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Borah Bergman: You Must Judge A Man By The Work of His Hands

Borah Bergman |

By [Laurence Donohue-Greene](#)



Borah Bergman is a one-of-a-kind pianist, composer and improviser whose originality lies in his entirely unique approach and utilization of left-handed and cross-handed techniques. Influenced by Lennie Tristano's hornlike phrasing and Monk's stride, Bergman has prolifically released on average one to two CDs a year since the early '90s (primarily solos and duos) featuring Thomas Chapin, Roscoe Mitchell, Oliver Lake, Evan Parker, Anthony Braxton and Peter Brötzmann. Last month, *AJ-New York* caught up with Bergman at his Upper West Side apartment.

All About Jazz: You have a unique two-handed technique. Speak of your left hand, your crossed hand style and your ambidexterity.

Borah Bergman: I saw that originality is the great equalizer. It cuts through everything, through all the impediments in the way...I decided to do something that nobody else was doing...[and became] consumed with developing the left hand. Nowadays I take it for granted, but then I got involved in learning how to play crossed hands... With crossing the hands over, since the structure of the hand is different...you could be thinking of an ordinary progression and the whole thing is kind of mixed up, but since you know harmony, you can in some way devise a certain sound that works.

AAJ: When did you begin to develop this concept?

BB: My father died when I was about 23. I know that some place in this obsession that I had, my father was there some place...at 25 I started to really practice and it was then I had an idea of playing with the left hand. The left hand is symbolic for me. My parents took me to a concert when I was a teenager: Paul Wittgenstein, [for who] Ravel wrote that beautiful "Concerto for the Left Hand Alone". Wittgenstein had one hand, the left hand, but I didn't know it when I was watching him play because he had this big cape on! I was wondering why he was gyrating all over the place... Something else happened. I saw a Fats Waller record. The back notes said that Waller took lessons from Leopold Godowsky who re-wrote the Chopin etudes and wrote pieces for the left hand alone... Then there were stories where one night Bud Powell couldn't play with his right hand, so he played with his left... Also, I once had a dream where this boy was reaching for a star with his left hand!... All these things got me very interested in playing with the left hand because the left hand up to then was really just comps and chords. [It] was always stressed, but nobody did it in a linear way and before I knew it, 20 years passed by! The thing is, finally I got to a very strong level, but I was not known.

AAJ: You were already in your 40s when you released your debut album [*Discovery*, Chiaroscuro] in 1975. How did that come about?

BB: Hank O'Neal [owner and founder of Chiaroscuro Records] asked if I would like to record... It's interesting that my first recording [was] after Earl Hines [who recorded for Chiaroscuro just before Bergman that day] left his energy in the piano for me!... [He was] one great pianist. I came in contact with someone from a whole other period; an incredible talent [with an] incredible sense of timing. His right and left hand, the way they related to each other, was just unbelievable.

AAJ: Since then you have created an almost altogether new role for the left hand, setting you aside from other improvising piano players.

BB: At the beginning, there were guys who tried it a little bit: Phineas

Newborn, even Billy Taylor used to fool around. But there was a tradition in the piano development that really influenced me: Tatum, the stride pianists and Teddy Wilson [Bergman took lessons from him towards the end of Wilson's career]... The left hand was very important with the stride pianists and ragtime and the Swing pianists had a certain approach. But I wanted a left hand that knew, that could play like the right hand plays with phrasing. And I felt that it was just a matter "of any idiot can do it" - it's just that I was the only idiot doing it [laughs]!

AAJ: What was your background as you were coming into this approach?

BB: Bebop. "Free" came into my playing a little later on... I don't know if I would call myself a "free" pianist because I can also play bebop. I was influenced strongly by Ornette Coleman... I was also very influenced by chamber music and Bach and Dixieland or New Orleans, where all of the instruments were playing contrapuntally and polyphonically. So I figured I'd like to do it myself. The left hand was a perfect vehicle for me. Also, I get these impulses. In order for my impulses to come out, I need a recovery act and the left hand would always recover quickly and make things correct... I take a lot of chances and if you take a lot of chances you could fall on your face, but the left hand would always come and help me out. You can be disorganized, but if you can organize your disorganization, then you're organized [laughs] ... organized chaos.

