

CRITICS' CHOICE

## New CDs

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### **DAVID BERKMAN QUARTET**

*“Live at Smoke”* (Challenge)

Here’s an album underlining the importance of the small jazz club Smoke, on Broadway and 106th Street, just as that club has found itself in a serious fix. Smoke was flooded by the building’s sprinkler system after it was set off by smoke or fire last week on an upper floor of the building. The club needs thorough reconstruction and a new sound system yet still hopes to reopen this week. Hear this record, and you may find yourself bookmarking the club’s Web site, [smokejazz.com](http://smokejazz.com), and wanting to come to its rescue.

Smoke books recurring weekly acts, jam sessions and multi-night runs with the same band. It creates regulars, both on the bandstand and in the audience. It helps particular bands become good, which is the only way jazz stays good. The pianist David Berkman has been one of the club’s beneficiaries since it opened in 1999, and before that, at Augie’s, which occupied the same space. “Live at Smoke” comes from a two-night gig there in August 2006.

Mr. Berkman started breaking through in the 1990s as a sideman and leader, and some of his playing and writing evokes [Herbie Hancock](#), Kenny Kirkland and [Keith Jarrett](#), with stripes of [Bud Powell](#) and bebop in general. (On a deeply inventive version here of Benny Golson's "Along Came Betty" — pretty much one long piano improvisation against the bass, played by Ed Howard, and drums, played by Ted Poor — the tune finds its ending in the opening line of [Charlie Parker](#)'s "Klactoveedsedstene.") Basically Mr. Berkman is on the extremely smart end of the post-1960s mainstream, like everyone else in the band. It's spinning off new dialects from a shared traditional language and moving in coordination.

Mr. Berkman plays with moderate aggression, swinging hard in his phrasing. And to some degree he always burrows in, finding transcendence. Most of his solos here are worth revisiting to track how they grow so far from modest beginnings — "Weird Knack" especially, in which he seems to enter a kind of clear-minded start-from-scratch state, and the tenor saxophonist Jimmy Greene follows him there. (Mr. Greene, a few years younger, brings to this band a flexible traditionalism similar to Mr. Berkman's.) But as a bandleader and a soloist, Mr. Berkman has commitment and poise and modesty; he listens and moderates and subtly changes course. All this, and warm sound, makes "Live at Smoke" a record to live with. **BEN RATLIFF**