



Back In Time

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Take Five

Dave Brubeck, the jazz musician, died on December 5, 2012, one day before his 92nd birthday. When I heard the news I went straight to *downbeat.com* and read the lengthy obit for the pianist who gave us *Take Five*, a musical composition that once took the world by storm. Brubeck's megahit started playing in my head, and the unmistakable rhythm inevitably flashed me back to Montevideo in the late 1950s.

Take Five was the most popular track on an album that went on to become one of the best-selling jazz recordings of all time. The album, *Time Out*, was recorded at Columbia Studio in New York, and released in December 1959. It arrived in Montevideo that summer and my mother was an instant fan. My mother, Muriel grew up in a musical family in Buenos Aires. By day her father was a branch manager with the Bank of London & South America, but he was also a self-taught virtuoso pianist who could play anything you could hum or whistle. Muriel was tall and blonde and young and lovely, with long legs, a beautiful dancer. She had always been mad about music and, in the 1950s had a subscription to *DownBeat*, the hottest jazz magazine in the world. When the glossy magazine arrived from New York in its brown paper wrapper I used to wonder whether the people in the mailing department up there wondered who was *that* keen on jazz in Montevideo, Uruguay, South America. It was Muriel, of course. She would hand me the latest issue, opened at a particular page, and introduce me to Thelonius Monk, Gerry Mulligan, John Coltrane and, of course, Miles Davis.

My mother also taught me to dance, but her greatest gift was teaching me how to feel the music. "Don't *think* about the steps! *Feel* the music!" She moved easily and gracefully on the floor and could follow anyone. Keeping time came naturally to her. When *Take Five* appeared she was as thrilled as she was intrigued. What were they doing? Joe Morello on drums, Gene Wright on bass, Paul Desmond — who actually wrote the piece — on alto sax and Brubeck at the keyboard. "I'm not sure how to dance to it," she said. "It makes you want to think."

It certainly was the most cerebral music I had ever encountered, and it came at a complicated time when I was just starting to think about things I had never thought about before. Relations between Latin America and the United States were difficult. The Cuban revolution was still fresh on people's minds when *Time Out* was released and, to some people, jazz was Communist music and should be banned. *Take Five* therefore had a certain intellectual appeal that contemplated living as an outsider in a parallel universe of unorthodoxy and risk, evoking glamorous fantasies

of existential lifestyles and staying up all night in a big city, smoking and talking till dawn. Lots of people loved it; the album was the first jazz LP in history to sell a million copies. Jazz was cool.

Take Five was a stimulant — like a double espresso shot — compared to the music of the period. My mother was right, it did make me think. I looked around and saw people demonstrating on the streets, shouting "Yankee go home" while wearing blue jeans and drinking Cokes, and wondered how such opposites might learn to coexist. I was dimly becoming somewhat aware of social conditions beyond the cocoon of my family's British community. The dissonance I sensed between the two realities was somehow expressed and affirmed in the disjointed feeling I experienced when listening to Brubeck's music. To my untrained ear it sounded like discordant notes juxtaposed in a mesmerizing rhythm that suggested a harmony of autonomy and structure — freedom *and* form — that in turn generated waves of exhilarating thoughts and insights. When I listened to *Take Five* things seemed to make more sense. Not look prettier or taste better—make more sense. Jazz was definitely cool.

At my mother's suggestion, my brother and I were taking ballroom dancing lessons at the time, with about a dozen other girls and boys, all from the British Schools. We convened on weekday evenings in the large room over the Graham's garage in Carrasco, where we were taught the standard ballroom dances and, of far greater importance, how to behave in a formal social setting such as a ball. Sometimes the lessons were held in the Ciudad Vieja, somewhere off 18 de Julio, and on those occasions my brother and I would catch the 118 bus half a block from our house on 26 de Marzo and ride it into town. The 118 was an old rattletrap operated by CUTCSA (Compañía Uruguaya de Transportes Colectivos S.A.). It had an open back platform, which meant that Christopher and I could jump off the bus while it was still moving and thus be delivered on the very doorstep of our destination. Once inside, we learned to fox-trot and waltz, rhumba and samba, and always had great fun when a polka allowed us to romp around a bit. But we never danced to Dave Brubeck. He was too cerebral.

Or so we assumed, until the magazine interview appeared that revealed that he wasn't entirely about the head after all. He said, "One of the reasons I believe in jazz is that the one-ness of man can come through the rhythm of your heart. It's the same anyplace in the world, that heartbeat. It's the first thing you hear when you're born, or before you're born, and it's the last thing you hear." Makes you want to think.