

A DAY IN THE LIFE

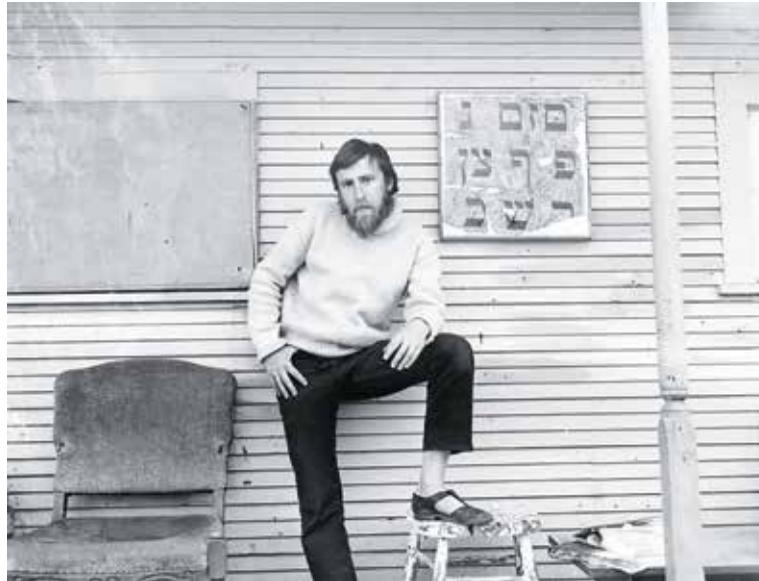
Alan Licht on new Wallace Berman Recordings

WALLACE BERMAN (1926–1976) truly embodied the “mesh between poetry and music and visual arts” that San Francisco–based artist Bruce Conner once described as being at the root of the exuberant atmosphere of mid-century California. Berman was a pioneer of assemblage, perhaps best known for his systematic Verifax collages of a right hand clutching a transistor radio, its speaker replaced by various images appropriated from print media. Many of his other works manifested his interests in language and Jewish mysticism, with Hebrew letters painted on parchment and rocks. As a young man he had made firm connections in the jazz scene as well, designing a 1947 Charlie Parker album cover and collaborating on lyrics with blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon. And his influence was as vast as the range of his passions, not only in underground art and poetry circles but on the fringes of Hollywood and popular culture. Actors Dennis Hopper, Dean Stockwell, and Russ Tamblyn were close friends whose artmaking Berman encouraged; Hopper gave Berman a walk-on part in the 1969 film *Easy Rider* as a seed sower on a hippie commune. In 1967, Berman even made an appearance on the star-studded cover of the Beatles’ LP *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Yet despite his widespread impact, Berman has remained a mysterious figure, largely because he preferred to keep himself and his work out of the public eye. Although his homes in both Los Angeles and San Francisco became known as avant-garde salons, he never granted official interviews. His first major gallery exhibition, in 1957 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, was also his last: After the show was busted by the LAPD vice squad for containing “pornographic” imagery, he resolved to show his work only outside of commercial spaces. Berman self-published nine issues of a handmade folio publication, *Semina* (1955–64), which featured his photography and collages alongside poetry, writings, and artwork by friends (Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Jess Collins) and heroes (Jean Cocteau, Lewis Carroll, Hermann Hesse) alike, but these were also distributed privately, by mail.

Berman’s reticence makes the discovery of a curious document from his Los Angeles years all the more remarkable. A cassette recently resurfaced that contained a recording of a 1968 gathering at Berman’s residence in Topanga Canyon. The hour-long tape, which was

A newly released recording renders audible Berman’s aptitude for collapsing different artistic worlds.



