

Saxophonist completes final pilgrimage

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As the new year began, Michael Brecker's life was coming to an end.

But the tenor saxophonist, suffering from acute leukemia, was still thinking about his music. He went downstairs to his home studio to perform the last notes on an electronic wind instrument for what would be his final album. The 57-year-old died in a Manhattan hospital on Jan. 13, just four days after telling his manager that the record was ready for mixing.

That album, "Pilgrimage," has been released this week — an inspiring coda to the career of a quiet, gentle musician widely regarded as the most influential tenor saxophonist since John Coltrane, whether playing straight-ahead acoustic jazz or electronic jazz-rock in seminal fusion bands like The Brecker Brothers.

It's the first of the 800-plus albums the 13-time Grammy winner recorded as a leader and a sideman — with such pop icons as Paul Simon, James Taylor and Aerosmith — consisting solely of his original compositions.

Brecker's wife, Susan, considers it "a miracle" that her husband managed to record "Pilgrimage" — the title of the last track he ever recorded, a 10-minute musical journey with a deeply spiritual prelude that evokes memories of his main inspiration Coltrane.

"I believe it was his spirit, his wanting to complete the record ... that kept him alive a lot longer than really was humanly possible given his physical condition," she said, interviewed with his manager Darryl Pitt in a midtown Manhattan restaurant.

For nearly 2 1/2 years Brecker had battled myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS), a cancer in which the bone marrow stops producing enough healthy blood cells, that eventually progressed into acute leukemia. He had to stop publicly performing in March 2005 and could not practice his saxophone more than five minutes at a time. But he used the time remaining to him to write the album's tunes at his home in Hastings-on-Hudson, north of New York City, in between lengthy hospitalizations.

"What I would like people to take from this record is that it is one man's testament to the human spirit," said Susan Brecker, her voice choking with emotion. "This music is just one man's response to hearing he is going to die ... and there can be nothing more honest or more vibrant than that, nothing."

Just two weeks after Brecker died, his wife and children, manager and jazz musician friends gathered in a midtown Manhattan recording studio for the mixing of "Pilgrimage."

"Hearing Mike playing so vibrantly in the studio it was literally as if he were conjured back to life," said the album's executive producer Pitt, Brecker's close friend and manager for 20-plus years. "It was deeply moving and profoundly touching and sometimes deeply upsetting."

The 78-minute CD respects Brecker's wishes by including all nine original tunes he recorded with a jazz all-star lineup of guitarist Pat Metheny, pianists Herbie Hancock and Brad Mehldau, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Jack DeJohnette.

"The compositions are among the best Mike had ever written," said Metheny, who appeared on Brecker's first solo album in 1987, in an e-mail response. "I have always contended that he was one of the best modern jazz composers of our time. He had a strong individual voice."

Pitt says the album would not have been possible were it not for Brecker's 18-year-old daughter Jessica. Brecker was close to dying in November 2005 when she volunteered as the half-match donor in an experimental clinical trial at a University of Minnesota hospital involving a new stem cell transplant procedure. The operation alleviated the pain by killing off large growths of leukemia cells, but the transplant failed to engraft, leaving the disease free to spread again.

Last June, Hancock, at Pitt's suggestion, coaxed a reluctant Brecker into making a surprise appearance at a JVC Jazz Festival concert at Carnegie Hall honoring the pianist. He received a standing ovation after performing the tune "One Finger Snap," his last public performance. The experience encouraged Brecker to go ahead with the recording session that had already been postponed twice.

"When he asked me to be on the record, I was really thrilled because I just didn't expect it to happen," said Hancock. "And when we actually started working on the record ... I said, 'Wait a minute Michael, are you sure you're still sick?' ... What was exuding from him was so much power, conviction and enthusiasm to do this record, and it was just a joy to experience that."

During the August recording session at the Manhattan studio, Pitt and Brecker intentionally masked from the other musicians just how poorly Brecker felt in order to keep the focus on the music.

But none of that frailty is reflected in Brecker's performances, whether its his rapid-fire arpeggio runs on "Anagram" with its shifting tempos or his deeply emotional, soulful playing on the poignant ballad "When Can I Kiss You Again?" — a question

asked by his son Sam during a hospital visit when physical contact was prohibited to avoid infection.

"No one would ever think when they listen to this recording that this guy's fighting for his life. ... You get the feeling of somebody who's at the top of their game," said Patitucci.

After the session, Brecker was optimistically planning for future albums. He took a family vacation in Florida and attended his son's Bar Mitzvah. He was diagnosed with acute leukemia in October, but kept working on the record.

It was bittersweet for those closest to Brecker when just days after the mixing session ended in early February, he won two Grammys for the CD "Some Skunk Funk," recorded in 2003 with older brother Randy on trumpet.

On Feb. 20, Brecker's family, fellow musicians and fans filled Manhattan's Town Hall for a memorial celebration. Hancock and Paul Simon performed "Still Crazy After All These Years," one of the many classic pop tunes with a memorable Brecker solo.

"His efforts to get this final message out to all of us (on "Pilgrimage") will go down as one of the great codas in modern music history," Metheny said in his eulogy.

Brecker's legacy also includes his efforts to encourage people to enroll in the national marrow donor registry. The introverted saxophonist went public about his illness after realizing how many thousands of people die every year waiting to find a genetically matched blood stem cell donor.

More than 30,000 people have been added to the registry since 2005 as the result of Brecker-sponsored events at jazz festivals, concerts and synagogues, said Pitt, who with Brecker's wife founded the Time Is of the Essence Fund, named after a Brecker album, to pay for blood tests for potential donors.

"Mike was a hero through the whole thing," said Hancock. "He used the challenge of a life-threatening disease to express his compassion for human beings and was able to express it with his music."

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