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FRIDAY, AUGUST 7, 2009

David Berkman Quartet - *Live At Smoke* (2009)



by Pico

Jazz is special kind of art because it's not an art that's put on display in a museum; rather, it's an art that comes alive and evolves in the small clubs in cities around the world. That's especially true, of course, in New York

City, and like countless other jazz musicians who ply their craft there, pianist David Berkman appreciates these clubs and their owners "who provide us the space we need to make music in."

That's why Berkman brought his quartet into one of these small dives on Broadway to make a live recording and issue a record, one he considers a collaboration between the club and the band. And so, it's little wonder he put the name of the club in the album's title, christening it *Live At Smoke*.

Smoke isn't really so much a dive, at least not the way Berkman describes it in his liner notes, but it was preceded by a club that was, Augie's. That place became the joint where many of the more talented younger musicians played, like [Joel Frahm](#), Larry Goldings, Bill Stewart, [Chris Potter](#) and Berkman himself. But even though the new owners cleaned up the place and gave it a new name, the magic remained.

For this live show, Berkman chose a young but talented trio of players: drummer Ted Poor, bassist Ed Howard and the saxophonist we've highlighted here a couple of times already, [Jimmy Greene](#). They are, in short, just the kind of up-and-coming talents that thrived at Augie's and now at Smoke. This lineup had played their first gig at Smoke a couple of years before this 2006 date, thus making the occasion of playing there again all the more meaningful.

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Berkman's crew had straightforward mission for this set, and that was straightforward jazz. The kind of soulful, groovin', no-frills hard bop that formed the gooey essence of many a classic jazz record. Almost all the songs are Berkman originals, and he had intended to introduce many new ones for this record, but the band ended up reaching back to some of the older tunes of his instead. It never hurts to just go with the flow.

Weird Knack is a little weird, as a matter of fact, but in a pretty cool way. The theme consists of Greene and Berkman exchanging short phrases, at times stating them together. The melody is carried by Howard and Berman's left hand, leaving Berkman's right hand to handle the harmony and Greene entwines his extended statements around both. Berkman's solo is the whole chord variety, but he modulates it well with the help of Poor's sympathetic drumming.

Greene lays out for one of Benny Golson's standards, "Along Came Betty," allowing Berkman to negotiate the familiar melody on his own. He does so while only hinting at his inspirations (such as the inescapable influence of Bill Evans) but never crossing the line into aping anybody.

Other songs very some in tempo but still exude that cozy nightclub ambiance. "The Mayor Of Smoke," a salute to popular fixture at Smoke, bassist Ugonna Okegwo, percolates as Greene and Berkman murmur around its long bass strides. "Simple Pleasures" and "Hidden Fondness" are the protracted pieces of the bunch, with the former a softer tempo showcase for Greene, while the latter is a burner for primarily Berkman and Poor.

For the closing number, the easygoing funk that is "Carroll Street Pop Tune," Greene displays a deep sense of the groove with his soprano sax, but not before Howard gets a chance to show off his steady pulse out front.

Live At Smoke hit the street on July 14 as a [Challenge Records](#) release.

Purchase: [David Berkman Quartet - Live At Smoke](#)

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