



CITY LIGHTS  
BOOKS

# TOSH

Growing Up in Wallace Berman's World

**TOSH BERMAN**



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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

*preface*

by **Amber Tamblyn**

For as long as I can remember, my parents' Los Angeles apartment has harbored a collection of iconic art. Their home is stuffed with the rusted, burned, patina-patterned works of art from some of the greatest American visual artists of the 20th century. In their office, a variety of wild works cover the walls: the George Herms piece made of mangled white wire, glued to a water-stained plank of wood; the Bruce Conner *mélange* of black ink prints, popping off the white paper like a bevy of baby Rorschachs; my father's own vibrant assemblages of electrified planets orbiting a blackened, blizzard sky. There are the fine photographs of Dennis Hopper and the fine arts of Dean Stockwell. On the glass bookshelves are the books of poetry by Michael McClure and Jack Hirschman's handbound chapbooks. And beneath it all, in a silver frame, a photo of a man sits on a wooden table as if the art above him were thought bubbles. The man has long hair and a long beard and looks straight out at you, his hand placed on a rock with a letter from the Kabbalah emblazoned on its surface. His gaze is gentle, his eyes as soft as a baby's palm. This man is Wallace Berman.

I was very young the first time I ever asked about the man in the silver frame. Who was he? A guru? A hippie? A friend? An artist? A father? A visionary? A revolutionary? It turns out he was

all of these things plus one more: a victim of a drunk driver. When I first asked my dad about his friend Wallace, his eyes softened and he made the kind of physical closure one does with a well of untapped pain: He clasped his hands across his chest, crossed his bony dancer legs, and looked down to the floor. “Wallace,” he said, “was everything.”

To my father, Wallace was a brother. Wallace was a mentor to an entire world in which my father and other artists like him lived. In 1976, at the age of 50, Wallace was killed by a drunk driver in Topanga Canyon, a moment that permanently broke my father’s heart. My father once told me the story of the night he ran into Wallace’s killer at a local Topanga bar. And while that’s a story for my father to tell someday, it bears noting here that he applied what Wallace had taught him that night, in a testament to Wallace’s spirit: Cut your enemies down with love.

Wallace was a purveyor of love, a seeker of love, and a maker of love. Love was in his marrow, and poets, filmmakers, painters, and dancers flocked to him. He was the frontman of the era’s assemblage art movement, and his work has been revered, admired, and even copied by some of the most legendary artists of our time.

Of course, next to almost every heterosexual male artist who devotes himself to his work is a damn good woman who keeps the fires lit. Wallace’s wife Shirley Berman, a dancer and the subject of many of his pieces, is an incredible woman whose impact on Wallace was huge. If artists lived inside the world that was Wallace Berman, then Shirley was the sun around which he orbited. Shirley, the daughter of a traveling circus dancer, is a beacon of feminism in my view, as are most women who lived through the masculinity of that era. As Tosh writes so beautifully in this book, “At best, women were expected to be the backup in case the male fell apart.” These words still ring true for many women today.

One of the most stunning works of art Wallace and Shirley Berman made was their son, Tosh. While reading *Tosh*, I found

such a tender kinship to his journey, one that parallels my own in many ways. We were both born and raised in Los Angeles, surrounded by a strong family structure and a similar mixture of eclectics and eccentrics from around the world. Tosh and I grew up around junk artists, Beat poets, and musicians who would some day become rock 'n' roll legends, everyone from Ed Ruscha to Neil Young. Through his father, Tosh was introduced to a world most could only hope to experience, and through my father's connection to that legacy, so too was I.

I have much to thank Wallace and Shirley Berman for, as their mentorship and friendship with my father led to my own mentor and friend, the poet and activist Jack Hirschman. I was fortunate to grow up hearing Jack read his poems many times in my parents' living room, and he became a powerful mentor for me. He inspired and urged me to write, nurturing my poetic and political voice from an early age, even publishing my very first poem when I was 11 years old. My work and life as a poet has run parallel to my work and life as an actress for over two decades, and the former very much informs the latter. I have my dad to thank for my relationship with Jack, who came to us from the world of Wallace Berman. I am forever grateful for that man in the silver frame, even though I never got to meet him.