Wallace Berman,
Larkspur, CA, 1961.

released earlier this year as an album, *Wallace Berman—In Conversation . . .* by Edition Muta and Derringer Books, offers an unprecedented and exceptionally candid glimpse into the artistic and social life of this enigmatic figure. The recording comes via curator Hal Glicksman, who surreptitiously brought a tape recorder along on an evening visit. The night unfolds as a microcosm of Berman’s aesthetic and interpersonal eclecticism, rendering audible his aptitude for collapsing different artistic worlds. Poet Jack Hirschman and his then wife Ruth stop by on a social call. There is quite a bit of show-and-tell: several pristine issues of *Semina* in Glicksman’s possession, a Kabbalah-related book, a George Herms show announcement designed by Berman, a press clipping by Eve Babitz. The recording itself turns out to be quite layered: Several conversations are often heard at once, with children, the family dog, and crickets in the background, plus snatches of the first Traffic album and side three of Cream’s *Wheels of Fire* (1968) emanating from the stereo system. This makes for the kind of real-life, organic counterpoint that Luc Ferrari, Chris Watson, and other contemporary concrete composers have sought to isolate with more intentionally focused field recordings. And the sonic collage of Berman’s environment recalls the heterogeneity and spontaneity of his material assemblages.

Coincidentally, another of Berman’s conversations from the 1960s has also recently become available, this one recollected rather than recorded. On June 1, 2014, the forty-seventh anniversary of the release of *Sgt. Pepper’s*, the artist’s son Tosh Berman posted a short reminiscence to his Facebook page, which was subsequently issued as a hand-sewn, letterpress chapbook by

synaesthesia press. Here Tosh describes phoning his father, who wasn’t home, after receiving an envelope in the mail from Beatles manager Brian Epstein that contained a brief business letter and a black-and-white photo of the now-famous album cover. Then a teenage Beatles enthusiast, Tosh remembers the thrill of spotting Wallace on the cover—and his father’s nonchalance upon hearing the news.

The cover design was initially conceived by Paul McCartney and executed by Pop artist Peter Blake with his wife Jann Haworth and photographer Michael Cooper; each of the Beatles was queried for a list of personages they wanted to have on the cover. It appears, however, that Wallace’s inclusion was due to the input of London gallerist Robert Fraser, who showed Berman in the group exhibition “Los Angeles Now” in 1966 and had often discussed avant-garde art and poetry with McCartney. In any case, his inclusion was uncannily appropriate. Wallace, like the Beatles themselves, was a big music fan, known for playing everything from the Kinks to Bach to Moroccan trance music while he worked. In the chapbook, Tosh also mentions that Wallace knew or had met several of the other notables depicted on the *Sgt. Pepper’s* cover, including Larry Bell, Terry Southern, Bob Dylan, and Lenny Bruce; his mother-in-law had even worked with Tom Mix. Fraser was probably unaware of many of these interconnections, and they were surely unknown to the Beatles, yet Wallace was clearly not just a subversive reference for the Fab Four, but a kindred spirit just as keyed in to the zeitgeist as they were. □

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Rob Young

Books

Why are so many writers and artists turning books into albums?

For a brief few weeks around the close of 2014, it felt as if you could divide your acquaintances into two groups: those who were listening to *Serial* and those who were not. Devotees of this spin-off from the popular podcast *This American Life* soaked up the insistent, questioning voice of investigative journalist Sarah Koenig as she unpicked the frayed ends of a true-life murder case. But, beyond the fascinating, disturbing facts it forensically investigated, *Serial*'s enormous popularity suggested that the spoken word might have become the 'new rock and roll'.

Spoken word has long been treated as if it were a genre, although, being pan-generic by definition, it's more of a market category than anything else. At its most functionally archival, it consists of audiobooks read by actors (aimed at the visually impaired or frequent travellers), BBC releases of radio drama and comedy, or the British Library's curated compilations of historical authors and poets reading their own work. But, somewhere between Richard Burton's 1954 BBC rendition of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (rightly celebrated for its phantasmagoria of Welsh accents and evocative sound effects) and William S. Burroughs's experiments with cut-up tapes of his own voice, beginning around 1960 (and collected on the excellent CD *Break Through In Grey Room*, 2001), spoken-word recordings

began to take on a life of their own, occupying a hinterland between avant-garde sound practice and dramatic recital – an interzone recently reopened as a site of exploration by a surprising number of contemporary writers and artists.

