



Josh Berman

Old & New Dreams

By Michael Jackson

On a clammy summer afternoon in Chicago, DownBeat met with cornetist Josh Berman at his apartment in the bleak West Town district of the city. Teeming with life's essentials—books and records (including impressive stacks of vintage vinyl)—Berman's boho pad is clearly geared toward music practice and artistic contemplation.

Because it's cooler in there, the kitchen has become an ad hoc rehearsal space. More CDs of various persuasions from doo-wop to Ornette Coleman, Betty Carter and Cecil Taylor populate a makeshift table in front of a music stand on which ancient etudes, a book of trumpet calisthenics and sheaves of compositions by Warne Marsh are gathered at the ready, perhaps material Berman has in mind for his regular Monday trio gig at the Old Town Ale House. "I like the discipline of playing standards every week, though it's not my main bag," admits Berman, who has risen as a salient voice on the improv/creative music scene, as a sideman sessioneer, leader, booker and general catalyst and abettor.

Looking like '50s-era Dave Brubeck in black-rimmed spectacles, Berman is a no-nonsense type, committed, intense and not likely to suffer fools—least of all himself. The latter comment is quickly evident when discussing his patchy development as a musician.

The grandson of a hard-working Maywood paint store owner, things were expected of Berman growing up, without undue pressure to join the family business. A formative exposure to music came from the cantor at his local synagogue and later from hip high school humanities teacher Richard Kamka, who provided him with an "aesthetic base," according to Berman. Then a beatnik school pal turned him on to Miles Davis, whose solos Berman quickly learned to sing and therefore assumed he'd be able to play.

But it wasn't until Berman was 19 that playing an instrument gelled as a semi-serious option. Into the nouvelle vague of French cinema and imagining himself the next Chris Marker, he began art school studies at Columbia College, getting a grounding in drawing, painting and film editing, pulled toward progressive elements. A defining moment occurred, however, when dorm chum and nascent no-wave/free improv nonpareil Wea-

sel Walter inveigled him into his band of fledgling "non-musicians."

After jamming with Walter, Berman confesses he became a bit square due to an interest in actually "learning to play jazz," as it were; he figured he was getting away with murder thanks to an attentive ear and a skill for bluff and arty displacement. Berman lasted a couple semesters at art college, but had already begun volunteering at the non-for-profit performance space SouthEnd Music Works.

"That was amazing," recalls Berman. "I got to hear Fred Anderson, Douglas Ewart, the first time [Peter] Brötzmann and Hamid Drake performed together." But it was the proximity of two particular shows in 1991, by Lester Bowie and Paul Smoker, that proved revelatory.

"Bowie was with George Gruntz at the Chicago Jazz Festival, and he and Ray Anderson stopped by for an afterfest jam at SEMW. It flipped my shit—he was so stylish, funny and had such power and presence," remembers Berman, who was equally impressed with Smoker. "Smoker had another energy, a propelled freedom, more frantic, lots of notes, but still the blues was detectable." An air of confidence and initial focus followed by unpremeditated invention drew Berman to Smoker's style, and he began emulating the onstage gesticulations of Bowie and Smoker.

As his mission clarity grew, Berman proactively sought professional guidance but was crestfallen when hardbop trumpeter Brad Goode had him envisage a decade grinding at the millstone before he could count himself a player. "I didn't understand there was such a thing as an embouchure," admits Berman with masochistic bashfulness.

Goode suggested Tom Talman, jazz director at suburban College of DuPage, would screw his head on straight. Berman learned a lot from Talman but still felt like a late starter, a long stretch shy of the money.

He sidestepped, gaining a degree in social work from Western Illinois University in Macomb, Ill., a decision that probably didn't infuriate his social worker mother. But within days of hitting WIU, he met music faculty member Dr. John Murphy, who streamlined Berman's work ethic, made him more efficient, ultimately directing him

to classical trumpet professor Bruce Briney, who took him on "as a project," as Berman puts it.

Berman's assiduous curiosity for what was out there, what the benchmarks were, held his ego in check. Future heavies on the Chicago scene and beyond, including drummer Chad Taylor, seemed to dig his playing, but Berman still saw himself as a charlatan. He'd sniffed around the Jazz Record Mart as a teenager, and one day writer Peter Kostakis gave him a cassette of Dave Douglas' *Tiny Bell Trio*. "It was another life-changer," says Berman. "This was before Douglas broke out. The history of free-jazz trumpet was evident, the gestural elements, the spatters and spits, but there was something fancy and legitimate underneath Douglas' playing, a true virtuosity." Again, Berman felt the need for reappraisal. "If not directly via the Haydn concerto, I felt I'd actually need to learn to play this instrument if I wanted more choices."

Becoming an employee of the Jazz Record Mart, the world's largest store of its kind, inevitably bred Berman as a gangster pedant about a wide swath of the music. The dichotomy of the JRM's sister concern, the Delmark label, with its simultaneous traditional and avant garde specialisms, also gave him conceptual perspective. Just as Picasso forged into the avant garde through primitivism, Berman realized that Ornette had come through a lot of music to arrive at his sound. "I read in a Ben Ratliff interview that Ornette had even checked cantorial singer Yossele Rosenblatt," he points out.

Berman's merciless misgivings about his playing are adversely proportional to his analytical intelligence, which becomes emphatically obvious when, checking YouTube clips on the laptop in his kitchen, we dig deeper into his passion for early jazz pioneers.

I'd had a jazz epiphany after witnessing Rex Stewart perform alongside Henry Red Allen and Pee Wee Russell in a film Delmark's Bob Koester once showed. Berman and I revisited the clip and my original impression was confirmed, but I was less fascinated by Stewart's statement of the melody to Ellington's "Morning Glory" (a Berman favorite) until Berman mimicked Stewart's articulations for me on his cornet, illustrating in syntax, musically and figuratively, what makes his

