

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'Was Elvis Presley's manager a killer on the lam?'
by Mike Dash, Smithsonian

Colonel Tom Parker wasn't a colonel, wasn't called Tom Parker and wasn't American. He was born Andreas van Kuijk, in Holland – where he may have killed a woman, writes Dash

Infinite possibilities

Andy Battaglia reviews a recent raft of notable solo piano albums, each of them singular in its own way, from the quietly startling *Avenging Angel* by Craig Taborn to the striking *Inside Piano* by Reinhold Friedl

Writing is a lot like playing piano, or at least it can seem that way when one is in an impressionistic mood. Certainly the typing part is: fingers tapping away at keys, hands moving around in rhythm, nerves guided by forces that are hard to divine.

So, can the reverse be true – is playing piano anything like writing? All of us can identify with what it takes to write or type, but far fewer know the mysteries that attend the ebony and ivory. And what could be more mysterious than a large, complex and improbably elaborate music-making machine with hundreds of years of history behind it?

In certain ways, the piano is the archetypal instrument, so it stands to follow that solo piano music deserves special status as something like a quintessential distillation of music itself. One musician, one mechanism – both conspiring to navigate an infinite array of possibilities made at least somewhat comprehensible by constraint.

All of which explains the momentous sense of drama and power at play in a recent raft of notable solo piano albums, each singular in its own way. Fans of the form have had much to follow in the past year or so, starting with a quietly startling hit called *Avenging Angel* by Craig Taborn. Released last summer by ECM, the revered German label, *Avenging Angel* garnered good notices early on and then continued to linger as word of it drifted beyond those cerebral realms where solo piano albums routinely find favour.

Taborn is nominally a jazz artist, with standing both as a bandleader and a sideman in New York, but the solo piano scenario has a way

of smearing notions of genre out of sorts. So it is that *Avenging Angel* treks through a meticulous index of sounds, each of them subsumed by all the others. *The Broad Day King* opens the album on a careful and contemplative note, with a sense of empty space slowly filled in by more and more transactions as the pianist begins to establish his place. *Glossolalia* follows with a flurry of notes, each cleanly articulated and micro-focus clear, before *Diamond Turning Dream* sweeps them all away with a sparse, haunting rumination delivered in an avant-garde sense of atmosphere.

It's a lot to run through in just the first three songs, but range is to be expected from a solo piano format in which sameness might otherwise seem fated to pervade. By the time he's wrapped up the tumbling and churning at work in the vertiginous title track *Avenging Angel* Taborn has established a spell-binding sense of thinking out loud – of venturing towards temptation and searching for ideas for things to simply try out – that doesn't fade the least bit through repeated plays.

The same goes for Keith Jarrett's *Rio*, another solo piano album issued by ECM, this one a two-CD set from a raucous live concert in Brazil. Jarrett has been synonymous with solo piano performance since the 1970s, so it's no surprise that he is undaunted by the prospect of sitting down in front of a crowd for an hour and a half and simply winging it in the name of improvisation. The nature of his playing is wild and wandering, with a jazzy warmth and an aim to please when the time for acceptance is near. Jar-

rett plays bigger and brighter than Taborn, but he has a habit of humming along with what he plays in abstracted tones – a feature that gives certain tracks an eerie accompaniment while also amplifying the sense of being inside a musician's head and hearing what he hears as he himself hears it for the first time.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny comes from a more classical context than Taborn or Jarrett, but the solo piano pieces on his album *Detours* share a similar sense of investment in the simple but profound act of making music try to say what can't be said quite the same way otherwise. One of them, *George Fox Searches*, plays as an aural travelogue inspired by the excursions of the 17th-century founder of Quakerism in England and, later, the new world of America. Another piece, *13 Detours*, gets paired in the liner notes with a photograph of a man in a circus kissing an alligator; it's not clear what the link might be, precisely, but piano on its own leaves a lot of room for narrative indeed.

