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Knives Out: Radiohead vs. Brad Mehldau

SJB SELECTION · OCTOBER 2026

There is something revealing about hearing a great song stripped of almost everything we instinctively associate with it. Radiohead's *Knives Out* and Brad Mehldau's interpretation demonstrate precisely this. The two recordings inhabit radically different musical worlds, yet somehow arrive at the same emotional destination.

The original *Knives Out*, released on *Amnesiac* in 2001, is one of the album's relatively conventional songs. Its 4:17 are built around intertwining guitars, a mobile bass line, driving percussion and Thom Yorke's haunting vocal presence. The guitar language also bears the influence of The Smiths: Johnny Marr recalled being told that Radiohead had attempted to capture something of his particular approach to the instrument.

What makes the original so compelling is its sense of continuous motion. The guitars seem to circle around the vocal rather than simply accompany it. Bass and drums keep pushing forward while the melody appears to float uneasily above them. The result is music that moves almost hypnotically while maintaining an underlying sense of anxiety.

Then Brad Mehldau removes the voice.

And the guitars.

What remains is piano, Larry Grenadier's double bass and Jeff Ballard's drums. Recorded for the 2005 album *Day Is Done*, their *Knives Out* lasts 8:29, almost twice as long as the original.

But this is where it gets fascinating.

Instead of exposing the limits of the composition, removing the defining elements of the Radiohead recording reveals how strong the composition actually is.

Mehldau does not merely transfer Yorke's melody to the piano. He opens the architecture of the song and allows the trio to move inside it. Melody becomes less a destination than a point of reference. Harmony becomes elastic. Rhythm, most importantly, becomes unstable.

The original recording's forward momentum is transformed by Ballard into something considerably more volatile. Contemporary criticism singled out the performance's dark harmonies, irregular phrase lengths, rhythmic tension and speed. Another review described Ballard using double-time figures and passages reminiscent of breakbeats.

So where Radiohead create hypnotic propulsion, the Mehldau trio creates rhythmic instability.

That difference changes everything.

And there is an extraordinary detail behind the recording. According to Mehldau himself, the trio had never played the piece together before entering the studio. The version heard on *Day Is Done* was the first take. Mehldau remembered it as having a "wild energy" while simultaneously possessing remarkable focus between the three musicians. He deliberately chose it to open the album because of that high-energy character.

Knowing this makes the performance even more interesting. Its instability isn't simply an arrangement device. There is a genuine element of discovery taking place between the musicians.

And perhaps this is where the essential difference between the two versions lies.

For Radiohead, *Knives Out* is fundamentally a song. Its emotional world emerges from the interaction of words, voice, guitars, bass, drums and production.

For Mehldau, the composition becomes both a song and a territory.

The recognizable material remains, but it becomes the framework within which three musicians can negotiate rhythm, harmony, dynamics and space in real time. *Knives Out* no longer simply progresses from beginning to end. It becomes something capable of being stretched, destabilized and rediscovered.

Yet the remarkable thing is what Mehldau does not change.

The anxiety survives.

In the Radiohead recording it comes through Yorke's voice, its unsettling lyrical imagery and those drifting guitar lines. In Mehldau's interpretation it emerges through darker harmony, irregular phrasing and rhythmic tension.

Same psychological landscape, different vocabulary.

That is why describing the 2005 recording simply as a “jazz cover of a Radiohead song” misses the point. Mehldau is not translating *Knives Out* from rock into jazz. He is testing which parts of the composition can be removed without destroying its identity.

The answer turns out to be: almost everything.

Voice disappears. Guitars disappear. The compact four-minute structure disappears. The arrangement disappears.

The unease remains.

And that may be the greatest compliment an interpreter can pay a songwriter. Mehldau does not imitate the surface of *Knives Out*. He identifies its emotional DNA and rebuilds the music around it.

If the original Radiohead version creates anxiety inside the song, the Brad Mehldau Trio version takes that anxiety out of the song and turns it into improvisation.

Two languages. Two radically different performances.

> ***The same darkness underneath.***

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