

# Fire On the Mountain

Karl Berger reflects on his ongoing quest for creative challenges.

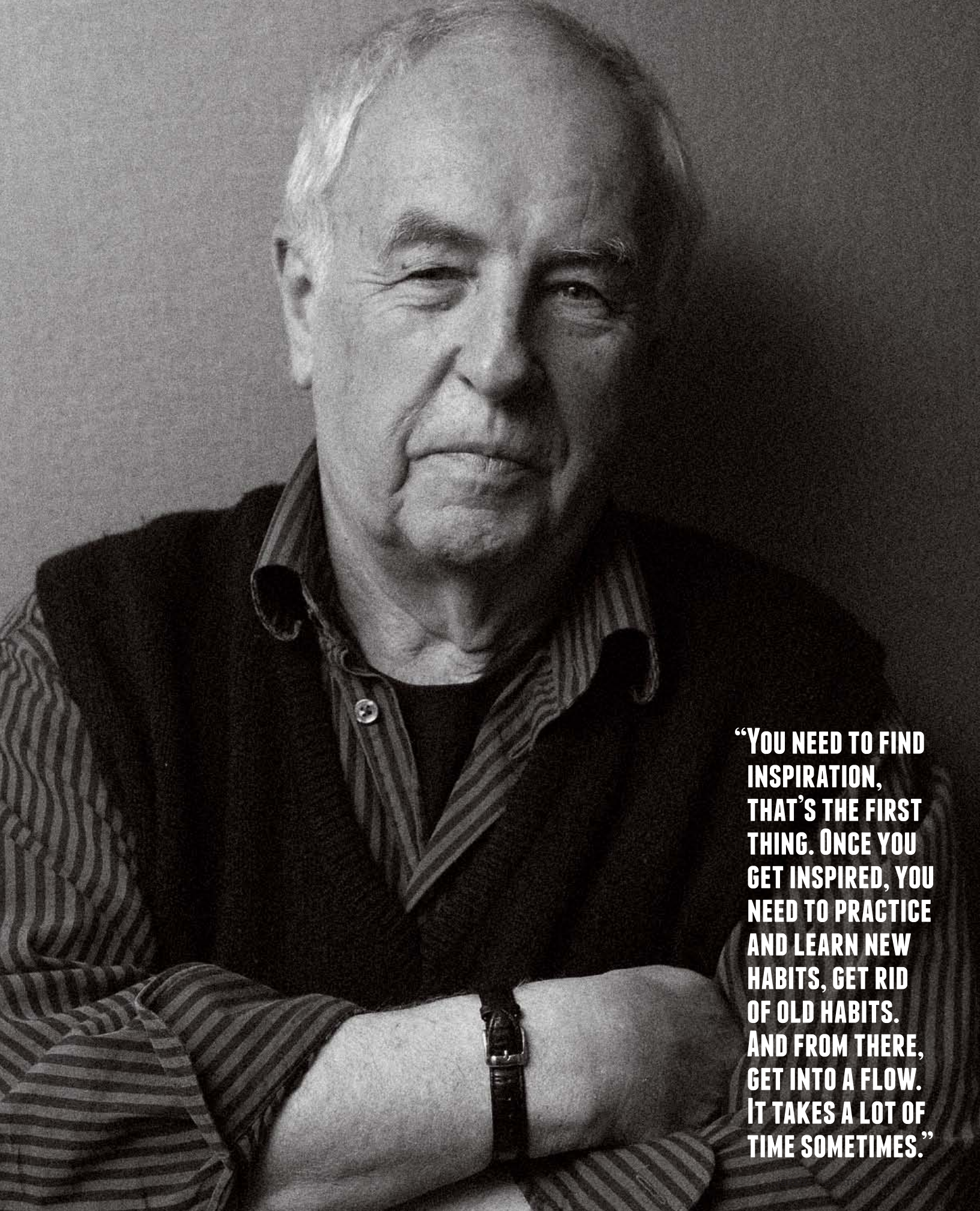
By Bob Weinberg

**During a recent residency at The Stone in New York City, Karl Berger flitted from one musical setting to the next, as productive as a honeybee in a field of flowers. Over the course of six** days in September, the pianist and vibraphonist, who turns 80 in March, performed solo and in duos, with small ensembles and with his Improvisers Orchestra. A multigenerational array of artists, including trumpeter Steven Bernstein, cornetist Kirk Knuffke, violinist Jason Hwang, bassist William Parker and drummer Tyshawn Sorey contributed to the cross-pollination of musical ideas, as did Berger's wife and longtime collaborator, vocalist Ingrid Sertso.

Berger has long sought out such challenges. In fact, 42 years ago, he and Sertso and Ornette Coleman founded the Creative Music Foundation in Woodstock, New York, to foster just these types

of exchanges. And certainly The Stone's proprietor, John Zorn, is no stranger to spontaneous interaction. The saxophonist and producer, whose Tzadik label has attracted similarly adventurous artists, released Berger's beautiful and moody trio album, *Gently UnFamiliar*, on his imprint in September. The second in a planned trilogy — following 2010's solo-piano album, *Strangely Familiar* — the disc features Berger with longtime colleagues Joe Fonda and Harvey Sorgen on bass and drums, respectively. On a third release, he'll interact with a string quartet.

Zorn had been inspired to record Berger on piano after hearing him perform with Sertso and saxophonist Anthony Braxton during a Creative Music Studio (CMS) benefit about five years ago. While Berger made his bones as a malleeteer — he practically owned the vibes category in the *DownBeat* critics' polls from



**“YOU NEED TO FIND  
INSPIRATION,  
THAT’S THE FIRST  
THING. ONCE YOU  
GET INSPIRED, YOU  
NEED TO PRACTICE  
AND LEARN NEW  
HABITS, GET RID  
OF OLD HABITS.  
AND FROM THERE,  
GET INTO A FLOW.  
