



# Wallace Berman: The Artist Who Should've Been a Household Name

By Crombie

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*Photographs by Wallace Berman; Copyrighted by The Wallace Berman Estate, Courtesy of the Kohn Gallery.*

Until Dane suggested this interview, I'd never heard of the artist Wallace Berman, and I felt very uncool about it.

Then I put a hashtag next to his name and pulled up a meagre 1377 results—meaning you probably haven't heard of Wallace Berman either. Which is crazy given he sat at the centre of some of the coolest movements in American cultural history.

In the 1940s, Berman was a familiar face around the West Coast jazz scene, hanging out with soon-to-be legends like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. In the 50s, he was a member of the Beat Generation, exchanging ideas and (probably) marijuana cigarettes with the likes of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsburg. By the time the 60s rolled around, Wallace Berman was recognised as the quintessential artist's artist, and if you need proof of that, take a look at the album cover for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*—that's him next to Tony Curtis. Recognition doesn't get much better than that.

So, why isn't Wallace Berman a household name? One reason could be that he only ever agreed to a single interview, and that interview never saw that light of day after he kidnapped the interviewer and stole the tape (Wallace and the journalist went on to become close friends. Go figure). He also only exhibited his work publicly once, at the Ferus Gallery in 1957. The L.A. Vice Squad busted the show because of a rude drawing on display by the artist Cameron. Wallace was arrested and fined \$150 for his involvement in the show. He only exhibited out of his home after that.

There's a lot more to learn about Wallace Berman and his invaluable contribution to art and culture. Fortunately, his son, Tosh, has written a book that will help shed a little more light on who this guy was and what he did in his extraordinary lifetime. I gave Tosh a call.

**Tosh, I was excited to talk to you about your new book, *Tosh: Growing Up in Wallace Berman's World*...**

Yes?

**But I'm extra excited now because I just discovered that you are a fan of the band Sparks.**

I'm a huge Sparks fan. I wrote a book about Sparks.

**I know. You've got two books about Sparks: *Sparks-Tastic: Twenty-One Nights with Sparks in London*, and then another book that's a collection of Sparks lyrics, right?**

Yeah, I wrote one book, and I published another book of Sparks lyrics (*In the Words of Sparks... Selected Lyrics*).

**And the book that you wrote is about your experience attending twenty-one Sparks concerts in a row.**

Yes.

**And at each show they performed a different Sparks album; they went through their entire catalogue.**

Exactly. It took place in London, and each night was a different album, from their first to their most recent.

**I'm not a big Sparks fan.**

Oh no?

**No, but I'm a big fan of a big Sparks fan.**

You're a fan of... a fan?

**Yeah, and you know who I'm talking about.**

I do?

**Yeah!**

I don't think I do...

**MORRISSEY!**

Oh yes! Yes! He was actually kind enough to write the introduction to the lyrics book.

**He wrote the intro?**

Yeah, yeah. He's great.

**I'm semi-forbidden from mentioning Morrissey, so this is great.**

Oh, yeah, you can mention him. He's quite a character.

**You know him then?**

Well, I've met him a couple of times, but the general communication has been through email. I used to work at a bookstore in West Hollywood called Book Soup, and he would come in from time to time, and we would talk.

**Wow.**

So, you're a fan of Morrissey.

**Yeah. And there's his name again, just to annoy the publisher.**

Morrissey, Morrissey, Morrissey, Morrissey.

**I know! And also—Morrissey, Morrissey.**

Yes. Morrissey. [laughter]

**So, in January next year, your book *Tosh: Growing Up in Wallace Berman's World* is coming out.**

Yes.



Wallace Berman, *Untitled #84*, c. 1964-76, single negative Verifax collage, 6 x 6 1/2 inches

**And it's a book that traces your life from birth onwards, living with your dad and your experiences with the different eras he was at the centre of: the Beat Generation, the 60s, all that stuff.**

Yes.

**How did you conjure up memories from so long ago? Did you have to interview people?**

No, not at all. In fact, I tried to stay away from doing that. I spoke to my mom a lot, but that was just conversations; by no means were they interviews. I have very strong, distinct memories of my childhood, and I think I have a great memory of that time for various

reasons—for one, a lot of people ask me about that era; they approach me because I am the son of Wallace Berman and they want to know stuff about him.

**So, you've talked about it a lot.**

Exactly. A lot of people are totally obsessed with that era, in the same way that you are obsessed with Morrissey. And of course, all of your questions will come back to Morrissey, so it helps if you know a little bit about Morrissey.

