



DENNIS LICHTMAN
Hot Jazz Ringleader

By Allen Morrison

A decade before he became one of the instigators of New York City's traditional jazz revival, Dennis Lichtman was studying music business and clarinet at the Hartt School of Music in Hartford and thinking about the future.

"They didn't teach me to go play at a little dive bar on the Lower East Side that isn't really a music venue, and to make no money for the first couple of years, and to just have fun, and maybe a scene will coalesce around it that you'll become known for 10 years later," he said recently over coffee in his Long Island City, Queens apartment. "But that's what happened."

The little dive bar is called Mona's, where, since June 2007, Lichtman has been packing them in, leading "Mona's Hot 4" every Tuesday night between 11 p.m. and "stupid late," as his website says. The "hot jazz" scene at Mona's attracts many of the city's top musicians, who often drop by after their regular gigs. In recent months they have included stars like Cecile McLorin Salvant, Anat Cohen, Chris Thile and Jon Batiste. He has made two live albums there. The most recent of them, 2012's *Tuesdays at Mona's* (www.dennislichtman.com), includes 19 guest musicians and a DVD including a documentary film.

Meanwhile, Lichtman, now 38, has become one of the busiest multi-instrumentalists in town. In addition to his clarinet acumen, he plays fiddle and mandolin in a variety of outfits including The Brain Cloud, a Western Swing band featuring singer Tamar Korn, with whom he has made three albums, and a new old-timey quintet called the Lovestruck Balladeers. In the fall he will tour China (with banjoist Cynthia Sayer) and Israel with his own quintet.

He is also a long-time member (on clarinet) of trumpeter/composer Brian Carpenter's 11-piece "Ghost Train Orchestra," which plays "chamber jazz" from the 1930s with crisp, period arrangements but forward-looking soloists. "I've been playing with Dennis for 10 years," Carpenter said. "He has one of the most stunningly beautiful clarinet sounds in jazz today. And then you find out how old he is and how many other instruments he plays - it's unbelievable."

Lichtman's latest album, *Just Cross the River*, pays tribute to the "unglamorous" borough of Queens, which, because of its affordability and convenience to Manhattan, was home to more giants of jazz than just about any other place in the country, including Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Bix Beiderbecke, Fats Waller and Billie Holiday. In August 2018, Lichtman debuted the album with two sold-out shows at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola at Jazz At Lincoln Center. "Madonna came to the first show!" he said, still marveling at the memory.

Unlike most jazz musicians, who want to sound as contemporary as humanly possible, Lichtman is an articulate advocate for earlier styles. Asked why he chooses to play this music, his response is immediate: "I love it. That's the short answer. The longer answer is that there's something communal about music from the earlier era of jazz... For me it's the jazz version of three chords and the truth... the perfect combination of broad appeal and deep sophistication. You can get as nerdy and intricate as you want. But if the rhythm section is thumping, any *shmo* can walk in off the street and be moved by it."

And there are plenty of gigs, he said. "In some ways, it might be easier than it is for modern jazz players. Lots of restaurants in New York are interested in having trad jazz. It's lively and fun, acoustic, not too loud. The standard pay may even be a little higher than for other types of jazz."

Other musicians occasionally ask him, "with a degree of condescension, 'Why would you play that stuff that's 80 years old,'" he said. "When *they're* playing something that sounds like Coltrane in 1965. It's *all* vintage. It's America; it's history, but it's also part of an ongoing evolution. Pick your starting point and go from there."