IT TAKES A LOT OF  
TIME SOMETIMES.”**

# Cindy Bradley

## "Bliss"



"Open, Honest, Revealing..."

Featuring her #1 hit radio single  
"Riverside Jive"



Gutmore Ent.

trippin' N Rhythm  
Records



Look Out For the FREE Trippin iTunes App

the late-'60s to mid-'70s — he considers himself a pianist first and foremost. Apparently, Zorn concurred.

"[Zorn] suggested this series, because he had heard something in my piano playing that he liked. And he wanted that particular feel, which is very spacy, kind of in slow motion," Berger relates by phone from his longtime home in Woodstock, his soft German accent hinting at his Heidelberg roots. "The way I played with [Braxton] is a contrapuntal style. Instead of playing with another instrument, I play with my two hands being two instruments. And they're not necessarily playing in the same key, and they don't necessarily agree on everything. But they relate dynamically to each other in a way that comes out harmonious — although if you read the chord on a piece of paper, it would be a dissonance."

Creating harmony out of dissonance is a Berger hallmark, one that he expertly employs on *Reverie* (Leo), a recent duo recording with prolific Brazilian saxophonist Ivo Perelman (see sidebar). The pair had never met prior to the March 2014 sessions at Systems Two Studios in Brooklyn, but that was hardly a deterrent — for Perelman, who had requested Berger as a duo partner, or for Berger, who was unfamiliar with the younger Perelman. The results are thrilling, a high-wire conversation between improvisational masters whose approaches often contrast dramatically. Where Perelman favors over-blowing for unfiltered emotional expression, Berger is the epitome of sublime minimalism. However, they achieve balance and beauty in a shared vocabulary and sensibility, each man meeting the other halfway. That, and combined decades of experience, are about all they brought with them to the session. "I went in with a cup of coffee," Berger says. "We didn't even talk about the music. We just played it."

