



Take Five: The Public and Private Lives of Paul Desmond

By Doug Ramsey

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Extensive biography of jazz saxophonist Paul Desmond, one of the major jazz figures of all time, written by noted jazz critic Doug Ramsey. Large format (10x11"), hard bound with dust jacket, 372 pages, 190 photos, matte paper; complete with discography of all Desmond recordings.

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Editorial Review

Review

"... attractive combination of affection and candor... A serious, thoughtful book, as lucidly written as a first-class literary biography..." -- *Terry Teachout, The Wall Street Journal*

"A major piece of jazz scholarship, the book cuts no corners." -- *Ben Ratliff, The New York Times*

"Every jazz musician should be lucky enough to get a biography as thoroughly researched and luxuriously produced." -- *Paul deBarros, Seattle Times*

"Rarely in the annals of jazz biography has a subject's career been documented so thoroughly... a monumental work." -- *Downbeat Magazine, July, 2005*

...an invaluable addition to jazz literature. I knew Paul Desmond, but I found so much more I did not know. - *Nat Hentoff, noted critic and jazz writer*

The detail of the research is astonishing. The writing is exquisite. I've never seen a biography like it. -- *Gene Lees, Editor of "The Jazz Letter"*

This is the finest biography we've had of an important jazz figure. -- *Dan Morgenstern (Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies)*

About the Author

Doug Ramsey is a veteran print and television journalist, who has written extensively on jazz and jazz personalities.

From The Washington Post

Even today, 45 years after it first became famous, Paul Desmond's best-known composition, "Take Five," remains fresh and alive. It began as a rehearsal riff over an unusual 5/4 rhythm and quickly caught on as the signature tune of one of the most popular jazz ensembles in history.

Desmond, who played alto saxophone with the Dave Brubeck Quartet from 1951-67, found pure magic with "Take Five," the first instrumental number to sell a million copies. It's a subtle, smart, engaging and deceptively simple piece of music, with a complex underlying framework -- in other words, a lot like the man who created it.

Desmond was an enigma, even to those who knew him best. With his suit and tie, receding hairline and horn-rimmed glasses, he looked more like a regional bank manager than a night-owl jazzman. He had a wry, sophisticated wit, was widely read and carried a typewriter with him on the road. Probably the most literate jazz musician ever, he once lamented that women might deign to date a man like him but would ultimately settle for security and wealth: "This is how the world ends, not with a whim but a banker." Almost 30 years after his death, Desmond remains the most lyrical of all alto saxophonists, with flawless musical taste and a dry, elegant tone that is instantly identifiable. His refined originality never sounds dated.

Jazz critic and journalist Doug Ramsey, who was a friend of Desmond's, attempts to solve the puzzle of

Desmond's life and music in his new book. Issued by a small publisher in Seattle, it is an awkward blend of biography, reminiscence, discography and coffee-table photo book -- with note-for-note musical transcriptions of Desmond's solos thrown in as well.

Desmond was born in San Francisco in 1924 and was known, until he changed his name at 21, as Paul Breitenfeld. He was often assumed to be Jewish, but neither Ramsey nor, apparently, Desmond himself could find a conclusive answer.

His mother was beset by phobias -- she couldn't stand to touch anyone, including her son, would wash her hands for as long as three hours and wore rubber gloves. Young Paul was sent to live with relatives for four years but seems to have emerged relatively well adjusted.

His father, who abandoned the law for a career as a theater organist and musical arranger, gave his son a solid musical education. After working in an Army band, Desmond was briefly married, studied English at San Francisco State University and, hopped up on Benzedrine, played in jazz clubs at night.

After working with Brubeck in the late 1940s, Desmond impulsively dissolved their innovative musical partnership. Realizing what he'd lost ("A little pinnacle, all my own, in the music world -- a way of playing not quite like anyone else"), he begged Brubeck to take him back.

In long, introspective private memos, Desmond outlined his goals as both a musician and a would-be writer: "beauty, simplicity, originality, discrimination, and sincerity." With time and practice, these qualities would define Desmond's haunting but accessible saxophone style -- and give the Dave Brubeck Quartet its lyrical soul.

Beginning on the West Coast in 1951, the reconstituted quartet became a jazz sensation with its sophisticated blend of rhythmic complexity, melodic grace and plain old swing. By the early 1960s the success of "Take Five," which Desmond wrote as a throwaway tune, had propelled the Brubeck Quartet to levels of popularity that no jazz group has equaled since.

After the quartet disbanded in 1967, Desmond drifted in a haze of cigarette smoke, scotch and inertia. He claimed to be writing a memoir that was never completed, but in the years before his death from lung cancer at 52, he resumed playing, as brilliantly as ever.

All the elements are here for an interesting tale of an important if quirky figure in jazz history, but Ramsey fails to pull them together. His book seems not to have been edited at all and contains dozens of spelling and punctuation errors. It includes an abundance of irrelevant detail and repetition -- four times Ramsey tells us that an obscure California musician changed his name from "Kriedt" to "van Kriedt," and he includes the maunderings of too many of Desmond's ex-girlfriends. Yet we never learn such basic facts as whether Desmond graduated from college or exactly when his parents died.

Moreover, Ramsey often interjects himself into the narrative, reprinting his own 40-year-old reviews and reminding us of how tight he and Desmond used to be. As a visual counterpoint to the disjointed text, Ramsey includes hundreds of photographs, but his effort to cram everything into his hybrid book produces a clumsy, intermittently interesting jumble.

The best thing to do is put on some of Desmond's classic recordings and just listen to his economy and grace. He always knew what to leave out.

Reviewed by Matt Schudel

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Users Review

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