

## Brad Mehldau, Fred Hersch, Dan Tepfer, Jason Palmer, and Donny McCaslin front a busy week

Pleasures, simple and otherwise

By [JON GARELICK](#) | March 2, 2011

I guess jazz pianists don't really play jazz any more.

That's the thought that occurred to me as I traversed recent recordings by **BRAD MEHLDAU** and **DAN TEPFER**. A reckless thought — silly, even. And not a value judgment. I've always embraced the broadest view of jazz. And Mehldau and Tepfer — each widely accomplished in the jazz world — don't need me to defend their bona fides. But after listening to the two audio discs from Mehldau's monumental two-CD/DVD solo-piano gig *Live at Marciac* (Nonesuch) and about half of Tepfer's very fine trio CD from last year, *Five Pedals Deep* (Sunnyside), the usual markers of mainstream jazz had begun to disappear: "straight" rhythms or grooves, bebop, blues. Mehldau plays his share of "standards," but in his own dense, rhapsodic way, which has as much to do with Schumann or Brahms as with Rodgers & Hammerstein.



HOT AND COOL Palmer, a regular of the Boston scene, comes to Scullers March 15.

As I say, I'm not complaining. (Well, maybe a little bit about the Mehldau.) It's just another interesting indicator of how the mainstream (essentially tonal, rhythmically well behaved, even tuneful) has shifted. Kenny Barron it ain't. In a duo with Lee Konitz recently at the Regattabar, Tepfer gave the 83-year-old saxophonist a breather by playing two of the *Goldberg Variations* (Nos. 2 and 5, if you're keeping score at home) and improvising on them. On *Live in Marciac*, Mehldau covers Radiohead, Nirvana, Nick Drake, and the Beatles along with Cole Porter, Rodgers & Hammerstein, and Bobby Timmons.

This preamble is by way of saying that Mehldau and Tepfer are just two of a bunch of artists with new or recent albums who are playing live over the next couple of weeks — all of whom you should go out and hear if you can.

Since establishing himself in Joshua Redman's early quartet, Mehldau has stretched hither and yon. He's led two extraordinary acoustic trios, created a fetching, electronically induced, pop-flavored CD (2002's *Largo*) and a genre-blurring jazz-classical ensemble album (last year's *Highway Rider*), and made recordings of his own art songs alongside classical and pop standards with opera stars Renée Fleming and Anne Sofie von Otter.

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INTENSITY! You can hear Schumann and Brahms along with Rodgers & Hammerstein in Mehldau's music.

He likes odd meters and dense textures, a propensity that is often (but not always) kept in check by the fluid grace of his trio playing. When he's solo, the density often takes over — as it did at Sanders Theatre in February 2010, when he offered a program similar to the one on the Marciac discs (from 2006). The pianism is stunning. Such is his manual independence that, instead of the usual melody-line right hand with rhythm-chord accompaniment left, he'll get two, even three independent lines going at once. So you get the brooding density of his

concert-opener original "Storm" with its hammering eighth-note drones, and only a slight respite from Cole Porter's "It's All Right with Me," which accelerates rapidly into starburst explosive runs and thunder chords. But he reins it back just in time with a beautiful statement of the melody and some sterling runs up and down the keyboard with spare rhythm accompaniment. His reading of the American Songbook standard "Secret Love" settles into some gorgeous legato melody lines over softly sighing 4/4 bass chords. And "Martha My Dear" gets a Bach-like contrapuntal treatment. But even this little Beatles English-music-hall ditty soon accelerates with manic intensity.

Some virtuosos plunge into glib, empty virtuosity. That's not true of Mehldau — there's musical "content" in every phrase. And he never loses control. But sometimes I wish he'd take a breath — and give us one, too. His next Sanders show (on March 12, courtesy of World Music/CRASHarts, world-music.org) is billed as "Brad Mehldau and Friends" and will offer the Boston premiere of a "new work for two pianos, six winds, and percussion" as well as pieces by other composers. Along with a murderers' row of saxophonists (Chris Cheek, Chris Potter, Joshua Redman, Greg Tardy, Sam Sadigursky, and Joris Roelofs), the night includes singer Becca Stevens. I'll be there.