That methodology, too, was honed at CMS some four decades ago. While the music laboratory no longer maintains a physical campus — Berger closed the doors in 1984 — its mission lives on, through workshops, residencies, performances and hours and hours of archival material captured on tape and stored at Columbia University, where it's being digitized. Awarded earlier this year, an \$11,600 grant

from the Grammy Foundation has helped finance the painstaking and expensive process of digitally transferring some 400 concert tapes. Some of that music has been released on the three-disc 2014 collection *Archive Selections, Vol. 1* (Innova).

Culled from performances spanning 1977 to 1981, the discs capture a rarefied time for CMS, presenting team-ups of avant-garde jazz giants such as drummer Ed Blackwell and saxophonist Charles Brackeen; orchestral works composed and conducted by Olu Dara, Oliver Lake and Roscoe Mitchell; and pioneering world-music pieces by Ismet Siral, Nana Vasconcelos and Foday Suso. The aim is not only to digitize the material, but to remaster it — under the careful ministrations of longtime CMS engineer Ted Orr — and perhaps even make it possible for participating artists to release it commercially on individual albums.

There's also an oral-history component to the project, with interviews being conducted by students at Columbia's Center for Oral History, at least of the artists they've been able to track down. Brackeen was not among them. "We could never locate him," Berger says. "We know now where he is, but he's not playing anymore. It's a sad story." As is the tale of bassist and composer David Izenzon, who's heard on *Archive Selections, Vol. 1* in a trio with Berger on piano and Sertso on vocals. In frail health, Izenzon, then 47, suffered a fatal heart attack while running after a thief who stole a bow from his car in 1979. "Ingrid and Dave were really very tight, and that trio was a gem," Berger reflects. "Definitely, working with Izenzon was one of the highlights of our time there."

And, like so many important elements in his life, Berger shared a link with Izenzon to Ornette Coleman.

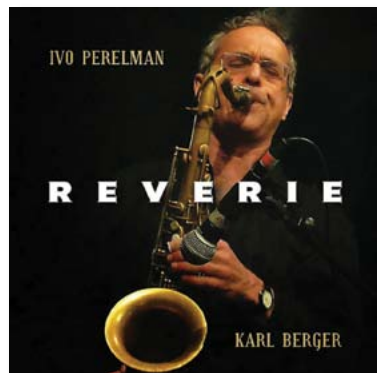
**Berger says he responded immediately to Coleman's music, from the moment he and Sertso first heard the Coleman quartet's**

1961 recording *This Is Our Music*. The couple, who had met in Heidelberg in 1958, were excited by Coleman's harmolodic innovation and dedicated themselves to its pursuit. In Coleman's sound, Berger discerned the integral rhythmic pulse that was largely absent from much of the avant-garde music being made in Europe at the time. "A few

# In Space, No one Can Hear You Scream

**Ivo Perelman prizes spontaneity over most other concerns. The Brazilian-born, Brooklyn-based saxophonist says that state of surprise is best achieved when he knows little**

about his collaborator beforehand. And forget about advance



conversations regarding the music. Such was the case when he invited Karl Berger to join him in March for the session that produced the duo album *Reverie* (Leo). Sure, he'd heard a Berger album or two, and he knew of his history playing with some of the great-

est figures in modern jazz. But the pair had never performed together or discussed just how that would go down. "I shook his hand and talked to him a minute before the red light went on," Perelman says.

The results are remarkably harmonious, particularly considering the partners' contrasting styles. Perelman's dense note clusters and emotional intensity rub up against Berger's spare, more oblique playing, but never at the expense of the musical conversation. "It's a very spontaneous, natural response," Perelman explains. "The first few notes and my saxophone is doing things it never did. The music dictated that I play a certain way, and it's totally in response to Karl's playing — it's not sparse, but he edits. So he doesn't need many notes to say many beautiful things."

"Because I left these spaces, Ivo began to play differently," Berger says. "And to me, it becomes more musical that way, because the listener can actually get involved. I'm not interested in expressing dissonance; there's enough dissonance in the world. The complexity will come from our having our own ideas. We're going to play notes that some would describe as dissonant, but we can make them harmonize because of the dynamics, how we get out of each other's way."

