Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

GEORGE BENSON
NEA Jazz Master (2009)

Interviewee: George Benson (March 22, 1943 -)
Interviewer: Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Date: April 17-18, 2011
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Description: Transcript, 108 pp.

Brown: Today is April 17th, 2011. This is the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program interview with NEA Jazz Master, guitarist, vocalist, composer, and arranger George Benson in his house in Phoenix, Arizona, conducted by Anthony Brown with Marty Ashby and Ken Kimery present.

Good afternoon, George Benson.

Benson: Good afternoon.

Brown: I just want to say, first of all, that it's indeed a pleasure and an honor to be here to conduct this oral history interview for the national archives, and I just want to say that the last interview we conducted was with Hubert Laws, last month with Hubert Laws, and of course when I think of both of you, you two basically created the soundtrack for my college era in the '70s, the music on CTI, and then you later on, on Warner Bros., was a music that I came of age with, and I just want to thank – as I did thank Hubert Laws – thank you for giving my life such a blessed soundtrack.

Benson: He's a great musician. I really enjoyed – I knew I moved up in class when I started working with him.

Brown: If we could start by you stating your full name, your birth name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

Benson: As far as I know, my name is George Washington Benson. I was born in 1943, March the 22nd. I'm from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That's my beloved home town. That's my beginnings.

Brown: Let's talk about your parents: your mother's full name and your father's full name. I know your stepfather was very influential in your life, but whatever you can share with us as far as your family history.

Benson: It's incredible. My mother's name was Irma, and her last name was Benson. I was born when my father was in World War II. I didn't see him until I was four years old. I guess I was two before he even knew I was alive. By that time he was married to a French girl. They were both kids. He was only 19 or 20 or so. When he came home from the army, he saw – well, someone came to him. The story was someone came to him. They were in a foxhole. The guy said, "Man, that boy looks just like you." He said, "What boy are you talking about?" "That boy you got by that Benson girl in Pittsburgh." He said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Yeah, you got a son. He looks just like you." I think I was about two then. That was the first he heard of me. Two years later, he had a son who was almost two by the French girl, whom he had married.

When he was four, I finally met my dad. I remember him taking me on my shoulders – on his shoulders, rather – and taking me to meet his dad, who owned a filling station about a mile and a half from where I lived.

We lived in a very poor neighborhood of Pittsburgh, but we didn't know what poor was, because nobody ever defined it. We just lived from day to day. I ate every day. The sun shined every day. My mother treated me kindly, and everyone around me was kind. So there was no difference. It was just life itself.

But it was something different when I met my father and found that I had a father, first of all. I remember that day just like it was yesterday, meeting my grandfather at his gasoline station. I remember he was a stocky built guy. My father was an average built guy, but he had muscles. He was a pretty live-wire kind of guy.

Any other questions?

Brown: What was his name?

Benson: His name was Charles Evans.

Brown: And you mentioned your grandfather.

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Benson: My grandfather's name was Major Evans. He was a businessman. He was always doing something to create a livelihood. His favorite hobby was picking up the back end of a – what do they call the first Fords? The A something? T. Model T Ford – he would go pick up the back end of the Model T Ford. That's how he showed his prowess, "my strength." I remember that story, because my father made a point of getting me to hear that story, and I've always respected – I wanted to see him do it. I never saw him do it, though.

But I loved him, though. There was something about him that was very different and special. It was years later when I found out – I got a chance to hang out with him and find out what kind of guy he was and how I had a lot of his traits too.

Brown: It sounds like your father's side of the family was native in Pittsburgh?

Benson: They were actually from South Carolina.

Brown: Where?

Benson: I don't remember now, but recently I started finding out – trying to find the history, and I found out what date my grandfather married my grandmother, who was a full-blooded Indian. They got married at a very young age. I think it was 1915, something like 21 they got married. Then she moved – no, he moved to Pittsburgh. Then she moved to Pittsburgh after that. So I got a chance to see her while she was alive. Not for long. She passed away in the 70s, I think. So I got a chance to see pretty much who I was, through them. I found out I had a lot of their traits. I used to have these high cheekbones as a kid, and always wondered why. My father had a lot of freckles on his face. His father was part Irish and Welsh and African-American.

On my mother's side, it was closer to African-American all the way. My grandfather on her side – her father – was from Alabama. When I was there not too long ago, not too many years ago, there was a kinship. I could feel some of that. I'm walking along a riverbank. I think it was in Mobile. I said, wow, this is part of my origin. I'm from this part of the world.

I could imagine my grandfather back in those times, quite different times. I was near this fort. They had this big – it wasn't actually that big. I guess they called it big in those days. It had guns pointed toward the water – the river. I began to feel that history and get a chance to know who I really was, my roots.

Brown: Let's talk about Pittsburgh. You're growing up. You already mentioned your neighborhood. Could you tell us exactly where your neighborhood was when you grew up? Or could you tell us where you were born, what house in what neighborhood?

Benson: I was born at a place called Magee Hospital. Magee was in a different part of Pittsburgh. It was in – not Schenley. What's next to Schenley? It's in Oakland – Oakland, Pittsburgh. My mother ended up working there.

Brown: At the hospital?

Benson: Um-hmm. She was only 15 when I was born. I was born a few days after she turned 15. She turned 15 March the 16th, and then I was born March the 22nd. She worked there for the first few years of my life, until she met my stepfather four years later – no, seven years later. Sorry.

Brown: Seven years after you were born?

Benson: Seven years after I was born. This is when the music started to come alive.

Brown: What was his name?

Benson: His name was Thomas Collier. He was a guitar – a novice. He loved the instrument, and he loved Charlie Christian. But now, if you could imagine. I'm playing on a – I lived in an alley. It was called Gilmore Alley, right in the heart of the ghetto of Pittsburgh. The next connecting street, a cross street, was Fulton Street. Now that's a very friendly street in Pittsburgh. All day long you could hear sales people coming through. "Got any I? Do you want any I today?", meaning, do you want any ice? These were ice farmers.

Brown: Oh, so these were street hollers.

Benson: Yeah, they were hollering in the streets. They wanted to sell this ice for our ice boxes. There was no refrigerators, because we didn't have any electricity. So we had an ice box, and we had gas lamps on the wall. If it wasn't that, it was "Coal man, coal man, coal, coal man."

This day, something happened. They dumped the coal right at the entrance to our alley, Gilmore Alley, a big pile of coal. For us kids, we loved that. So I went up immediately, playing on it, running to the top of the coal mound and running back down. I was at the top of the coal mound, and a car was coming down the street. He stopped suddenly. [Benson makes a shrieking brake sound.] "Coal." He got out of his car. If I had to say

what that was, I'd say that was like a 1952 Chevy. He got out of the car. He had on an apple hat, the same kind Charlie Christian would wear. He came over to me, and he said, "Hey little boy. Can you tell me where Irma Benson live?" I said, "You mean my mother. Yeah, she live right here." He said, "Not your mother," because she didn't tell him she had a kid, see – "Not your mother. Irma Benson." I said, "Yeah, yeah, she's right here." So I took him. Now he found out she got a kid. But somehow or another they got together, because I saw him all the time after that, and a year later he married her.

But before that happened, the first thing happened after that that I can remember is – and I have to set this up. My grandfather was what you call a godfather in the neighborhood, the grandfather on my mother's side, African-American, real African-American, very dark-skinned guy, about six-foot-three, as I understand it. I never met him. But I saw pictures of him, and I could picture him now in front of me. He had just passed away before I was born. Before he passed away, he was a bootlegger. He had a small hotel. So my mother, when she grew up, she grew up in relative opulence. She had beautiful dresses every day. My uncle, who was the only son he had – we called him Uncle Nate. His name was Nathaniel Benson – he went to school during the Depression. He had three-piece suits and spats on, going – when he went to school. So, they had money.

So that is what was happening before I was born. After he died, my grandmother didn't live long after that, because the police harassed her. They harassed her, because my uncle, when he had the hotel, they were bootlegging liquor out from the basement up to their customers in the rooms. He used to pay the police to stay off of his back. So they would come around for money, and she didn't know what they were talking about. She was a church lady. He kept her shielded from all that. So when she didn't give money, they found reasons, found violations, and they put her in jail. She got sick, and she died.

So now we were living in – the house I first told you about was the maid's quarters. So that's why it didn't have any electricity. It had gas lamps. It was for the maids serviced the hotel there. So now we were stuck in that house after the grandmother died, or after my grandfather died, I should say.

Brown: What was his name?

Benson: The thing that made the difference – his name was George Washington Benson. My mother told me I got the name from him, because she said her mother told her before she died – she said – when I was born, she said, "If you name him after your dad, he'll have good fortune all his life." That's what happened with my grandfather. He always did well. So she named me after him because of her mother's wishes.

So now we moved. They kicked the few people that were left in the hotel – couldn't run it any more – kicked them out. We all moved into this small hotel. It was a three-story building, and there were four families, my mother and her two sisters – they all had children now – and my uncle. He had – he had just gotten married, and he had one kid. So we divided up the floors and so forth – the rooms – and we moved there. The problem was, the first day we moved there, there were no light bulbs. Whoever was in the building had taken all the light bulbs out. But it did have electricity. So my stepfather went to the pawn shop and got his guitar out, which he had pawned. He had nowhere to plug it in anyway. He got it out of the pawnshop, brought it to the house. He had a record player too, a little portable thing. This big, gigantic. It was supposed to be portable. I remember it was the dusk part of the day. It was just starting to – you could barely see in the rooms. He plugged it in. The amplifier was over there, and the wire ran over to his guitar. I'm thinking, what's this going to do? Never seen wires before, and it was plugged into a guitar. He took the guitar, and he strummed it, brrrrrmmmm, and the sound came out over there. I said wow, man, that's amazing. I couldn't believe it. I went over, stuck my ear down where the speaker – the sound was coming out. Fascinated. I sat right in front of it for hours, with my back against the speaker, listening to that sound. So I was hooked on electric guitar from the very beginning.

Then we moved in that house. He started playing records, mostly Charlie Christian records with Benny Goodman, the sextet, and some records by George Shearing, who was the new star at the time, had a great new sound. So that's – day in and day out, I heard that. But the first day I told you about, where I had my back against the guitar, my stepfather got – he had to go to the bathroom. So he put his guitar on a chair, and he said, "Now whatever you do, don't touch that guitar." I said okay. No sooner than he left the room, I ran over there to the guitar, ding dong ding. He came back in the room. He said, "Now you're going to have to learn how to play it. If you're going to be touching my guitar, you're going to have to learn how to play it."

My hands were definitely too small at seven years old. He found a ukulele in a garbage can, all cracked. It was all cracked to pieces. Somebody had trashed it. But he was a handyman. He glued it back together, put some strings on it, and taught me to play first chords on it. But having good ears – because my mother sang to me all the time. So I knew all the songs on the radio that were popular at the time, and movies too – movie soundtracks by people like Jo Stafford, and they had a movie out that had Virginia Mayo in it. That soundtrack was in my head all the time. I remember – I forgot to tell you that I had started school very early. I started school when I was four years old.

Brown: Which school?

Benson: I went to a school – my elementary school was called Letche, spelled L-e-t-c-h-e, Letche Elementary School.

Brown: Was it segregated? Integrated or segregated?

Benson: It was integrated, but mostly African-Americans.

Brown: Is it within walking distance of your house?

Benson: It was one block from my house and right next door to the school I went to later, which was called Conley Vocational High School. Very few African-Americans could get in there. You really had to have had tremendous grades.

But the first years were at Letche Elementary. Once they found out that I could sing, that was it. They called me for everything. "All right, little Georgie. Come on up here and sing something for us." I started singing something. Then later I learned to play the ukulele. Now I sang and played. So they really called me for everything.

I was in music class for a while, but they found out I wasn't reading the music, and they kicked me out. My first instrument was violin. I had already tried to play piano at home. We had an old raggedy piano in the living room at that hotel, that was left over. It was beat up, really, and my hands were just too small to play. So my second instrument was violin. But once I heard a tune, I could play it. I didn't need no music no more. I had good ears. So the teacher said, "You're not playing what's on the – play this." "What is that? I thought it was Mary Had a Little Lamb" or whatever it was. I just played it. So they kicked me out of that class.

But the entertainer Georgie Benson, the little kid, little Georgie Benson, started to gain popularity around the school. Now here's the biggest thing that happened to me during that time period. They had a program that allowed you to sell newspapers. You had to be at least 7 years old. I can't even imagine that today, a 7-year-old selling newspapers. I had turned 7 recently. So now I'm looking forward to going down to the newspaper stand to sell papers. The problem was, they had a clock downtown I could see from the stoop outside of the hotel where I was living. The Benson Hotel was the name of the place. Now there was no hotel anymore. It was where I lived. I had all these little girlfriends who liked to hear me sing and play. They were all on the steps, and I'm strumming my ukulele, singing songs, and watching that clock. Then, all of a sudden, I noticed it was one minute to 7, and I had to go three blocks. So I didn't have time to take my ukulele back upstairs. I said, "Oh, I got to go," and I took off, ran down to the newspaper stand. The guy was passing out newspapers. It was right in the heart of the action, where everybody hung out when they came to Pittsburgh, Charlie Parker, Billy Eckstine, Art

Blakey – everybody hung out – Stanley Turrentine. It was right across the street from the Blue Note. It was called the Stanley Theater – no, Stanley's nightclub, I'm sorry. Then right next – catty-corner from that was a place called – it was a pharmacy. I can't remember the title – the name of the place now, but that's where the paper stand was.

When I got there, I asked the man if he could hold onto my ukulele until I came back. They gave me the initial number of papers you were allowed on your first day. They gave me 5 newspapers. They were selling for 5 cents apiece. You got a penny-and-a-half on every paper. So if you sold all five, you get 7 1/2 cents. But they wouldn't give you the half cents. You'd get 7 cents.

I remember going into these bars, because it was loaded with bars up and down the street, a lot of walking traffic.

Brown: What's the street name?

Benson: Wiley Avenue. Between Wiley and Fullerton Street – no, between Fullerton and Logan Street, on Wiley Avenue, was a high-traffic area. They had a lot of bars. I went down to this one bar. I think it was called Spokane's. The problem was, you had all these people, smoke everywhere, a lot of racket. The juke box is up load, a lot of ambient noise. And I'm the little boy, never sold any papers. "Would you like to buy a paper?" "Excuse me, mister, could" – they were walking all over me. Didn't even know I was there. Too small. I was feeling mighty bad. I remember walking out on the street corners. It started getting late. I only had one hour to sell, because you had to get back home. A guy came up to me, "Hey, little boy. Give me a newspaper." I said oh, okay. I took the paper and gave it to him. He had a quarter. I said, "I don't have any change." So I figured I lost the sale. He said, "You keep the change." I said oh man, keep the change. I noticed it's going on 8 o'clock. So I run back to the – turned in my four papers. The guy gave me the one penny that I got for selling the one paper. I had a 20 cent tip. So I had 21 cents, a lot more than I expected.

So I walk – I get my ukulele out, and I walked into the drugstore, which is right here. It's called Goode's drug store. I'm looking in the candy counter, because that's how tall I am. The top of the counter is under here, looking at the candy to figure out what I'm going to buy. Somebody comes, "Hey boy. Can you play that thing?" I turned around. [Benson imitates bright-paced ukulele strumming and then starts singing] "I used to spend my money to make you look real sweet." The crowd comes around. My cousin, Reginald, who lived in the same house – Reginald Benson. He's a year older than me, maybe two years. He sees all these people, and they're all reaching in their pocket. He takes his baseball cap out, and he goes, and they all put money in the baseball cap. Now we got –

we're rich. I gave him a quarter on every dollar. Each time I got a dollar, I'd give him a quarter out of that.

We'd make two or three dollars that first day. So we went down the street and did the same thing. Had a hatful of money. Between my house and the newspaper stand, they were having a street fair where they had a ferris wheel and cotton candy. So I went up there and loaded up: cotton candy, [?], popcorn, shot the little guns they had, rode the ferris wheel. I did that for a few days. This was during the summertime. I did that for a few days, especially on the weekend, mostly.

One day, my mother woke me up for school and saw all this money under my pillow. 50 cents's, quarters, not dollars. But it was a lot of it. It was more money than she made in a week. She said, "Where did you get all this money?" I said, "Mom, I do it every night." She thought I was selling papers. She never asked me about it. It was more money than she made in two weeks, as a matter of fact. She used to make $40 every two weeks, and I was making that a night. But I was storing it away with my friends. "Hey, George. Give me some money." I give him a quarter, this one 50 cents, give a quarter. It didn't mean anything. All I needed was enough to get a couple candy bars.

During that time, a man saw me on the street corners. He said, "Little Georgie, can you take me home and introduce me to your parents?" I took him to the house. He said, "My name is Cephas Ford, and I own a nightclub called Little Paris." He said, "I'd like little Georgie to work in my nightclub." My mother said, "No, he can't – he's just a kid." He said, "Why not?" "Well, he's got to go to school." He said –

[recording interrupted by phone call]

My mother said, "No, he's got to go to school." Mr. Ford said, "Not on the weekends. If he worked Fridays and Saturdays, he doesn't have to go to school the next day." She said, "But he's too young for all that." Then he made her an offer she couldn't refuse, $40 a night. She said, "Wow, that's a lot of money." So she agreed to it. She agreed to have me back – the show didn't go on until midnight. She agreed that they would have me back at home at 1 o'clock.

My stepfather took over the managing job, took me down to the theater. I remember hearing this incredible band, drums. It was so exciting. There was a whole show. They had stage girls, like the Rockettes. That's the only thing I could relate to now. They were doing their kicks. The music was jazzy and funky. Everybody was having a good time. Then they called Little Georgie. I came out with my ukulele. Sometimes my stepfather accompanied me. He played the guitar, and I played the uke. I sang, danced, and played

ukulele. The people started throwing money on stage. They threw the money on the stage. I said wow, this is exciting.

Then one night the doors flew open, and the cops came in. They had hatchets and sledgehammers, and they commenced to chopping that place up. They chopped all the tables up. They hit the bar, all the liquor on the bar. They chopped the counter up. One cop came and said, "What's this little boy doing in here?" My stepfather said, "That's my son. I got to get him out of here." Another cop, who knew my real father, said, "That's not his son, man. That's not his son. Stop them. Hold them." So they held us both, and they took us up to the police station along with all the other performers. They weren't concerned at all.

When we got to the police station, they hollered upstairs. They had two floors, one for me, one for women. So the guy hollered upstairs, "Do you have room for any more women upstairs?" Then they started laughing, and they snatched the clothes off of these women, and these red balls fell out of their breast and bounced all over the floor. My father grabbed my eyes immediately – my stepfather. He said, "Don't try to understand it, boy. Don't look." Man, that was a traumatic night. I'd never seen anything like that. I didn't realize that those stage people, the Rockettes, were not women. I guess that was the biggest thing of all, that the judge, he wasn't standing for it. He locked my stepfather up, put him in prison for six months, and they threatened to take me from my parents, my mother.

I was about 8 then. That's when my stepfather decided to marry my mother. Then he became legal. When he got out of jail, first thing he did was marry her. Then we started – I started having brothers and sisters. The first one was a – I had a sister first, and then three or four – five altogether, brothers and sisters, over the years.

That was the beginning of a traumatic part, and it was the end of that period, because now we couldn't take any chances that we would – we already had gone on record with something negative. My mother said "No, that's the end of that. No, he will do nothing."

So, I continued. I learned to play the guitar when I was 9. I switched from ukulele to guitar.

Brown: Before we make that switch, can I ask a few more questions? How long had you been working at this club before it got busted?

Benson: I can't really remember. It wasn't a long time though. I imagine it would be probably a few weeks.

Brown: You mentioned earlier that your mom used to sing to you. Did she take you to church? Or was she a churchgoer at that time? What kind of songs was she singing at the house?

Benson: Good question, my friend. When I came up, my mother was always looking – remember, her mother was a church person – my mother was always looking for answers, Bible answers. So she took me to every kind of church there was. There were a lot of churches in our neighborhood. I remember going to the very beautiful ones, and the ones that didn't have any money, the falling-down churches, and tent churches, where they would set up temporary tents. I remember waking up in the middle of a rain when it was muddy. The preacher was jumping up and down. People were singing. The preacher was making all kind of sounds. I started crying. My mother said, "If you start crying, I'm not going to buy you no sundae," because that's how she kept me from making noise. She promised that we would go by the drugstore and get a sundae. I really looked forward to those sundaes. So that would keep me quiet.

That's what was happening during that time. She took me to every kind of church there was in the neighborhood. She was a very spiritual-minded person. She always sang. They called her Sing in school. That was her nickname. I remember, when she was nursing me, she would always be humming. All those songs – melodies – stayed in my head. That's probably how I got introduced to music, through her little ramblings.

Brown: Was she singing not only popular music, but also church music as well?

Benson: No. We weren't the gospel type. I did sing in church. I remember a couple of times singing in church. And then they took a church group downtown during holiday time, and we sang in this great department store. They had us singing, and I thought, wow, this was big time. We're singing in public. That was exciting. But we didn't do a lot of that, because she was still going to different churches. She wasn't happy with what she was hearing in these particular churches.

I forgot to mention that my father played several instruments, my natural father. He played trombone, drums, and piano. I found out later that his friends were some of the most popular people in the music world. The greatest one to me would be Charlie Parker.

[recording interrupted]

I'd like you to continue with your questions, because you sparked my memory.

[microphone adjustment]

Where were we now?

Brown: You were going to talk – you were saying at age 9 you started playing guitar. I think that's where we transitioned.

Benson: That's right. Yeah, I switched to guitar at age 9. I was still going out on street corners during the summers and playing. Now I got approached by another guy, who says, "Little Georgie" – the reason why they called me Little Georgie is because I was always small for my age. I was never as big as the rest of the people who were my age group. My class, I was the smallest guy in class. Remember, I was a couple of years younger than everybody else, too.

Brown: Let's go back to your school. How did you do in school? Were you interested in any particular subjects? Would you consider yourself an A student, B student, C student?

Benson: I wasn't a hard-working guy, but I – yeah, I was a pretty good student, above average. They had me in the spelling bee and carrying on. I didn't do well, but . . .

Brown: Were there any subjects that were interesting to you?