On tape, Burroughs mumbles the phrase, 'The silver smoke of dreams'. These words could certainly apply to the remarkable *Sleeping Tapes*, a sequence of intimate, stream-of-consciousness monologues by the American actor Jeff Bridges, which appeared early this year as a download, cassette or vinyl (including a limited-edition wax-pressing in a die-cut, gold-leaf sleeve). It plays out as if inside the head of The Dude (as the actor is also known), yet it's clear the vocal, soporific ambient music and nocturnal field recordings were all captured around the house of the Hollywood star. Another high-profile figure, novelist Michel Faber – author of *Under the Skin* (2000) – recently teamed up with UK experimental musician Andrew Liles to create *Ohrwurm* (2014), in which Faber reads a creepy tale not so much accompanied by, as battling against, an eclectic array of twisted samples and electronic cut-ups.

It's a powerful and innovative combination: the experimental sound assembler and the literate speaking voice. The Hackney-based imprint Test Centre recognized this when it launched in 2011 with the release of *Stone Tape Shuffle*, an LP by Britain's



1
Jeff Bridges
Sleeping Tapes, 2015

2
Wallace Berman
In Conversation, 2015

psychogeographer general, Iain Sinclair. His collage of book extracts, off-the-cuff musings, found noises, sound effects and improvised ephemera were layered onto a soundscape by Dan Scott. Much of the record feels like a private tape or voice memo made on the hoof with a mobile phone. It puts you right there at the author's shoulder mid-*dérive*, reading aloud from *Lud Heat* (1975) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979) as traffic zings past. At one point Sinclair sounds like

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These records can be seen as doodles in the margin, where fresh ideas and identities can take root without the pressure of formal publication or broadcast.

a frazzled David Attenborough, anthropologist of the modern city, larynx tightening against the encroaching smog. An incantation near the end of side B, imagining the route to Wessex and the Holy Grail while plodding the alleyways of east London, approaches the rapture of prayer.

Test Centre's second LP was by Sinclair's old friend, the filmmaker and novelist Chris Petit. *Museum of Loneliness* (2013) featured sonic interruptions by Mordant Music, an artist associated with the loose musical subgenre known as hauntology, and his smearings and reworkings of soundtracks from Petit's films, such as *Asylum* (2000) and *Content* (2010), make for a subdued counterpoint to the author's terse, bitter prose. The A side, 'Dead Drunks', features the Robinson character familiar from Petit's fiction – and, by extension, from Patrick Keiller's films, *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997). The LP is named after, and forms a part of, his *Museum of Loneliness*

project and, on the record, Petit explains how this ongoing 'non-institution dedicated to working in the gaps' is 'about returning to underground activity in a spirit of decommission and noncommission, in opposition to the cultural exhaustion of conventional systems. It being notable how those media have confronted the information revolution by becoming more conservative, by offering only more of the same, at the cost of any margins.' Projects such as these records, perhaps, can be seen as doodles in the margin, where fresh ideas and identities can take root without the pressure of formal publication or broadcast.

That's certainly true of another Test Centre LP, *Pedigree Mongrel* (2015), by the maverick (by BBC standards) art critic, television presenter and author Jonathan Meades. Like Sinclair and Petit (and recalling their common mentor, J.G. Ballard), Meades speaks in a privately

educated English that sits delightfully out-of-kilter with the exploratory textual material. Meades's memoirs – drawn from *Pompey* (1993), *Museum Without Walls* (2012) and *An Encyclopaedia of Myself* (2014) – skitter between autobiography and fantasia, at one point dipping into Cockney slang and announcing a break to 'pop to the loo', while occasionally allowing Mordant Music to dub his vocal into a wilderness of echo. This is both a more raconteurish and a less formal Meades than the one he has allowed to appear on TV.

