

'It's hard to be real in this world - and make it'

GEORGE BENSON

in conversation
with Ike Isaacs
and George Adie
Transcribed by
George Clinton

George Benson first played the guitar when he was six and made his first record (for RCA) at the age of ten - but as a vocalist. He worked steadily as R & B singer-guitarist until he joined organist Brother Jack McDuff in his teens, and embarked on a jazz career. He was recently in London, playing a season at Ronnie Scott's Club . . .

I enjoyed working at Ronnie's, the people really listen. It's also good in the States. It depends where you play. Working in some of the clubs where the young people patronise you get pretty good attention. We played a club that was five or six times larger than Scott's, and man, in this place they needed binoculars just to see the band. But you could've heard a pin drop - that is, when we weren't playing! And at the weekends it was packed.

There's still an awful lot of jazz being played. But I'll tell you a player you should get over - he's called Nelson Simon. He's something else. If you can imagine a black Johnny Smith. The clean-ness of Johnny Smith with the very close harmony chords, but swinging much harder, and with solos more dissonant. I've got a tape he recorded in 1960, and wow, that tape is really something. He plays triplets a lot, and you know, he's the only guitar player I know who plays John Coltrane's tune *Giant Steps*. His concept is amazing. In some instances he's real simple, and then he'll get very intricate, and then back to the simple stuff.

He's a pick player and he'll stand up and play. I went along to hear him and he's playing *Moonlight in Vermont*, but not like Johnny Smith. The chordal thing would be like him, in spots, very clean. But when he soloed, then he was really different. Very fiery. That's the thing about him; and his attack. He was using a full-bodied Gretsch. I don't like the sound that he got out of it, but never mind, that guy plays plenty guitar!

II *What set you off on the guitar? Were you inspired by music, or guitar players?*

I should say it was Charlie Christian. I heard his records when I was about six or seven years old; the first records I ever heard.

II *Did you study with anybody? Did you learn the legit. pick techniques?*

No. That's why my right hand looks so funny. My father told me, 'Do whatever's comfortable.' And look what I got; *this* is comfortable? I hold the pick with the two fingers. Which is more or less the 'forties way of playing, because the guitar players out of the forties tend to hold the pick like that. And due to my hand position, I hit the string at an angle. I use a standard Fender pick. I can't use those tiny ones; I can't hold



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'I have to be very conscious to make my hand press hard.'



them. I can't even hold the big ones, they pop out of my hand regularly. You see, I learned to play with my thumb, and I didn't know cats were using picks, not for years. Until one day I was on a gig and the guy next to me says, 'Why don't you get a pick? Cats don't play with the thumb!' But I didn't know that; whoever sees a pick in a player's hand?

So now I play with a pick or my thumb; it's the same. If you develop your corn then it'll sound just as well as a pick. As a matter of fact I've recorded a lot of things with my thumb. Just about a third of my recordings have been made just with my thumb. It's a much warmer sound and of course it's connected to your brain direct. You know what it's going to be like before you touch the string. So you can regulate it better. Finger players are much warmer than pick players — at least to me. Mind you, with the pick I can make certain notes pop. With the thumb it's hard to do.

GA *What kind of string do you like?*

Strings? I like the heavies. You see, I already have an electric sound when I play, because I pick *hard*. I have a hard right hand; an uneducated right hand, like a barbarian. So I've got this barbarian right hand and my left hand has experience. I let this hand do all the work. I work things out so that my right hand won't be doing its full share. I found out years ago that I'd never be a Johnny Smith; it'd take twenty years to develop that kind of right hand. It's not just his playing. It's the amount of chops that he has; and his right hand does quite a bit. But I was on a job where they didn't give you years to learn the tunes and the heads to the tunes, so if you didn't have it here, you just didn't have it — and you were out. I didn't want to lose the job, so I would make this hand work.

I would take lines that would go this way, (*plays a run up the fingerboard*) since my problem was skipping strings. I could never do it with my right hand so I've learned to play laterally, and that brought my left hand closer. In other words, instead of playing this and skipping a string (*plays across the fingerboard*) I could play it here, see, on the next string (*plays the same scale up the fingerboard on two strings*). So I kept my strokes more even, up and down — and still got a very wide control of the scales. I'd have two-and-a-half octaves going instead of two, just by going straight down. It would *sound* like it was an ascending instead of just *being* an ascending line; everything would go into one motion. And when I descend it's a descending sound because I'm actually descending on the instrument. Well anyway, that's the way it works for me, but not for everyone 'cause some cats have the ability to play straight up and down the box.

So I have these hang-ups with the right hand and when it starts going out I just have to take a breather. My instrument has to be a certain way. It has to *feel* that way to my right hand. If it goes out, my right hand will know it. Also I have a high action so that I can play clean on the chords and at the same time allow for the hard right hand.

