



A Historical Study of the Improvisations of  
**BRAD MEHLDAU**

Kavyesh Kaviraj

Jazz Styles and Analysis  
Columbia College Chicago

# The Music of Brad Mehldau

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Brad Mehldau is one of the most celebrated jazz pianists of the 21st century; his contributions to jazz music has changed the field of jazz forever, and he continues to impact jazz musicians young and old all over the globe. Mehldau first emerged into the scene in the mid- 90's, near the end of the Young Lions movement- a burst of primarily college-trained musicians with musical foundations set in classic bebop and hard bop styles [1].



Brad Mehldau Trio in its present incarnation  
From L to R: Larry Grenadier (bass), Brad Mehldau (piano), Jeff Ballard (drums)

Mehldau's most recognizable work is in the trio format. Starting in 1996, his group released a widely-acclaimed series of five records on Warner Bros. entitled *The Art of the Trio* [2], of which several critics wrote rave reviews about. Volume 4 of the series *Art of The Trio 4 - Back at The Vanguard* earned a GRAMMY® nomination in 1999. Mehldau has also recorded extensively in other formats, including solo piano albums *Elegiac Cycle* and *Places*, a selection of 19 live solo piano performances entitled *10 Years Solo Live*, duo recordings with Joshua Redman, Chris Thile, Pat Metheny, Kevin Hays and a more recent electric project titled "Mehliana" with Mark Juliana, and hybrid trio recordings in albums *Largo* and *Highway Rider* [2].

Even as Mehldau's stature in the jazz world grows, Mehldau's music extends beyond the lines of musical genres. Mehldau is famous for re-interpreting various popular classics as vivid original re-interpretations. His music has been featured in several films, and he has composed the music for a French Film *Ma Femme Est Une Actrice*. Mehldau's work in classical music has been recognized widely, and he has been commissioned by several prestigious organizations such as Carnegie Hall, The Royal Conservatory of Music among many others [2].

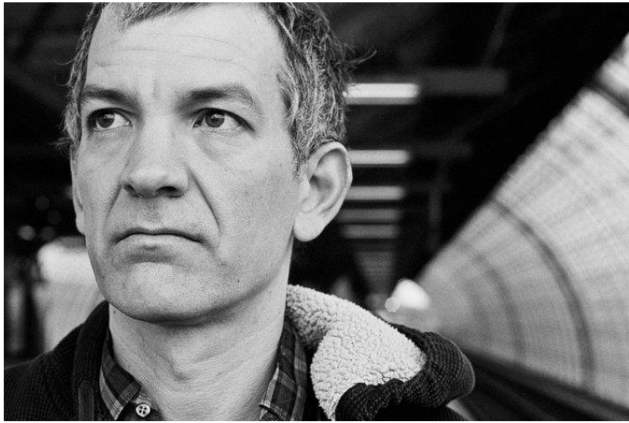
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1. Smith, Will. "Jazz 101". Downbeat.com. accessed April 2018. <http://downbeat.com/S=0/site/jazz-101/P17>
  2. "Bio". Bradmehldau.com. accessed April 2018. <https://www.bradmehldau.com/brad/>

# Biography

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Bradford Alexander "Brad" Mehldau was born on August 23, 1970, in Jacksonville, Florida. His father, Craig Mehldau, was a doctor, and his mother, Annette, was a homemaker.

There was always a piano in the house during Mehldau's childhood, and he initially listened to pop and rock music on the radio. His family moved to West Hartford, Connecticut, when Mehldau was 10. Up to this point he had played mostly simple pop tunes and exercises from books, but the move brought him a new piano teacher, who introduced him to classical music. his new interest lasted for a few years, but by the age of 14 he was listening more to jazz, including recordings by saxophonist John Coltrane and pianist Oscar Peterson.



