

Michael Brecker - Biography

Following a two-and-a-half year illness, Michael Brecker passed away at the age of 57 in January 2007. As a result of his stylistic and harmonic innovations, Brecker is the most influential saxophonist of the last 30 years and is among the most studied contemporary instrumentalists in music schools throughout the world today. He is also a 13-time Grammy winner.

Born into a musical household in 1949, Michael Brecker's father—a lawyer and jazz pianist—played jazz on the record player for his young sons and took Michael and older brother Randy to see Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington perform live. While Randy took up trumpet, Michael launched his studies on clarinet and then alto sax. Moved by the genius of John Coltrane, Brecker switched to tenor sax in high school. After studying at the University of Indiana, as did his brother, Brecker moved to New York City, landing work with several bands before co-founding the pioneering jazz-rock group Dreams in 1970. Three years later, Brecker joined his brother in the frontline of pianist/composer Horace Silver's quintet. The following year, the siblings branched off to form the Brecker Brothers—one of the most innovative and successful jazz-funk fusion bands of the decade.

The brothers owned the popular downtown Manhattan jazz club, Seventh Avenue South, where jam sessions with keyboardist/vibes player Mike Mainieri, bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer Steve Gadd led to the 1979 formation of Steps Ahead. With Peter Erskine later replacing Gadd, the all-star quartet recorded seven albums.

In the '70s and '80s Brecker recorded and performed with a virtual Who's Who of jazz and pop giants, including Eric Clapton, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Aerosmith, Chet Baker, George Benson, Quincy Jones, Charles Mingus, Joni Mitchell, Jaco Pastorius, Paul Simon, Frank Sinatra, McCoy Tyner, Bruce Springsteen, Steely Dan, Pat Metheny and Frank Zappa.

Brecker cut his first record as a leader in 1987. That solo debut, *Michael Brecker*, was voted "Jazz Album of the Year" in both *Downbeat* and *Jazziz* magazines. The follow-up recording, *Don't Try This At Home*, garnered Brecker his first Grammy. After investigating new rhythmic concepts on 1990's *Now You See It... Now You Don't*, and subsequently being a featured soloist for a year and a half with Paul Simon, Brecker reunited with his brother for 1992's *Return of the Brecker Brothers*. The Breckers' *Out of the Loop* (1994) and Michael's *Tales From the Hudson* (1997) put additional Grammys on the saxophonist's shelf, leading to Brecker being named "Best Soloist of the Year" by *JazzLife* and "Jazz Man of the Year" by *Swing Journal*. Around the same time, Brecker appeared on Herbie Hancock's *The New Standard* and

McCoy Tyner's *Infinity*, followed by extensive touring with each piano titan.

Following *Two Blocks from the Edge* (1998) and *Time Is of the Essence* (1999) was Brecker's *Nearness of You: The Ballad Book*, which featured a dream ensemble of fellow jazz giants—Pat Metheny, Herbie Hancock, Charlie Haden and Jack DeJohnette—who never before recorded an album together. Produced by Metheny, with James Taylor on two tracks, *Nearness of You* was named "Record of the Year" and Brecker was named "Artist of the Year" in both the Critics' and Readers' Polls of Japan's *Swing Journal*—which has the largest circulation of any jazz magazine in the world.

In June 2002, Brecker, Hancock and trumpeter Roy Hargrove released *Directions in Music*, a live concert at Toronto's Massey Hall which celebrated the music of Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Brecker began 2003 by creating a large ensemble record, *Wide Angles*, which featured Brecker's 15-piece quintet. *Wide Angles* appeared on dozens of "Best Jazz Recordings of the Year" lists and also won two Grammys.

In August 2004, Brecker was in a great deal of pain during a performance at the Mount Fuji Jazz Festival. Following an initial diagnosis of a cracked vertebra, Brecker was subsequently diagnosed with the bone marrow disorder myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS). Despite an exhaustive search for a matching bone donor (during which tens of thousands of new bone marrow donors registered at Brecker-sponsored donor drives throughout the world) and an experimental blood stem cell transplant, Brecker passed away from leukemia on January 13, 2007.

Although he was extremely ill at the time, Brecker was able to complete a final album before he died. *Pilgrimage*, his first recording consisting entirely of his original compositions—with Herbie Hancock, Brad Mehldau, Pat Metheny, John Patitucci and Jack DeJohnette—received stellar reviews upon its release in May 2007.

More than a dozen lives have been saved so far as a result of Brecker-inspired blood stem cell donors—and his professional accomplishments assure Brecker being forever intertwined with the history of music. Said *Jazziz* magazine: "You'll find no better example of stylistic evolution than Michael Brecker, inarguably the most influential tenor stylist of the past 25 years."