

Dmitry Baevsky

Down With It

According to Dmitry Baevsky, it was all luck, though his first big break, so to speak, must have been hard to recognize at the time. Then in his early teens, he had recently been recruited by a friend to play alto in an after-school big band in his native St. Petersburg, Russia. But only a few weeks into the school year, Dmitry fractured a bone in his foot, forcing him to stay home for a month.

“I had nothing to do,” Dmitry recalled to me over coffee on a recent Wednesday afternoon. “When I got the horn in September, I couldn’t play at all. But I was bored; I started practicing several hours a day. By the time I came back to school, I was, like, advanced!”

I suggested that it would be nice to always be able to improve that quickly. “It’s been annoying me ever since then,” he replied, half smiling, half scowling. “I thought it was going to be easy!”

Dmitry launched into learning jazz with the unflagging intensity that has driven

his progress ever since, transcribing whatever he could — Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, Benny Carter — and enrolling at age 15 in a full-time pre-university conservatory program. By age 19, he was ready to come to the States. A Russian couple living in America had been impressed after hearing Dmitry play in St. Petersburg, and they arranged for the young saxophonist to attend a workshop at the University of Massachusetts.

“These people just hooked up my life here,” Dmitry recalled fondly. “They made a tape of my playing and sent it out. Somehow, through friends’ friends’ friends’ connections or something, my tape got to the New School. I didn’t apply myself; I didn’t know how things worked in this country. I was just the right guy at the right time.” In 1996, at age 19, he entered the New School on a full scholarship.

So Dmitry hit the scene around the turn of the millennium armed with a music degree, a network of musician friends — and, in his view, a lot of good fortune.

“What I think was important,” he told me, “is that I was lucky enough — really lucky — for all those years, from let’s say 1999 to now, I had steady gigs every week. It was just sheer luck. And I learned a lot by doing that. Trios, quartets, in restaurants or whatever, with my friends. I’ve played hundreds. Sometimes I played four or five gigs like that a week. And it lasted all through the past decade.”

Now, Dmitry is a modest and relentlessly self-critical cat, a disposition he attributes to the middle-class Russian Jewish milieu he grew up in, the ethos of which he sums up as, “By default, you’re wrong.” So allow me to voice the opposing perspective. I don’t think “sheer luck” will get you ten years of steady gigs any more than it will land you a full ride at the New School.

Dmitry has worked hard over the years to develop his formidable natural ability and put himself in a position to make the most of whatever opportunities come his way. To wit: Dmitry got more from those steady gigs than just rent

money; he drew on the experiences to form some of the signature components of his style.

“I learned to play so quietly, it was incredible,” he said of his years of restaurant gigs. “I had to, because I really wanted to play. Some places you play, you have cats sitting three feet from the bell of your horn. So I think that’s how I developed, one, an ability to play super quiet, and two, my love of playing in the lower register, because people wouldn’t complain as much.”

Those traits are on abundant display on “Down With It,” Dmitry’s first recording for Sharp Nine. His rich alto sound extends through the full range of the instrument, and more than most players he exploits the effects of sharp dynamic contrast and the fullness and warmth of the lower register. On his bittersweet treatment of the Harburg/Arlen ballad “**Last Night When We Were Young,**” we’re offered glimpses of his sonic influences, as traces of Cannonball and Johnny Hodges reveal themselves; but there is also a uniqueness to Dmitry’s

sound, a plaintive quality that tinges even happier melodies with a shade of melancholy.

That ballad is but one piece of a carefully chosen repertoire that brilliantly showcases Dmitry’s unique sound and style. Assembling it wasn’t easy.

“I’m constantly in a very painful, very painful search for these tunes,” Dmitry said. “I don’t know how to describe them; they have to have a certain vibe.” The result of Dmitry’s struggles is an exciting set list full of lesser-known gems that, in the hands of the exceptional musicians on this record, become much more than vehicles for improvisation. The band, anchored by the effortlessly swinging bassist David Wong, shows an astonishing ability to bring out that vibe, imbuing each tune with a particular, unmistakable character from the first note to the last. Though hewing to the melody-solos-melody format, the band manages simultaneously to transcend it, producing cohesive pieces that each tell a unique story.

