

## MUSICIAN



Greg Allen

# GEORGE BENSON

How the elite guitarist opened his mouth and changed jazz history

By Jeff Tamarkin

BY THE EARLY 1970S GEORGE BENSON WAS QUICKLY gaining recognition as a young hotshot guitarist on the jazz scene. He'd already cut more than a dozen acclaimed instrumental albums and had been tapped by the likes of Miles Davis to lend his six-string chops.

But Benson wanted to try his hand at singing, testing the waters with a cover of the Beatles' *Abbey Road*. Although the album was well received, a half-dozen years passed before Benson's vocals would impact his career. That happened with the release of *Breezin'* in 1976. Fueled by the Top 10 hit "This Masquerade"—featuring Benson's trademark scatting and soulful vocals—*Breezin'* became the first-ever platinum-selling jazz album, according to the RIAA.

The following decade would see more smash singles, including "On Broadway," "Give Me the Night," and "Turn Your Love Around," and sold-out concerts worldwide. "By the time my records as a vocalist started to get popular, I was not a kid. I was like 33," says

Benson. "And that was a great thing. I said to myself, 'I can't let anyone dictate how I'm going to live my life,' and I didn't."

On his latest album, *Inspiration: A Tribute to Nat King Cole*, Benson honors one of his lifelong vocal influences, performing "Unforgettable" (with guest trumpeter Wynton Marsalis), "Straighten Up and Fly Right," "Route 66," and other Cole classics—some featuring recently discovered arrangements by the late Nelson Riddle. The album, produced by John Burk, begins and ends with the timeless ballad "Mona Lisa," the first take recorded when "Lil' Georgie Benson," as he was then called, was just 8 years old. Even then, he knew his way around a song.

At 70, Benson has lost none of the flair and skill he's always brought to the guitar. Still a tireless performer, the 10-time Grammy winner discussed his new project, how he developed his distinctive style, and why he still practices.



**"I don't go to the table with half my arsenal—I bring everything to every gig."**

### Why a Cole tribute album now?

Nat Cole put out all kinds of songs—jazzy songs, novelty tunes, beautiful ballads. They all went over well, and his audience ranged across the board. That really impressed me. I always said, "I want to play for everybody. I don't want to just play for some people."

### Who chose the songs?

My producer, John Burk. One thing I've learned is to give the other man room to breathe—he might come up with a great idea. It was [producer] Tommy LiPuma who brought me "This Masquerade." I asked him, "Why do you want me to do this song? I don't know this Leon Russell guy who wrote it." It was the same thing with "On Broadway." Tommy asked if I knew the song and I said, "I know it, but you don't want me to destroy it, do you?" Tommy made a star out of me with his suggestions. I've come to realize there's value in paying attention to the comments of others.

### When did you decide to sing?

I was actually a singer first. Then I went instrumental and gained my fame through my instrument. Then I went back to singing—to the chagrin of many. It was right

**'Music will never die, and it will never settle in one place.'**

after the death of [jazz guitar great] Wes Montgomery. He was so loved, and they wanted somebody to fill his shoes. I said, "That ain't me, because there's only one Wes Montgomery." He was a very good friend and I learned a lot from him in terms of approaching music. I never got all his concepts down but I loved listening to him go from one thing to another, how he knitted things together so beautifully.

### Did you ever consider not playing?

I had a manager who tried to convince me to put the guitar down. I said, "Oh no, man. I've spent too much time." That was a controversy that Nat dealt with. Nat's wife told him, "You're the world's greatest singer—they can't stop you from singing!" So instead Nat stopped playing piano.

### What makes a great song?

Something with a great story, or something that feels good. Something I don't have

to beef up because it already has those elements. Then I'm not hurting anything. I try to enhance it. It doesn't always happen but I'm always glad I tried. Later I go back and hear things I didn't hear when I was recording and I might say, "That wasn't a bad effort at all. This album's gonna come alive!"

### How did you find your style?

Everybody is made up of their experiences. I try to bring everything I've learned. But I don't go to the table with half my arsenal—I bring everything to every gig. I've listened to them all—Charlie Christian, Hank Garland, Kenny Burrell, Grant Green, and the baddest cat who's ever done it, Django Reinhardt. And I hung out with the baddest cat of our time, Wes Montgomery. I had a lot of things I could pick from, and I melded them all together.

### You recorded with producing giant John Hammond.

I had so much respect for John Hammond because he introduced Charlie Christian and Benny Goodman and Count Basie to the world. I used to sit in his office listening to him tell stories about Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen. Once he was leaving Kansas City and heard Count Basie on the radio. He turned around, found the radio station, and paid for him to come to New York. The bandleader that Basie was working for died, so John went to Basie and said, "Bill, how'd you like to take over the band?"

