

Average White Band & Ben E. King - Benny & Us (1977)

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1 *Get It Up For Love* 4:33 2 *Fool For You Anyway* 5:38 3 *A Star In The Ghetto* 7:01 4 *The Message* 5:17 5 *What Is Soul* 4:34 6 *Someday We'll All Be Free* 5:13 7 *Imagine* 4:56 8 *Keepin It To Myself* 4:30 Ben E. King – lead vocals Alan Gorrie, Hamish Stuart, Onnie McIntyre – guitar Roger Ball – keyboards Roger Ball – alto saxophone Malcolm "Molly" Duncan – keyboards, tenor saxophone Alan Gorrie – bass Steve Ferrone – drums, percussion Alan Gorrie, Hamish Stuart, Debra Gray, Luther Vandross, Robin Clark – backing vocals Lewis Del Gatto – baritone saxophone (tracks: 2, 5, 8) Michael Brecker – tenor saxophone (tracks: 2, 5, 8) Marvin Stamm, Randy Brecker – trumpet (tracks: 2, 5, 8) Barry Rogers – trombone (tracks: 2, 5, 8)

Benny and Us resulted from a chance meeting in Miami between Ben E. King and the Average White Band, who were vacationing there just when King was starting work on a new album. The finished LP yielded two hit singles and became King's best-selling LP, rising to number 33. The sound is soulful and funky, very bright and passionate -- the upbeat, relentlessly catchy "Get It Up for Love" and the soaring, horn and string driven "A Star in the Ghetto" made respectable showings on the R&B charts, and a good portion of the rest ("The Message," "What Is Soul") is pretty powerful stuff as well. "Imagine" is so busy and so self-consciously earnest that it's difficult to enjoy, but King is so good in the moments when he is on target, that it's hard to skip this track, even if it is the weakest number here. The radiant "Keepin' It to Myself" and the poignant cover of Donny Hathaway's "Someday We'll All Be Free," by contrast, are among King's very best records. Benny and Us was a good enough record that it nearly led to a joint tour (as opposed to some joint appearances, which actually happened) between King and the Average White Band -- one can only marvel at what those shows must have sounded like, and lament that fact that no live album was cut. It also marked King's last major appearance on the charts for Atlantic. To date, however, it's only available as an import from Sequel Records. That reissue, apart from excellent sound, also includes alternate edits of "Fool for You Anyway," "The Message," and, especially "Star in the Ghetto," including the 12" single version of the latter -- all are worth hearing. ---Bruce Eder, Rovi

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