

Close at Hand

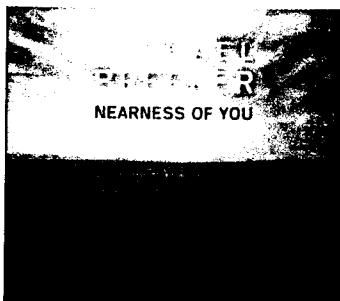
Saxophonist Michael Brecker gathers his friends for a set of ballads.

By Michael J. Kramer

WHAT SHOULD A JAZZ BALLAD

ACCOMPLISH? Should it rip a listener up with blistering emotion or should it soothe with poised reassurance? Should it grab you by the ear lobes or beckon coyly from afar? Michael Brecker, the consummately articulate tenor saxophonist, chooses the cool, calm, and collected approach on *Nearness of You: The Ballad Book*, although an undercurrent of provocative sourness creeps into the album as well. Fronting an all-star band consisting of guitarist Pat Metheny, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Jack DeJohnette — with guest appearances by vocalist James Taylor — Brecker lets the ballads lead him rather than trying to bend them to his will. For the most part, the songs are distilled to essences of fascinating tenderness or tartness.

This is Brecker's eighth release as a leader, but his long career as a superb sideman informs the music just as much. Prior to his eponymous 1987 release on Impulse!, Brecker recorded with everyone from his funk group, The Brecker Brothers (with sibling trumpeter Randy), to the aforementioned Taylor to Paul Simon, Yoko Ono, and even the



MICHAEL BRECKER
Nearness of You: The Ballad Book
(Verve)

rock group Aerosmith. As with his masterful session work, Brecker fits his playing to the song at hand. The best ballads on *Nearness of You* are quietly enlivened by the saxophonist's sense of graceful balance. Yet the most moving tracks feature something more than a pro's craftsmanship. On "Incandescence" and "Sometimes I See," Brecker injects a surprising shot of acerbic irritation into his tone, undercutting the assured logic of his ideas to turn these ballads into tales of beauty haunted by a nagging sense of unease.

His sidemen (all leaders in their own right) display a palpa-

ble lack of ego — a willingness to leave space around the notes. In a way, the 11 cuts seem to happen by their own accord. Songs simply bake in the sunshine and ripen in the moonlight. This is not always a good thing. There are stretches in which the music almost starts to spoil from sitting too long. The song that really goes wrong is "Nascente." Metheny's synthesized-guitar solo shoots through the harmonic changes like a chintzy, toy laser gun; it beams out a veneer of high-tech glitz, but the music is fetid underneath.

Other tracks range from pleasantly tender to deeply moving. In the album's spirit of minimalism and restraint, James Taylor pares the melody of his hit "Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight" to its bare essentials (his presence refers to Brecker's appearance on the original '70s version). Taylor also ably handles the title track, Hoagy Carmichael and Ned Washington's "The Nearness of You." The band turns a shade bluesy on the Joe Zawinul composition "Midnight Mood." Here the musicians are at their best, finding all sorts of subtle hues and harmonic twists within the song.

DeJohnette and Hancock are the secret stars on a number of other tracks, such as Brecker's composition, "Incandescence" and Metheny's piece, "Seven Days." DeJohnette adds cymbals and toms that glisten and rumble in "Incandescence," especially in response to the question-marked phrases of Brecker's sax solo. The surprisingly dissonant discoveries of Hancock's solo on "Seven Days" salvage that track from any threat of lugubriousness. And two of the album's most evocative collective performances come on the Irving Berlin composition, "Always," and the Kurt Weill-Ira Gershwin piece, "My Ship," which indeed swells and crashes like a clipper lost at sea.

The 11 songs are arranged into a kind of novella, with the first five serving as chapter one, the second five as chapter two, and the eleventh as an epilogue. They deliver on their promise of sparse eloquence. The epilogue, Brecker's own "I Can See Your Dreams," closes this *Book* as perhaps a good ballad should, with a mixture of resolution and lingering wonder. Like this album as a whole, it tells a story that finds a place to end, but could, if it wanted to, go on forever. ▲