After you read this compelling, glorious journey of growing up wild, free, and radical amongst some of the most fascinating people in America, you'll be grateful for Wallace too.

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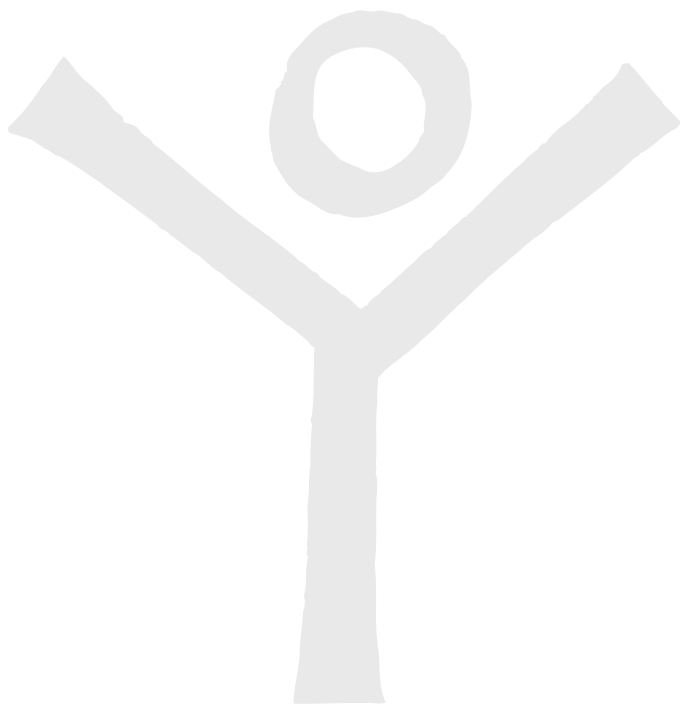
A Note

on **Wallace Berman**

*February 18, 1926 – February 18, 1976*

My father Wallace Berman was an artist. Or, I should say, he *is* an artist; though his body is not here anymore, his art is very much part of this world. He's considered the father of the California art assemblage movement, but he also was one of the first artists to work with a photocopier, specifically a Verifax, which was a wet-chemical-process copy machine for office workers. Wallace got a hold of one and eventually modified it to make art. It became his brush, canvas, and camera all in one. He's also known for his art and literature journal *Semina*, which was handmade, individually numbered and signed, and only given out to friends or people he admired. He was a pioneer of DIY publishing, without a thought of financial profit or concern for the art market. He also never left the medium of sculptures, making works on rock and boulders. He was a charismatic figure in the arts landscape from the 1950s until his early death in 1976. I've never believed it was a coincidence that he's one of the faces on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), or that he appears in the background of Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), or his appearance in Andy Warhol's *Tarzan and Jane Regained . . . Sort Of* (1964). Wallace never gave interviews to the press, nor did he

like talking about his art. He did art, and only did art. He was a family man, but that doesn't adequately express who he was. It's my hope that this memoir will reveal not only yours truly, but also the presence of Wallace as a father, the Batman to my Robin, as well as the constant misery and disappointment of him not being here. But we do have his art, and he does live in my book.



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**TOSH**

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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

## Wallace / *chapter 1*

My mother, Shirley Morand, first saw her future husband—my father—driving a convertible, with a cat wrapped around his neck, somewhere on the streets of Hollywood. Wallace Berman, at that time, never left the house without his cat. The 19th-century French writer Gérard de Nerval had a pet lobster named “Thibault,” and he would take it out for evening walks through Paris, attached to a silk leash. Wallace, in his fashion, was returning to the eminent, artistic, eccentric personalities of 19th- and 20th-century Paris. Without a doubt, he made backward glances to the artists he greatly admired and their peculiar habits. I learned style through both parents, due to their knowledge of such dandies of the past and present, as well as the art and literature that dwell in that world of provocateurs and visionaries. I understood the importance of the past as a reference for the ideal life, and I inherited a passion for artists and poets who didn’t belong in the world, who had to invent a landscape in which they could live and do their art. I learned that from Wallace, due to his numerous homages to the artistic set that lived before him.

