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Ben Finberg

Featured Musician for May



Trombonist **Ben Finberg** has known he wanted to have music as part of his life since before he could talk. Music was a significant part of each of his parents' families, especially his mother's; he's related to **Jascha Heifetz** on that side, his mother is an amateur guitarist, pianist, and vocalist, and his grandfather was (surprise surprise) a jazz trombonist. His mother correctly guessed he had perfect pitch when he was a toddler; she used to sing to him and play guitar, and if her voice was tired and she played a song in a lower key, he would cry and yell "wrong music, Mommy!"

The first instrument Ben played was Piano, Yamaha method, around Kindergarten. He was given to understand that he was better than all the other kids in his classes, but never prodigious. He still plays a little, mostly to aid in composing and arranging. Piano is terrific in that all the notes one could ever play are laid out in front of you, so it's unquestionably his instrument of choice for figuring out voicings and experimenting in general.

Ben got his first trombone in preparation for 5th grade beginning band. His grandfather took him to the music store and tried out the various used horns, ultimately settling on a King 606 student model. He still has it and plays on it; it doesn't have the dark subtlety of his two professional horns, but you really couldn't ask for more from a couple-hundred-dollar student horn.

He was always above average for his age, but he didn't really get serious about playing until his freshman year of high school. In preparation for his all state jazz audition, he practiced every single day for a week; magically, his range shot up by a half in octave in that short time, to say nothing of his tone and precision, and he was able to take 2nd chair in the state as a 14-year-old. Ever since then he's been a huge believer in practicing every day. "You can have the best ideas in the world, but if you don't have the chops to back your ideas up, you're wasting your time."

Because he first got into jazz as a high schooler in the early 90s, the so-called young lions were also a huge influence. **Joshua Redman** was his first hero; given that he was a fellow Ivy Leaguer, Ben would daydream about taking a similar trajectory as he, getting his degree and then joining the NYC jazz scene. He has always loved the combination of smarts and soul that Josh puts into his music. **Roy Hargrove** is another he listened to a lot, especially in high school. And to this day, he loves **Christian McBride** -- "if he's in your band, chances are you're gonna be at least ok.."



Ben was born in Boston, grew up in Arizona, moved back to Boston after college, and has returned to the Southwest (hopefully for good), now making his home in Santa Fe. While in Boston, he studied with **Berklee** professor **Jeff Galindo**, and has shared the stage with trombone greats **Carl Fontana** and **George Masso**. These past few years, he's been into the later-period Berklee folks. He finds guitarists **Kurt Rosenwinkel** and **Lionel Loueke** both utterly amazing. And a lot of the professors, most notably **Jerry Bergonzi**, are some of the most underappreciated monsters in the idiom.

Ben also loves exploiting other people's (low) expectations -- particularly other musicians' expectations -- of the trombone when someone hears him play for the first time. "You walk into a new jam session with a trombone and the feeling is "oh god, let's hope this is over soon", so people's mental bar is almost always set really low." He can't even count the number of times he's been begrudgingly allowed to sit in with a band (often towards the very end of the night), then he can feel the energy of the room change



Bulletin Board



Discography



Amazed by the high quality of New Mexico's vibrant music scene, Ben says, "you can't be a jazzman in New Mexico without giving a nod to the best of the locals, who are really among the best anywhere. I'm in awe both of **Bobby Shew's** intelligent gracefulness and **Doug Lawrence's** unparalleled swing feel." Ben is playing in a variety of local Santa Fe- and Albuquerque-based groups, as well as working on several new projects. **Sugar on Top** is a funk and soul band he has helped to form, comprised of some of New Mexico's most talented young jazz musicians; it makes its debut on **May 19th at Zinc Wine Bar in ABQ**. He is also in the process of forming two slightly unusual jazz quartets, one with no drummer, the other with no harmonic instrument.

Some of the players who influenced Ben were **JJ Johnson**, who is thought of as the father of bebop trombone, who is to bebop trombone what **Bird** is to bebop sax or **Dizzy** is to bebop trumpet. Whereas the slidy, raunchy side of trombone was a perfect fit for dixieland, the blistering fast linear precision of bop threatened to remove trombone from the jazz picture altogether. JJ found a way to play fast and clean bebop on the trombone, keeping up with Bird and Diz, and keeping the trombone from fading into obscurity.