Benson: Not in grammar school. In high school I studied electric power and commercial art.

Brown: When you said you were kicked out of the music class, the music program, had you been receiving any training in school? Or you just brought what you had to the class?

Benson: They had a music training course. I remember their names. We had two people. One's name was Mr. Peeler, and the other one's name was Miss Pugh. They were both very nice people, but like I say, they had rules, and rules didn't seem to matter to me. I saw them scuffling with things that I could sing in two seconds. They were scuffling trying to play tunes. Play it, play it. It goes like this. Come on with this. But they did things very methodically. Everybody had a part. I wasn't used to that. I was always used to being the leader. And then, when we did things together on stage, singing, I would be up there in front of the class, doing the lead part. So that's where I always assumed that I belonged.

When that ended – they kicked me out of at least the music instrument. They had no ukulele and guitar class in school. So I was learning that on my own. My stepfather taught me the very beginnings.

There was a man who owned a barbershop. He had an amazing instrument. He had a Gibson L-5, brand new. He couldn't play anything, but he just loved the instrument. He had one in his barbershop. It was always set up, ready to go. When he saw Little Georgie Benson walking down, he [said], "Hey man. Bring that Little Georgie Benson. Come in here, Little Georgie." I'd come into his place. "Play my guitar." I said, wow, that's an electric guitar. I didn't have an electric guitar. I only had a little $16 guitar that we got for Christmas, and it was terrible on your hands. So I was playing this fabulous, shiny instrument, brand new, and he had a Fender amplifier – oh, no, I think he had a Gibson amplifier. It made beautiful sounds. He let me play as long as I wanted to play. It usually lasted about a half hour or 45 minutes. I remember – I'll never forget that – I think that that had a lot to do with my believing that I could make a transition and one day would end up playing electric guitar, although nobody could afford that. That was hundreds of dollars. That was ridiculous. It was like wishing for the moon.

So that was one part. Now this guy approached me. He was from that part of the city, maybe up the street a little ways. I wasn't allowed to walk that far up, but it was on Centre Avenue. His barbershop was Centre Avenue and Fulton Street, just a little up from Fulton, and the place where this man was from was – he worked at a place called The Sandwich Inn. They sold pastrami sandwiches and things like that. It was very famous for that, ham sandwiches. His name was Harry Tepper.

He – here's how I met him. Someone approached me and said, "There's a man who wants to meet you, George. He's at a place called the Sandwich Inn on Centre Avenue" and such-and-such street – "and Aaron Street" – Centre Avenue and Aaron Street. I said, "I have to get permission to go up that far." So I asked my mother if I could walk up there, and she said "Yeah, go ahead on up." I'm about 9 years old, maybe 10. I walked up. I'll never forget, looking over the counter. The counter was here. Now Harry's only five-foot-six. The counter's here, and I see all this meat in the counter, and they have these machines slicing the meat. I said, "Is Mr. Harry Tepper here?" He said, "You must be Little Georgie Benson." I said, "Yeah, that's me." He says, "Wait a minute, man," and he takes his apron off and comes around. He said, "Could you take me and introduce me to your mother and father?" So I told him where we lived.

Next thing I remember, he was talking to my mother and father about taking me to New York and making a record. I thought that was pretty exciting. He finally did talk my mother into allowing him and his partner – he brought a guy with him. To me, they're both men. I'm 10 years old. Everything older than 15 is a man, as far as I'm concerned. I found out later that the man who he brought – his name was Eugene Landy – was only 19 years old at the time. Harry I guess was maybe about 22. They convinced my mother to let them take me to New York to try to get a record deal. They were convinced that they could.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

This was going to be a very expensive endeavor. Nice looking Landy – handsome young fellow – had a lot of girlfriends. One of his girlfriends was a 22-year-old schoolteacher, looked like Elizabeth Taylor. The other one was a 39-year-old lady who was the manager of an apartment building in Pittsburgh. I remember him taking me up to her apartment. She was on the penthouse at the top. You could see all of Pittsburgh from there. I'd never seen anything like that in my life. The apartment was laid out. He convinced her to buy me a new guitar and bought me a new suit. It was a lavender suit. Bow tie went all the way out to my shoulder.

We went to New York. We drove in her car. I think it was a 1955 Plymouth or something like that. When we got there, I remember trying out for the George Jessel show – he was a variety show. It was popular at the time – and trying out for the Arthur Godfrey show, but when he heard me play ukulele, he shut me down early, because that was his instrument, ukulele. So he – "Nah. Not on my show."

We also went to the Copacabana, because this lady was wealthy. We were staying at a hotel that does not exist anymore, but it was across the street – catty-corner – from the most famous hotel in New York – what is it? – the Waldorf Astoria. It was catty-corner, and it was just as famous as the Waldorf in its day. It was in a lot of movies that we saw. I'll never forget. Our hotel bill was – $400 a day? – it was suite – in 1952 or '3. That was gigantic.

Here's what happened. I hate to tell it, but one day I woke up in the middle of a tremendous argument. I could hear people, loud, making all kinds of threats. My manager was arguing with his – with the 39-year-old girl – lady. She was nice to me. She treated me very nicely. When the argument was over, she finally came up to me, sat on the edge of the bed –

[interview momentarily disrupted]

If we could continue, while I still got the concept – she came over to the edge of my bed and sat down and said, "Little Georgie, you won't understand any of this." She said, "But Landy and I have had a falling out." She said, "I'm going back to Pittsburgh." She said, "Now, I want to say to you, if you decide to come back to Pittsburgh with me," she said, "I guarantee you that I'll get you that record deal that we're talking about." She said, "But if you say no, I'll understand." She said, "Don't worry about it. The decision is yours."

I told her – I'll never forget. I went into tears, because that was a terrible decision. I never came into a situation like that. So I went into tears. I said, "My mother expects me to

come back with Landy, because I left with him. So she expects me to come back with him." So she said, "I understand, George." And I never saw her again, ever, after that, although she lived right down the street. She managed the hotel building, the Bigelow building, right down the street from my house.

It was six months later we came back to New York. We flew this time on an airplane, and we recorded our first record. We cut four sides for RCA Victor, *Shout, Holler and Scream, She Makes Me Mad, It Shoulda Been Me,* which was a Ray Charles song originally. It took me years to find out that the guy who wrote the new lyrics to *It Shoulda Been Me* was King Curtis. His name was Curtis Ousley. And there was the Leroy Kirkland band. He was the one who wrote the charts and directed the seven-piece that we had for that record.

Here's what happened that was so incredible. A guy – the guitar player – between songs he left his guitar sitting on a bench or something, or stool. I went over. I picked it up, and I started playing. He came over to me, and he said, "Man, you're going to be a guitar player." I said, "Yeah, I like it." He said, "Yeah, I can hear that. You're going to be a guitar player."

If I can skip a few years, just to make a point: five years later, I came to New York with a singing group called the Altairs. We were making our first record. Between sessions, I went over and picked up the guitar and started playing. The guy came over. He said, "Oh man, I like what you're doing on the guitar." He said, "Man, you're a guitar player." Nine years later, we're in the studio, making a record. A guy comes over to me. He said, "I know you from somewhere." I started explaining, "Maybe you know me from five years ago when we made records." He said, "Yeah, I told you then you was going to be a guitar player," because now my popularity was going up. We were in the top five guitar players in the world at the time. I'm 24 at that time. Then I said, "I also made a record with Leroy Kirkland." He said, "I was on that session." He said, "I told you then you were going to be a guitar" – his name was – Carl Lynch was his name. He was the most recorded cat in New York before – I forget his name, who just passed away recently. I should say recently, but overtook him as the top guitar player in the studio. Played on Grover Washington's records. What was his name?

Brown: Eric Gale?

Benson: Eric Gale. He was on the same session, but he was playing on different songs. He became the new studio guy. But Carl Lynch dominated New York for years. I thought that was an interesting story.

After we did the records, the fear was – I was on the radio all the time, and I couldn't live like a kid anymore. I'm 10 or 11 years old, and every day or so my manager would come, "Come on Little Georgie. We got to get out of here. We got a radio interview to do." I'm at a swimming pool, swimming with my friends. He comes over and he's on the fence, "Get out of there, man. We only got 20 minutes. We got to be on the radio."

Brown: Who's your manager? What was his name?

Benson: Actually he was my agent. It was the second guy I told you about, who came with Mr. Harry Tepper. Harry was still my manager. Eugene Landy was my agent. He would come, and he would be booking all these crazy things.

My mother got tired of it. People thought I had money, because I was on the radio, and lots of stories about us in the newspaper. They thought I was doing well. Her fear was that someone was going to kidnap me and ask her for a ransom, and they wouldn't believe her when she told them she didn't have any money.

The thing that broke the camel's back was my manager asked my mother if he could take me to Hollywood. He said, "Mrs. Benson" – no, Mrs. Collier was her name then, because she had married my stepfather, Tom Collier. He said, "I'm going to take Little Georgie to Hollywood. I'm going to make a star out of him." She said, "No, you're not. You're not going to make a star. He's not going to Hollywood. He's not going anywhere." So my career died. At 11 years old, it was all over. I went to school and lived like a normal kid. So I understand stories about other stars who would go through that. I know exactly what it is. It was good to have my life back and hang out with my friends.

The only part was that gangs began to form in Pittsburgh. You either belonged to this gang or that gang. I had – my cousin and I belonged to a little club. It wasn't big time. It was just so we could say that we belonged to a club. We belonged to the – what was the name of our . . . ? – the Cavaliers – the Junior Cavaliers was the name of that club. There was the Cavaliers, and there was the Junior Cavaliers. There was the Jaguars, and there was the Junior Jaguars. The major ones, they were cats who were actually men, in their 20s maybe, or close to 20. But the rest of us were in our mid-teens or younger. But it's trouble all around. What broke it up was one of my cousins was killed. They had a gang fight, and he was stabbed. That showed us how real it was. We couldn't believe that he was gone and we'd never see him again.

He was – him and I, we grew up in the same house, my mother's sisters, and he was like an older brother to me. He was one year older than me, my cousin Reggie was two years older than me, and then he had a brother two years older than him. So we all grew up together. We were the Benson family. Nobody messed with any Bensons, because they

knew they were going to have to go through crazy Benson, Tommy the Mule, because they say when they got hit by Tommy, it was like being kicked with a mule, and they called him Shotgun. One guy said it was like being hit with a shotgun blast. So they called him Shotgun and Mule. So, if you was a Benson, nobody messed with you.

The one who got killed was a guy who was like Muhammad Ali. You couldn't hit him. He made people furious, because they'd be in a fight with him and he could do like Muhammad. You couldn't hit him. Then he'd come back and bang you, boom, knock you down again. He'd be laughing at you while you're fighting. One day, it got to be too much. The cat ran home, got his brothers. They all came back. They came back with guns and knives, and they killed him. Um-hmm.

That changed our whole lives. We – it ended the gangs for us, for all time. I had been getting in all kind of trouble. I went to a reform school for six weeks. I got into a gang fight and got shot. I thought we were going to play basketball, but we were going into a neighborhood we weren't allowed. People from the Hill weren't allowed nowhere. They found out you were from the Hill district, they hated you. They'd run you back. We decided to go down to Fifth Avenue, the high school, and play basketball. They had a nice basketball court. We didn't have none where we lived. But when we got down there, it was maybe eight of us, and they had about 25. They surrounded us. I noticed one guy was from the school I was going to. So we avoided each other. He went to the other side of the crowd. I was – he didn't want to rumble with me, because we were friends at school. We had a little crazy guy on our side. He was little. He was my size. He only weighed about – I only weighed about 80-some pounds. 90 would be tops. He weighed about 90. They started talking all this crazy stuff. Their guy looked like Superman. He was built. He took off his shirt, and our guy took off his shirt. He was wiry built, like me, little. They got to fighting, and our little guy was whopping the crap out of him, bloodied him all up, because he was actually a boxer. He was learning how to box, and he proved it that day.

During the fight, one guy said – oh, the guy tricked him. He said, "Okay, man. You win." My guy dropped his guard, and the guy picked him up, slammed him on the ground, had him in a full Nelson with his head under his leg. Beating his – he started crying out, "Ain't nobody gonna help me, man?" So one of the crazy guys from our side went to a garbage can and came back with a milk bottle, whoosh. When that little guy got loose, you ain't never seen no fighting like that. If you thought he was beating that guy up before, he really beat him up.

The police came with their guns. Pow, pow. We're running everywhere. They shot one of my friends in his ankle. When I saw them shooting, heard the guns, I thought it was like the movies. The movie said, "You have to announce three times – shoot three times in the

air, pow pow pow. Then he can shoot at you." We believed that stuff. So I kept hearing shooting. I said one round, two. I'm counting, but I'm looking back. Now I can hear rapid fire. Pop, pop, pop, pop. I looked back. I said, "Okay, man," like this, and then I flipped over. Another cop came out of nowhere, grabbed me, and swooped me up off the ground. The other cop who had his gun, he said, "Where'd I hit you?" He's looking all over my chest to find out where he – I said, "You didn't hit me man," because I didn't feel nothing. Then he said, "There it is." I had a gash in my forehead. If you look real hard, you'll see the indentation or the skin ruffled. It knocked – flipped me over, because that's what 38s do, I found out later. I said, "How come they didn't kill me?" He said, "38s are built to stop you. Hit a bone, you're gone, you're down."

So I went to reform school on account of things like that. I spent a six-week tour at Thorn Hill. Remember Thorn Hill in Pittsburgh, my friend? That was the eye-opener for me. I knew that I wasn't going to spend no more time in – locked up behind bars. So when I came out of reform school, I was reformed. I also – because of the fact that I wasn't eating nutritious meals, that's why I had no size. But in there, you eat as much as you want, and you eat foods you never ate, a mixture of food, a combination of food, a variety of food at the same meal. Unheard of. We either had beans and wieners, or just corn and bread, or beans and bread, but nothing – beans, meat, milk, cheese, all kinds of stuff like that, different kinds of meat, even.

The first day, I got in trouble. I was scraping the plate. I saw the man who ran the cottage. There was about 18 of us – 14 or 15 of us at the table. I saw the guy. This man weighed about 240 pounds. He got up out of his chair. He was a stocky- built guy, caucasian guy. He walked around. I didn't dare look at him. I just kept eating, scraping the – next thing I saw was red everywhere. He lifted me up out of that chair with a slap. There was blood everywhere. He said, "If you wanted something else to eat, why didn't you just ask for it?" He sent me up to my room, locked me back in the room. We had these little kimonos on. They sent the ice cream bar up later. That was my snack for the evening.

That whole six weeks I was there taught me a lot about life. I'll never forget. Every day we fought. Somebody was going to make you fight him. So I got used to it. After a while, you didn't feel it anymore. You didn't care whether you fought. So you made sure you got the first lick in. That's the last thing they expected from a little guy. So when a guy started on me, "I told you not to turn the channel on the television. Now I'm turning the channel." Then I went up there and turned it back to channel 5 or whatever. He came on, pop. Start to rumble like crazy. You couldn't feel it, the fight.

If you didn't – if you weren't tough, you were in some serious trouble in jail. That's all we did every day, was fight. Then the man would come down. He said, "Why do you fight so much?" He said, "Who's ready to fight me?" He took you in the room, and he

would beat you up style, and his wife be sitting there knitting in a rocking chair. "Now John, don't hurt that little boy." I'm only 14. I turned 15 in jail – in the reform school. On my birthday it was the only day he didn't get tough on me. "Yeah, today's your birthday, turning 15. Are we going to have any trouble out of you today?" I said, "No, Mr. Hartman" – that was his name, Mr. Hartman – "No, Mr. Hartman. You ain't going to have no trouble out of me."

When I got out of there, I got into – I got a fight the first day. After that, my cousin and I started a singing group. It changed my whole life. I learned everything you could know about doo-wop groups. Today I'm an authority on doo-wop groups, because of the next couple years of my life. We became the top doo-wop group in the Tri-State area,0 Pittsburgh – I mean Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia – I mean, West Virginia. That was a great experience, because I had to learn how to emulate all these great singers.

After that the guitar started getting very, very popular. There problem was, there weren't enough guitar players in Pittsburgh. So they started asking me to play guitar with them. I said, "Man, I'm a singer." I said, "I play a little guitar, but I'm not a guitar player. I'm a singer." They said, "You play good enough." So I had to learn some songs. I had to learn – the top instrumental of all time at that time, or one of the tops – maybe the tops at the time was *Honky Tonk*, Bill Doggett's group. So I learned to play every lick in it, all the guitar licks. I found out later that was Billy Butler who played guitar, a master musician. Then I learned how to play a few other instrumentals: *Walk, Don't Run,* by the Ventures, and *Rumble*. Do you remember that song?

Now I'm going to an all-white school, 1400 students. There's 30 blacks in the school.

Brown: You had your family – your mother and your cousins are still living at the old hotel?

Benson: You mean at that time?

Brown: Yeah, through high school. Let's back up, because now you say you're 15 years old. This would make it about 1958. So if you could discuss that, your living situation and how you get to an all-white school. And also if you could talk about who were some of the other vocalists in your – the Altairs, some of the folks you were working with . . .

Benson: Um-hmm.

Brown: . . . and what your repertoire was.

Benson: Great. I'm finished with the Letche Elementary School. I'm in high school. That's when I got in all the trouble with the gangs and so forth. I'm 15. I miss a semester. But remember, I was always a year ahead of everybody anyway. I miss a semester in school. I came back. Started going to school. The kids, because I was one of the few guitar players in school, they started asking me to play behind them. They knew I had a singing group and I was playing with a singing group. So they called me for things in school. The difference is, you got a white constituency there, and their song choices are much different than what I was into. So I started learning all these little crazy tunes. [Benson imitates a heavy guitar vibrato] *Rumble* and *Walk, Don't Run.* They considered those miracles, because they couldn't play them. But I could hear anything, and I learned all these crazy songs.

Whenever I got into trouble in school – because there was a lot of that too – I made a lot of friends. First I made enemies, and then I turned them into friends. The thing that never – I could never figure out is, I'd be in a fight. Didn't win them all. Some of them I won. But I was always waiting on the white guys to jump me up and beat me up, because I'm fighting a white boy, and they're all white, and I'm black. I think they would all stomp me. But they never did. And every fight, they would always say, "All right, now shake hands." "Shake hands? I won't shake hands with nobody, man." "Shake hands, man." We would always do that, shake hands. I said, man. That showed me a different way of thinking. That's these pictures I've got, these guys. I'm shaking hands with them. I met them later, and they said, "George, you remember that fight we had?" I said, "I don't remember that." I said, "But you're my friend, and you will always be. A great part of my history is spent with you." I said, "I know we had problems, but you're my friend," these same guys I used to rumble with. Conley Vocational High School. I think it's the difference between people like myself; Jimi Hendrix, who had the same experience; Prince, same experience; and a few others. So I begin to see how people see us, how they view us. First when they told me what they thought about me, I said, "What? Is that what you think about me? Man, you got to be kidding. Here, take this." [Benson makes a punching sound.]

Brown: They go looking for your tail and all that stuff?

Benson: The hurting part was, I could outrun anybody, out-swim anybody. And I had a friend who was better than me. He was black also. He was crazy, though. He'd do 200 pushups like it wasn't nothing, like nothing. Nobody could even get close to him. He was built like Superman. He was my same size, but he had – muscular. His name was Poopado, we called him. His real name was Sylvester Harring, but his father called him Poopado. So the whole – that was his nickname in the street. He would always pick fights with somebody. "Hey man, who are you talking to like that?" "Man, I don't" – Poopado. They said, "I don't care who you" – [punching sound] Poopado. He said, "Georgie, kick

his behind." "You picked the fight with him. You kick his behind. I don't want to fight nobody."

But we grew up. We gained the respect of our friends around us. We were all known as the littlest guys, but so-called toughies.

Brown: So you ended up at this vocational school after you got out of reform school, but you're still living in the same neighborhood. So . . .

Benson: I was actually going to that school during the time I got into that trouble. I was always in trouble, first of all. But after that, things calmed down.

I lived – at first I lived right across the street, because remember I told you my two schools were right next to each other? Then they came through. They were going to build an arena, which they had been talking about for 20 years. We figured, ah, they're never going to build this arena. The first thing they did was kick everybody out. They bought all our houses for peanuts. The city condemned them all. That made them – the value died. Nothing had value anymore, when they condemned them. I think we got $150 for a whole hotel, something like that.

We moved into the new projects that were built like a quarter-mile away. We were glad to get new buildings, new rooms. It was like moving to heaven by – for us. I watched them tear down my neighborhood. I got the photos there, and along with it all of the memories.

I was still going to Conley Vocational High School. I had to walk now from my house in the projects across town every morning. The big question now, because I was working with a singing group and we worked on weekends, Monday I'd be tired out. Although I had B-pluses and A's all through school, my teacher – my art teacher said, "George" – she said, "Why are you always sleeping in class?" Because when I finished – I finished early, because I did my work. I said, "I worked last night. I'm in a singing group." I said, "I have to make money to help support my folks." He said, "No, you have to make up your mind whether you want to go to school or play music." I said, "Oh man, that ain't no contest. I'm out of here." I had already taken the graduation pictures and everything. They were making up the books. I was in it. So everybody assumed I had graduated with them until 10 or 15 years later, when the guy said, "George, remember when we graduated from high school?" I said, "You graduated. I didn't." I'm talking to the vice principal of the school and one of my best friends in class. They said, "What?," but they didn't say nothing to me. Then one day they tricked me. They said, "George, let's go back up to Conley and have some lunch back up in the lunch room, just for old-times sake." I said yeah.

When I went up to the school that day to have lunch – I was in town playing a gig – I got there. People were everywhere. I got up to that floor in the elevator, hundreds of people, and the press [Benson makes a cheering sound] and everything. I said, "What is this?" They said, "George, we're going to give you your diploma. You forgot to pick up your diploma when you left." That was the one thing my mother hated, that I had never got that diploma. They gave me the diploma in front of my mother and my stepfather. They were there. I said, "Mom, I hope you're happy now." She wanted me to be a doctor. But I finally got that diploma to her. That was one of the greatest days of my life.

