

GEORGE BENSON: OFF THE RECORD

by Eric Myers

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At the George Benson press conference on November 26, the questions and answers were predictable: Benson's transition from a jazz guitarist to a popular entertainer; his underprivileged childhood on the streets of Pittsburgh; the debt he owes to jazz greats like Charlie Christian, Wes Montgomery, John Coltrane; and so on. We discovered that Benson was in reform school for six weeks as a teenager but, despite his participation in the life of the streets, he never got into drugs.



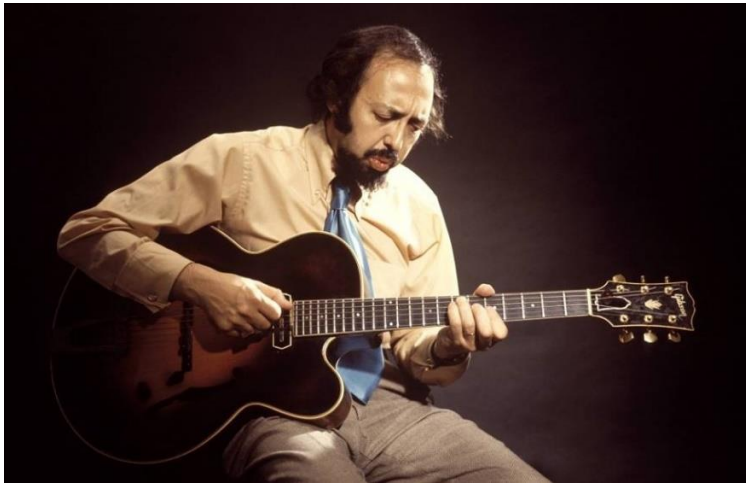
George Benson: he moved to Hawaii recently because his phone never stopped ringing... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

He is an Arian (born March 22), now a Jehovah's Witness, and moved to Hawaii recently because, back in the States, he was continually being pestered by old colleagues in the music business, wishing to climb onto his successful bandwagon. He felt impelled to move away because his phone never stopped ringing.

Far more revealing was the extended conversation I had with George Benson later over lunch. I was not scheduled to meet him personally but, at the press lunch, he happened to sit at my table directly opposite me, and he proved to be entirely open and willing to answer questions, and discuss frankly a whole host of things.

On the question of his so-called "commercialism", he was not offended by Barney Kessel's recent comment, that "George Benson is a great jazz guitarist who is not presently playing jazz." He feels that, while it is important for music that the pure

jazz mainstream continues, he is concerned now to play music that the general public will like and accept.



Benson is not upset by Barney Kessel (above), who said “George Benson is a great jazz guitarist who is not presently playing jazz”... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS

After all, he spent a long apprenticeship as a jazz guitarist, making 11 albums, appearing in Carnegie Hall, and winning various polls before it was discovered that he could sing. He points out that, ten years ago, he shared the general elitist attitude of jazz players towards other forms of music – so much so that he never bothered to listen to Jimi Hendrix; he was only turned on to that great music well after Hendrix's death.

"Man, when I was a jazz player, we were playing to the walls," he said. "When pay day came around, we were always worried about our money, and the club managers were always worried about their money being there". He points out that, now, hundreds of people come to hear him play the guitar, and he is still basically playing in the same style which he developed as a jazz musician.



Benson said he owes his greatest debt to the guitarist Charlie Christian (above)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

He owes his greatest debt to the guitarist Charlie Christian, whom he never heard live but remembers, in particular, the records he made with Benny Goodman. "Charlie Christian," says Benson, "made me fall in love with the guitar." It is well-known that George Benson, as a young man, was highly influenced by Wes Montgomery. With nothing to lose, he was one of the few guitarists willing to sit in with Montgomery, who was, at that time, the "boss" guitarist. George remembers that Wes Montgomery was never one to teach the guitar; he was more concerned to play, and set an example. Benson was highly impressed by the simplicity and direct beauty of Montgomery's guitar style.

I asked him about Patti Austin, the superb singer who, on the *Give Me The Night* album, joins him on *Moody's Mood*, which is actually a James Moody saxophone solo on the changes of *I'm In The Mood For Love*, to which lyrics have been set. Benson had some interesting information: she is now a millionaire in the USA, because of residual royalties she receives for studio work – when she records a commercial, it is played from coast-to-coast in the United States; and Quincy Jones is her godfather.



Patti Austin: a very wealthy lady, much more wealthy than Roberta Flack...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Many people will remember Patti Austin from the vocal group which accompanied Roberta Flack in Australia in the mid-70s. At the Hordern Pavilion concert, Roberta had Patti sing *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. "Patti is now a very wealthy lady", said Benson, "much more wealthy than Roberta".

