

# Dave Brubeck

## Take Four

In part three, Richard Palmer focuses on the Brubeck quartet's 1964 Impressions recordings and three 'suppressed' standards albums



Although Brubeck's interest in polytonality and abstruse time signatures never left him - it remains a characteristic of his playing to this day - 1964 marked the end of what in later parlance might be termed these 'concept albums'. In that year he returned to another of his governing musical foci, 'Jazz Impressions'. He had already made two such - 'Jazz Impressions Of The USA' in 1956 and 'Jazz Impressions Of Eurasia' two years later. The former was Morello's debut recording with Brubeck, and his feature *Sounds Of The Loop* is a truly remarkable, richly auspicious performance; elsewhere, *History Of A Boy Scout* is no less riveting. The latter I discussed briefly in part one; it was Joe Benjamin's last full album with the quartet, and forms a noble swansong, with the original *Brandenburg Gate*, *Nomad* and *Marble Arch* especial highlights. After a gap of six years there followed, hard upon each other, 'Jazz Impressions Of Japan' (recorded in June) and 'Jazz Impressions Of New York' (June & August).

It is important to stress, even if it's pedantic to do so, the precise meaning of 'Impressions' in this context. More than a few reviewers chose to sneer at what they took to be a forlorn attempt to promote a succes-

sion of whimsical tunes as if they formed a coherent, suite-like and sociologically resonant representation of a city or country or continent. It was they who were adrift, not Brubeck. Amongst all else, he always had a painter's eye and sensibility (as 'Time Further Out' perhaps best exemplifies), and his 'Impressions' are - without wishing to deify him or overstate my case - similar to the Impressionist artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Those radicals sought to inspire a mood while also creating something rivetingly beautiful: like their near-soul-mate Picasso, they saw beyond immediate facticity, 'it-looks-just-like-it/him/her' safety and 'realistic' comfort, looking instead to speak to something more subtle, more personal and above all more individual. As I say, Brubeck's ambitions and achievements may not be strictly comparable, but he was always in his own (sweet) way a radical himself, and even if the listener does not at once conjure concrete images of America, Japan and New York from his images, they offer, if only obliquely, a telling manifestation of different cultures and ambiances.

It is apposite to link Brubeck's work in this

area with that of another great favourite of mine, Oliver Nelson. First, he recorded two Brubeck tunes on his wonderful 1964 album 'More Blues And The Abstract Truth' - *Theme From Mr Broadway* (the opening composition on 'Jazz Impressions Of New York') and the song Brubeck wrote after the television series in question (q.v.) folded in mid-season, *Blues For Mr. Broadway*. Second, not only are both cuts gorgeous - the latter illuminated by special guest Ben Webster at his ravishing best: they partly adumbrate Nelson's own 'impressionist portrait' of New York, the 1967 'Jazzhattan Suite' (still only available on CD thanks to Mosaic) which I think is his greatest single achievement.

All that duly logged, it has to be said that any 'Impressions' enterprise is in some peril if the results approximate pastiche rather than genuine absorption and engagement, and to my ears 'Japan' falls into that trap on occasion. The closing *Koto Song* is a triumph, being both beautiful and (it strikes me) a genuine cross-cultural evocation; the tender *Rising Sun* is similarly successful, and Desmond is at his lyrical best on *Fujiyama*. And if *The City Is Crying* could be *any* city, it is still a muscular and fetching line which elicits fine performances from everyone. But despite Brubeck's affecting sleeve-note story about the shock the quartet experienced on arriving at Osaka from Kyoto - Western industrialisation rudely supplanting 'the city of two thousand shrines' - *Osaka's Blues* has little resonance. It's a decent performance, certainly, but in impressionistic terms it is anonymous, which undermines the programmatic intent.

I'd say much the same about *Tokyo Traffic* and *Toki's Theme*: Brubeck is characteristically literate and eloquent in pointing out how Americanised some Japanese music has become (think of all those ghastly Elvis impersonators, and indeed the even more ghastly karaoke tradition), but in the end I'm afraid these cuts come across as little more than incidental film music, well again though everyone plays. And *Zen Is When* was a mistake. The tune is attractive and there are some interesting harmonies, but there's a posturing quality to it which is borne out by the sleeve notes. *Zen* is a mystery to nearly all Westerners, and emphatically not something trendily to dabble in, as too many would-be-hip Americans have