

George Benson – Songs and Stories (2009)

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01 Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight [3:51] 02 Family Reunion [4:21] [play](#) 03 Show Me The Love [4:19]

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04 A Telephone Call Away [5:58] 05 Someday We'll All Be Free [6:24] 06 Nuthin' But A Party [5:32] 07 Come In From The Cold [4:35] 08 Exotica [5:32] 09 Rainy Night In Georgia [4:53] 10 One Like You [4:45] 11 Living In High Definition [7:25] 12 Sailing [5:18]

Personnel: George Benson - Vocals, guitar Gerald Albright, Tom Scott - Saxophones Toninho Horta, Jubu, Paul Jackson Jr., Steve Lukather, Wah Wah Watson, Lee Ritenour, Marcelo Lima - Guitars William Magalhaes - Fender Rhodes Greg Phillinganes - Fender Rhodes, keyboards, piano Rod Temperton, David Paich - Keyboards Bruno Cardozo, Bobby Sparks II - Hammond B3 organ, keyboards Steve Porcaro - Synthesiser David Garfield - Piano, organ, keyboards Marcus Miller - Bass, Fender Rhodes, marimba, keyboards, vibes, percussion, vocals Butterscotch - Beat box John "JR" Robinson, Maguinho Alcantara - Drums Paulinho Da Costa - Percussion Noel Lee - Wind chimes Lalah Hathaway - Vocals Patti Austin - Vocals, background vocals Norman Brown - Vocals, guitar Carolyn Perry, Lori Perry, Sharon Perry - Background vocals

Many jazz fans regret the fact that (like Nat "King" Cole) George Benson seemed to be gradually drifting away from the jazz world when he started doing vocals more and more and playing the guitar less and less. The shift is exemplified in the sleeve listing of "George Benson - Vocals, guitar" - not the other way round. Yet he still plays the guitar, although we are unlikely to hear any jazz as forthright as the thrilling stuff he played on early albums like The George Benson Cookbook in 1966.

This new CD is not much different from many of George's previous albums, but at least he chooses quality songs by such composers as James Taylor (Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight) and Smokey Robinson (One Like You). The opening track betrays the influence on Benson's vocals of Ray Charles, although that's a pretty good model. In Show Me the Love and several

other tracks, George does his distinctive trick of scatting along with his guitar - either in unison or in harmony - and it's a bewitching sound. A Telephone Call Away has Lalah Hathaway guesting on vocals and sounding mellifluously like Randy Crawford.

Benson's version of Someday We'll All Be Free underlines the resemblance between his vocal style and that of the song's composer, Donny Hathaway. Despite the large number of contributors to this album, Come in from the Cold is marred by a thick, thudding bass. Like several songs on the albums, this is basically a routine funk outing. The worst example is Nuthin' but a Party with an unsubtle drum loop. However, George's personal mix of voice and guitar often adds a touch of class to even a mediocre tune - and brings out the best in a good one. Although very different in many ways, George Benson is similar to B. B. King in having a guitar style that perfectly fits his singing.

The album ends with Sailing (the song by Christopher Cross, not the Rod Stewart anthem), which - because it is mainly an instrumental - hints at what jazz devotees lost when Benson put his emphasis on vocals instead of guitar. The result is an album that is more likely to be filed under "Easy Listening" than "Jazz" - but it is still very agreeable. ---Tony Augarde

Veteran smooth jazz guitar master George Benson is no one-dimensional purveyor of musical wallpaper. He is, without question, one of the few remaining true musical legends. Guitar is his genius, but it is George Benson's voice that is his fame and fortune. It is 30 years since Benson made a similar strategic decision to go with the smooth, choosing mass appeal over the affection of a chin-stroking jazz minority. It means that today the 66-year old is able to step sprightly forth to an introduction that describes him portentously as "ten-time Grammy award winner George Benson".

Few musicians master even one style of writing and performing in their lifetime, but Benson has at least two under his belt - soulful R&B and authentic Wes Montgomery-style jazz guitar. The fact that he works in two camps should work against him, but it didn't. Jazz fans ought to be horrified that he sings pop songs, while the R&B fans should be scratching their heads when he starts playing be-bop guitar lines. Somehow he pulls everyone together, though, and gets roars of approval whether he's singing seductively a deep and velvety ballad, or pulling off the kind of guitar licks that Django Reinhardt would have been proud of. This recording is another snapshot of a career that has spanned nearly five decades and many successful albums, and it wires

towards the smooth side.

The beauty of the set is the band's ability to move between genres Soul, Jazz, Funk and back again. It's a mixed bag, older songs such as Donny Hathaway's "Someday We'll All be Free" matched by some new pop tunes such as Marc Broussard's "Come in From The Cold". "Songs and Stories" is wide-ranging enough to cover a swaying, uptempo version of James Taylor's "Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight" - featuring the excellent Tonhino Horta on acoustic guitar and Paulinho da Costa on percussion - and Bill Withers' "A Telephone Call Away", a laidback, 80's style groove which features the ubiquitous (and sometimes over-rated) Lalah Hathaway on vocals. Another highlight is the gorgeous, anthemic "Someday We'll All Be Free", which receives a beautiful small jazz band treatment here, without reaching though the height of the masterful, prime jazz version by the incomparable Regina Belle on Baby Come to Me: The Best of Regina Belle, track # 9.

But then, this is the good thing of this album, George Benson plays in such a relaxed fashion, never pretending to offer his audience the definitive versions or to strike it with masterpieces, and without being too formulaic and repetitive. Many guests join in: the Perri Sisters and Patti Austin on background vocals, Greg Phillinganes on keyboards, Tom Scott and Gerald Albright on sax, Marcus Miller -who co-produces with John Burk - on bass, Jubu and Lee Ritenour on guitar and more. George Benson is quite capable of providing a five-star masterpiece, which "Songs And Stories" is not. Nonetheless, this release has more pluses than minuses. This is another winning number and a very strong selection of Smooth Jazz grooves that mixes in Funk and Fusion. As usual, Benson's playing is soulful, smoothly evocative and fluid. And very enjoyable. You will love this elegant, feel-good album. Enjoy! The album debuts at # 1 of the Billboard Top Jazz Albums. --- Jazz for the dappers, amazon.com

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