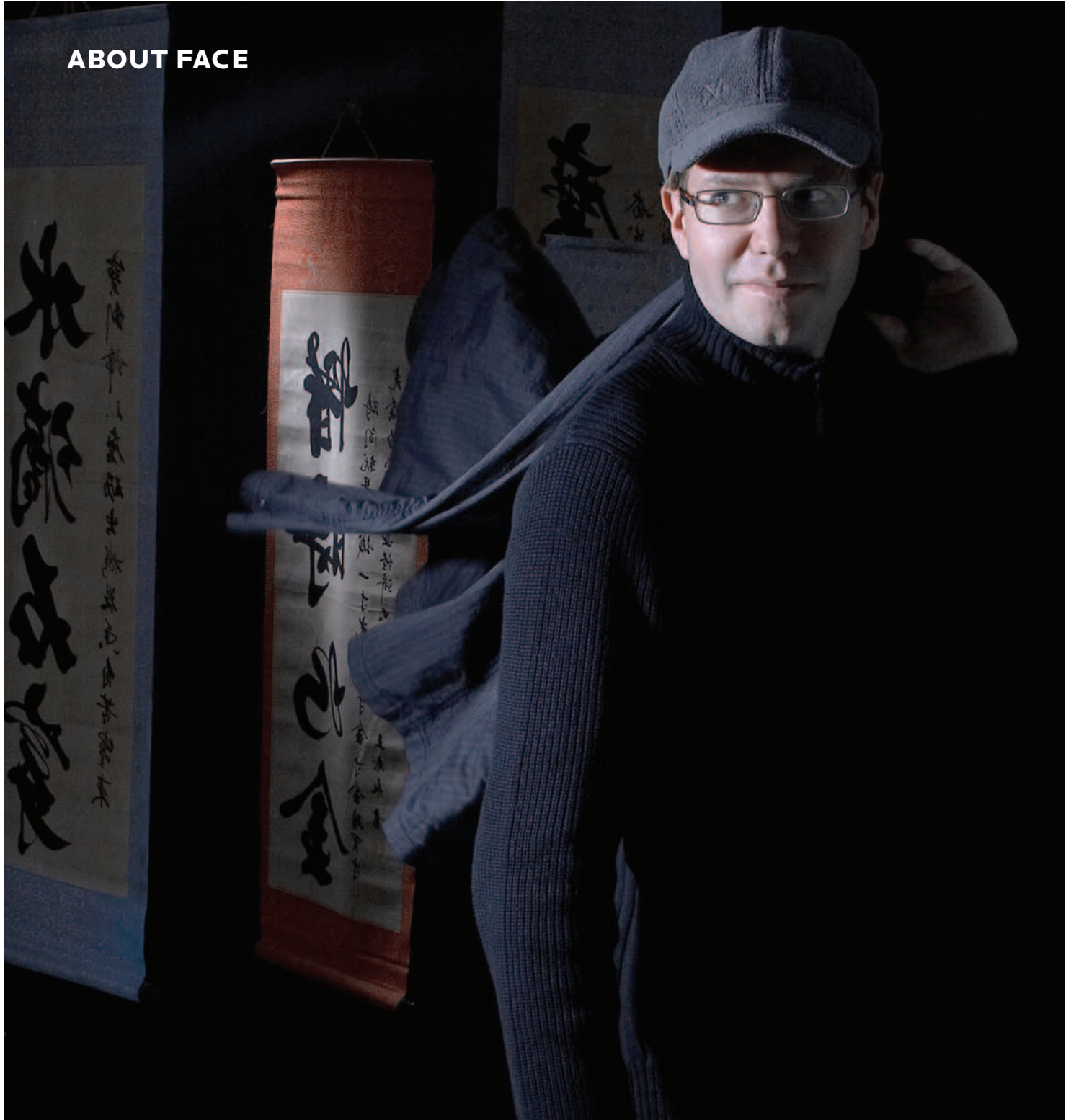


## ABOUT FACE



HUGO BOSS JACKET FROM MITCHEL ALAN MEN'S CLOTHIER, BURLINGTON

# DAVID BRAID

**He's one of the fastest rising** instrumental jazz stars in the country. A Juno Award winner, National Jazz Award recipient and Governor General's Academic Medal nominee, 31-year-old pianist and composer David Braid is writing original music for Canada's jazz elite, touring with musicians who have supported the likes of Ray Charles, Oscar Peterson, Tony Bennett, Kenny Wheeler and Fraser MacPherson – the all-Canadian ensemble known as The David Braid Sextet. He's doing duets with the "Dean of Canadian Jazz" Phil Nimmons, has composed for full orchestra at the Winnipeg Symphony and even a piece in honour of one of the most brilliant minds of our time, Dr. Stephen Hawking. His last