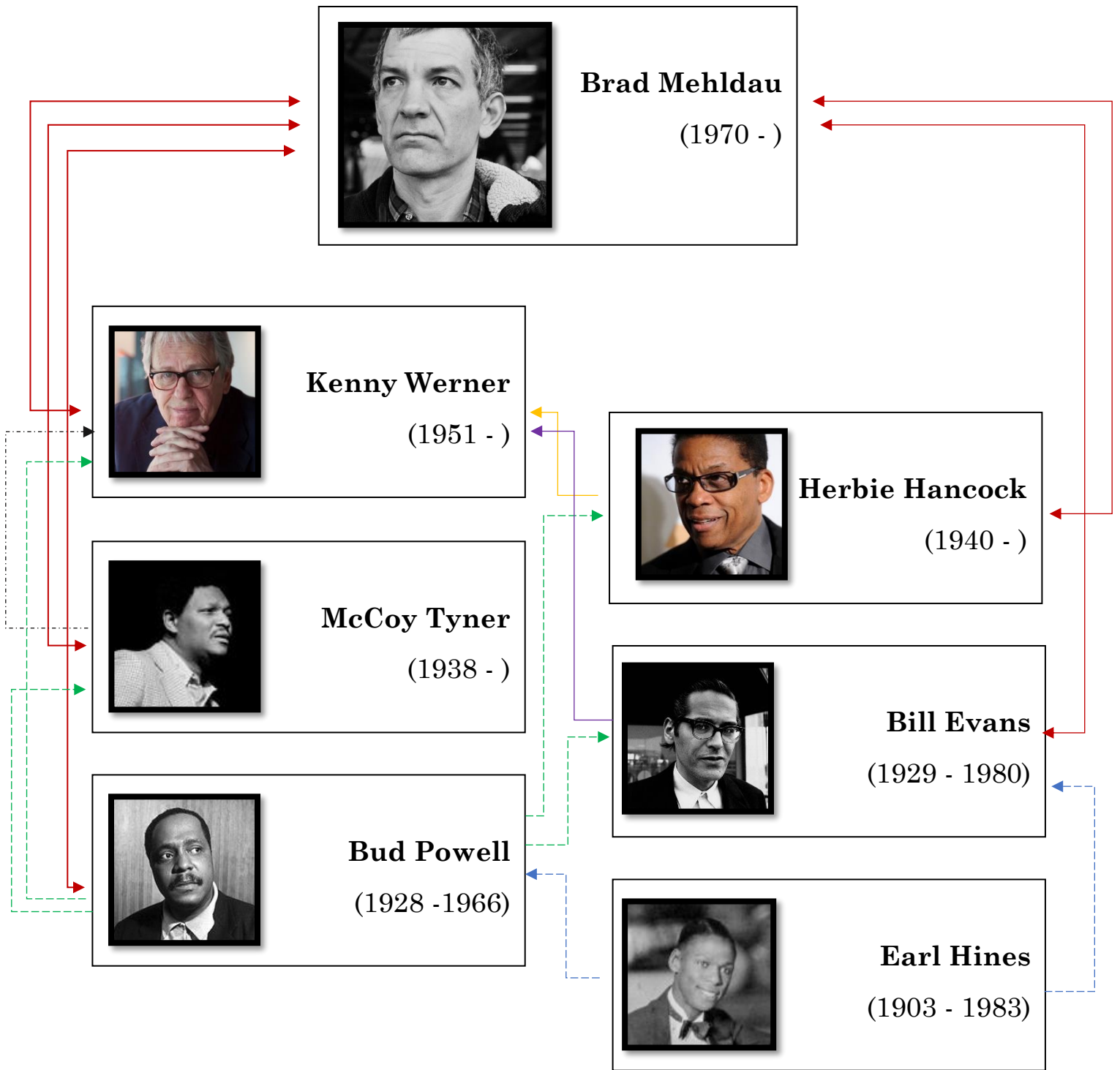
Brad Mehldau Media Photo

Mehldau attended William H. Hall High School and played in its concert jazz band. From the age of 15 until he graduated from high school he had a weekly gig at a local club, and performed for weddings and other parties, often with fellow Hall student Joel Frahm. In his junior year at the school Mehldau won Berklee College's Best All Round Musician Award for school students. Mehldau described himself as being, up to this point, "a white, upper-middle-class kid who lived in a pretty homogenized environment".

After graduating, Mehldau moved to New York City in 1988 to study jazz and contemporary music at The New School. He studied under pianists Fred Hersch, Junior Mance and Kenny Werner, and drummer Jimmy Cobb. Before the age of 20 Mehldau also had gigs in Cobb's band, along with fellow student Peter Bernstein on guitar.

By the mid- to late 1990s Mehldau was regarded by some as one of the leading jazz musicians. Mehldau's struggle with an addiction to heroin during the 1990s, up to 1998. Around 1996 he moved to Los Angeles, to try to overcome this drug problem. Mehldau later stated that "Once I stopped using heroin, it was like a rush of creativity that had been held in check came out".