At the time of my mom’s first sighting of Wallace with his cat, he cut quite a striking figure that screamed “Los Angeles dandy.”

Wallace Berman as a child

A man who had an understanding of the criminal street life, he knew that the results of such a life had to be fine clothing, which to him meant zoot suits. It was World War Two, the height of the zoot suit craze, and there was, in fact, a law on the books that forbade the zoot suit, owing to the excess fabric in making the outfit; all surplus material was expected to be sent to the government for the war effort. What could attract a criminal-minded youth more than wearing such clothing at the height of war?

My father's family had come from another part of the world. His mother Anna and his grandmother were Russian Jews. They settled in Staten Island, New York, where his father was an owner of a candy store. According to speculation, the store was a front, either for a speakeasy or for bootlegging. My grandfather seemed to have too much money just for owning a neighborhood candy store. In the only picture I've seen of Wallace's father, he's wearing tennis clothes—long white pants, tight white shirt—with a racket in his hand. My mom also told me that she used to own a photograph of Wallace's mother and father in a large car with a chauffeur. When he died, which I think was from the aftereffects of tuberculosis, he only left two books for Wallace, a collection of tales by Oscar Wilde and T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926). After his death, the family, which by then included Anna's brother Harry, relocated to Boyle Heights, Los Angeles.

At the time, Boyle Heights was a community of Japanese Americans, Latinos, and Jews. Much of the neighborhood's population changed after the 1950s, when the freeways were built. The Berman clan eventually moved to another Jewish neighborhood, in Fairfax, which is very close to Hollywood. Around this time Wallace had a best friend by the name of Sammy Davis, Junior. My grandmother Anna said to me that her heart began to race one morning when she went into Wallace's bedroom and saw Sammy asleep in the bed. At first, she thought Wallace had turned black, but he was sleeping by the bedside on the floor,



WALLACE BERMAN /  
Anna Berman, Wallace's mom, 1958, Larkspur

giving Sammy his bed. I remember my dad telling me how he and Sammy went to the Hollywood Palladium on Sunset Boulevard to see Glenn Miller and his big band and weren't allowed to go in because of Sammy's skin color. Wallace never told me how they initially met, but I presume the first laid eyes of each other on Central Avenue, in one of the jazz or dance clubs of the 1940s. They totally lost touch with each other after their teenage years, but right before Wallace died, he saw Sammy at the dentist.

Wallace popped his head into the office and said hello. My dad told me that Sammy—dental tools still in his mouth—nearly perished in the chair. Wallace said a quick “Hello, how are you?” and then got out of there.

During his late teens, in the middle of the '40s, Wallace underwent a series of failures. First, he got kicked out of Fairfax High School for gambling. Then he enlisted and got kicked out of the Navy due to a nervous breakdown. Then he went to Chouinard Art School, and was kicked out of there for reasons unknown. Be they cause or effect of these failures, my father's taste for the outsider's life and distaste for mainstream American life were firmly established. It's been hinted to me that my dad was involved in the criminal world as a teenager, though I've never heard any stories of his actual criminal activity. But he clearly never felt comfortable in the “straight” world. The nine-to-five schedule wasn't for him. He had no problem with people who preferred that life, but for him, there was another world out there that was so much more attractive, the world that existed in the night. The key to that world was, at first, criminal activity, but that led to his beloved pursuits of jazz, poetry, and the visual arts.

Wallace discovered the world of books at the Los Angeles Downtown Library on Fifth Street and Flower. This library was probably where he discovered the poetry of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and perhaps the early surrealist writers. For sure, he became acquainted with the visual world in the library's art department. At the time, in Los Angeles, there weren't any huge contemporary art collections. So his initial exposure, specifically to art made in the past, came from books. The very first painting that I was conscious of as a child was Henri Fantin-Latour's *Coin de Table* (1872), a portrait of Verlaine and Rimbaud among other poets of their time. My mom and dad had a print of this painting on the wall in our house in Beverly Glen. I looked at this work, not knowing anything, really, except who Rimbaud was—even



though, of course, as a child, I never read him. My father taught me his name as soon as I began to form words on my own.