II *I thought to myself, 'George has got a low action because he plays easy on the first two strings'. But then I think you've got strong hands.*

Yeah, but what happens is, I get a very staccato-ey sound because I have to be very conscious to make my hand press hard and if I don't pay any attention to that, my playing becomes very 'plucky' — too percussive.

GA *Do you reckon that your out-of-the-ordinary technique with your right hand has made this band stronger because of having to do so much work with this hand?*

I haven't really thought about that. These were things I just noticed about my own self — that my left hand was weaker than most cat's; pressure-wise. I'm trying to slow this down but I can't because when I'm in the middle of a tune I still get the urge to dig in. That's my problem — to try to keep the tone together; to control it. If you hit too hard you begin to get a thud, and it's a horrible sound.

II *Tell us about your instruments.*

I'm using an L5 now, but I have a D'Angelico that I love. It happens to fit my hands very well and it's such a well made instrument, and the response is so nice — it's fitted with a Johnny Smith pickup. But the airlines won't let me take it on the plane with me, they want to put it underneath. So I carry the Gibson which is a decent instrument.

GC *Do you ever use a solid guitar?*

I've used one once, but I didn't feel that I had an instrument in my hand.

GC *You like to feel a hollow body?*

I like to feel *some* body. I don't think that the electronics can produce what that wood does.

(*At this point George Benson gives Ike's Gibson L5 a going over, giving perfect enjoyment and a turn to the conversation.*)

II *Have you recorded that piece?*

No. They don't want you to play music on records man. They just want lots of this (*hammers out rock rhythm on table*).

GA *What do you think about rock? You sound as if you don't like it.*

Well I don't think it gives a young mind a chance to develop.

GC *What about the strains of rock that we're bearing in jazz these days?*

But it's unnatural. It had to happen, because it's hard to kill music as great as jazz and they want to play it, so they just put rock beats in and still improvise. It's good for keeping it alive but there's no replacement for jazz. It's like classical music. You know classical music when you hear it; nobody has to tell you. Jazz music should be left alone, I think, even though I'm suffering along with everybody else.

GA *You don't think it can fuse? I mean stay alive and viable commercially by absorbing a bit of rock?*

It depends on the people who shape our lives. If they say they want it to be big, it'll be big. Rock music just happens to be the music of the moment, and only by their mouths they've made it.

GA *John McLaughlin claims that he prefers to play to a rock audience than a jazz audience . . .*

Smart, for a man who wants to make a living, to say that!

GA *No, he really means it. He's not being commercial. Don't you think he's that sort of man?*

Oh, I don't know man, because I've heard him play some music. And when I hear him play the other things — which is OK for the people who dig, because their ears are tuned to that — I just don't know. You can't tell me that a man wants to give up all of his harmonic knowledge, the things he's stored up in his whole life and not be able to play it. People have a tendency to call anything that's improvisation, by a jazz label, because they can't understand it. You know, when they start the gibbering part — all the 'plucky' notes, then it's jazz. But rock has no kinship with jazz at all. How can you compare that with Louis Armstrong's music? It has no kinship at all; the music I play has very little kinship to Armstrong. Don't get me wrong, I understand where I'm at.

GA *But you do seem to me to have one big kinship and that is concerned with melody; which the rock man doesn't have. He has a concern with rhythm and texture, whereas the jazzman's interest is with sheer melody.*

Well that's right, that's the thing he excels at. With rock, the rhythm section is so overpowering that you can't fight it, so you have to join it. How many kids can play a ballad? How many rock groups can play a ballad? You're talking about a field or some place they've never been. It's like asking someone about New York, who's never been there. They know of it, but that's all. In jazz the rhythm does not overpower the melodic line and that's the difference. If they would cut the rhythm section down, then you would hear how horrible some of their concepts are. That's why they play so loud. Anybody who has any knowledge of harmonics wouldn't normally want to waste his time playing something that was going to cover it up.

You can't stop it though. It's like trying to stop a war. You don't have to like it: you just know it's a way of life and you keep constantly trying to figure out how to beat it. I see a lot of cats who play rock who wished they could play something else. But they don't dare because they know they've got a living to make. It's hard to be real in this world — and make it!

GC *What do you think about the direction X has taken?*



'I found out years ago that I'd never be a Johnny Smith.'

◀ Don't quote me man, please. But he doesn't like it, 'course not; but he happens to be a smart man.

GC So it's not really part of his development at all, is it?

It represents a big backwards step. That's what it represents, 'cause both you and I know that the man's a genius. There it is, he's a perfect example. They say he's gone on rock. Well he couldn't play rock; he just hasn't the feel for it — no way. His concept is so foreign to that way of thinking. It's usually the guys around him that shape the music that gives it the name or title. It certainly isn't him, because he doesn't have any idea. It's that label thing again. If for instance Ringo Starr would record *Tenderly* or *Green Dolphin Street*, then all the kids would say, 'Hey, Ringo's playing jazz now.'

