadier, bass; Jeff Ballard, drums. Recorded in 2008.

BEFORE: [listens to leadoff bass solo, then at length to piano solo, saying nothing] The first time I heard Larry Grenadier he was still a teenager, and he was playing in Joe Henderson's quartet. I'll never forget how he cut

the piano player that night. His solos were so good. I felt for Brad there in a way, like, OK, you're playing these

"Rhythm" changes in A, and you give Larry the first solo. Of course Brad's one of the great piano players, but he had a bit of a challenge on that track, I think, playing cleanup for Larry. Brad has an incredible harmonic imagination. Even playing "Rhythm" changes in A is an indication of some breadth. Is this Brad's tune?

No, Clifford Brown's. Well, he played it like it was his tune. Clifford Brown didn't play it in A, I'll tell you that much. [Ed. note: Brown

## played it in B-flat, and much faster.]

2. Muhal Richard Abrams

## BEFORE: I think it's Matthew Shipp. It makes me think

about how far improvised piano has come in terms of the different harmonic colors he's able to access, as compared to maybe a more hardcore perspective-a Cecil Taylor perspective, a Lowell Davidson perspective,

even an Alice Coltrane perspective. It just shows you that everything is available.

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"Part 2" (from Vision Towards Essence, Pi). Abrams, piano. Recorded in 1998.

starting with a low A and I almost said, "This is just like that Muhal Richard Abrams thing that starts with that low A." [laughs] Have you listened to a lot of his work?

AFTER: Damn it, I know this. In fact, I cited this album on my blog. That's embarrassing. I remember it

musician. I think he did a lot, probably the most out of all the piano players, to try to erase the divide between modern classical music and jazz music. You hear it in [this track]. 3. Gerald Clayton

Not enough. I would go so far as to say he's a blind spot in my listening. But I know he's a very beautiful

Gretchen Parlato, vocals. Recorded in 2012.

"Future Reflection" (from Life Forum, Concord Jazz). Clayton, piano; Ambrose Akinmusire, trumpet; Logan Richardson, alto saxophone; Dayna Stephens, tenor saxophone; Joe Sanders, bass; Justin Brown, drums;

BEFORE: I'm really envious of that piano player, who plays so percussively and beautifully through that

playing this kind of music now, in a way. It's music that I don't listen to much because I don't want to be

complex form. He did some things that really surprised me. I have no idea who it is. There's a lot of people

influenced by it, this sort of current thing. I'm like, "I don't want to check that out because I don't need that.

AFTER: He sounds great. What I heard in the composition was a tension between some more outré or prog

elements and then the sort of Jaco [Pastorius] Word of Mouth/Weather Report thing. If I were in charge, I'd

#### cut out all the Jaco/Weather Report stuff and just do the prog stuff. It can get a little schmaltzy for my own taste.

Which parts are "prog," in your view?

I'm already too old for it." [laughs]

do whatever he wants. 4. Bud Powell "Off Minor" (from The Complete Blue Note and Roost Recordings, Blue Note). Powell, piano; Curley Russell,

The odd-meter hooks, the very beginning of the track. But obviously Gerald is phenomenally talented and can

#### BEFORE: It's great to hear that again. Bud and Monk were very close and did a lot of hanging out, showing each other stuff. There's this, but on the same record there's "Nice Work If You Can Get It," which they also

bass; Max Roach, drums. Recorded in 1947.

think anyone ever will. It's a very private, personal language.

This track makes me think of how mysterious the real bebop is. Monk and Bud know harmonic and percussive secrets, and they just keep it to themselves and play the stuff that no one else has. We still don't

have it. It's still completely radical, what we just heard. No one else has learned what that was, and I don't

It's also slightly over-pedaled. Bud hadn't recorded much at this point and was maybe a little nervous at this

session. In general he's a little heavy on the damper pedal. But who am I to criticize Bud fuckin' Powell?

both play. They both sort of play it the same way. Not everyone plays that song, but those two cats play it.

