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CONTACT: Bonnie Somers
310-570-4770
bsomers@mff.org

Jazz Legend Dave Brubeck's Passion

For "The Brotherhood of Man" Will Live On

Dave Brubeck, one of the best known and loved jazz artists of all time, died today at age 91, just one day shy of his 92nd birthday.

In a career that spanned more than six decades, Brubeck was celebrated as a performer, band leader and composer. The Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Take Five" is one of the most popular jazz recordings of all time, and Brubeck compositions such as "Blue Rondo a la Turk" and "The Duke" have become jazz standards. Brubeck also composed works that explored the profound nature of humanity's record of war and peace, prejudice and understanding. He was a great friend of the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music, which recorded *The Gates of Justice* in 2001 as well his choral cantata *The Commandments* in 2007.

"Dave Brubeck was a giant not only in music but in spirit," said Milken Archive founder Lowell Milken. "His work will continue to speak an eternal message of hope for the brotherhood of man."

David Warren Brubeck was born on December 6, 1920, in Concord, CA, the youngest of three sons. His father was a cattle rancher and his mother a piano teacher who led the choir at the local Presbyterian Church. Brubeck started piano lessons at age four from his mother; his two older brothers were already accomplished pianists. At 12, the family moved to Ione, in the foothills of the Sierras, where his father became manager of a 45,000-acre ranch. He entered the College of the Pacific (now University of the Pacific) in Stockton, CA, which was then a Methodist University with many required courses, some of which left a lasting impression on Brubeck, including a course in world literature and a course on the Bible as history. Brubeck had entered college intent on being a rancher and studying veterinary science, but already playing piano in clubs, he switched to studying music. The College of the Pacific is also where he met his wife Iola Whitlock.

After graduating in 1942, Brubeck enlisted, serving with Patton's Third Army in World War II. However, before the Battle of the Bulge, Brubeck was asked to perform piano at a Red Cross evening. His performance was such a success that he was ordered to form a combo. His band, "The Wolfpack," which included saxophone player Paul Desmond, attracted attention not only for their music but also because they were an integrated band, in fact the first such band of servicemen to include black musicians.

Many years later in [a conversation with Eugenia Zuckerman](#) for the Milken Archive, Brubeck recalled an incident in his childhood where his father had wanted him to learn how African-Americans had been treated in this country. His father asked one of his African-American workers to take off his shirt; what Brubeck saw – that the man had been branded on his chest like a farm animal – shook him deeply.

After the war, Brubeck enrolled at Mills College in California where he studied with Darius Milhaud, the legendary composer who had fled France in 1939 as a Jewish refugee. Milhaud, a leading exponent of the uses of polytonality, who had first heard jazz on a trip to New York in 1922, encouraged Brubeck to compose jazz and to use different tonalities in his compositions. Milhaud was a great influence on Brubeck on both a professional and personal level (Brubeck named his first son Darius in his honor).

Brubeck's first recordings were with an octet that included Paul Desmond, Cal Tjader and other Milhaud students. Tjader and Desmond would later become part of Brubeck's Trio and his quartet with Bill Smith.

Eager for paying audiences, Iola wrote to all the colleges within driving distance, and set up a series of performances that introduced jazz to thousands of young people, launching what was, in essence, the first college jazz tour. Brubeck's ensemble also played major cities as part of a jazz "package tour" where they performed on bills with Duke Ellington, Stan Getz, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Brubeck's quartet included Eugene Wright, an African-American bassist, and on many occasions venues cancelled engagements rather than let an integrated band play. Brubeck consistently chose principle over pay.

Brubeck's popularity as the exponent of "West Coast Jazz" increased to the point where he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1954, the second jazz musician ever to do so (the first was Louis Armstrong in 1949). The following year The Dave Brubeck Quartet released *Jazz: Red, Hot and Cool*, the album that featured "The Duke," Brubeck's tribute to Duke Ellington which has become a jazz standard.

Although in those early years a number of performers played in the quartet, what has come to be known as the "classic" David Brubeck Quartet featured Desmond on alto saxophone, Wright on bass, and Joe Morello on drums. In 1958 the band toured Europe to international acclaim.

Brubeck's interest in innovative odd-time musical signatures, polyrhythms and polytonalities led to the Brubeck Quartet's 1959 album *Time Out* which exceeded all

expectations, becoming the first jazz album to sell a million records and achieve Platinum status with the now classic songs “Blue Rondo a la Turk” (in 9/8 time) and “Take Five” (in 5/4 time).

