

The long and winding road of Dave Brubeck

by Marty Rosen

Over the course of a career that spans more than 50 years, Dave Brubeck has gigged on every inhabited continent. He's played for presidents and royalty. He's played clubs and auditoriums of every stripe. At the height of the Cold War, he toured behind the Iron Curtain as a goodwill ambassador of jazz.

But perhaps the most memorable gig of his career happened in a place called the Mudhole, outside Verdun, just behind the Allied front during World War II a few months after D-Day.

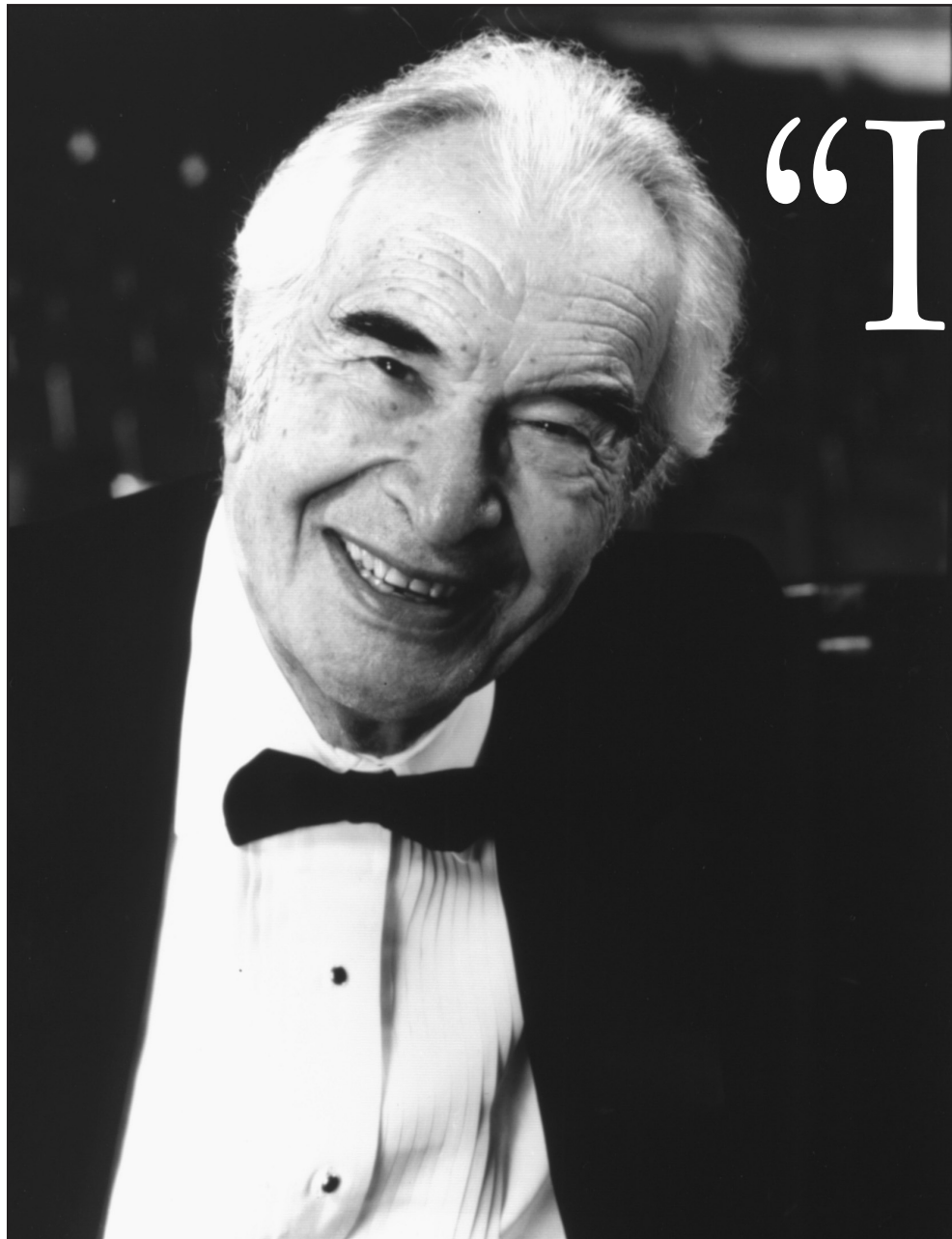
"I was a rifleman in the infantry," Brubeck recalled during a phone interview. "I was slated to go up to the front, but the day before I was supposed to leave they brought up some Red Cross girls to entertain us. They had a piano on the back of a truck, but they didn't have a piano player. They asked if someone would volunteer to play, and I raised my hand. A Col. Brown, who later went on to become a general, and was one of the administrators responsible for feeding the German people after the war, heard me play, and he told his officers, 'Don't ever let Brubeck go to the front. I want to keep him here and form a band.'"