All the teachers except one – the one teacher who ran me out of class – first of all, he was a very nice guy, and he was a fantastic art – he taught me art very well. The biggest – I hope they still got it somewhere – the biggest day was when he – he would always have someone stand in front of the class, and we would do a quick sketch of that person. He would judge you on that. One day he said, "The subject today is me." This man had a gigantic schnozzle, bumps all over his face. A kindly fellow, though. He was very kind. He was a smoker. He went out of the class every ten minutes. He came back, and the whole class was lit up with smoke juice. He wasn't allowed to smoke in the class.

Anyway, he did that thing. He stood in front of the class, stood for about ten minutes or so. Then he came around and he judged you, real quick. He went table to table. When he got to mine, he looked at me, and I looked up. ("What? You got a big schnozzle. I can't do nothing about that. I drew what I saw.") I'm thinking. This is what I'm thinking. I'm thinking he's going to give me an E. I know it. He said, "A plus." First he laughed. He said, "Look kids," he held it up, everybody laughed like crazy, and then he gave me an A-plus.

Then we had that debacle about me sleeping in class, and I left. I should not have, but I left the class. He was the only one that was not there to see that celebration when they gave me my diploma. All the rest of the teachers, after many years, they were all there, teachers I had been seeing on a daily basis for – let me see. I went there when I was – from the eighth grade to the twelfth. Four years.

Brown: When did you return for this?

Benson: Hmmm. I imagine it had to be – let me see. No, I'll tell you when it was. I left in 1961? '60, I think. And I came back in – I think that was 1978. So that's 18 years later, isn't it? Man, hard to believe. It went by fast.

That got me through an era. Now the thing – the transition happened when I started working in nightclubs around Pittsburgh. Organ trios had started to get popular because

of Jimmy Smith and Johnny Smith and a few others, Wild Bill Davis and such. I was one of the few guys that played guitar. So they were all hitting on me. I ended up working in a group, the Bob Storey trio and then later the Bob Storey quartet. I kept hearing something I never heard before. We had a Lester Young aficionado in the band. He was an older guy. He kept playing all these little Lester Young sounds, the stuff you hear behind Billie Holiday today, on her recordings. I talked to him. I said, "What kind of music is that you're playing. I like it." He invited me to his house. I remember he had a lot of children. He said, "Yeah man, I'm into" – they had a nickname, Pres. That's what they called Lester Young – "I'm into Pres."

He left the band – as a matter of fact, he passed away – and I left Bob Storey's band to form my own group. I had a young saxophone player. His name was Larry Smith, and he was like the other guy, the older man, only Larry was my age. We were both 17 years old. He was playing all this weird stuff, whole lot of notes, good colors, but a lot of notes. We're playing r-and-b strictly. Somehow it worked. I don't know how.

I had to drive him home one day. He lived in – what's the town Henry Mancini's from?

Kimery: Altoona.

Benson: No.

Kimery: Aliquippa.

Benson: Aliquippa, yeah. I knew it was an A. So Larry Smith was from Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, only about five miles out from The Point. He said, "George, it's late. You're going to have a cup of coffee before you drive that home." So I went in his house, and he put on a record, Charlie Parker with strings. *Just Friends* came on. I said, "What is that, man? What am I listening to?" He said, "That's Charlie Parker." I said, "Who the heck is Charlie Parker?" I said, "Who's that?" "You don't know who Charlie Parker is?" He said, "Sit here and listen to this." He played that whole album for me. I was convinced now that the guitar could speak like the voice. It could tell a real stories. I said, man, I want to play like that. That's what my father had been telling me, my natural father. He said, "What's all that 'We want Cantor' stuff you're playing?" I said, "What do you mean by 'We want Cantor'?" What's Cantor's first name?

Kimery: Eddie.

Benson: Eddie Cantor was a Broadway superstar. Sometime he would take too long to get on the bandstand, and they would, "We want Cantor," chant "want Cantor." So that became known as the 'We want Cantor' chant, or a lot of r-and-b songs had that as their –

underneath their lyrics. [Benson sings a I-vi-ii-V melody:] “Oh Sherry” – “We want Cantor” – “You know how I love you” – “We want” – “Man, what do you keep playing those ‘We want Cantor’ changes for?” I said, “Well, that’s the way the song goes. I mean, how should I play it? That’s the way it’s written.” He said, “You can play anything. You can play something different from that.” I said, “Like what?” He said, “Listen to Charlie Parker.” I said, “That ain’t telling me nothing.” He said, “Play chromatics.” I said, “Chromatics? What the heck is chromatics?” [Benson hums an ascending chromatic line.] I said, “No, that ain’t working. That won’t work.”

We argued about that a lot, until I started going to jam sessions. They had a guy in the neighborhood. His name was Carrie Evans. His real name was Chad Evans, but we all called him Carrie. Another guy that had a lot of children, a house full of babies. But on Saturdays he would allow us to come to his house. We’d drink cheap wine or beer. We’re all kids. We ain’t supposed to be drinking nothing, but we’re drinking the cheap wine and beer, and he would play all the latest records. There was a new guy out, Wes Montgomery. There was a new guy out, Grant Green. Kenny Burrell was known to be playing with Jimmy Smith’s records, and he was an expert. So we played – he knew how to get the licks, because he had the chops. “Now it’s played like this. Look at my fingers, man. Yeah. Now this chord is shaped like this. Now put your finger over here.” He was teaching us things that we didn’t know, we couldn’t get anywhere else. I learned a lot.

The guy he introduced me to that was unbelievable was a country kid, Hank Garland. The only way he bought that record – he didn’t know who Hank Garland was, but he saw a record label with a guy in a car, and he had lots of guitars sticking out of the back of the car. He bought it based on that. “Well, maybe he’s good.” We put that record on. I said, ooo, that’s it. That’s the way I want to play guitar, with that kind of fire, that sound. I haven’t heard that since Charlie Christian, because he would light a song up.

Hank Garland, whom I met later. He became one of my big mentors. From that point on, I started going to jam sessions, which everybody in Pittsburgh hated, because I was known as the singer. Whenever women saw me on the bandstand, they said, “Georgie, sing something. Stop playing that guitar and sing something.” So the guys in – they’d start grumbling, the keyboard, the piano player. “That’s why I hate him when he comes in here. I hate that kid when he comes in here.” So they didn’t like it.

There’s a bass player who is a very good friend of yours who was there during that time. He’s an expert. One of the world’s greatest graphic artists. You know who I’m talking about. He didn’t like that Little Georgie Benson.

But there was one guy who let me come to his house. He had jam sessions on Saturdays. First we used to stand outside. Then when I started growing a little more as a guitar

player, “Come on in and play something.” So he let me play. I’d scuffle through some changes. I could play the blues. Anybody could play the blues. So I began to learn a little more and more. Then when I formed my own group, I got a chance to experiment, because nobody could tell me what to play and when to play it.

One year I had bad fortune. I had never heard of anti-freeze before. I had a car. I didn’t know what anti-freeze was. We had a bad, below zero day, and my father said to me – my stepfather – he said – remember, this was a fixit man. He could take anything. He was a carpenter, electrician, plumber, makes guitars. He made my first electric guitar, which I forgot to tell you about. He said, “Did you put any anti-freeze in the car last night?” I said, “What’s that?” He said, “I’ll tell you in a minute.” He looked down – the freeze plugs. He said, “You might be safe. The freeze plugs popped,” because that’s what they were put on there. They were designed so that if you get ice in the engine, they would pop. He said, “The freeze plugs have popped. You might have got away with it.” Then he opened up the hood, and there was a crack right down the middle of that engine. And do you know, he fixed it. What do they call that iron that’s not flexible? They don’t – yeah, it’s iron. They had just come out with this new stuff called epoxy. That kept some of the compression in. Couldn’t go fast. 30 miles an hour was the top speed now, and you had to put water in it a lot, because the water was leaking out through the cracks. But he made it work.

But then the car went all the way down, and I had to leave town for the first time. You remember that bad experience I had in New York as a kid. Everyone who came through Pittsburgh, as great as they were, none of them seemed to have any money. I paid attention to that. They all came through. On the first day of any gig I went to to see these guys, they was begging the club owner for a draw on the salary. They all were raggedy. They’d come in very slouchy. So I didn’t like the idea of going out on the road. I never wanted to go.

But this year, I got an offer to go. I was 19 years old. So I went on the road with – I have to think about it – oh, Willie Love was his name. Willie Love was a great saxophonist. He came along with Stanley Turrentine. They were taught by the same guy. He was one of Pittsburgh’s top saxophonists. He was working at a gig in Toronto, Canada – no, sorry. What’s the one in Quebec?

Brown: Montreal.

Benson: Montreal, and also the town where the atomic secret was stolen. That’s also in Quebec province, I think. Ottawa. Is that a different province? Ottawa, Canada, is where the atom bomb was passed to the Russians – the secrets to the atom bomb was passed to

the Russians. We played there, and we played in Montreal, two of the meanest gigs of my life.

Brown: Was it the wintertime?

Benson: It was the middle of the winter, but that wasn't the problem. It was volatile. They had gangsters up there who used to charge ten percent to protect you, so to speak, while you were there. "Yeah, for 10%, nobody going to mess with you while you're here." So I guess Willie Love, being a very docile guy, he just paid it. Most groups did. We had one nut, one guy. He said, "Protect me? From what?" He said, "Well, it's just a protection. It's no big deal. It's only 10%." He said – he put his gun on the table. He said, "Protect me from what, man?" He had put his pistol on the table. The guy said, "I guess we better get the heck out of here. This guy is" – "We're going to have to kill him," in other words. That's the only guy they didn't mess with. When he came to town, they didn't get no percentage from him. I remember that very well, because that's what made me remember the club.

My son got sick when I was up there. He was going to die in the hospital. He had spinal meningitis. The doctor – I called the hospital. He said, "George, listen." He said, "We have a new drug we want to try. We think it'll work." I said, "Why don't you try it?" He said, "There's nobody to sign." I said, "Wait a minute." He said, "Nobody's been here, George." He said, "And if you come in" – he said, "By morning, he won't be here.

I called the airport. They said, "We have nothing going to Pittsburgh from here" – Montreal. I said, "Wait a minute, man." This is 1961 – '62 or '3 – '63. "This is 1963. Fly me to England, but they got to have some way to get me to" – he says, "If that's the case, yeah, we can fly you to New York and then Pittsburgh." It took all the money I had to pay for that trip, but I got there in time, signed, and saved his life. He lived for another 30-something years. I went looking for my wife. That was not a good day.

So that got me in trouble. Jack McDuff saved my life, along with a guy whose name was – this is very instrumental to where I am in history today – Don Gardner. Used to be a drummer with Jimmy Smith, but he had a group called Don Gardner and Dee Dee Ford. He had some hit records out – medium hits. I happened to go down – this was my last night before my hearing was coming up in front of the judge over the rumble I had with my wife. We'd only been married 11 months.

I was hanging out that night. I went down to the club. There was hardly anybody in there. I heard Don Gardner, because I'd always liked his group. I didn't have a dime in my pocket. Looking forward to the next day when I knew I was going to go – be sent to the workhouse – prison. He said, "Jack McDuff is trying out guitar players. He's looking for

a guitar player." I said, "Man, I can't play that good. I can't play that well," because his guitar player was a masterful musician, and I had heard him before. I said, "No, I'm not in that" – he said, "Yes you can, man. You can make – you can play that gig." I said, "Well, it don't mean nothing to me, because I ain't got no money to get out. He's on the other side of town."

What I didn't know, my father had been listening to us talk. He was in the club too. He ran out in the street and hustled up 50 cents. Came back, and he said – he was huffing. He was huffing and puffing – "Here, now. Now you can go on the other side of town and go and sit in with Jack McDuff." I said, "Come on, Dad. Come with me." Streetcar. We're going by streetcar. It cost 25 cents. I said, "Yeah, come on, Dad. You can come with me." He said, "No, you're going to need 25 cents to get back." So he didn't go. I went out there.

I walked in at the last part of his show, and the women started screaming, "Oh, Little Georgie Benson's in the house. Georgie Benson's in the house." Jack said, "I don't know who the heck this Georgie Benson is, but if you want to come up, sit in, play something with us." So I went up on stage, and I played one song. That's all they had time for.

When I got off, he said, "You sound like – I like what you do." He said, "It's a shame you came on the last night." He said, "But could you bring your guitar down to the hotel tomorrow?" I said, "Where are you staying?" Right down the street from where I was living in downtown Pittsburgh. I said, "Yeah, I'll be there tomorrow."

I'll never forget. I knocked on his door. He came in. He had his robe on, smoking his reefer. I didn't know nothing about drugs and stuff. He said, "All right, man." He had a Horner, a little thing that you usually play by mouth. But now they had a new thing. You plug it in. It had a little air blower that blowed through it, and it worked like a keyboard. He had that sitting on his arm. "Take your guitar and play something." I think I had my guitar in a shopping bag. I had no case.

He started playing. I started playing. The only records I heard with organs was Thornel Schwartz. Remember this guy I had been sitting in with on Saturdays taught me how to do that. So I'm playing [Benson sings a rhythmic phrase], just what he loved. He said, "Hold it a minute. Wait a minute." He got on the phone and called his manager in New York. He said, "I found this bad little young fellow. He's only" – he said, "How old are you now?" I said, "19" "– he's only 19 years old. Man, this kid is bad." He said, "I'm bringing him to New York." I said, "What? Hold it." I said, "Mr. McDuff, hold it." He said, "What?" I said, "I'm going to jail today." He said, "What?" He said, "Will money help you?" I told him the story. I said, "I really don't know."

He gave me $35. He said, “I hope this will help.” So I went to court. My wife at the time knew I didn’t have a dime, because she knew I spent all my money getting back in to save my boy’s life, and it did that. But this judge did not play that stuff. No jumping on no women. I didn’t hurt her, but I roughed her up pretty good. The judge said – I told him the story. I said, “Judge” – I told him what happened. I said, “First of all, Judge, I have an opportunity to leave town. I just got offered a job to play with a traveling band, and you won’t see me no more after today.” I said, “He’s leaving. He’s taking me with him today if I can get past this.”

The judge said – he looked at my wife. He said, “I don’t see no damage on you.” He said, “Why don’t you just let him pay the cost of the court? He said he’s leaving town.” She knew I didn’t have any money. So she said, “If he can pay the cost of the court, I’ll sign the paper.” I said – he said, “Can you pay the cost of the court, son?” I said, “How much is it, Judge?” He said, “$27.” I said – took out that 27. Now, my wife is furious, because she thought she had gotten me in prison. She storms out. He said, “Now, don’t go downstairs and jump on her, because, if you do, you’re going to prison. I’m telling you right now.” I said, “When I said, I’m out of here, I mean, I’m out of here. I’m gone.”

The incredible thing is that I’m going to go – jump forward in history. That night, I left with Jack McDuff, and we played at a town that wasn’t far from Pittsburgh. He fired me the same night. But think about this. I’m 19 years old. I’m supposed to be in prison, but I’m not, because Jack had saved me from prison. So I’m not unhappy about nothing. I had already told him, “I’m not no jazz guitar player. I don’t play jazz music, because I can’t,” and he started playing jazz tunes on the organ. I was stuck. I didn’t know where to go with these changes. He said, “I don’t think you’re going to be able to make it with this group.” He said, “But you know what? I got a group – when we get to New York, I got a gig for you. I think it’ll be a great gig for you.” I said, “That’s good enough for me.” I’m out of jail. I’m happy I’m going to New York.

He was thinking about Willis Jackson’s band. But Willis had just hired this genius, Pat Martino, who was younger than me and played twice as much guitar. But by the time I got to New York, two or three weeks later, I had been paying attention to his book. His manager heard the band. He said, “Jack, did I hear you say you were going to fire this kid?” Jack said, “Yeah. Why?” He said, “You can’t fire this kid.” He said, “What do you mean, I can’t fire him?” He said, “Man, you know how much better your band sounds now than it did when you left here?” He said, “I suggest we go in the studio and make a record with him,” and we did. The record became a small hit, and I did six or seven more after that, with Jack.

Brown: Okay, let’s – whew.

Benson: I didn't mean to go through all that.

Brown: No, no, no, but I just wanted to come back and pick up a few things. Now that you have left Pittsburgh, I want to come back and look at some of the things that were happening in Pittsburgh. I want to go all the way back to what we talked about off mic, when we mentioned when you were seven years old in the second grade and you were out there on the street corner playing ukulele, singing, and Eddie Jefferson . . .

Benson: Oh yeah.

Brown: You want to tell that – talk about that experience?

Benson: I used to go down to the playground. It was right near that bar, the Spokane Bar, where I was trying to sell papers and nobody would listen. The jukebox was loud. On that same street, a block down, was a playground. It was brand new. I was on my way back from there, and I ran into two guys. One of them I knew. They were men, and I was just a kid. One of them I knew, because he was the director at the center that I used to play games at. I used to shoot pool there, and basketball and all that stuff was played there. I was too small for that then – and ping pong and stuff. He said, "There he is. There's that kid right there." He said, "Georgie, here's a quarter. Sing that song, *I Got the Blues.*" I started [Benson sings], "I got the blues. I don't know how to lose it. I got the blues." I used to sing it twice as fast as I do now. All of a sudden they started laughing. I wonder what they're laughing at? But I kept singing, "I got the blues." "Haw, haw," and they fell on the ground and started rolling around. "Haw, man, haw." I'm thinking, what is wrong with these guys? I knew the name of the one guy's name was Nesbitt, Mr. Nesbitt.

21 years later – because I hadn't seen Eddie Jefferson in all them years, and I didn't know that I had been talking to Eddie Jefferson, that he was the guy who actually recorded the song. That's one of the songs I sang in the nightclub. He said – oh, I met him in – he said, "Georgie, you won't remember this." He said, "But when you were a little kid, I came to you on the street corner . . ." I stopped him. I said, "Eddie, don't tell me that was you." He said, "You don't remember that." I said, "There was two of you." He said, "You're right." I said, "His name was Nesbitt." He said, "You remember that!" I said, "Like yesterday." I just said, "You just helped me over a hump. I was wondering why you guys were laughing so hard." I said, "Now I know why you were laughing." We had a ball talking about that. But I can tell you now, he was the baddest bebop singer of all time. Nobody could touch him. It was built in. It's like he was just born to do that.

One day I tried to compete with him. No contest. I had to get up off of him, because he cut me into 85 different pieces. I'm glad I got a chance to perform with him, though. It

was not too long after that he lost his life in Detroit. But it was in Detroit where I sat in with him, same club.

Brown: You mentioned your father – your stepfather making you a guitar.

Benson: Oh yeah. When I was with the singing group, we had to hire a guitar player, because I couldn't sing and play at the same time, in those days. You know, jump up and down, like singing groups do, and dance and all that. So we hired this guitar player. The problem was, I had to show him everything. We'd be playing a song, and he'd play the wrong changes. I said, "Let me show you here. It goes like this." Bling. Two minutes later, "Give me that back, man. The chord looks like this." Bloom. And the band – the guys in the group – the singing group, said, "George, why don't you just play the guitar?" I said, "I can't do all that and sing." They said, "Yes, you can. It's better than going through this." So I learned how to play the bass line, boom-chick-a, boom-chick-a, rhythm, boom-chick-a, boom-chick-a, blank, blank, boom-chick-a, blank, the whole thing, and I had to sing and dance at the same time, do steps with the group.

My father – we needed a guitar. I didn't have a guitar. I'm 15 years old. I kept crying about that. "Ma, I got to have a guitar. I need a guitar." I saw this one in that pawn shop right next door to Spokane's, same place, right next door to that bar. He said, "Take me down there and show it to me." It cost – what was the – what were they asking for? $55. They wanted $55 for this electric guitar. It was a cute little, beautifully constructed thing. Not well constructed, but I loved the looks of it. It was yellow.

So I took him down. You know how they had the store fronts in those days? You'd go in this little cave in, and then they had the two windows. The other side was the same way, and the entrance was right between. So he went around. He could see the front and the side. He said, "I can make that."

First thing we did was, we got some paper. I went home because, I told you, I studied commercial art. So I drew the guitar on this piece of paper, the one I wanted, the shape I wanted. He cut it out with a coping – he traced it onto my mother's hope chest, which was an oak wood top to a place where she kept blankets and things. It took a whole day, about 20 saw blades, to cut it, because it kept breaking with this oak wood. Finally got the shape. Then he used this new stuff called Formica. It was brand new then. He surfaced it with the Formica. We bought $23 worth of parts, and it worked. Plugged it in. I had my first guitar.

I remember taking it to the gig. The first day I took it on a gig in a shopping bag. I went to – we were doing a record hop. When we got there, the white disk jockey – they were playing, "Let's go to the dance" or something like that. Then he scratched the record

taking it off. “Hey kids.” The kids said, “What’s going on here?” He said, “I want you to see this,” because he asked me what it was I had in that bag, and I showed him this guitar. He said, “This is amazing.” So he took the record off, scratched it, and then he took – he said, “I just want you to see what this kid’s father made for him.” They all applauded, the whole thing, and then we played. I went up with the singing group, and we played. A very crude instrument, but it worked.

Brown: Frets and everything.

Benson: Then I made my own, a year later. I designed one that was a little better made than that one, because I was in a vocational school. So I had friends in all these different classes. I said, “Cut this out for me, with a hole.” Band saw. I said, “Sand it down good for me now. Come on.” I said, “Yeah, now put some black lacquer on it.” My classmates in commercial art thought I was crazy. Every day I’d come in with a different part to the guitar, or I’d have those cats deliver me something different. I said, “Why don’t you put some holes in up here for the tuning pegs?” Then I brought my fingerboard in, and I brought the strings. I brought the wire and an amplifier, and the tailpiece and the bridge. I put it all together in class, because I already had – they had stuck the fingerboard on for me already. That was already done. The whole class gathered around. I put it all together and tuned the strings up. Then I turned the amplifier on. Bling. The whole class went crazy. “It plays, man.” They all went crazy, and they applauded. “Yeah, man. That’s bad stuff. Congratulations.” Nobody believed it would work. But they didn’t know I had done it before, my stepfather had made – so yeah. That was the beginning of that – that was the end of that, rather.

Brown: You talked about working with your own group. There are several accounts. One says that you were already being a bandleader, forming r-and-b groups at 17. Is this the Altairs?

Benson: The Altairs was my singing group.

Brown: Did you have any other groups? And if so, who were some of the members in that?