But Wallace also kept an eye on American popular culture. Ever since he was a kid, he had a love for Alex Raymond's comic strip *Flash Gordon*. The comic was published in the newspapers beginning in 1934, the year of my mom's birth. He was fascinated by Raymond's drawings, and the design of the strip inspired him to emulate Raymond's skill, matching it with his love for jazz and surrealist culture. He was also a fan of the *Flash Gordon* film serials that came out of the 1930s, starring Buster Crabbe as Flash. To Wallace, both media were equal, and the serials pretty much followed the pictorial sense of Raymond's vision in the comic strip. My dad later used images from the serials in his film *Aleph* (1966) and in the Verifax collages, and I think for him, *Flash Gordon* followed a natural progression from the comic strip to the big screen to his artwork.

He also appreciated the design and costumes in the *Flash* films; in a way, they were not that different from those of a Diaghilev ballet. Both the *Flash Gordon* serials and the Ballets Russes were highly in tune with my dad's sense of aesthetics, for my dad without a doubt appreciated the art of dance. There are images of the dance world in his artwork, and he loved ballet. Or, I should point out, he loved the *images* of the ballet. I don't recall him ever going to, or showing interest in actually attending, a dance recital. But I was raised with a variety of portraits of Vaslav Nijinsky in the family home. He never commented to me about his love for Nijinsky or the ballet. Many people would have sat you down and talked about why they liked a particular artist or entertainer, but not Wallace. His reasons were in his head, and he often showed his love for these artists in his artwork. I believe he felt that his art alone explained everything.

Wallace was also a huge admirer of Nijinsky's diary, the disjointed writings of a man who lost the plot, but nevertheless left a large shadow of genius on its pages. Nijinsky being part of

the Ballets Russes (the company started and controlled by Sergei Diaghilev with the help of Picasso, Erik Satie, and Jean Cocteau, among others) also held a tremendous appeal for Wallace. The dance world is a vast spectacle. For a sharp-minded borderline street thug like my dad, that world must have seemed impossible to attain, but reasonable to imagine. And while he never attended a ballet, Wallace was heavily into swing dancing. It was a portal through which to make progress in another culture, and he was never afraid to step through that entrance to see what was on the other side. One of the many pleasures of big band jazz was the dancing and the whole world within the dance club. Dancing also led to his discovery of numerous musicians who were part of the big bands, and in turn became part of the be-bop movement in jazz. That world never left my father's aesthetic. As much as he took in contemporary music, he never tired of the late '40s to early '60s experimentation in sound, fury, and beauty known as be-bop.

The earliest artwork that exists to my knowledge by "Wally Berman" is the cover for Dial Records' compilation *Be-Bop Jazz* (1947), renowned as the first appearance of Charlie Parker on a 78 rpm recording. It's a highly collectible record on two fronts: one, if you're a Charlie Parker fan, this is the holy grail of his recordings; and two, it was the first appearance of Wallace's artwork for public consumption. The label head, Ross Russell, had a record store in Los Angeles that specialized in be-bop, called Tempo Music, which was located at 5946 Hollywood Boulevard. Besides the Downtown Library, this was the crucial location for Wallace. The record store was devoted exclusively to be-bop, and I imagine every great musician had been through its doors. Due to my father's hanging out at the store, Russell hired him to draw the artwork for the cover. Wallace also went to the original recording session with Charlie Parker on March 28, 1946. He saw Parker as one of the great artists of his time, yet he never conveyed his thoughts on the session, or what it



