

The Art of the Ballad: Pianist Dave Peck Explores the Beauty of Improvisation



Seattle pianist Dave Peck will celebrate the release of his trio's new album, *Good Road*, with an appearance June 21 on KPLU-FM 88.5 and performances at Tula's June 23-25. On July 2, he will appear as a guest on Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz, heard on National Public Radio. (PHOTO BY TIM ROUNDS)

BY TODD MATTHEWS

For pianist Dave Peck, the biggest musical treasures can be found in ballads. This was made crystal clear during a visit to Peck's North Seattle home and studio last month, where we listened to songs from his new recording, *Good Road* (Let's Play Stella Records), shortly before its release. Halfway through the sixth track—"The Star Crossed Lovers" by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, one of several ballads on the new album—I mentioned to Peck that he seemed naturally drawn to the slower tunes.

Peck agreed.

"It's my temperament, I guess," he explained. "I like to look at pretty things. The ballads seem to hold the most interest for me. I keep trying to find new, interesting and obscure up-tempo tunes, but it's hard. I could just go ahead and play the up-tempo standards everybody knows and try to do something different with them. But I can always find a gorgeous ballad that hasn't been played much."

And thank goodness for Peck's affinity for ballads. Since 1998, he has released four al-

bums that mostly explored jazz's softer songs while opening up new ideas and roads toward improvisation. True, the ballad is a slow tune. But that doesn't mean Peck and his band mates—bassist Jeff Johnson and drummer Joe La Barbera—are asleep at the wheel. Peck's relationship with ballads is so close and respectful, one could argue that he's uniquely qualified to work with the tunes.

An appreciation of ballads is only one aspect of what makes his music so rich. Another aspect is the musicianship of his collaborators. Johnson and La Barbera are veterans who have recorded with Peck before, and the group works almost intuitively to create a unique and signature sound. "They're very comfortable and easy to play with," said Peck. "They have huge ears and great sensitivity to the kinds of things I like to do. I kind of like the idea that I don't really know what will happen. I don't really know what the music is going to sound like—which is kind of a nice thing. It just depends upon what the three of us are thinking that day."

A passion for improvisation also informs Peck's

sound. "What I do is what other piano players do," said Peck, "but it's subtly different enough that there's nothing really automatic about it." Case in point: Cole Porter's classic "What is This Thing Called Love," which appears on the new album. In Peck's hands, the song is gorgeous, yet almost unrecognizable until the end—when the melody is finally played. Peck likes to take standards and swap the traditional chord changes for new and unusual patterns. "The idea is that the chords we're making up are like the tune," he explained, "but there's no single chord progression. It changes all the time. The standard just makes a little home base for the things we want to do."

PECK WAS BORN in Tacoma in 1954. His parents were fond of music: his dad was a professional choir director; his mom was a singer and played the trumpet. During vacations in the car, Peck's mother taught him to sing harmonically. "I kind of got the bug then," he recalled. "As soon as I could, I picked up an instrument."

When the family settled in McMinnville,

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Pender Harbour Jazz Festival

Sept. 16-18
Pender Harbour, BC
Roster: Francois Bourassa, Glenda Rae, Harry Busby, others
(877) 883-2456, info@phjazz.ca
www.phjazz.ca

Anacortes Jazz Festival

Sept. 16-18
On Curtis Wharf and in downtown clubs
Ernestine Anderson, David "Fathead" Newman, Jessica Williams Trio with Mel Brown, Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, Jovino Santos Neto, and many more

Vancouver DixieFest

Sept. 30-Oct. 2
Sheraton Guildford, Surrey BC
Roster: trad bands
(604) 987-6544
www.vcn.bc.ca/vdjs/

DjangoFest

Sept. 29-Oct. 2
Langley, WA
Roster: TBA
(360) 221-8268
www.djangofest.com/

Glacier Jazz Stampede

Oct. TBA
Kalispell, MT
Roster: trad bands
(888) 888-2308, (406) 862-3814
www.kalispellchamber.com/jazz/

Medford Jazz Jubilee

Oct. 7-9
Medford, OR
Roster: trad bands
(800) 599-0039, (541) 770-6972
www.medfordjazz.org

Swing 'n Dixie Jazz Jamboree

Oct. 19-23
Sun Valley, ID
Roster: trad bands
(877) 478-5277
www.sunvalleyjazz.com

Earshot Jazz Festival

October-November TBA

Seattle, WA
Roster: TBA
(206) 547-9787

Ballard Jazz Festival

November TBA
Seattle, WA
Roster: TBA
(206) 781-2589
www.ballardjazzfestival.com

Diggin' Dixie at the Beach

Nov. 4-6
Ocean Shores, WA
Roster: trad bands
(360) 289-4094
users.techline.com/diggingdixie/

