

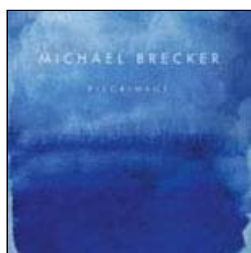


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Michael Brecker: Pilgrimage

Michael Brecker | Telarc Records

By [C. Michael Bailey](#)



Michael Brecker
Pilgrimage
[Telarc](#)
2007

The importance of saxophonist Michael Brecker's final recording, *Pilgrimage*, is densely multidimensional. The romantically inclined

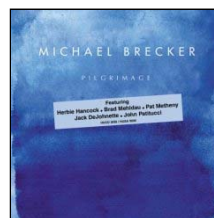
will attach significance to the fact that the nine compositions were conceived and recorded while Brecker was aware of the gravity of his final illness. *Pilgrimage* falls into an artistic/musical category that includes such disparate music as Mozart's *Requiem*, Puccini's *Turandot*, Billie Holiday's *Lady In Satin* and Johnny Cash's *American Recordings, Volumes 5 & 6*. All of these examples were conceived during the artists' autumnal periods and, in these cases, represent something of pinnacles in their outputs.

High art in the face of destiny is not always the case, however. June Carter Cash's final *Wildwood Flower*, while heartfelt, did the singer disfavor because she was obviously ill during the recording. Anita O'Day's final recording, *Indestructible*, similarly sincere, was recorded much too far past the singer's prime, and the aesthetic value of trumpeter Chet Baker's final recordings remains up for debate. So, what of Michael Brecker's final output?

In 2005, Brecker was diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome, a diverse collection of hematologic disease all sharing in common the inappropriate production of blood cells and their propensities for transforming into acute myelogenous leukemia. Unable to find a suitable stem-cell donor, Brecker passed away on Saturday, January 13, 2007. While Brecker did remain active during the period of his illness, appearing on Beatle Jazz's *With A Little Help From Our Friends* and Leni Stern's *Alu Maye (Have You Heard)*, he had been inactive a year before these recordings.

Thus, the artist's largest late effort was reserved for *Pilgrimage*. He is joined by pianists Herbie Hancock and Brad Mehldau, guitarist Pat Metheny, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Jack DeJohnette, all sacred to Brecker's generation of jazz musicians. The notable absence of Randy Brecker is acknowledged for the life-long collaboration he had with his brother in their various music endeavors. Save that, Brecker chose his group wisely as the results of the recording reveal.

Brecker's tenor tone is strong and muscular. His composing is the best of his career. His melodic head-lines are organic, approximating a flock of small birds flying scattered one second and then in unison the next. Brecker and Metheny share a Bill Evans-Scott LaFaro empathy throughout the recording, both buoyed by the impressionistic piano of Hancock and Mehldau. The heart of the disc exists in its center with the pieces "Tumbleweed" and "When Can I Kiss You Again." On the former, Brecker sets up a fast rolling theme and harmonics over which the soloists take quick flight including an aggressively distorted Metheny solo that gives way to one by Brecker. The rhythm section of Patitucci and DeJohnette creates a funky tonk with powerful momentum. No matter what, Brecker is in complete command.



Track Listing: The Mean Time; Five Months From Midnight; Anagram; Tumbleweed; When Can I Kiss You Again?; Cardinal Rule; Half Moon Lane; Loose Threads; Pilgrimage.

Personnel: Michael Brecker: tenor saxophone, EWI; Herbie Hancock, Brad Mehldau: piano; Pat Metheny: guitar; John Patitucci: bass; Jack DeJohnette: drums.

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“When Can I Kiss You Again” is Brecker’s introspective lullaby to his children, whom he could not see while in medical isolation. Again, his superior composing provides a carefully complex melodic introduction with a modal concept over which to solo. Composition and improvisation weave in and out of one another; constructing a silken fabric over which Metheny gives one his most inspired and introverted solos. Hancock provides his trademark abstraction as solo, depicting anxiousness as music. Brecker’s solo is middle to low register and impeccably structured (as are all of his solos). The disc’s title cut is a moody, Coltrane-esque meditation over electric piano with bass and drums occupying all sonic spaces. The piece grows in density and freedom as an open improvisation develops over the barest harmonic structure. And that was just the extended introduction. Brecker pulls all involved into an extended obbligato that is serpentine and seamless.

How does history view Michael Brecker? Many consider him to be the most important tenor saxophone player since John Coltrane. This is at the expense of Wayne Shorter, though Shorter generationally overlaps Coltrane. I would come closer to declaring John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter and Michael Brecker the apex of the tenor saxophone since Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster. That excludes a lot and that exclusion is necessary. Brecker’s importance lies in his universality. When I listen to Oliver Nelson’s *The Blues And The Abstract Truth* (Impulse, 1961), I think of that music as a jazz soundtrack of the 1960s. It had that sound that listeners would immediately identify as *jazz*; so with *Pilgrimage* and the opening of the 21st Century. Michael Brecker’s final recording is a finely crafted jazz soundtrack for a new millennium, serving in honor of the late saxophonist and all of jazz.

Tracks: The Mean Time; Five Months From Midnight; Anagram; Tumbleweed; When Can I Kiss You Again?; Cardinal Rule; Half Moon Lane; Loose Threads; Pilgrimage.

Personnel: Michael Brecker: tenor saxophone, EWI; Herbie Hancock: piano (1, 5, 6, 9); Brad Mehldau: piano (2-4, 6, 7); Pat Metheny: guitars; John Patitucci: bass; Jack DeJohnette: drums.

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