# Genealogy Map



# Historical Analysis

Brad Mehldau has been revered by many for his incredibly unique musical voice. Mehldau's improvisation and musical style, in spite of its contemporary nature and ground-breaking strides in creating new styles of Jazz, is a result of his deep study and intent listening of a vast collection of Jazz music, spanning over a period of time that begins at the conception of jazz, encompassing all styles of the music. This study examines the characteristics and nature of Brad Mehldau's improvisations, by juxtaposing previous jazz pianists improvisations against Mehldau's solo on "Hidden Pockets" by Peter Bernstein, on the album *SIGNS Live!* Released on SMOKE SESSIONS RECORDS.

Mehldau's improvisations use strong motivic development ideas, derived both from call-and-response ideas in Jazz. In the opening statement of Brad's solo, he opens with the following binary sequence:

C7(#11)      C#m11      D7      G#m7(b5)

MOTIF A      MOTIF A'      MOTIF B

Gm      D/F#      F 13sus      E7sus4      Em7(b5)

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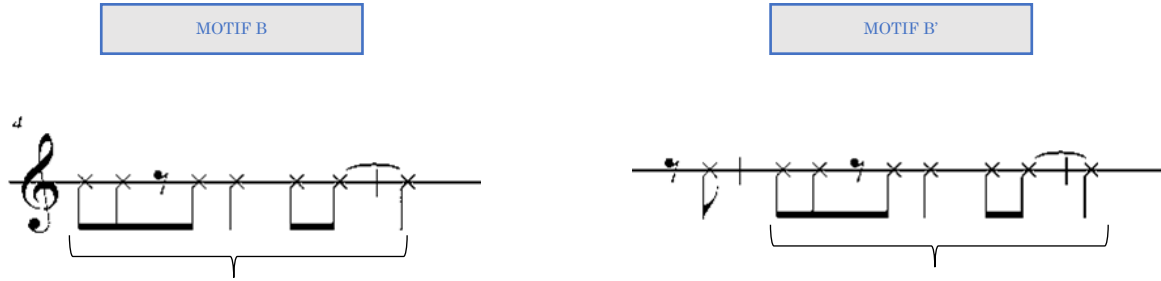
MOTIF B'

(Bars 1-8, Mehldau)

An observant listener will be able to appreciate the musical implication of the binary nature of this musical idea: this idea is memorable and the addition of variation creates interest in the solo's progression. On deeper analysis of this idea, one can appreciate the strength of the idea based on the rhythmic strength of the motifs-

MOTIF A      MOTIF A'

## Historical Analysis



This idea of Mehdau exemplifies his command over motivic development. In Motif A- he uses three upbeats (& of 2, & of 3 and & of 4) to lead into a downbeat-creating a tension and resolution on the strong beat 1. The variation of A, Motif A' is a displacement of this figure to the & of 4, now putting the downbeat on the less strong beat 3, and adding a tail end figure of two eighths and an upbeat as a variation on A. This alteration of ending phrases on downbeats and upbeats creates an interesting rhythmic tension, and he furthers this tension by using the Motif B, beginning on a downbeat, but quickly delving into a syncopated rhythm ending on anticipation accents.

Mehldau uses this tail end of Motif B to develop his solo further, as he uses this phrase in several endings (and even intros) of his motifs immediately after, varying:

9 E $\flat$ maj7 D7(♭13) D $\flat$ maj7 C7(♭13)

13 B9sus E maj7 A9sus C#7#9(♭13)

17 C7(#11) C#m11 D7 G#m7(♭5)

21 Gm D/F# F13sus E7sus4 Em7(♭5)

## Historical Analysis

This idea is very similar to **McCoy Tyner's** melodic development in his solo on John Coltrane's Mr. Knight. The reintroduction of the dual motifs, and the nature of the variations, make it very reminiscent of Mehldau's motivic development.

