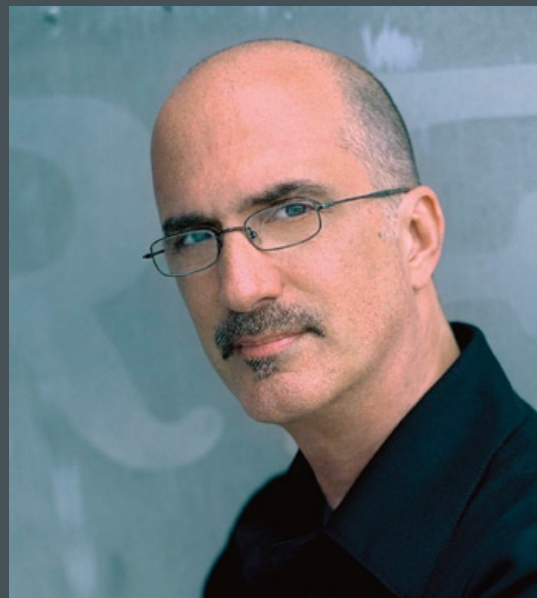


## Michael Brecker



BY TOM MOON

In the middle of “Hijera” on her 1980 live album *Shadows And Light*, Joni Mitchell asks her audience to listen for “shades of Michael Brecker coming through the snow and the pinewood trees.” On cue, the Philadelphia-born saxophonist saunters in, and in just a few measures, his soprano saxophone steers Mitchell’s restless ode in a new direction. There’s nothing unusual about the break—Brecker, who died in January 2007 after a struggle with a rare blood disorder, routinely laced apt and idiomatically astute magic into the tiniest crevices of pop tunes. What’s unusual is Mitchell’s name-dropping. It’s like she’s lifting the curtain on what she once famously termed the “star-maker machinery behind the popular song” long enough to reveal one of her secret weapons—Brecker’s fiery saxophonistics, which was also an X-factor on records by James Taylor, Paul Simon, Funkadelic, John Lennon and countless others.

## A Tribute

Brecker’s unmistakable saxophone sound—wily, agitated and bursting with life—routinely lit up pop records through the ‘70s and ‘80s. But he remained largely anonymous, a sultan of the studio, a hotshot hired-gun. Not many who heard his brief solos knew about the Brecker Brothers, the pioneering jazz-funk-fusion band he co-led with his brother Randy, a trumpet player. Fewer knew about his contributions to jazz records—among them Pat Metheny’s expansive *80/81*, Chick Corea’s *Three Quartets* and the projects of the band called Steps Ahead. Several years after the *Shadows and Light* tour, Brecker began to change that: In 1986 he recorded his first solo album, and began touring with a small jazz group.

Though he continued to take studio work, Brecker quickly developed a compelling “jazz” voice; over the next two decades, he created nine smartly arranged and forward-looking albums that deftly update jazz tradition while sidestepping the ongoing semantic debates about the music’s provenance/heritage. These projects reflect his wide interests—some contain reworkings of standards (the best of these is *The Nearness of You: The Ballad Book*, an understated set of torch songs in the tradition of John Coltrane’s classic *Ballads*), others veer into rumbling African polyrhythmic vamps or elaborate progressive rock development sections. These showcase Brecker’s thrillingly succinct, cut-to-the-chase improvisations (a byproduct of those eight-bar solo cameos), and benefit from the spirited contributions of such high-profile associates as Metheny and Herbie Hancock. As jazz albums go, Brecker’s were extraordinarily successful: not only did they sell well, but they brought him 11 Grammy Awards.

In a sense, Brecker was groomed for the jazz-soloist role from a young age. His father, a lawyer, played piano at home, and encouraged his children to take up music. Brecker once told the *New York Times* that his father took the family to “jazz concerts the way other kids went to ball games.” Throughout his childhood and during his years at Cheltenham high, Brecker and his siblings went to concerts by many of the legends of jazz, including Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington. Brecker recalled a 1965 Coltrane performance at Temple University as pivotal—the moment he knew he wanted to dedicate his life to music.

Though the elder Brecker loved jazz, he made sure his kids had solid grounding in the fundamentals of music. Michael Brecker began playing clarinet at age seven, switched to alto sax in high school and by tenth

grade was playing mostly tenor. For much of that time, he was taught by Philadelphia Orchestra principal clarinetist Leon Lester. Brecker attended Indiana University, and though he intended to study medicine, he wound up focusing on music. He left for New York after his freshman year, and by 1969 was involved in one of the great early jazz-rock fusion bands, *Dreams*, led by Billy Cobham.

At that time, a distinguishing characteristic of Brecker’s playing was his mind-boggling technical command—he could play faster, higher and at greater levels of intensity than any other saxophonist on the planet. The Brecker Brothers provided a suitable platform for those pyrotechnics; the group’s best late ‘70s works are machine-gun funk studded with dizzyingly complex run-on-sentence lines that sometimes resemble Coltrane’s “sheets of sound.” As he matured, Brecker became less concerned with displays of scissoring virtuosity, and more interested in cultivating expansive melodies. He began to truly sing on the horn. This approach, in evidence on *The Nearness of You* and *Two Blocks From The Edge*, sent the young saxophonists who’d emulated his early style back to the drawing board: Suddenly Brecker’s whiplash inducing riffs were replaced by a highly idiosyncratic personal language of heartfelt slurs and squiggles. He’d always had his own sound, but now, in an evolution experienced by many older jazz musicians, Brecker acquired his own vocabulary to match. Where once he’d specialized in improvisations with a high gee-whiz factor, Brecker became less assertive and more thoughtful. His notes could be transcribed, but the thought process behind them was impossible to cop, the work of a stealth genius as elusive as the wind through the trees.

Formerly a music critic at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Tom Moon’s work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *Blender*, *Harp*, *Vibe*, and *Spin*, as well as NPR’s *All Things Considered*. Moon is at work on his first book, *1000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die*, to be published in 2007.