

Jazzman keeps spirit in Lincoln

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior Reporter

When Butch Berman was 7, he started collecting records. By age 10, he had 300 albums. Now, more than 30 years later, Berman's music collection contains more than 20,000 albums, CDs, and videos.

"My goal is to live long enough to hear and view them all," he said.

Berman, a 48-year-old Lincoln native, has spent most of his life involved with the world of music, specifically rock 'n' roll. In 1964, he started his first band, The Exploits, as a student at Lincoln High School. Since then, he has traveled from San Francisco to New York, playing professional music in bands like Road Side Attraction, the Kaleidoscopes, the Perks and, most recently, the Hobnobs.

But about two years ago, Berman tired of rock 'n' roll and rediscovered his passion for jazz.

"There's nothin' like puttin' on a guitar and gettin' in somebody's face," Berman said. "But you get to a certain age, and you need to do something else."

Now, Berman is determined to increase jazz awareness in the Lincoln area.

"There's a very small hard-core jazz following in Lincoln," Berman explained. "Jazz has always been there, but it's always had to struggle."

Hoping to end this struggle, he established the Berman Music Foundation, a charitable, nonprofit organization involved in the promotion and protection of jazz music.

The foundation's first project was the conversion of Berman's house into a museum. He first considered the idea after finding an important jazz record at a Goodwill Industries thrift store.

"There was this lawyer who was not much older than me, who had

died, and somehow his stuff ended up at Goodwill," Berman said. "There was this incredible record for a quarter. I thought how there is no one I can really leave all my stuff to who I can really trust."

Realizing the importance of sharing and preserving the volumes of work he had amassed, Berman went through legal motions to turn his house into a museum in 1995. Since then, many people have donated rare albums to the foundation's archives.

"They know the record will have a home forever," Berman said of donors. "Years from now, people will be able to enjoy it because someone kept it clean and playable."

Though Berman would like someday to move the collection into a building and combine office space and a performance venue, for now he allows visitors to view the collection by appointment at his home.

Berman Music Foundation also promotes jazz by bringing musicians to the Lincoln area to perform. Past celebrity jazz musicians include saxophonist Benny Waters, vocalist Jane Jarvis and bassist Christian McBride.

"It's a great setup, because we give the musicians work while enriching the community and making friends for life," Berman explained. "I've now made friends with most of my idols."

The foundation has scheduled performances by two guest musicians this fall. On Oct. 4, the organization will help sponsor the Doug Talley Quartet from Kansas City, Mo., at Ebenezer's. On Oct. 19, it will co-produce with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Music Department a concert of the Minneapolis/St. Paul jazz sextet the Motion Poets. The performance will be at Westbrook Music Building.

In the meantime, Berman and the foundation are busy funding two CD projects with Arabesque Records.



MICHAEL WARREN/DN

ALONG WITH having a collection of thousands of records and compact discs, Butch Berman is also a gifted musician. Berman can play the piano as well as the guitar. Berman has become known in the clubs of New York City and Kansas City, Mo., because of his knowledge of jazz, and has earned himself the nickname the "Jazz Angel."

On Feb. 1, 1998, Andrienne Wilson's "She's Dangerous" will be released. Berman said he was an avid admirer of Wilson and took his greatest pride in working with the making of her album. Next year, Berman also will fund a new CD by Norman Headman and Tropique, who performed at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery's Jazz in June series this summer.

To help keep the public knowledgeable about the foundation's activities, Berman publishes a monthly newsletter, "Jazz." It's compiled by some of Berman's colleagues and includes stories about jazz performances and CD reviews.

The newsletter's July/August edition gave full coverage to the Jazz in June series and paid tribute to the

late jazzman Doc Cheatham. Berman had the opportunity to meet Cheatham at Sweet Basil, a New York City jazz club.

While working with the foundation, Berman also DJs for local radio station KZUM, 89.3 FM. Berman's show, "Reboppin'," airs Thursday afternoons from noon to 2:30 p.m.

"I started as a DJ about six years ago with my friend Dave Hughes," Berman explained. "It was called 'Bop Street' and revolved around the blues. When I got back into jazz, we just changed the name."

Berman said Lincoln's response to his endeavors has been positive. The main problem he perceives with a further increase of jazz in Lincoln is the lack of a suitable venue.

"Ebenezer's is the closest thing to a jazz venue in Lincoln," Berman said. "If I could design one here, I would make it like The Birdland in New York — great sight lines, a good menu, a lot of a variety in the musicians and steeped in jazz."

The closest true jazz community, Berman said, is Kansas City, Mo. Lincoln could learn from Kansas City's endeavors, Berman said.

The jazzman has no plans to leave Lincoln, however.