MCCOY'S REINTRODUCTION OF BINARY MOTIFS: 1<sup>st</sup> Chorus and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chorus

MOTIF A \_\_\_\_\_

MOTIF B \_\_\_\_\_

Mehldau's Solo indicates that he has a wealth of knowledge at his fingertips. Melodically his expertise is demonstrated with the precision in targeting notes to play within the changes. The idea of motivic development along advance rhythmic concepts like hemiolas, triplet figures with this target-note style improvisation proves very interesting to an apt listener. In this example of a triplet figure based line, Mehldau very quickly changes a note in an ascending series of notes to fit the next chord change that is not part of the chord family:

Notes from C altered scale  
C Db Eb E Gb Ab Bb C

Notes from D altered scale  
D Eb F Gb Ab Bb C D

G natural as approach to  
Ab (b13 in C altered scale)

## Historical Analysis

Mehldau anticipates the next change as not a part of the Ebmaj7-D7#9 family- hence one cannot stay in the parent scale of this family (D altered/Superlocrian)- and correctly plays G natural as an approach note to Ab just before the change Dbmaj-C7#9- which belongs to the chord family with parent scale C altered scale, all without breaking the line.

This is very similar to **Kenny Werner** altering his triplet based sequence of notes in his performance in “All Things Considered” by Lee Konitz:

Notes from C minor scale  
C Db Eb F G Ab Bb C

Notes from C minor scale  
C Db Eb F G Ab Bb C

F# is the M7 of G major scale  
G A B C DE F# G

Notice Werner plays the triplet line in the C minor chord family- as the changes Cmin7-Fmin7-Bbmaj7-Ebmaj7-Abmaj7 all belong to this family with C minor as parent scale. But when he approaches D7, he breaks the cycle playing F#, the M7 of G major, the parent scale of D7, all without breaking the line either.

Mehldau’s study of the bebop tradition has helped him understanding connecting long-flowing lines, along with the bebop chromaticism that helps target chord tones on strong beats. Mehldau uses long, angular lines with chromatic passing tones to connect lines and changes, as demonstrated in this passage:

Chromatic approach to target                      Chromatic approach to target

C altered/ half-whole                      B major / C# Dorian                      D mixolydian

Target- B(b7 of C# dorian)                      Target- D(b7 of G# locrian)



## Historical Analysis

One can see the dexterity Mehldau possesses as he changes tonalities, and how each change is smooth thanks to his connection of these lines using bebop techniques like chromatic approaches- this is extremely hard to pull off, especially at a tempo as fast as this.

His bebop-style lines bear resemblance to **Bud Powell**, and consequently **Herbie Hancock**, who has studied the former closely:

Bbmaj7 arpeggio   Chromatic descent (to b7 of bebop scale)   Cmin9 rootless arp.

9   Dm7   G7   Cm7   F7

11   Bb6   Cm7b5

Upward flourish   Downward flourish

3

- (Powell on Celia)

One can observe that often such bebop-styled lines have a descending quality, as in the above examples. This is descended from the 'trumpet-style' piano playing of Early Jazz, as pioneered by **Earl Hines**. It is characterized by the octaves and vibrant flourishes and runs as demonstrated in:

Downward flourish

17   D   Bm   E7   A7   D   Bm   E7   A7

21   D   Bm   E7   A7   D   Bm   E7   A7

Octave Shapes



## Kenny Werner

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“I had some very good lessons at the New School with Kenny Werner... Kenny showed me ways to construct lines and develop my solo vocabulary—specific harmonic stuff.”

- Brad Mehldau, *Downbeat Magazine* (2000)

“I’ve learned something from these young cats, starting with Brad, who was actually in my class when he was, like, 17. They have this precision without banging on the piano.

- Kenny Werner, *Jazz Times* (2003)

Kenny Werner (born November 19, 1951) is an American jazz pianist and composer. Growing up in Oceanside, Long Island, Werner began playing and performing at a young age, first recording on television at the age of 11. Although he studied classical piano as a child, he enjoyed playing anything he heard on the radio and improvisation was his true calling. In high school and his first years of college he attended the Manhattan School of Music as a classical piano major.

His aptitude for improvisation led him to the Berklee School of Music in 1970, where he met and studied with his first piano/spiritual teacher, Madame Chaloff. From Boston, Werner traveled to Brazil with the saxophonist Victor Assis Brasil. There he met Assis's twin brother, Brazilian pianist Joao Assis Brasil. His studies with Joao and Madame Chaloff would lead to the writing of the book *Effortless Mastery*.

Werner started his own trio in 1981 with drummer Tom Rainey and bassist Ratzon Harris. The Kenny Werner Trio matured for fourteen years, touring in America and Europe and recording four albums along the way. In the 1980s, he became the pianist for The Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra (currently known as the Village Vanguard Orchestra).

