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George Benson, photographed at home, Dec. 26, 2011

GEORGE BENSON

RETURNS TO JAZZ

WHILE RELAXING AT HOME, THE GUITAR LEGEND TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW, MOSTLY INSTRUMENTAL JAZZ ALBUM, AND HE REFLECTS ON THE PLAYERS WHO INFLUENCED HIM THE MOST

By Josef Woodard ⋮ Photography by Brandon Sullivan

After driving through the winding, arid Arizona landscape, I park the car and approach the house. Is this the right place? Upon hearing a familiar voice, singing ornamental soul riffs as he approaches on the other side of the large door, I realize that I have, indeed, arrived at George Benson's residence.

A gracious legend in a tailored black suit, at 3 in the afternoon, Benson offers a kind handshake and a warm personality on contact. He projects an air of friendliness, just like at his concerts. We settle into the living room of his expansive, nicely acquitted house outside of Phoenix, where he lives with his wife of nearly 50 years, Johnnie. Picking up one of the inexpensive, classical guitars that he likes to mess around with, Benson loses himself in a medley of themes, intricately adorned with riffs and harmonic slaloms. Suddenly, after one of his fretboard gymnastic feats, the theme songs to *Star Wars*, *Superman* and *Woody Woodpecker* emerge in the musical thicket.

Later during our conversation, he drops his low E string down to D and lays out a gorgeous variation on Leonard Bernstein's "Maria," and wends his way naturally into what has now become a latter-day signature version of "Danny Boy." Flecked with distinctive, octave-leaping hammer-ons, this is one of the dazzling solo pieces from Benson's latest album, *Guitar Man* (Concord Jazz), which has been described as a reconfirmation of Benson, the bona fide and naturally fueled jazz guitar hero who *could*, and still can.

Benson is basking in the success of one of his strongest genuinely "jazz" albums in years and such projects as a well-received tribute show to another instrumentalist-vocalist of note, Nat "King" Cole, which played to sold-out crowds at Sydney's Opera House and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

With his virtuoso, improvisational guitar skills and his numerous hit singles—such as "This Masquerade," "On Broadway," "Give Me The Night," and "Turn Your Love Around"—Benson is the rare jazz artist who has crossed over to mainstream pop-culture stardom. For many fans both casual and devoted, Benson is *the* face of jazz guitar artistry.

Benson has had an on-again, off-again approval rating in the jazz and music press. But he occupies a unique place in the jazz pantheon. One of the few musicians on the scene who can lay claim to being both a powerful instrumentalist *and* vocalist, Benson is widely revered as a commanding, clean-toned jazz guitarist who became a pop star but keeps showing us his roots in teasing doses.

Benson's previous Concord album, 2009's *Songs And Stories*, was more pop-lined and vocal-oriented—including some rigorous demonstration of his scatting prowess on the tune "Living in High Definition"—but *Guitar Man* keeps the focus on instrumentals. The song list plays roughly like a retrospective trip down the range of Benson's musical life and influences, from a solo rendition of "Tenderly" through John Coltrane's "Naima," Stevie Wonder's "My Cherie Amour," the Wes Montgomery-aligned "Tequila" and the sneakily "unsmooth" jazz groove of Ronnie Foster's hooky chordal maze, "Fingerloo."

Most importantly, there's a whole lotta playing on this date, much to the satisfaction of those who have been waiting for Benson, 68, to once again bust loose.

After a long, far-reaching interview, the guitarist leads the way to the garage area of chez Benson, which stores a Rolls-Royce, a late-'50s model red Cadillac (from the man who wrote the tune "Red Cadillac Boogaloo") and, most surprisingly, a 10-foot-tall replica of the silver robot from the classic sci-fi film *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. We pile into the Rolls, replete with a blanketing starry sky effect of tiny lights in the overhead ceiling headliner. As *Guitar Man* plays on the pristine surround-sounding stereo, Benson jumps in to sing along with the tune "My One And Only Love," with a tone and phrasing remarkably similar to that of Johnny Hartman, who made the song famous in jazz circles. "Well, I was exaggerating there," he says of his behind-the-wheel singing. "On the record, it's more *me*."

Later, at a packed, swanky piano bar in a nearby restaurant, the Benson entourage grabs a table in the middle. Benson—who seems a

natural entertainer, onstage and in person—graciously presses flesh with friends and fans, and pays respects to the piano man, who gladly slips "This Masquerade" into the set list.

