

Pianist to Composer
By Frank Stemper

My interest in composing Modern Classical Music evolved over a period of time when I was young, and it seems to me to be a natural evolution and not unlike many composers of my generation. I studied piano from an early age, and from as far back as I can remember I knew that some kind of music would be my life's goal. Intrigued by various forms of pop music, I played in rock bands in grammar school. When I first heard jazz — specifically a local pianist, Sig Millonzi, at KG's jazz club in Milwaukee — my interest changed.

That music blew me away, as they say. I was 14. Harmony and Rhythm seemed considerably more interesting, with more variety and complexity. So after hearing jazz, I *updated* my rock n roll harmonies, and quickly shifted to jazz groups. When I started meeting other jazz musicians my age, such as guitarist Don Linke, now one of the rocks of the Milwaukee Jazz scene. I knew I was in the right place. Don seemed to share my interest. We were both pretty naive about the language, but that didn't stop us. We were learning by doing.

In college, although I was majoring in Pre-Med (as dictated by my father), I was playing jazz regularly. But at 19, in a surprising show of independence, I confronted my father's rigid wishes and legitimate concerns, and switched my direction and college major to music. At that time University music programs were strictly built around Classical Music — there were no jazz options — or anything else for that matter. But that was OK with me, because I had heard that all the successful jazz players had had some sort of "classical" training. So, I figured I'd be in college studying some of this *Classical Music stuff* for a while, and then take off and play jazz piano forever.

Wrong. It wasn't to happen that way.

During the very first week as a music student at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, I heard the Fine Arts Quartet perform a Beethoven String Quartet. I was stunned. By the time the performance concluded my interest had changed again. Beethoven's use of harmony and rhythm was infinitely more immense than Jazz, and also dynamic nuance, articulation, color, as well as a zillion other musical parameters. But the biggest difference was form: the quartet lasted nearly 40 minutes, but, rather than a repeating 12 or 16 measure form, the piece was through-composed. There was no repetition. The music itself formally learned from itself, changing as it proceeded through time. It wasn't stuck in repetitive ease, it was alive, a living organism, making its way through its own life. The music had that *old fashion* aristocratic style of course, but still, Beethoven was jamming more ferociously than I'd heard anybody jam — Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Dave Brubeck, all the guys. My mind was made up BEFORE the applause for the Fine Arts Quartet subsided. Not only had I changed course from the strophic improvisation of Jazz, but I was no longer a performer, a pianist: I wanted to do with that Beethoven guy did. I wanted to compose.