**Morrissey.**

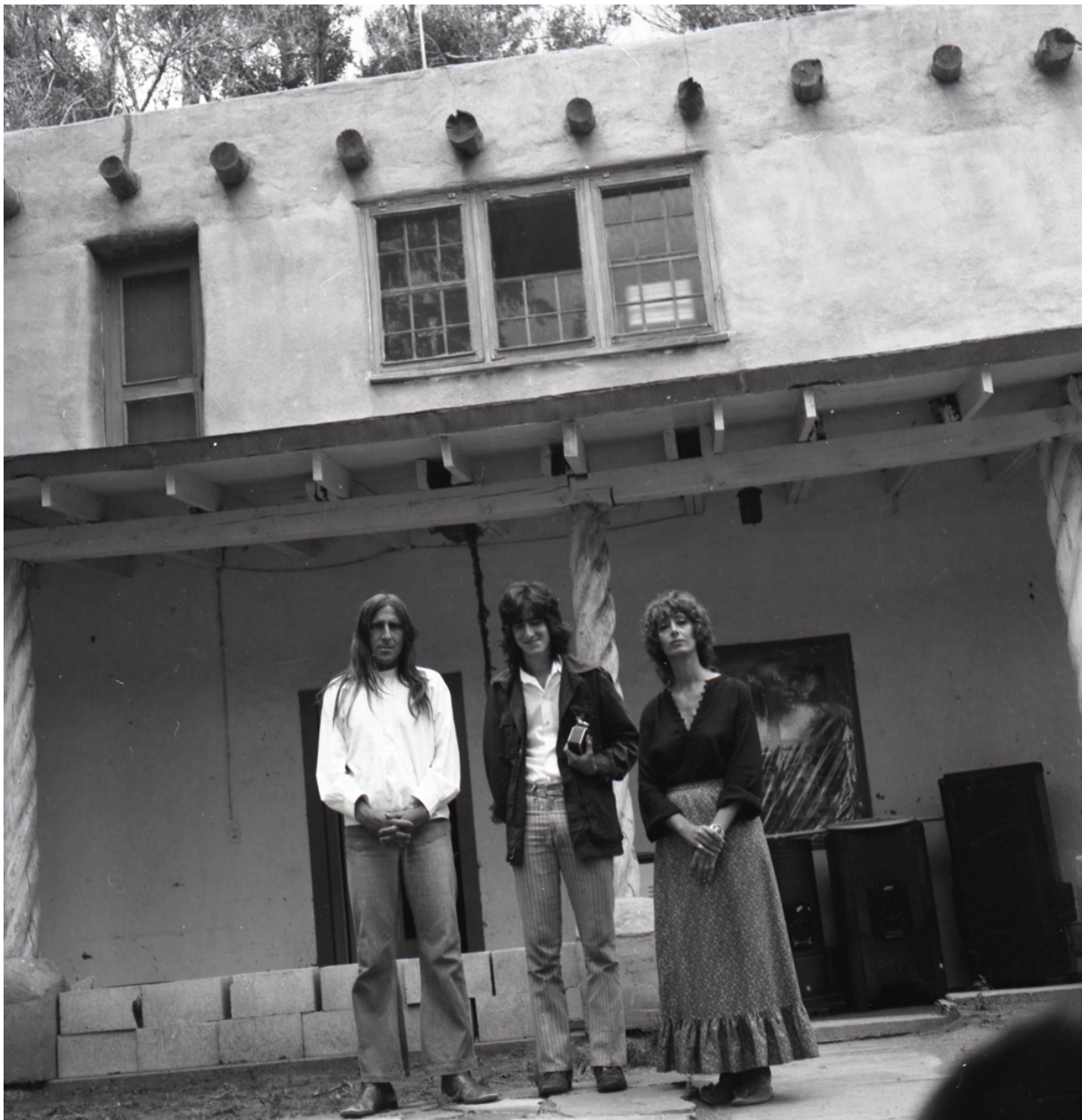
So, it's sort of the same way with me and the 1950s and 60s. Oddly enough, I can't remember things now as an adult. Like, I forget names or I get places mixed up; but I have a stronger sense of placement and memory with my parents in the 50s and the 60s.

**Would it be fair to say that your parents were 'Groovy'?**

It would be fair to say that. If nothing else, they were groovy. I never would have used that terminology, but, in comparison to some other people's parents, they were definitely groovy.

**You had what might be considered a non-traditional upbringing, but you attended school and stuff, right?**

I did go to school, yeah. But here's the unusual aspect of it all—I was raised by my natural father and my natural mother, whereas most of my friends at that time were raised by their mother because their father wasn't around a lot. So, I had a really solid family unit; that structure was always there, and that in itself was unusual in the 50s and 60s, especially in the bohemian world.



