



# 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

placement of beat and breath special.

"The sense of rhythm from those days is so distant from us now," he avers, "how they conceived of time, because it was before Max Roach. It is so foreign to players now, or even what Lee Morgan or Freddie Hubbard were doing: it's not about gliding over the head to "Confirmation." (Berman shedded with Jamey Aebersold's *Omnibook* of Charlie Parker solo transcriptions, by the by, learning tunes in all keys at the behest of hard-ass Chicago saxophonist Richie Corpolongo, during a year's weekly lessons.)

Listening to Ruby Braff play "Thou Swell," Berman can't resist putting the cornet to his mouth, stressing how Braff "throws out" his phrases, in the Louis Armstrong manner for sure, but somehow differently. "Even when these guys pay tribute to their heroes, it's altered. Braff borrows from Louis, but there is an off-kilter phrase, a turn here, a leap there; he is a character, in message and action. It may sound postmodernist, but when something genuine has been removed from its context and placed in a new context, it's attractive."

That last statement Berman savors in particular with reference to his chief musical beacon, who, tellingly, isn't a trumpet player. It remains one of Berman's deepest regrets that he didn't fulfill a dream to play with soprano saxist Steve Lacy. But he has studied with him, through absorption of Lacy's book of recommendations, *Findings*, and close listening to his exhaustive collection of the late saxist's recordings.

Berman flips on the amplifier in the musical nerve center that doubles as his kitchen. It's Lacy on "Remember," from the 1957 Prestige album *Gil Evans & Ten*. "This was the first solo I transcribed," says Berman. "Lacy had a hard time keeping up with the other musicians on that session who were accomplished readers. They had to keep retaking because he messed up, but Evans liked his playing and the experience taught him to read faster. It's a lesson in getting through what is required yet still being free."

Berman stresses Lacy's stylistic timelink, how he started playing dixieland, then became an aficionado of Monk and beyond. We listen to "Ella Speed" from the same album. "You see how that sounds like an authentic Sidney Bechet passage?" insists Berman. "And yet the context has shifted. You sense you know where it is going, but who knows where it will end up?"

This sound of surprise is key to a like-minded group of 30-something visionaries who came up with Berman in Chicago, including drummers Mike Reed and Frank Rosaly, vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz, trombonist Jeb Bishop, tenorist/clarinetist Keefe Jackson and bassists Anton Hatwich and Jason Roebke.

Jackson and Berman became joined at the hep as soon as they began playing together and fostered a collective attitude that led to the development of the Fast Citizens sextet, which has recorded twice for Delmark, once under Jackson's name (*Ready Everyday*, 2006) and more recently under Oakland-based altoist Aram Shelton's leadership

(*Two Cities*, 2009).

For an instance of Berman's uninhibited expression, check his gasping Lester Bowie-sanctioned schmears at the close of "The Twenty-Seven" from *Two Cities*.

Despite *Several Lights* (Delmark, 2005) with tubaist Mark Unternährer, Jackson and Rosaly under the banner of the Chicago Luzern Exchange, which was a taxonomical triumph of improvisational conceits, it wasn't until last year and a couple dozen side sessions later (with everybody from The Lucky 7s and Rob Mazurek's Exploding Star Orchestra to Adasiewicz's Rolldown quintet; glam-rock maverick Bobby Conn and alt-country singer Steve Dawson) that Berman finally released a record of his own.

Consistent with his young fogey streak, he called the record *Old Idea*, much as he dubbed another project "Josh Berman and his Gang" as a nod to the Austin High Gang, the group of West Side musicians, including cometist Jimmy McPartland, who originated Chicago-style jazz in the 1920s. The wry self-effacement of *Old Idea* notwithstanding, the music therein is fresh and porous, structures designed with flexibility as the core of conceptual strength. Delmark agreed to release the record as a record (i.e. in 12-inch vinyl format) as well as CD at Berman's request. This Luddite call is one of the charms of the association with Koester's resolutely unglamorous label but also telescopes back to Berman's artiness, which he attributes to kinship with his paternal grandmother, who was a painter. "It's an investment in the Future of the Object," he claims with gravitas.

In the age of instant digital downloads, where artwork is optional, Berman and his comrades have made a stand for an allusive art form for the more discerning palate, rejecting comfort zones, and they've arrived there through uncompromising dedication. Berman and Reed, for example, have promoted the Emerging Improvisers Series at the Hungry Brain every Sunday night for 10 years now, hosting local, national and international acts, offering haven to any serious startups or stalwarts on the creative music map, and together with Mitch Cocanig at the Hideout, Dave Rempis at Elastic and Mike Orlove from the Chicago Cultural Center have expanded what they began as the Phrenology Festival at the Brain into the wider-arching Umbrella Festival of Jazz and Improvised Music, an annual fall event that has become one of the most important of its kind, anywhere.

As Berman recounts multifarious aggregations and alliances, he has a soft spot for a group that never recorded anything substantial, Andiamo. He remembers they were hard on themselves back then, laboring under that peculiar jazz disease of never quite feeling worthy, yet how unwittingly burning they probably were.

Counter to his naturally bazorgt sensibility, it's amusing to note how Berman's self-motivated journey has led his playing back to the sporadically outrageous high art precepts that were always there, how savvy and cunningly erudite he's been all along.

The glories of hindsight.

DB

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