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Tepfer, at 29, is a generation younger than Mehldau, and also drummer George Schuller, whose trio will include him at the Vernissage Restaurant in Brookline tonight (March 3; [vernissagerestaurant.com](http://vernissagerestaurant.com)). At the Regattabar, Tepfer was just edgy enough to make Konitz happy as they transformed standard pop-song chord changes together, and he was brave enough to accompany the saxophonist with agitated running lines as well as rhythm chords. *Five Pedals Deep* (with bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Ted Poor) shows him in a more Mehldau mode — not beholden to jazz swing, pursuing out-of-tempo ballads, and with that particular rhapsodic streak that splits the difference between the German Romantics and Radiohead. I'm thinking in particular of his "All She Heard Was Nothing," with its insistent, tolling bass figure and the yearning rise and fall of those agitated melody lines. There are also restless modulations, but his textures aren't as thick as Mehldau's, and on his standard-sounding "I Was Wonderin'," he plays some fleet little runs that are so delicate and beautifully articulated, you'd imagine you could snap them off in your teeth like ribbon candy. Tepfer returns to the Regattabar ([regattabarjazz.com](http://regattabarjazz.com)) March 16 with bassist Joe Martin drummer Colin Stranahan.

FRED HERSCH, who comes to Jordan Hall March 8 ([necmusic.edu](http://necmusic.edu)) to play a free duo concert with pianist Jason Moran, could be the father of Mehldau and Tepfer — generationally and musically. In fact, he was one of Mehldau's teachers. Hersch has battled precarious health for years because of AIDS; in 2008, he fell into a two-month coma. The new *Alone at the Vanguard* (Palmetto) was recorded at that New York club during a week-long gig late last year. Here's all the technique and imagination of those who have followed him, and the wide-reaching rhapsodies. But however much else is going on — clustered modulations, extended counterpoint, stacked harmonies — his textures remain transparent. And, even in his own "Pastorale," which is dedicated to Schumann, he maintains his link with the jazz past, with American Songbook tradition (he has a long association with singers). There's also a wit and playfulness that's as affecting as his lyricism, as when his "Down Home" (dedicated to Bill Frisell) splits its folklike theme into diverging strands of melody that come back together. What's more, his rhythms on that tune go back past bebop to stride.

On what seems in this context like a different jazz planet is trumpeter JASON PALMER's *Nothing To Hide* (Steeplechase). It's not just that this is a trumpet/saxophone quartet. Palmer is a regular in Grace Kelly's band and has been one of the jazz standard bearers at Wally's Café. (He was also one of the stars of last year's locally made film romance *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*.) The new album (unlike his previous, all-original *Songbook* on Ayva) makes no bones about its hard-bop sympathies: seven of its nine tunes are drawn from the player/composers at the heart of that book: Clifford Brown, '50s Miles Davis, Donald Byrd, Lee Morgan, Booker Little, Freddie Hubbard. Nothing wrong with that — Palmer's quintet play it all with precision, grace, and the right bluesy feel. And they know how to break up an arrangement with subdivided features for alto (a graceful Mike Thomas) and bass (Lim Yang) or guitar (Greg Duncan) with rhythm (Lee Fish is the drummer). Best of all is Palmer, who builds fire with his secure tone and the cool deliberation of his solos. His band play *Scullers* ([scullersjazz.com](http://scullersjazz.com)) on March 15.

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Finally, tenor-saxophonist DONNY MCCASLIN (coming to Scullers March 9), one of Gary Burton's post-grad recruits from Berklee early in his career, has become not only a sideman whom bandleaders can depend on for brains and brawn (Dave Douglas, Maria Schneider, Mingus Dynasty) but an impressive leader in his own right. His latest, Perpetual Motion (Greenleaf), works the funk hard and well, sometimes explicitly ("Memphis Redux"), sometimes in a more abstract electric-Miles way ("L.C.Z.M"), with Fender Rhodes (Uri Caine or Adam Benjamin) and electric bass (Tim Lefebvre) stirring the pot. He brings another extraordinary band to Scullers: pianist Taylor Eigsti, bassist Scott Colley, and drummer Antonio Sánchez.

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