



Sam Barsh Anti-Elite Tunesmith

Sam Barsh carries the weight of several traditions, yet he always tries to make this combination sound anything but heavy. Though schooled in jazz, the keyboard player not only has a penchant for short, tight instrumental fare, but also for looking beyond the beaten path to attract listeners.

"The whole jazz-club setup is not inviting to young people to check out artists that they may have never heard of," Barsh said. "It gives jazz an elitist rep when it doesn't have to be that way."

Barsh's new album, *I Forgot What You Taught Me* (Razdaz/Sunnyside), is hardly elitist. Owing a small debt to "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" and "Birdland", the quartet release updates the tradition of catchy instrumentals, with 13 tracks that fall into the two- to six-minute range. What improvisation there is often embellishes the arrangements.

For the most part Barsh sticks to keyboards, extending from Nord and Korg to vintage Fender Rhodes and Wurlitzer electric pianos. He layers a variety of sounds over vibes, electric bass and drums. Originals such as "Plans Change" and "Between Dead and Alive" suggest songs rather than heads, while the repetitive, percussive style of "George Dub" and "Jew Hefner" embraces electronic music.

"The songwriting I've been doing, which is more in an r&b and pop vein, has helped me structure my writing in that way," Barsh said. "When you think about composing a song that doesn't need to be any more than four minutes long, you realize how much you can do in that span of time. If somebody doesn't like something in 10, maybe 15 seconds, they'll probably switch to the next song. I wanted intros, throughout the album to be immediately catchy.

"Bassist Avishai Cohen, whose Razdaz imprint released Barsh's album, compares the music to a "pop record without vocals."

"It's harder than we all think it is to convey something that stands by itself without the benefit of solos," Cohen said.



Barsh, who grew up in Wilmette, Ill., graduated from William Paterson University in 2003. He worked with Cassandra Wilson, Bobby McFerrin and Lonnie Plaxico before beginning a three-year gig with Cohen's trio. Alongside his fledgling solo career, he performs in the bands of guitarist Rez Abbasi, violinist Zach Brock and saxophonist Russ Nolan. He also moonlights with the Brand New Heavies, and writes and produces songs for several singers, along with collaborators Curtis Watts and Jesse Palter.

Pop music also informs Barsh's business plan. He celebrated the release of *I Forgot What You Taught Me* in May at The Bitter End, a New York club that books few jazz acts. "That model, especially to sustain a profile in New York, is way more effective than just trying to get a gig at a jazz club-and hoping that people will come and pay \$35 to see you on a Monday night," Barsh said. "That's futile."
-Eric Fine