## Herbie Hancock

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"I would add a big debt to Herbie Hancock... [He] was really in my listening a lot early on, and I still love to listen to what they both did with synths. The Herbie influence you can hear on a track like "Sleeping Giant."

- Brad Mehldau, *All About Jazz* (2014)

Herbert Jeffrey Hancock (born April 12, 1940) is an American pianist, keyboardist, bandleader, composer and actor. Hancock was born in Chicago, Illinois. Like many jazz pianists, Hancock started with a classical music education. He studied from age seven, and his talent was recognized early. Considered a child prodigy, he played the first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 26 in D Major, K. 537 (Coronation) at a young people's concert on February 5, 1952, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (led by CSO assistant conductor George Schick) at the age of 11.

Through his teens, Hancock never had a jazz teacher, but developed his ear and sense of harmony. He was also influenced by records of the vocal group the Hi-Lo's. In 1960, he heard Chris Anderson play just once, and begged him to accept him as a student. Hancock often mentions Anderson as his harmonic guru. The pianist quickly earned a reputation, and played subsequent sessions with Oliver Nelson and Phil Woods. He recorded his first solo album *Takin' Off* for Blue Note Records in 1962. "Watermelon Man" (from *Takin' Off*) was to provide Mongo Santamaría with a hit single, but more importantly for Hancock, *Takin' Off* caught the attention of Miles Davis, who was at that time assembling a new band. Hancock was introduced to Davis by the young drummer Tony Williams, a member of the new band.

## McCoy Tyner

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“I stopped listening to classical music more or less completely from 14 to around 23 - and when I now hear my playing from that time, I sounded like McCoy Tyner or Wynton Kelly, depending who else I was playing with.”

- Brad Mehldau, *The Guardian* (2002)

Alfred McCoy Tyner (born December 11, 1938) is a jazz pianist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Tyner was born in Philadelphia as the oldest of three children. He was encouraged to study piano by his mother. He began studying the piano at age 13 and within two years music had become the focal point in his life.

Tyner's first main exposure came with Benny Golson, being the first pianist in Golson's and Art Farmer's Jazztet. After departing the Jazztet, Tyner joined John Coltrane's group in 1960 during its extended run at the Jazz Gallery, replacing Steve Kuhn (Coltrane had known Tyner for a while in Philadelphia, and featured one of the pianist's compositions, "The Believer", as early as 1958).

Tyner has recorded a number of highly influential albums in his own right. After leaving Coltrane's group, Tyner produced a series of post-bop albums released on Blue Note Records from 1967 to 1970, which included *The Real McCoy* (1967), *Tender Moments* (1967), *Time for Tyner* (1968), *Expansions* (1968) and *Extensions* (1970).

## Bill Evans

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“Mehldau addressed familiar ballads with a world-weary delicacy that evoked instant comparisons with the late Bill Evans:”

- The New Yorker (2000)

William John Evans (August 16, 1929 – September 15, 1980) was an American jazz pianist and composer. Bill Evans was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, to Harry and Mary Evans (née Soroka). Harry began piano lessons somewhere between age 5 and 7 with local teacher Helen Leland. Even though Bill was thought to be too young to receive lessons, he soon began to play what he had heard during his brother's class. Soon both brothers were taking piano lessons.

During high school, Evans came in contact with 20th-century music like Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, which he deemed a "tremendous experience"; and Milhaud's *Suite Provençale*, whose bitonal language he believed "opened him to new things." Around the same time also came his first exposure to jazz, when at age 12 he heard Tommy Dorsey and Harry James's bands on the radio. Soon, Bill began to perform for dances and weddings throughout New Jersey, playing music like boogie woogie and polkas for \$1 per hour. Around this time, he met multi-instrumentalist Don Elliott, with whom he would later record. Another important influence was bassist George Platt, who introduced Evans to the harmonic principles of music. In 1958, Evans joined Miles Davis's sextet, where he was to have a profound influence. In 1959, the band, then immersed in modal jazz, recorded *Kind of Blue*, the best-selling jazz album of all time. During that time, Evans was also playing with Chet Baker for the album *Chet*.

In late 1959, Evans left the Miles Davis band and began his career as a leader, with bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian, a group now regarded as a seminal modern jazz trio.

## Bud Powell

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“His deep grounding in the various tributaries of post Bud Powell piano expression came through in the career-launching *Introducing Brad Mehldau*, which also documented his knack—he was then 25—for getting to the heart of a ballad.”