When I think about the "George Benson paradox," if it could be called that, I reflect on a Montreal Jazz Festival experience several years ago. Benson and his band played a polished and perhaps *too* slick set in one of the large theaters, before an adoring crowd. But some of us felt the show was flawed by a show-biz vibe, that it was lacking in jazz content, especially for such a prestigious jazz fest. Later that night in the hotel's after-hour jam session, I was walking by and heard some blistering guitar soloing over "Cherokee," and I thought, "Damn, that hot-shot player sure has been influenced by George Benson."

Lo and behold, it was the man himself, burning it up in the wee hours and channeling the once and future jazz muse set deep in his musical DNA. Music flows naturally from his being, as it has ever since his days as a child prodigy in Pittsburgh, starting in the early '50s, cutting records as "Little George Benson," long before his life as a jazz guitar master and occupier of positions atop the charts and polls.

DB: *Guitar Man* is one of your simplest productions in years, and also one of your strongest records. How do you feel about it now that it's a finished product?

George Benson: We didn't have a whole lot of money to spend on this record, so we decided to keep it simple. It was like the kind of records we used to make years ago. We just went in the studio and said, "Hey, let's play this." I had great musicians, so we could interpret it any way we wanted to. I didn't try to get fancy or anything, but just played like I would if I was on a date with the surge of an audience watching us, for the sake of the music. I let the rhythm and harmonies tell me what to play.

[People] had been asking me to do some solo pieces for a long time. [Producer] John Burk didn't know I could do any solo pieces on guitar. I would pick up an acoustic guitar, which always sounded better for solo pieces to me. I decided I better get something acoustic under my belt, so I'll be able to play something significant in the years to come. These things on the album are just small samples of things I've been messing with over the years, trying to find reharmonizations of some classics, without losing the composer's intent.

The first time we did "Tenderly" [for the 1989 album *Tenderly*], it wasn't so tender. I had an electric guitar in my hand with all of those devices that I had under my thumb at the time. I was "speed demon George." I let that tiger loose on that song. When I heard it back, I said, "What was I thinking?" But there were nice enough things in there to at least gain the interest of instrumentalists, especially guitar players.

This time, I wanted to go more the Johnny Smith routine. He's one of my favorite guitar players of all time. I really love his approach to ballads. I like leaning towards his approach to it. I'm not ashamed. When I see a guy who has something on the ball, I'll borrow some of that, stick it in as reminders of the great guys who made the song stick out in the past. Johnny Smith certainly is the guy who made that song, at least as far as guitar is concerned, stick out beautifully. He made it show what the guitar is capable of, and gave us some great ideas to run with.

You have a sense of adventure as a player. Even on tracks that are fairly smooth or polished, you'll take surprising turns and sneak into left field. Would you say that has always been a part of your musical voice?

I've never been afraid, man. One time, I heard Andrés Segovia playing along so wonderfully, and all of a sudden there was a little mistake, just a tiny thing, a blip. I jumped to my feet and said, "What? Andrés Segovia making a mistake? That's impossible." But I felt, "Well, if he can make a mistake, who cares if *I* make a mistake?" And I stopped worrying about it.

He said the whole idea of technique is being able to express and convey the idea you're trying to get across. You don't have to have chops like John McLaughlin to do "Mary Had A Little Lamb." You play the best you can, and at a pace that you can convince with and get your point across. If you happen to be a nervous guy like me, I play a lot of notes. It's the same way I talk.

I like to hear anybody play the guitar. If you happen to be great, like B.B. King, Johnny Smith, John McLaughlin or Pat Martino, that's even better. But I like to hear anybody play. I listen for things that are personal. I find that each one has their way of approaching the guitar that is different than the next one. That keeps my ears open. I let the other man breathe, take what I can. Some people call it stealing, some people call it borrowing [*laughs*].

People steal—or *borrow*—from you, as well.

Well, mine is a mixture of everything I've heard. I have heard bits and pieces of all these people—from people you've never heard of before and superstars like Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, Grant Green, Tal Farlow and many others. Chuck Wayne is another. Django Reinhardt. I'm a conglomeration of all those guys, and have taken bits and pieces from all of them. They were my teachers.

Your version of "Danny Boy" is quite interesting, with distinctive hammer-on notes. Did that idea strike you while you were messing around?

