Dave Bennett doesn’t fit the mold. For starters, you don’t find many jazz clarinet players who name Alice Cooper, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Chris Isaak among their influences. You won’t find many musicians under 30 who are equally conversant with the music of Benny Goodman (the “King of Swing”) and Roy Orbison (“The Soul of Rock and Roll”). In fact, you may not find even one other clarinet virtuoso who occasionally breaks from his swing era repertoire to sing rockabilly hits while accompanying himself at the piano—where he plays a mean barrelhouse boogie-woogie.

In the early days of jazz, the clarinet joined with trumpet and trombone to create the music’s signature sound and it ruled the roost in the swing era, when jazz was America’s popular music and dance-party soundtrack. If anyone can return the clarinet to its heyday, it’s Dave Bennett, who fuses serious jazz improvisation with a host of modern pop influences.

On his Mack Avenue debut, Don’t Be That Way, he shows that his skills and interests make him perfectly suited for the job. He stays within the mainstream repertoire and even covers several of the most famous hit records of the 1930s (by Goodman and such contemporaneous clarinetists as Woody Herman and Artie Shaw). But Bennett reworks these songs with up-to-date twists and surprising new arrangements. The result is an album that blazes his own path while still acknowledging his predecessors, and spotlights the jazz clarinet for a new generation.

“St. James Infirmary,” the ancient New Orleans blues tune, offers one example of Bennett’s tasteful revisionism. “I took some ideas from listening to pianist Bob James, and to some smooth jazz and funk, to come up with those voicings,” says the 29-year-old prodigy, referring to the contemporary harmonies that underlie both the clarinet’s theme statement and his own laconic, sweet-tobacco vocal. On the title track, Bennett and company apply a lightly bossa-inspired beat, stretching the melody here and there to create a contemporary rendition that’s more relaxed than the original 1938 recording but equally memorable.

The most striking evidence of Bennett’s approach comes on the classic “Sing, Sing, Sing.” Benny Goodman’s 1937 recording was an extended-length barnburner in which Gene Krupa essentially “invented” the drum solo with his simmering and then explosive trap-set improvisation. Bennett’s version stays close to the original in tempo and mood. But when it comes time for the solo with which Krupa galvanized the jazz world of the 1930s, it’s Bennett who steps to the fore, with an improvisation just as exotic, mysterious and ultimately exuberant as that long-ago drum break—and with an even greater degree of nuance, variety and virtuosity.

By turning the song into a modernist showcase for his clarinet, Bennett turns the song on its ear, yet retains its design as an exhilarating showstopper. This is no longer your grandfather’s “Sing Sing Sing”; now it’s Bennett’s.

“Since my early teens,” says the Michigan-based clarinetist, “I’ve been influenced by many other genres besides jazz. My clarinet solo on that tune keeps the same outline, but it’s different every time we play it; it’s based on chord progressions I hear in movie soundtracks, and I even stole some licks from some Alice Cooper tunes and from some solos by Stevie Ray Vaughan and other blues guitarists, just to get that kind of intensity. I think I’m finally finding my own voice, and I wanted to make that solo as dramatic as possible, so people wouldn’t say I was just copying Benny.”

Bennett hastens to share credit for the re-conceptualization of this music with the album’s arranger, Shelly Berger, whom he met through Tad Weed, the pianist in Bennett’s group. “I had told Tad that I was really frustrated with where I was musically and he said, ‘I know this arranger in Toronto who seems to think the same way you do, in terms of blending pop with classic jazz.’ So I listened to some of his music and then sent an email, out of the blue, to introduce myself; I just told him ‘I really like your stuff, and would you like to do this project with me?’”
"When he said yes, I drove up to Toronto and we spent a few days brainstorming—and I was on cloud nine. I thought, 'This cat gets it.' I would tell him the ideas I had for each song, and write out the chords, and ask him to come up with a creative way of pulling that together. My musical knowledge is limited; I can't write out arrangements and I couldn't have put together the charts for this album. I think this project would not be what it is without Shelly. And I can learn so much from studying his arrangements that I hope it will increase my own knowledge as well."

Bennett is not being modest when he calls his training "limited": almost entirely self-taught, he received his only formal instruction in the school band. And in terms of playing jazz, he had no formal lessons whatsoever while he was developing into one of the most lionized and accomplished young artists on today's scene. Born in 1984 in Pontiac, Michigan, the preteen Bennett didn't see himself as a musician. As he recalls, “In fifth grade, when the option to join the school band came along, I didn’t think I would be any good at an instrument. But the idea of playing intrigued me. And then my grandfather said, in a sort of ‘Holy Spirit’ moment, ‘I think you’d enjoy playing the clarinet.’ He just came out with it, and then he and Grandma went down to the local pawn shop and bought me a plastic Conn clarinet to try out.”

Even though he was growing up in a time far removed from the swing era and the technology (AM radio, 78 RPM records) that produced it, Bennett already had an appreciation for the era's music from the soundtracks of the old Abbott & Costello movies he watched at home. “And then about a month later, Grandpa bought me a cassette tape of Benny Goodman—and that’s what did it. I completely flipped out; it hit me square between the eyes and I knew at that moment that this is what I wanted to do with my life.”

By the time he turned 14, Bennett’s prowess had come to the attention of various Michigan-based trad-jazz bands, and he began to taste the life of a touring musician. At 17 he was chosen as one of two guest soloists (from a national field of 600) to perform with the Count Basie Orchestra; a couple years later he spent a brief time as part of the renowned Hot Club of Detroit. In 2005, at the ripe old age of 21, he created his own combo to perform his Tribute To Benny Goodman, which has performed throughout the U.S. and Canada. He has also appeared as guest soloist with more than 30 classical “pops” orchestras (including 8 such concerts with the Detroit Symphony), and will make his debut with the famed New York Pops Orchestra in the fall of 2013, in a tribute celebrating Goodman’s original Carnegie Hall concert.

Addressing this juncture of his life and career, Bennett says now, “I was trying to ‘break free’ [from the restraints of past styles] and couldn’t quite get there. But Shelly [Berger] was able to make it very coherent, and in the studio he kept everything moving along.” So in one sense, Don’t Be That Way is more than the title for a collection of freshly imagined swing era classics. It could just as well be Bennett’s admonition to himself on his Mack Avenue debut—to step out as a fully independent artist, steeped in but not beholden to the way things were done in the past.

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For more information on Dave Bennett, please visit davebennett.com

For media information, please contact:
DL Media • 610-667-0501
Maureen McFadden • maureen@dlmediamusic.com

For press materials on Dave Bennett, Mack Avenue artists or Mack Avenue Record labels in general (including album covers, promotional photos and logos), please visit media.mackavenue.com

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