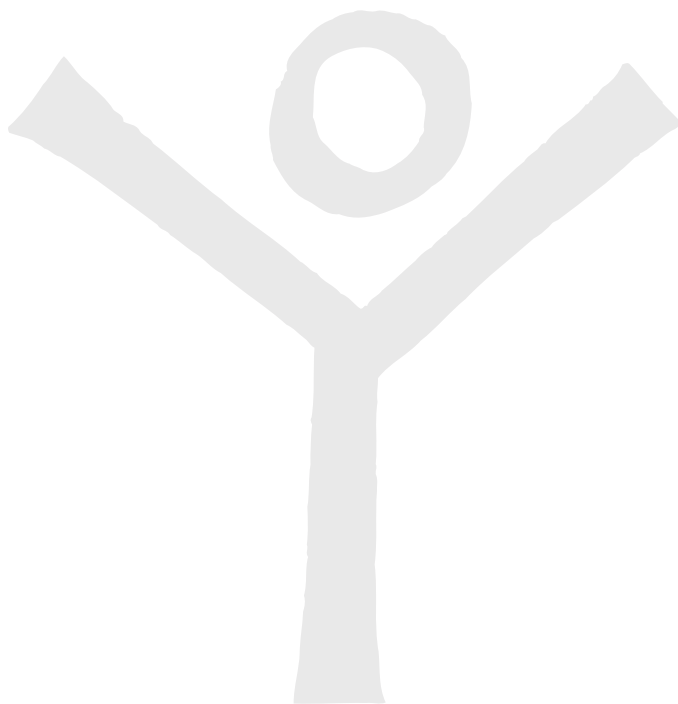
WALLACE BERMAN /

Untitled (*Be-Bop Jazz* Yellow Cover), 1948

was like to be in the presence of Parker, or his favorite singer at the time, Billie Holiday. He told me that he delivered food or perhaps some pot for her, but I can't remember which. Perhaps both?

The drawing had been made when he was a teenager, but Wallace was 20 when he selected it for the cover of *Be-Bop Jazz*. He also designed the original logo for the Dial label. Jazz has traditionally been an important element in the world of the arts, and Wallace was only one of many who felt its seductive pull. There was just an incredible amount of communication between the visual arts and the music. Around the same time that my dad was

hanging out at Tempo Records, Boris Vian in France was in the process of opening the world of American jazz to the French public through his writing and his activity as an A&R man for various French labels. Although they never met, they clearly belong to the same generation of artists and writers who were drawn to jazz. Wallace had one foot in the jazz culture of his time, and the other in the fine arts. The jazz world called out to my father, and he embraced the sounds and culture with open heart and arms.



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## Loree Foxx / *chapter 2*

Wallace had had a very prominent girlfriend before my mom, and that was Loree Foxx, a born criminal who stole not only from people she didn't know but also from anyone in her social circle and their families. She snatched objects like people breathe air. It came totally natural to her. Loree saw the world as a playground of thieving fun. She had the ability not to care if she was robbing from the rich or the poor, or even from pals. I have heard from my uncle, who became her boyfriend after Wallace, that Loree would start off her day by looking through fashion magazine ads, marking off each outfit and accessory she wanted. By that evening, her apartment would be filled with the clothing that she desired. Loree also had a knack for finding additional talented people who would allow themselves to become part of her gang of thieves. In her world, she was very much Fagin. Her mother had a thing for circus elephant objects: elephants in or on crystal snowballs, drawings, etchings, that type of stuff. Loree and her gang stole a circus elephant ride for kids that was parked in front of the entrance of a supermarket, and she gave it to her mom as a gift, which was highly unusual, since she never bestowed gifts. A reporter noticed the oversize kiddie ride in her mom's yard and did a story on it. I'm sure Loree left the neighborhood for a moment or two till everything cleared up regarding the elephant ride scandal.



# SEMINA TWO

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Like my father with his cat, Loree had her version of Nerval's lobster, keeping a pet alligator by her side. The reptile probably made her look like the prototype of a James Bond villain. At night, she would take her alligator out with a leash attached to its mouth and torso. My father agreed to keep an eye on the alligator from time to time when Loree's living space was compromised. He placed the alligator in his mom's bathtub. Anna, my grandmother, would scream whenever she had to use the bathroom. Every time she went in, the alligator made snapping sounds with its jaws, though she was perfectly safe, as long as she didn't join the beast in the bathtub.