recording (*Vivid: The David Braid Sextet Live*, furtively composed in the depths of McMaster University's Togo Salmon Hall)

BY GARINÉ TCHOLAKIAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALISHA TOWNSEND



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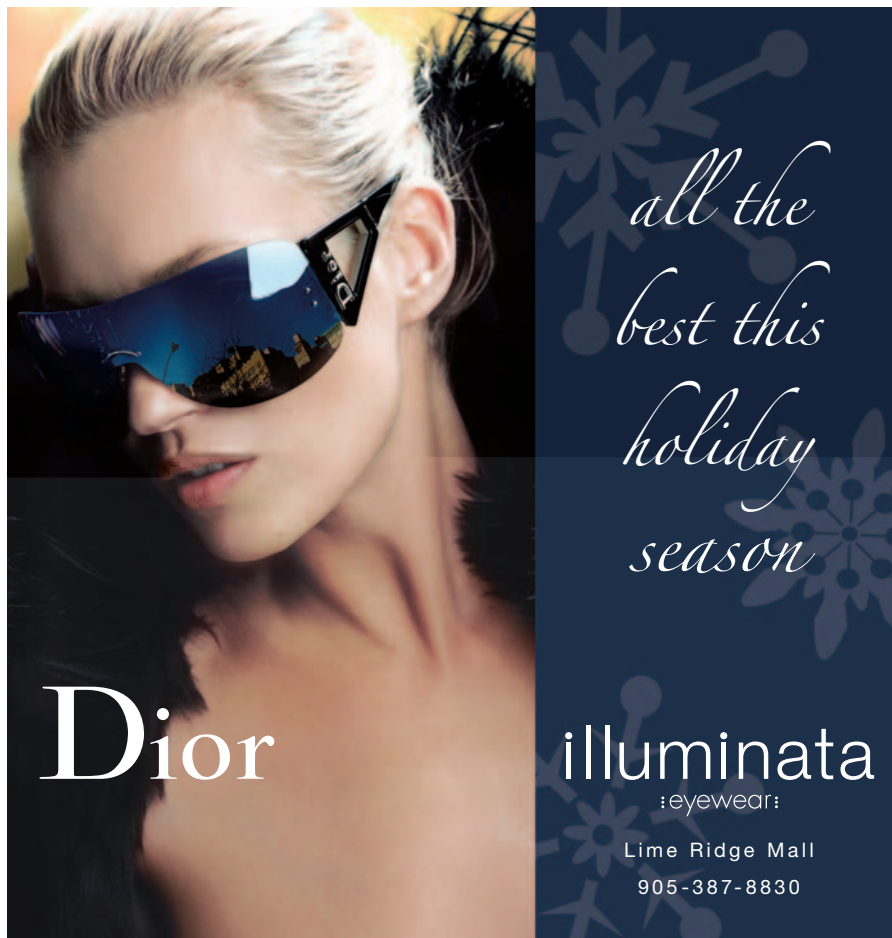
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made waves internationally, inspiring acclaimed jazz author Gene Lees to vow that he would have sent a copy to Bill Evans if he were alive. Recently back from an Asian tour with a third recording in hand (*Vivid's* live sequel, *Zhen*, which was just awarded the 2006 Hamilton Music Awards' Jazz Recording of the Year), Braid is touring the country. He stops in Dundas this November to perform with cellist Matt Brubeck as part of the Clearly Classic Concert Series.