Berger elicited a more contemplative side of Perelman's playing, one that's not obvious in the saxophonist's impassioned blowing alongside edge-walkers such as pianist Matthew Shipp or guitarist Joe Morris. It was sufficiently expressed for Perelman to title the album *Reverie* and to name tracks "Contemplation," "Pensiveness" and "Placidity."

"He brought out my dormant romanticism," the São Paulo native admits. "I had to deliver like that, or else it would have been a fiasco. Karl doesn't have to fill up every space, and I appreciated that. That was beautiful, and I reacted to it. And I think that makes a unique record in my discography." —BW

weeks ago, an interviewer asked me what I was thinking about when I heard [Coleman]," he relates. "And I said, 'Thinking about it? I wasn't thinking about it. I was getting into it.' I mean, that was the music I wanted to play."

Working in Paris in the mid-'60s, Berger one day spied Coleman's main collaborator, cornetist Don Cherry, on the street. Somehow, he summoned the courage not only to approach Cherry, but to blurt out his desire to play music with him. "He's a very intuitive guy," Berger says of the late horn player and composer who became his mentor, colleague and friend. "He just said, 'Rehearsal is tomorrow at 4,' and he gave me the address. And then I played for the next three, four years with him."

Cherry and Berger stayed busy, playing engagements at clubs throughout Paris with a group that included saxophonist Gato Barbieri and the French rhythm team of bassist Jean-François ("Jenny-") Clark and drummer Aldo Romano. Sets included music by Cherry and Coleman and integrated the world-music colors that the cornetist was beginning to absorb through shortwave radio. "He was walking around with shortwave earphones all day," Berger says. "He had an elephant's memory — he could hear a tune once and reproduce it. He took 'world music' very literally, in the sense that he would just pick up any melody from anywhere and just utilize it as he wished."

The group was holding down a nightly gig at the noted Parisian jazz club Le Chat Qui Pêche, when Coleman came to town with his trio mates, bassist Izenzon and drummer Charles Moffett. Coleman stopped by the club to check out Cherry's band, and Cherry introduced him to Berger. Thus began a relationship that would lead to the formation of the Creative Music Foundation a few years later. "Ornette helped me establish the organization [in 1972]," Berger says. "He was the one who really encouraged me to do this, because he saw what I was trying to do, creating a situation where people wouldn't study in stylistic terms, but they would really get into the core music. And that's what Ornette is all about himself."

Cherry brought Berger, Barbieri and Jenny-Clark to the United States in 1966, where they recorded the Blue Note classic *Symphony for Improvisers* — bolstered by saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, bassist Henry Grimes and drummer Ed Blackwell — at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Hackensack, New Jersey. They also played concerts at Town Hall and at the Five Spot in New York City. Although Berger returned to Europe, touring with his own group in the late '60s, he had already made up his mind to reside in New York.

With European institutions in mind, Berger realized the artistic value in starting a nonprofit venture, discussing possibilities with like-minded artists such as Carla Bley, Mike Mantler and, ultimately, Coleman. But it was another adventurous saxophonist, Marion Brown, who first brought him to Woodstock in 1971. "I saw the potential of this place," Berger says, "being close enough to New York [City] but not actually being a suburb of New York, being its own place and having its own tradition, artistically and otherwise." By '72, he and Sertso were living in Woodstock, tapping the talents of neighbors such as saxophonists Anthony Braxton and Joseph Jarman, who became CMS regulars.

