

FUNNY AS HE GOES

Bandleader ED PALERMO laces his seriously good music with wit and irreverence. By Michael Roberts

"I definitely believe music and humor can live side by side," says saxophonist, composer and arranger Ed Palermo, leader of the Ed Palermo Big Band and the instigator of off-kilter projects such as the thoroughly entertaining new double album *The Great Un-American Songbook, Volumes I and II*. "I prefer goofy — but intelligent goofy."

While this defense of smart humor sums up one aspect of Palermo, whose discography features vibrant originals and witty big-band reinventions of rock songs, he's much more than a genre-busting jester. His skills as an arranger impressed the late Gil Evans, and he's earned the respect of contemporary heavyweights such as bassist/composer Christian McBride. "I know at least 30 musicians who think he's one of the greatest musicians and arrangers in the world," McBride says. "He certainly has respect from a lot of high-ranking people."

That includes past associates of Frank Zappa, a kindred spirit to whom Palermo has paid tribute on multiple recordings, with more to come; he estimates that he's created new arrangements for over 300 compositions by the musical provocateur, who died in 1993. Among the numerous Zappa vets currently in Palermo's revolving stock company is guitarist Mike Keneally, who was

part of Zappa's last touring ensemble and currently leads his own group, Beer for Dolphins.

The first time Keneally sat in with Palermo and his big band, he expected to play what he refers to as "fairly standard Zappa cover versions — but I found out that Ed had taken wild liberties in a really creative way. He has a breathtaking approach to re-contextualizing everything in a fantasia that swoops from Frank's work to Todd Rundgren to Wayne Shorter to whatever — just traveling through the history of music. I was absolutely flabbergasted."

Another Palermo collaborator, saxophonist/vocalist Napoleon Murphy Brock, who played prominent roles on more than a dozen Zappa LPs beginning with 1974's *Apostrophe*, seconds that emotion. "There are two musicians in this business who I can say are jewels. One is George Duke," with whom Brock performed in Zappa's group and on a series of classic Duke albums, "and the other one is Ed Palermo. That's based not only on what they do musically, but how they treat you."

For Palermo, compliments like these more than compensate for the financial sacrifices he's made. "I lose money on this project," he says of the big band. "Oh, yeah. There's no money to be



made in this. And the band works for peanuts. I pay them what I can, but this is a labor of love to this day."

From the beginning, Palermo, who was born in 1954 and raised in Ocean City, New Jersey, ignored the supposed barriers between musical styles. He grew up on show tunes and started playing the clarinet in fourth grade — "but then The Beatles came out, and there was no clarinet in The Beatles." Over the years that followed, Palermo took up the guitar and harmonica, as well as the saxophone, and he remained "a big Beatles and British Invasion fanatic" — influences that are at the heart of *The Great Un-American Songbook*. "But then, in 1969, I saw Frank Zappa, and that completely changed my life."

He wasn't a Zappa novice when he walked into the concert. But, he says, "This was right before *Uncle Meat* came out, and I had never heard music like that before. I was in ninth grade, and I wanted to be Frank Zappa."

Indeed, Palermo admits that he wasn't really into jazz during the years that immediately followed. But his outlook broadened by the time he entered Chicago's DePaul University as a music major: "I practiced 10 hours a day, listened to jazz all day long

and transcribed like a madman." Upon graduation, Palermo headed to New York City, circa 1977, with a dream of playing for Horace Silver. "And I had a chance to audition for him, but I chickened out," Palermo says. Laughing, he adds, "If I told you the opportunities that I missed, they'd make you cry."

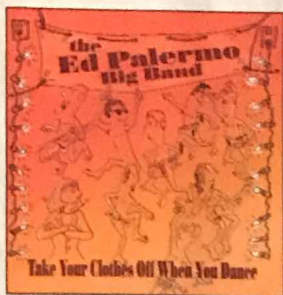
By 1979, Palermo had put together his first big band "and started playing a bunch of door gigs, non-paying gigs," he recalls. "Then I lucked out and I got the every-Monday-night slot at Seventh Avenue South, which was owned by the Brecker Brothers. I was there for three years, playing once a week and writing constantly." During one gig, Palermo recalls, "There were about six people there, but one of them was Gil Evans. He lived around there, and we became friends. And when I asked him to write the liner notes for my first album [1982's *Ed Palermo*], he did it. We sat and listened to the whole album in his apartment, and he said things like, 'I love the way you end your arrangements. I can never get the endings right.' And I thought, 'I don't have a fraction of your genius. What's Gil Evans doing with a schmuck like me?'"

