

**DAVID BERKMAN QUARTET**

Whelan's, Wexford St, Dublin Sun 8pm €18 (01-6703885)

Hot on the heels of Chris Speed's visit to Dublin comes another high-calibre contemporary New York small group, when pianist/composer David Berkman arrives with his quartet, courtesy of The Improvised Music Company. An impressive player and writer, Berkman combines a craftsman's knowledge of the past with a modernist's penchant for the unusual and surprising that has won him acclaim in

the US. With him is his working band. Alto saxophonist Dick Oatts is an excellent soloist and a composer in his own right, with decades of experience in the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis, Vanguard and Carnegie Hall Jazz Orchestras. Bassist Johannes Wiedenmuller gave ample evidence of his talent when he was here with pianist Kenny Werner. And drummer Nasheet Waits is a percussionist par excellence on the cutting-edge New York scene, and an important element in the trios of Fred Hersch and Jason Moran there. One to savour. **Ray Comiskey**

14

THE IRISH TIMES

Tuesday, March 9, 2004

The Arts

David Berkman Quartet Whelans, Dublin

RAY COMISKEY

A return visit by David Berkman saw the brilliant New York-based pianist and composer bring a stellar quartet to Whelans. With him were longtime colleagues Dick Oatts (alto, soprano and flute) and Nasheet Waits (drums), with Johannes Weidenmuller providing a fulcrum for the group's far-flung improvisations from the bass.

All the material, apart from a solo piano encore devoted, touchingly, to Billy Strayhorn's *Blood Count*, written three days before he died of leukaemia, was composed by Berkman. Typically angular pieces, written with an ear for their improvisational options and, frequently, with particular players in mind, they functioned as a kind of structural reference for some of the freest blowing heard here so far this year.

A lengthy first set embraced only five performances, *Weird Knack*, *Triceratops*, *Tom Harrell*, *Iraq* and *Slides*, and although the standard remained high some pieces worked better than others. Berkman produced a gem of a piano solo on *Tom Harrell*, and while the quartet closed the first set with a wild and impressive outing on *Slides*, perhaps their finest collective moment was on *Iraq*, a lament with Sturm und Drang that Berkman called "our first protest song", which saw Oatts play beautifully on soprano.

Berkman called *Back In The 90s*, a more or less straight-ahead tribute to the late pianist Kenny Kirkland, to open the second set. Oatts, back on alto, seemed more at home in this context, and he was excellent, too, on alto on *Blue Poles*, a piece inspired by a Jackson Pollock painting.

On what was a good rather than a memorable night's music, Berkman remained the most interesting soloist. But the outstanding performer was Waits. In a textbook demonstration of playing "outside" and "inside", he was so consistently and incredibly responsive to every nuance in the group's explorations that he frequently took the breath away. And his superb contribution to the music was never done at the expense of dominating what was going on.