

May 2004

## DAVID BERKMAN QUARTET

### *Start Here...Finish There*

#### Palmetto

David Berkman's music is sophisticated but unpretentious, sleek but devoid of the pandering reductions of smooth jazz, fresh and unpredictable but neither shall nor self-conscious. The pianist compliments his audience by assuming that they come in search of substance and possess the acuity and patience to follow the unfolding of complex ideas.

*Start Here...Finish There* is primarily about Berkman's quietly dynamic compositions and clean arrangements, as elaborated by his strong working band. Ugonna Okegwo is a nimble accompanist and a bass soloist capable of sustaining a story line, Nasheet Waits is becoming one of the first-echelon drummers in jazz, musical even when belligerent. Dick Oatts on reeds (mostly soprano saxophone) sounds so comfortable in the pre-

cise outlines of Berkman's tunes that he flies around in them, free. Whether comping or soloing, the pianist always seems to be affirming and ascending. Oatts and Berkman are bonded, their voices commingling in instrumental variants of the same bright, quick language.

Most of the album sounds like "Cells" and "Stone's Throw" and "Quilt," which are medium tempo filigrees of graceful melodicism. Berkman has a light touch, yet there is only one actual ballad, the radiant, stately "Only Human." There are two solo piano pieces. "English As a Second Language" is just a few isolated, suggestive fragments. "Mean Things Happening in This World" is a Woody Guthrie song, a complete departure that closes the album with hymnlike formality and stark sincerity.

The best piece is "Iraq." It starts with ominous rumblings and clatterings from Okegwo and Waits, then a tricky unison line by Oatts and Berkman becomes a Berkman solo that insidiously takes on urgency. Then Oatts enters on soprano, like a muezzin whose cries echo over a smoking city. It is a political piece that works. This whole album works. THOMAS CONRAD