Benson: The Altairs consisted of my cousin Nathaniel Benson; Richard Harris, whose father taught Ray Brown how to play bass. He taught Paul Chambers, he taught Stanley Turrentine, he taught Art Blakey, when they were kids around Pittsburgh, taught them how to be musicians. “You guys ain’t going to be no musicians. You ain’t going to be nothing. I can play. I can play better than you.” He said, “You can’t read no music.” So he took them all in, taught them how to read music. All of them. Took them off the streets. It was a boys club.

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So I'm with his son now. That was Mr. Raymond Harris, and his son was Richard Harris, his youngest son. His mother became my manager. Richard Harris's mother became my manager. We had a cat named Ralph. I can't think of his last name. Ralph. And then we had William Herndon. You've never seen a crew – there are no two people in the world alike. I know that. But these guys, we were unbelievable, that we could come together, being from so different a – and yet, because we all grew up in the ghetto, we had something in common. We knew what rough was. But we went from nothing – we were laughed off the stage on our first appearance – to becoming the top group in the area. We had more fans than anybody.

We made that one record when I was about 16 years old, I guess. It was called – *Groovy Time* was the name of the record. "We're going to have a groovy time." That was supposed to be a slick saying. That was the only record that we ever made. But we were very, very popular in the area, until we just grew out of it. The guitar got popular, drew me away from the group. They offered me more money. I could see that the group wasn't going to go anywhere. We were going to be doing that for the next 10 years, and that didn't appeal to me. So I got out and formed my own band, called the All Stars.

The All Stars had Larry Smith. He's the one I told you about. And they had a friend of mine who, I gave him a job. My father turned his guitar into a bass guitar. He converted it, so I could give him a job working for me as a bass player. The problem was, he went out and robbed a bank. So now we became known as Little George Benson and his Bank Robbers. That's the truth. George Benson and his Bank Robbers.

That was quite a band, like I said, until the Jack McDuff syndrome, that thing happened with Jack McDuff.

Brown: I know that that's a big benchmark in your life. I want to talk about – we talked a little bit off mic about Stanley Banks. Stanley, through Ken Kimery, said to ask you about singing *Mona Lisa*, playing ukulele and singing *Mona Lisa.*

Benson: Oh yeah, yeah. Somebody recorded – I think it was my manager – or agent, Eugene Landy. I was in his office one day. He had an office, downtown Pittsburgh. He had a couple of artists. He had a – it was another older singer. He sang a lot like – the only person I can compare him to today would be Johnny Mathis, that kind of singer. He came in. He was there the same time I was in Landy's office. I'm a young kid then.

No, no. That happened earlier, because I'm playing ukulele and not guitar. Oh, the only place it could have happened was when they offered me to go to a music school in Pittsburgh. Ducky Kemp, who was a member of the local union there in Pittsburgh, Local

47 or something like that. What is that? 47, yeah. They had two unions in those days. They had 60-47 [60-471], and then something-78. I forget the name of the other one.

Brown: Were they segregated?

Benson: Yeah, in those days. They joined up later, but in those days they were segregated.

They gave me a scholarship. At first they were going to teach me how to read music and so forth and so on. I remember being – and they had a little makeshift recording studio. That's how I ended up doing it. It was on Centre Avenue. I went up to this little studio, right next to a flower shop – or perpendicular to a flower shop. They put me in the studio. That's how I ended up doing that *Mona Lisa.*

Brown: Does that side still exist? Does anybody have that?

Benson: Yeah. We used it at the beginning of our Nat Cole show. It is a great introduction. What always confuses me is that people don't see the connection at first, because I was saying – I open the show by saying, "There's something I want you to hear." I said, "In case you want to know how long I've been in love with Nat Cole" – and that should be the cue right there. I said, "All right. Put that on." It would start playing. [Benson sings briefly in a very high voice] "Mona Lisa." Way up. And the guitar – the ukulele goes plink, plink, plink, plink. "The mystic smile." Plink, plink, plink, plink, plink, plink. I say – I have to go – before they respond, I have to go, "Yep. That was Little Georgie Benson at 7 years old, singing *Mona Lisa.*" Then they go, "What!?" And then they go crazy. So it's a nice gimmick that we use today to let people know how long we've respected Nat's music

Brown: And then that first recording that you did when you went to New York in 1954 – I'm showing – I'm looking at Lord's discography. They only show two titles. You always mention four, and other records mention four. Do those sides still exist? The ones they mention are *It Shoulda Been Me* and *She Makes Me Mad.* But you mentioned four titles.

Benson: There was – on the other side it was *Shout, Holler and Scream* and *A Little Boy's Dream.* [Benson sings the first phrase of a blues:] "Oh little girl, you're just a little boy's dream." That's all I can remember. Yeah, we did four sides, but only two of them came out, you know, the one record.

Brown: Okay. Now you've already left Pittsburgh with Jack McDuff. You're in New York now. Did you relocate to New – did you actually move to New York? Did you find a place in New York?

Benson: Remember my cousin with the baseball cap?

Brown: Oh yeah.

Benson: He lived in New York now, and he asked me to come and stay with him. I was reluctant to do it. I said, "Man, you'll be crowded out in there." He said, "No, George. Come on. Move in here." I volunteered to give him money. "I don't want any money from you." I said, "Nope. I'm going to contribute to your rent."

Whenever we came back to New York – which wasn't that often, because Jack lived on the road. We were all over the place, all the time. For the next two-and-a-half years I was with Jack, and that was my base, at my cousin's house in New York, when I came back, whether we played the New York area – if we played in Newark, New Jersey, or anywhere in the New York area, we'd stay in New York itself.

Brown: You said that when Jack McDuff – when you went there, you made a record. So that would have been your first record for . . .

Benson: That was my first album appearance. It was called *Live at the Front Room.* The Front Room was a club in Newark, New Jersey. We always had big responses there. So they decided to do an album. They invited everybody from the Front Room over. Lots of people that were regulars at the Front Room, they invited them to the studio. So we did the same things we would do at that club live, and that's why we had that response. That kept us – the groove alive, made it sound more real. It was a hit.

There was a song he wrote called *Rock Candy.* The reason why they named it *Rock Candy* was, when I first went to Jack's apartment – he lived on Lenox Avenue in an apartment building – his wife used to put all this candy on the table, a dish. By the time she went in the back and came out, the candy was gone. I done ate it all up. She said, "Now what happened to the candy I just put out there?" He ate it up. So she put another one. So he named his new song he was writing, *Rock Candy.*

Brown: I'm showing – I'm looking at the Lord discography. They're actually showing a 1962 recording of the George Benson quintet, one title, *Godchild,* Ronnie Cuber, Lonnie Smith, then yourself, Gene Taylor on bass, and Billy Kaye. Is that accurate? Is that actually accurate? It says it's for Cursio.

Benson: No. It would be different sessions.

Brown: This is – it must have been an Italian release.

Benson: Oh yeah. They just pulled that together.

Brown: Okay. So this is inaccurate.

Benson: And the wrong time. Our first records with Columbia were made in late ’65 or early ’66 with John Hammond. Those titles you mentioned were on there. It was – *Clockwise* was one of the songs.

Brown: Okay. So then, your first – as you say, your first LP or album would have been the *Live.*

Benson: That’s the first one where I appeared, album where I appeared on. My first album was also made with Jack McDuff’s quartet, but it was called *The New Boss Guitar*. It wasn’t about me being a boss of the guitar. It was about this new instrument that I had, that it was a boss instrument. It was great big, and a very expensive instrument. So they called it *The New Boss Guitar*, meaning the instrument, not the guy. Wes Montgomery was always the boss of the guitar when he was alive.

Brown: You’re saying that that would have been – chronologically, that was the first album that you did, *The New Boss Guitar of George Benson*?

Benson: Yeah, that’s the first one under my own name.

Brown: Under your name. Okay. But the first album that you recorded was, as you said, the live recording with Brother Jack McDuff, *Live at the Front Room.*

Benson: Yeah, that’s right.

Brown: That’s showing New Jersey, June 5th, 1963. So you were already – you’ve been with Jack. You’re saying that you just got hooked up with him. So the chronology is that you actually hooked up with him in June rather than in – in ’63 as opposed to ’62. Is that correct?

Benson: It was ’63.

Brown: It was ‘’63. Okay, good. We want to make – because most records are showing that you joined in ’62.

Benson: No, I joined him in ’63.

Brown: And the recording was made shortly after you joined the band.

Benson: Um-hmm.

Brown: Okay, great, great. Cleared that up.

Then the next recording they're showing is Brother Jack, *Live at the Jazz Workshop*. The band, which is the band that's been featured all along, Red Holloway on tenor sax and Joe Dukes on drums. Can you tell us a little bit about Joe, because . . .

Benson: Spectacular young fellow. He was a nuisance.

Brown: He was a nuisance.

Benson: He was a nuisance to me, because he stayed on my back all the time about my playing not being up to par, and we fought over women all the time, because he was used to having them all. I said, "But you can't take them all home with you Joe every night." So if he saw me with a girl, he would say, "That's mine you got with you." I said, "Your what? Get out of here." [Benson imitates a woman's voice (indecipherable).]

One time – he started – he would come by my room, bang on my door in the middle of the night, boom boom boom boom, and he'd call me a name, "You nig" – then he'd run down. I said, "I'm going to beat all the black off of you." Man, you're talking about crazy. But when he was on that bandstand, he was the knockout cat of the night. Everybody came from everywhere. No musician would pass up the chance to see Joe Dukes. Count Basie band, the whole band. They were working around the corner from us in Philadelphia, at Pep's. We were working in a little club down in the basement. They all came by. Count Basie himself sat right in front of Joe Dukes, because at the end of the show he would play a roll on the bass drum and play the drums backwards, like thundering and lightning. He used to swing like nobody's business. Yep. He would just swing all night.

Jack had these wonderful arrangements. They weren't perfect, but they were exciting. He always gave me the sophisticated parts that I didn't understand, but I played them perfectly. I mean, it was the best I could. They were exciting.

Red Holloway, he always got on me. He said, "I envy you." He said, "Because it takes me three days to learn these parts, and I read music." He said, "You – in 20 minutes you got your part down," and I'd be putting pressure on Red, because he couldn't get his part together. I said, "He gave me a part." I didn't even know what it was I was playing. I was playing the second harmony to *Four Brothers* [Benson scat sings the melody] like it was

nothing, and Red would be scuffling through that. So he said, “I don’t know how you do it.” He said, “You’re going to be a monster guitar player.” He said, “Don’t pay no attention to what them cats is talking about.”

We had an exciting two-and-a-half years. It was contentious.

Brown: Because?

Benson: He was – and I learned, because Jack put the pressure on me. Jack used to get mad at me on the bandstand. Every now and then he’d grab the microphone and cuss me out on the bandstand. Um-hmm, until one day I threatened to beat everybody up. I couldn’t beat everybody, but I was mad enough to, though. I said, “I tell you what. I want all of you all to come out. We’re going out in the alley. I’m going to beat all of you all. Come on. Come on.” Then they start taking out their switchblades. I said, “I’m 19 years. You mean you can’t beat a 19 – come on in the alley. I don’t care. Bring your switchblade. I’m going to beat all you all.”

Brown: You were truly talking . . .

Benson: Talking stuff. But it was enough. Got them off my back. They finally got off my back.

Brown: Was that because, first, you’re new kid on the block, the newest member of the band, plus you were so young?

Benson: I didn’t know anything. They were trying to catch up with John Coltrane and Miles Davis, and I just wasn’t in that category. I had no idea what they were talking about.

Then I started hearing things. I said, oh, is this what – okay. I can do this. Then I started adding things, my own impression of what they were trying to do. That impressed Jack, because I made him sound good. If you listen to those records, I’m kicking behind Jack. [Benson sings a rhythmic pattern.] Jack loved that stuff.

My solos weren’t good. My solos were mediocre, and he insisted on one thing which I hated. “Play some blues.” I said, “Does every song have to be the blues?” I said, “Why does every song got to be the blues? What happened to all the pretty music?” He said, “George” – he said, “Blues is accepted everywhere in the world. You could be in China and play the blues, and they’ll like it.” I found out later he was right. I said, “I don’t want to play blues all . . .” – he said, “Oscar Peterson plays blues in everything. Everything he

plays is bluesy." I started listening. I said, damn if he ain't right. Excuse my language. He's right.

So I started listening to Jack. Then he would tell me things like – he would say – he said, "George, first of all, you falling into the bag. You get into the groove. Get with it, rhythm. Then you show some technique. Play some hot licks every now and then. Let them know you can play." He said, "And then play some blues. Play some blues." And you know, he was telling me the right thing.

I started paying attention to that. I noticed that when I played the blues, I got a response, right in the middle of the song. [Benson sings a blues lick.] People go, "Yeah, yeah!" So I started playing a lot of them [Benson sings another blues lick.] They go, "Ah, yeah!" Reluctantly so. I wasn't playing like Hank Garland.

The biggest thing I did in Jack's band, the most memorable thing, was by accident. Jack had a song called *Blues 1 & 8*, meaning we'll play one chorus of blues, which is 12 bars, and then 8 bars. Then the last 4 bars, the whole band drops out, boom, and then you have to introduce the next chorus with those 4 bars. There's an open hole for you to do your thing in. We had gone around the song. *Blues 1 & 8* was [Benson sings the melody]. Here's the second chorus [he continues singing]. Pop. Now I've got to fill that hole. [Benson sings a 4-bar-melodic break.] We're back in, right? That's *Blues 1 & 8*. So we had went around a few times. I had got a chance to fill in about three times. Now I couldn't think of nothing to play. Now the hole was coming around to me again. They stopped, boom, and I played this little chicken sound [Benson imitates a chicken clucking], and the audience went to pieces. So for the next year-and-a-half, every place we went, "Play that song with the chicken in it, man."

That's the biggest thing I did with Jack's band. I couldn't believe how people – how one gimmick, one thing different, can make all the difference, because it's mental. I took that stuff in. Everything was important to me. I had to find out, why is this so important? Why is that so big? I analyzed. Me and this cat, we both do the same thing. We analyze what's going on around us, and we pay attention.

Brown: I was going to say – well, two things. One, I just want to make a comment that Monty Alexander is in the room with us on this interview. You may hear him interject every now and then.

Benson: The [?].

Brown: The great Monty Alexander.

Benson: Yeah, that's what he is.

Brown: Jamaica's finest, pianist, composer.

Back to *Blues 1 & 8.* I've seen that that's the first track on the *Live at the Jazz Workshop.*

Benson: That's right.

Brown: So how was that, going out to San Francisco? It was your first trip out to the Coast, right?

Benson: Oh man. Oooo. We're playing at the Jazz Workshop. Just the name, Jazz Workshop, and here's what was significant about that. I'm glad you mentioned it. When I met Montgomery for the first time, Wes Montgomery, he was playing in my hometown at a club right across the street from where I was playing.

[recording interrupted by phone ringing]

Okay. Let's hope we can get through this. When I was playing at this club with the All Stars, we were playing at a club called Mason's Bar and Grill. I'm 17 years old. Right across the street, diagonally, is Pittsburgh's number one jazz club, called Crawford's Grill. I remember walking down the street that day, and I was wondering, who's playing at the Crawford's Grill tonight? I saw this picture of a guy. Looked like – almost like a black cowboy, because he had his guitar strap. I later found out why he strapped his guitar like a cowboy. But it was this guy named Wes Montgomery. I said, wait a minute. I heard that name before, Wes – but the way they described him, I thought he was like Andrés Segovia, because they said he didn't use no pick. I'm thinking, oh, no pick, a classical guy, plays like Andrés Segovia. I didn't know he was African-American, either. But I remembered the name Wes. So I said, I got to go check this guy out. He had just won the New Star award. He was brand new. This was before I started going to those sessions I was telling you about.

His brothers, between breaks, used to come across the street to our little corner bar called Mason's Bar and Grill. They came over because the drinks were cheaper. So they did their drinking at Mason's Bar and Grill. Then they went and they played the set across the street. Well, they came in during the middle of one of my sets. I met Buddy Montgomery. He said, "You know something?" He said, "You ever think about playing jazz?" I said, "No, I could never be no jazz player." He said, "Yes you could. You got the chops."

So now I'm with Jack McDuff's band, about a year-and-a-half after that, maybe, and I'm in San Francisco at the Jazz Workshop. In between sets, he comes up to me. He said, "Where do I know you from?" I said, "I met you in Pittsburgh." He said, "You're that kid that was playing." He said, "I told you you could play jazz." I said, wow, I guess I made it. I'm thinking I'm big time.

But that happened with me and Buddy Montgomery. We remained friends, and his brother and I became very good friends, because Wes Montgomery was such a figure. He was like the law. When he spoke, that was it. So being in his presence was like going to the highest school in the world, the most prestigious school in the world, and I was one of the few guys he would hang out with, because he knew I really loved what he did. I would never criticize him about anything, and I listened to everything he said. He told me some wonderful things. But being in his presence was the big thing, because I got a chance to know how he thought, what he thought about life, and what he thought about other players. He would never criticize anybody in front of anybody else, but he would tell me his honest opinion, and I ended up agreeing with him on a lot of things. But we never mentioned it.

So he became my friend for a few years, the last years of his life. I think he died in '68, and that meeting that I met him was in like '63 – no, before Jack McDuff. I met him in '61. Then in '63 is when I met his brothers, out on the West Coast, and they told me he had met me in Pittsburgh.

Brown: Can you share with us anything that Wes shared with you, about views on life or other comments about other musicians?

Benson: I ain't going into that. I remember asking him to show me something, because every guitar player that I asked to show me something, did. Remember, I'm not a kid anymore. Now, I'm a young man. I ran into Wes. I said, "Mr. Montgomery, could you show me something on the guitar?" He said, "No, I can't show anybody anything." I said, "Really? You can't show me anything?" I said, "Why not?" He said, "I'm too busy learning myself." See, I didn't think that was – I couldn't measure that answer then. Now I know what he was talking about. Too much to learn. You can always still learn. I don't know everything.

That was our first encounter. After that, when he saw me come into a club – oh, he heard me play somewhere. I remember I was playing my brains out. I was falling off of the stool, because I always played on stools in those days. I was cooking. We were playing a way up-tempo song. I opened my eyes, and he was right there, and he's yelling, "What are you doing? What are you doing?" I said, oh. I almost fell off the stool.

Then I used to go see him play. My father – my stepfather – swore that there was no other guitar player alive except Charlie Christian. He was the best of the best, and that was the end of that. Forget it. I said, "Have you ever heard Wes Montgomery play?" "I heard him play. He's all right. He's okay." I said, "You sure you heard Wes Montgomery play?"

One day, I missed my plane, and I had to go 200 miles, from Pittsburgh up to Harrisburg, where Wes was playing. We got there – oh, I was going to be playing the next week. Wes was on his last night. I think it was a Sunday night. So he had to drive me up. My stepfather drove me up to Pittsburgh – I mean, to Harrisburg from Pittsburgh. When we got there, Wes was on the bandstand, tearing that place up. My stepfather, he was getting kind of nervous, and all these people was responding to what he was playing. Then I looked over at him, and he said, "Yeah, he can play. He's a great player."

[recording interrupted by phone ringing]

Brown: When I think about Pittsburgh, I think it has probably one of the greatest legacies as far as producing jazz musicians. I was just wondering, before you left Pittsburgh, were you – what were some of the other groups that were around? Were the Turrentine brothers playing? Or Roger Humphries? Or some of the other folks that might have been contemporaries of yours?

Benson: Turrentine was ahead of me. He had – when Clifford Brown died, with Max Roach . . .

Brown: '56.

Benson: . . . the Turrentine brothers joined Max Roach's band. They were trying to get Tommy Turrentine, who was the great trumpeter. What they got was one of the greatest saxophone players of all time. Tommy didn't stay with the band. Neither one of them stayed with the band. They had big troubles with Max.

But most of the people you have known from Pittsburgh to be real famous had left. I saw some of the last of the Pittsburgh greats when I was coming up. Perry Como, he had left. Henri Mancini had gone off. He was already a superstar, but he was still producing some pretty incredible music. Who else was there? Ahmad Jamal was a superstar at the time. We had a couple more piano players that the world has not heard of, who were just great musicians. I remember that Ahmad Jamal's guitar player – I can't think of his name.

Monty Alexander: Ray Crawford.

Benson: Crawford. That's his name, Ray Crawford. See why he's . . .

Brown: Monty Alexander.

Benson: Let me see who else was left then. Roger Humphries, the drummer, great drummer. We were rivals, in the sense that we were up-and-coming people, people that they didn't know who they thought was the best. "Nah, George Benson is." "Nah, Roger Humphries." We had maybe a couple more young stars. We had a couple of drummers in there. And we had great saxophone players. What's the young Caucasian boy that was blind?

Brown: Eric Kloss.

Benson: Eric Kloss. Then they had another blind one.

Kimery: Plays clarinet too.

Benson: Yeah. They had two great young musicians. I think they both were blind, and both played like nobody's business. I remember Eric Kloss sitting there with Sonny Stitt, would always invite him up, and he always shined. I always thought that him and I would end up playing together, but we never did.

Then they had the crazy drummer that was so incredible. What's his name? In Pittsburgh?

Alexander: Spider.

Benson: Yeah, his name is Spider. Is it Martin?

Alexander: Rondinelli.

Benson: What's the name?

Alexander: Spider.

Benson: His last name.

Alexander: Rondinelli.

Benson: Rondinelli. Spider Rondinelli. I remember he sat in with Rahsaan Roland Kirk one day. Rahsaan tried to get rid of him by playing a tempo so fast nobody could even breathe, much less play. He played it. It was the most incredible thing I've ever seen. He

started playing. "All right, man, *Cherokee.*" [Benson sings the first phrase of the melody at a lightning-fast pace.] And Spider said [Benson imitates drumming]. And there was no letup, because you know Rahsaan played that at that tempo, the whole thing. Didn't lose one bar, and neither did Spider. He was the happiest cat in the world – not that the song was over – that he got a chance to play with Rahsaan. He was sweating like a hog. I have never forgotten. That happened one day 50 years ago, and I still never forgot it.

I asked about him. Somebody said something about him maybe 10 years ago. What's he doing now? Is he still alive? Yeah, I asked about him. Whatever happened to him? I think he's the most incredible cat in Pittsburgh I ever met. Never heard anything like that.

