



ivo perelman

jazz crusader

IVO PERELMAN WASN'T ALWAYS a renegade saxophonist. He began as a young interpreter of Villa-Lobos and Bach on the six-string, and was a teenage player of Dixieland and bossa nova on clarinet, trombone, piano and cello. Then came his first moments with the tenor sax. "The moment I put it in my mouth, something spiritual really touched deep down," he recalls with child-like wonder. "It felt like an animal, an entity, a living thing."

The Brazilian-born saxophonist makes music both rich and reedy, blowing abstract improvisations heavy with blaring split-tones, bent phrasing and soaring melody. A simple but skewed melodicism runs through *Ivo* (K2B2), *Children of Ibeji* (Enja) and *Tapeba Songs* (Ibeji), his trilogy of revamped children's tunes with Euro-Brazilian, African >

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and Tapeba Indian roots. On those albums, sing-song folk material becomes a springboard for Perelman's free improvisation, reminiscent of work by avant-gardist Albert Ayler — though Perelman insists he never knew of Ayler before critics suggested a connection.

"So I went to the store and bought [Ayler's] *Spirits Rejoice*," says Perelman. "At first I didn't get it. But then I listened more and more and started to ingest his music. Now, I like it a lot. I think it's beautiful. He has his own set of rules and his language is very personal."

Now living in New York City, Perelman, 36, first arrived in the U.S. in 1981 to study music at the Berklee School of Music, but says he "felt suffocated by all that reading and all that harmony... I could never follow the natural study methods. I was always fighting it." He left after just one semester.

That rebellious spirit gives Perelman's work a singular edge. His so-called free jazz compositions require another kind of discipline, and follow a difficult set of guidelines. "Some people think that free jazz is chaos," he says. "It's actually the opposite of chaos. It's the ultimate state where one should create music because you don't have the luxury or the benefit to stop time and fix that wrong note."

Successful free improvisation, especially as a collective effort, is tricky business even for the most seasoned professionals. But Perelman says the greatest challenge in making his music is not the performance itself, but "the daily discipline of dealing with my small daily life, as mundane as waking up and realizing that I'm alive, I'm limited, the world sucks, there is a lot of poverty, we might exterminate ourselves, and the anger and hatred everywhere."

This hyper-absorption with grim reality stems from the saxophonist's formative years in Sao Paulo, where he daily confronted the social inequities of urban life. As a child, he furiously threw himself into his studies as a means of sublimating what he saw on the streets.

"The first years I went to a private Jewish school," he reflects. "I was learning Hebrew, and Jewish and Brazilian history, and playing with Brazilian kids who couldn't afford a soccer ball. So, I started to realize the discrepancies. Never on a conscious level, it was just information that I was absorbing. But maybe I didn't want to face reality. Maybe it was too harsh."

Perelman balances life's grim realities with what he describes as "this immense urge inside" by restlessly giving himself to his music. In just the last year, Perelman has released nine distinctive albums, including a striking solo venture *Blue Monk Variations* (Cadence). Other discs have him collaborating with some of the greatest improvisers of the day: Matthew Shipp, Joe Morris, William Parker, Rashied Ali, Marilyn Crispell and Gerry Hemingway. It's an intense spate of activity rivaling that of '60s-era Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane.

Lofty comparisons aside, Perelman's music clearly aims to speak for the earth's dispossessed. "So this is the struggle," he concludes, brooding behind round spectacles. "There is no answer. What's the answer to the human condition? I could do anything I wanted and lead a normal, easier life. But this thing is eating me up inside. And I have to get it out." — Sam Prestianni