



GEORGE BENSON

BIOGRAPHY

From hard bop guitarist to R&B/pop superstar, **George Benson** has worn a wide variety of hats over the years. R&B lovers know him as the guitar-playing vocalist who is responsible for such hits as "Give Me The Night" and "Turn Your Love Around", while the jazz world continues to treasure his classic instrumental albums of the 1960s and early 1970s. And it goes without saying that Benson's million-selling *Breezin'* album of 1976 practically defined the NAC, quiet storm, and contemporary jazz radio formats.

Because the guitarist/singer is so diverse and unpredictable, one never knows what he will do from one album to the next - and on his latest GRP release, *Absolute Benson*, the eight-time GRAMMY®-winner surprises us once again by emphasizing instrumental music. While Benson's last album, 1998's *Standing Together*, was full of R&B/pop singing, only three of *Absolute Benson's* nine songs find him providing vocals: his rendition of Ray Charles's "Come Back Baby", an infectious remake of the late Donny Hathaway's soul classic "The Ghetto", and Benson's Latin-flavored "El Barrio" (a companion piece to "The Ghetto"). Everything else on the album is instrumental, and this time, Benson's distinctive guitar playing takes center stage.

Though Benson is still quite capable of playing straight-ahead hard bop, *Absolute Benson* isn't a bop album. Blending jazz with R&B and pop, *Absolute Benson* aims for accessibility and recalls Benson's albums of the early-to-mid 1970s. From the haunting "Deeper Than You Think", the intriguing "Medicine Man", and the slightly Wes Montgomery-ish "One On One" to the funky "Hipping The Hop" and a thoughtful version of Stevie Wonder's "Lately", *Absolute Benson* illustrates Benson's virtuosity without sacrificing his commitment to the groove, the beat and the melody.

On *Absolute Benson* the guitarist is joined by an appealing combination of veteran improvisers and "young lions". While bassist **Christian McBride** represents jazz's younger generation, pianist/keyboardist **Joe Sample** (who was a founding member of The Crusaders and presently records for GRP) and drummer **Steve Gadd** are jazz veterans with long and impressive resumé's. Other musicians featured on this new release include percussionist **Luis Conte**, drummer **Cindy Blackman**, and organist/keyboardist **Ricky Peterson**.

Absolute Benson was produced by longtime friend and collaborator (and Verve Music Group Chairman) **Tommy LiPuma**. ("The Ghetto" and "El Barrio" were produced by LiPuma and the **Masters at Work** partnership of "**Little**" **Louie Vega** and **Kenny "Dope" Gonzalez**). Benson and Masters at Work (who had previously collaborated with Benson on their acclaimed Blue Thumb Records album *Nuyorican Soul*) also brought in a number of special guest musicians to record "The Ghetto" and "El Barrio": **Carlos Henriquez**, bass; **Vidal Davis**, drums; **Luisito Quintero**, percussion; and **Claudia Acuña**, **Lisa Fischer**, and **India**, backing vocals. **Richard Shade** and the legendary **Roy Ayers** also contribute backing vocals on "The Ghetto".

Of course, playing with first-class musicians is nothing new for Benson - he's been doing it since the early 60s. Born in Pittsburgh, Benson fell in love with a variety of music as a child

and was only eight when he first sang in a local nightclub. As a guitarist, Benson's primary influences were Charlie Christian and Wes Montgomery; but by the time organist Jack McDuff hired a 19-year-old Benson as a sideman in 1962, it was clear that he had become quite distinctive and recognizable himself. Benson's first album as a leader, 1964's *The New Boss Guitar of George Benson* on Prestige, was in the hard bop/soul-jazz vein and was followed by the critically-acclaimed, John Hammond-produced straight-ahead albums he recorded for Columbia in 1965 and 1966.

When one thinks of improvisers who defined straight-ahead jazz guitar in the 1960's, Benson's name is inevitably mentioned along with Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, and Grant Green. But Benson was never a jazz purist, and his love of R&B, rock and pop became increasingly evident when he joined forces with producer Creed Taylor - first at A&M in the late 1960s, then at Creed Taylor's CTI label from 1971 to 1975. While Benson was still best known as a jazz instrumentalist during that period, he didn't hesitate to incorporate funk, soul, and rock rhythms or interpret the hit soul, pop, and rock songs of the day.

It was in 1976 that Benson took the plunge and became a superstar in the pop and R&B worlds thanks to the platinum *Breezin'*, which soared to #1 on the pop charts and contained his GRAMMY®-winning hit recording of Leon Russell's "This Masquerade". For the first time, Benson was enjoying worldwide mass appeal.

In the late 1970's and 1980's, Benson emphasized vocals and enjoyed one major R&B/pop smash after another, including "The Greatest Love Of All" and a remake of The Drifters' "On Broadway", "Give Me The Night", "Turn Your Love Around", and the Kashif-produced "Inside Love" among others. But true to form, Benson refused to play any one style of music exclusively - he returned to classic standards and acoustic-orientated jazz with 1989's *Tenderly* and paid tribute to Count Basie on 1990's *Big Boss Band*.

The 1990's found Benson rejoining Lipuma - who had produced Benson's Warner Bros. recordings throughout the '70s and '80s at GRP Records. Together they offered a modern vision of contemporary jazz on the 1996 gem *That's Right*. They also collaborated on 1998's *Standing Together*, which again showcased Benson's chops while bringing in elements of hip hop and Caribbean rhythms.

Throughout his career, George Benson has embraced everything from straight-ahead jazz to contemporary jazz to R&B/pop vocals. And through it all he has demonstrated that creativity and commercial success aren't mutually exclusive. *Absolute Benson* clearly continues that display.

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