



According to the *JPS Dictionary of Jewish Words*, to be called a *mensch* is a high compliment indeed. The Yiddish word means a caring, decent person who can be trusted. In a broader sense, it refers to acting in an honorable way, doing the right thing without the expectation of thanks or credit.

David Bromberg uses that word to describe Bob Dylan, whom he backed on *New Morning* and *Self Portrait* in 1970. But the same might also be said about Bromberg; at least the word signifies the values that have guided his life.

During dinner at the Kingcakebaby restaurant in Wilmington, Delaware, just before his Tuesday-night blues jam at the nearby 4W5 Café, Bromberg paid tribute to the man whose musical and poetic genius gave voice to a generation and whose influence endures to this day. Standing next to the legend, hearing him

record, was an experience not soon forgotten. “To me, Bob Dylan has always been a mensch. It means a man, but the word means much more — respect, somebody with a lot of heart and integrity. Compassion and integrity and courage — that makes a mensch.”

Are these qualities that he tries to emulate himself? “You got it,” he said.

Since the 60s, Bromberg has established himself as a “musician’s musician.” As an instrumentalist, he has been called brilliant, eclectic, electrifying — a virtuoso on Dobro, mandolin, fiddle, and guitar — master of both flatpicking and fingerstyle. And the accolades continue as critics refer to his vocal style: acrobatic, passionate, tender, exquisitely expressive. Onstage, he’s incredibly comfortable, an expert interpreter, as well as a natural humorist and storyteller, and even his Big Band is never

quite sure what’s coming up. Ticket sales prove he has legions of fans. After his hiatus in the 80s, sold-out houses have welcomed his return to the stage in the late 90s, wherever he plays.

Bromberg has released *Billboard* top albums in his own name, but he also is respected as a much-sought-after sideman, playing backup on over 100 albums. There isn’t a red carpet large enough for all the “big names” he’s worked with, artists as diverse as Tom Paxton and Dion, Ringo Starr and Sha Na Na, John Hartford and Bonnie Raitt, Willie Nelson and Phoebe Snow, to name a few.

But you won’t find him sitting on the edge of his seat on Grammy night or hawking soft drinks during the Super Bowl. And if you’re waiting for that MTV video — well, it’ll be awhile. In fact, he has no immediate ambitions.

“You know what? I’m really liberated by not having a career,” he said. “You want publicity photos of me? I haven’t got ’em. If you don’t know who I am, don’t book me. I’m not trying to climb any ladders. I’m very happy playing music with friends. And that people still want to hear it is rewarding on any number of levels.”

You might even call Bromberg a marketing liability — somewhere in a music store right now, there’s probably a clerk holding up a Bromberg CD wondering, “Which rack do I put this one in? Bluegrass, blues, R&B, soul, folk, old time, Cajun, swing, jazz?” The answer is “all of the above.” Bromberg’s area of musical expertise defies classification.

“Commercially speaking, it would be much more intelligent to do [one genre of music],” he admitted. “I have a friend, Linda Ronstadt, who did it perfectly correctly. She nailed it. Linda created hit after hit after hit...Then all of a sudden, she pops up on Broadway singing Gilbert and Sullivan — and then the crowning thing was she’s of Mexican-American origin, which I didn’t know, and she started to go and sing Mexican songs, and reached a whole new audience,” he said. “*Me* — I just did everything I could think of — everything I wanted to do.

“I’ve learned not to be disdainful of any music,” he said, not even mainstream commercial music. “Music has always been written to be bought. I mean, Mozart composed for rich people. And all of us treasure the rock ’n’ roll hits when we were young. I play American music, I play world music... I never saw why I shouldn’t.”

When he selects material, “first, I have to decide it’s me — something I felt. It doesn’t have to be something I think I have to dedicate my life to, just something that at some point I felt. I’ve been very privileged — I’ve always been able to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to — and that’s how my shows go.”

One thing he doesn’t aim at is perfection — “A lot of bands play the same set every night, and they have it absolutely perfect,” he said.

“I’ve never been a very perfect musician, and I don’t strive for perfection. As far as the band members, I throw all kinds of stuff at them. There’s no way they can be perfect. But what they are is consistently good. I don’t see perfect as that great an asset. Perfection can sometimes get in the way of feeling and flow. We don’t *strive*, we *play*.”

At a concert at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s Whitaker Center last spring, Bromberg’s musicians proved they can think on their feet. Some of his Big Band members have been together for nearly 40 years. The lineup consists of Jeff Wisor (violin, mandolin), Butch Amiot (bass, vocals), Richard Crooks (drums), John Firmin (sax, clarinet, pennywhistle), Peter Ecklund (cornet, trumpet), Curt Linberg (slide trombone), Mitch Corbin (guitar, mandolin, violin), and Bromberg’s wife, Nancy Josephson (backing vocals). Wisor, Amiot, and Corbin also perform with the David Bromberg Quartet. Other veterans of more than 20 years are his sidemen: manager Stephen Bailey, the roadies, and the soundman.