AAJ: What has this style allowed you to do?

BB: If you're going to write a composition, you can write stuff for the left hand and people could learn to play it. But if you're going to improvise for the left hand and you never know what's coming up next, you just can't play it as if it were a composition. If you're improvising, you have to be ready for anything that can come up... In developing the left hand, I also developed a new concept of fingering by figuring out all the finger combinations...so if that means that the hand has to be turned over, or fingers overlap each other, that's what I do.



AAJ: There are so many left-handed musicians who play piano, yet none have thought about doing what you've done.

BB: First, it's so hard that most people would drop it. I was also attracted to the sound. It's pretty close to the saxophone. That was one of the most important influences: the sound of the left hand, the human voice, the horn, the vibrations...and density from the bass register... Frankly speaking, [people are] still playing the piano in the same old way - left hand chords, right hand plays the melody...I'm not saying that I want to develop a new school of piano playing, but it seems to me that the piano hasn't moved any place technically. And this century is an age of skills! You are not going to devise a new style of piano [playing] unless you develop the left hand because it's an absolute necessity. It produces polyphony, counterpoint and the freedom to relate one rhythm in one hand [to] another rhythm in the other hand.

AAJ: When you play fast, one may better understand the effectiveness of the cross-handed approach, but when you play slow, what would that sound like if you hadn't played it cross-handed?

BB: Well, [plays an altogether new melodic note progression to the theme of "Round Midnight" utilizing crossed hands] See? Crossed hands opens a whole new world particularly if you know the chords. And there is some intangible consistency to it because it's the same person doing it all the time... But leftie, rightie, whatever you're doing, it's what you say that's important. If you've got something to say, it works. If you have nothing to say, it doesn't.

AAJ: Your intriguing technique, it's so unique even though it has its previous roots.

BB: Not many people were trying it, or doing it. I decided it would give me an original style, which I think it did... I was never exactly a conformist. I think that one of the things that defines me from the other pianists is what I call the "double idea"; that I can get two things going at the same time because I have equality in the left hand... When the left hand does play, it plays like a right hand with a sense of authority and verve.

AAJ: Of your recent project with guitarist Dom Minasi - there's not many "free" piano/guitar duos.

BB: Guitar is the hardest instrument for me to play with...[and] Minasi's a great versatile guitarist. In the newer music, this combo is rare... Physically it's hard to play contemporary improvisation, which came from the "free" music on the guitar, unless you're going to play pointillism and basic chord structures with intervals in between...Dom plays a certain way... [and] I'm not

going to be able to predict it until it happens. So, fingers [not hands] crossed.

AAJ: What were your early experiences growing into becoming a pianist? Were you self-taught?

BB: I took lessons when I was a kid, then I dropped it...I must have had a good number of teachers. And I still remember running. My folks built a little house up in Westchester. You know one of those little houses, bungalows, that they could go to in the summer, weekends and things. So I used to stay past the school year; I'd go part school in Westchester, near Peekskill, and then I'd go to New York. And, so they gave me piano lessons. And the reason I'm mentioning that is because the house was in the country. In those days, they still didn't have that many houses, so you could run through the fields. I still can remember one teacher, I ran away, (and) they had to go and find me [laughs]! I ran into the fields because I didn't want to take a lesson... You have to remember something, I was listening to music when I was very young, particularly because my family was left-wing. I lived in a community where there were a lot of performers; the people who came up - a lot of black entertainers - would come up there, and a lot of black intellectuals. There was this place called Mohegan Colony in Peekskill, NY. So I was listening to folk music, and I got interested in the blues.

AAJ: How young were you when you were taking piano lessons?

