

## *Live at the Baked Potato!*

**Charged Particles and Tod Dickow  
Play the Music of Michael Brecker**



CD Liner Notes by Bill Milkowski

This heartfelt tribute to iconic tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker, who passed away on January 13, 2007 after a prolonged illness, is staggering in its authenticity and collective desire by the participants to get it right. No less an authority than Randy Brecker weighed in with his approval of Charged Particles' *Live at the Baked Potato!*: "Everyone's at the top of their Mike game. I found myself pinching my arm to remind myself that Mike is sadly no longer with us."

Indeed, this dedicated crew really did get it right. And in tackling Brecker's imposing oeuvre, they reveal the genius of his compositional prowess, a side of the multi-faceted Michael that was often overshadowed by his legendary chops. Fans, aficionados, and aspiring saxophonists all over the world still share YouTube clips of Michael Brecker going into "beast mode" — a rarefied zone where his sheer acceleration, incomparable speed and darting imagination on the instrument leave most other sax players well behind. Yet there is no attempt here to recreate Michael Brecker's awesome technique — no transcriptions of his heroic solos, no slavish adherence to every nuance of his classic recordings. But the Bay Area based Charged Particles does capture the essence of Michael's spirit in their faithful renditions of his tunes spanning three decades.

The success of the group's mission to honor Michael is due in no small part to the contributions of veteran San Francisco tenor saxophonist Tod Dickow. The sheer force and fluency of his lines seem to lift the entire band throughout this March 17, 2019 set at the intimate Baked Potato in Los Angeles' quaint Studio City neighborhood, while his passionate intensity and Breckerian authority immediately command our attention. Truly, he is a talent worthy of wider recognition.

"I certainly listened to enough of Mike's music that it's going to come out in my playing," said Dickow, "but it's not really like I've ever outright tried to imitate him. I just know that some of the devices that he used have become a part of my playing."



The bold tone and clarity of articulation, the nonchalant doubling of tempo in the middle of a solo, the dramatic octave leaps and seemingly effortless flights into the highest register of the horn and sheer intent behind every note — it's all part of the Michael Brecker playbook that Dickow has internalized. "It's uncanny how perfect Mike was able to construct solos and pull off a lot of the things that he pulled off," Tod continued. "So he's always been a model of perfection to try and achieve. I've looked at his playing and the playing of other great saxophonists as targets to strive for. I was a Coltrane-Brecker-Bob Berg-Liebman-Grossman kind of guy ever since the '70s and always played that way. Those giants attracted my attention, but Michael's example is the one that shines through the most for me."

The core trio of drummer-leader Jon Krosnick, pianist Murray Low, and bassist Germain began working together around the Bay Area in 2011. Early on, they prided themselves in tackling challenging material by the likes of Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, and other revered jazz composers. "This band takes on hard compositions, harder than I think many groups are

willing to do,” said Krosnick. “We’re willing to spend the time practicing by ourselves and rehearsing as a group. I feel like that’s what has made this band different from a lot of others. And when audiences listen to us, they realize that we’ve done the homework to put on something that took preparation and that has lots of dramatic value and communicative power as a result.”

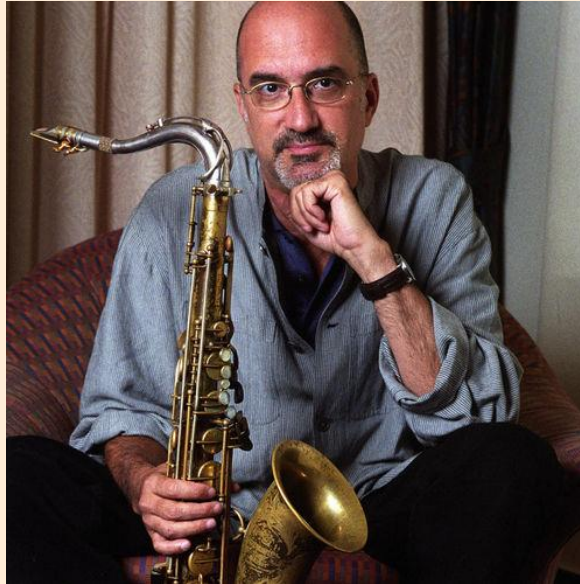
After doing nearly a thousand gigs together as a trio, Krosnick floated the idea of adding a tenor saxophonist in order to do a full-fledged Michael Brecker tribute. And keyboardist Low knew exactly who to recruit. As Jon recalled, “When I asked Murray, ‘Who’s the guy?’ he didn’t hesitate: ‘There’s only one guy. It’s Tod.’”

