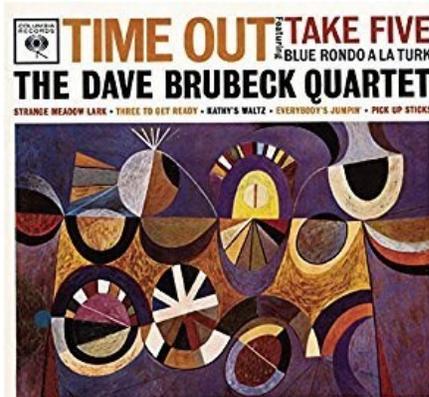


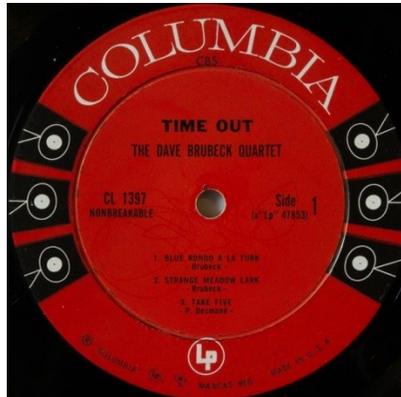
# “Time Out”—The Dave Brubeck Quartet (1959)

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Essay by Stephen A. Crist (guest post)\*



*“Time Out” album*



*“Time Out” label*



*Dave Brubeck*

The Dave Brubeck Quartet was, quite simply, the most famous and commercially successful jazz combo of the 1950s and 1960s. The group and its individual members (Brubeck on piano, Paul Desmond on alto saxophone, Joe Morello on drums beginning in 1956, and Eugene Wright on bass from 1958) routinely won the popularity polls of magazines such as “Down Beat” and “Playboy.” The Quartet toured extensively, performing frequently in every corner of the United States. They also traveled abroad several times per year, beginning in 1958 with their first European tour, a month-long commercial enterprise that took them to the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark, and that was followed by a ten-week stint as goodwill ambassadors on behalf of the U.S. State Department, with performances in Poland, Turkey, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), East Pakistan (Bangladesh), West Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq.

By the time Brubeck signed with Columbia Records in 1954, his quartet was inextricably associated with the performance of jazz concerts on college campuses. His first Columbia album, “Jazz Goes to College” (recorded live at three Midwestern schools), sold so well that it earned back the advance and began producing royalties within just a few weeks. In November 1954, Brubeck became the second jazz musician (after Louis Armstrong in 1949) to be featured on the cover of “Time” magazine. The Quartet’s first studio album for Columbia, “Brubeck Time,” was released in February 1955. Even though almost all of it had been recorded before the article appeared, the album’s cover incorporated the portrait of Brubeck from the magazine—a brilliant marketing strategy. In view of the time experiments on the recordings of the Dave Brubeck Octet and Trio, in the 1940s and early 1950s, it is significant that all eight selections on “Brubeck Time” were in standard 4/4 meter. The choice of title implied nothing about the temporal aspects of its music, and the unusual meter signatures of “Time Out” were still five years in the future.

The recording sessions for “Time Out” took place in New York on June 25, July 1, and August 18, 1959. Dave Brubeck’s eldest son, Darius, characterized the intent of the album as experimental and “entirely dedicated to the working out of a particular musical idea”—namely,

the use of meters and rhythms that were not common in jazz. The marketing executives at Columbia opposed the project, predicting commercial failure because its music was thought to be unsuitable for dancing. Moreover, “Time Out” included abstract art on its cover (a painting by the eminent graphic designer S. Neil Fujita) rather than the usual depiction of the Quartet or its leader, and it contained only original compositions as opposed to tried-and-true standards. Because of this initial resistance to his creative vision, Brubeck was especially proud of the album’s sales figures. By 1963 it had achieved gold record status (500,000 units), and it reached double platinum (two million)—nearly unheard-of for jazz—in 2011.