- *Downbeat* on Brad Mehldau (2010)

Earl Rudolph "Bud" Powell (September 27, 1924 – July 31, 1966) was an American jazz pianist. Powell's father was a stride pianist. Powell took to his father's instrument at a very young age, starting on classical-piano lessons at the age of five. His teacher, hired by his father, was a West Indian man named Rawlins. But by the age of 10, Powell also showed interest in the swing-era jazz that could be heard all over the neighborhood. He first appeared in public at a rent party,<sup>[5]</sup> where he mimicked Fats Waller's playing style. The first jazz composition that he mastered was James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout".

Bud's older brother, William, played the trumpet (and the violin), and by the age of 15 Bud was playing in William's band. By this time, Powell had heard on radio Art Tatum, whose overwhelmingly virtuosic piano technique Powell then set out to equal. Bud often sought out opportunities to hear Tatum in local venues.

Powell was engaged in a series of dance bands, his incubation culminating in his being given the piano chair in the big-time swing orchestra of Cootie Williams. Powell's career advanced again, when Parker chose him to be his pianist on a May 1947 quintet record date, with Miles Davis, Tommy Potter, and Max Roach; this was to be the only studio session in which both Parker and Powell were to play together.

## Earl Hines

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Earl Kenneth Hines, universally known as Earl "Fatha" Hines (December 28, 1903 – April 22, 1983), was an American jazz pianist and bandleader. Earl Hines was born in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, 12 miles from the center of Pittsburgh, in 1903. His father, Joseph Hines, played cornet and was the leader of the Eureka Brass Band in Pittsburgh, and his stepmother was a church organist. Hines intended to follow his father on cornet, but "blowing" hurt him behind the ears, whereas the piano did not. The young Hines took lessons in playing classical piano. By the age of eleven he was playing the organ in his Baptist church. He had a "good ear and a good memory" and could replay songs after hearing them in theaters and park concerts.

In 1925, after much family debate, Hines moved to Chicago, Illinois, then the world's jazz capital, the home of Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver. Hines started in Elite No. 2 Club but soon joined Carroll Dickerson's band, with whom he also toured on the Pantages Theatre Circuit to Los Angeles and back.

Hines met Louis Armstrong in the poolroom of the Black Musicians' Union, local 208, on State and 39th in Chicago. Hines was 21, Armstrong 24. They played the union's piano together. Armstrong was astounded by Hines's avant-garde "trumpet-style" piano playing, often using dazzlingly fast octaves so that on none-too-perfect upright pianos (and with no amplification) "they could hear me out front". Richard Cook wrote in *Jazz Encyclopedia* that

[Hines's] most dramatic departure from what other pianists were then playing was his approach to the underlying pulse: he would charge against the meter of the piece being played, accent off-beats, introduce sudden stops and brief silences. In other hands this might sound clumsy or all over the place but Hines could keep his bearings with uncanny resilience



# List of Compositions

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## **When I Fall in Love - Mehldau & Rossy Trio (1993)**

At a Loss

Convalescent

## **Consenting Adults- MTB (1994)**

Consenting Adults

## **Introducing Brad Mehldau (1995)**

Angst

Young Werther

London Blues

Say Goodbye

## **The Art of the Trio Volume One (1996)**

Ron's Place

Lament for Linus

Mignon's Song

Lucid

## **The Art of the Trio Volume Three (1997)**

Song-Song

Unrequited

Sensucht

## **Elegiac Cycle**

Bard

Resignation

Memory's Tricks

Elegy for William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg

Lament for Linus

Trailer Park Ghost

Goodbye Storyteller (for Fred Myrow)

Rückblick

The Bard Returns

## **Art of the Trio Volume 4- (1999)**

Nice Pass

## **Places**

Los Angeles

29 Palms

Madrid  
Amsterdam  
Los Angeles II  
West Hartford  
Airport Sadness  
Perugia  
A Walk in the Park  
Paris  
Schloss Elmau  
Am Zauberberg  
Los Angeles (Reprise)

**Art of the Trio Volume 5 (2000)**

Dream's Monk  
Largo (2002)  
When it Rains  
You're Vibing Me  
Dusty McNugget  
Franklin Avenue  
Sabbath  
Alvarado

