

# What I Love About...

# Paul Desmond

By Austin Vickrey

# Paul Desmond - Overview

- Born - November 25th, 1924, San Francisco, CA (Paul Emil Brietenfeld)
- Died - May 30th, 1977, Manhattan, NY
- Began on clarinet at 12 years old. Began saxophone as a freshman in college (San Fran State). Drafted into the military for 3 years but never saw action.
- 1942 - After being discharged from the military, he changed his last name to "Desmond." He liked the sound of the name and heard it from listening to singer Johnny Desmond from Glenn Miller's band.
- Known for - Working with pianist Dave Brubeck. "Cool Jazz" style of playing (West Coast Jazz/Left Coast Jazz), composer of "Take Five."

# Paul Desmond - Overview

- Influences - Lester Young, Lee Konitz.
- His sound has been characterized as light, melodic, floating, and airy.
- Witty, quipping, and darker sense of humor. Some quotes that are interesting:
  - “I have won several prizes as the world's slowest alto player, as well as a special award in 1961 for quietness.”
  - “I was unfashionable before anyone knew who I was.”
  - “I think I had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to sound like a dry martini.”
  - “If I want to tune everybody out, I just take off my glasses and enjoy the haze.”
- Bands - Dave Brubeck Quartet - 1951 - 1967, collaborations with Gerry Mulligan, Jim Hall, MJQ, Chet Baker, Ed Bickert and others.
- Dabbled in drugs, drinking, and smoking his whole life. Died of lung cancer at 52 years old.

# Paul Desmond - Impact on me as a musician

- Heard Paul Desmond not long after I heard Charlie Parker, due to first saxophone private teacher.
- Heard the most famous song associated with Paul Desmond, "Take Five."
- I learned to try to copy his style of playing; sound, inflection, feel.
- Listed to me as an "idea man," full of improvisational language and vocabulary, melodic and flowing.

# Paul Desmond - What grabs me about his music

- His sound is very unique and very recognizable.
- “Effortless” playing when weaving melodies through chords.
- Smooth and flowing, known for making use of the “altissimo” register of the alto saxophone.
- Not aggressive playing, to me it sounds like “intelligent” playing.
- “West Coast Jazz” - Calmer style of “bebop” and a sub genre of “cool jazz.” Relying more in composition and arrangement than on highly individualized improvisation. Not as flashy.

# Paul Desmond - Notable Recordings

- 1953 - "Jazz at Oberlin" - Dave Brubeck Quartet
- 1957 - "Gerry Mulligan - Paul Desmond Quartet"
  - "Line for Lyons" - Mulligan
  - "Body and Soul" - J. Green
- 1959 - "Time Out" - Dave Brubeck Quartet
  - "Blue Rondo a la Turk" - D. Brubeck
  - "Take Five" - Paul Desmond - Became biggest-selling jazz single of all time, still used in movie and television sound tracks and continues to get air play on the radio, Grammy Hall of Fame (1996). \*20 attempts in 40 minutes led to postponing the original recording session for 6 days before cutting the single/album.\*
- 1962 - "Two of a Mind" - Mulligan/Desmond
  - My favorite Paul Desmond album. Improvised counterpoint between Mulligan and Desmond.
  - Notable tracks - "All the Things You Are," "Blight of the Fumble Bee," "The Way You Look Tonight."

# Paul Desmond - The Take Away

- Known for his melodic/contrapuntal style, his unique sound, and his smooth, flowing playing.
- One of the key jazz alto sax players in West Coast / Cool Jazz style.
- As a saxophone player, I feel it's important to study many styles of playing. I feel this style gets overlooked a lot by young players because it's not as "flashy."
- Learning to play in this melodic, flowing way can really give a young player a lot of ideas for learning how to navigate through chord changes smoothly and intelligently.
- Other saxophonists that are similar: Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz, Warne Marsh, Art Pepper.

# Paul Desmond - YouTube Links

- “Jazz at Oberlin” - Dave Brubeck Quartet - <https://youtu.be/5jwjbU5pHjA>
- “Gerry Mulligan - Paul Desmond Quartet” - <https://youtu.be/4fzBrTgCImI>
- “Time Out” - Dave Brubeck Quartet - [https://youtu.be/\\_1d-Axi4mhY](https://youtu.be/_1d-Axi4mhY)
  - Listen to “Blue Rondo a la turk” and “Take Five”
- “Two of a Mind” - Paul Desmond / Gerry Mulligan - <https://youtu.be/LDjTc8GzstQ>
- “Paul Desmond and The Modern Jazz Quartet” - <https://youtu.be/pc4nIJjwHFE>