Despite Evans' endorsement, *Ed Palermo* didn't set the jazz world on fire, and neither did its successor, 1987's *Ping Pong*. In

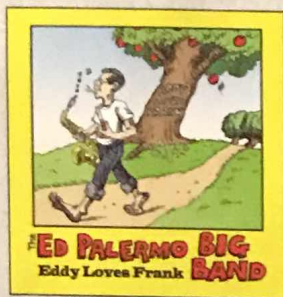
ON THE RECORDS

When it comes to analyzing his own work, Ed Palermo tends toward humorous self-deprecation. Here are his quick hitters about the recordings that preceded his most recent outing, *The Great Un-American Songbook*.

Ed Palermo (Vile Heifer Records, 1982) Palermo's debut album features mostly his original compositions plus appearances by a handful of big-name guests. *"I would call that my trial-and-error period. It also featured Randy Brecker and Dave Sanborn. I got Sanborn right before his saxophone was on every TV commercial and he was making an enormous amount of money."*



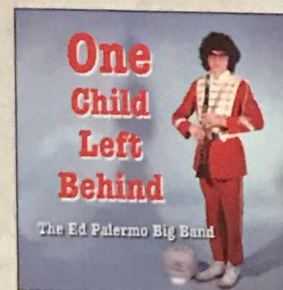
Ping Pong (Pro Jazz Records, 1987) Palermo's second outing blended his own compositions with unusual covers, including Emerson, Lake and Palmer's "Bitches Crystal," which also appears on *The Great Un-American Songbook*. *"I wasn't thrilled with how that came out, so I never really tell anyone about it. But my bass player at the time was Anthony Jackson, and he's amazing. I tell people about that."*



Ed Palermo Big Band Plays Frank Zappa (Astor Place Records, 1997) This long-player marked Palermo's first recorded venture into the Zappa oeuvre. *"My intention was to pay tribute to Frank Zappa by making arrangements to some of my favorite songs, but staying very close to the original versions. Of all my Zappa albums, I take less chances as far as branching out and coming up with my own stuff."*



Take Your Clothes Off When You Dance (Cuneiform Records, 2006) This Zappa sequel smartly managed to avoid duplicating the original. *"That one was the beginning of me taking more chances with Zappa's music and throwing in my own ideas."*



Eddy Loves Frank (Cuneiform Records, 2009) This disc inventively marked the continuing evolution of Palermo's Zappa interpretations. *"It goes even further out than the others. I was still making sure Zappa's melodies were right, but I started throwing in my own chords and doing slightly different things rhythmically. As an artist and arranger, it's ridiculous to just replicate something that's been done before."*

Electric Butter (self-released, 2014) Singer/harmonica player Rob Papparozi joined Palermo's big band in a salute to Paul Butterfield and The Electric Flag. *"I was never a big-band fan when I was growing up in high school, but there were certain bands with horns that I loved. Zappa was one, Paul Butterfield was another, and also The Electric Flag. Along with Edgar Winter's White Trash, they made me really love horns."*

Oh No! Not Jazz!! (Cuneiform Records, 2014) This two-CD set had a split personality. *"It's two discs, and the second disc is my original material. That was a way of introducing my music to Zappa fans, to see if they liked it or not. Some did, some didn't."*

One Child Left Behind (Cuneiform Records, 2016) There were plenty of charming twists and turns on this collection of outtakes from *Oh No! Not Jazz!!*. *"It was a combination of my originals and Zappa songs and some by other people, like Neil Young. And Mike James does 'Is That All There Is?' When we were in the studio and he was singing that, the engineer and I were on the floor laughing. That's usually a good sign."* —MR

response, Palermo dropped out of the club scene, as he had done a couple of times before. (Over the years, he has also worked as a sideman for Tony Bennett, Tito Puente, Aretha Franklin and many other notables, as well as playing his share of weddings and bar mitzvahs.) But during the early 1990s, he says his passion was rekindled by a Keneally-led show called Zappa's Universe. By that time, Keneally explains, Zappa had been diagnosed with cancer, and Zappa's Universe "was conceived as a combination orchestral-rock tribute to him. Frank actually had quite a hand in the initial stages, but he became too ill and wasn't able to travel. But the whole thing had Frank's thumbprint on it."

Inspired by the show, Palermo started arranging "a ton" of Zappa songs. "By the time he died, in December of 1993," Palermo recalls, "I'd put together another band, and we were playing at a club called the Bitter End, doing my own material once a month. But I spent the next several months arranging a whole show's worth of his stuff, thinking I'd do it as one of my monthly things."