### Wasn't cutting Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" in 1971 an odd choice?

I had never heard of it before. I'd never even heard of the group! It sounded so bizarre, as opposed to what I wanted to do. But I have never run away from a challenge. I will try anything, and if it fails, I know not to go that route again. The *White Rabbit* album was very exciting—it was an adventure. I really enjoyed doing that stuff.

### How have you seen music evolve?

Music will never die, and it will never settle in one place. Lots of jazz musicians, when they heard the Beatles, said, "Ah, that music ain't going to last." That's when I learned my lesson. They said the same thing about Elvis Presley. What are we supposed to do, sit back and wait till it dies? We'll be dead before their music dies. So I formed a different opinion, and still have that mentality: One guy will come along and bend us in a different direction or add something new. Prince, same thing, he brought something

## ESSENTIAL BENSON



### Body Talk, 1973

Those who've never experienced George Benson as pure jazz guitarist should take note of this funky entry.

Surrounded by such aces as Harold Mabern, Earl Klugh, Ron Carter and Jack DeJohnette, Benson lets his fingers fly on the uptempo jams and wings soul from the ballads.



### Breezin', 1976

Benson's debut for Warner Bros. elevated him to superstar status with sales in the millions.

He still focuses on guitar almost exclusively in this collection of instrumentals, but the one vocal track, Leon Russell's "This Masquerade," landed him in the Top 10 and altered the course of his music forever.



### Weekend in L.A., 1978

The term smooth jazz had yet to be coined, yet this live album virtually defines the genre. Expertly but cautiously

played by Benson and band, the tunes lean to the lighter side of 1970s R&B. The highlight, a 10-minute take on the Drifters' "On Broadway," would become a permanent Benson staple.



### The Essential George Benson, 2006

This double-CD anthology is the most concise overview of Benson's career through

1980. It reaches back to his earliest days with organist Brother Jack McDuff, samples Benson's output for the Prestige and CTI labels, and offers the best of his Columbia years and Warner Bros. hits.



### Guitar Man, 2011

Benson returned to his guitar-playing roots with this chiefly instrumental collection.

On material ranging from an orchestral take on the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" to John Coltrane's "Naima" to standards like "Paper Moon," Benson reminds us that he's still a formidable axeman.

MUSICIAN



Onstage at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Montreux, Switzerland, 2013

Marshall Trezzini/EPAL/Landov

**'I have never run from a challenge. I will try anything, and if it fails, I know not to go that route again.'**

new. That kid Michael Jackson turned the world upside down.

**What guitars do you play?**

Acoustic and electric F-hole type. Some are full-sized jazz guitars I created for Ibanez. The best-selling model in the history of Ibanez is the GB10—that's a mid-sized guitar. When I designed it they told me I was going to lose some low end, but I said, "Well, that might be good because most of these instruments play so loud." My guitar rejects feedback, and it's one of the world's greatest road guitars. It's hard to damage. I've done about eight or nine models with the company over the years. I also just signed a deal to design an amp for Fender called the Hot Rod Deluxe.

**Any effects?**

No, I don't like effects because they take away from what I'm going to play. I'm a man who plays a lot of notes so I need to pay attention all the time.

**Do you still practice?**

I play every day, even when I'm not working. I practiced this morning. Without even thinking, I grabbed the guitar and tried to look for something I didn't play yesterday. I always keep one within arm's length. On the road I get exercise every night because it's really demanding. But when I'm home I'm playing out of pure joy, and searching for new ideas. That keeps my chops up. If you don't use something it's going to clam up on you.

**THE JAZZ SINGER**

When George Benson announced he was going to sing and play, not everyone was on board. "I decided to sing a song and got opposition from my own band!" he says. "They were telling me, 'I didn't sign up to play behind no singer.' I felt bad. But then B.B. King told me the same thing happened to him and he started thinking, 'Wait a minute, this is my band!' When he started singing his whole life changed. He went from being 'Blues Boy' to 'King of the Blues.'" Benson's intuition soon proved on the money. "I was in a New Jersey club and the owner told me, 'When you sang the other night, nobody left. They stayed for the next set.' So I put it to the test and sure enough, I sang one song and everybody stayed. That was my way of filling up the clubs so the owners could afford to pay me." In 1976, George Benson scored his first Top 10 hit singing on the Grammy-winning "This Masquerade."

GEORGE BENSON | KORN | JOE NICHOLS | DREAM THEATER



**LORDE**  
Queen bee

**AVETT BROTHERS**  
Double duty

**CELINE DION**  
Gets gritty

**AVRIL LAVIGNE**  
Does it her way

**+ APP HAPPY GEAR GIFTS STAR MAKER**