

**One Long Tune: The Life and Music of Lenny Breau.** By Ron Forbes-Roberts. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2006. \$29.95. 325 p. ISBN 978-1-57441-210-9

Winnipeg-born guitarist Lenny Breau (1941-1984), a legend among guitarists and non-guitarists alike, has long been neglected in the literature on jazz and jazz musicians. This book, a thoroughly researched and comprehensive account of his life and music, unequivocally addresses this neglect. Music journalist and classical guitarist Ron Forbes-Roberts has meticulously compiled information and opinions from 115 personally conducted interviews as well as numerous concert and recording reviews. He weaves a stimulating and consistent mixture of biography and musical commentary—perhaps with more writing about Breau’s life than his music, but that is to be expected. For a first book on the guitarist, there is much to learn and assimilate.

Lenny Breau began his career singing with his parents’ vaudeville act, “Lone Pine and Betty Cody,” touring mostly through Maine and ending up in New Brunswick. He started playing guitar at the age of eight, immediately demonstrating a remarkable ability to memorize what he heard and replicate it. A key turning point in his development was when he heard Chet Atkins on the radio in 1952, whose unique and virtuosic picking was to become the technical basis for Breau’s style. When the two finally met in 1967 they established an instant rapport. Atkins became a father figure for Breau, arranging for his first major record, procuring work for him, and eventually getting caught up in a futile attempt to

keep him on a straight path as he descended into chronic drug use and financial and marital turmoil. In the end, Atkins, who was seventeen years his senior, actually lived seventeen years longer than Breau, who was tragically murdered and found at the bottom of the rooftop swimming pool of the decrepit Los Angeles apartment building where he lived. The case was never solved, although his wife at the time was cited as a strong suspect.

Atkins’ style of guitar playing may have been Breau’s first inspiration and influence, but he quickly became intrigued with jazz, and to a lesser extent, flamenco guitar. In particular, Breau was captivated by Bill Evans’ chord voicings after hearing the pianist’s work on Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* through long-time friend and mentor Bob Erlandson, a jazz pianist from Winnipeg who had first hired Breau in 1958 as a singer. (Like Atkins, Erlandson also continued to look after Breau until the last years of his life in Los Angeles.) For Breau, the incorporation of Evans’ harmonically ambiguous voicings (e.g., no roots, altered extensions, etc.) with his single-line playing was a natural fit. He was already using a finger style method of playing with very light strings enhanced by his patented chordal harmonics—a method of pinching the strings to produce overtones without actually striking them.

One could argue that Evans’ influence was not evident in the way Breau structured his improvisations, but

the sounds were there. Breau's astounding technical facility, his lightning-fast runs and extended chords, his ability to effortlessly comp and play melodic lines simultaneously, and his stylistic mastery of country, flamenco, and jazz, all may have gotten in the way of his ability to deliver logical and coherent musical statements. He was simply too caught up in the moment by the technical and stylistic possibilities that present themselves in a tune. With the exception of such set pieces such as "The Claw," a solo guitar piece, most of Breau's improvisations were dazzling but disjointed, in contrast to the highly controlled and stylized gestures of Bill Evans. While Breau played and recorded with Atkins on several occasions, he only managed once to sit in briefly with Evans during a club performance in Toronto in 1971. As documented in the book from Doug Riley's recollection, the encounter was not all that successful due to the similarities in comping and voicings—they simply got in each other's way. I would guess that they also had radically different conceptions of improvisation and that an aesthetic divide may have played a role in their incompatibility.

The book reads well and has been rigorously documented, with a list of all of the interviews, a bibliography (including references to radio and television shows), a detailed discography, and an outstanding index, which merits some comment. Through the index one can trace Breau's musical influences, his numerous guitars (listed individually and under one heading), his recordings, concerts, television and radio appearances, his drug and alcohol use, and his wives. Not only is it possible to

easily pinpoint pages where Breau's "development of guitar style," "attitudes towards improvisation," and his "interest in flamenco music" occur, there also is documentation on many aspects of his personal life, including such peculiarities as "housekeeping arrangements with Lenny Breau," under the entry of his wife, Valerie. The discography is detailed and accurate, although I couldn't find information on an intriguing recording made in 1962 for a radio station that is mentioned several times in the text. Breau plays bass, with a solo that "was not simply a piece of astonishing technical work: its guitaristic concept presaged an approach to bass that would become cutting edge ten years later and supports the great Canadian jazz bassist/pianist Don Thompson's assertion that 'Lenny Breau was ahead of us all on bass'" (p. 74).

Breau's recorded output was (and is) uneven, some of it marred by the smorgasbord approach he took to repertoire development and improvisation, and some of it simply unsuitable for release. The album that caught everyone's attention was *The Velvet Touch of Lenny Breau: Live!*, aptly named because "it really did look like he was just tapping his fingers on a piece of velvet, just stroking it. The movements he would make with his right hand were so small, so controlled and so light" (p. 211). It was recorded in 1969 at Shelly's Manne Hole in Los Angeles during a three night engagement that led one commentator to exclaim, "If you had dropped a bomb on the place that night you'd have wiped out all the guitar players of the world. They were all down there, from Howard Roberts to George Van Eps to Joe

Pass... I remember Lenny and George Van Eps meeting and George kept saying to him, 'What a player, what a player!'" (p. 135). Until fairly recently, it was this album through which most people knew Breau's music.

Forbes-Roberts has done a remarkable job in putting together this biography and has collected in one place everything you need to know about Lenny Breau, leaving you with a real sense of his genius and personal struggles. He also provides insightful

commentary on Breau's music, with numerous informative technical explanations and references. Given the tormented life and tragic death that Breau led, it is at least satisfying that this first biography will likely not be rendered obsolete any time soon. Combined with Randy Bachman's efforts to release all of Breau's music through his Guitarchives record label, there is much to savour.

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