BB: I don't remember. I was no prodigy. I don't know, I suppose not 5. Well, older than that. Maybe 8 or 9. But the point is, I stopped taking lessons...I don't know. I would have to look into this. I stopped playing the piano when I was a teenager because I was had to take lessons, and it was getting to be a pain. So, I took up the clarinet, dropped the piano, and played clarinet, and then I went into the army. It's interesting that when I went into the army, you know what mark I scored very high on? Morse Code. I knew nothing about the Morse Code. They gave you these tests, then they gave you some paper and some insight into it, and you had to figure it out while it was going along. And I got a very high score. And that obviously showed a musical talent because of the rhythms. Of course, the army doing what they're doing, they put me in the tank core, because I had second degree flat feet. They never took advantage of the Morse radio, (as) they gave me another job...When I came out (of the army), they pay you some money...What happened is I decided I wanted to be a writer. So, when I got out, I went to college, and I took all kinds of different courses in college and tried to find myself. And it's interesting that I did very well, I scored very well, on the subjects I was interested in - but the subjects I wasn't interested in I didn't score as high. Like American Literature - got an A, Sociology I got an A, Physics I got a D or a C, Organic Chemistry, my god, or Chemistry, my god! My nature is not very meticulous, so to measure everything like that...The point is, I did get out of school, and I took a Masters in English. I was writing these stories. I still have them. I never could get to the end, though. I was having difficulty in writing the stories. (So) what do you think I did? I went to the piano...and I got interested. I would sit down and improvise...

AAJ: Where did you go to college?

BB: I went to NYU...I noticed that they were teaching the Schillinger system of composition. I thought that would be a very interesting thing to do, and registered in one of the classes. And about after 2 months, they told me about a piano teacher, also an arranger, (who) was really good. His name was Danny Hurd, or Daniel Hurd, and so I went to him. And that was when I took an interest in the piano. I was about almost 25 years old, and I started practicing like a fiend. Then Daniel Hurd, for some reason, got involved with (Lennie) Tristano and he learned Tristano's method of teaching, and as a result I was influenced by that method of teaching which was very good. I'm not saying that (I agree with) some of his aesthetics, (which) I don't believe in, because he didn't like certain people, but I did learn to play like a horn. I used to sing with records you know. And I got very involved with bebop. I still can sing [scats a bop line, and laughs]. It took me a few years - not too long to (really) learn to play. Then I decided I was going to teach, on the side I was going to play the music. But eventually it took me over. I would practice hours and hours. I had this obsession, particularly after my father died. I don't know what it was. And I kept on. Before I knew it, years were rolling on. And I made my first record in 1975...

AAJ: What was the music scene like for you and your new music concept at that time?

BB: You have to remember my strong area was in a time when the '70s was a rather chaotic operation, and there weren't the resources that they have now, to advertise and get everybody else to know what you were doing. So this was my private little endeavor which I started...I had this idea of wanting to play a certain way, and it kept going on and on and on, and I can't really talk about it too much. I have this prodigious ability, but I'm not that well known because I wasn't hanging out that much. I wasn't making deals, etc. I had

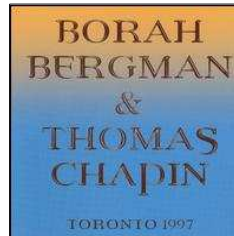
some opportunities, to a certain extent. But, I knew I wanted to play a certain way...

AAJ: Talk about the time of your father passing, and how soon thereafter you began seriously developing this approach, and the significance of that time in your life.

