



ED PALERMO

BY KEN DRYDEN

Mention Ed Palermo and the first thing that comes to mind is the music of Frank Zappa. Already a working jazz professional during college in the mid '70s, Palermo recorded or performed with a number of stars, including Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Tony Bennett and Mel Tormé, besides leading his own groups. But his career began to soar soon after Zappa's death in December 1993, when he started arranging and playing the music of Zappa for his big band.

Palermo was obsessed with music from an early age. "It started with The Beatles. I saw them on Ed Sullivan and my two older brothers [Nick and John] and I were enraptured. We checked into the British Invasion bands: Procol Harum, Traffic, John Mayall. Nick started bringing different types of music into our house. Frank Zappa's humor piqued my interest at first, but as I listened to it more, I noticed some incredibly beautiful music beneath the lyrics. When I was in ninth grade and saw Zappa live, that sealed the deal for me. Nick tried to get me into jazz, but that didn't take until college."

Although Palermo played both tenor saxophone and guitar in high school, he admits that he wasn't that skilled since he didn't take private lessons. Things changed when he entered DePaul University in Chicago. He explained, "I knew that I'd have to start practicing and that I couldn't make a living as a rock 'n' roll saxophonist, I had to learn to play jazz. I immersed myself, listening to Cannonball Adderley, Phil Woods and Jackie McLean. My high school grades were bad, but DePaul accepted me because my brother went there the year before." Palermo became a serious student and did well at the university.

While at DePaul, Palermo checked out local jam sessions in the city, eventually finding work for his small group. Palermo recalled, "By my junior year I was pretty busy. I met Kenny Soderblom, a woodwind player who was established in the jingle world. He got me great gigs like live performances with Tony Bennett, Perry Como and recording sessions. At this point I was a tenor player and really into jazz. I wanted to play with Horace Silver or Elvin Jones' band. I was playing in the style of Dave Liebman, Michael Brecker and the post-Coltrane guys. But when I got to New York, people like me were a lot closer to their dreams than I was! I started jamming and it took me a year before I got work with Tito Puente's band, who I played with for three years. During the day I would go to the library and take out LPs to study classical scores. I was already writing and composing in college, but I wanted to arrange for a large ensemble. Once I went to hear Woody Shaw at the Village Vanguard, where he had four horns and a rhythm section. I put together a nine-piece band of young musicians. [Pianist] Dave Lalama was a mentor to me. I jammed with him a lot and we became good friends. He was more into bebop and I wanted to do something modern like Liebman's Lookout Farm. I started arranging then called Dave with questions. I would record my rehearsals on

cassette, then sit for hours listening, trying to figure out what was right and wrong, totally trial and error. I started arranging big band stuff after a friend's suggestion. I was doing door gigs for a long time."

When Frank Zappa died in 1993, Palermo decided to do a concert of Zappa music. "I wrote some charts over the next two months and we played The Bitter End. Usually unknown big bands outnumber the audience in New York City, but it got out on the internet and it was swamped when we played Zappa. We moved to The Bottom Line and played there often over the next nine months." Palermo continues to arrange Zappa songs, with around 300 charts in his vast book.

There are a number of reasons for Palermo's success interpreting Zappa's music. Many jazz fans of his generation are also devoted Zappa collectors who enjoyed Zappa's writing and arranging for big bands in 1972 and 1988. The leader has had success fleshing out brief Zappa themes like "Toads of the Short Forest" and "Twenty Small Cigars" while he also shares Zappa's affinity for sneaking in surprising song quotes into his arrangements. Palermo has emulated Zappa's playing of long medleys without stopping for a break in concert, though he covers songs in depth rather than just minute or two snippets in an Ellington-like "Let's knock out a bunch of hits at once for the casual fan" medley. A number of Zappa sidemen have guested with Palermo on recordings or gigs. The leader notes, "[keyboard player] Mike Keneally said that, 'Besides playing with Zappa, playing with you is the only thing that does it for me.' [Saxophonist/vocalist] Napoleon Murphy Brock said that my band is the dream that he's had his whole life because he used to be a big Stan Kenton fan. Now he gets to do arrangements I've specifically written for him. [Guitarist] Denny Walley guested with my band in Sweden and [vocalist] Ray White has sung with us."