The play list included some breakneck bluegrass, wailin’ blues, the sentimental “Last Date,” political commentary — dedicated to the former Texas governor — “’Lectric Chair,” and the tender “Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor.” On the full-band bluegrass swell of “Dark Hollow,” the arrangement even made room for a trombone break — in bluegrass! Who knew? Then Bromberg left the band behind and stepped in front of the mike to add a few more verses to cynical bad-relationship song “I’ll Take You Back.” (*When snakes have*



The David Bromberg Quartet (2004) - (left to right) Jeff Wisor, Bromberg, Butch Amiot, and Mitch Corbin

Philadelphia in 1945, he was raised in Tarrytown, New York. He studied guitar as a teenager, and after high school, he entered Columbia University as a musicology major. But it was the 60s, and he was soon lured by the thriving Greenwich Village folk scene. “I spent a year or so playing in what they called. ‘basket houses.’ There were some very peculiar cabaret laws in New York City which made it necessary for people who played a stringed instrument of less than 88 strings to be fingerprinted and photographed in order for them to pay you at that cabaret. So these guys just didn’t pay us. But they allowed us to pass a bread basket around after we performed.” However, patrons who paid exorbitant prices for a Coke didn’t understand that the musicians were not getting paid. “It was hard to get money; we were all starving. And when you’re young, and you’re all starving together, it’s good times!”

“And,” he added, “it was a place to be bad. And I exploited that to the fullest — I was pretty bad. I met a lot of wonderful musicians and played with a lot of people who later became famous,” he said, including Richie Havens, Janis Ian, and Jerry Jeff Walker, and he met Linda Ronstadt at the Bitter End. Other influences included Doc Watson and the married duo of Jody Stecher and Kate Brislin, he recalled. “And Don and Ron Reno were also good to me.” Bromberg’s talent as an instrumentalist of impressive range and expertise garnered the attention of Paxton, Davis, Chubby Checker, and others who hired him as a sideman.

knees and money grows on trees, Have your people call my people.)

As fans called out requests, he paused at the mic long enough to let the commotion subside. With warmth and humor, looking more like a character from “Fiddler on the Roof,” albeit a very edgy Tevye, he scolded them, “Nooooow, children. I take requests, but I don’t play them.”

“They are wonderful,” Bromberg said of his fans. “It makes it very easy to play and very satisfying.” He doesn’t always refer to fans as children — But “probably a lot. It’s something I get out of church. I used to be the eyes for Rev. Gary Davis [the late blues and gospel master who was blind since childhood], so I spent more time in black churches than anybody you know. I love black preachers. What I know of the church is only black preaching. ... I’ve never felt as welcome any place on earth as in the black churches.”

A disciple of the legendary Davis, Bromberg also counts other influences on his style as he developed his skills. Born in



The David Bromberg Band (1976) - (left to right) Dick Fegy, Bromberg, and Hugh McDonald

He didn't go solo until 1970, after becoming an unscheduled headliner at a gig in the U.K. "It was the last Isle of Wight Festival," he recalled. "The reason this was the last Isle of Wight Festival was that kids from all over Europe came, and a lot of them came with the attitude that music should be free. By Wednesday, there were over 200,000 people there. So the overwhelming majority of those 200,000 people hadn't paid. The promoters lost everything, but they wisely put on the show [to avoid a riot]. And the audience, not having paid, they were not necessarily receptive. Some very good performers got booed off the stage.

"I was there on Wednesday or a Thursday, and the significance of the day of the week was, it was before the press arrived. I played guitar for a singer named Rosalie Sorrels. Rosalie is a very intimate singer, and the crowd had very little patience. They were starting to get restless because Kris Kristofferson got booed off the stage. And Rosalie, for some reason, asked me to do one of my tunes. She asked for it by name; she asked me to do a very long tune of mine called 'Bullfrog Blues,' a long performance piece of mine. And they loved it — they were wonderful. And they permitted Rosalie to finish her set after that.

"And when I stepped off the stage, the promoters approached me and asked me if I would come back at 6:00 and do some more. So I came back at six and asked them how many songs they wanted me to sing, and they said, 'Do an hour.' I'd never done an hour before, I don't think. Maybe it was that I was so obviously not a star or professional or something, but they really liked me, and they gave me at least three encores that I remember, possibly more.