“Blue Rondo à la Turk” is the first selection on “Time Out” and the album’s keynote in many respects. Its prevailing meter is an asymmetrical version of 9/8. The opening composed section (before the improvised blues) consists of numerous iterations of a four-bar pattern. In the first three measures of each phrase, the eighth notes are grouped 2+2+2+3. Each segment is then rounded off with a fourth measure in the more usual compound triple meter (three groups of three eighth notes). Placing the tune with the most unusual and challenging meter as the initial cut was a bold statement of Brubeck’s artist intent. The familiarity and accessibility of “Blue Rondo à la Turk” has blunted its effect somewhat. It remains a *sui generis* composition, however, not only in the wider world of jazz standards but even within the more narrowly circumscribed group of Brubeck’s time experiments. “Blue Rondo à la Turk” brings to jazz a unique combination of elements from three different musical cultures. The blues is a quintessentially American brand of art with African roots, and a significant branch of jazz, Brubeck’s native musical language. Rondo form represents the practices of European “classical” music, and is a bit farther removed, both geographically and culturally. The Turkish component (the asymmetrical *aksak* rhythmic pattern of Anatolian folk music) is the most remote, and it is associated with so-called world music, with its overtones of Orientalism and the exotic Other.

The second cut on “Time Out,” “Strange Meadow Lark,” is a gentle ballad that begins with a lyrical piano solo in *tempo rubato*. Even when the bass, drums, and alto saxophone enter (after about two minutes), the pace is fairly laid-back. The piece includes complex harmony—and some polytonality at the very end—but nothing remotely discordant. It is, indeed, some of Brubeck’s easiest listening. Perhaps the most important observation about “Strange Meadow Lark” is that it is *not* a time experiment. On an album devoted to breaking the hegemony of 4/4 meter in jazz, it stands out in bold relief as the only cut in straightforward common time. The creative spark for the tune is reflected in its title. It was inspired by the call of the western meadowlark, which is captured in its opening motive. Dave Brubeck’s wife, Iola, penned a set of lyrics addressed to an anthropomorphized meadowlark, which evokes nostalgia for budding love during a previous summer. The jazz singer Carmen McRae recorded this version with the Quartet in September 1960.

“Take Five” is the best-known cut on “Time Out” and the most famous composition associated with the Dave Brubeck Quartet more generally. It is in 5/4, a meter not common in jazz in the late 1950s, and its harmonic palette is limited almost exclusively to oscillation between two chords. Nearly half of “Take Five” is a drum solo. Strictly speaking, however, it is not a “solo,” because the piano and bass continue the vamp all the way through. Brubeck’s alto saxophonist, Paul Desmond, is credited with the composition of “Take Five,” but its origins were collaborative. Brubeck heard Joe Morello playing a rhythmic pattern in 5/4 when he was

warming up backstage, over which Desmond improvised. Brubeck asked Desmond to compose a tune along those lines, and he helped to shape Desmond's fragmentary melodic ideas into a coherent structure. The piece's iconic title was entirely Brubeck's idea.

Side Two of "Time Out" consists of two pairs of Brubeck originals. The members of each set initially seem quite different from one another. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that they share deep affinities. For instance, "Three to Get Ready" and "Kathy's Waltz" both juxtapose triple and quadruple meter. In "Three to Get Ready" the contrasting time signatures are used in alternation, whereas in "Kathy's Waltz" they occur simultaneously. The dedicatee of "Kathy's Waltz" was Brubeck's daughter Catherine, who was five years old when he recorded "Time Out." A typographical error by Columbia Records immortalized the misspelling of her name.

Although the last two cuts on "Time Out" are in very different styles, they also share much in common. Both "Everybody's Jumpin'" and "Pick Up Sticks" were written with Brubeck's drummer Joe Morello in mind. Another significant similarity is that both tunes exist in two versions with distinct titles. The alter ego of "Everybody's Jumpin'" is "Everybody's Comin'" from Dave and Iola Brubeck's musical "The Real Ambassadors." "Pick Up Sticks," on the other hand is closely allied with an item known as "Watusi Drums." The fundamental metrical pattern of "Everybody's Jumpin'" consists of three four-bar units (4/4, 3/2, 4/4). This twelve-bar structure underlies all six choruses. In the head, it is extended by four additional measures of 3/4, then a telescoped version of the preceding phrase. The most important feature of "Pick Up Sticks" is its use of an ostinato, a six-note figure in the bass, which is heard no fewer than ninety-nine times in a row. The same pattern forms the basis of "Watusi Drums," which the Quartet performed during the 1958 tour of Europe under the title "Drums Along the Thames" (or whichever river happened to be nearby). It was changed to "Watusi Drums" when Brubeck later recalled that it had been inspired by a Central African drumming pattern that he heard on a field recording from the Denis-Roosevelt Expedition in the 1930s.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.