BB: When my father passed away when I was 23, I hadn't started on this binge yet, but it might be that I was trying to show him something possibly. I felt guilty; I don't know what it was. I started to really practice, and I had an idea of playing with the left hand. My father had told me to read *Steppenwolf*...Did you ever read that book? There was also something else: My mother was quite a striking looking woman when she was young. But unfortunately, she had face cancer, skin cancer not from the sun, but from electrolysis or whatever, something happened. Her face kept deteriorating, (and) she had some plastic surgery... For some reason my playing had this craggy quality because I came from a craggy family - I was never really attracted to playing with a very smooth concept. That's one of the reasons I find crossed hands so engaging because I can utilize my softer personality, but the voicings come out, craggy voicings but definitely the lyricism is very powerful...I started practicing (and) I started playing around. (Trombonist) Steve Swell still remembers me when I was playing out in Jersey...One of the people I played with (was) Norman Grossman. And I'm looking for tapes we made. I wonder where Norman is these days. And I was playing with other people but they weren't very well known, and I wasn't making records. It wasn't like in that time, (well) it wasn't like it is today...(where) you can put everything on the computer...When I was doing it, there was no way of publicizing what you were doing unless you went through a whole thing with a newspaper, and the loft scene could be very tied up. Eventually, I kept doing it, and doing it...Hank O'Neal stepped in and I started recording. What happened is, when I was recording, in the late '70s, I sent two records to Arrigo Polillo, who was in Italy. He was the editor and publisher of *Musica Jazz*; *Musica Jazz* is the *Downbeat* of Italy. And he wrote me back, (and) he says, "You have to come to Italy. I've got to introduce you to (Giovanni) Bonandrini". Bonandrini owned Black Saint and Soul Note Records. So I did, and he said I'll get you some concerts. I did - I went. Before that, I only made two records for Hank O'Neal, and it's funny - I had these standards that I had to get to a certain point, obsessive standards. I only made two records for Bonandrini in the '80s. In Italy the comments in the newspapers were quite strong, very strong. But I didn't play the game, searching around, as I still was here (in New York)...I kept practicing. Finally around 1990, I decided to start playing with horns...

AAJ: Up to that point, you hadn't?

BB: Well, I played with horns, yes I played with horns, but I never recorded with them...The first one was with Thomas Chapin, which we did up here (in my place). I don't particularly think that's so great compared to the second record (*Toronto 1997*, Boxholder) we made. That's a good record...But I tell you, Tom Chapin, I think I really got him to really play on that record. See Tom Chapin was a great, great saxophone player. He dug in as much as the situation warranted.



AAJ: Great flute player, too.

BB: Phew...Oh man! He certainly did play the flute... Roscoe Mitchell, Oliver Lake, Evan Parker, Anthony Braxton, Peter Brotzmann, were there and a number of others. One of the reasons I could do it was because how the left hand played like a horn and then I played the horn myself, so I could pretty much figure out what the horn was playing. And if you notice in some of the reviews, it says sometimes it sounds like Bergman is accompanying the horn. All of this ability came of course from Tristano's influence in the sense of singing with the record and learning how to play like a horn. So, I did that, I finally started. I recorded a few records for Soul Note, then I recorded for Boxholder, then other companies, and I was making records but I really wasn't playing on the scene that much. I never really could take advantage of the scene. There's various social aspects that some critics can't get by...When Giovanni Bonandrini retired, his son (Flavio) took over... (Much of) the loft scene wasn't so good for pianists, (as) there were no pianos. So, whatever happened, I landed up with what I do now. But I have this whole flood, I must have made 20-something records since around the early '90s. It's kind of weird isn't it?

AAJ: Making up for lost time.

BB: I don't know about making up for lost time, it's only 2 records a year [laughs]! ... This is why I am in the situation that I'm in. I have got this tremendous ability; I've played with some of the best horn players; I'm

getting good reviews, even in the concerts...But there's an underground movement about it, not encouraging you too much. I never realized what jealousy, envy, and fear, how important it is in the scene. I wasn't a safe bet for a lot of critics to push too much. I myself misinterpreted a lot of behavior from musicians when I started going down to CBGBs. I realized what this is all about. Most of the musicians are really frightened to death that they may not be working and so they have to really hustle it. I think that probably my not being on the scene enabled me to develop a style, a kind of an idiosyncrasy, a very strong style because I could do just about anything I would want, because I had another job. Then I resigned from teaching, and I decided just to do this. And this is where I'm at, at the present time. But I was always consumed with developing the left hand, because for some reason it had something to do with the brain...I'm not terribly familiar with some of the generalizations but specifically the left hand is controlled by the right side of the brain, and vice versa. (I think) the left hand is more emotional, (though) I don't know if that's true... You have this evolution in terms of phrasing with either hand, and it's an exciting thing to do.

AAJ: You have performed, and recorded, primarily original material, yes?

