



Intimacies lost in the open air

MUSIC

Brad Mehldau Trio

Becks Music Box, Perth Esplanade, March 6. The Basement, Sydney, March 11 and 12, Rundle Park, Adelaide, March 13.

BRAD Mehldau is a musician's musician; a searching improviser with a sophisticated sense of structure, a finely tuned ear for counterpoint, a taste for unusual textures and a formidable piano technique that he never unleashes simply to impress.

In fact, impressing the audience seemed like the last thing on Mehldau's mind at this outdoor concert for the Perth International Arts Festival. To say this was a laid-back gig would be an understatement.

With bassist Larry Grenadier and Jeff Ballard on drums, Mehldau eased into the set with a restrained version of *Dream Sketch*. In a show devoted mainly to original works, *Twiggy* added an additional layer of rhythmic buzz, giving the impression the trio were going to gradually step up the energy levels through successive numbers.

In *Bee Blues*, there was some virtuosic rhythmic play in Grenadier's classy solo, stretching the sense of underlying pulse to its limit. The excitement was beginning to build among the sell-out crowd and, at this point, one of Mehldau's sure-fire hits or ever-popular Radiohead arrangements would have had them screaming for more.

Instead, Mehldau took us in a totally different and unexpected direction with the somewhat experimental-sounding *Wyatt's Eulogy for George Hanson*. Based on characters from the film *Easy Rider*, there was an unsettling moodiness about this piece with its restrained, almost haunting opening. Mehldau's right hand elegantly dispatched fluid streams of ornamental notes and his use of repeated chords and extreme registers created a vivid, novel soundscape.

But this piece wasn't for everyone; in fact, it wasn't until a ravishing version of *Something Good* from *The Sound of Music* that Mehldau completely won over the crowd. Curiously, it was the quietest, most delicate piece of the evening that had the audience totally rapt. Mehldau's melting melodic tone and beautifully judged accompaniment were exquisite and, as if that wasn't enough, he then transformed the colour and mood of the song with an extraordinary closing solo based on repeated ostinato patterns that added a darker, more melancholy, inflection.

Holland by Sufjan Stephens closed out the set and, for the encore, Mehldau's terrific version of Radiohead's *Knives Out*.

The artistry of the Mehldau trio is apparent in everything they play, yet this performance might have worked better in an intimate jazz club than a large outdoor venue. The crowd went home wanting more, but at least they got to hear some Radiohead.

Mark Coughlan