



Start Here...Finish There
David Berkman (Palmetto)
by Russ Musto

On his fourth outing as a leader, David Berkman displays commanding compositional capabilities. While Berkman's earlier ensemble efforts have earned him considerable credit for his writing, this pared

down quartet date, with saxophonist Dick Oatts, bassist Ugonna Okegwo and drummer Nasheet Waits, should bring him comparable commendation as an exceptional pianist and improviser with a personal style marked by intelligence and restraint. These qualities, together with an assiduous avoidance of hackneyed structural strategies, have driven him to create music that is remarkable in the wide range of human feelings it expresses.

Berkman's background as an author of fiction informs his songwriting. Most of the selections on the appropriately titled *Start Here...Finish There* can be described as narrative progressions, eschewing the familiar AABA construction commonly utilized by jazz composers. The opening "Cells" is developed from a simple three-note soprano sax figure that steadily grows in complexity. "Triceratops" starts as an intricate staccato line before changing into a funky Ornettish blues, featuring Oatts' Dolphyesque alto. "Iraq" begins with a meditative Okegwo-Waits duet introducing a Middle Eastern motif initiated by the leader's pensive piano and extended by Oatts searing soprano. The appealing "Stone's Throw" is a pretty melody reflecting Berkman's experience performing with Brazilian bands. "English As A Second Language" is an introspective improvised piano solo.

Berkman's "Penultimatum", a harmonically complex construction driven by Waits' propulsive percussion clearly indicates the influence of Wayne Shorter on the composer's style. The lyrical ballad "Only Human" is a straight trio piece with a few odd twists thrown in towards the end. "Old Forks" pays tribute to Keith Jarrett's Ornette Coleman-influenced compositional approach in the pianist's American quartet, whereas the subsequent "Quilts" seems more affected by the pastoral impressionism of his ECM repertory. The date ends with a folkish solo piano reading of Woody Guthrie's "There Are Mean Things Happening In The World Today" at times reminiscent of Abdullah Ibrahim. Berkman is a musician who would like to change the world. His challenging music certainly makes it a more interesting place to hear jazz.

For more information, visit www.palmetto-records.com.
Berkman is at *Jazz Standard* Apr. 20th. See calendar.