Take “**Mount Harissa,**” from Duke Ellington’s *Far East Suite*. It’s an unusual Latin composition, bookended by a long, mysterious minor-key intro/outro that Dmitry brings hauntingly to life with his soulful low tones. After an interlude, he expressively intones the major-key melody, floating airily, buoyed by drummer Jason Brown’s gentle cymbals and pianist Jeb Patton’s delicate, impressionistic chord voicings. The effect of these combined touches is one of almost dreamlike lyricism.

Or take the very next track, Thelonious Monk’s “**We See.**” Here the vibe shifts radically, and again, one can’t fail to be impressed by the consistency of approach. Dmitry and Jeb each extend the Thelonian flavor of the melody into their solos, interspersing flowing bebop lines with angular, playful rhythmic and harmonic inventions.

The addition of trumpeter Jeremy Pelt on four numbers only enhances the band’s musical and thematic cohesion. On the melody of Clifford Brown composition “**LaRue,**” for example,

Dmitry's alto hums subtly in the background as Jeremy's elegant muted trumpet deposits notes that seem to land like raindrops on the rhythm section's simmeringly swinging foundation. The three lyrical, restrained soloists each make a statement without disrupting the tune's delicate minor mood. (I was shocked, after hearing the results, to learn that Dmitry and Jeremy had never before worked together; it's a collaboration well worth reprising.)

Back at the coffee shop, I asked Dmitry about his approach to improvising, about what he strives for in his playing. His answer reflected his upbringing as the son of parents involved in literature and translation.

"I think soloing is analogous to language," he said. "If you listen to the greats play, there's some kind of logic to the way they do it. It's like learning English for me: I can speak properly, but it's boring; the idea is to be funny, creative, find different combinations of words that make people think."

"When you talk to someone who's really funny," he went on, "he might be telling you a story about how he went to the store to buy two bottles of ginger ale — the stupidest story — yet he makes it so funny. So that's the idea: I can get up there and play 'Sweet Georgia Brown' or something and be, not 'ha-ha' funny, but entertaining. Even though I'm just telling you I went to the store, I might be picking up little nuances, details that no one else notices, and all of a sudden it becomes a nice little anecdote. At least, I wish I could do that. All the great guys — Sonny Rollins, Bird — they do that."

By those standards, Dmitry and his bandmates have accomplished something special. *Down With It* is filled with moments worth savoring. It's stories told with wit, joy, and soul by five fine, swinging musicians locked in with each other and the music.

— Gilad Edelman
Astoria, NY

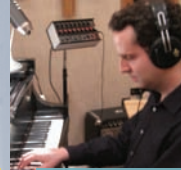
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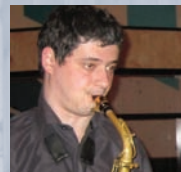
Jeb Patton



Jeremy Pelt



David Wong



Dmitry Baevsky

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Jeremy Pelt appears courtesy of High Note Records

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- 1 **Down With It** 4:53
Bud Powell / BMI
- 2 **Mount Harissa** 7:24
Duke Ellington / ASCAP
- 3 **We See** 6:37
Thelonious Monk / BMI
- 4 **LaRue** 7:44
Clifford Brown / BMI
- 5 **Shabazz** 7:36
Gigi Gryce / ASCAP
- 6 **Last Night When We Were Young** 5:57
Harold Arlen, Yip Harburg / ASCAP
- 7 **Decision** 5:35
Sonny Rollins / BMI
- 8 **Webb City** 5:14
Bud Powell / BMI
- 9 **I'll String Along With You** 8:25
Al Dubin, Harry Warren / ASCAP

TOTAL TIME 59:29

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Down With It

Jeremy Pelt

Jeb Patton

David Wong

Jason Brown



records