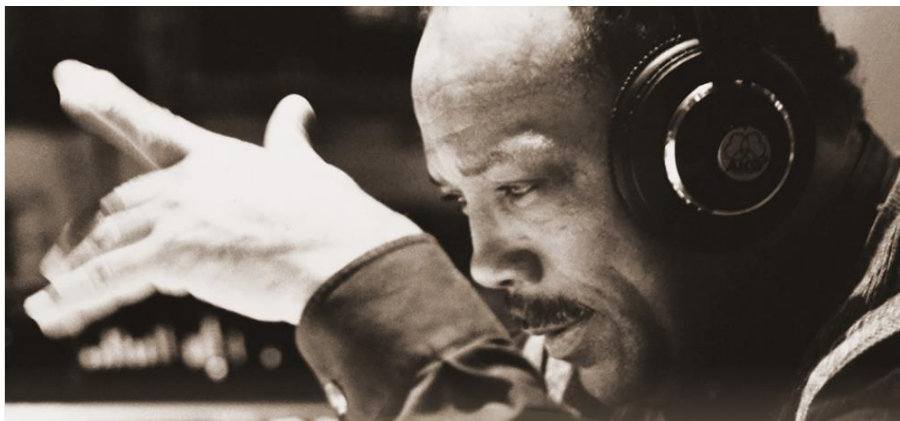
On Donny Hathaway, the extraordinary singer and musician who committed suicide a couple of years ago, George Benson, who knew him well, believes that essentially he was a frustrated musical genius and perfectionist who was not able to express the creative urges inside him. His great ambition was to write classical and orchestral music but Atlantic Records, who had him under contract, was interested in nothing more than the kind of commercial hit records that would sell.



Donny Hathaway: the ultimate singer ... all other singers sounded pedestrian next to him... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Benson sees Donny Hathaway as the ultimate singer in the general style he himself has adopted and points out that, when Donny Hathaway sang, he had such a beautiful delivery and style, all other singers sounded pedestrian next to him. "He made us all feel bad, he was so good", says George.

Benson's latest album *Give Me The Night* has been produced by Quincy Jones. Quincy had total control, says George, selecting all the material and giving the album a quality and direction that he (Benson) was apprehensive about. He was worried that the album might not get airplay. But Quincy's judgement proved infallible. Even in Australia, *Give Me The Night* has sold over 50,000. "Quincy Jones is a positive thinker," said Benson. "If you're negative about anything, he'll shut you out".

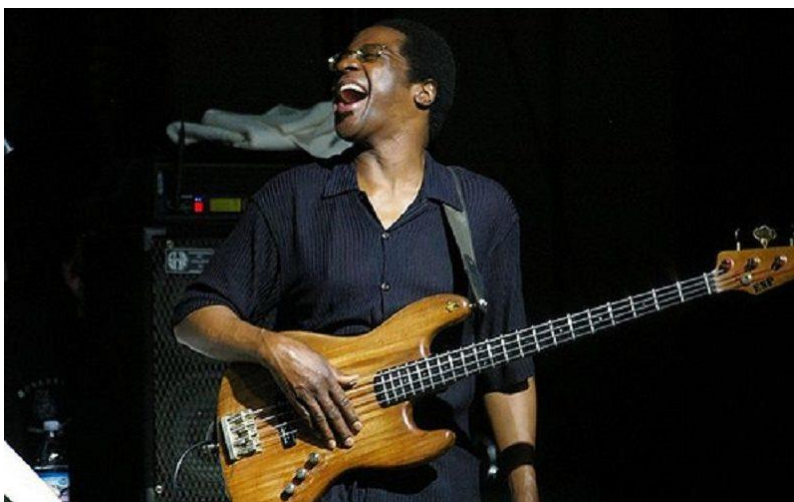
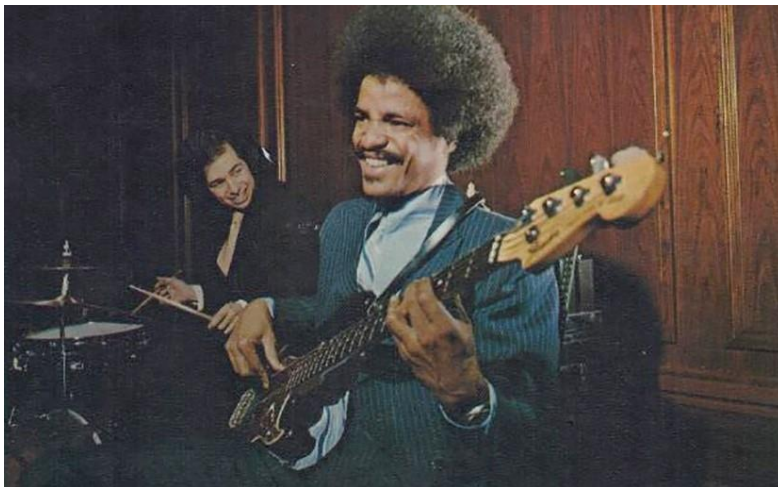


