

**TIM BERNE** (b. 1954)

**THE SEVENS**

80586-2

Tim Berne's universe, like ours, possesses a prevailing sense of balance. But it's a precarious, restive balance—not the stuff of complacent repose. Equilibrium, for Berne, embodies not a state of being but rather a set of actions, designed to foil stasis and foster static. Merriam-Webster, taking its cue from Isaac Newton, accurately describes this process as an “equipoise between contrasting, opposing, or interacting elements.” Think tightropes, seesaws, tugs-of-war.

According to Newton, every action meets its reaction, opposite in direction and equal in force. Berne often thwarts this paradigm, creating tensions that ultimately go unresolved. It's true that he weighs clear vistas against knotted brambles, expansive freedoms against intricate forms; yet it's an incomplete truth, because in Berne's oeuvre there are no diametric oppositions, only shifting relationships. If a car teeters on the edge of a precipice (as cars often do), Newtonians consider masses, net forces, vector sums. Berne might be more inclined to imagine the arc of the thing as it pitches over, the explosive bloom on impact.

Berne's music occupies a singular space precisely because of this imagination, which resists not only genre distinction but even the trappings of idiom. As a result, it's far easier to settle upon what it's not than what it is. Jazz, a word now stretched so thin as to be meaningless, seems somehow inaccurate—although there's a way in which Berne's procedures (often involving variations on, or permutations of, a theme) veer more closely to “jazz” than to even the most contemporary chamber music. Tim Berne is a jazz musician, to be sure. But the carefully rough-hewn calibration of forces that distinguishes his music—inside/outside, intellect/instinct, individualism/collectivism, chaos/control—can be found nowhere else in the lexicon. So call it Tim Berne Music, and leave the usual tag lines (“avant-garde,” or “postmodern,” or “downtown”) for the armchair semioticians who give a damn.

After all, Berne doesn't. Growing up in Syracuse, New York, in the sixties, he gravitated not toward jazz but Stax/Volt soul: Sam and Dave, Johnny Taylor, the Staple Singers. He only became a musician himself at age nineteen, after purchasing an alto saxophone from a fellow student at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon. This coincided with his discovery of the St. Louis alto saxophonist Julius Hemphill—whose debut solo album *Dogon A.D.* bridged the gap between the soul music of Berne's childhood and the adventurous improvisational music of the day. By 1974 Berne had moved to New York City, where, after a few lessons with composer/multi-reedist Anthony Braxton, he met Hemphill. The older saxophonist took the younger under his wing.

“The hip thing about Julius,” Berne recalls today, “was his ability to allude to a mood without being literal. He could write a blues, or something even like a standard, but they always sounded like him.” This was one of many lessons gleaned firsthand during an intensive master-apprentice relationship that lasted a number of years. Hemphill imparted knowledge of every sort: from saxophone technique to the finer points of composition, spirituality, and do-it-yourself promotion. Berne helped his mentor record *Blue Boyé*, a solo dissertation released on Hemphill's own Mbari label; a few years later, he went into the independent record business himself, founding a label with the mock-grandiose name of Empire.

Berne's pursuits continued to reflect an affinity with Hemphill's core beliefs—in particular, the conviction that an artist should, above all else, heed his Muse. This impulse yielded four albums on Empire and two on the Italian Soul Note label, before Berne was signed to Columbia Records in 1986—one of several fortunate incongruities in that company's history. Two years later, having recorded a couple of critically acclaimed, non-commercial albums, Berne was excused from his contract. He immediately began a fruitful association with JMT, a division of Polygram. Over the next eight years he would furnish this label with nine albums—unveiling, in the process, such distinctive ensemble projects as *Fractured Fairy Tales* (featuring, among others, cellist Hank Robertson and violinist Mark Feldman); *Diminutive Mysteries* (a Hemphill tribute recorded in collaboration with alto saxophonist David Sanborn); *Miniature* (a collaborative trio with Roberts and drummer Joey Baron); *Caos Totale* (an elastic

sextet featuring, among others, Parisian guitarist Marc Ducret); and *Bloodcount* (a texturally-advanced quartet consisting of Berne, bassist Michael Formanek, multi-reedist Chris Speed and drummer Jim Black). Then the dissolution of JMT, in 1997, prompted Berne to form his second independent label, ushering in a new era of Hemphillian self-sufficiency. As of this writing, the Screwgun Records catalogue includes some thirteen titles—under Berne’s leadership as well as that of Ducret, Formanek, and keyboardist Django Bates. In 1999 the label also acquired and reissued *Blue Boyé*, which had long been out of print. (Unfortunately, attempts to resuscitate *Dogon A.D.* were unsuccessful.)