**Being brought up in bohemia, were you aware that you were living outside of the mainstream world?**

Yeah, I wrote about this in the book. I was raised watching TV shows like *Father Knows Best* and *My Three Sons* and *Ozzie & Harriet*, and those shows were about straight people in this really straight environment, and my life was not like that. I didn't grow up in the *Ozzie & Harriet* surroundings.

**Instead, you grew up with people like William Burroughs, Marcel Duchamp, The Rolling Stones, etcetera.**

Yeah. Well, Brian Jones from the Rolling Stones was friends with my father; he would come to our house in Beverly Glen, which is a canyon area in Los Angeles, very close to UCLA, Sunset Strip, Topanga Canyon, around there. Marcel Duchamp, I only met once at this huge retrospective he had at the time; it took place in 1963, so I was eight or nine years old...

**Were you aware of your father's importance?**

I was aware of my dad's presence, or quote-unquote fame because people would treat him differently, or they were nervous in front of him. I could tell they thought he was really special. There was definitely something different about how people talked to my dad. And as I child I picked up on that and definitely, as a teenager, I noticed he had a certain charisma.

**He seemed like he was a very cool guy.**

He really was a cool person, but not a person who wanted to be cool or tried to be cool-he was just a hardcore cool person.

**He was legit.**

He was very legit. He was cool seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. His stance on life and his presence and his world were all definitely cool-in the traditional sense of cool.

**And he grew up with Sammy Davis Jr.?**

Yes! Sammy Davis was his childhood friend.

**That's crazy.**

Yeah, it is. From a very young age, my dad was attracted to street life, and he loved black American culture and street life. And he really loved jazz music, especially be-bop. So, he was going to all the jazz clubs in South Central L.A. in the 40s. He was a teenager and pretty much hung out there and got to know all the musicians: Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, people like that...

**Amazing.**



Yeah, and he was very good at dancing. He was a good swing dancer.

**Didn't he design the album art for Charlie Parker's first record?**

Yeah, he did the drawing on the album that featured Charlie Parker's first appearance on a disc. It was a compilation album with a bunch of other jazz artists on a label called Dial Records. Dial was one of the first labels to really get into be-bop. The owner had a record store on Hollywood Boulevard called Tempo Records, and my dad would hang out there as a teenager. He developed a relationship with the record store people which lead to him creating the art for this compilation album that happened to have Charlie Parker's first recording on it.



Wallace Berman, *Untitled (BeBop Jazz Yellow Cover)*, 1948, album cover, 10 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches

**That's such a trip. And I guess his interest in jazz lead to his involvement in the Beat Generation?**

Yeah. Jazz was very important to the beat movement and my dad's life. If you've read Jack Kerouac, you'll know that the importance of jazz on that era can't be underestimated.

**Did you meet Kerouac?**

No, I never met him. I met Morrissey, but not Kerouac. [laughter]

**I can't believe you met Morrissey.**

I have a Morrissey story to tell you at the end of the interview.

**Excellent. Let's talk about your dad's publication, *Semina*.**

Yes?

**He published it himself from 1955 to 1964... Is it fair to say that *Semina* was the invention of the zine?**

Well...

**Did your dad invent the zine, Tosh? I feel like he might've. I mean, it was self-published, he mailed it out to people...**

Well, the whole premise of *Semina* was that it was handmade.



Wallace Berman, *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*, 1964, mixed media collage, 44 1/2 x 32 1/4 inches

Like a zine. How did he make it?

He had a printing press, like a little hand printing press, which was quite time-consuming and complex at times. He'd make a limited edition, and it was put together not like a book, but with loose pages in a folder; and each [issue] was very different from the other. I mean, they were all basically the same in that the pages were always loose, but the sizes were different and the design was different. But they were all very distinctively my father's work.

**And it was free, right?**

Yeah, he'd give it out for free, but only to people who he admired. He'd send it to them in the mail, or else he'd meet someone he liked and give it to them by hand. So, he never sold a copy to anyone... Although, he did have the first issue of *Semina* on consignment at City Lights Books in San Francisco.

**I think your dad invented the zine. I mean, what the fuck? He invented the zine, he grew up with Sammy Davis, he was on the cover of *Sgt. Peppers*... who was this guy?**

I like the idea that he invented the zine—and I'd love to give him credit—but, honestly, there's always some other unknown person doing stuff you don't know about, so, you know. Also, there've been artists who made their own magazines before: you had people like Marcel Duchamp, and others from the Dada movement and the Surrealist movement, the Futurists, they all made their own handmade publications. But, I guess what made my dad's unique is that it definitely had a zine aesthetic; it wasn't made for the masses, it was made to be given out to people he admired and liked, and it didn't exist to sell anything. If you had a copy of *Semina*, it was so special because you got it directly from my father, and it was a gift given to you specifically.