The band would become known as The Wolf Pack. Its members were mostly battle-hardened, patched-up veterans. "When wounded soldiers came back from the front, they'd ask them what they did back home. If they were musicians, they'd send them over to join the band. Nearly all our members had Purple Hearts. We traveled back and forth, just behind the lines, playing for soldiers who were going up. I think we were better accepted by the men because most of us had been in combat and knew what it was like."

And as Brubeck told Ken Burns during the filming of the documentary "Jazz," the Wolf Pack was also notable for being one of the first racially integrated units in the U.S. Army during World War II.

Brubeck's beginnings hardly suggested that he would become one of the most beloved and best-known jazz performers of the century. He grew up in Concord, Calif. The son of a rodeo performer and cattleman who managed a 45,000-acre ranch, Brubeck spent much of his youth riding fence lines. It was during those years, he said, that he began to experiment with polyrhythms, singing rhythms that ran counter to the pulse of the horse trotting beneath him.

After the war, Brubeck studied with French composer Darius Milhaud, who then was teaching at Mills College. Under Milhaud's tutelage, Brubeck began to employ jazz idioms in traditional compositional structures and began to experiment with polytonality, the simultaneous juxtaposition of multiple key signatures. He



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formed a cutting edge progressive jazz trio with drummer/vibraphonist Cal Tjader and bass player Ron Crotty, recording for the Fantasy label and staking out a strong position on the West Coast.

In 1951, saxophonist Paul Desmond joined up, and the Dave Brubeck Quartet became one of the most popular forces in the music. The group's novel blend of up-front intellectualism and hard-driving swing earned legions of fans among college-aged youth. In 1954, the Brubeck Quartet signed with Columbia Records, and its importance as an exponent of cool, West Coast jazz was recognized when Brubeck made the cover of *Time* magazine.

In 1959, Brubeck crossed another threshold when his album, *Time Out*, became the first jazz album to sell more than a million copies — on the strength of Paul Desmond's witty, addictive little

essay in 5/4 meter, "Take Five."

Over the years, Brubeck has recorded perhaps 150 albums. His children have become a kind of extended musical dynasty, playing and teaching jazz in nearly every imaginable context. One son, Darius, is the director of the Centre for Jazz and Popular Music and professor of Jazz Studies at the University of Natal, Durban, South Africa. Another, Matthew, is a cellist who records with people like Tom Waits, Sheryl Crow and Tracy Chapman. Dan is a drummer. Chris is a multi-instrumentalist who has recorded with people like Larry Coryell.

And Dave Brubeck himself may be the hardest-working octogenarian in the music business. "I play about 180 one-nighters a year," he said. He spends a large part of each day composing and arranging. And in 2000, he established the

Brubeck Institute at the University of the Pacific. The Institute offers full scholarship assistance to a small group of young jazz musicians who receive an intensive year of jazz instruction, as well as performing opportunities and recording experience. (For information about the program and the audition process, see <http://brubeckinstitute.org>)

Dave Brubeck performs at Jazz Week on Sunday, Feb. 23, at 2 p.m. at U of L's Comstock Concert Hall (\$20). He also performs Monday, Feb. 24, at 8 p.m., at the Brown Theatre (\$50/\$30/\$35, students \$15). He'll be accompanied by Bobby Militello (sax and flute), Michael Moore (bass) and Randy Jones (drums). For more information, call 852-6907 or visit www.louisville.edu/music/jazz.

Contact the writer at martyrosen@hotmail.com