There's more, of course, but we'll stop there. Because none of this fazes David Braid. In fact, even as he is touted as one of the country's most gifted young composers and pianists, Braid insists on maintaining "a student attitude" about his music. He insists he's "not prolific at all," explains how, if he were "more talented," he could "compose a lot faster" and marvels at those "real composers" who can compose on demand. He shares how he grapples with the challenge of knowing what to erase, about the importance of "not becoming egotistically attached" to what he has written, and about the laborious process – often five to six months – to write a piece that he's "truly happy with." It's the kind of humility that is hard to ignore, and in Braid's case, the kind that's rarely rooted in anything other than the deepest commitment to personal integrity.

"People describe me as unassuming," he says. "I think that comes from a culture that I grew up with in Hamilton." Indeed, Hamilton is where Braid was first introduced to jazz music by his St. Thomas More high school teacher and became fascinated by the genre's idea of "spontaneous composition." It's where local pillars like Larry Paikin helped him get his start – and continue to do so to this day. But Hamilton is also where you find the first hints of Braid's fire, the early traces of the defiance that would later define and permeate his music. Like the time he promptly quit his classical piano lessons at the age of 11 after his teacher – one of those old-schoolers who would place erasers over hands to keep wrists straight – insisted he play exactly what was on the page. Or how he "faked his way through" the Hamilton All-Star Jazz Band, never looking at the stack of books that bandleader Russ Weil kept placing on his piano. "What I was reading and what I was feeling were completely different," says Braid. "I've never really prescribed going to books for doorways into [jazz] music. It just wasn't for me."

It's that same down-to-earth nature, refreshingly devoid of any starry-eyed tendencies, that pierces the industry's drawbacks today. Braid sees his Juno win, for example, as nothing more than a stamp of approval, currency for the music-buying public. "Not to imply that I'm



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not appreciative that people found it rewarding to listen to, but the public perception of a Juno Award is completely disproportionate to this small little act – that someone said, ‘Oh that’s good’ [...] As long as I’m trying to be sincere about what I’m trying to communicate, I can fall asleep at night, because I know I have an honest intention to be pure about the music that I write.”

It may come as no surprise, then, that Braid’s latest album title, *Zhen* (pronounced djen), comes from the Chinese root character to expressions that mean “sincere,” “genuine” or “authentic.” “A lot of jazz recordings nowadays are mass-produced in studios and some of the soul is gone. Maybe even all of the soul, who knows? They’re more about being pristine and maybe a little bit sterile – about getting the perfect sound. I’m not sure if that philosophy is good for jazz music because I think that jazz comes from a very human place. It’s very much in the moment. It has a sincerity to it. That’s maybe what attracts me to it. [*Zhen*] was done live, and there are mistakes on it – if you want to call them mistakes.”

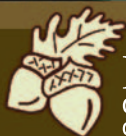
While Braid certainly relishes the spontaneous spirit of jazz, his veneration of the elements of the classical form – melody, harmony, form and rhythm – has resulted in “more potent amalgamations” with jazz and orchestral traditions, something that has both impressed and perplexed critics. Such jazz-classical “experiments” include his recent recording with cellist Matt Brubeck, son of famed jazzman Dave Brubeck, slated for release this December. “It’s still jazz music in essence,” says Braid. “We’re improvising, but the approach we take – like the touch that I might get on my piano – might be like the classical thing, or I might compose music that sounds like classical music. But if the audience was actually aware of what was written down and what wasn’t, they’d be surprised at how much of it was being spontaneous.”

Indeed, with musical influences that range from Duke Ellington to Igor Stravinsky and Mozart to Art Tatum, Braid’s unique “sound” has been seen by some as a force to be reckoned with. For Braid, however, all forms simply lead back to one thing. “I try to extract and sculpt the engaging forces of music into composition because I want the people to be a part of the performance. I don’t believe in that idea of art for art’s sake. I think that’s a misnomer. I engage these elements to write music from because people relate to those things. You want people to come in – but without selling out. Without making any kind of compromises artistically.”

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