The original Dave Brubeck Quartet disbanded in 1967 when Brubeck sought more time to compose. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, with Erich Kunzel conducting, premiered his oratorio *The Light in the Wilderness* in 1968.

Shortly thereafter Brubeck was commissioned by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the lay association of American Reform synagogues, and the University of Cincinnati’s College Conservatory of Music to compose a piece that would reflect the shared bonds of the Jewish and the African-American communities, particularly in the fight for civil rights.

As Brubeck explained in a Milken Archive interview with conductor Russell Gloyd, relationships between the Jewish and African-American communities had become frayed at the time, following a tumultuous year of political unrest and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some black militants were making anti-Semitic statements, while the Jewish community’s passion for the civil rights movement was cooling in the face of other issues such as the Vietnam War. Brubeck intended [*The Gates of Justice*](#) to bring back together and reinforce the bonds between the Jews and African-Americans.

At the instigation of Rabbi Charles D. Mintz, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods presented the first performance of *The Gates of Justice* in Cincinnati in 1969. Rabbi Mintz has since commented, “Dave Brubeck is a product not only of Judaeo-Christian thinking but of the humanistic tradition of the Enlightenment. His identification with Jews, blacks, and with all who have known the lash of oppression is anything but accidental. It is the by-product of his love for humanity and is an integral part of this ability to share in the joy and the pain of his fellow man.”

For “Gates,” Brubeck drew on texts from the Torah, the Psalms, the writings of Hillel and Martin Luther King, as well as poetry by Brubeck’s wife Iola. The score abounds in musical references to Jewish cantorial music, spirituals and blues music, and includes a section that referencing contemporary artists including the Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel as well as Mexican folk music. In 2001, the Milken Archive recorded *The Gates of Justice* featuring the Dave Brubeck Trio, Baltimore Choral Arts Society, with Cantor Alberto Mizrahi, bass-baritone Kevin Deas, and with Russell Gloyd conducting.

Brubeck later remarked that because he wasn’t Jewish he had not expected to be part of the Milken Archive, but was delighted when approached and enthusiastic about the recording.

In the 1960s Brubeck toured frequently with saxophonist Gerry Mulligan as well as Brubeck’s sons Darius, Chris and Dan. In the 1980s Brubeck toured the Soviet Union,

and in 1988 Brubeck accompanied President Reagan to Moscow to perform at the Reagan-Gorbachev Summit.

In 1980 Brubeck became a Roman Catholic, and one of the personal highlights of his career was composing “Upon this Rock” for the visit of Pope John Paul II to San Francisco.

In a long and varied career, Brubeck and his various ensembles performed with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, as well as orchestras all over the world, and were regulars at jazz festivals in Newport and Monterey. Brubeck composed music for ballets, television theme music, oratorios and cantatas, as well as the recent mini-opera *Cannery Row* (2006) based on the work of John Steinbeck.

A newly-formed Dave Brubeck Quartet began touring again in the late 70’s, and continued to perform worldwide until the late 2000s. Personnel for the Quartet changed over time, with the final group comprising Bobby Militello, saxophone, Michael Moore, bass, and Randy Jones, drums. The Milken Archive filmed the quartet [performing standards in concert](#) in 2007.

In 2005 Brubeck composed *The Commandments*, a work whose theme he had been pondering for many decades and whose genesis he attributed to his World War II experiences – the conflict between the carnage of war and the commandment “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” The work emphasizes what Brubeck once said is man’s “God-given potential for redemption.” The world premiere recording of *The Commandments* was released in 2010 by the Milken Archive.

Brubeck’s many awards include the National Medal of Arts, the Smithsonian Medal, the Laetare Medal from Notre Dame University, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, the DownBeat Hall of Fame, the BBC Jazz Lifetime Achievement Award, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the California Hall of Fame, the Benjamin Franklin Award for Diplomacy from the State Department, and numerous honorary university degrees. In September 2009, he became a Kennedy Center Honoree.

The University of the Pacific founded the Brubeck Institute in 2000 to honor Dave and Iola Brubeck. Originally established to house Brubeck’s archive, the Institute now awards scholarships, has a summer jazz colony and a Brubeck Jazz festival.

Brubeck is survived by his wife Iola, as well as his children Darius, Chris, Dan, Matthew, and Catherine. The Milken Archive of American Jewish Music extends our condolences to the Brubeck family for its loss.

To hear part of the Milken Archive’s 2003 [oral history with Dave and Iola Brubeck](#), recordings of *The Gates of Justice* and *The Commandments*, and more, go to <http://www.milkenarchive.org/people/view/composers/862/Dave+Brubeck>