I had been listening to [violinist] Fritz Kreisler's version of "Londonderry Air." His piano player's harmonies were so beautifully played behind him, and I tried to emulate some of that phrasing. It's a little more difficult on guitar than it is on violin. After that, I was in South Africa and heard an arranger who did it with a string group. He reharmonized "Danny Boy" in the last half. When I heard that, I thought, "Got to adapt that."

You also take on "Naima." How much have you explored John Coltrane's work?

He was my friend. I hung out with him a few times, he and Wes Montgomery and the great drummer Elvin Jones. One of my father's best friends was his bass player, Jimmy Garrison.

When I think about John Coltrane, I think about "Naima" more than anything else. It defines his character. He was a gentle guy and a giant of a musician, but even when he played sensitively, there was a tremendous power there, and you could feel it getting ready to burst at any moment. He'd play in flares, flaring up and going back to silence. He made sensitive, sensual sounds, and when he wanted to, he could just blow you away with power.

I was thinking about that song, that day. It came out very nicely. I never thought I would [put] that song on a record. It's a little bit outside for me. But it was fun doing it, and a lot of people say it's the best tune on the album.

People may be wondering if you might go further down that road, playing more Coltrane or working with modal or hard-bop turf. What do you think?

I don't rule nothing out, man. I play for people, so when people suggest things to me, it stays on my mind. When I'm at home, I do all kinds of crazy stuff, stuff that I wouldn't dare think about laying on the people. But when they hear something they like, I listen. They're on my back about doing that *Superman* theme I was playing for you. All my guitar friends, who heard me play that—and even *Woody Woodpecker*—like it, and say, "George, you gotta put those things out."

Wes Montgomery had a big influence on you, and there was a point when Coltrane

Benson with some of the awards displayed in his house

one of his songs was slightly different, the ones that rose above the fray.

It gave you something to look forward to, the *next* Nat "King" Cole record. I didn't want another song so close to "Mona Lisa" that I had to make a choice. It was a completely different circumstance with a completely different story. And it shows your talent, that you can take a song that people know from one point of view and give it a slightly different attitude or twist.

You have recently been doing a Nat "King" Cole tribute project, in which you're taking on a role, channeling another musician. How has it been, stepping into the shoes of another artist?

I'm bringing back some of the best sounds that ever hit people's ears. They hear it on record, but to hear it live, being in a room with it surrounding you is a whole different thing. The vibe from the people reacting to the music and seeing the orchestra—man, that is exciting. We do that for two-thirds of the show, and then the last third of the show is me doing what people know me for. We cap it off with that, so everybody goes home happy.

There is an obvious analogy between you two, in that you're both great instrumentalists also blessed with great voices—and whose voices took you into the popular realm. Do you see that connection?

That became a problem for Nat, because there really was no room for crossover at that time. People knew you for one thing, and that's what they expected you to be doing. If you were a country singer, you sang nothing but country. Sam Cook was trying to go into the Copa [Copacabana in New York City]. It didn't work the first time. Years later, it started to make sense.

It takes time for people to adjust to anything. But that doesn't mean that it's impossible. That's the same thing I told Earl Klugh. People don't know, but Earl's got a great right-hand picking style. Perfection. I said, "Earl, when you play with your fingers, I can feel you. You project that energy that is warm, romantic, and it's educational. The prestige of your playing is light-years beyond what people expect." I'm proud of him, because he changed the outlook of the acoustic guitar in America, big time. Now everybody's trying to play like that.

That's an interesting concept, his playing being "educational." Your own playing has sophistication and potential "educational" content. Do you like that idea of educating or enlightening listeners who might not necessarily be jazz fans?

Well, Jack McDuff was my first instructor on the road, so to speak. I was in his quartet and was very fresh, having never just played guitar for a living. Now I was playing guitar only for a living, with no singing. He hated singers. He said, "They always grab the spotlight. No matter how good the band is, you take a mediocre singer and the people will love them."

When he was trying to get me to understand what he was looking for from me, and what he expected me to do, he said, "When you play, man, play a little blues, licks, show some technique, and play with conviction, like you mean it." You know, that formula still works.

Your mid-'60s Columbia titles, *It's Uptown* and *Cookbook*, have token vocal tracks. How did that happen?

That's a good question. I had to. John Hammond, who discovered everybody—Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman—would bring in these jazz artists. They wanted people who would sell records. Some of them turned out to do that, like Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. But he'd bring in these jazz artists who couldn't sell records. I was one of them. He wanted to sign me to Columbia, and they said, "No, we don't need no guitar player." To keep the contract valid, I had to put at least one vocal on.