Brown: All the ones that we know associated with Pittsburgh, when they came back, say Art Blakey or any of the others, like you have a picture of Billy Eckstine, and all those folks – when they came back, did you always go out and see these folks, hometown made good?

Benson: We mentioned one guy here who just passed away. He was a great organist. What's the . . .

Alexander: Gene Ludwig.

Benson: Gene Ludwig. We used to call him Eugene Ludwig. People called him Gene Ludwig. He preferred that, Gene Ludwig. And also, Jerry Byrd and his brother Wendell Byrd. Fabulous musicians. He played the first real live jazz guitar that I ever heard, Jerry Byrd, and his brother was a fabulous horn player, a great showman. Jerry ended up working with Gene Ludwig. That was a fabulous trio, one of Pittsburgh's best small groups.

So I did get a chance – I got a nice send-off. Pittsburgh, they lit up the road, because they were making noises all up and down the East Coast. Not on records necessarily. They did make records. They don't sell well, but they made a name for themselves wherever they went. Then I guess they helped introduce me. They said, "We got a guitar player in Pittsburgh, Georgie Benson. You got to check him out." They would always put in a good word.

Then we had another great guitar player. What's his name? "Fats" Ponder, we called him. His name is Jimmy Ponder. So there was a lot of action going on in Pittsburgh. Not like in the old days when you get one guy, like Billy Eckstine, who was so gigantic, it was ridiculous. But I had a – when I told people I was from Pittsburgh, they recognized Pittsburgh's contribution to the world was tremendous. So I felt good, coming from Pittsburgh.

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Brown: Let's go back to the Jazz Workshop. You mentioned how important it was to you. Was this indicative of Jack McDuff? Was he touring a lot?

Benson: Jack worked constantly, and he set the tone for me. I used to work somewhere between 45 and 48 weeks a year. Jack worked about the same, constantly. We didn't make any money, but we worked all the time. I was the only one that had money in my pocket, because I had no vices. Those cats used to borrow money from me, which I charged them 6% interest. They hated me on payday. I said, "Man, where's my $30, Joe?" Joe would whisper under his breath, "You jive – here's your money." "Listen, man, don't play with my money. Give me my money." We had that kind of lingo.

Then, there's the biggie. When they first started making portable televisions, they had the little plastic portables. First they came out in black and white. Later in color, but I had the first black and white. First one they ever made. You could wrap a wire, go in the hotel room. Our hotel rooms used to cap out at about $18 a week. Usually they were somewhere around $15 a week. So I'd have me a television in my room. The guys got jealous. One day, Jack McDuff said – in front of the group, he said, "You got about as much right with a television as a monkey with a wristwatch." I said, "If you want a t.v., why don't you go buy – you make more money than me. Go buy you a television." He did. A great big old – that thing weighed about 150 pounds – just to show me up. "And this is color."

That's what kind of guy – Jack was a jokester. He made constant jokes all the time. It was quite – being on the road with Jack McDuff was the most volatile and crazy experience anyone could ever go through. Anyone who's ever been on the road with him would tell you the same thing.

What knocked me out was that he was finally proud of me before he passed away. When *This Masquerade* came out, the album *Breezin'*, he was one of the first guys to confess – I didn't expect that from Jack, because Jack is not that kind of guy – but he came to me and told me that – he said, "That record" – he said, "What I like about it, it wasn't a negro hit. It was a world-wide hit, smash," because a lot of records were played on juke boxes, but they didn't sell. You could work off them. If you had anything that played a lot on the radio, you could work. But that record was so big. And don't forget, it was the first of its kind selling over a million units.

I was always wondering if I could do anything to help Jack. Jack was not a guy – he didn't beg [?] or nothing. He was not that kind of person. So I had to invent ways of helping him out. The only thing you could probably convince him was, you could find some reefer somewhere. "I'll accept that." In a bag that big, maybe.

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And every time he got in trouble, you know I had to respond. The man saved me from going to the penitentiary. So somebody told me, "Hey, George, they arrested Jack on the turnpike. They got him down there." I said, "Where is he at?" I jumped in my big 600 limousine. Went down there. Had to fight with the police – not literally anymore. I don't do that no more. I got great lawyers. They said, "Just sit down in that corner right there." I said, "I've been sitting here 45 minutes, and you told me he'd be down in 15 minutes." "Well, just wait until I tell you." I said, "Look, I'll be back in about 15 minutes with a lawyer." "I'll have him down here in 5 minutes." They would get him down. I'd pay his fine, get him out. With pleasure. There's nothing that Jack could have asked me I wouldn't have done. But he never asked me for anything. He was an independent guy. He did his own thing. He didn't beg nobody for nothing. And he always took his own medicine. When he got in trouble – police used to stop him on the turnpike, and he'd be there smoking reefer right in front of their face, have a pipe [Benson inhales and exhales]. They say, "What's in that thing you've got there? Give me that thing." He gave it to him. "What's in that pouch on the windshield? Put your hands behind your back." Then I'd find out what jail he's in. We'd go hustle him out. He just didn't care. He said, no, he was going to have his dope.

One day they stuck something in my mouth. This is why I never got in trouble, gentlemen. My life has been one of – I couldn't say – it's relative pain, but nothing really painful. They stuck a reefer in my mouth one day. I said, "Wait a minute. What's this?" He said, "That's a reefer." I said, "That's what a reefer looks like? This little thing here?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "What is this?" He said, "How you feel?" I said, "How am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to feel?" "You don't feel nothing?" I said, "Wait a minute. How much is this?" He said, "50 cents." I said, "50 cents. Man, I could have bought two packs of Kools for that."

That's the reason why I don't do drugs today. Just that alone. I could have bought two packs of Kools for 50 cents. They buying me a little tiny little cigarette. I said, naw. I said, no drugs will get my money. So just that incident stopped me from going into something that could cause me a lifetime of pain and fortune. So I give Jack credit for that too.

Brown: Great lesson for you youngsters.

If we return to the chronology, the next recording that's listed here is Brother Jack McDuff Quartet with Benny Golson Big Band. Do you recall that?

Benson: Jack's hero was the great Jimmy Smith, of course. He respected other players. Johnny Smith – Johnny "Hammond" Smith – was a great organist too. But Jimmy was

his favorite. He was flashy and always bluesy and funky, and he had these fabulous records, *Walk on the Wild Side* with Oliver Nelson. Jack wanted to do something similar. So they hired Benny Golson, who's a great arranger himself and a great musician too. But he used me on the record. I said, oh man. You know, I don't read any music, see? They had all this music. I said, uh oh. Here it comes. I'm looking at all this music. I said, man, they got some notation. [Benson sings a melody.] I said, oh no.

But they made a mistake and rehearsed it twice, and that's all I needed. As long as I heard the rehearsal, "All right, let's make this record, you all. Come on. Come on, Jack." That was a – that was one of the highlights of my life. I just heard the solo in recent years, like maybe a year ago, and I said, is that what I played on there? Is that me playing that? I said, man, I was trying to be sophisticated on it. I should have did what Jack told me to do, play some more blues.

Brown: It looks like you guys were quite prolific. The quartet recorded quite a lot on Prestige, and then, as we mentioned before, *The New Boss Guitar of George Benson.* That was recorded in May of 1964. Then I'm showing also Joe Dukes got to do a date under his name, *The Soulful Drums,* Joe Dukes with the Jack McDuff Quartet. Any recollection about that? *The Soulful Drums, Greasy Drums.* I'm reading some of the titles off of that. *Moanin' Bench.*

Benson: And *Moohah the D.J.* There was actually a guy.

Brown: Yeah, *Moonah the D.J.* Well, they must misspelled it.

Benson: Actually it was *Moohah.*

Brown: *Moohah,* okay.

Benson: *Moohah the D.J.*

Brown: *Moohah the D.J.*

Benson: Can you believe that? There's a guy, a disk jockey, from his hometown, Memphis, Tennessee. His name was Moohah, and Joe honored him by naming a song after him. *Moohah the D.J.*

Now remember, I was having all these problems with Joe on the road, right? But we went home, to his hometown. He lived not too far from where Elvis was born and raised in the area – where Elvis was raised.

Brown: He was from Mississippi.

Benson: Hmmm?

Brown: No, go ahead. I'm sorry.

Benson: This was Memphis I'm talking about.

Brown: Memphis, okay.

Benson: Because Joe was relating to me how he used to come to Beale Street when they were young. They used to see Elvis when they were young. He said that – when we went home to his hometown, he hadn't seen his mother in six years. This changed my whole opinion of Joe. I wanted to kill Joe every day, because he was so cruel to me and he was always making a fuss about something. The only time I didn't [?] him was when he was on the stand playing his drums and at the end of the show when he did that thing that was so incredible. But the rest of the time, he'd be picking on me, and I'd be swearing I'm going to beat him up, which I never did. But I'm happy I never did – got a chance to do anything like that.

His mother saw him, and she cried her eyes out. I said to myself, I don't care who a person is and how much you hate him, there's somebody that loves him somewhere. I said, if it was me, I'd be beating all the black off of this mother, who thinks he's the greatest thing that happened to mankind. I learned something that day. It was a great lesson. And I thought of him differently after that. I got off of his back. And I could see flaws in him that I couldn't see before. He was so magnificent as a musician, a drummer. I thought he was one of the greatest things that ever happened to mankind as far as musicianship was concerned. I was hoping that one day I could share the bandstand with him on an equal basis. I began to see some flaws in him too. His hero was from my hometown. It was Art Blakey, and he played them same lumpy rolls that Art used to play, them single-stroke rolls. [Benson imitates the sound.] I said, what? Oh man. It was incredible to watch him. But he played it musical.

Blakey remained his hero. I had to find out about Blakey after that. I studied Blakey after that. Started going to check out his show. Saw why he became probably the best ambassador to jazz – one of the best of all time, but I think overall, because of his distance in life, the amount of ground that he covered, I think he was probably the best ambassador that jazz ever had. He played all over the Planet Earth and he did it in style, class. He took fresh talent with him everywhere he went. All the arrangements were classy. Great energy. There was never a bar that went by that wasn't exciting. So he became my friend.

Brown: There was a picture earlier of you behind a set of drums. Did you actually learn to play drums?

Benson: Because my father played drums, he was always on me. "You got to learn the rudiments. There's 26 rudiments – 27 rudiments. You got to learn them all. But you got to learn to play them on a pillow. Not on no bouncy table or nothing. Oh yeah. Now, a single-stroke role" [Benson imitates the sound]. "Double-stroke roll" [Benson imitates the sound]." He did them. "Triple-stroke roll" [Benson imitates the sound].

Brown: On a pillow.

Benson: On a pillow. I said, ummm, I don't know if I'm going ever to be able to do that. But he was – he couldn't really play a set. But he loved Blakey too. Blakey was his hero. Blakey told me. He said – all the things my father had told me, I thought was a lie – he said, "No, man, me and Parker hang out a lot." "Yeah," he said, "nah, I was there when you was a little boy, I was hanging out with Charlie Parker." I thought he was lying. Then one day, Art Blakey told me – he said, "Yeah, me and your dad and Charlie Parker used to be" – I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "Don't ever let anybody tell you anything negative about your pop." He said, "That's your dad, and he loves you." He said, "That's all he talked about, was you." I thought he hated me, telling me all that stuff about rudiments, about the We want Cantor changes, and all the . . .

We had one incident that changed both of our lives, changed my relationship with him. When he was in the Army, he got shot. He had 21 bullets in his leg, 21 bullet holes. A machine gun lit him up, going across one of those battlefields that he shouldn't have been on. You know, one of those no man's lands. But they had no way to get you off of morphine, coming out of the Army. So it turned him into a drug addict. That plagued everybody around him. We all were plagued by that.

Through my teens, when my career started rising and people started noticing my talent and whatever it was I had at the time, and we were getting popularity, he used to show up at my gigs to get money from me. He wasn't making enough. He – one day he got into a big argument with me, and he grabbed me. I must have said something he hated. He said, "Don't ever say that to me again," and he grabbed me around my throat. I said, "Dad, go on and finish it. You might as well kill me." I said, "I can't go through this the rest of my life. Just go on and kill me." He felt so bad. After that – he left me go. He was feeling so bad about that.

As we were riding home that night from the North Side of Pittsburgh back to downtown Pittsburgh – I had a 1957, nice looking car. I used to drive my band around – there was

nobody on the bridge, one of the many bridges that cross Pittsburgh. Nobody on the bridge, late at night. All you could see was the street lights coming down through the fog. He was walking. He walked everywhere. He never had any car. Never. One of the guys in the car said, "Hey, ain't that your dad we just passed by?" I jammed on the brakes in the mid-center lane. There was nothing in back of me, nothing coming across the bridge. I backed up. I said, "Come on, Dad. Get in the car. Get in the car." That's the last argument we ever had, that night. From that day forward, we became very close acquaintances, father and son.

One day he wanted to teach me how to box. He said, "Son, put up your hands. I want to see what you know," because he was a street fighter. I said, "That's unfair." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I can't hit my father. That's a death penalty in the Scriptures. I can't hit my father." That impressed him so much. I said, "Do you know that's a death penalty?" But he respected that. That's the only time I ever got him to go to a church. He went to the church one time, based on that incident about the boxing thing.

The last time we were together, I was getting ready to go record a new album for Warner Bros. It was called – the album was called *Weekend in L.A.* It had no title yet. We were going to record at the Roxy Theater live, for the whole weekend. He said, "Son, take me out to L.A. I want to see my father. I haven't seen him in 31 years." And I hadn't seen – no, he hadn't seen him in 21 years. I hadn't seen him since I was four – 31 years earlier. I said, "Yeah, Pop, yeah. Come on. Come on with us."

We got him a great hotel, a suite. Him and his dad hooked up. They were at the gig when we did this *Weekend in L.A.* When the song *On Broadway* came on, they were all out there, jumping up and down and hollering. The club kept complaining about this old man who kept leaping over the rail, because to get to the bathroom, you couldn't – the place was so crowded. So he had to leap across this rail to get to the center aisle to get to the bathroom. "Who is that old man? Go throw him out." They said, "You can't do that." They said, "Why?" "That's George Benson's grandfather."

That was the last time they saw each other, during that time period. In 1979, my father was killed. That was in '78 when we recorded – actually, we recorded in '77. It came out in '78. Last time he saw his dad, and the last time his dad saw him. Now they're both gone. But I'm glad he got a chance to come out there and have that experience. That was some experience. We spent that whole week or two together.

Brown: We going to – we don't have – we have a limited time here. I just wanted to wrap up a little bit more with Jack McDuff, because I'm looking at the Antibes Festival and Stockholm. So you guys went to Europe. This must have been your first time to Europe.

Benson: Um-hmm.

Brown: I'm looking at – it's the quartet. There are several recordings and several engagements – *Silken Soul*, the concert, Jack McDuff. Any recollections about that tour? Or anything that was instrumental in your development?

Benson: Some things you can't – I'm glad you said instrumental in development. When we went to the French Riviera for the first time, they had a new guy from South Africa. That was Hugh Masekela. And from France, it was Jean-Luc Ponty. Me and Jean-Luc were the exact same age. We were 20 at the time, when we met. I never heard anybody play like that, swing like that and play all that stuff he was playing. It was just incredible.

Our next gig was in Sweden. Jean-Luc was on a t.v. show with us. I met him in the hallway after the rehearsal, and I said, "Jean, show me something." He said, "What do you want to learn?" I said, "That's some great stuff you play." I said, "There's one line you play [Benson sings a descending line]." He said, "Oh yeah, that's a double diminished scale." I said, "Okay, double diminished. Teach me that." So he taught me how to play [Benson sings the line]. I said, "Oh, man." Played it up and down and backwards [Benson sings ascending and descending lines].

I've always loved this cat, but the last time I talked to him, in the middle of the night – you're going to go through recordings here, so let's . . .

Brown: No, no. Keep going.

Benson: In the middle of the night – he called me up about 1 o'clock in the morning. He said, "George, I'm in New York, and we're making a record. Can you come down to the studio?" I said, "It's 1 o'clock." He said, "No, we're going to be here all night. If you could come. Just do this one song." I'm glad I did. I got up because of who he is. I always loved him, and his playing is impeccable. I went down to the studio. He had this song called *Space Age Blues* or something like that. They was space age, too. So I said, I guess I got to go to the moon with them. So I started playing some theories and stuff. Somebody says, "George, that's the best record you ever made." We're talking about soloing, up to that time, at least.

Brown: You're going to start your own career as a leader with Columbia, starting to record. I just want to wrap up. You left Jack McDuff when, and why?

Benson: It was the second time I had left – no, it was the first time I left. I was in San Francisco. I had just bought that guitar. I had to pawn the guitar to get back home. The

reason why, is because I had a girlfriend in L.A. I went down to L.A., and I ran into one of them three-card Molly guys. So my airplane fair was on that three-card Molly table that that cat took like it wasn't nothing. I mean, when ten minutes went by, he had all my money over on his side. So I had to pawn this brand-new guitar that I had just got. I paid a thousand bucks for it – $998 or whatever it was – and I had to pawn it for $75. The fare to get from San Francisco to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was $72 and change. So I had about $3, or $2 and change, to eat for the next two-and-a-half day, because that's what the trip took. I starved to death, because my money was gone before we even got out of the state, California. So, for the next two days, I didn't eat nothing.

But I got to New York, and the reason – oh, before we left San Francisco, I had went out that night, looking for a club, to see what was going on. I ran into a guy who was playing solo piano. His name was Freddie Gambrell, a blind pianist. I was so impressed by his playing, because he sounded like Oscar Peterson to me. I couldn't tell the difference between piano players at that time. I went in. I said, "Hey, man, you sure sound good." He said, "Yeah. What's your name?" I said, "George Benson." He said, "You're the guitar player that played with Jack McDuff." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Go get your guitar. Come play something with it." So I went and got my guitar. Came back. Then he started calling off these changes while he was playing. "Yeah, a C with a flat 5, a D9." I said, "Uh-huh." By the time I found it, he had went to something else. Then he said – he stopped the music. He said, "You know, George" – I said, "You said a D9." He said, "Yeah, but I didn't mean that one." I said, "It's a D9." He said, "No, no." He said, "There's lots of ways you can do it. You can do it this way. You can substitute it with this if you want." I said, "Oh. Man, that's interesting." So he started showing me, "Did you know you can do this here?"

For the next two days, I didn't sleep. I was up all night. I got threatened by a guy who was going to kill me. He busted my door. I said, "Man, if you come in, I'm going to wrap this guitar around your head." Either it was that or a violin. I forget which one I had. I was practicing violin at the same time. For two days I didn't get no sleep. So I had to get out of L.A., because I wanted to practice this stuff while it was in my head. I had to start a band, so I could start using this information.

That's when I pawned my guitar. I finally got to Pittsburgh, three days later. Then I called this young fellow, Lonnie Smith. He said, "George, whenever you get ready to start a band, just call me." I tied a trailer to an old raggedy car, which for a nickel, this girl helped me buy, and went up and got Lonnie Smith. Then I called a friend of mine who said, "If you ever start a band, you just give me a call. I'll find you some work." I called Mr. Jimmy Boyd, who became my manager for the next 11 years. We got – he sure found us some work, working behind go-go girls in a club in the Bronx. But we was happy to get work.

Then we finally moved – after a few weeks, we moved down to Manhattan, right down the street from the Apollo Theater, a club called the Palm Cafe, a big place. Every night, James Brown would come in, because he'd be working down the street. He would come in. Then, one night, he sat in with us. We knew all that stuff. That was like candy for me and Lonnie. Lonnie had been playing that for years. He couldn't play no jazz, but he had great rhythm.

James Brown was so impressed at what we could do, he said, "How'd you like to work with the James Brown band? You know what I'm saying? What did you say your name is? George, George, George, George. You want to work with the James Brown band? How'd you like to open my show?" Then me, with my crazy self, is saying, "You know, Mr. Brown" – because I heard he was a tough guy – I say, "You know, Mr. Brown, we're jazz musicians. We want to play some jazz stuff." So I turned him down. Can you imagine what we might have been today? [?] James.

While we were there, the great comedian – what's his name? I'll think of his name in a bit – he said he was going down – he said, "George, I know a guy who would love you." He said, "The problem is, he's not in town. He's down in Florida. He's at the Fontainebleau Hotel." He said, "I'm getting ready to go down there and play." He said, "I'm going to tell him about you." He said, "I'll bet you he'll come back up here to see you. I'll bet. Don't be surprised if you see him." Oh, his name was Rogers. What's his first name?

Alexander: Timmie Rogers.

Benson: Timmie Rogers was the guy.

Brown: Timmie Rogers?

Benson: Yeah. I'm saying – I'm looking at you, saying, if I'd have left you behind, brother, wouldn't have nothing to talking about here.

Sure enough, we're on the last night of the gig at the Palm Cafe. Now we got a go-go girl on the stand. We're playing go-go. Here's what's incredible. The club owner hated jazz music, but he didn't know it. He didn't know jazz music when he heard it. So once I found that out, I said, "Hey, I thought this fool was going to fire me. He don't even know" – I said, "Play another jazz tune. He don't know." He'd come up to us while we were playing. We'd be swinging. [Benson scat sings.] He said, "Is that jazz you're"- I said, "No, this ain't no jazz."

But on this particular – toward the end of the night, there weren't that many people in the place. The go-go girl, it was her time. She'd get the last 20 minutes of the show. She's up there dancing. Then I see this guy come in. He's a Caucasian guy. He has sloppy pos – he's got a newspaper in his pocket. But his wife is just immaculate, with diamonds and rubies on, and hair fixed beautifully. I said, [Benson sings a corny ending riff]. The go-go girl looked at me. I said, "Get down, get down." I started playing *Clockwise* [Benson sings the opening melody]. Before he even sat down, he was "Awwwwwww." When I came off, he said – he took a piece of napkin. He said, "Just sign your name here. Just sign there. This is a contract with CBS Records. Just sign your name right here." Jimmy Boyd, he grabbed my hand. "George, don't sign that. Man, you can't sign that." I said, "Why not? This is CBS Records, man." He said, "Ain't nothing on there. They could put anything on there." I said, oh, man. You know, I didn't sign. That made sense. He said, "No, just come down to my office. We'll work all this out. Don't worry about it."