At the heart of this narrative lies a fundamental theme: the tensile balance (there’s that word again) between composition and improvisation. Berne has, at various moments, leaned substantially to one side or the other; more often he blurs distinctions between the two. *Caos Totale* and *Bloodcount* were both as inclined toward “free” playing as to densely notated figures. *Paraphrase*, a trio featuring drummer Tom Rainey and bassist Drew Gress, never employs written music of any sort—but there’s no question that the resulting performances convey a compositional air. And *Big Satan*, a trio with Rainey and Ducret, intertwines melody and embellishment so effectively as to make them indistinguishable. This seems less a function of intent than a matter of taste; Berne ignores the usual distinctions because they’re of no use to him. Composition and improvisation are merely two routes to the same destination.

But this is not to say that Berne has no guiding compositional focus: quite the contrary, in fact. Since his earliest recordings, Berne has been closely associated with a sort of “long-form” writing style that bobs and weaves onward, sometimes without recapitulation. At the same time, he has developed an instantly recognizable harmonic signature, inspired more by particular intervallic relationships than by theoretical edicts. Often in his music, two or more melodic lines brush against each other, producing a shower of sparks. The key isn’t counterpoint, but rather a kind of interlocking quality—like a churning system of irregular gears, propelling a swift machine. This image brings to mind another definition of balance: “an oscillating wheel operating with a hairspring to regulate the movement of a timepiece.”

Movement, in such a context, is essential. Addressing the topic of polyphony, Berne explains, “Sometimes it should be thought of as two melodies; sometimes it’s one melody with three voices. The idea is that they have momentum, and you can look at them horizontally or you can look at them vertically. And vertically it doesn’t all add up. It doesn’t have to. Because if the horizontal thing is strong enough, it doesn’t matter. If you have two really strong melodies going, and rhythmically they’re locking, it doesn’t matter what kind of harmony’s in there sometimes. And then other times it does. That’s what’s fun. It’s like a puzzle. But the momentum’s really important.”

These principles—horizontal motion, rhythmic interlocking—find perfect expression in *The Sevens*, Berne’s most explicitly “compositional” statement in some time. The album’s core, a pair of through-composed movements performed by the ARTE saxophone quartet, could serve as an apotheosis of chamber writing in the Tim Berne vein. “Repulsion” features four melodies (or is it one melody in four voices?), variously in dialogue or in chorus. Moving through a range of tonal colors, the piece reflects both Berne’s fondness for friction and his less-celebrated sensitivity. In fact, certain sections sound almost wistful, as Berne cloaks his dissonances in subtle shadows.

Berne notes that “Repulsion” was composed entirely at the piano. “Which is pretty strange,” he muses, “now that I think about it. It was interesting because it’s so easy for me to imagine saxophones that I could write it at the piano and still kind of know: ‘Okay, this is going to sound great on baritone....’ I wasn’t looking to really push the extremes. So I really knew that the intervals and the harmonies were going to work. Because I just know the saxophone.” A somewhat unintended result of this method is that the piece occasionally sounds less like a saxophone quartet and more like a solo piece for accordion. This is especially true as the movement winds down, succumbing to what Berne calls “a slow-leak effect.” The ARTE Quartett, capable of phrasing and breathing as a single instrument, endues this segment with the appropriate sense of contraction.