Unsurprisingly, Berger's weeklong stand at The Stone in September kicked off with a night dedicated to Cherry. Don't call it a tribute, the pianist and vibist warns, but rather a celebration of Cherry's venturesome spirit and boundary-blurring aesthetic. Most

# Jackie Allen My Favorite Color



*Top 10 Playlist* - USA Today  
*Top 10 Vocal Jazz* - Amazon  
 "As spellbinding as ever" - JazzTimes  
 "A masterpiece" - Billboard

Jackie's long anticipated follow-up to *Tangled* (Blue Note). Now available wherever fine music is sold



Jackie Allen-vcl, John Moulder-gtrs, Ben Lewis-keys, Hans Sturm-bs, Dane Richeson-drms, Tito Carrillo-tpt, Steve Eisen-sax

[www.jackieallen.com](http://www.jackieallen.com)

avant: bass

of the players on the bandstand — bassist Mark Helias, trumpeter Steven Bernstein, saxophonist Peter Apfelbaum — shared a history of working alongside the cornetist, who died nearly 20 years ago. No question, his influence on Berger and the CMS proved profound, particularly as reflected on CD 3 of the *Archive Selections*, which comprises world-music selections. Berger had invited musicians from all over the globe to participate in freewheeling sessions that blended players in a kind of sonic Pangea. And somehow it worked, illustrating Berger's desire to create harmony from disparate elements, and predating world-music trends by a decade or more.

"There was not just an intellectual idea about it," he explains of his cross-cultural experiments. "It was just like, 'Music is our common language.' That was the idea. So people just started playing together, not thinking a lot about in what style they would be playing or anything of that nature. It would all be about personality, and just feeling good about playing together. So, whatever happened from there, that was the music."

## As he approaches his 80th birthday in 2015, Berger is hardly ready to retire.

**However, he and Sertso have discussed** the possibility of ducking Woodstock's woolly winters and finding a seasonal home, perhaps on Florida's west coast. The couple will test the waters in May and June by holding down a three-week residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach. "We are Mediterranean people," he explains with a chuckle.

But the man loves to work, as is obvious from his schedule. In addition to his week-long stand at The Stone in September, Berger performed with bassist Fonda and drummer Sorgen — the trio on the new Tzadik recording — at The Falcon, in Marlboro, New York. Back in the city, he convened his Improvisers Orchestra, an up-to-30-plus-member ensemble, which played its 75th concert since 2011 at the Shapeshifter Lab in Brooklyn and kicked off a series of gigs there that ran through November. One of those performances featured vocalist Tom Buckner interacting

with Berger and Sertso and the orch — a multi-textured assemblage that may utilize anything from cello and oboe to shakuhachi flute and mandolin — and served as a fundraiser for the ongoing CMS Archive Project. An expensive undertaking, even with the Grammy grant and Columbia's aid, the project was also the subject of a Kickstarter campaign that came up a couple of thousand dollars shy.

The CMS marked its 40th anniversary two years ago, but, Berger laughingly admits, they're still celebrating. They held a fall workshop in late-September/early-October, in which participating artists such as drummer-composer John Hollenbeck, tabla master Badal Roy and cornetist Kirk Knuffke provided instruction at the Full Moon Resort in Big Indian, New York (in the Catskills), and held nightly concerts with Berger and Sertso. And Berger continues to offer private instruction, conducting his "Music Mind" sessions via Skype. "There's really three steps that I teach people," he says. "You need to find inspiration, that's the first thing. Once you get inspired, you need to practice and learn new habits, get rid of old habits. And from there, get into a flow. It takes a lot of time sometimes. For me, it took years and years to get there."

A physical CMS campus may rise again, he says, revealing that a business plan is in the works, but it would take a different form. "The form we had before was almost like a college, where you would study in 10-to-12-week semesters and summer sessions," Berger says. "And I don't think we would want to do that. We would maybe do it more like a retreat center for artists, where people come up with a group and they work on a project and they record and they basically have leisure time to get things together."

Non-musicians are welcome to attend CMS functions, too. In perhaps the ultimate fan experience, jazz lovers who play nothing other than the stereo can participate in workshops and sessions and come away with an even greater understanding of and appreciation for the music. "It's a mind-opener," Berger says. "It's a game-changer for some people. Mainly, you could discover for yourself your own potential to hear things. You hear more after you've been there than you've heard before." ▲