"It was an intimate thing because it was between me and 200,000 people — there were no press. So it only existed for those of us who were there, and I've never yet met a single person who was in the audience. It was very exciting. I felt really good, but I didn't know what to do with it — who could I tell about it?"

Columbia Records had a representative there filming. The film somehow got damaged, but Bromberg negotiated a contract, which led



Linda J. Morris

Howling the blues - Bromberg and 4W5 Café House Band drummer Mark Campanile

to his first four releases: *David Bromberg, Demon in Disguise, Wanted Dead or Alive, and Midnight on the Water*.

In 1977, Bromberg moved to the San Francisco Bay area and recorded several albums for Fantasy, including the double album *How Late'll Ya Play 'Til?* He was touring extensively, but something was absent.

"When I lived in New York City, when I wasn't on the road, I was constantly jamming with my friends. In California, I never found people to jam with. I'd get home and rest, but I didn't get a lot of rest, I actually was burnt out — and I didn't recognize it as that. All I knew was, I was no longer writing; I was no longer practicing, and I was no longer jamming — so I considered myself dead as a musician. I didn't want to be this bitter old guy who could go through the motions because that was the only way he could earn a living." When it "stopped being fun," he felt that it was unconscionable to accept money for performing.

So, in 1980, he and his wife moved to Chicago, where they later raised a son and a daughter. "The best intellectual stimulation,

the thing I could really sink my teeth into, was learning about violins in a local violin shop. I learned to repair bows." When he did go on the road, he would bring along bows and tools, "and at three o'clock in the morning, I'd be back in my hotel room, repairing bows."

But, he said, "I toured in the way people don't tour any more. One time we were on the road three years without being home as much as two weeks."

Bromberg decided to leave the stage and enroll in the Kenneth Warren School of Violin Making in Chicago. Four years later, he graduated. "Got my diploma on the wall." He became not only a fine instrument maker, who played his own creation at Carnegie Hall, but an expert on the instrument, sought after to authenticate antique violins. He worked for a while for a shop in Chicago, then was asked to represent the shop on the road. "It was right up my alley." From there, he drifted into buying and selling, going to auctions in Europe three times a year. "I ended up being the person who brings the most French bows into the United States," he said. "I had become an expert, and that's what I still do, and that's what I continue to study. In other words, people will bring me violins, and I'll tell them, if I can, who made it, when, and where. I continue to study so I can learn even more. It's one of these things like music; you can never learn everything."

Eventually, the climate in the Windy City took its toll. Two years ago, the Brombergs moved to Wilmington. "The man who used to be my road manager and now is my manager in general, Steve Bailey, is now the associate director of the Grand Opera House [in Wilmington], and is also a very good friend, so that had a lot to do with me coming here. On the broader level, we had been living in Chicago for 20 years, and we didn't want to face another Chicago winter. My wife and I wanted to move back East, and we wanted to move somewhere where the weather is appreciably nicer than Chicago. We're not really Southerners," he said. "Wilmington is the perfect compromise." The city is close to New York City, Philadelphia, and other metropolitan areas. And it's easier to line up gigs on the East Coast. With a daughter still

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

David Bromberg Quartet/Live NYC 1982
David's Private Collection (2003)

**My Own House/
You Should See the Rest of the Band**
Fantasy (1998), reissue from 1980 and 1979

**Reckless Abandon/
Bandit in a Bathing Suit**
Fantasy (1998), reissue from 1978 and 1979

The Player: Retrospective
Sony (1998)

Sideman Serenade
Rounder (1989)

Long Way From Here
Fantasy (1986)

My Own House
Fantasy (1980)

How Late'll Ya Play 'Til?
Fantasy (1977)

Out of the Blues: Best of David Bromberg
Columbia (1977)

Midnight on the Water
Columbia (1976)

Wanted Dead or Alive
Columbia (1974)

Demon in Disguise
Columbia (1972)

David Bromberg
Columbia (1971)

David Bromberg also appears on more than 100 recordings as a sideman and on many compilations.

www.davidbromberg.net

in high school, the family-friendly and neighborly atmosphere they've encountered in the city have made them feel right at home.

In an effort to revitalize the downtown scene, the city provided an attractive real estate deal to Bromberg. For a dollar, the couple bought a dilapidated, but full-of-character home on Market Street, where Bromberg, hundreds of thousands of dollars later, set up shop. David Bromberg's Fine Violins is a retail store, repair center, and museum, featuring rare antique violins. As proprietor, Bromberg is on hand to authenticate instruments and give advice to the public. Josephson, an acclaimed sculptor known for her multi-media approach, also has a studio in the building. And her artistic influence may have brought out another side to Bromberg's talent.

"I'm very happy to be married to Nancy, very grateful. Like every marriage, we've had our ups and downs, and we've survived it." Then, with a proud grin, he confided, "I'll tell you what I'm getting Nancy for our anniversary, which is September 3rd — our 25th. I had a medal made, like a military medal.

