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Exceptional clarity of jazz duo

Also in a quartet, guitarist Pat Metheny and pianist Brad Mehldau have a way of enfolding complex ideas in simple structures.

By David R. Adler
FOR THE INQUIRER

Earlier this year in New York, guitarist Pat Metheny performed at memorial concerts for two tenor saxophonists, Dewey Redman and Michael Brecker, who died four months apart. Despite their stark aesthetic dissimilarities, both played on Metheny's classic album *80/81* more than a quarter-century ago. Honoring their memory in exquisite song, Metheny underlined the idea that jazz is more than music — it's a social-historical fabric, an endeavor of partnership, of unspoken yet intimate connection.

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Now 52, Metheny has collaborated with an imposing roster of artists, including the great innovator Ornette Coleman. His latest partner is 36-year-old pianist Brad Mehldau. Their paths had already been converging: During the '90s, each made appearances with saxophonist Joshua Redman, Dewey's son. Like Redman, both recorded for Warner Bros. until its jazz division folded, then migrated to Nonesuch Records.

Mehldau grew up a big fan of Metheny's work. And Metheny, like many others, was positively thrilled when he first heard the young Mehldau play. Last year, they recorded an album, mostly duets, called *Metheny Mehldau*. This year, they're following up with *Metheny Mehldau Quartet* and a tour, which stops at Carnegie Hall April 11 and the Keswick Theatre in Glenside April 13.

Together, the piano and guitar "can generate too much harmony," as Mehldau has observed; the chord voicings tend to clash. But seasoned as they are, Metheny and Mehldau achieve an exceptional clarity in both the duo and quartet settings.

Their colleagues on the album and tour, bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jeff Ballard, happen to be members of Mehldau's current trio. Metheny hired Grenadier for his remarkable trio projects of 1999 and 2000. Clearly, there's a fund of shared experience here; the rhythmic chemistry announces itself from the first bars of "A



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Jazz virtuosos Brad Mehldau (left) and guitarist Pat Metheny will bring their quartet to Keswick Theatre in Glenside on April 13.

Night Away," a Metheny/Mehldau co-creation that leads off the new CD.

One can't fully appreciate the Metheny/Mehldau phenomenon, however, without noting the paramount alliance of Metheny's career. Pianist Lyle Mays, effectively a co-leader of the Pat Metheny Group for 30 years running, is a fine musician who continues to operate in Metheny's shadow. He may not be Mehldau's technical equal, but he has issued some truly enduring work.

By the end of the '70s, Metheny and Mays had emerged as something unique in modern jazz — a genuine songwriting team. They took to the road like rock stars, and sometimes with rock stars. In 1979, they backed Joni Mitchell on her *Shadows and Light* tour. In 1980, they recorded the duo album *As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls*, cited by Mehldau as an early favorite. It is less a live-playing date than *Metheny Mehldau*, and more a creature of the studio, replete with multi-tracked synthesizers and other atmospheric effects. But the second track on *Metheny Mehldau Quartet*, "The Sound of Water," recalls *Wichita*'s more ethereal moments (and features Metheny on a harplike 42-string guitar). Mehldau's 2002 album, *Largo*, a collaboration with indie-rock producer Jon Brion, can be seen as part of the *Wichita* legacy, building on the studio-orchestration ideal that Metheny and Mays did so much to advance.

Along with their instrumental skill, Meth-

eny and Mehldau share a readiness to think in terms of the large canvas. Mehldau's *Love Sublime* (2006), a duo with the famed soprano Renée Fleming, includes complex song cycles on the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and Louise Bogan. The most recent Pat Metheny Group project, a 70-minute opus called *The Way Up*, challenges a culture in which attention spans are dwindling and music has become ever more abbreviated.

In a word, both men are intellectuals, although Mehldau fits the mold more precisely — his early liner notes are peppered with citations from the likes of Hegel, Mann and Emerson, all relating back to jazz and the elusive nature of creativity. Metheny uses his Web site to recommend books, including Ian Buruma's *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*.

Concerned as they are with the interrelation of art and society, Metheny and Mehldau do not make heady, academic-sounding music. On the new album, moods range from the acoustic ballad "Don't Wait" to the torrential swing of "Fear and Trembling," from the bluesy gait of "Santa Cruz Slacker" to the majestic cadences of "Secret Beach."

Metheny spends most of the session on his hollow-bodied electric guitar, sculpting melodic phrases. Mehldau, who has molded stylistic inheritances from Herbie Hancock and Keith Jarrett into his own captivating modernist language, comes at every chord progression with a clear sense of narrative, but also deep harmonic mystery. Apart and as a team, the two have a way of enfolding complex ideas within simple structures and vice versa. Brecker was wise to feature them both on his final recording, *Pilgrimage*, due out in May.

In a recent cover story, *Downbeat* magazine posited that Mehldau might be "the most influential jazz musician of his generation." Amid the high praise, one can forget that these two artists are of the jazz community. Metheny isn't too big to show up at a local church and eulogize a departed colleague. Mehldau, as acclaimed as he is, still works with his far less-renowned peers; he does not hover over them.

And the Keswick Theatre might not be Carnegie Hall, but consider what Metheny wrote in a recent liner note. Philadelphia, he declared, is "maybe the city in the U.S. that has been most consistently supportive of our thing right from the beginning and one of the best audiences in the world." Don't miss the chance to welcome him back.

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