Quincy Jones: if you're negative about anything, he'll shut you out... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The recent Benson concert at the Horden Pavilion had many interesting aspects. His nine-piece band included Ronnie Foster (keyboards), Phil Upchurch (guitar) and Stanley Banks (bass) among others – all regulars on Benson's records over the years. It was a great band that really rocked.

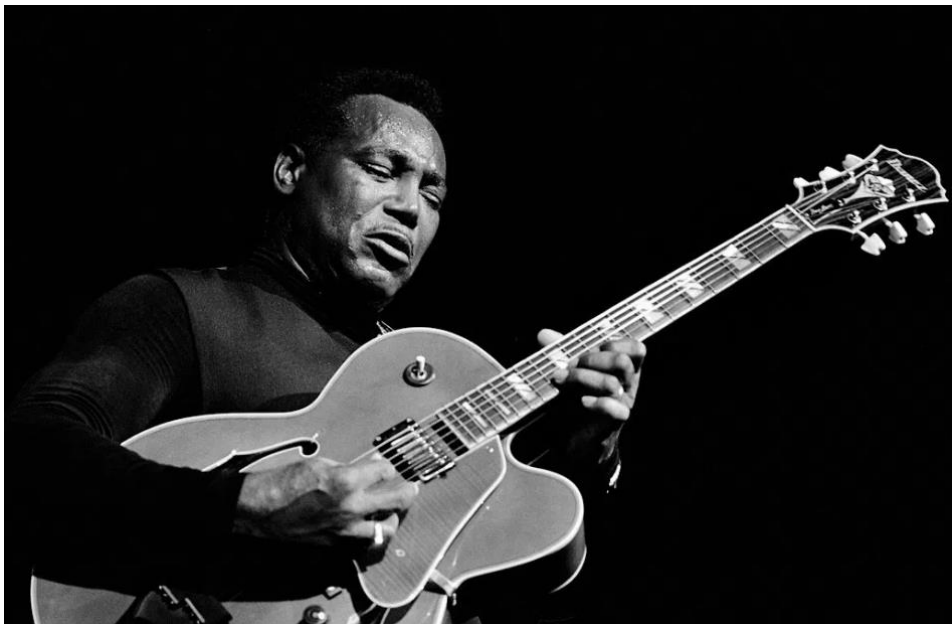


*Ronnie Foster (above, keyboards), Phil Upchurch (below, guitar) and Stanley Banks (far below, bass): all regulars on Benson's records over the years...
PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN*



Soundwise, there were problems. The 29-strong string section of Australian players came through the speakers at a volume level that was usually too high, and I had difficulty hearing Benson when they were playing. This did not destroy the concert, but continually irritated the ears; I shuddered each time the string players made an entry.

Benson opened the concert with three instrumentals, including *Affirmation* and *Weekend In LA*, and then did most of the material from the *Give Me The Night* album, before going on to the old favourites like *The Greatest Love Of All*, *This Masquerade* and *On Broadway*. He really is a magnificent singer, and his artistry is such that we can only wonder why he played jazz guitar all those years, rarely singing a note.



Benson: when jazz musicians choose to play popular music, they do it so much better than the popular entertainers themselves...PHOTO CREDIT JAN SCHEFFNER

In live performance, he sang freely and, to my way of thinking, adopted a style which is in some ways a caricature of his recorded style – a little larger than life, heavily reminiscent of the lead singers of African-American groups of the 1950's, for example The Platters.

Musically, Benson at 37 years of age is very much a child of the 1950s, which perhaps explains his version of *Unchained Melody*. Over lunch I had asked him about *It's All In The Game*, one of my favourite songs as a child, and which Benson recorded on the album *Weekend In LA*. He loved that song too as a child, he said, and knew intimately the classic Tommy Edwards vocal line.

Needless to say, the concert was a sellout and Benson's two-hour non-stop performance resulted in a standing ovation. It illustrated the old verity, first proven by the great Louis Armstrong, that when jazz musicians choose to play popular music, they do it so much better, with so much more musical taste, than the popular entertainers themselves.