

## Jazz sounds to soar this year

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James Lamperetta , The Saratogian

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**The new year typically brings about the doldrums where new music is concerned as labels large and small gather themselves from the hectic holiday season and set their sights on the year ahead.**

As I sit here and write, we are just three weeks into 2004 and, if these first two new releases I'm going to discuss are any indication, this will be a banner year.

The cause for such optimism is forthcoming titles by pianists David Berkman and Craig Taborn. Berkman's fourth date as a leader for Palmetto, 'Start Here, Finish There,' is due to hit stores Feb. 24, and Taborn's 'Junk Magic,' on Thirsty Ear is set for release April 20.

Berkman's last two Palmetto releases (the highly recommended 'Leaving Home' and 'Communication Theory') spotlighted his formidable compositional and improvisational skills in the context of sextets that featured three-horn lineups.

For this outing, he strips things back to the basics, leading a nimble quartet, rounded out by saxophonist Dick Oatts, bassist Ugonna Okegwo and drummer Nasheet Waits.

Both onstage and on CD, pacing is very important, and Berkman hooks the listener right from the get-go with the deliciously understated lyricism of the opening 'Cells,' (which is gently propelled and beautifully framed by Watts' masterful cymbal work), before segueing into the jagged, angular blues of 'Triceratops.'

Up next is 'Iraq,' a terse political statement whose Middle Eastern modality provides a backdrop and inspiration for one of Oatts' numerous compelling forays.

Two interludes, 'English as a Second Language' and the disc's lone cover tune, the Woody Guthrie penned 'Mean Things Happen in This World,' spotlight Berkman alone at the keys and in two very different moods, with the former being sparse and pensive and the latter surprisingly upbeat, given the pessimism (or realism) of its title.

I suppose a minor quibble could be that the disc clocks in at just under 50 minutes, generous in the LP days but not so much in this new digital era. Still, program sans fluff and filler beats a disc of 75 minutes with a couple of throwaway tunes in my book any day. Also, the old showbiz adage says always leave them wanting more, and I'm already anxiously looking forward to Berkman's next offering.

*James Lamperetta of Saratoga Springs is a jazz enthusiast. Jazz Beat is published the first Sunday of each month in the Life section.*