In “Quicksand,” the centerpiece of the album, the ARTE Quartett is joined by Berne and Marc Ducret, both of whom provide improvised commentary above and around what’s on the page. Here, in one piece, is a fulfillment of the yin-yang ethos inherent in Berne’s work. “I’m trying to create an atmosphere that promotes ideas, really,” the saxophonist says. “That’s what composing is, for me.” In other words, Berne sets the usual function of composition (documenting a finished impulse or idea) on its proverbial ear; in his view, notated music serves not as the end, but the means. “The quartet [‘Repulsion’] is the most extreme example of me composing,” says Berne, “but I don’t see it a whole lot differently than the long piece [‘Quicksand’], because all the improvising in that piece has to work as transitional material. You can either write it out or you can improvise it. And I like the excitement of improvising those things. But the way we’re improvising and the energy that we have is really relevant to the written material—otherwise there would be no point to having the composed part.” He adds that there’s no way of knowing what aspect of a song will prompt inspiration: “It doesn’t always have to be chords. It’s harmony, it’s texture, it’s velocity, it’s rhythm.”

Obviously, this method leaves much to interpretation. And on *The Sevens*, the process of interpretation assumes several different shapes. First, there’s the conventional notion of improvisation on a theme, as described by Berne above. Then there’s the subtler way in which Ducret personalizes the solo miniatures “Sequel Why” and “Sequel Ex”—two fairly divergent takes of the same hauntingly pretty song. Finally, there’s the more radical manner of interpretation seen in “Reversion” and “Tonguefarmer”—both of which are the product of studio manipulation at the hands of guitarist/programmer David Torn. This last procedure, a collaborative effort, stretches the bounds of “composition” in clearly contemporary ways.

“Reversion,” the first of these pieces, is essentially a remix of “Repulsion,” with significant modifications. Torn subjects Berne’s source material to a sort of collage, adding new timbres and textures in the process. It’s not a revision so much as a reconstitution: a brand-new piece, with a formal logic of its own. Yet, as Berne observes, “he’s using all the material. I mean, he might be transferring it to some other instruments, but he was really religious about that, and that was important. He’s really adhering to a certain structure.” Torn, who mastered the first Screwgun release in 1996, has lately come to fill a larger role in Berne’s musical world; his production is a key presence on both *The Shell Game* (2001) and *Science Friction* (2002). “I’m trying hard to be inside Tim’s vision,” Torn says of his substantial contribution to *The Sevens*. “When you have somebody as strong as Tim, who really has a very pointedly clear aesthetic, it makes me want all the more to get it from his point of view.”

In one case, this desire produces a kind of double vision. “Tonguefarmer,” the second of Torn’s remixes, is essentially a palimpsest consisting of successive layers of exposition. If it’s hard to tell where one layer ends and the next begins, there’s a reason: Those layers are indeterminate. Torn describes hearing the source material—Ducret’s improvisation over Berne’s fragmentary theme—and thinking it was through-composed. The resulting remix, which treats Ducret’s extemporizations as structural components, seems all the more compelling for its successive levels of stratification. In short, the original composition (Berne’s) is transmuted once (by Ducret), then the results are transmuted again (by Torn). While the finished product reflects facets of all three personalities, it ultimately stands, in Torn’s words, as “a testament to the fluidity of Tim’s writing to begin with.”

The process also exposes a final balancing act: the establishment and relinquishment of control. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows “balance,” archaically, as connoting the “power to decide or determine; authoritative control.”) For Berne, this has always been a conscious negotiation. “In the seventies and eighties,” he recalls, “I was obsessed with these records being like little movies, or little books—where it really flowed like a story. And I liked that. Then I got to the point where it almost felt like I was exerting too much control. So I made a bunch of live records. In a way I was working on my playing, and I wanted it to be exposed so I would have to deal with it, confront it.” He adds that *The Sevens*, with its various interpretive assignations, was “probably the hardest one to make, of records I’ve made, in a long time.” For an artist steeped in self-jurisdiction, surrendering even a portion of the product can be a terrifying prospect. Which is exactly why he did it.

Berne doesn't see himself as a contrarian (despite the confession "I have a hard time doing what I'm supposed to do"). He prefers to be regarded simply as a self-motivator: "Whatever the thing is that I'm least secure with, I tend to want to expose that and face it, in a way." Accordingly, *The Sevens* ultimately resembles neither the filmic odysseys of the eighties nor the audio snapshots of the nineties—instead defining a new Tim Berne paradigm, an uncertain but surprisingly smooth continuum expressing what the composer calls "unity through contrast." The act of writing music need not be definitive, nor inflexible, nor even solitary. In Berne's eyes, "it's really just building something, and it doesn't matter how you build it. If you see a nice house, doesn't matter how it was put together." What does matter is that the materials are solid, the foundation sound. Never mind that the ground, in the process of leveling, tends to shift beneath your feet. —*Nate Chinen*

Nate Chinen is a music writer for the *Philadelphia City Paper* and co-author of a forthcoming memoir with jazz impresario George Wein.