"I enjoy traveling, and I've been all over, but I'm going to stay here and see what we can accomplish," Berman said. "Lincoln presents a challenge, and I'm having fun bringing all these people together for jazz."

Record company red tape doesn't discourage band

BY BRET SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

Corporate rock still sucks.

But you won't get Jon Taylor of Mercy Rule to admit that — yet.

Local rock darlings and vocal powerhouse Mercy Rule worked for two years to release an album and hoped that by signing with rock music mastodon MCA, their wait would finally be over.

Instead, they have encountered a new tangle of legal technicalities and corporate upsets.

Recording demos at Fort Apache in Boston and completing the album during the summer of 1996 at Smart Studios in Madison, Wis., Mercy Rule waited for months for a response from MCA.

The one they got wasn't the one they wanted to hear — the album would not be released.

"We're just grumpy that we lost a lot of time," said Taylor, the trio's guitarist. "We expected it to come out last spring."

For a label to decide not to release an album is nothing unusual, but Mercy Rule's response was. Now, Taylor, bassist Heidi Ore and drummer Ron Albertson are trying to buy back the legal rights to the MCA-produced album. The arrangement would allow Mercy Rule to buy the album's reproduction rights for \$6,000, a fraction of the cost of ownership rights.

"Typically what happens is the band will shop around to find another label to buy the rights to (the album)," Taylor said. "We had never intended to wait for another label to pick up this record, so we started negotiating im-

mediately to release it independently."

Mercy Rule's first recording success came with Relativity Records, where the band made its biggest album to date: 1994's "Providence." In early 1996, Mercy Rule recruited Bob Mould's former production partner, Lou Giordano, to help produce its follow-up to "Providence." Before the album got under way, however, Relativity shed its rock acts, opting, instead, for the recent momentum of urban and hip-hop groups.

Giordano stuck with Mercy Rule and organized a Fort Apache studio demo session, where the recordings sent to MCA Records were recorded. The demo was well-received, and a recording contract was signed. Mercy Rule finished the album in less than four weeks and submitted it to MCA, which still owns the record the band so anxiously wants manufactured.

"(MCA) has difficulty dealing with any band that isn't a very large commercial success, meaning: They put all their eggs in one basket, and if the band doesn't do extremely well in commercial radio, they just drop the project," Taylor said.

MCA didn't return phone calls seeking comment for this story.

Taylor said that MCA felt Mercy Rule wasn't commercial material, which is fine with Taylor, who cites such examples as Superchunk and Jesus Lizard in pointing out successful bands that have not received much attention from popular radio stations.

Mercy Rule's staying power in the region has always rested on its relationship with students, forged from the intimate rock howls and cavernous bass and guitar of Ore and Taylor.

Taylor said while MCA may see success in dollar signs, he believes it is measured in what the band has produced.

"The big labels just limit themselves so much," Taylor said. "Either it goes on big radio stations, or it doesn't matter. I know that's where they get most of their sales, but if they just slowed down and put out better records that rock, they would take care of themselves."

Ore agreed with Taylor and commented that Mercy Rule never saw anyone from MCA while recording. Their only real communication came with the decision not to release the album, she said.

For now, though, Mercy Rule has had enough of labels.

"We are not that anxious to sign any more contracts," Taylor said.

But Mercy Rule has made a brief agreement with the same company that produced their infant indie offering, "God Protects Fools," in '91. By returning to Caulfield Records, the local label that initiated Mercy Rule's momentum to major label MCA, Mercy Rule should have its latest album ready for distribution by September.

Despite the anxiety and letdowns, Taylor still believes in the benefits that large companies such as MCA have to offer relatively unknown bands.

"It's not like we are bitter about any of this label stuff, and we're not pissed off," he said. "I'm not saying that a band shouldn't try to get signed. I think these labels are good for helping bands afford to go into a cool studio with a cool producer and make a record better than the one they made before."

"We are not that anxious to sign any more contracts."

JON TAYLOR
guitarist for Mercy Rule

The opportunity to produce a record with Giordano led Mercy Rule to MCA in the first place, Taylor said, because working with producers of his stature cost more than the band could muster by themselves. Taylor said Giordano's input on the recordings was essential.

"Before we would just play real fast at the end of songs and keep speeding up," Taylor said. "He made sure we didn't do that, and we would have taken the first takes because we're lazy, but he said, 'No, try it again.'"

With Giordano's influence and the new album, Mercy Rule is taking its act on the road for the first time in more than a year. The band is traveling in its signature van through Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas for the next few weeks. The band hasn't had any problems scheduling dates, Taylor said.

"When I started calling bars to book some shows, the response was great," he said. "Sometimes you feel like it's a race and, if you get out of it, you're lost and out of the pack. It seems like people just kind of stick with you. Obviously, we've lost some momentum because it's been two years since our last record, but obviously, it's not that big of a deal."