Peck, from page 1

Oregon in 1964, Peck started to play piano and trumpet. His high school had two jazz bands—Peck played piano in one, trumpet in the other. His first choice was the trumpet. Dental problems as a child left Peck with two broken front

teeth. "I had a couple of fangs here," he said, pointing to his front teeth, "and this nice big air hole. No matter what braces they put in my mouth, I had the air hole. What really stopped the trumpet playing was when the dentist finally took all the braces out and capped my two front teeth. I remember I went home thinking, 'Oh, boy! I'm going to be able to play the trumpet!' But I didn't have the air hole anymore. I couldn't get a sound at all."

Peck then focused on the piano, which he had used as a composing tool while playing trumpet. He studied music at University of Oregon in Eugene, and moved to the Puget Sound region when he was 22 years old. He launched a long career as a sideman for a number of mainstream jazz musicians, such as Chet Baker, Joe Williams, Sonny Stitt, Lee Konitz, Art Farmer, Gary Peacock, and Freddie Hubbard, as well as more locally-known musicians—most notably saxophonist Bud Shank. He was also hired as an Associate Professor of Music at Seattle's Cornish

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Dave Peck's Upcoming Performances

Tuesday, June 21, 2005

KPLU-FM 88.5 with Midday Jazz host

Nick Morrison

Listeners will have a chance to win free tickets to Peck's June 24 performance at Tula's, as well as copies of the new album *Good Road*.

Thursday, June 23, 2005

8pm to midnight

Tula's Nightclub and Restaurant

Dave Peck, Jeff Johnson and Joe La Barbera

"Student Night": \$15 cover, \$7.50 with student ID, FREE to students who pre-register for the Joe La Barbera drum Clinic at Seattle Drum School on June 26 (see below). NOTE: Call (206) 364 - 8815 for details on clinic. For reservations at Tula's for this performance please call (206) 443 - 4221.

Friday, June 24, 2005

8:30pm to 12:30am

Tula's Nightclub and Restaurant

Dave Peck, Jeff Johnson and Joe La Barbera

"CD Release Party hosted by KPLU's Abe Beeson": \$15 cover. For reservations at Tula's for this performance please call (206) 443 - 4221.

Saturday, June 25, 2005

8:30pm to 12:30am

Tula's Nightclub and Restaurant

Dave Peck with Jeff Johnson and Joe La

Barbera

Jazz After Hours' host Jim Wilke hosts the final celebration of the release of *Good Road*. \$25 package with advance reservations, \$15 cover day of event/cover only. Purchase the package and, along with reserved seating and your cover charge (regularly \$15), receive a voucher redeemable that night for a free copy (regularly \$15) of Dave's new CD (or any CD available from the catalog). Also receive a coupon for a free download from www.DavePeckMusic.com. A portion of the proceeds of each \$25 package will be donated to MusiCares (providing support to music people in need) www.Grammy.com/MusiCares. For reservations at Tula's for this performance please call (206) 443 - 4221.

Sunday, June 26, 2005

2pm to 4pm

Joe La Barbera Clinic @ The L.A.B. at Seattle Drum School

12510 15th Avenue NE, Seattle WA 98125

Call for registration at (206) 364 - 8815

Register and pay in advance to Seattle Drum School by June 22 and receive a pass to the June 23 CD release performance at Tula's. NOTE: Under 21 may be in the club until 10 pm.

Saturday, July 2, 2005

5pm

Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz

The show airs in Seattle on KPLU-FM 88.5.

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College of the Arts.

Peck's collaboration with Shank fostered relationships between the pianist and other Pacific Northwest musicians, including bassist Chuck Deardorf and drummer Dean Hodges. "I think what was neat about it was that Chuck, Dean, and I were very young," Peck explained. "We were really excited about trying different things. Right at that same time, Bud kind of wanted to get out of that LA Four bossa nova thing that had made him so much money back in the day. He just wanted to be an alto player. He wanted to experiment with all sorts of different things, which we were certainly up for. So I wrote a bunch of music for that band, and we tried out all sorts of different ways of playing. Some were really good, and some didn't work out. He was just quite happy to try. It was very exciting."

Between 1987 and 1994, Shank hired Peck to record four albums: *The Bud Shank Quartet at Jazz Alley* (Contemporary Records, 1987), *Tomorrow's Rainbow* (Contemporary Records, 1989), *Tales of the Pilot: Bud Shank plays the music of David Peck* (Capri Records, 1990), and *The Lost Cathedral* (Pacific Records, 1994).