Then we ended up having what they called a tape audition. I had Ronnie Cuber. He suggested we needed a drummer. He had a great drummer. I can't remember his name now, but he was a fabulous drummer.

Brown: Jimmy Lovelace?

Benson: Jimmy Lovelace. We started recording. John Hammond came in the studio. After the first tune, he said, "This is no longer a tape audition. This is a recording session." I said, oh man.

That's how we ended up getting started with CBS Records. I met the right person, John Hammond, and he answered all the questions nobody else could answer. He told me about Aretha Franklin. He told me about Bob Dylan. I didn't know who Bob Dylan was. Didn't care, but I later found out how important he was. He told me about Benny Goodman, Count Basie, how they got started, Billie Holiday. He told me all the stories, from the beginning. He told me about Charlie Christian, how he went up and found him, how he was riding through Kansas City and he – he was already past Kansas City, and he heard the radio, heard this band playing live at a radio station. He turned right around and drove back to Kansas City. He had to find the band. "Where's the" such-and-such radio station? He found them. It was somebody else's band then – Bennie Moten's band. He paid for them to come to New York. Bennie Moten died. He went to Mr. Bill Basie, who didn't have the Count name yet. He said, "Bill, how'd you like to take over the band?" He said okay. As simple as that. That's how it became the Bill Basie band. Then later, because they already had a Duke, they needed a Count. So he became Count Basie.

It's a heck of a story, isn't it? But all of his stories were the most amazing and incredible things. He told me things that just – like movies, films coming alive, right in front of my face.

Brown: We have to stop now.

Today is April 18th, 2011. This is day two of the Smithsonian interview with NEA Jazz Master, guitarist, vocalist, composer, and arranger George Benson in his house in Phoenix, Arizona. George, how are you feeling today?

Benson: All right. How are you?

Brown: Great. Happy to be back and continuing on. Where we last left off yesterday, you were talking about how you had met John Hammond. He was explaining his history and involvement with this music. Now you are signed to Columbia, as – the major label – as an up-and-coming star, new artist. Would you like to take the story from there?

Benson: If you can imagine, here I am. I had just made friends with a man who loves my playing. He's comparing me to his early days with the great Charlie Christian, my first mentor on guitar, the man I wanted to be like more than anything, but felt it was quite impossible, because Charlie Christian was like a god among the guitar world, and his recordings with Benny Goodman were the most outstanding recordings I had ever heard.

But now I'm sitting in the office, talking to John Hammond. I didn't know how extensive he was. I didn't know he had discovered all the other people, like Aretha Franklin, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Bennie Goodman, and many, many others – Bob Dylan, and later, Bruce Springsteen. He was quite the A & R man. He told me these incredible stories, each one, how he first initiated contact between them and what the relationships were, how they got them into the studio and got their recording careers started, the most fascinating stories I ever heard.

I knew John Hammond came from money. I knew that, because everybody [who] talked about him, always talked about John Hammond, the wealthy A & R man.

Brown: Right. Vanderbilt family.

Benson: Yes. So I felt that I was sitting in a room with everything meant anything. Here was a man who knew what money was. He was determined to make me a star. I didn't realize the problems that he was having, though. The big problem was that CBS didn't want a guitar player. They had had Kenny Burrell earlier, and they made him sing on his records, because John Hammond could not get him signed as a guitarist. So he signed

him as a singer. As a matter of fact, he had to do the same thing to get me on the label. He signed me as a singer, which meant I had to do at least one vocal on my CBS albums. The first one, I think I did *A Foggy Day* on. That's how he got us on the label. He had to fight for that.

He had problems with the financial people on the label. They wanted to get rid of anything and anybody that didn't make money for CBS. They sent him a notice – a dismissal notice – and he had a heart attack. The guy who sent the notice got fired, because he had brought so many wonderful people to the label. The guy didn't really know who he was. He just saw, oh, this guy's not making any money for us. Let's get rid of him. That'll save us – so they sent him a notice, and John had a heart attack.

He was also responsible for the president's chair, of people over at CBS. He recommended people for the presidency over there. I think one was Goddard Lieberson, who was in charge when I was there. Later I think he sponsored – from Arista Records. What's his name?

Brown: Clive Davis?

Benson: Clive Davis. And other people who worked, he recommended them, whose names I can't remember now. But he just went down the line. He was not a selfish guy. He only cared about the music. He started coming to Harlem to my gigs. I was working at Minton's Playhouse. We were the hottest new act in town.

Teddy Hill, who owned – who ran the – Minton's Playhouse, told me great stories about how he named Dizzy Gillespie. He said they used to come in to rehearse, but Dizzy would always be late, and he was always making jokes, cracking jokes. So he came up with this, "Where's that dizzy trumpet player?" So they ended up nicknaming him Dizzy.

He told me that story, where it came. He also told me a story about Charlie Christian. When they were putting together what became later known as bebop music, it was Charlie Christian who had a gig with Bennie Goodman, used to be working downtown on the hot gig, the money-making gigs, and he would lug his amplifier up to Harlem, to Minton's Playhouse, where he could gig with Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and . . .

Brown: Klook – Kenny Clarke.

Benson: And Kenny Clarke. I didn't know about him, but that makes sense.

Brown: Yeah, there are recordings of Charlie Christian playing with Monk and Kenny Clarke on drums.

Benson: He told me one day he was coming out of the bathroom – he was coming out of his office, which was catty-corner from the bathroom, and a guy came out of the bathroom, stuck a pistol in his nose, backed him up into the office, tied him up to a chair, and put a gag on him. Then he asked him for the number to the safe. "What's the number to the safe?" He was trying to tell him, but the cat had a band-aid on his mouth. He was "Ummmmmm" and the cat was beating him with the gun. "What's the number to the safe?" "Ummmmmmm." He said, "Boy, I don't know what the world's coming to, George." But he survived.

When I started thinking about Minton's Playhouse, that story popped up in my mind. He was quite a character with his cigar. But he loved us. He treated us very nicely. And we saw – the people who hung out at Minton's were there in the early days, when bebop was being invented. They heard everybody. That's why you couldn't pull the wool over their eyes. They heard Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, Charlie Christian. All the greats came through there. Some of them, who had become addicted on drugs, hung around Minton's Playhouse like it was the only place in town. They were still there. They were among the elite musicians of that time. So I got a chance to hang out and talk to them about the old days, and then they told me about my potential. They heard me play, and they said, "You remind me of Charlie Christian. Yeah, I remember when he first came through here. He was just like you." I loved hearing that stuff.

John Hammond would come up in the middle of the night during our set. We went on from 10 o'clock, and we played until 4 in the morning. John Hammond, being Caucasian, one of the few in the house – it wasn't a racial point. It's just, where was it located? – John would be walking through the neighborhood with his newspaper. I said, "Man, aren't you afraid to come up here?" He said, "No, George, I've been coming up here a long time." I said, "But this is a different crowd, here." He said, "Oh, nobody's going to bother me." And sure enough, nobody ever bothered him. They robbed my car every night. They sold me my hubcaps back every night. They said, "Hubcaps. $2 a piece." I said, "Man, give me those hubcaps. Here's your money." Every night.

Minton's was quite a place. It was a proving ground, because if you could make that crowd happy, then you had a good chance of making the jazz world happy. We scuffled hard. We saw all the newcomers come through: Monty Alexander, when he was young. We were close to the same age. And – what's his name? He was working with Stan Getz. Great pianist.

Brown: Kenny Barron?

Benson: No, white. Oh, actually, he's from the – either part Mexican – what's his name? Chick Corea.

Brown: Oh, Chick.

Benson: Um-hmm. Chick Corea was very young then. He was – he used to come and do Monday nights when he wasn't working with Stan Getz. He was a wizard on the piano. The people were looking forward. They were talking about him. The buzz was on about his playing.

So we were the new guys coming in at the time. It was a lot of fun, and it was exciting, because the buzz was out. People kept coming to us with all of these wonderful scenarios, looking at my career in the future. Trying to tell me, you're going to be this, you're going to do that, I can see you going very far.

Then we started opening for – down – we started going down in the Village. I wanted to get the good gigs, the ones that had the name, like the Vanguard, the Village Gate, and a few other clubs that were downtown. We were always stuck up in Harlem. Some people didn't know. We had no identity yet.

So we opened for Thelonious Monk.

Brown: At the Five Spot?

Benson: No, but that was another club that I liked too. We opened for him down at the Village Vanguard. He used to talk to me in the kitchen. That was the dressing room, really, the big kitchen they had.

Brown: Oh yeah, at the Vanguard, right.

Benson: He used to talk to me about Charlie Christian. He told me I was going to be the second Charlie Christian. Then he told me that when he came to New York, he was like Art Tatum. He said, "I was only 17 years old. I scared everybody to death." That's what he said. It was fun talking to him, because he was so different. But he was definitely a genius. I found that all those cats who had those weird reputations – "Oh, he's crazy. Miles is crazy." No, the one thing I know, Miles ain't crazy. And Thelonious Monk? A genius. A crazy man can't do what Thelonious Monk can do. I can tell you that. And when he'd talk – although sometimes he'd go off in a corner – he'd be talking about things you couldn't possibly understand, because he was way ahead of everybody else. But he was exciting to talk to.

Brown: Did you get a chance to play with him? With Monk?

Benson: No. We went on tour together, though.

Brown: Because you were both on Columbia at this time. No, maybe – yeah, yeah.

Benson: That's possible. We went on tour in 1967. He was voted the number one pianist in the jazz world. The tour was Thelonious and Sarah Vaughan, Barney Kessel, Jim Hall. I was part of the guitar trio – Barney Kessel, Jim Hall, and myself – and I got beat up every night. Those guys turned me every way but loose, and Barney Kessel just took it to the moon. He was so slick with his stuff. I admire him a lot. I always did. But being on tour with him was an awesome thing.

Brown: Who organized the tour, and how long was it?

Benson: It was a George Wein jazz tour of Europe. I had never been on my own. This was my first time, in '67. I remember going to – we were in Italy. A guy invited us to his house, all of us, the guitar players. He was a guitar player also. He was also an arranger and did a lot of movie soundtracks and things. He was quite big in Europe, this guy. I remember eating my first homemade pasta. I said, "Man, what we got ain't spaghetti. This is real spaghetti."

While we were at his house, he said, "You know something?" He said, "People here don't know who you are." I was young, maybe 24. He said, "But I predict in two years you'll be the number one jazz guitar player." I said, "What?" I couldn't believe he thought that much of me. Three years, he was – it happened. Three years later, and I was shocked more than anybody, because all I do is play, because that's what I do. I leave all that other stuff up to everybody else.

The division that came about when I went to New York was a gigantic surprise to me, because every lick I played was scrutinized. If I played a blues lick, they said, "Aw, you ain't nothing but an old blues guitar player." Played a rock lick. "You ain't nothing but a rock player, man. Play all that rock-and-roll. That's all you're playing." I'm saying to myself, so what? I mean, I ain't no Andrés Segovia. I'm not trying to be. And I ain't no Wes Montgomery. So what? I didn't know that there was a division between the rest of the world and the jazz world. They were very protective of what they do. I said, wow. Now I know why my father was saying to me, "Son, whatever you do, put a jazz tune on your album. All of them. Put one – at least one jazz tune." And I was always saying to him, "Why is that so important, Dad?" I said, "Isn't it nice to know I got fans? I sell a lot of records. People love what I do." "Yeah, that's all right, but put a jazz tune."

He insisted on it. My uncle said the same thing. But his was more directed to guitar itself. I put out an album that didn't have one guitar lick on it. He said, "Don't ever do that again." He said, "People love your guitar." That I knew was right. When he said that, I knew he was right, and I said, maybe my Dad was right too, when he started talking about jazz.

But the stations died. All over the world, jazz stations folded. So you could have a brand new record out, and nobody would know it.

Brown: We're talking about the late '60s at this point.

Benson: Yes. Things started changing drastically.

Brown: What – do you recall what precipitated that change?

Benson: I have no idea. I just know that we have one jazz station in New York, and we have maybe a college station, or something coming out of New Jersey. That was . . .

Brown: WBGO, WOR.

Benson: WBGO, where they're still in business. But the one station that did play jazz in New York, WRVR, it went out right after I had – the *Breezin'* album came out, in '76. But they were a catalyst in making that record very big. They – I remember taking the test pressing by. I knew the record was going to be mildly successful, I figured, because everybody was buzzing about it, the people who were involved with it, "This record is" such and such. They finally sent me the vinyl test pressing. I said, I think I'll take this over to the radio station. I got an interview with them this morning. They want to know what I'm doing. I went over, and we talked a while. Then he said, "What are you working on, George? What's new?" I said, "I got a copy of a test pressing of my new record." I said, "Maybe we can play one track, because it's not due out until another two weeks, or a week from now." He says, "Okay. We'll play one track." He played *Breezin'*, and the lights on the phone started click click click click click click click click click click click. He said, "Wow." He said, "That's a great record," when it went off. He said, "People – there's some people. They all want to talk to you." I said, "What do they want to talk to me about?", because I wasn't used to talking to people on the radio. He said, "No, they want to talk to you." So I started talking. "Yeah, George, where's that record from? When's it gonna come out?" And "Who's on that record?", and so and so.

Then that disk jockey said, "George, is there anything else on there?" I said, "Hey man, that's – I already went overboard." I said, "Maybe we can play you just one more." So we

played *This Masquerade,* and every phone in that whole building – brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr – lit up.

Brown: We're going to come back to that, because obviously that is a watershed moment. So, when you – I want to start – let's go back to Columbia in the – because by '68, you're already on Verve. So what precipitated the break with Columbia, going to Verve? And if you can answer that question, I have one more, about how you chose your sidemen back in those days.

Benson: We started having problems with CBS. We began to understand that they really didn't want a guitar player and they didn't do very much to promote our records or anything like that. It wasn't John Hammond. We loved John Hammond. As a matter of fact, he helped us out as much as he could.

But we were tied to a contract. So my manager said, "George, we got to get out of this contract." Other people started hitting on us and said, "Are you free?" He said, "Because I would like to make a deal with you, with some real front money." I said, "Ooo, wow."

I remember us having a lawyer that was one of the top music lawyers in New York, a feisty kind of guy. He said, "Ain't nothing I can't do, because I can break any contract."

Brown: Do you know his name?

Benson: Then he said to me, "The reason why you can break any contract," he said, "because the guys who make up the contract always leave an out for themselves in it," and he said, "And there, within that out, is your out." He said, "So there's no such thing as an iron-clad, because they always leave an out for themselves." So we set up an argumentative thing – arbitration thing with CBS Records, and the union – we complained to the union.

We had a date. My manager was very slick. He says, "George, they're going to send your lawyer on vacation. He won't be here for that." I said, "But he's our lawyer." He said, "I'm telling you, George." So we started calling. "Hey man, where you at? We on for tomorrow?" They said, "Oh, he's on vacation." So the manager knew exactly what he was talking about. But I remembered that phrase that he said. "There is no contract iron-clad." So we – I said, "Jimmy, get that contract out. Let's go through it." We went through page by page, and we came upon a phrase in it, and within that phrase was our out. So we just walked away. We knew they couldn't challenge, and they weren't going to challenge it anyway.

John Hammond asked me later, many years later, "George, why did you walk away from – how did you do that?" I said, "I don't want to get specific, John, because I might have to use this again." I said, "But yeah, we found an out in the contract, and we walked." We got a few dollars, upgraded my life a little bit, my family and stuff, and we tried to make the record company happy that they had made that move to hire us. We still weren't selling records, but we were trying to do it by finding songs that we thought people would like. Remember, my theory was, when John Hammond told me that jazz records don't sell, and I asked him one day, "How many records do you think we're going to sell, John? Just give me a rough estimate." He said, "Somewhere between 3,000 and 6,000." I said, "Man, there's 180-million people in America. You mean" – he said, "George, jazz records don't sell." He said, "Even the biggest jazz artists – Miles Davis only sells 20,000 records." I said, "That doesn't make any sense to me. Somebody's doing something wrong here. I think if you put something on that record that people want to hear, they'll buy it." So that's what I've been trying to do all my life, putting something on the record that people want to hear and not worrying about what it was. If it was *Hello, Dolly*, which I understand Louis Armstrong did not like. He hated it, as a matter of fact. He turned it into a pop smash, but he was considered a jazz artist. And Stan Getz, through his artistry, through bossa nova music, became very successful. It's the scenario and what you can get attention from, I always believed. So I've been – all my life, from that point on, after John Hammond said that to me, I've been searching for a way to put myself in the big leagues. The thing that did it for us, I think, was Creed Taylor, which came later. We'll just talk about something else now.

Brown: Again, looking at your discography, by February of 1967 you were recording with Verve. You have – you're doing *Giblet Gravy*. You have Herbie Hancock on piano, Ron Carter, bass, Billy Cobham, drums. So, George Benson leading what would become some of the movers and shakers of jazz for the next four years. Here you are. This is your group, and you've signed with Verve. So Verve is the first label that picked you up when you left Columbia. Is that correct?

Benson: That's right.

Brown: It sounds like you were taking this concept of trying to put something on the recording that people would like, because when we look at some of the titles on that – you got a lot of r- – you got some r-and-b. You got some pop hits on there. But you've been singing all along. So we want to make sure that folks listening to this know that you have been singing all along, with the encouragement of Columbia. But then now, when you get to Verve, you got female vocalist backgrounds. You're doing *Sunny*, Bobby Hebb's big hit.

Benson: Instrumentally.

Brown: Instrumental, but with the vocals background.

Benson: With the vocal background.

Brown: The female vocals. So you're really broadened out. Not only were you doing jazz and r-and-b. Now you're going into more what we called soul music back then, and the golden age of Motown, the '60s. Who was deciding your material at this point? And who was your producer at Verve?

Benson: The industry was changing. Verve had had the great Wes Montgomery. They took pop tunes and turned them into smashes. So they saw me as the same potential. I forget the producer's name. What's his name, that produced those records for Verve?

Brown: I'll get that for you in a second. I have those here. Do you want to continue? I'll get those for you.

Benson: Wonderful cat.

Brown: Scour the personnel. Let's see. Dang. Not showing producer. It'll show up. This is real small print, George. Go ahead. Continue your story. I'll get back . . .

Benson: The producer saw me as the next Wes Montgomery. But remember, Wes Montgomery was still alive. So we couldn't step on his toes, because nobody was as good as he was and as elegant as he was.

I had chops, a strange sound that was – it was recognized – easily recognizable, because I had my own little quirks in things I do. People would say, "Here is – I heard that sound before." Then later, they heard enough of it to say, "I know that's George Benson." Then when I started adding formulas that I concocted over the years, then it became easier and easier to identify myself.

Brown: I found the producer: Esmond Edwards.

Benson: Esmond Edwards, an incredible guy. For this record, he wanted to get into some big-band things. So he hired a man, Tom McIntosh, who happened to be my father's best friend, and I didn't know it. And he didn't know that I was my father's son. During the session – and we were having a ball. Billy Cobham on drums, he was brand new. This might be Billy Cobham's first record. At the time, he was working with Horace Silver, but he hadn't recorded with him. So his first record might be this record here, if you can believe it.

Brown: February 1967.

Benson: Tom McIntosh was the arranger for the commercial things that we did. He kept saying to me – he said, "I've seen you before." He said, "I know you from somewhere." I said, "Maybe you know my father." He said, "What's your father's name?" I said, "His name was Charles Evans." He said, "No." He said, "Wait a minute. Carlos," because that's what they called him in the army. "Carlos." He said, "That's right. You look just like him." He said, "Come over here," and we became the best of friends and still are today.

He also became the man who did *Shaft* for Isaac Hayes. He did that incredible arrangement. But at that time he had done these fabulous arrangements. I didn't understand anything, because I don't read music that well. The great guitar player we mentioned yesterday – the new cat in the studio . . .

Brown: Eric Gale.

Benson: Eric Gale was reading my music from across the room. I didn't know him. I had heard about him. They said – when I first got to New York, I was new, and I was pretty hot. They said, "You're almost as good as Eric." I said, "Eric who? Where's he at? I'll kill him," thinking in my brain. I didn't say that to anyone. I said, "Yeah, who's Eric?", with one of those Billy the Kid attitudes.

When I finally met him, I really liked him a lot. His guitar playing was so unusual. He had his own niche. He read music fluently, had a great sound, great rhythm. I said, I better leave this cat alone. And I did.

So, from across the room, I was playing all these wrong changes, doing this. He said, "George, let me see that. Hold that up." I held the music up. He said, "Oh, the chord looks like that, brrrm, sounds like ths, brrrm." I said, "Hey, man, thanks, man, thanks." After he did it about three or four times, I said, "What's your name, man?" "Eric Gale." I said, oh, that's Eric Gale, okay. We became excellent friends after that.

That record – the next day Esmond Edwards said, "We'll go in the studio with Ron Carter and Herbie Hancock. We're going to do some jazz things." I said, "Can you include congas, because sometimes the rhythm gets out on me. I don't know where I'm at. Congas will even all that out." So he got Ray Barretto. Couldn't beat it. No, it wasn't Ray. It was Johnny Pacheco. Johnny just made things even out so beautifully for me, made it easy. It was later when Ray Barretto came into the picture.

But yeah, here I am, trading fours with Herbie Hancock, and too dumb to realize it, that I was messing with a boss. Great musician. But that's something we did every night. We always played. Then we traded fours. So I said, "Okay, let's trade some fours here." So I initiated it. I noticed that when I stopped playing, Herbie would take up from where I left off and turn it into something special, then back it up. I said, wait a minute here. After about two times of going around, him and me, me and him, I said, I better get out of this while I'm still alive here.

But that was enough to initiate Ron Carter calling. I think he was the one. I'm guessing that he's the one who called Miles. It could have been Herbie. Because I got a call from Miles right after that.

Brown: What was that call like?

Benson: Oh man. I'm thinking, Miles Davis called me on the phone. He – "I want to make a record." I said, what can I do on a Miles Davis record? I went down to the studio. The first day was a disaster. Miles came in. Took out his horn for about five seconds. Went to the microphone. Brrrp brrr brrrp. Then he took it apart, put it back in the case, and he walked out. We sat there for a couple hours, and I said, "Guess he ain't coming back." The next day, he came in the studio, took out his horn, and blew a few notes. Then he took his horn apart, put it in the case, and he walked out again.