BB: I write my own material. At first, the reason I got involved with the Schillinger system (was) because I wanted to be a songwriter too. So, I've got all these ballads, which I think I'm going to start using... I noticed that, like with this last record I made with Lol Coxhill [*Acts of Love*, Mutable Music] - he was really playing, (and) people seem to like it. I think it's a slightly more accessible me on that record. And now John Zorn



asked me to do another record for him [for Tzadik Records]. I did this cantor thing [*Meditations for Piano*, Tzadik], and a lot of people seem to like that record, too... You have to understand, my mother's family, everybody played something, or sang, so there was a certain scale [plays], and it's a very cantorial scale. I don't come from a religious family; I come from a secular family. But I know my cousin used to sing in synagogues and she called herself a female cantor, so there must have been something in the whole family that made me understand what a cantor does. So, I did it for John Zorn, and he seemed very pleased. He asked me to do something else now for him, with a trio. I don't know exactly what it's going to be...Also I owe Tom Buckner [of Mutable Music] a record. The whole thing's weird, you know. I've been making two, sometimes three, records a year.

AAJ: Why do you think that many people compare you to Cecil Taylor?

BB: They used to, a long time ago.

AAJ: You think it's the lack of imagination of people writing about music, casting you off as "another" Cecil?

BB: A lot of people, first of all, don't like Cecil Taylor, so it's easy for them to compare me to him. I know how he learned to play. There are certain similarities, but I think one of the important things with Cecil Taylor was that there was someone out there doing something provocative. And he kept doing it, no matter what anybody said, which is a great contribution. I would say when it comes to rhythm and those kinds of things, I don't see any comparison. Of course, the way I play now it doesn't bother me the slightest because I've gone onward. So, it's a question I can't really answer... But I think the thing that people might compare me with Taylor is the attack. But even the attack is different.

AAJ: Well, both of you can be aggressive when you want to be at the piano.



BB: Yeah, I can be very aggressive. I think there's that impression. There's nothing wrong with that. I mean, painters have gone on who have had influences from other people. I don't think he (Cecil) was particularly ever an influence on me...but they went on with their own purposes, and developed styles of their own. But you could always

say he was influenced by so and so. This is true with Picasso; this is true with a countless number of artists. They're not so pure that they haven't had an influence from another artist...I don't take it seriously. It doesn't happen too often. Personally, like on the Coxhill (record, *Acts of Love*) to me, the only thing that you can hear on it - first of all, definitely not Cecil Taylor on that record in terms of the rhythm - is the excitement. Every once in a while I start digging in at the piano. Who digs in at the piano, or who did? Taylor possibly, and a few other pianists... I know how Cecil Taylor developed his style and I developed mine in my own way. But Cecil Taylor's rhythm is totally different than mine. He phrases on the beat, and I phrase off the beat,

more like jazz. I respect him. He's got a certain type of personality that I don't have. I mean, I have this ability to continue on a project, but Taylor has got a certain approach to learning his pieces. He'll repeat a phrase until he gets it, the same phrase, and you can hear it in his playing. Everything's so meticulous...I don't have that. If I practice the phrase five times, that's it - I don't even do it five times. I like the adventure of going into the unknown, like you're clearing out the forest. I used to do that with my father. We used to get trees to plant; you know we had an acre of land in Westchester. So, we would go out into the woods, pull out the trees, and then we would plant them near the house...it's funny I associate myself more with outside the city, than the city.

The city has influenced me and the people who live in it, but my associations are in the country, like a stone quarry, or rocks, and the struggle for survival; (it) gets all the elements...I don't know if you hear it. And when I was developing the left hand, that's what I felt... Actually, one of the reasons I developed my left hand, (well) another reason, is that the tone of the piano drops off immediately, so by playing like this [plays], you have the illusion that this is holding on [plays]. You're losing this, (but) this is holding on [plays]. If you're doing it alone, [plays]...can you hear the difference? (The saxophone doesn't have that problem. The left hand creates an illusion. When you listen to Bach for instance, (there's) an illusion that the sound is hanging. And most pianists haven't taken advantage of it... Now (my) left hand, I would say in the next few months, it's going to be just so natural, probably better or at least as good as everybody else's right. And that makes it easier for me because my personality is not consistently disciplined. So, if I do something in the right hand that is not appropriate, leftie will take care of business by doing something which will make the thing I did in the right hand correct. You know you respond to that. And that I'm pretty sure about. Basically speaking, I may have a certain nature too. I haven't taken advantage of opportunities that came along because I was interested possibly in a certain goal for myself. I'm not sure. I'd rather not even think about it.