It also courts seriousness and solemnity. Both figure highly in a recording of the composer Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories*, written in 1981 and reconfigured for a new release in recent months on the Belgian label Sub Rosa. Played by Jean-Luc Fafchamps, the solo piano in Feldman's soft, spare, suggestive piece sounds almost like it's talking to itself about the roles of patience and perseverance within its own chosen cloistered existence.

Its soundings also serve as a replacement for an earlier issue of the same piece by the same pianist, released in 1990, that was made

according to an early draft version of the score that was subsequently corrected a few years later. The revised score, *Fafchamps* writes in the liner notes, featured a "tiny notation detail" that had "tremendous consequences on the form of the composition" and he could no longer live with the earlier recording. "I was mortified," he confesses. So Fafchamps returned to *Triadic Memories* to do it again, on the same piano with the same recording engineer and the same basic approach to Feldman's aesthetic that he had employed a decade earlier.

If solo piano often inspires work governed by nuance or a certain softness of touch, it also rewards radical reinvention. For his striking two-CD collection *Inside Piano*, Reinhold Friedl, a German artist who paired his formative study of the piano with work in mathematics, plays with a process by which he filled the inside of a piano with small objects (springs, screws, etc.) to affect the output of its sound. Some tracks reach cacophonous crescendos that border on noise, while others court austere resonances achieved by way of scraping the strings that make up the piano's inner workings.

Precious few passages of *Inside Piano* are immediately identifiable with the instrument that serves as their subject, but, as so many moments on so many records suggest, piano can summon a panoply of sounds. It's all written into the way the instrument is played.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Bookforum* and more.



The pianist Craig Taborn's *Avenging Angel* treks through a meticulous index of sounds. Philip Ryalls / Redferns

playlist

The keys to success: Four more undisputed masters of the ivories

Liberace

The Best of Liberace (2008)

Despite being accused of massacring the classics with his sloppy, sentimental playing style and pilloried for his flamboyant public persona – "a fruit-flavoured, mincing ... heap of mother love", according to one commentator – in his heyday, Liberace was the highest-paid performer in the world.

The Best of Liberace



Tori Amos



Little Earthquakes

Tori Amos

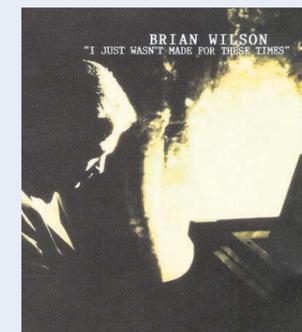
Little Earthquakes (1992)

Amos's strict religious upbringing, a previous mental breakdown and survival of a sexual assault were all distilled into her confessional, piano-driven debut. Arguably, her tortured musings paved the path for Alanis Morissette, Fiona Apple and the slew of other female singer-songwriters of the 1990s.

Brian Wilson

I Just Wasn't Made for These Times (1995)

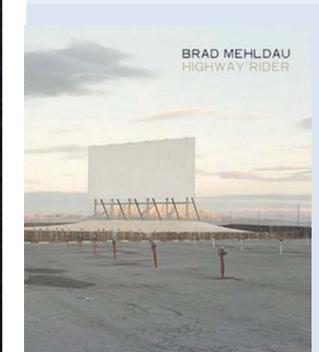
After penning most of the Beach Boys early hits and their near-perfect 1966 album *Pet Sounds*, Wilson suffered a drug-induced mental breakdown. This LP of stripped down, piano-led versions of earlier compositions, reminded us all of his musical greatness.



Brad Mehldau

Highway Rider (2010)

In recent years, the Florida-born virtuoso has helped redefine jazz piano for a new generation. Although possibly best known for previous deconstructed cover versions of Radiohead and Nick Drake tunes, this album, in which he fuses small-band jazz with a chamber orchestration, is among his finest work.



BRAD MEHLDAU
HIGHWAY RIDER