“I had known Tod for a long time,” said Low. “We were actually in bands together in the South Bay years ago. One big band was called Fasmania, run by a husband and wife team of Kelly [drums] and Lou [trumpet] Fasman. That band played regularly at the Gordon Beirsch Brewery’s restaurant. It was a ‘will play for food’ gig. But the owner, Dan Gordon, who was also a bass trombonist in his former life, took care of us. It was a great way to network with other musicians, and that’s where I first met Tod. I was playing piano, and he brought in arrangements of Mike Brecker tunes like ‘Slings and Arrows.’ And when I had a chance to hear him play in that context, I thought, ‘Whoa! He sounds just like Brecker!’ He was the only sax player I knew who had that sort of bent, and he did it so well.”

This edition of Charged Particles (actually, the third iteration of the group since Krosnick formed it in Ohio back in 1993) played its first gig as a quartet with tenor man Dickow on December 3, 2015 at THE Jazz Club, an art gallery in Cloverdale, CA. Three weeks later, they began a longstanding residency at the 7 Mile House, a small club in San Francisco run by jazz entrepreneur Vanessa Garcia that serves as a showcase for local groups. Over the course of its residency at the 7 Mile House, Charged Particles workshoped new material and built up a repertoire, with no intention of ever recording any of it. “I’m always looking for new projects, something new to do to change things up for us, to keep it interesting,” said Krosnick. “But I think all of us, including me, were intimidated by the idea of trying to record anything that would somehow try to compete with the memory of what Mike did. That was pretty intimidating for a very long time.”

Low mentioned that Dickow’s intimate knowledge of Michael Brecker’s material helped the band chart its course. “Tod has had such a passion for getting it right and capturing the sound,” he said. “In rehearsals, he’s been meticulous in guiding us through his ‘Michael vision’.

It's really helped us with the authenticity of what we do. Hopefully, people will hear that on the record."



Added Krosnick, "Tod knows this music so well that when we rehearse, he can break it down bar by bar and make corrections, spotting a single wrong note or a rhythm out of place. That's the level at which he had the details memorized. It's like being rehearsed by Leonard Bernstein in front of a symphony orchestra. He was the guy to make sure that we were doing this faithfully and precisely.

"We rehearse a lot," Krosnick continued. "We don't go in public after saying prayers. We are prepared by the time we get on the stage. And everybody does their homework before each rehearsal. So by the time the Baked Potato happened, we had it together."

*Live at the Baked Potato!* opens with the hard-charging "Peep," from Brecker's third Impulse! album, 1990's *Now You See It...(Now You Don't)*. This tightly crafted piece introduces the Charged Particles sound and quickly establishes Dickow's tenor primacy. After navigating his way through the dense form with its complex, choppy bridge, Tod begins his solo at the 2:30 mark. At first, taking his time as the band percolates beneath him, he goes into his own "beast mode" by the 3:20 mark, culminating with a fierce tenor-drums breakdown with Krosnick (echoing Michael's face-off with drummer Adam Nussbaum on the original recording). It's a portent of things to come throughout their exhilarating set.

“These tunes are not your typical standard forms and chord progressions,” explained Dickow. “There’ll be a complex melody, a kind of through-composed arrangement with a different set of chord changes for the solo sections, and just unusual kind of things all over the place. It’s difficult, unusual music.”

“Mike was a very thoughtful composer,” added Krosnick. “One of the things he did was to write a piece that has a very predictable next place for the music to go. And then he very intentionally didn’t go there. He went to a different place. That’s what keeps listeners constantly engaged. At least it always keeps me engaged! I see that most powerfully in Mike’s writing for *Pilgrimage*, where he intentionally tricks the listener over and over: setting up an expectation and then taking an unexpected twist.”

Some of those twists can be heard on “Arc of the Pendulum,” from 1999’s *Time Is of the Essence*. With keyboardist Low switching from piano to organ to fuel the proceedings, Germain switching from electric to upright bass, and Krosnick adopting a loose, loping, Elvin Jones-ish mid-tempo swing feel on the kit, Dickow unleashes a flurry of Breckerisms (including a clarion call octave leap at the 1:00 mark) with undeniable power and precision. Dickow’s scorching solo develops over the course of three minutes is a stunning display of chops, passion, and risk-taking. The last minute of the piece features Dickow going toe-to-toe with Krosnick, both unleashing over a band ostinato in the vein of Michael and Elvin from the original 1999 recording.

From the opening strains of “African Skies” (which first appeared on The Brecker Brothers’ 1994 recording, *Out of the Loop*, and subsequently on Michael’s 1996 quintet recording, *Tales from the Hudson*), Dickow’s tenor sax resounds with rare authority and a familiar bold tone as it glides over the captivating West African 12/8 groove. Throughout his show-stopping three-and-a-half minute solo, he touches on a few Breckerian devices, blowing with Herculean power while nonchalantly double-timing the churning pulse laid down by drummer Jon Krosnick, percussionist Omar Ledezma, and bassist Aaron Germain. Tod executes his searing lines here with impeccable clarity as he pushes the harmonic content of the tune with abandon before soaring into the upper register of his horn. Germain follows with a virtuosic electric bass solo that is rooted in the tradition of former Michael Brecker Band bassist Jeff Andrews and frequent Brecker collaborator John Patitucci. “Big props to Patitucci for being one

of the first people who would just effortlessly switch from upright to electric,” said the Charged Particles doubler.