I thought that part of my career was gone. Remember, I was only 22 years old. But I had been a singing star in my hometown since I was seven years old, working in nightclubs and on street corners, with my ukulele and later the guitar—playing behind my singing, mostly.

Then people started calling on me to play guitar with them in their bands. I learned all the popular stuff on the radio. You don't need a lot of chops when you're playing honky tonk. But jazz? That was a whole different story. You had to have imagination and chops to play what your imagination was dictating to you. That took years.

From the era of your more lavishly produced albums, Quincy Jones was another collaborator of yours, who knew how to inject interest in r&b with jazz. Was he a strong creative ally during that time?

It was interesting being involved with these great producers, especially working with Quincy Jones, because he was so slick at everything he did. He knew what was going on. On [the album] *Give Me The Night*, he said, "George, we want to capture the jazz market," so we did "Moody's Mood For Love" and won a Grammy for that. But we also won a Grammy for "Off Broadway," our r&b instrumental hit. And then we had "Give Me The Night," which was pop. So we got all three that we went after on that record.

Although people tried to label us, and said we sold out, it seemed so foolish to me when I heard people talking like that. I remembered people talking about Nat Cole that way. I thought, "What?"

Have you had moments in your career where you felt like the musical product was too slick and over-produced for your tastes?

The problem was that we sold so many records, we started competing with r&b and pop artists. We were ending up on the same charts. To do that, you cannot compete with someone who is spending $3 million on a record with a $50,000 budget. He'll out-slick you every time. So we ended up spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on our records, and we got used to it.

It's just like everything. Cat eats caviar every day, he can't go below that anymore. Don't get me wrong: I'm not sorry that we did it. I'm happy that I did blues, r&b, pop music, rock 'n' roll, all of that, and became a successful star. And I went to jazz music and had a career there, went to number-one jazz guitar player, before I had this success.

So now, I mix all of that stuff that I learned, all of the experience, and let it hang out in my own way. **DB**

asked Wes to join his group, didn't he?

They played together. Wes went on the road with them for a short time. But he didn't stay in the group. He said he felt self-conscious about playing. He wasn't comfortable, so he left. That would have been interesting, although their way of thinking was completely different.

Montgomery was a beautiful player. He liked the sensitive stuff. I think he underestimated himself. He was very self-conscious about what he was doing. We hear things that he wasn't hearing about himself. He was lightyears ahead of everybody else in his approach to the instrument, and he turned us on to some really nice things, things that we passed over, like they didn't exist. [There was] his mastery of the dominant seventh chords, and playing them on the inside, and he'd play things guitar players never think about, because we're so root-conscious. He would play the inside stuff, all the flat thirds, flat fives, raised nines, flat nines. He just kept moving. He kept the chords moving and would do multiple chords on top off each other, what I call "chord stacking." I miss that guy.

Wes was a pioneer, and older than you, but you were also contemporaries, weren't you?

I was coming into the industry, and he was the mainstay. He was the captain. He was one of the front-runners in the whole world on his instrument, and in the jazz field and in guitar. He was outstanding, one of a kind. I think he let me hang out with him because I always said nothing but glowing things about his playing—because I meant them. I was happy that he was here, because he was teaching us something. The whole world was hearing and learning things that they didn't know or hear before, so that was a blessing for the guitar and everybody that loved music.

But hanging around him, I checked out his mannerisms and how he approached things. When I saw him play guitar, he was just doing these simple things. I couldn't play like him, but there were things I could do that were special, even if they were only special to me.

These things were true to the way I think. It was important that I got that concept, and I learned it from people like him, from Grant Green, Kenny Burrell, Tal Farlow.... Tal was one of my favorite cats of all time. He was an experimenter. That's what I wanted to be—a scientist—and do things that people had not done. Tal Farlow was the man, as far as that was concerned. He proved that he was truly an octopus. He went in all directions. I used to try to steal his licks, man. I'd hear twenty and I'd get one. I'd think, "Well, that's one I didn't have yesterday."

We became very good friends and did a couple of concerts together. I got to hear him a lot when he came to New York and played on the East Side. I took Larry Coryell along and introduced him to Tal. I played concerts with him, and he wiped us out. But I never felt so good getting beat up, man, 'cause I was right up close and personal, hearing him and watching him play this stuff.

One thing leads to another. We learn from each other. We've got this great variety of players in the world that we can pick from now, who we didn't have years ago.

