

April 2004

DAVID BERKMAN QUINTET

Start Here, Finish There

(Palmetto)

Pianist Berkman, a New York mainstay for close to 20 years, favors intimate and complex musical dialogue between himself and his mates. His compositions can be brainy and even knotty. In some cases, it's almost as though Berkman constructs them as obstacle courses. But they're never pedes-



trian, though the group here operates at a chamber dynamic throughout.

Berkman the composer seems to gain his inspiration from Berkman the improviser. His pieces move from capricious ("Stone's Throw") to deeply introspective ("English as a Second Language"), from free-floating ("Only Human") to march cadence ("Penultimatum"). But they're always thoughtful.

Berkman is in the considerable company of an inspired mix of players: saxophonist Dick Oatts (of the late and lamented Carnegie Hall Jazz Band), the probing bassist Ugonna Okegwo, and drummer Nasheet Waits. Waits is a great asset to the leader. He doesn't just keep time and/or add accents; he upholsters each piece with a custom-made fabric of texture and contour. He seems to devise a different palette of sounds for every cut. An ascending dynamic on the tension-filled "Iraq" has Oatts rippling and curling soprano-sax surging against tom toms and cymbals before a spent resolution.

Berkman's precise and often crystalline playing favors the middle and upper registers. He'll take the lead here, lay back there while the band negotiates terms, or his piano will intervene and call the meeting to order. He always seems to know what the situation calls for. This album is an unassuming triumph of structure and spontaneity.

—KIRK SILSBEE