**Live in Tokyo (2002)**

C Tune  
Waltz Tune

**House on Hill (2002-05)**

August Ending  
House on Hill  
Bealtine  
Boomer  
Backyard  
Fear and Trembling  
Embers  
Happy Tune  
Waiting for Eden

**Day is Done (2005)**

Artis  
Turtle Town

**Metheny Mehdau (2005)**

Legend  
Annie's Bittersweet Cake

**Metheny Mehldau Quartet (2005)**

A Night Away  
Fear and Trembling  
Santa Cruz Slacker  
Secret Beach  
Brad Mehldau Trio Live  
Ruby's Rub  
B-Flat Waltz  
Buddha Realm  
Fit Cat

**Brad Mehldau Live in Marciac (2006)**

Storm  
Trailer Park Ghost  
Goodbye Storyteller

**Highway Rider (2009)**

John Boy  
Don't Be Sad  
At the Tollbooth  
Highway Rider  
The Falcon Will Fly Again  
Now You Must Climb Alone  
Walking the Peak  
We'll Cross the River Together  
Capriccio  
Sky Turning Grey [for Elliott Smith ]  
Into the City  
Old West  
Come with Me  
Always Departing  
Always Returning

**Nearness**

Always August

## Discography

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| <i>Year</i> | <i>Title</i>  | <i>Label</i>  |
|-------------|---|---------------|
| 1993        | <i>New York-Barcelona Crossing, Volumen 1</i>                       | Fresh Sound   |
| 1993        | <i>New York-Barcelona Crossing, Volumen 2</i>                       | Fresh Sound   |
| 1993        | <i>When I Fall in Love</i>  | Fresh Sound   |
| 1994        | <i>Consenting Adults</i>  | Criss Cross   |
| 1995        | <i>Introducing Brad Mehldau</i>                                     | Warner Bros.  |
| 1996        | <i>The Art of the Trio Volume One</i>                               | Warner Bros.  |
| 1996        | <i>Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz</i>                               | Jazz Alliance |
| 1997        | <i>Live at the Village Vanguard: The Art of the Trio Volume Two</i> | Warner Bros.  |
| 1998        | <i>Songs: The Art of the Trio Volume Three</i>                      | Warner Bros.  |
| 1999        | <i>Elegiac Cycle</i>  | Warner Bros.  |
| 1999        | <i>Art of the Trio 4: Back at the Vanguard</i>                      | Warner Bros.  |
| 2000        | <i>Places</i>   | Warner Bros.  |
| 2000        | <i>Progression: The Art of the Trio, Vol. 5</i>                     | Warner Bros.  |
| 2002        | <i>Largo</i>  | Warner Bros.  |
| 2002        | <i>Anything Goes</i>  | Warner Bros.  |
| 2003        | <i>Live in Tokyo</i>  | Nonesuch      |
| 2002–05     | <i>House on Hill</i>  | Nonesuch      |
| 2005        | <i>Day Is Done</i>  | Nonesuch      |
| 2005        | <i>Metheny Mehldau</i>  | Nonesuch      |
| 2005        | <i>Metheny Mehldau Quartet</i>                                      | Nonesuch      |
| 2006        | <i>Brad Mehldau Trio Live</i>                                       | Nonesuch      |
| 2006        | <i>Love Sublime</i>   | Nonesuch      |
| 2006        | <i>Live in Marciac</i>  | Nonesuch      |

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3. "Brad Mehldau Discography". Wikipedia.org. accessed April 2018

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| <b>Year</b> | <b>Title</b>                          | <b>Label</b> |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| 2009        | <i>Highway Rider</i>                  | Nonesuch     |
| 2010        | <i>Love Songs</i>                     | Naïve        |
| 2010        | <i>Modern Music</i>                   | Nonesuch     |
| 2008–11     | <i>Ode</i>                            | Nonesuch     |
| 2008–11     | <i>Where Do You Start</i>             | Nonesuch     |
| 2011        | <i>Nearness</i>                       | Nonesuch     |
| 2014        | <i>Mehliana: Taming the Dragon</i>    | Nonesuch     |
| 2004–14     | <i>10 Years Solo Live</i>             | Nonesuch     |
| 2012–14     | <i>Blues and Ballads</i>              | Nonesuch     |
| 2015–16     | <i>Chris Thile &amp; Brad Mehldau</i> | Nonesuch     |
| 2018        | <i>After Bach</i>                     | Nonesuch     |