Palermo has written a number of originals over the years and devoted one-half of his recent two-CD set *On No! Not Jazz!!* to them, yet he only sparingly plays his compositions on gigs. "I don't have any burning desire to play my own material for audiences. Even with the Zappa charts, I'm doing shorter versions so I can go on to do the next new arrangement. I created a mash-up medley with a reharmonized swing version of 'God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen' that leads into Zappa's 'Lumpy Gravy', with the sax player soloing on the changes to 'What Is This Thing Called Love?'. Then we combine Dizzy Gillespie's 'Things to Come' and 'Bebop', with the melodies on top of one another. I don't like playing the melody then have someone soloing over its changes, that's been done to death." There's no shortage of music for future releases, as Palermo notes, "I have two to three CDs of music ready to go." ♦

For more information, visit palermobigband.com. Palermo's big band with guests Napoleon Murphy Brock and Rob Pappozzi is at Iridium Jan. 17th-18th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Ed Palermo – *Eponymous* (Vile Heifer, 1981)
- Ed Palermo Big Band – *Ping Pong* (ProJazz, 1988)
- Ed Palermo Big Band – *Plays the Music of Frank Zappa* (Astor Place, 1996)
- Ed Palermo – *Take Your Clothes Off When You Dance* (Cuneiform, 2005)
- Ed Palermo Big Band – *Eddy Loves Frank* (Cuneiform, 2008-09)
- Ed Palermo Big Band – *Oh No! Not Jazz!!* (Cuneiform, 2011-14)

all new
www.innova.mu

innova recordings

facebook.com/innovarecords

INNOVA

DIFFICULT TO LABEL

JAZZ STANDARD

"Best Jazz Venue of the Year" NYC JAZZ RECORD ★ "Best Jazz Club" NY MAGAZINE+CITYSEARCH

CELEBRATE THE NEW YEAR WITH US!
THU-SUN JAN 1-4
★ A NEW YEAR'S WEEK GALA WITH ★

RICHARD BONA:
MANDEKAN CUBANO
DENNIS HERNANDEZ - REY DAVID - OSIMANY PAREDES - LUISITO QUINTERO - ROBERTO QUINTERO

TUE-WED JAN 6-7
HELEN SUNG QUINTET
SEAMUS BLAKE - MIKE RODRIGUEZ - REUBEN ROBERG - OBEID CALVAIRE

THU-SAT JAN 8-10 ★ 7:30PM & 10PM ONLY
MS. LISA & GRAND FISCHER BATON

SUN JAN 11
STEFON HARRIS & SONIC CREED
JAMES FRANCIES - JOSH CRUMBLY - JONATHAN PINSON - ELENA PINDERHUGHES - MIKE MORENO

TUE-WED JAN 13-14
OMER AVITAL
JOEL FRAHM - MICHAEL RODRIGUEZ - YONATHAN AVISHAI - DANIEL FREEDMAN

THU-SUN JAN 15-18
AARON GOLBERG TRIO
REUBEN ROBERG - ERIC HARLAND

TUE-WED JAN 20-21 ★ CLOSED

THU-SUN JAN 22-25
NeTwork
CHARNETT MOFFETT - CYRUS CHESTNUT - VICTOR LEWIS

TUE-SAT JAN 27-31
CHRIS POTTER UNDERGROUND ORCHESTRA

★★★ MINGUS MONDAYS ★★ MINGUS MONDAYS ★★

MON JAN 5, 19 & 26
MINGUS BIG BAND

MON JAN 12
MINGUS ORCHESTRA

JAZZ FOR KIDS WITH THE JAZZ STANDARD YOUTH ORCHESTRA EVERY SUNDAY AT 2PM - DIRECTED BY DAVID O'ROURKE

ENJOY THE 'BLUE SMOKE' MENU BEFORE & DURING THE SHOW! "NEVER A MINIMUM"

SETS NIGHTLY AT 7:30 & 10:00 / FRI & SAT THIRD SET AT 11:45PM

116 East 27 Street 212-576-2232 www.jazzstandard.com ticketweb STEINWAY & SONS