AAJ: How often do you perform each year would you say?

BB: Oh, I can't really say. This summer I had a few festivals and that was it...How many times do I perform during the year? I can't really say. Not more than 25, if I get to 20. Not more than 15, maybe not more than 10. But I do make records, which seem like I'm very professional. I mean, I know they're good. But I'm never good enough, and that's in my personality. I'm never satisfied, and I never think I'm good enough.

AAJ: You're your own worst critic.

BB: Well, you helped me yesterday. You said something yesterday...The *Meditations* record is a style unto itself, and I'm going to utilize that. I was listening to it. It's got a certain type of rhythm hand-relatedness... That's a devastating thing I did...the pregnant pauses. All of a sudden I realized that this is good stuff here... I can't do that again! There's something in there. I never heard it. I don't know if you understand, because there isn't that much obvious variety at times. There's something beyond Jewish-not Jewish. It's not necessarily a cantor at all! I listened to it, and I said, "My god, did I do that?" And it took me a year, probably more than a year to hear it. And I can see why people like it, because of the timing I think, it's an original sense of timing, (and) maybe it's a good idea to utilize that concept.

AAJ: Can you talk about the locked hand approach, not to be confused with your crossed hand approach?

BB: There was a locked hand way of playing, which I think Milt Buckner, and later maybe (George) Shearing picked up, and some others. But I wasn't interested in that...I could do it; a lot of pianists were playing like that in the late '40s and '50s.

AAJ: What's the distinct difference?

BB: This is completely different. One hand doing what it wants, the other hand doing what it wants, and putting them together...Well, locked hands [demonstrates]...You usually double the top note [plays]. Does that sound familiar to you? The thing is that didn't interest me. But this other thing interested me because there was nobody doing it, I think mainly. Also I had these dreams and these associations, and those experiences. I told you about Paul Wittgenstein. Then there was this tradition in jazz - the left hand for the pianist, but a different kind of left hand. So my mind focused on it. Also, I'll tell you something that I feel very strongly about that you may notice now and in the future, and you may have even noticed it on the Coxhill (recording, entitled *Acts of Love*). I like the sound of [plays]; I like the sound of this certain register - it's very human [plays]. In other words, you can play, it's warm. You really feel it in here. And I wanted that, so I went after it. And it also made me feel - I don't know - special or what. Nobody else was doing it! They'd talk about it, but nobody else would do it. I developed certain techniques of practice which helped me do that. There was a tradition that

really influenced me.

AAJ: Did you ever get to see a lot of your influences perform live?

BB: No. I saw Bud Powell perform live (though). I did take lessons from Teddy Wilson when he was towards the end of his career, (and a) very fine man. I don't know, something nice about him. And he encouraged me, (and) told me about some of the contests they used to have - the piano contests - and who could play faster and longer with the left hand [plays a fast tempo demonstration]...But you hear it! The problem you see with that kind of left hand is that it's so set that you can't do anything else.

AAJ: You've since become "Professor of the Left Hand"!

BB: Well, not really the left hand - it's music. It's a tool that can help you make music a certain way.

AAJ: Do you think it's just another case where in this society in particular, and not just with piano but with most things, that we bring kids up to do things right-handed in our right-handed centric society?

BB: You're right. First of all, the left hand has all the dirty work. And there's no doubt about it. And certain societies have relegated the left hand to do certain things.

AAJ: Talk again about the physical nature of the hand, and because you're using your left hand that there's a certain progression and emphasis with notes.