Certainly, guitar is one of the most recent to evolve as a lead instrument in jazz. Charlie Christian was making noise long ago, but it seemed that, until the late '50s, guitar didn't stake much of a claim on the larger jazz scene.

There was Barney Kessell, but he was very jazzy. The other one who crossed over was Johnny Smith, with "Moonlight In Vermont." That was a small pop hit. When I heard it, I thought it was a harp.

Barney was my friend, too. He, Jim Hall and myself did concerts in Europe, and Barney was passing out lessons every day. That was in 1967 when [promoter] George Wein [organized] a tour of Europe. Sarah Vaughan and Thelonious Monk were the stars, and he had Archie Shepp and the trio with me, Jim Hall and Barney Kessell. And there was also Elmer Snowden, a banjo player. That was some tour, man.

Were you always locked into the clean-tone, fat-body jazz guitar sound? You didn't really embrace distortion and other effects much, did you?

I'm glad that I couldn't afford all those instruments. I didn't know about a fuzz tone, or these other devices—the wah-wah and other tools. Plus, I was so busy just trying to learn how to play, I didn't have time to worry about what was happening with my feet. Also, I was convinced after hearing Charlie Christian play, the sound was so great, and I was searching for a good speaking voice for the guitar.

I think we stumbled into something fairly good over my lifetime. It went well with my imagination and was very close to what I was hearing. There were some days in the early part of my career when I would hear a guitar and it would sound like a whole different instrument. They were my thoughts, but with somebody else's sound. When I went to Warner Bros. and made [1976's] *Breezin'*, I finally found the sound I was hearing. That took a change of amplifiers. I used a Johnny Smith guitar for the first time, and a Polytone amplifier. I said, "That's what I think I should sound like." No harsh edges. Like a horn, or a keyboard. There was an evenness, and the only sounds were ones I wanted to come out.

When Creed Taylor heard the record I had just done for Warners, I owed him one more, see. I was in the studio making this last project for him and he said, "George, tell us how you got that sound on *Breezin'*." I said, "I've been complaining about my sound all these years, and you never heard me." He wouldn't let me experiment with nothing.

Which amp were you using earlier?

The Fender Twin. They were very harsh. They'd make me afraid to play because I'd have no *ping* to the sound. I was getting that edge, making me sound more like a blues player than anything else. Nothing wrong with playing the blues, but some things I was playing were meant to sound more jazzy than that.

We went around and around about the sound of my guitar, and finally, when I went out to L.A. and hooked up with Al Schmitt and the *Breezin'* album, it was instant. The first thing we played was [*sings the melody to "Affirmation"*]. Tommy Gumina, who owned Polytone, came in the studio and said, "Man, that's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard." That's the first take. We tried it one more time, threw [away] the second take and kept the very first take.

***Breezin'* was really a game-changer for you, on multiple levels, wasn't it?**

No doubt. I finally got the sound I was looking for, even with the vocal. I found that I had a friend—the engineer was very friendly, and that's how I got the guitar sound right. He knew mic placement very well. [For my vocal], he used what used to be a nighttime talk show host microphone, an Electro-Voice 666. Nobody would use that microphone for a singer. I've never heard the voice that sounded like "This Masquerade."

That album also awakened your own sense of how you could combine voice with guitar, scatting along with your playing. That became one of your musical signatures.

I tried to do that when I was with another record company before. I said, "Put a microphone over here. I've got an idea." I started [*scats a riff*]. He said, "Nah, that won't work." I said, "OK, we'll try something else." So I got off of it. When I went to L.A. to record "This Masquerade," I started doing that, and they said, "Man, that's fabulous." You never know in life what's going to happen.

Pretty soon, everybody wanted me to do that on every song. I said, "Enough of that. The reason I did that was because it seemed like the thing to do at the *time*, to bring some interest to the song." They said because it was part of my signature that I should be doing that on every record. But then where is the contrast? I use it on some things now, the way it should be done. When you have some success, everybody wants you to jump on what was successful five years or ten years ago. I said, "Man, that was then."

With your successes along the way, you must have had pressure from record companies and other sources, who wanted lightning to strike again. How have you dealt with that?

[*Laughs*] I never believed in that. What I loved about Nat "King" Cole was that "Too Young" was not "Mona Lisa," and "Dance Ballerina" was not "Nature Boy," and yet they were all classics within themselves. Every last