**Next question: your dad is in the movie *Easy Rider*.**

Yes.

**Which one is he? I can't figure out who he is. I'm assuming he's in the scene where they stop at that commune?**

Yeah, my dad and mom are in the commune scene. There's a close-up of my mom when the camera pans around that part...

**Where they're sitting down to eat with all the hippies?**

Yeah, they're sitting in a circle.

**And the camera does a 360° pan of everyone sitting at the table.**

Yes. And my dad is in a shot where he's throwing seeds.

**He's trudging along throwing seeds in a field. I know exactly who he is now.**

Yeah, he's way in the background. Dennis [Hopper] insisted that my dad had to be in the movie. I actually had a role in the film.

**Wait, you were in *Easy Rider* too?**

I was hired to be in *Easy Rider*. I had three or so lines and, on the day we showed up on set, I told my mom and dad I didn't want to do it.

**Oh, no.**

I just didn't want to do it.

**What were your lines?**

They were spoken to Peter Fonda... 'Oh, I'm so happy to see you,' or something like that.

**I can't believe you blew your chance to be in *Easy Rider*. I wouldn't be able to live with myself.**

I know. I was in an Andy Warhol movie, though.

**No way. Which one?**

It was called *Tarzan and Jane Regained*... Sort of. I think it was made in 1963, and I played 'Boy,' Tarzan's son.

**Who played Tarzan?**

Taylor Mead.

**And did you meet Andy Warhol?**

I did, but I have no memory of him.

**What were the pros and cons of growing up the son of Wallace Berman?**

Well... It was a very isolated existence at times because I felt separated from the mainstream world; I knew there was another world out there, and I never felt totally part of

that. I'm not saying that was a good or bad thing, but just being aware that there was another planet out there... I felt like an alien from outer space sometimes, or *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, of sorts.

**Right.**

During my school years, I felt that I really didn't belong there, so I was rebellious because of this feeling of displacement.

**It must've been pretty cool to grow up around artists and beatniks, bohemians...**

Yeah... In hindsight, I can see that it was meant to be this utopian thing, a utopian landscape, and it was utopian in a certain sense, but it wasn't utopia if you were a woman or a child. It was very much a group of people who were totally devoted to their art or their craft, and usually the family would come in second. Having said that, it was not an ultra-heavy childhood to go through, but it was definitely people making up the rules as they went along, and sometimes those rules were good, and other times they didn't work.

**Were there other kids you grew up with in that bohemian environment?**

Yes, and, in my opinion, they weren't always in great households or happy surroundings. A lot of the relationships were very fractured or didn't last long. When I lived in Topanga, there were so many single moms with kids, so there were all these wild male teenagers who did not have fathers. Even then, the importance of having a unit behind you was very clear to me, and a lot of these kids didn't have that.

**Was Wallace a good dad?**

He was a very good dad in the sense that he pretty much raised me. My mom worked, and my dad stayed home with me while he did his work. So, he was a good dad in that he took care of my basics. He wouldn't talk to me a lot, though. I'd be there, helping him in the studio, so I was sort of like his assistant. His first priority was his work; therefore, I had to be in his studio with him while he's working, and a lot of the time I'd have to be quiet and just watch him work for hours, you know?

**Just sitting there doing nothing?**

Well, I was like his little DJ; he had a record player in the studio and he'd have me change records while he worked.

**What drove you write *Tosh: Growing Up in Wallace Berman's World*?**

I was never super happy with the stuff that has been written about my dad in other books, articles and so forth, and I thought if I want to have my two cents in that history I'm going to have to write something about it.

**And this is the definitive Wallace Berman story because you're his son, you were there.**

Well, it's my version of Wallace Berman. It's my version of Wallace and my mom, and other people have their different opinion about it all... But (my book) isn't IT in capital letters; I don't think that ever exists, to be fair.

**What's your fondest memory of your dad?**

Oh my god, the fondest memory... I think my fondest memories come from just being in his presence.

**Just being his son.**

Yeah. He was somebody that people really admired and when he walked in a room, there was that presence, and I felt that. I knew that presence existed, but I never felt intimidated by it. He was just a very special, charismatic figure. I remember being picked up by him, touched by him, and, of course, those are my fondest memories.

***TOSH: Growing Up in Wallace Berman's World* by Tosh Berman will be on sale January, 2019, published by [City Lights](#). To see more from the Dane Reynolds Guest Editor issue, [get it here](#).**