BB: Very important...The strong fingers are the top of the left hand - 1, 2, and 3. That means [plays], the melody notes. What they do with the right hand in classical music, they make special exercises. Because in romantic music for instance [plays], you have to do 3, 4 and 5 which are the weakest fingers, so they make exercises...Chopin did it. Liszt did it. And the meaty part of the hand is at the bottom [plays]...The left hand has been associated with all kinds of experiences. I just found that it was something to do that was my own property.

AAJ: And by your first recording, at what point were you in your left-hand development?

BB: I was pretty strong, but I wasn't strong enough. Probably, but it didn't satisfy me. I was teaching then. I didn't handle the opportunities possibly that I could have had.

AAJ: Have you had many students over the years?

BB: Not recently. I haven't looked for them. But I'm thinking now that I will accept students. I may even advertise... I'm open for teaching by the way folks! Call me up, or send me an email. I have my studio and a Steinway piano...

AAJ: So would you say now that both of your hands, you can equally utilize them, or is your left hand stronger than your right hand?

BB: Well, let's put it this way. Actually when you develop your left hand it seems like it's a more natural hand because when you throw the hand, you're throwing your strong fingers. Also, psychologically, it's like you're going down [plays]. This is going up [plays]...(And) this is one of the reasons a lot of pianists are very limited. They just use these first three fingers [plays]. These fingers on the right hand, the weakest fingers, are very necessary in romantic music to bring out the melodies, but in the left hand the thumb is very strong so that it's more natural. It's what I said before.

AAJ: I remember the first time I saw you perform live, and I had a seat where I could see your profile while you played. And it literally looked like you had two right hands when you were doing these dense runs! Your left hand was moving so quick that it was hard to tell which was your left, and which was your right.

BB: The thing I can do now...[plays] (is) I can play slow now in the left hand, which is really very hard to do...Also when I cross the hands over [plays], I can play with the left hand when it's crossed over into the treble. Basically what it does is that it brings out the feeling in the piano. Because you know the piano can be a cold instrument...

AAJ: Would you ever be interested in doing an album of standards? That would be a very interesting project because there's so many musicians doing standards that basically regurgitate the past, but you would offer a very fresh perspective.

BB: Yeah, I used to play them. I still can play them. I have a whole

book...The thing is, I come from what they call “changes”. I’m not strictly a “free” pianist. In other words, I know harmony, and I can put my hands on it.

AAJ: Your first four sessions were solo recordings. Do you prefer playing alone? And even though your first four were solos, everything else after that have pretty much been duos, pretty much. Is there a preference between solo and duo?



BB: Well if I was doing lots of solos, I’d want to do duos. Since I did all those duos, I want to do a solo record now... Whatever comes along, I’m going to do it!

AAJ: And with regards to your duo work - is that final Thomas Chapin collaboration your most memorable?

BB: Memorable because Tom was very ill. It’s a nice record, but so are some others... I’ve been told that when somebody plays with me, it comes out differently. I think Roscoe (Mitchell), particularly the second one (*The Italian Concert*, Soul Note), plays differently, (and is) much warmer. But the reason is, well I can’t say - I do feel very confident when I play duo...

AAJ: Is there an added comfort level, playing with horns?

BB: Well, first of all, I learned horn style on piano...So there isn’t much a horn player can do that I don’t know that he’s doing it. Playing with horns, you get a lot of ideas from the horns.

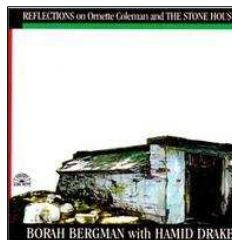
AAJ: Would you ever be interested in performing with another pianist?

BB: Well, depends on the pianist. First of all if someone came and offered me \$10,000 to play, I’m not going to say “no”, but there’s certain pianists that I would find interesting for certain reasons. You know, two pianists don’t sound that great together. I mean, I already sound like two players sometimes!

AAJ: And have you ever thought about experimenting on the inside of the piano?

BB: Yes, I found it very boring. It’s a technique that was developed through Cage and other people, and I don’t see any point in doing it, and it’s a little late (for me) to do it. It’s been around for 50 years.

