

Jazz scene's regular visitor makes it to Inverness at last

By Kenny Mathieson

New York-based jazz pianist David Berkman has been a familiar visitor to Scotland in recent years through an ongoing relationship with jazz promoters Assembly Direct. He has played in a number of Scottish venues, including Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Islay and Nairn, and now gets his chance to add Inverness to that list when he visits Eden Court Theatre on Tuesday.

Usually David has performed solo or linked up with local rhythm sections on his visits, but has the chance to bring over his own band this time, albeit with Johannes Weldenmuller filling in for regular bass man Ugonna Okegwo, saxophonist Dick Oatts and drummer Nasheet Waits complete the line-up.

"The band came together for a tour of the midwest a couple of years ago," David explained, "but we had all played in different combinations before that. In fact, Nasheet was one of the first guys I went on the road with; we used to go to Japan every summer with a Japanese trumpet player. Ugonna couldn't make this trip, but I've been fortunate to get Johannes instead."

David's visits to Nairn included playing with singer Lane Monheit on her first appearance there, and a solo concert at the jazz festival, and he is looking forward to extending that acquaintance to Inverness.

Another result of his regular presence here is that he is involved in a project with pianist Brian Kellock, funded by the Creative Scotland Award that Brian received last year. The idea is that they will work on developing Brian's compositional skills, and also get together on a tour as a piano duo.

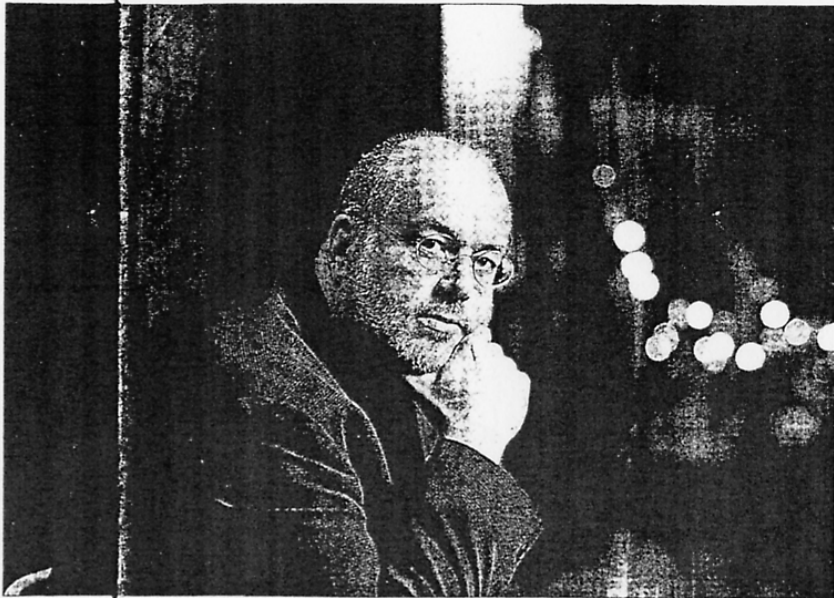
although it is still a bit away from fruition. "It's moving on slowly," David said. "We're still trying to figure out exactly what shape this project is going to take, but Brian is such a great musician that he can do whatever he sets his mind to. We have talked through some of the ideas, and he has been working on some material, so we need to get together soon and look at what he's been doing."

"For me, composition is often about how you write yourself out of a hole, or find out what's keeping you from writing. It can be a question of tricking yourself into getting started, and then it flows from there. I've had to do that for myself a lot of times."

David has released a new album with his Quartet, "Start Here, Finish There", his fourth for the Palmetto label. Given that he has worked hard at keeping a regular band together, I wondered if he approached his writing with those specific players in mind?

"It's about half and half," he decided. "It varies a lot, though. Sometimes what moves you as a composer is tied to thinking about a particular set of players, and sometimes, as in the tune 'Iraq' on the new album, it's something external and completely unrelated to the players. You need the germ of an idea, and often that doesn't come from any particular musician. Against that, there are moments when something that one of the guys has done will become part of a tune."

He has recently had a taste of a different aspect of composition, writing for a 22-piece classical wind ensemble. He



David Berkman: Discovering a whole new way of writing.

did study composition at the University of Michigan, but this is a new departure.

"It's a whole different direction," he admitted. "I'm really interested in. At different points I've felt a little stuck with small group ensemble writing, and it's very liberating to write a piece where there is no improvisation, and it is all just as you write it."

"When you write for a jazz ensemble there is a big element of fill-in-the-blanks to it. You leave a lot of space for the other players to interpret. The time scale involved in the composition is very different as well."

"I see it as the difference between writing a short story and writing a novel — not that I've done either of those things, although I did start out intending to be a writer before I got sucked into music at college."

David grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and developed a very early awareness of jazz through his father, an amateur jazz pianist.

"I first heard jazz when I was very small. I'd love to say well, yeah, I was transcribing bebop from records when I was three, you know, but it really wasn't like that!" he laughed. "I had one of those cheap little 45 rpm record players, and my dad gave me a record that I played all the time. I don't really know

what it was, it was definitely bebop, I think probably Dizzy Gillespie. "I used to put it on and just laugh and laugh at how outrageous it was. It meant that I was exposed to it very early, though, and by the time I was 12 or so I was really interested. I was big on Ben Webster, and my dad was a huge Oscar Peterson fan, and had 150 of Oscar's albums. Later in school I got to know other people who were interested, and it just kept growing."

"I know lots of my peers now who are going back to some aspect of their early experience in rock, and some of them have gone full circle back to the music they played in high school. If I did that it would still take me back to jazz. Obviously I knew about rock, but it wasn't my thing at the time."

David made the move to New York in 1985, at a time when he was beginning to grow frustrated with the academic approach in college (he was at Berkeley in Boston by that stage), and was also having some technical problems caused by tendonitis.

"I felt it was time to make the break into the real world," he recalled, "and New York felt like the place that people were really doing it. I came to study with a particular classical teacher, Sophia Rossoff. A lot of jazz players have worked with her. She's a terrific teacher, and she helped me with the technical problems I was having."

The other big influence on his development at that point was jazz pianist Kenny Werner, famous for his teaching as well as his playing. His book "Effortless Mastery" and associated workshops are now well known, but David worked with him at an earlier stage.

"Kenny had married somebody I knew from Cleveland," David explained, "so I knew him before I went to New York. Studying with him was very helpful. I felt I was playing well enough, but something was missing, and it wasn't really technical or harmonic or whatever."

"There are always things you can work on in those areas, but what I needed was really more to do with finding myself. There are relatively few teachers who can help you with that, and Kenny was a great help."