

PAUL DESMOND is perhaps the most famous sideman on today's jazz scene. For 14 years, he has been the alto saxophonist with the Dave Brubeck Quartet, from the group's early days of struggle to the notably successful present. Over the years, the quartet has often been the target of hostile criticism, but Desmond usually has been singled out for praise, even by the group's strongest detractors.

Considering these circumstances, and the common urge of jazz sidemen to become leaders, Desmond's reluctance to step out on his own is indeed an exception to the rule. But then, the tall, slender, soft-spoken altoist is an exceptional person in many ways.

He is indifferent to publicity. "I still think you should save this whole story for some significant event," he said during the course of this interview, "like when I die—you could have a picture of an alto and an empty chair and a bottle of J&B. . . . I always wanted to be a romantic jazz player."

His sense of humor—or, rather, his wit—nonwithstanding, Desmond is a romantic player. This is evident both in the graceful, warm lyricism of his playing and in his stage personality: somewhat diffident, introspective, and slightly withdrawn. This image has given rise to frequent speculation that Desmond is detached from the rest of the quartet—though both his playing and his words belie that interpretation.

"It's weird," he said; "so few people really know or care what we are trying to do—which isn't really that complicated. The questions people come up and ask after we play run like this: 'How do you know when to come in and when to stop?', or 'Who writes the choruses?', or 'How many of you are there in the quartet?' . . . It gives you a feeling of futility. Only very rarely—monumentally rarely—does a person come by who realizes what we are trying to do, and when we did it and when we didn't.

THE WITTY PAUL DESMOND

An Interview With
The Self-Styled

"Rapidly Aging John P. Marquand
Of The Alto Saxophone,"

By Dan Morgenstern

Everybody else takes from it a number of things; there are a lot of levels on which the quartet can be enjoyed, so they go away perfectly happy, but that doesn't necessarily have any relation to what we are trying to do."

The quartet is in a position now to pick and choose jobs, and as befits its role as one of the pioneers in the jazz-concert field, it now plays concerts exclusively.

"We don't play clubs any more—for at least three years, maybe longer," Desmond said. "The last club we played was Basin Street East, which almost doesn't count. We were playing two sets a night, which equals one concert, and we just ended up with the difficulties of both situations. The club was always pretty full, so there was none of that last-set loose experimenting which is one of the fun things about working clubs, and still we had the club atmosphere. Do I miss the clubs? Musically, yes . . . but we did so much of that, for 10 years or more, and if we had continued, we probably would be disbanded by now."

The Brubecks average about two concerts a week, "and if we do go out on a week of one-nighters, we have a week or two off afterwards—it's a lot more civilized."

Among the group's concert appearances have been special events featuring Brubeck's writing for symphony orchestra and combo. The most recent was *Elementals*.

"I kind of hope it stays the last," Desmond said. "That sort of thing is more gratifying to the composer, to perform it is a kind of struggle. It's a little frustrating when you are on stage with 80 symphony musicians and succeed in functioning just about as well as you ordinarily do, and it's considered a great accomplishment—like tap dancing under water."

Not that he rejects this kind of musical experimentation, he pointed out: "The challenge will always be there to make an alliance between the two forms, and it certainly makes more sense than a lot