Dickow delivers with a kind of quiet dignity on the poignant ballad “Never Alone,” from 1990’s *Now You See It... (Now You Don’t)*. Even in that more subdued and lyrical setting, he exudes an abundance of chops while also conveying a deeply emotional expression on the instrument.

Next up, Charged Particles tackles the frantic, chops-busting “Not Ethiopia,” from The Brecker Brothers’ 1981 album, *Straphangin’*. A tune brimming with impossible unisons on the head, they nevertheless cut it with remarkable aplomb. Dickow digs deep on his potent solo here, accelerating through a myriad of ideas, with a few Breckerian devices along the way.

The riff that kicks off “Slings and Arrows,” a Brecker favorite from 1996’s *Tales from the Hudson*, has always struck me as a kind of retro superhero theme song. (I can just picture a bespectacled Michael, a ‘B’ for Breckerman emblazoned across his chest, cape flapping in the breeze as the music plays in the background). The earnest and uplifting theme soon segues to a swinging solo section that has Dickow unleashing aggressively over “Impressions” styled modal changes. Low follows with a brilliantly swinging piano solo, paced by Germain’s unerring walking upright bass lines and Krosnick’s simmering ride cymbal pulse. Germain also delivers an outstanding bass solo here, and Krosnick provides whirlwind activity around the kit near the end of the piece as Dickow wails over the top in typically unrestrained fashion.



The tenorist reserves some of his most lyrical moments for the Don Grolnick composition “Talking to Myself,” which originally appeared on Brecker’s 1988 album, *Don’t Try This at*

*Home*. As the piece develops, kicking into a higher gear at the 2:07 mark, Dickow reverts back to a more forceful mode, the kind of playing that has been his calling card around the Bay Area for years.

Next up is perhaps the most challenging number of the set, “The Mean Time,” from Michael’s 2007 swan song, *Pilgrimage*. From the intricate, kinetic head to the runaway blowing section, underscored by Germain’s walking upright bass and Krosnick’s swing factor on the kit, Dickow delivers a commanding performance here. Low contributes a probing piano solo to add an element of mystery to the swinging proceedings.

The program concludes on an exhilarating note with “Song for Barry,” a catchy Michael original from 1992’s *Return of the Brecker* that was dedicated to his mentor and Dreams bandmate, trombonist Barry Rogers. Low’s opening sampled marimba ostinato sets the tone for this dynamic number, a regular set closer in Brecker concerts. Dickow is given plenty of room to stretch here, and he responds with muscular abandon and envelope-pushing verve over the course of his nearly four-minute solo.

While Dickow is the star of this show, kudos must also be given to inventive keyboardist Low, whose nimble segueing from piano to organ to sampled sounds and assorted synths during the set (courtesy of some complicated splits on his keyboard allowing him to cover multiple parts at once) helped approximate the original studio recordings by Brecker’s various bands. Germain’s seamless doubling from electric to upright bass provided the band with some much-needed versatility to cover this wide swath of Brecker music. And special commendation goes to Charged Particles founder-drummer Krosnick, who has been the driving force behind this band for nearly 30 years ago.



Krosnick, like Dickow, had seen numerous Michael Brecker live performances over the years, whether it was with Steps Ahead, The Brecker Brothers, leading his own groups, and in other people's bands. Both had the occasion to chat with Michael after gigs, mostly at Yoshi's in the Bay Area. Both found him to be uncommonly approachable and engaging for a bona fide super star. "When he got sick, I wrote him a letter," Krosnick recalled. "telling him that his music has been the soundtrack of my life and how grateful I was to him. I feel like our new album is my way of saying thanks to him again, for so much happiness that his music has given to all of us over the years."

Krosnick added, "In just 57 years, to do what he did, to give so many gifts, was more than any human should ever be expected to give or could ever give in a lifetime. The number of recordings and the number of smiles and everything else...you can't say, 'Oh, if only he had lived longer, he could've done more.' If Mozart had lived longer, he would have done more, too. But Mozart gave plenty. And so did Michael Brecker." — *Bill Milkowski*

**Bill Milkowski is a longtime contributor to *Downbeat*, *Jazziz* and *Absolute Sound* magazines. He is also the author of "Ode to a Tenor Titan: The Life and Times and Music of Michael Brecker" (Globe Pequot/Backbeat Books)**