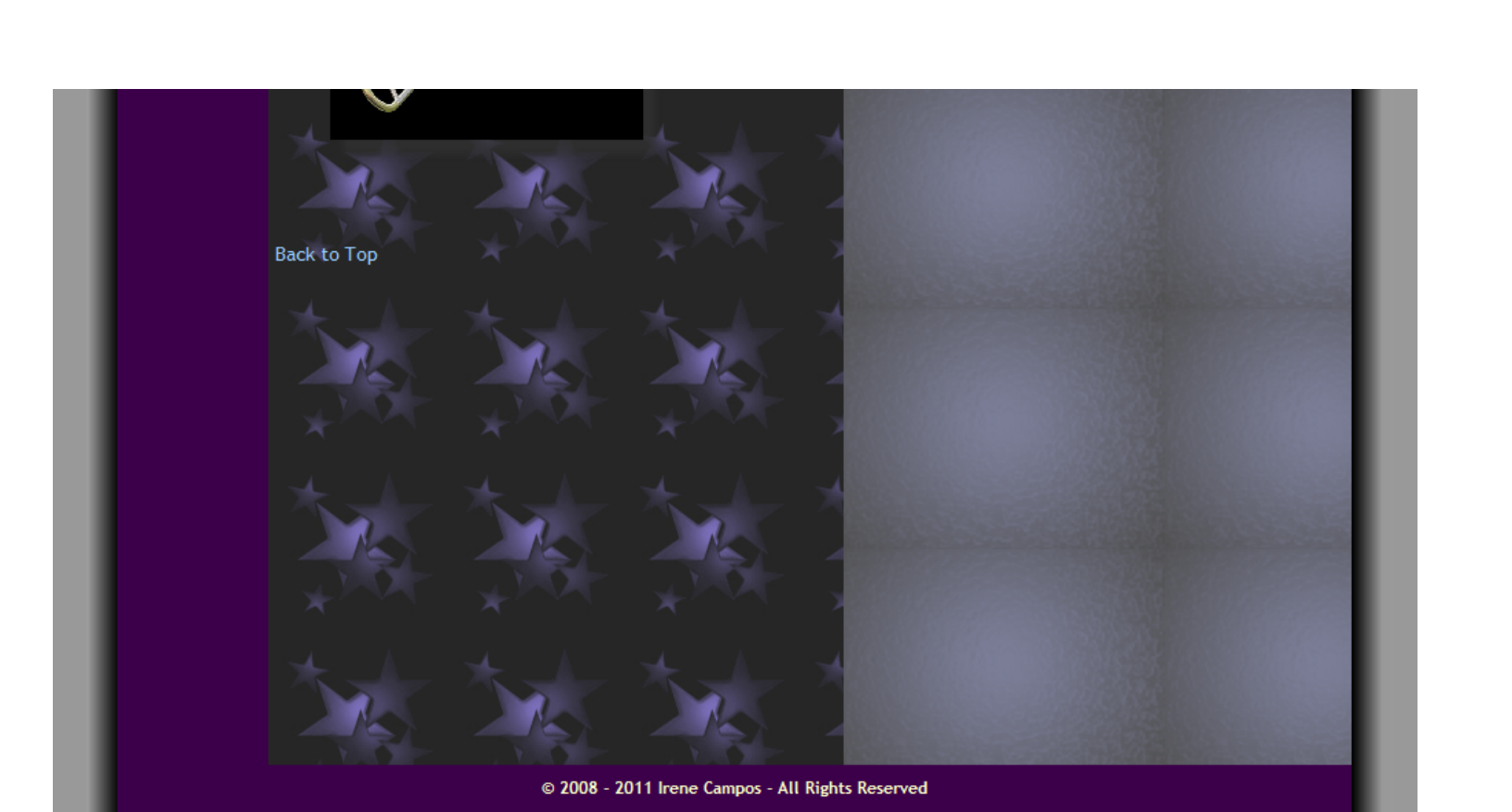
Frank Rosolino took JJ's cleanness and precision, expanded it, and added a swinging, soulful joy to the mix. While most jazz aficionados have heard of JJ, comparatively few have heard of Rosolino. Some of it is era (JJ is an original bebopper, Frank started his career at least a decade later), some of it is geography (JJ started in New York, Frank was a west coaster). Most of Ben's influences are non-trombonists. **Miles Davis' Complete 1964 Concert** (originally released as two LPs, **Four and More** and **My Funny Valentine**) is without a doubt his favorite album. Until he heard it as a freshman in college, he had listened to a hodgepodge of good music and pure crap, but this was his last and best crossover bridge to serious jazz. As much as he loves the burners, it was the drifting, hard-swinging ballads that hit him in the gut. He thinks Miles was almost surely the greatest band director in the history of jazz, surrounding himself with the finest musicians and conjuring up amazing arrangements. On the '64 concert, Ben just loves all the **George Coleman** and **Herbie Hancock** solos, with **Ron Carter** and **Tony Williams** keeping a fiery foundation underneath. All the other music from this transitional period is terrific as well; **Wayne** compositions catalyzed the seminal quintet a year later, but it's George Coleman's beautiful harmonic ideas and precision that are the high water mark for Ben personally.



as he plays and surprises everyone by actually sounding good!

He's lost count of the number of times this has happened, but perhaps the most, "cinematic" of these was a time he took a gig with a Berklee professor guitarist named **John Finn** in his rock band. They were playing a gig to close out a guitar festival at **Berklee Performance Center**, every seat packed, largely with Berklee guitar students. Ben had a solo on the last song, and just did what he does, clearing that low bar with a rock solo that didn't suck, and the crowd just went nuts. "It was so cool to feel that audience, of all audiences, transform like that!"





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