A year after *The Lost Cathedral* was released, Peck was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome—an ailment that derailed his music career. He took a leave of absence from Cornish and quit performing. Two years later, still battling the disease, Peck gathered enough energy to call Deardorf and Hodges and record his first album as a leader. That album, *Trio* (Let's Play Stella Records, 1998), was awarded the 'Earshot's Golden Ear Award' for Recording of the Year. It was also named one of the 'Best

Northwest Jazz Albums' by Jim Wilke's Jazz After Hours radio program. *Seattle Times* jazz critic Paul de Barros called the album "a pure pleasure," and said Peck was "without peer as a pianist on the Seattle scene." *Cadence* magazine critic Stuart Broomer wrote, "There's clarity and precision . . . and a fine lucidity . . . and the [album] has a gorgeous sound, emphasizing Peck's developed sense of sonority and the spare thoughtfulness of the trio."

In 1999, Peck released a solo album, aptly entitled *Solo* (Let's Play Stella Records), that also received rave reviews. The album was also nominated for an Earshot Golden Ear Award, and was again named one of the 'Best Northwest Jazz Albums' by Jazz After Hours.

Peck teamed up again with Deardorf and Hodges to release *3 and 1* (Let's Play Stella Records, 2000) the following year. Once again, audiences and jazz critics embraced the album. Earshot Jazz named it the 'Northwest Recording of the Year,' Jazz After Hours called it one of the 'Best Northwest Jazz Albums,' and the album reached the Gavin Jazz radio chart Top 10. *Jazz Times* critic David Franklin wrote, "[*3 and 1* is] an excellent example of how satisfying chamber jazz can be. This one's a keeper."

In 2002, Peck released *Out of Seattle* (Let's Play Stella Records, 2002), which included bassist Johnson and drummer La Barbera. The album was recorded live at Jazz Alley in Seattle. *Coda* magazine called it "a beautifully composed performance."

Discussing the success of those albums, Peck was modest. "I had been putting off recording as a leader for a long time," he recalled. "I was a sideman for so long, nobody knew who I was—other than the sidemen I played with. I also

had that long period with chronic fatigue. As I was starting to come out of that, I just decided it would be a great time to record. I also found some very nice people who helped me financially with the first album. That made a huge difference as well. The thing to do at the time was record a trio and solo piano playing. The albums sort of caught on, and became pretty popular in sales and radio airplay."

PECK WILL BE busy promoting his new album *Good Road* this month. He will appear June 21 on KPLU-FM 88.5 during Midday Jazz with host Nick Morrison. He will also appear at Tula's June 23, 24 and 25, where he will perform with Jeff Johnson and Joe La Barbera in support of the album (see 'Dave Peck's Upcoming Performances' for more information).

Peck will also appear July 2 at 5 p.m. on Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz, heard in Seattle on KPLU. The show was recorded last November in New York City, and resulted from a distant connection between McPartland and Peck that dates back to his teenage years. "When I was in high school," Peck explained, "I went to summer jazz camps in Seattle and Portland. Marian was on the faculty, along with Joe Pass and Phil Wilson. I kind of kept in touch with Marian over the years. I got up the nerve last year, while she was in town, to ask to be on her show. She called me up two months later. It was great fun. We talked over some of those old times and played a bunch of tunes, including a new one called 'Bluebird,' which I dedicated to Marian."

And Peck is also teaming up with

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here, Polestar played a huge role in creating a community, and I'm very excited for the collective Gallery 1412, which took over Polestar. The space is musician-run now and I feel that there's a more expansive, inclusive attitude. There are certain key people who work really hard to keep things progressing. Gust Burns comes to mind. He has been a huge force in creating opportunities for people here, in fostering a scene. Tom Swafford as well—he's been hosting *Sound of the Underbrush* every Monday night for a couple years now. Audiences mostly come out to see players whose names are internationally famous. But there are enough hardcore listeners and musicians who come regularly to make the shows fun and worthwhile. Making a highly uncommodifiable art form in a commodity age sort of dooms you to small audiences. But there's also a utopian quality of complete remove from the marketplace. You sort of end up passing the same wrinkled five dollar bill back and forth, going to each others' shows.

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ArtistShare.com to provide written music, out-takes from the *Good Road* recording, and audio lessons for purchase from the Artist Share Web site.

As *Good Road* closed with the Hart & Rogers tune "She Was Too Good To Me," Peck reflected on the new album. "It's a lot like *Out of Seattle*," he said. "It's the same guys doing the same sort of thing: spur of the moment explorations of some of the tunes we like to play."

For more information about Dave Peck, visit www.davepeckmusic.com.

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