Stewart Home's LP, *Proletarian Post-Modernism* (2013), is the weakest link in Test Centre's small catalogue: a lo-fi, no-frills compilation of live readings of Home's mildly confrontational poetry and prose, in front of a tittering audience. Laboriously and fastidiously pornographic – like a revolutionary Readers' Wives column – Home's dutiful readings are surprisingly unsympathetic to his own deadpan transgressiveness and flatten out any residual humour. Home recently published a book via Penny-Ante Editions, a small imprint based in Los Angeles. After several years of print publishing, the company has just issued its first LP, *What Gets Kept* (2015), on which the writer, critic and *frieze* columnist Lynne Tillman reads selected passages from her books, such as *Motion Sickness* (1991), *No Lease On Life* (1998) and *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* (2014). Her mix of essays, autobiography and cultural critique is well served by a vocal style that remains flat and serious across a range of emotional tones. A nice touch is to end with a handful of her favourite jokes, and her own hilarity at their telling becomes infectious.

At a time when digital interfaces and streaming apps have, in some senses, taken the fun out of assembling and curating personal collections of audio material, spoken-word recordings offer a liberating alternative, audibly melting text from the permafrost of print. A spoken text permits freedom of movement for the listener while, at the same time, for the artists, recordings can be made in – or salvaged from – ephemeral, mobile environments beyond the clinical, dry studio of countless audio books. The microphone, the portable recorder and the phone's voice memo function

allow the writer to become a performer and deliver her or his own words in a more elaborate setting than the promotional book reading. Text approaches the condition of music. And music – in the form of lengthy, unfettered improvisation – can be a way of hearing afresh certain archival speech recordings, which are interesting as much for their historical grain and otherness as for what is being said.

A case in point is *In Conversation*: a salvaged tape of an informal evening with Wallace Berman, the American collage/assemblage artist and creator of the influential *Semina* magazine (1955–64). Released this year on LP by the New England-based publishing house Edition Muta, this lost recording was taped during a social gathering at Berman's Topanga Canyon home in 1968 – crickets audibly chirp from the stoop outside. It's an impromptu and rambling beat house party, Berman's thoughts zooming in and out of focus alongside those of his friends, with snatches of pop music and domestic noise. Almost an abstraction of the idea of contingent audio, this 'conversation' captures the free-wheeling spirit of its age while remaining diametrically opposed to the professionalized, informal formality of *Serial*. Eavesdropping on this record's serendipitous weft of voices from 50 years ago, with its engaging flux of materialized and cast-off ideas, you can hear speech shaping thoughts in real time. Prior to both authored literature and to actorly performance of text, this is spoken word in its rawest, most mercurial state.

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Wallace Berman

In Conversation

Edition Muta LP

Tosh Berman's rediscovered tapes of his artist father and friends just hanging out and talking might seem to be too personal and obscure to be of interest to a wider audience, but as field recordings go, it's touching. This discussion, recorded at Topanga Canyon, California in 1968, spans art theory, their reviews, childhood, monsters, Kenneth Anger, weird things they've sent each other in the post, postcards from Europe from some pataphysics society, zen and whatever else. Occasionally they address or notice the tape recorder, but usually carry on, neither performing for it nor paying it much attention. It's hard to follow who's talking or who they're talking about, but it barely matters – the focus shifts like a more rambling and unedited take on Linklater's *Slacker*, set 20 years earlier, and like that film, it's clearly the product of a pre-social media world where recording was still either a personal or specifically performative thing, not a performance to be generally shared and constantly evaluated. Traffic's *Mister Fantasy* album plays in the background; kids, cats, dogs and crickets make appearances, and the whole effect conjures a world of chilled out, bohemian Los Angeles summer that could just as easily have been forgotten.