### 5. Andy Milne & Benoît Delbecq

BEFORE: It sounds like multiple pianists. [pause] There's that Fred Hersch record with Benoît Delbecq [2013's Fun House], but there's nothing this thorny on it. Is this it?

"Ice Storm" (from Where Is Pannonica?, Songlines). Milne, Delbecq, Steinway pianos. Recorded in 2008.

You're in the right galaxy. Well it's Benoît then, of course. But it's not Fred. ... Oh, it's gotta be Andy Milne.

Yeah, Benoît is a big influence on me. I met him and Andy at the same Banff workshop. This was like 1990. I

don't know Andy as well, though it's always great to hear him. But Benoît and I have hung out a lot over the

I didn't listen to it much because I also got to hear it live. There's a lot there and I should study it. It's quite

brilliant the way it's orchestrated for the two pianos. They put a lot of thought into how that would work-and

#### years, and he's honestly one of those guys I can really sincerely say I've stolen from. It's only a few peers I feel that about. But Benoît, I should probably write him a check.

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of course this "drum" part, which is the prepared piano. Now, I think that must be an Andy tune.

It is. That just shows you that I've got to get more into Andy Milne. Because it's obviously very advanced

#### composition. To read the rest of this story, purchase the issue in print or from the Apple Newsstand. Print and digital

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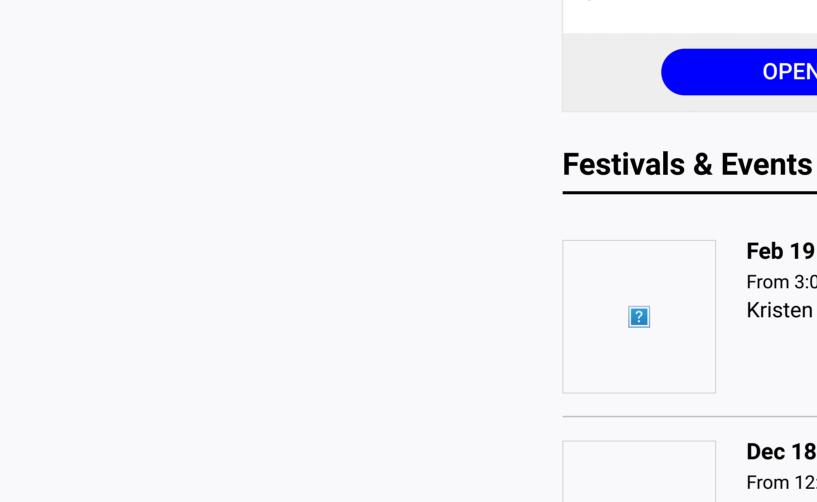
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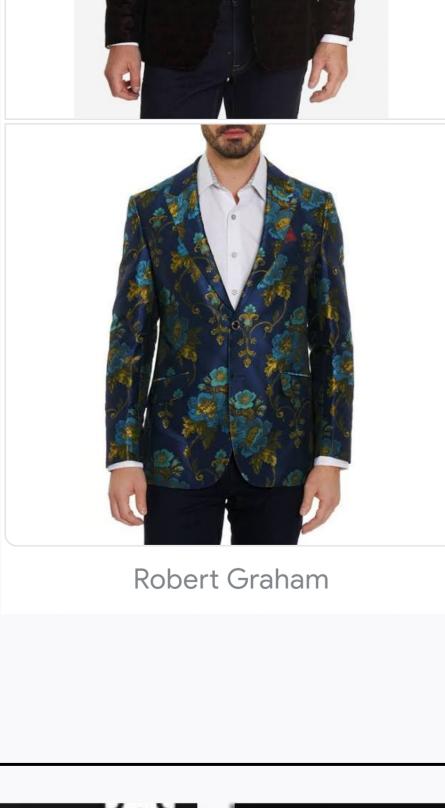


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