He called me on the phone. I said, "I ain't coming in tomorrow." I didn't tell him that. The people who called me. It might have been John Hammond, because he was there for that session, I believe. Teo Macero. I think he invited John. I'm not sure. Teo finally asked him, when Miles came. He said, "Miles, what's wrong with you?" He said, "What's happening that we need to know about?" He started some grievances, letting them out. "First of all, this microphone sounds like a tin can." He said, "We can fix that. What you need?" He started talking about, he was mad at them for some move they made before, and he started talking about the difference between white and black musicians and all that rhetoric. But Teo was used to hearing it. So he didn't pay him no mind. When he started talking, I wanted to crawl under a table, because it was embarrassing.

Later, all of that was straightened out by Art Blakey. He said, "Black people didn't advance jazz music." He said, "It was done by a lot of different people, whites and blacks. The reason why jazz has the status it has today is it isn't all black." He said, "It might be initiated by black people, but that's not how it developed." He said, "No." He said, "No, that's wrong." I was saying, "You know something. You're right." Nothing was developed by any one individual. When people get an idea, they all embellish it. They throw in their two cents worth, five cents worth. Some people throw in more than

others. There are great musicians of all races in jazz music. I know, because I played with them.

Brown: You can talk about it back in Pittsburgh, all the cats back there.

Benson: Later I played with the greatest. Some of them happened to be Caucasians. I played with some Mexican musicians, Cuban musicians, Puerto Rican musicians, everywhere, European guys. So I know the difference. When Art Blakey said that, he straightened me out, because in my mind, I couldn't get past the Miles Davis statement that he made in the studio years ago. It's all done now. Teo Macero knew it. I wish I had talked to him.

What's you got?

Brown: I was going to say, when did you finally get it? On the third time?

Benson: Oh. Miles called me. He said, "You coming to the studio?" I said, "They don't need to be coming to me. I don't want to take your money like that." He said, "Don't worry about that. Come on down. We're going to make a record today." But he said it in his voice. "Come on down. We're going to make a record. Don't worry about it."

I went down. Finally – they started playing – rehearsing the craziest song I ever heard in my life. It was a Wayne Shorter tune. I remember him complaining to Wayne about the song. He said, "Wayne, what kind of song is this?" He said, "I think you be writing these tunes just to hang me up, just to see if I could play them." I felt the same way. Then Tony [Williams] started telling me how to play. "George, play these chords right here," and Miles said, "Tony, shut up." He said, "He's the guitar player. You're the drummer. Play your drums. And furthermore, take your drums and set them up over there against the wall. You're playing too loud." I said, man, this cat is Miles Davis. They didn't lie. A different kind of cat. But there's something about him you just love.

Brown: No rehearsal? You just started playing? You rehearsed? You practiced?

Benson: We rehearsed maybe an hour. The chart wouldn't do me no good. So I was listening to what they were playing, trying to find something to play, somewhere to get in this tune. I think Miles liked it when I was rambling, rumbling, just rambling through things, because he heard – I played a few hot licks here and there – whoop whup, whoop whup, where it is? What key are we in?

It was – we did a couple songs. One of them made it in that album, and one of them came out later.

Brown: That was on *Miles in the Sky, Paraphrenalia.* Then later, *Sidecar* was issued posthumously. That was the second session you did, *Sidecar.* So, two tunes. That was it.

Benson: That was it. Then someone told me, "George, Miles is going to call you. He wants you to join his band." I said, oh man, I'm in like Flynn. My manager said, "But you can't do it." "What do you mean, I can't do it?" He said, "Everybody at the record company says you're going to be bigger than Miles." I said, "Bigger than Miles? What – who is that you've been talking to?" He said, "That's what they're saying. They're saying they think you're going to be bigger than Miles." I said, "Man, somebody" – I said, "I wonder why they're thinking that?" But everybody after that that we associated with had a different opinion of who we were. All of a sudden, their opinion of me or my association with them changed to a different degree. They had a little – seemed to have a little more respect for my potential, because I really didn't know what I wanted to do.

I just wanted to play guitar. I had a great band. We worked more than anybody. We worked 48 weeks a year. So I was always sharp, technique-wise. I had great technique. I didn't realize how much my technique had improved until cats started telling me about it. They – I heard John McLaughlin when he came from England. I remember he borrowed my amplifier. They rehearsed in Harlem at a club called – what was the name of that club? I can't remember now. They asked if they could borrow my amp. I think Tony Williams brought him over, Tony Williams Lifetime. I had a great big old tall Fender amplifier with a lot of power. When I came to work that night – I told them, "Yeah, you all can borrow my amp. Go ahead. Use it" – when I came to work, everything was turned up to 10, everything. I said, who in the world is this? When I heard him, I had a lot of respect for his playing. He was so different than everybody else I had heard. Later in life we became friends. Somebody tried to hook us up. People were always trying to have Billy the Kid and a showdown. So they booked me and him on the same gig. The difference is, when he started playing – this was at – what's the name of it? That great hall? The Alice Tully Hall. Where's that at?

Brown: Down at Lincoln Center.

Benson: Lincoln Center, one of those halls there. When John started playing in the sit-down position, it sounded like he was playing a sitar. But he played guitar. He always had that sound. He told me later, "I did it to avoid you, George. I didn't want none of that contest stuff. I don't want people comparing us. So I did something completely different." I said, "I was thinking the same thing. I just didn't know where to go." So we stayed up-tempo, and then we played some bluesy things. But yeah, there was a lot of tension in the house. I'm thinking, man, I'm going to get killed in here today, and he was

thinking the same thing too. “Man, I’m going to get killed in here.” Him and I laugh about that today.

Brown: We can go back to your encounters with Miles. He was with Columbia. You’re on Verve. Was that ever an issue? Probably I . . .

Benson: No, as a sideman, no.

Brown: I just wanted to clear up, since I do have the *Giblet Gravy* and the other Verve ones here, that it was the Sweet Inspirations on it. I forgot to call them by name.

Benson: That’s right.

Brown: This was a different era for you, because now this was just prior to the CTI. So maybe if you want to talk about that transition.

Benson: If you could imagine, remember that the records I made for Verve were an attempt to bring me into the new mentality that made Wes Montgomery so big. Creed Taylor found songs that Wes Montgomery could do and still maintain his integrity as a musician. He used his talents in a very sophisticated way, and it got through. It worked beautifully. So it was no wonder that Esmond Edwards tried it with me.

But now I’m with the man who invented it, the man who knew best how to do that. He invented bossa. He brought bossa nova music to the United States, put it [on a] Stan Getz record, and went to the moon. He took Jimmy Smith, a funky organ player, out of the clubs, put a big band behind him, did *Walk on the Wild Side*, and turned him into a household word. Now he had me.

Wes Montgomery had just passed away in 1968. Man, that was a blow like you wouldn’t believe. He wasn’t a guy that I felt was in the way, because I never thought I’d be nowhere near what he could do. So we just – we needed somebody to make a path for us. Wes Montgomery was the man, although I had love for Grant Green’s playing too. He seemed to be more into something that I could reach for, although I couldn’t play like him either.

So now I was with Creed Taylor. How we got with him, it was Wes Montgomery who got us on A&M Records. How he did it was, he asked Herb Alpert one day – I remember seeing the t.v. show where Wes Montgomery was on with a Herb Alpert special. Herb Alpert said, “And now, ladies and gentlemen, my favorite guitar player, Wes Montgomery.” He sat on a stool. He sat beside him, and he hugged him. I said, man, that’s impressive. Wes was a star. He played *Goin’ Out of My Head* or something, or

Wendy or something, and it went over like a fat rat. I said, man, that's what I want to be like.

Now he passed away, but before he died, he said to Herb Alpert – he said, "You ever heard of a kid named George Benson?" Herb said no. He said, "You will." That's all he said. "You will." When he died, Herb Alpert said to Creed Taylor, who had produced all of Wes's records, the big ones – he said, "Do you know a kid named George Benson?" Creed Taylor said, "I do. I know him." He said, "You think you could get him for our label?" He said, "I'll try."

When I saw Creed Taylor come into the Vanguard, I said oh man, this is going to be exciting. Sure enough, he hooked us up with A&M Records. A lot went on there, but we won't get into that now. We'll go into something else, or we'll never get out of it. I could do four hours on any aspect of this thing.

Brown: Okay. Your association with CTI is the one that got you into – because it's CTI records, it didn't have the distribution, I'm sure, that everyone wanted, but . . .

Benson: Well, at first it was A&M Records. We didn't sell a lot of records, because . . .

Brown: Right. *The Other Side of Abbey Road*?

Benson: The first record was called . . .

Brown: That came later.

Benson: No. Go back to A&M.

Brown: Unfortunately, that's one of the things that's wrong here . . .

Benson: Oh, okay.

Brown: . . . is that they have foregrounded and put in . . .

Benson: There was a picture of me on the cover, like I was being born. One of my friends had to explain that to me later. I had no idea what they were trying to do with these labels, these record companies. But it was called . . .

Brown: *Body Talk* is . . .

Benson: *Beyond the Blue Horizon.*

Brown: *Beyond the Blue Horizon.* Excuse me. That's right.

Benson: *Beyond the Blue Horizon*, and then we did – the second album I think was – no. *Beyond the Blue Horizon* was the first record with Creed Taylor. There's some before that.

Brown: *The Other Side of Abbey Road* is on A&M.

Benson: Yes. That's the second record that we did.

Brown: Okay. Then this discography is missing . . .

Benson: We did one before that.

Brown: Unfortunately this goes from Verve to A&M. I'll do some research while we go. So, A&M. How did that turn for A&M into CTI then?

Benson: When Creed couldn't come up with the big smashes anymore, he had a falling out with Herb Alpert, or the record company, I should say.

Brown: *Shape of Things*?

Benson: That's it. *The Shape of Things to Come.* They had a picture of me half-naked on there. Creed Taylor was telling me, this is what's going to be happening next. *The Shape of Things to Come.* We did some very commercial-sounding things, but they did allow me to rip a few things. But the world wasn't ready for that yet, not from my point of view.

Brown: Okay. But you got to choose the material? Or was this a collaboration?

Benson: Some of it. No, Creed was – he was in charge. There were a lot of things that went on that I didn't particularly – I wasn't particularly fond of, but I was so happy to be in an environment where people knew what they were doing – I'm talking about, who had the same goal that I had, finding an audience. There were a few things on there I really liked. *Chattanooga Choo-choo.* It made me famous among country people. The country guitar players love that stuff. They still remember that stuff. When I went – I started playing down at the Grand Ole Opry and places like that in the South . . .

Brown: Did you ever meet Chet Atkins?

Benson: Him and I became the best of friends.

Brown: I figured that would be the case.

Benson: We did, and we recorded a fantastic song together that I partially wrote, called *Sunrise.* You got to hear that song. Have you heard that, *Sunrise*?

[Unidentified]: No, I haven't.

Benson: You got to hear the song called *Sunrise.* We recorded it in Chet Atkins's studio.

Anyway, we were talking about what?

Brown: The transition from Verve to CTI. You're working with Creed. So Creed is the common denominator.

Benson: That's right. We did two records. I think we did *The Other Side of Abbey Road.* Oh, the world hated that – I'm talking about the critics – hated that record. So that was the end of our stay over at – then we were having problems. Creed Taylor said, "I'm starting my own label," so forth and so on. I said, yeah, okay. "Yes, we want to be on it." We went over on his label.

Our first record was *Beyond the Blue Horizon,* which was a very weird sounding thing, but I had the chops. I had been on the road all the time, playing all over the place. My chops were high. They're getting higher and higher.

It was Creed's first record. He had to borrow money to make the record. So he didn't have any – the good thing about it is that he didn't have no money to put any sweetening on it, no strings or anything like that. So I just came in with the band. I had been on the road. So it had some really – some special things. We used to take a lot of chances. We didn't care. We just wanted to show what we could do. Bet you can't do this? And if you don't like that, try this.

Then he started getting a few dollars together. A few of the other artists – agreeable cats – were very great artists, as a matter of fact. Stanley Turrentine came over. Freddie Hubbard, Hubert Laws. We had access to all these great musicians. Ron Carter had been there a little while. So it was a great family we had going on. We were helping each other out on records. Stanley Turrentine's record *Sugar* was a fantastic record, with me and Freddie Hubbard. And then Freddie Hubbard's record . . .

Brown: *First Light*?

Benson: . . . *First Light* was also a great record. To put him – for the first time in his life, he was rated over Miles. So he really loved me after that. He said, "George, I'm the number one trumpet player in the world." I said, "Don't be braggin' on it, man. Just let it ride." But he really – because it's something he never thought could happen, and all of his friends were applauding him. I was up against him at the Grammy awards. My album *White Rabbit* was up for a Grammy, and his *First Light* won. I was happy for him. I said, "Hey, man, nobody ever nominated me for anything. I just happy to be nominated and on a Grammy winner, your record. Right on." I was happy for him. We became excellent friends, and listening to him play, I learned something every night.

I remember him coming to me once and saying, "George, I went out and got a transcription of one of your solos." He said, "I couldn't even play it." He said, "I've been trying to play it. I can't even play it. That's some weird stuff you're doing on there." I said, "I know. I don't even think about it. I just play it." And Miles started asking me those questions. "What do you think about when you play, George?" I thought he was kidding me. I said, "Oh, man, get out of here." I said, "I should be asking you what it is you do." Then, after about four or five times, he said, "No, I'm serious. I want to know what it is you think about when you play." I said in my mind, I said, man, Miles Davis is asking me what it is I think about when I play. I started trying to explain to him, but it took half a day to explain what I'd be thinking, because I don't know what the heck I'm thinking about when I play. I bounce off of things.

I used to practice so much. I have a theory that if you practice a hundred things, you'll remember 10%. So if you practice 1,000 things, you'll remember 100%, 10,000 / 1,000. So that was a lot of things. I found out that a lot of what I was saying – thinking, was true. I knew that I could never run out of ideas. I'd be on a date – not a date – dates too, but on the gigs at night, we'd play for six hours, six sets, and I'd have ideas all night. I'd be playing like it wasn't nothing. I guess that's what cats were hearing. They'd say – comment on my records. They were hearing these things, and I didn't know what they were hearing, because I couldn't measure my own successes.

Brown: Were you listening to other kinds of music at this time? You came . . .

Benson: I was listening to everything. I was listening to guitar records. I listened to Charlie Parker records, Art Tatum records, and other musicians who we would go to town and we'd go to their jam sessions or their gigs, and I'd hear what they were playing, all the organ players. That was what we came from, the organ era. So, Jimmy Smith, Jack McDuff, Johnny "Hammond" Smith, and quite a few, Jimmy McGriff and Groove Holmes. These were all still our favorite guys.

But the world was changing. The organ was going away. Piano was coming in. So I started – the greatest thing happened to me. There was a young genius organ player from Buffalo, New York. I met him when he was 15, and I knew he was going to be a great player. But his – I went home and met his folks. His mother begged me. She said, "Mr. Benson, don't take my son out of here. I want him to finish high school." I said, "Okay, Mrs. Foster, I will not take him out on the road." When he graduated from high school a couple of years later, he gave his mother a diploma, and then he left that same night, not to join me. He joined another band.

But I ran into him again. I always remembered his genius. He was having some domestic problems of some kind with his girlfriend or something. He said, "George, I don't want to play organ no more. I don't never want to play nothing, as long as I live." I said, "That'll change. You're fighting over a girl, life and death. That'll change." I said, "But if you want someplace to put your organ, put it in my studio – my garage." Then I called him. I say, "Hey man, I need an organ player, and all the guys got a gig." He said, "Okay, I'll do it for you." So he did it.

Now, everything started changing over the keyboards. I said, "I got a bass player. I need a piano player." He said, "I'm not no piano player." I said, "I know that." I said, "I know that for sure." I said, "But I need a Fender player. I got a Fender piano. We're going up to Canada." We went to Canada. His first piano solo, he got the biggest hand he ever had in his life. The place went berserk. Then he came to me, apologizing after the show, saying, "I told you I'm not a piano player." I said, "Did you hear these folks." I said, "I already know you're not a piano player. I played with the greatest. I played with Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and all the other guys. I know what piano's supposed to sound like." I said, "But there ain't nothing wrong with your piano playing."

So I had him in my band now. We needed a bass player. He called one of his friends that was [?], this young boy. Stanley Banks was his name. He brought him to rehearsal. Stanley was a kid. He was only 23 years old.

A year earlier, I had heard a piano player who was playing with Bernard "Pretty" Purdie at Buddy Rich's nightclub on the East Side of New York. I took his number, because I remembered how dynamic he was. For a whole year I had the number. I started having trouble with Ronnie Foster on keyboard. I said, I better cover myself, because Ronnie was unpredictable. He'd like to quit in the middle of the show. So I said – Jorge Dalto – I said, "Come on over here, man. Come to one of our rehearsals. Let's just see what happens."

Now we got two keyboards. Jorge, when he heard Ronnie play – because he had never heard him before – he said, "I can't play with your band." I said, "Why?" He said, "this

kid, he's a bitch, man." I said, "I know what he can do." I said, "But he's not you. You all don't play the same things. He's different than you." So he agreed to sit down and play.

I took them on the road. I can't tell you what happened that week, because it was the most incredible thing. First of all, nobody ever had a two-keyboard band, except for Ferrante and Teicher, two piano players. But there was no such thing as a two-keyboard band at the time. Later, Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock went out, but that was later.

I had these two keyboards, and they played multiples. Ronnie was a great synthesizer player, because it was similar to the organ technique. Jorge played great electric piano, but he played great acoustic piano, and I had him on clavinet, because Stevie Wonder had created a great sound, using the clavinet for a rhythm instrument instead of a guitar. So I had him playing guitar parts on the clavinet.

We went out that week. We went out as a side – as an opening act. When we left the bandstand – every gig we played – when we left the bandstand, the crowd was gone too. 80% of the crowd was gone after we left. Then the word got out. Don't hire the George Benson band. Because I remember, I got cancelled by Herbie Hancock. He was going to pay me $10,000 a week to work on the road with him. I said, what? I'm going to open for Herbie Hancock. $10,000. I'm wealthy. I'm rich. Then they cancelled us, because they heard the bad news, that we were butt-kickers. So we lost that gig.

The one thing we didn't have was a hot record. At that time, I had just signed a contract with Warner's. We got that contract because of Creed Taylor. I had cut a few records. We had one or two that made noises. One was called *Bad Benson.* Another one – I forget. It had a red label. You see any more of those CTI records there?

Brown: Oh yeah. I got all of the CTIs. *Body Talk.*

Benson: That's it. There was *Body Talk,* and then there was . . .

Brown: *Good King Bad,* after *Bad Benson.* I'll run down your CTI, starting with *Beyond the Blue Horizon, White Rabbit, Body Talk, Bad Benson, Good King Bad, Benson and Farrell.*

Benson: *White Rabbit* was a gigantic record . . .

Brown: Right, the last one that got you a Grammy nomination.

Benson: . . . was a big record for us, and there's a reason why. Creed Taylor had stopped using my photos on the cover. When they heard this acoustic guitar, some people thought

it was me playing. So they figured I was a white guy. I was in a store one time, getting ready to buy some strings and guitar picks. I was playing right down the street, in Washington, D.C. These two guys, white guys, they were talking. They said, "What's at the club this week?" They said, "It's a guy named George Benson." They said, "Who is it?" They said, "It's a white guy. He plays like Howard Roberts." I said, WHAT?, to myself. I stood there and grinned a little bit, but I couldn't let them know that I knew that they were talking about [me]. I said, man, this is amazing.

But all of my gigs now, which used to be so-so, there were lines around the corner at all my gigs. We were moving up in the world. But we didn't have a big record. We had a good record, but not a big one. So we're still playing clubs. The types of clubs we're playing, sophisticated clubs, all over America. I had a good band.

Then, when the records came out, Creed couldn't give us any accurate numbers anymore. We didn't know what we were doing, where we were selling records. He didn't have good distribution. That was the problem. When the record came out, *Bad Benson,* which we know sold over 100,000 records, we became interesting to other record companies. They said, if that company didn't have any distribution, sold 110,000 records, we probably could have sold a quarter of a million or a half a million records. So the word went out.

A guy came to me one day and said, "George, the conversation we're having is between you and me." He said, "There's a guy. His name is Nesuhi Ertegun. You ever hear of him?" I said, "I know Ahmet Ertegun." He said, "No, Nesuhi is his brother." He says, "He's in charge of the International, Warner International, Warner/Elektra/Atlantic." I said, "Yeah?" He said, "They're going to make you a big offer." I said, no. He said, "Yeah, they're going to come to you. They're going to make you a big offer." He says, "It's going to be over a million dollars." Man, I know something's wrong here. He said, "I know this don't sound right to you," he said, "but in the next few days, expect to hear something." He said, "And don't tell anybody where you got this from." It was a black lawyer who told me this.

Sure enough, we're playing at Keystone Korner in San Francisco, which Freddie Hubbard always says, "Right over there next to the Keystone Cops." The police station was right next door. We were playing that night, lines around the corner. A guy came in with a Bugs Bunny jacket on, a jacket with Bugs Bunny on it. I said, uh-oh. They came backstage. He said, "Yeah, who's your manager? What number can I call to get in touch with him?" So he took our number. We had a great time back there. He was talking. He said, yeah, such and such and such. He told me about all the people he knew. He was a good friend of James Brown, was on the road with him. So I knew he knew records. He was a Jewish guy who hung out with a lot of African-Americans. He said, "We'll call

your manager. We're going to try to work out something between you and Warner Bros. Records."

So I called my manager up first thing in the morning. "There's a guy. He came to see me last night, and the guy before that told me that Warner Bros. is going to offer me over a million dollars to do a record, to do a four-record deal." He said, "Don't believe all this stuff." He said, "Grover Washington sold 750,000 records, and he didn't make any money at all. Nobody offered him a million-dollar deal." I said, "But if somebody cares enough about you to offer you half of a million-dollar deal," I said, "why is this a big deal with you? You mean somebody can't love me enough to offer me a decent record deal?" Because Nesuhi Ertegun was a billionaire, and he told – I found out later – he said, "I want George Benson on this record yesterday. I want it right now." He said, "I don't care what it takes to get him on the record." That's what I heard that he had said. When I met him, I knew why. He was the biggest Benson fan, and he was a good friend of John Hammond and a lot of other people who wished me well. He was one of those guys.