GA When you go on stage and improvise yourself, how much of that is truly improvisation? It's a funny question, I know...

Most of it, because I don't believe in extensive charts. I believe in stating a theme and just going to town on it. But that's still not the jazz part; that's only improvisation. You see, that feeling that was prevalent in the thirties and up through the forties, now that was it. If somebody says, 'Can you play *Stardust*?' you'd just break out into *Stardust* — don't need no big band, just give me a bass player, or a piano player.

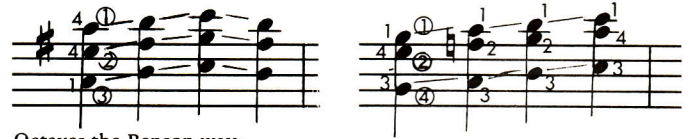
Jazz music was music that you knew you weren't ever going to hear like that again — never. So when you hear a man play, you pay attention 'cause it's gone, and that feeling that came across the audience and swept the room was that you ain't never going to hear it like that again.

GA What do you think about free jazz?

I think it has its value. I just think you should take the jazz label off and call it something else. That's the whole thing that confuses everybody. And that can destroy it; that kind of thing. Even the bebop. The bebop players said, 'This is bebop music — Montgomery...' 'I still play his tunes because he was great.'



not jazz.' And someone will say, 'Well, it sounds like jazz to me; there's improvising, right? So it must be jazz.' No it isn't; it's another music altogether. It became much more complicated. A man had to have more than chops to play bebop. He had to have a great knowledge of harmony. So it deserved to be called something definite. It deserved a new title. You might say that it belongs to the jazz family — the surname's the same, because it came out of jazz; but like jazz came out of spiritual music. Fine, but they don't call jazz 'spiritual jazz', do they?



Octaves the Benson way:

(i) with a fifth in between, (ii) a sixth in between

II What I liked that you did so well was the octave thing with the fourth and the fifth. It comes off nicely.

It's a nice effect, man. I've always liked the way Errol Garner and Fats Waller rattled those notes in the chord. It's such a good feeling. And I've been trying to play like I was those cats for years. I wish I could step back into history about twenty or thirty years. Or just hear Charlie Christian play and Art Tatum. Do you know what's unbelievable, man? It's that kids nowadays are deprived of music. And this is a drag — what the system's done. They've robbed people of that music. If a person who calls himself a musician hears that music and is not affected by it, then he's no musician to me. And if they played those records, the quality of music would improve. It's as simple as that. The first record I heard was Charlie Christian and I never got over it; and then I heard Django Reinhardt and that just made it worse.

I didn't miss Wes Montgomery though. I still play his tunes and try to captivate that feeling sometimes, because he was great. And I forget about the people who say, 'Oh, he's copying,' because I know what I can do. I play it because, you know, it was a great time when this man was alive. The whole quality of music was up. And if a person called himself a guitar player, the first thing he was going to hear was, 'How do you like Wes Montgomery?' And that would make you practise. You could shoot for something. But now you don't have anything to shoot for brother. There's not much out here that a man has to account to; there's no whip over him any more. People might say, 'Who's the greatest guitar player in the world?' 'Well, Jack Johnson. Jack Johnson's the greatest player in the world — goes like wildfire man!' Well, there's no such thing as the greatest player in the world — unless it's Andres Segovia; and you don't hear him on no rock stations!

Today there's so much happening that there might be things you want to hear more, so people desire to hear other things than Louis Armstrong and Wes Montgomery. That variety is always going to be there. But we must remember where things come from so we can put them into their proper context. In other words, you can't take a man who dabbles and dabbles in, say, classical music and put him above people who've had forty years experience; even though he might come up with something that is super great for a time, something unique. Because he just can't make it. He can't even sit down with those guys. You take a man like Montgomery. He spent a lifetime doing what he did and there ain't no twenty-year-olds who can sit down with that man and do nothing except but to say, 'I've sat down with Wes Montgomery and learned something.'

That's the whole concept I'm trying to get across. Though I have believed everything, because like everybody else, I'm trying to stay alive; and I listen, but I don't hear anything coming out of it any more. It seemed to be going some place at first, but after the death of John Coltrane and Montgomery, the quality has gone way down man. Way down. And even the guys who have a potential to play are being pulled away by people offering them so much money.

GA Well it looks as though you're the one guy who's never going to be bought.

Well, no. I cut records to make money. I bend a little like everybody else, but the whole thing is you don't lose track of where you are. It's like losing one battle and winning the war. ●