**Tim Berne** was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1954, and was subjected to a perfectly normal childhood. But he didn't decide to take up music until nearly twenty years later, when he was attending Lewis and Clark College in Oregon, putting most of his energy into intramural basketball. At this point, while resting a sore ankle in his dormitory, Berne encountered a saxophonist who was selling his alto, and bought it on impulse. "There was just something about the sound of the saxophone that got to me," he says.

Musically, up to that point, Berne had always been motivated by all types of music, but especially by the great Stax artists like Sam and Dave and Johnnie Taylor, as well as Motown artists like Martha and the Vandellas and Gladys Knight. This passion for the soulful quality in music would follow him for the rest of his career, a career that he could not possibly have foreseen at the time. "I hadn't listened to much jazz, but then I heard Julius Hemphill's album *Dogon A.D.*, and that completely turned me around. It captured everything I liked in music. It had this Stax/R&B sensibility and it had this other wildness. It was incredible. That's when I started playing."

Berne moved to New York in 1974, sought Hemphill out, and entered into a sort of apprenticeship with the older musician. The "lessons" they had together lasted for hours and covered everything from composition to record promotion to recording to pasting up handbills to aspects of magic and spirituality and, sometimes, even playing the saxophone. "From the beginning," Berne says, "even while I was still learning to play the saxophone, Julius always encouraged me to write my own music as well. So it never occurred to me that most people don't play their own music or aren't bandleaders. I thought that was just part of it. You learn how to play music, you start a band, and that's it. Julius didn't offer me one system, but a lot of possibilities, with the emphasis always on ideas and sound."

Berne began issuing his own albums on his own Empire label in 1979. Over the next five years he would record and distribute five albums, recently reissued as the *Empire Box* on Screwgun. In 1988 he began a long relationship with the JMT label. Berne's JMT legacy climaxed with the historic Paris Concerts given by his quartet Bloodcount, released in three volumes (*Lowlife*, *Poisoned Minds*, and *Memory Select*). In 1996 Berne once again founded his own label, Screwgun Records, which has issued thirteen releases to date.

For more information on Tim, go to [www.screwgunrecords.com](http://www.screwgunrecords.com).

The **ARTE Quartett** ([www.arte-quartett.com](http://www.arte-quartett.com)) (Beat Hofstetter, soprano saxophone; Sascha Armbruster, alto and soprano saxophones; Andrea Formenti, tenor, alto, and soprano saxophones; Beat Kappeler, baritone, alto, and soprano saxophones), was founded in 1993. The musicians have a classical background yet they are stylistically open-minded, a fact shown by their collaboration with musicians and composers of various styles. The ARTE Quartett is mainly committed to contemporary music in its various aspects. Since the foundation of the quartet, ARTE has worked closely with many composers, which has permitted the group to be involved in the process of composing. ARTE has premiered a large number of commissions. Part of the concept is clearly structured and well-reasoned programming as well as repeatedly working on larger projects. During the past years ARTE's

projects have included concerts with Terry Riley, Tim Berne, Urs Leimgruber, Fred Frith, Pierre Favre, and Nadir Vassena. The quartet tours regularly and plays at various festivals and concert series and has recorded a wide number of new pieces with various national broadcast companies. Improvisation and the use of electronic equipment and material are other aspects of ARTE's musical work.