"I figure she deserves a medal for staying married to me for 25 years. On the bar it says 'courage and integrity' And there's a little eagle sitting on it. And then there's a ribbon that comes down, and over the ribbon is a medallion from a U.S. Army medal for distinguished service. Then on the bottom there is a pierced heart, which is a religious symbol..." White gold and diamonds complete the ornamentation, he said, then paused a moment, considering his creation. "It's very busy," he admitted. "I tried to make it look like she had designed it. Of course, I can't." He was sure, however, she would cherish it!

Since the 90s, Bromberg has built his touring schedule around his other interests. "I don't feel stressed," he said. Like his mentors in the 60s, he continues to speak his mind onstage and off, especially with the presidential election approaching. He supported fundraisers for candidate John Kerry.

"I have very strong feelings about this election. I think it's the most important election in my lifetime. I think that our Constitution is under attack from the higher-ups in the current government. I think they're ignoring, circumventing, and generally hurting the fabric of which this country was built — all under the façade of patriotism. I say façade because self-interest is much more their aim.

"The fact that this administration felt that they could jail anybody they wanted and put them in jail without charges or right of attorney — even American citizens," he feels is an outrage, and he doesn't mind sharing his opinions with the public.

His thoughts on artists using their positions to advocate their views: "I have the same right [to speak out] as any citizen, but I don't feel that anybody should put any more weight on what I say because I play music.

"I talk to my audiences as my friends. I don't say anything to them that I don't say to my friends, and I don't say much to my friends that I don't say to my audiences. People don't come and argue, but I have heard some boo's

"There's some really fine musicians, and the real unusual thing that's happening lately is that kids have been turning up. Talented, talented kids! If you stick around tonight, there's a 16-year-old guitar player who is as good a blues guitar player as any I've ever played with, and I've played with some really good guitar players. That's John Lippincott — he's a killer!"

Bromberg also encounters the same at the Thursday-night bluegrass jams. "There's a kid who couldn't have been 12, who plays beautiful mandolin. There's even younger players too," he said, "so, we have some fun!"

"Look at something you will observe tonight. Look at the racial makeup — you



4W5 Café - (left to right) Bromberg, Andy Vincent, and John Lippincott

Linna J. Morris

won't see that hardly anywhere else in Delaware. This is a place where the black community and the white community can come and have a good time."

Bromberg's influence goes deep into the fabric of the local music scene, a fact of which he is modestly aware. "I feel a responsibility. I don't talk about what I do as art. In my view, art is something for somebody else to say about what

— I don't mind. Everybody's entitled to their opinion, and everybody's entitled to speak their mind. And that includes musicians. Just because I'm up there doesn't mean I have to speak, but it also doesn't mean I have to shut up," he said. "It also doesn't mean anybody has to listen to me."

At Kingcakebaby, extolling the virtues of his po' boy and gumbo, Bromberg spoke of life in his new home. "I worked in Chicago's Hyde Park, a 60/40 black-to-white population. It was a graveyard for restaurants, and the only restaurant that was successful had New Orleans-style food," which is featured on the menu for the Market Street dining spot, which had been open only a day.

When he's not on the road, he jams at the 4W5 Café two nights a week. "Originally, it was part of my agreement with the city. Part of what I agreed to do in return is to try and get music started on Market Street. I don't know if they really thought I'd do anything or not. I went to every restaurant on Market Street and nobody was interested [except 4W5], so we started these jams. The truth is, I started them, and they could run without me now, but I love them. They're the best part about living in Wilmington for me.

you do." But others are awed by his commitment. Later, at the 4W5 Café that Tuesday night, keyboard player Kenny Thompson and members of the house band looked forward to the evening's blues jam. "We get to play with a real superstar," Thompson said, "On Tuesday night he does his blues thing, and on Thursday night he does his bluegrass thing."

The gig got under way around 7:00. Bromberg jammed with the house band, with John and Gordon Lippincott, ages 16 and 19, Parrish Warrington and Pat Kane, both 14, sitting in. Bromberg looked on with obvious joy as the teenagers wowed the house with their guitar virtuosity and vocals. From time to time they turned to receive his approving nod or applause from the master. The mostly full house heard the favorites like "Keep on Drinkin'" and "Let the Good Times Roll." Bromberg shared vocals with Thompson on "Bring it on Home to Me." And local blueswoman Kitty Mayo belted out, "You can have my husband, but don't mess with my man!" The jam is free to the public, as are Bromberg's services, but art has its own rewards.

"It's not a paying gig," he said. "I do it because I like to do it. To me, it's just fun!"

