

Rhapsody and Rhythm on a Firm Foundation

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Brad Mehldau has a warm, pliable, softly radiant touch at the piano, suggestive of waning sunlight or certain precious metals. At the Village Vanguard, effectively his second home, that tactile impression can sometimes seem enveloping and serious. But there was looseness in his first set on Tuesday night, along with variety and depth of feeling. Appearing with his trio, which sold out the full week in advance, Mr. Mehldau conveyed a spruce informality, mixing impulse with erudition.

His working partners are the bassist Larry Grenadier and the drummer Jeff Ballard, and Mr. Mehldau wisely grants them the full measure of his trust. On a new, untitled waltz early in the set his solo choruses were fluid and free enough to feel almost unmoored, and yet it was precisely the deep rhythmic pull of the song that made this possible. To the extent that Mr. Mehldau is a rhapsodist — and among modern jazz pianists only Keith Jarrett deserves the term more — it's because he has no qualms about his foundations.

Nor does he shun familiar conventions. Among the highlights of the set was a version of the Clifford Brown tune “Brownie Speaks,” set at a sly tempo. Expanding on the boppish theme, Mr. Mehldau briefly evoked Tommy Flanagan, along with a clearer influence, Wynton Kelly.

For “Stan the Man,” a bright original, Mr. Mehldau borrowed the chord changes of Charlie Parker's “Confirmation,” and within that framework he stretched time. Tossing off brisk octaves, he made a hurried cadence feel relaxed, almost leisurely.

Mr. Mehldau's devotion to melody has often steered him toward pop songs of one form or another. Here he opened the set with “Got Me Wrong,” from Alice in Chains. Riding a

floating 7/4 pulse, he created the sensation of a trance. Mr. Grenadier, filling pockets of space with resonant scurries along his soundboard, kept things from slipping into torpor.

Later, on another untitled original, Mr. Mehdau and Mr. Grenadier played an astringent melody in unison against a double-time rock groove. In its tone and delegation of duties the song called to mind the Bad Plus, another piano trio with a firm sense of purpose. It was also an effective platform for Mr. Ballard, the rare drummer who can play fast and busy at low volume. His efforts here were no heavier than a water bug skimming a pond.

After so much assertive rhythm, the natural move was to balladry: in this case, an exquisite solo piano meditation on “Where Do You Start?” by Johnny Mandel. Staying close to the melody at first, Mr. Mehdau gradually spiraled outward, with shimmering chords and an airy swirl of phrases. His sound, completely luminous, filled the room.