**Marc Ducret** was born in Paris, France, in 1957, and began his professional career as a self-taught musician in 1975, playing with dance bands, folklore groups, and singers and doing a lot of studio work. Interested in a very wide range of styles and instruments (acoustic and electric 12-string guitars, oud, fretless and baritone guitars), Ducret was a member of the first National Jazz Orchestra in France in 1986, and also led his own trio, which gave many concerts and performed in numerous festivals in France, Germany, Sweden, Italy, Africa, India, and Japan. Ducret has also performed with Larry Schneider, David Friedmann, Michel Portal, Joachim Kuhn, Franco Ambrosetti, Didier Lockwood, Eric Barret, Miroslav Vitous, Enrico Rava, Adam Nussbaum, Django Bates, David Sanborn, Joey Baron, Michel Godard, and others. Since 1991, his collaboration with saxophonist Tim Berne has made Ducret one of the few European musicians regularly playing abroad. Frequently invited to be a guest soloist by groups, composers, and radio programs in Germany, Ducret created his own tentet, *Seven Songs*, exploring the music of the sixties with a very personal touch, and plays regularly with Louis Sclavis and Dominique Pifarely's Acoustic Quartet. He has also recently collaborated with the band AKA Moon and with the percussionist Bobby Previte in duet and the quartet *Latin for Travelers*.

**David Torn** (a.k.a. Splattercell) is a composer, texturalist, guitarist (two-time winner of *Guitar Player* magazine's Readers' Poll Award, 1994 and 1996), multi-instrumentalist (live looping, oud, saz, kikuyae, kotar, Mac OS, samplers, programming, etc.), producer, remixer, & sporadically vociferous consultant to technological niches within the musical instrument manufacturing community. **David Torn/Splattercell** is often featured as the creatively contributing texturalist and/or soloist on films scored by Carter Burwell, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Cliff Martinez, Howard Shore, Peter Nashell, Mark Isham, Patrick O'Hearn, Michael Whalen, and Theodore Shapiro, among others. In addition, he himself has begun scoring for film.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### **Tim Berne**

*Diminutive Mysteries (Mostly Hemphill)*. JMT 514 003.

*Empire Box*. Screwgun 70009.

*Fractured Fairy Tales*. JMT 834 431.

*Fulton Street Maul*. Columbia Records, reissued as Koch Jazz 7826.

*Open, Coma*. Screwgun 012.

*Sanctified Dreams*. Columbia Records, reissued as Koch Jazz 7825.

*Science Friction*. Screwgun 013.

*The Shell Game*. Thirsty Ear 57099.

### **with Caos Totale**

*Nice View*. JMT 514 013.

*Pace Yourself*. JMT 834 442.

### **with Bloodcount**

*Discretion*. Screwgun 70003.

*Lowlife*. JMT 124 054.

*Memory Select*. JMT 124 099.

*Poisoned Minds*. JMT 124 055.

*Saturation Point*. Screwgun 70004.

*Unwound*. Screwgun 70001.

### **ARTE Quartett**

Urs Leimgruber. *Xylem*. stv/asm 003.

**Marc Ducret** (as a leader)

*Detail. Winter & Winter 3.*

*Un Certain Malaise. Screwgun 70005.*

*News from the Front. JMT 849 148.*

*L'Ombra di Verdi. Screwgun 70010.*

**PRODUCTION CREDITS:**

Produced by Tim Berne, except tracks 3 and 5, produced by David Torn/Cell Labs

Engineer: Ron Kurz

Tracks 1, 2, 4, and 6 mixed March 5 by Ron Kurz at the Workshop in Switzerland; tracks 3 and 5 mixed March 1–6 by Splattercell at Cell Labs.

Digital mastering: David Torn/Cell Labs

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Xtra special info at [www.screwgunrecords.com](http://www.screwgunrecords.com).

All compositions by Tim Berne, except track 3 by Tim Berne/David Torn and track 5 by Tim Berne/Marc Ducret/David Torn

All compositions published by Berne Party Music (BMI), except tracks 3 and 5, by Berne Party Music (BMI) and David Torn/Torn Music (BMI)

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1. *Repulsion* 11:22

ARTE Quartett (Beat Hofstetter, soprano sax; Sascha Armbruster, alto sax; Andrea Formenti, tenor sax; Beat Kappeler, baritone sax)

2. *Sequel Why* 2:49

Marc Ducret, acoustic guitar

3. *Reversion* 4:20

ARTE Quartett (source material); David Torn, electric guitars, loops, sonic nurturing

4. *Quicksand* 25:20

ARTE Quartett; Tim Berne, alto sax; Marc Ducret, acoustic guitar

5. *Tonguefarmer* 4:53

Marc Ducret (source material); David Torn, electric guitars, loops, sonic redistribution

6. *Sequel Ex* 2:31

Marc Ducret, acoustic guitar

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