AAJ: What about the fact that musicians, probably more so now than ever, can’t focus exclusively on their music these days? They need to split their time not only between playing, but the booking aspect, the self-promotion aspect, etc. It’s not something that musicians can obviously afford to do, to have someone else to do that work for them to allow them to focus on their art. And ultimately, how much does that take away from the art form itself, if musicians can’t dedicate the time that they need to with regards to playing?... And how do you get the world to hear the fact that Borah Bergman is out there playing?



BB: I spent a lot of time on developing. I’m pretty confident about what I’m doing, since I spent a lot of time learning to do it...the best I can do is to make records, maybe do concerts, but I do need somebody to get these concerts for me... I’m here to stay and I’m going to keep doing it [long pause], (but) get me a managers, a booking agents, somebody to get me jobs!

AAJ: You mentioned to me a mythical mentor you have.

BB: I never really had a true mentor, so I made one up. His name is Spindell Kresge. I referred to him in some previous interview and concert notes. He's running and somebody's chasing him. I don't know what the symbolism is - but he needs all the resources he has to get away from that person who's running after him. And when I play the piano with both hands, I need all the resources that I have to get away from somebody who is chasing me also. Who it is, I really don't know...So, the way I handle the left and right hand is very different from every other pianist who's improvising in the scene. Maybe they don't have somebody running after their mentor, as I do: Spindell Kresge. This is why I have the "double idea". If right hand makes a mistake, left hand takes over and corrects it, when the left hand makes a mistake, rightie takes over and corrects it.

AAJ: You mentioned you're like two piano players in one. Do you feel like two people playing?

BB: I don't feel any more like two people playing. I used to when I first started. I weave, and I turn around corners, but they're still after me. It's like an Ingmar Bergman film. Did you ever see *The Seventh Seal*? Somebody's after me.

AAJ: So, would it be a relief, or the exact opposite, if suddenly you weren't being chased while playing?

BB: I don't know. The thing is I know my own uniqueness. I learned everything I could from other people, then put myself in there also...I wouldn't say the notes are you, but the placement of the notes are you, that's the difference; I play like a horn not the piano, (and) I used to play the horn; it's a highly syncopated style; most free pianists play straight on the beat which I never do; my basic background is bebop, and "free" came into my playing a little later on, that's why you get a sense of buoyancy in my playing - you don't get a feeling of dead weight.

AAJ: When you play, do you have an image in your head, other than possibly being chased?

BB: I'm quixotic, or Quixote-like. I went to this psychiatrist, and we talked about wind mills. I think being quixotic in your playing is attractive. I don't know if it's a worthwhile thing in your life to be quixotic. Basically learning to play with the left hand, I had a sense of rebellion. Everybody's practicing with the right; I've got to practice with the left. So, now I'm in a very precarious situation. I have to decide what to do next! ...Of course, I do feel that I have a certain ability, so I can afford being myself.

AAJ: From your first records on Chiaroscuro to your last two, what do you feel your progression's been?

BB: Well, technically, I've come very far. I really can do this, this "ambi-ideation". I prefer not to use the word ambidexterity; I use "ambi-ideation". Because you don't know what ideas are in your head, until you get the equipment to get them out; it's amazing when you have the equipment to get them out, and you find, "Wow, these ideas, I was thinking them?"

Bergman is at 5C. Café Nov. 6th and 27th with Dom Minasi. See calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Borah Bergman - *Discovery* (Chiaroscuro, 1975)
- Borah Bergman - *The Human Factor* (Soul Note, 1992)
- Borah Bergman - *Reflections on Ornette Coleman and the Stone House* (Soul Note, 1995)
- Borah Bergman/Thomas Chapin - *Toronto 1997* (Boxholder, 1997)
- Borah Bergman - *Meditations for Piano* (Tzadik, 2003)
- Borah Bergman/Lol Coxhill/Paul Hession - *Acts of Love* (Mutable Music, 2003)

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Peter Gannushkin (color)
Jack Frisch (b&w at piano)

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