

Trying to Tune Out the Noise

Josh Berman Trio, US vs. the World



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The Latest Chapter of Josh Berman's Trio Might be the Best Yet

The title of [Dance! Skip! Hop!](#)—the terrific new album by Tomeka Reid's long-running quartet—is in part an homage to [A Dance and a Hop](#) (Delmark), the excellent 2015 recording by Chicago cornetist Josh Berman's trio. That recording was something of a breakthrough for the horn player. A couple of years after its release he told me, "The trio sparked a new way of working for me. I really loved working that way—rather than coming up with arrangements, you write pieces that are phrases and gestures, some of which can be quite tune-like. I like tunes. With the trio record, I think I figured out a way to do a lot of things I like. I like tunes and I like free improvisation, and I like it when they happen at once." He made the record with bassist Jason Roebke—who also plays in Reid's quartet—and drummer Frank Rosaly, who decamped to Amsterdam soon after its release. When the cornetist organized a European tour Rosaly wasn't available, so he pivoted, putting aside his sturdy, elliptical tunes in favor of fully improvised performances with free jazz veteran Paul Lytton taking over the drum throne. [In 2019 I wrote](#) about the trio's Astral Spirits release [Trio Discrepancies](#):

[It] maintains that highly reactive, nimble sense of movement, but the performances dispense with composed themes in favor of long-form improvisations where the leader's innate sense of melody arrives in terse sallies erupting from extended passages of herky-jerk abstraction. Berman's puckered tone, fatback licks and tart smears—as ever bridging the gap between the garrulous, vocalic excursions of Ellington trumpeters like Bubber Miley and Rex Stewart and modern seekers like Wadada Leo Smith and Nate Wooley—are steadily buffeted by the rhythm section's shifting gambits. The bassist unfurls deep, woody lines and the drummer peppers his flow with wonderfully jarring, chaotic accents, but despite the turbulence they forge an inexorable sense of forward motion, providing a platform for the cornetist to toggle masterfully between lyric flurries and knotted outbursts. Unlike the airtight miniatures on *A Dance and a Hop*, these pieces allow the players to re-situate the same language onto a wide-open plane—pushing and pulling in changing directions and allowing spontaneous motifs to play out fully, although each musician never lets any single notion overstay its welcome.

On a subsequent European tour the trio was rounded out by another legendary European musician, the late Sven-Åke Johansson. Unfortunately, a studio session the trio undertook on a day off during the tour hasn't been released, but the music is wonderful, reverting back to the tune-driven approach captured on *A Dance and a Hop*. Of course, Johansson had a much different sound than Rosaly, a kind of fractured yet still metronomic feel that the cornetist and bassist deftly pushed and pulled against. Some of the tunes from that unreleased session will appear on the trio's upcoming

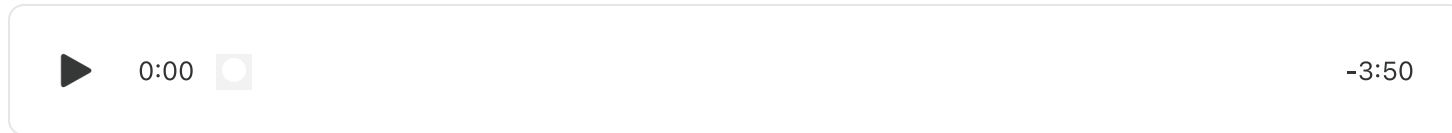
album *Everybody Else's Life, Too*, which is due in June on Corbett vs. Dempsey. Yet another terrific drummer has entered the fold, both on the recording, and on the group's current European tour which brings to Berlin for a concert on [Tuesday, April 28 at Richten25](#): Chris Corsano. Together they bring remarkable concision and fervor to the leader's indelible themes, which continue to rely on terse lyric gestures of profound elasticity. They can embrace a kind of tuneful post-bop, with a rhythmic thrust that occasionally upends the flow for tension-generating counterpoint, or they can be a glue that holds together more chaotic excursions.



Josh Berman, Jason Roebke, and Chris Corsano (photo: Jason Roebke)

There's a stunning rapport across the recording, with Corsano complementing the imperturbable connection Berman and Roebke have honed over many years of playing together. The music consistently engages in a thrilling push-pull between structure and openness, with the cornetist's corkscrewing lines sauntering, slashing, and

spitting shapes in fluid succession. Within a sound that more or less maintains post-bop shapes there are nifty, rapidly shifting forays into texture-building, where the bassist and drummer unleash striated, strident long tones produced by visceral bowing, or the cornetist smears tones, blows short blasts of unpitched breath, and unleashes gnarly tangles of sound that nonchalantly straddle a century of cornet playing. It's one of the strongest albums I've heard this year and it reinforces the artistic bump Berman got from the original trio's inception. Below you can check out the opening track of the upcoming album, "Observers."



The Continued Imbalance of the Transatlantic Jazz Business

The New York jazz publicist and artist manager Matt Merewitz published [a lengthy post in his sporadic newsletter The Side People](#) last week, in advance of this past weekend's [Jazzahead](#) conference in Bremen, Germany. For those who are unaware of this massive gathering, it's a jazz business trade show where booking agents, management firms, labels, festival directors, curators, national jazz export organizations, and musicians all gather to network. There's also a lot of live showcases where artists pay for the privilege to perform for a lot of disinterested biz types. I can't say if the investment is worth it for the artists, but in my experience most of the artists I've seen aren't very interesting. I remain steadfast that for music-first artists—that is, those that prioritize art over commerce even if they desire some degree of financial