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Dave Brubeck and Artistic Courage

by Rushworth M. Kidder

What is artistic courage? What makes a musician break with tradition and venture into new aesthetic spaces? Is it the same as moral courage?

Those questions were on my mind last week when legendary jazz pianist Dave Brubeck came to Camden to perform with his sons Chris and Dan.

The jazz cartography that the Dave Brubeck Quartet inherited in 1958 was largely marked out in a 4/4 beat. True, syncopation had long been the hallmark of jazz, and Latin beats were breaking in. But all of these were fixed in a four-square time signature. Dance bands occasionally played in 3/4, though only for such unjazzy standards as "The Tennessee Waltz." But until Brubeck, the terra incognita of funky jazz rhythms -- 5/4, 7/4, 9/8, and the rest -- lay unexplored.

During a press conference orchestrated by Bay Chamber Concerts, and later over a private lunch, I asked Dave why, given his almost surreal talent at the keyboard, he had plunged into new rhythms. Why not stick to the standards? What gave him the strength to do something the public might not go for?

"Not caring whether they went for it or not," he shot back with a smile. Then he explained.

He grew up on a 45,000-acre California ranch, son of a cattleman father and a pianist mother. His father, as Dave's wife Iola told me, was a tough-minded cowboy with a strong sense of integrity. Dave remembers his mother as a "talented and driven musician" who raised him on Chopin. The friends his father brought home were "cowboys and rodeo guys," the kind that "my mother didn't want to have in the house." Instead, she brought in classical musicians who had studied, as she had, with some of the famous teachers of their day.

"I don't know anybody who had two more different parents," Dave noted. But he grew up happily cutting wood and hauling water from the spring. In those days, "I really wanted to be a cowboy. I didn't want to go to college," he said, "I just wanted to play on my own."

Some of his courage evidently came from that background, which made him, as Chris Brubeck said, "a very free-thinking person, culturally and socially." The rhythmic breakthroughs may also stem from life on the ranch. To keep himself entertained over long hours in the saddle, Dave remembered, "I'd do polyrhythms against the horse's gait." He still gets a kick when each of the musicians on stage is playing in a different rhythm -- "parallel metric confusion," as Chris put it with a chuckle -- before resolving into a common rhythm at the end.

But playing polyrhythms for fun and taking them public are two different things -- especially in the 1950s. Dave recalled that Columbia Records fought him all the way on his famous 1959 album "Take Five." "It broke all the rules," he remembered. It had a painting on the cover, a list of all-original tunes that included no recognizable standards, and a set of "funny time signatures that people can't dance to." Against stiff resistance, he held out and finally won.

So what's artistic courage all about? For Dave Brubeck, it was a version of moral courage. There was a risk involved, commercially and aesthetically. Yet it was done for the sake of an artistic principle that led listeners into new areas of emotional satisfaction. And it required a tough-minded willingness to endure danger, rooted in a faith that the artistry was more important than the marketing.

That courage is still evident today. In our age of cleverly staged brashness masquerading as artistic courage, the Brubecks continue to shatter stereotypes. On stage and off, Dave and his family genuinely like each other. They put on no airs, demand no special treatment, cast no egotistic shadows. They undercut the image of agonized genius depending on angst and tragedy to create beauty. And they prove that age is irrelevant: As Shakespeare says of Cleopatra, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety."

Why does such courage matter? It's sometimes said that with true artists there's no distinction between the thought and the expression: If you can think it, it comes out. With Dave Brubeck, I think, it goes further. There seems to be no distinction between *desire* and expression. It's as though anything he *wants* to do comes forth without conscious thought. The risk of so facile a talent -- the kind that Picasso had as a draftsman and that Brubeck has as an improviser -- is that doing fine things can come too easily. Such talent demands new outlets, the creation of new forms. But whether in Cubist painting or polyrhythmic jazz, it takes true grit to break away from the easy successes of the familiar and go from fine to great.

Artistic courage? Sure. But it's also moral courage. It's needed today just as much by candidates and CEOs as by painters and pianists. But that's another column....