The performance quickly became more than a one-off. "That was when the Internet was just starting to become the ubiquitous thing it is today," Palermo says, "and when word started getting out that a big band was going to do the music of Zappa, it got crazy. I was used to the band outnumbering the audience, but the place was packed with people I'd never seen before. People drove down from Canada to see it, and it went over spectacularly. Afterward, Paul Adamy, my bass player, said, 'Ed, this is too good to just do once.'"

Shortly thereafter the big band moved to the Bottom Line, where Palermo and company spotlighted Zappa's music on a bi-monthly basis for nine years. The run would likely have lasted even longer if it weren't for legal warnings from Gail Zappa, Frank's widow, who didn't want anyone profiting off her husband's music, little knowing that, according to Palermo, profits were mighty scarce. "I talked to her on the phone once," Palermo says of Gail, who died in 2015. "It started out with 10 minutes of yelling, but I managed to charm her, and by the end of the conversation she was actually nice. But it only took about a year before she started threatening me again. It was weird."

The threats weren't enough to make Palermo swear off Zappa. He followed the 1997 album *Ed Palermo Big Band Plays the*

Music of Frank Zappa with several more Zappa-centric recordings that were just as well-regarded by his supporters. Brock, who has appeared on several of Palermo's big-band albums, including *The Great Un-American Songbook*, says that there's at least one good reason for that. "A lot of people thought Frank was a hard guy to work with, but no, no, no. It was just that Frank thought, 'Why do it wrong when we can do it right?' And Ed's like that, too. He's a perfectionist."

He's also lightning fast, as Christian McBride knows from personal experience. McBride met Palermo through his wife, Melissa Walker, who runs Jazz House Kids, a Montclair, New Jersey, music school where Palermo teaches. (He also oversees the jazz department at Hoff-Barthelsson Music School in Scarsdale, New York.) McBride was working as the musical director for a Carly Simon

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show at the Apollo Theater, and mere hours before the first rehearsal, he says, "She called and said she wanted to change about six of the songs. I thought, 'There's no way in the world I can get these songs transcribed in time.' But Melissa suggested I call Ed, and he said, 'I can do three.' And then, about 90 minutes later, he said, 'They're done.' And I was like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

After that, McBride hired Palermo to do arrangements for several other major productions, including James Brown's 2006 "Soul on Top" concert at the Hollywood Bowl — and after each assignment, he's been more blown away. "I wish this guy was a household name, and in due time I think that will happen," McBride says. "He has the personality where he's not looking for that; but for people with that attitude, I always hope they get what they deserve."

For now, Palermo is focused on giving his lighthearted muse free reign. The two volumes of *The Great Un-American Songbook* offer lively, quirky big-band versions of songs he loved in his youth by artists who aren't from the United States, including King

Crimson and blues-rock band Blodwyn Pig. The only exceptions to this rule are Miles Davis' "Nardis," which is paired with, of all things, The Beatles' "Don't Bother Me," and the medley of "America," from *West Side Story*, and Green Day's "American Idiot." Palermo doesn't think he broke his own rule on "America," since his take is based on a version of the song by Keith Emerson's The Nice, a British group. As for Green Day, he cheerfully acknowledges, "I don't have an excuse for that."

Given the tenor of the times, the set's title may strike some listeners as political, and Palermo says he likes the idea of needling what he calls "fake patriotism on Fox News." But he emphasizes that EPBB guitarist/vocalist Bruce McDaniel came up with the title before the Age of Trump began and the moniker stuck because it

made everyone laugh.

That same goal — making people laugh — is at the heart of elaborate theatrical presentations Palermo has been staging at New York venues such as The Iridium and The Falcon. Brock has happily donned appropriate costumes for ren-

ditions of Zappa ditties "Muffin Man" and "The Evil Prince," and McDaniel was among the co-conspirators at a night of James Bond songs that found Palermo playing a chrome-domed villain. "I went online and bought a bald wig," Palermo says. "But it didn't look right, so I went to a barber and had my head shaved. I tell people I'm the only person in the world who had his head shaved for a door gig."

Palermo has several future projects in the waiting. In addition to a third volume of *The Great Un-American Songbook*, he's hoping to release *Zodd Zundgren*, which he describes as "a mash-up of Todd Rundgren and Frank Zappa," in 2018. He's also looking forward to releasing a straight-ahead jazz album, the title of which is secret for now. "I'm keeping that close to my vest," he says, "because it's so funny."

Humor, it turns out, is a key component of Palermo's creativity. "When I work on an arrangement, so many funny things go through my mind musically — and the jokes are a very important part of that," he says. "I'm always looking for an intelligent way of getting people to crack up." ●