Wallace and Loree were the king and queen of the swing dance world in Los Angeles. My uncle Donald told me that my dad and Loree dominated the dance floor. Wallace was very much a zoot-suited jazz obsessive who danced extremely well. This makes perfect sense given his lifelong love for music—why not dance, as well? After Wallace's death, my mom found his dance trophies at Grandma Anna's house. I'm sure they weren't of value to anyone because otherwise Loree would have stolen them and sold them off.

Wallace once played craps with another gambler in some vacant alley, and Loree was right beside him. The other player, who was losing and sore about it, was anxious to check the dice my dad was using. Loree immediately took the dice out of Wallace's hands and threw them away, which, in turn, meant that my father got beaten to a pulp by the other gambler. Sadly, Loree was mistaken about the dice. They were not loaded.

I remember Loree from when I was a child. I remember thinking at the time, "Was she that bad?" She was neither here nor there for me, nor did I pick up on any troublesome vibrations

from her. But alas, I think I was just small enough to fly under her radar. Loree was fascinating because she sounded to me like pure evil, yet she was very close to my parents and, of course, my uncle. Oddly enough, as far as I know, Donald only ever had one serious relationship with a woman, and it was with the queen of crime. I grew up in an environment where people were not judged for their weaknesses or faults. I never heard my father say a harsh word towards anyone. There never were any snap judgments, like “So and so is evil,” or “So and so is no good,” or any view of someone on a subjective level. All were accepted, or not. I hardly ever heard my parents condemn anyone for anything. Loree would break into the homes of her friends to steal without giving a second thought to the morality of it all. It never crossed her mind, or my parents’ or their friends’.

Loree once broke into our house in Beverly Glen to steal my mother’s passport, but once she found it, she realized it was a family document with my name attached to it, and therefore she couldn’t use it for her devilish purposes. When Loree and Donald settled in New York City, my mom visited them and stayed for a whole summer in their apartment. Shirley wrote to her new boyfriend Wallace on a regular basis, and she let Loree mail out the letters for her. Loree opened the correspondence, destroyed it, and wrote her version of the letters to Wallace, signed Shirley. As you might gather, she was, among her many talents, an expert forger. She almost ruined their relationship, but Wallace and Shirley figured out the trouble. Oddly enough, my parents never had a harsh word for Loree. They accepted her fully. She was a criminal and not to be trusted. On the other hand, she was a swell gal.

Nevertheless, Wallace and Shirley did eventually end their friendship with Loree, because they just couldn’t trust her in any form or fashion. It wasn’t because she stole from them so much as they realized any of their friends could have become a victim of her criminal schemes. This meant my mom’s brother also didn’t





WALLACE BERMAN /  
Loree Foxx, 1955

talk to my parents for a while. Donald and Loree relocated to the desert near Palm Springs, where I presume she robbed all the Palm Springs ladies as much as possible. Their house was a farm, and since Loree had a taste for exotic pets, she had not only the alligator but all sorts of wild birds, as well as two lions. One Christmas, at my grandparents' home in Topanga Canyon, Donald brought one of the lions with him. The doorbell rang, I opened the front door, and this lion jumped upon me. The giant cat had no teeth, but it did pull me around the living room like I was a rag doll.

I was terrified, but the grown-ups around me just watched the action in front of them and were all highly amused.

Unhappily, though perhaps fortunately for some, Loree died in a prison cell in 1972 while having an asthma attack. Throughout her life, Loree suffered from asthma. The guards gave her medicine that she was allergic to, and she died right there on the spot, in her cell. Her niece Suzy, also a friend of my parents (and featured on the cover of *Semina 2*), went to the jail unit to identify the body. She went not out of courtesy, love, or family duty, but out of fear that Loree might be still alive and faking her death. But alas, Loree Foxx, artist, ex-girlfriend to my father and Uncle Donald, and master thief, was sincerely dead.

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