My manager kept saying no, it was jive. "George, it's jive." I said, "Give the man a call." So they finally – he kept calling. I mean, I called him. I said, "My manager doesn't believe it." He said, "Where's your manager at? We'll go and see him." Somehow or another, we worked it out with Warner's, and I ended up signing with Warner's.

This is right after I had been beating everybody up on the road as an opening act. Now I got a deal with them. They gave me money. I bought a beautiful home, had money in the bank, moved out of the Bronx, over to New Jersey, brand new cars. The only thing I had to do now was to do this record for Warner's.

My manager went with me to California, and they gave us a big check when we signed the contract. They gave us a big check. I said, "Where's this bank at?" My manager said, "Where's this bank at?" They said, "Across the street." We went over and cashed that thing. We didn't trust nothing, man. I gave him his 10% right away. He put that in his pocket. I took $10,000 in cash out and put it in my pocket. I never – it made me feel rich, something I never dreamed would happen. I thought if I ever had $10,000, I would retire. That's where we were in my life. I sent the rest of it home by money order, not by check. I got a money order from the bank and sent it to my house in the Bronx, so my wife – it's like cash – so she put all this money in the bank.

We went – we had to do this record. We went, and we did the record. We had four days to do it. We rehearsed one day, and then we went in the studio for the four days of recording. By the third day, we had finished the album. On the fourth day, we're just dreaming away, hanging out, and listening to the tracks, because they were all so amazing. We were doing like breathing for us. There was nothing hard about it at all,

nothing, no edges. Most of the things we did were first takes. *This Masquerade* was only one take. Everything went so – everybody was so happy. I was so happy with what I was hearing back from the engineer. The thing that I had with him, I didn't have with Creed Taylor. I couldn't make any comments about the recordings, about the recording techniques and all that. But with this new engineer, I said, "There's something about this vocal. I never liked the sound of my voice." I said, "It's got too much low end in it. It saturates the tape, and it takes away from all the other instruments." He said, "We can do something about that," and he started clicking off the bottom end – the low end – on it, took off a few hertz. I said, "That's getting better." He said, click. I said, "Oh, that's a lot better." I said, "Can you do that?" He said, "I don't want to get too far. It's going to get skinny in a minute." I said, "Just one more." He said, click. I said, "That's what I think I sound like. When I'm talking to you, to me, that's the George Benson I think I'm bouncing off the wall. But when I hear my recordings, all loaded [Benson makes a rumbling sound] – loaded down."

So he got the EQ perfect. I remember it was playing back. *This Masquerade* was playing back, and Bobby Womack – I had asked for him to come in. We were going to do this song *Breezin'*, and I wanted some new ideas, because there had already been two recordings of *Breezin'*. I said, "What's the use of doing a third recording of *Breezin'*? I mean, What does it mean?" I said, "What we need is a new idea, something fresh. If we can get Bobby in, maybe he'll give us something new."

So he was coming in while we were playing back the playback of *This Masquerade.* He said, "Hey man, who the hell have they got a voice like that?" They said, "That's George Benson." He said, "Yeah, but I thought he was a guitar player." They said, "Yeah, he's a guitar player, but he also sings."

When Bobby came in, we got – oh, here was the comment. Tommy LiPuma, who's got great savvy, he said, "George, we could be here all night, and that song will never get better than that." I said, "I agree with you," because I liked what I heard. One take.

So now we're moving on to the Bobby Womack tune, and Bobby made the greatest statement of all. He said, "All of the recordings – I was on the first recording. The second recording was great." He said, "But I never got on that record what I wanted to get on it." I said, "What is that?" He said, [Benson sings the opening rhythmic lick of his version of *Breezin'*]. That's what was not on the other recordings. Now, to the world, that is *Breezin'*.

Brown: That was written by Gabor Szabo originally. Correct?

Benson: No, it was Gabor and Bobby Womack.

Brown: Okay. So it was a co- . . .

Benson: But Gabor did not think the song was going to be anything. So he took his name off of it. He didn't care whether his name got on there. He didn't care. He thought it was going to be nothing, because it was so simple. It was just, do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do. And it was a – they threw it together at the end of a jam session – at the end of a recording session, I'm sorry. It was like a jam tune. But Gabor was good at that stuff. He had a very folksy style. It was very simple, but it was jazzy in the way that he put things together. He had a good sense of harmony and stuff, and rhythm too, also. As a matter of fact, he was loved among African-Americans a lot. He sold probably more records among us than he did anybody.

So when he did that lick that became known as *Breezin'*, he set the tone for the whole album. Tommy LiPuma said, "The next day, George, I took this record to Warner Bros. They were all in these corporate meetings." He said, "Cut this. Cut this meeting." They were at this big oval table, about 15, 20 people. "Now cut the meeting." "What's going on, Tommy." "Cut the meeting. I got something. You got to hear this." They set up the speakers and stuff, because Tommy, he does not do that ordinary stuff. He brings his own engineer, the same guy that did the recording, his own speakers and amplifiers. He set it up. He said, "You've got to hear this," and he started playing *This Masquerade.* They said, "Who's that?" He says, "That's George Benson." They said, "But I thought he was a guitar player." He said, "Yeah, but he also sings." He said, "Get that record." He said, "I'm still working on it." "Don't worry about it," he said. "I just want you to hear what we're doing," and he put on *Breezin'*. They said, "When are we going to get that record?"

He took that record – which we recorded for peanuts – he took it to two European countries. He recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra. He recorded with the Munich Symphony Orchestra. Munich Symphony Orchestra was where Claus Ogerman, who wrote the arrangements, was. The problem is, they didn't have any earphones – they didn't have enough earphones for the orchestra, because we had a – I don't know – 40- or 60-piece string section. They didn't have enough earphones. So the greatest thing that could have happened, did. They took the earphones off. Nobody had earphones except the conductor and the arranger, and they did what orchestras do best: they watched the conductor, and the music floated and set a pad for me that made my music sound like it was in Heaven. Because they can't count. You can't have 60 guys counting "1". "1," you get 60 – rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr – but this, him, they know, and that's what made the difference in that record date. It was floating on a pad all throughout.

They kicked him out of the studio. He didn't buy enough time. So he went to London and finished the record in London. All that together, with all those meals – Tommy, he eats at

the best restaurants in the world, and he had his friend with him, his engineer – with all of that, the travel, airplanes, the studio time, a whole session, including the four that we did in New York, cost $45,000. So that record was a – it was in the black from bar 1. The first year we sold about 4-, 4-and-a-half million records, and they didn't owe nobody nothing. So they started giving me bonuses and stuff. And there's only six songs on the record. They were used to paying out for ten songs, especially in the publishing end. So they gave me the balance of the publishing money, just for bonuses. I'm telling you, the world turned into GeorgeBensonville overnight.

Brown: For the historical record, we know that that album went platinum. It was number 1 in the categories of not only jazz, but r-and-b and pop. That was the first time a jazz artist had been able to place. You had established a record with that recording, and now fortunately you've shared with us the genesis of that recording. Anything else you want to talk about that? Now you've reached your dream. This is the dream you've had all – up until this point. Is that correct?

Benson: That's right. Now we're on our way. The record was nominated for five Grammy awards: three for me and one for the engineer, one for the producer.

Brown: The engineer's name?

Benson: Engineer: Al Schmitt.

Brown: Oh, Al Schmitt.

Benson: He's got more Grammys than anybody.

Brown: Al Schmitt, oh yeah. I know him because of – through his association with Al Jarreau. Beautiful. Yeah, Al. Well, that fills in that gap.

Benson: Fabulous. We're very, very good friends. He's got quite a history, going back to Sam Cooke days.

Brown: Now is there pressure from Warner Bros. for you to be able to follow up on this incredible, this groundbreaking hit?

Benson: Actually I'm getting advice from everywhere. People started to say, "Hey man, don't do nothing different." They said, "Don't let nobody start telling you what to do here," neither do that. I said, "No, I think I know how to make a record." But everybody starts suggesting things.

We were fortunate to come into *Nature Boy,* because I always loved that, but I'd never thought about trying to match one of his performances. The one thing I always do, and that seems to work very well for me, is I try to stay out of the way of the original. State the case. In other words, pay respect to the original version, and then do something else. So when I did *Nature Boy,* I changed the tempo on it, and I started doing improvisations with some formulas on top and all that kind of stuff, to make sure that they know I wasn't trying to be Nat Cole, because there's only one Nat Cole. So I left him alone.

It was well received in Europe. It was gigantic. I was on the bandstand in Paris. Four or five girls came out of the audience. They all kissed me at the same time. They all had tongues in my mouth at the same time. I said, what in the world? I said, now I know I'm in Paris. And they were all young kids. I'm thinking, man. Now I'm in my mid-30s. If that had happened to me 10 years earlier, I would have been in great shape. But I still had a pretty youthful appearance. My father and my mother are very youthful looking people. They always have been. So I didn't look like I was in my mid-30s.

That tour worked out very well. Then after that we did . . .

Brown: *Breezin', In Flight,* and then the *Weekend in L.A.*

Benson: *Weekend in L.A.,* live. That's where I told the story about my grandfather and my father meeting up for the first time in 21 years and, for me, 31 years. That was an exciting day. One quirk we had. On the first night, when we recorded *On Broadway,* I didn't quite know where the tempo should be. So I was experimenting, and I started it off too slow. On the second set – if you hear the recording, you'll hear me adjusting the tempo. It starts off real slow, then it speeds way up [Benson hums a phrase], and then I back it up. I let the audience tell me. The [Benson hums and claps]. That's it. Then I [Benson sings] "They say the neon" – once I got the tempo right, because we had failed on the first one.

Tommy LiPuma fell in love with the first one. He said, "That's good enough for me." But when I started hearing back the playbacks – after we finished the session – it was very successful – I started hearing the playbacks. I said, now, let's get that *On Broadway,* because we took that version home with us that same night we made it, and we couldn't take it off. We had a cassette. We asked the engineer to make us a cassette, which he did in a mobile unit which was placed in back of the club. We took it home, and nobody would let us take it off. "Play it again," over and over and over, for hours, because it was longer. It was about 14 minutes long. The version – or 11 or 12 minutes – the version you hear is about 9 minutes.

So when we went for the playback – and I was happy with everything else – we got to what I believed was going to be the smash, because I never got a response on a song like that before, and then he played the first version on Friday night, which was the slow one. I said, "Tommy, take that off, man. That's not the one." He said, "George, this sounds fantastic. I'm telling you, this is" – I say, "Tommy, I've been listening to a version of this song that I know is going to be a smash." He said, "I didn't hear that. I didn't hear nothing like that last night." He said, "I think we erased it." He said, "I think we ran out of tape. We needed tape. So we just went back to an older that we had, and we just went over it." I got so disturbed, I walked out of that room and took a cab, or jumped in my car, a rental, and went back to the hotel. He called me back up. He says, "George, I think we found the tape." So I went back over to the house. It was my lawyer's house, or maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was Tommy's. He said – he put the – I said, "Let's hear this hit now, man. Put the hit on." He said, "I think the first one sounded good." He said, "But this sounds okay." I said, "Put on the hit, Tommy.' He put it on, and that thing was rocking from bar one. I said, "That's a hit record, man. If I ever heard one, that's a hit record." He said, "I agree with you. I agree with you."

We had one little quirk. But Tommy and I always – because he has a commitment to a music world, to music itself. I'm an audience guy. I've been looking in the face of the audience since I was a kid, and when I go to a place, I go there for one reason, to make people glad they came. That's always been my goal. If I had to do a circus act, I would, to get that reaction. But I don't have to. I play music. So, with the things I know in music, I should be able to accomplish that goal. That's always been my mentality. When I'm hearing a song back, I'm thinking, how would this go over in public? But I already knew that, because I did it in public live, and it went over like a fat rat. So I said, this – I'm going to enjoy playing this every night. So we had us another smash on our hands.

But I forgot to tell you what happened in between *Breezin'* and *In Flight,* or during the same time period. Michael Masser came to me. I heard there was a person trying to get in touch with me, but I didn't know who he was. I was invited to a party. It was all these bigwigs from record companies, executives. It was in Hollywood, or Beverly Hills, rather. There was this big room, all these great big tables, hundreds of people there, and a fight broke out. Somebody hit somebody in the head with a chair. So everybody's eyes was on this rumble, and I saw a guy crawling along the floor, trying to get through these legs. I guess he was sitting a couple of tables over, and he was trying to get to us. He ended up crawling over to my table. I told – I bumped my wife. I said, "Honey, there's a crazy cat coming over here on the floor. So don't pay it no mind."

He came over. He started making rumbles, talking. I didn't pay him any attention until he said, "Muhammad Ali." I said, "Muhammad Ali? What do you know about Muhammad Ali?" He said, "I'm doing the music to his film." I said – to myself I said, that's

impossible. I said, “You’re doing it?” I said, “Why are you doing the music to his movie?” – to the most popular African-American in the world. As a matter of fact, at that time he was the most popular man in the world. He said, “I wrote *Touch Me in the Morning.*” I said, “You did?” “I wrote *Theme from Mahogany.*” I said, “That’s awesome, man. What’d you say your name is?” He said, “I got this song I want you to hear. I’m writing it for Muhammad’s film, and I’d like you to do it.”

So I got his numbers and stuff. I ended up over at his house. He lived in the Hollywood hills. I went to his house. He started playing these beautiful melodies. I fell in love with the song instantly. He said, “George, we got one big problem. Arista owns the soundtrack. They got a lot of artists, and everybody wants this song. Johnny Mathis could do it. Gladys Knight and the Pips could do it.” And there were several other people. He said, “But I want you to do it.” He said, “Because you sound like Muhammad.” I got a foggy voice like Muhammad there. [Benson imitates Ali:] “I’ll drop you in four, unless you want some more.” That attitude. He loved that fogginess in my voice.

We [?staffed] off everybody. My record company didn’t want me to do it, because it would sell records for Arista, which was distributed by CBS. They’re like arch enemies.

When the record came out, it leaped everywhere at the same time, not in the jazz world, but in the pop and r-and-b world. Without any help from anybody, the record did its thing, and I started making – getting double the offers for my personal appearances, just because of that one record.

He got mad, Michael, because he didn’t get any help from anybody. He told me that they actually nominated him for an Academy Award, which he turned down. I believe him, because that’s what kind of cat he is. He’s a very proud guy. So we fought off everybody, and we created a classic.

Brown: *The Greatest Love of All.*

Benson: *The Greatest Love of All.* The other song – which I thought was a better song, but it didn’t have the – quite the meaning and it didn’t hit as hard on the mentality of the audience – was called *I always knew I had it in me*. It was a great song, also. But that song, *The Greatest,* took off. I remember Muhammad Ali called me in the middle of the night. “Hey George.” I said, “Muhammad?”, because I knew his voice. I knew him since he was 20. “I just heard that record. Tell me one thing.” I said, “What is it?” He said, “Would you think about me when you recorded that?” I said, “Now you know, Muhammad, I don’t go that way, man.” I said, “But yeah. Who do you think I was thinking about? About bad, man.” He said, “That’s all I wanted to know, baby. That’s all I wanted to know. It’s a great record,” and he hung up.

Brown: So, recorded on Arista, and of course then they got Whitney [Houston] to do another version herself. But could we return back to *In Flight*?, because when we look at the tunes on there, you already mentioned *Daytripper*, but you got *Valdez in the Country*. That goes back to the great Donny Hathaway. *The World is a Ghetto*, from War. But let's talk about the relationship with Donny Hathaway.

Benson: Yeah. There were two incredible singers out at the time, Donny Hathaway and Stevie Wonder. They both were just dynamic. I hung out for a short while with Donny Hathaway. I actually wrote a song with him which I found out later he recorded. But just to hang out in his company, I felt big-time. Say, man, I'm with the great Donny Hathaway. I said, "Let's go uptown." I took him to Minton's Playhouse. When he walked in that place, pandemonium set in. I didn't think they would know him from Adam. Everybody knew him. There wasn't a person in there that wasn't all over that cat.

We had just come from sitting at a piano in his living room, writing songs. I was listening to his tonality, voice. I said, man, that's a great throat that he has. Never thought that one day I'd be competing with him. A couple of years later, we had the biggest records in the country out. We were among the biggest record makers. I always wondered how he felt about that, what he would say. George Benson, the guitar player, songwriter, came a long way. I give him a lot of credit, because I tried to steal his technique, his vocal technique. I think what he had was just special, his phrasing and everything, and what came out of his throat. It had so much air in it. It was soft and yet powerful at the same time. And with his church or gospel experience – it seemed like he had a great gospel experience – it made him unbeatable. So that was a great experience for me.

And yeah, I thought about the song. Me and Phil Upchurch, we were very familiar with it. He had worked with Donny before, was friends with him. So that was a natural for us. We threw it together, and we called it simply *Donny*.

The World is a Ghetto, that's one take. There are no two takes that I know of on it. I remember one time. We were so tired after we did it, we said naw, let's don't do that again. I remember creating the intros [Benson sings the melody]. I said, "Give me these chords, man." [Benson sings]. "Let's go back." I said, "Now we need some rhythm. Harvey, bring us in, man." Harvey said [Benson sings a drum fill and rhythmic pattern.] I said, "March on through it." And he didn't let go. Harvey was quite a drummer. He knew what was in our minds, and he knew how to get the job done.

Brown: How did you guys hook up?

Benson: Tommy LiPuma. He said, "We'll hook you up with Harvey Mason." I said, "Please do, because he's" – I've been knowing him since we were both teenagers. I saw him go through Berklee School of Music, and now he was the hottest drummer in Hollywood. So I said, "Yeah, please, get Harvey Mason if you can." And Harvey wanted to record with me. He always said that. "I'm going to make a record with you." He kept saying, "I'm going to make a record with you." "Okay, man, we'll make a record." We ended up making several records together. But he tore that one up too, tore it up.

We learned something from him. We left that song intact, and it just went on for days, duh-duh-dut duh-duh-dut duh-duh – just started all over. It kept – it was too much. I think if we had taken out two or three minutes of that record and condensed it down, we would have had a record that would have got a lot more airplay. So those things happened to us too. But I learned, and when we did *On Broadway*, I made sure that didn't happen again. So we took a couple minutes out of *On Broadway*, and it made a difference. It worked.

Brown: *Everything Must Change*, Bernard Ighner. On this album you did some – you followed up behind *This Masquerade* with some vocals that had – *Everything Must Change.* That was on Q's [Quincy Jones] album, *Body Heat*, but it didn't get as much play, I think, as yours did. So, what was the inspiration to do that tune?

Benson: It was a great song, first of all. I didn't remember much about it. I didn't want to concentrate on the original version, which was expertly done, by the way, and it's still to me the best version that's on there, although Randy Crawford did a great version too. So I didn't picked up on all those – the wonderful interlude that he had in it. It really set a mood, like a bedroom kind of mood, to the song. I created my own thing, which is more of an r-and-b vibe. [Benson sings the rhythmic groove.] That kind of thing, which was a lowdown groove.

Brown: But you heard the original.

Benson: I heard the original.

Brown: On Q's album.

Benson: But if I had went back and said, let me study the original, it would have changed my whole opinion, my whole approach to the song. I tried not to do that, to keep me from imitating the original, and leaving the original intact, so that it can still be the classic that it is. That's exactly what happened. We left Bernard Ighner's version intact. Ours is different, and so is Randy's. I'm happy for that.

Brown: Then after *Weekend in L.A.*, now you got to follow up *This Masquerade, On Broadway.* What was – was there pressure on you now at this point? It's like, "Okay, George, what you going to do now?"

Benson: Yeah. There was always that pressure. I think we ended up doing the album with me taking a picture in the park in Detroit. What's the name? To me, it's my best album. It represents me better than any album. Earl Klugh's – the title to Earl Klugh's song . . .

Brown: *While the City Sleeps?* No.

Benson: No. Go back, earlier.

Brown: *Living Inside Your Love.*

Benson: That's it. *Living Inside Your Love.* That's the song that Earl Klugh wrote. He probably wrote it while he was still in my band.

Brown: Let's talk about that relationship, because obviously that – you – Earl Klugh. George Benson, Earl Klugh. We got to talk about that.

Benson: I think back to this kid whose manager owned the nightclub we used to play in Detroit, called Baker's Keyboard Lounge. It was a famous Detroit nightclub. It's on Livernois [Avenue] and 8 Mile Road in Detroit. Anybody who's ever been there will realize what kind of a vibe that is on that corner.

Earl, being too young to come to the club, his manager had to sponsor him. So his manager would sit him way in the corner, a dark spot in the corner where you could hardly see him. He saw all the acts that came through, Oscar Peterson, everybody. But he loved us. So he would always be there when I played. Or any guitar player that played there, he'd be there.

His manager, Solly Hartstein, who owned the club – he didn't own it, as a matter of fact. He was leasing the club from his friend Clarence Baker, who owned Baker's Keyboard Lounge. He said, "George, I'd like you to listen to this kid Earl. I think he's a great player. I'd just like to get your opinion." I said, "Bring him down there at the – we rehearse" – because I used to rehearse almost every day, my band, when I was on the road. We had nothing else to do. "We're going to rehearse tomorrow."

So he came down. After my rehearsal, he came up to the bandstand. Earl is a slow mover. He fumbled around. Plugged his guitar in, or maybe he didn't plug it in. Maybe he just

played acoustic. But he was on the stool, and he's jiggling this, tuning that. I said, come on, man. He started playing, and I heard real talent, perfect technique, finger style. I asked him questions. He said, "Oh yeah. I studied with a man who studied with Andrés Segovia." I said, "I can hear it, because your technique is perfect. You make no mistakes." He said, "I also play with a pick, but I don't like to." I said, "Man, don't play with a pick."

So his manager said, "How do you like him?" I said, "I think he's fantastic." He said, "Well, do something for this kid. Take him out on the road. Do something." I said, "Hart" – I said, "Solly, I can't do nothing for myself." This was way before *Breezin'* came out. I said, "I can't do nothing for myself."

But he stayed on my mind. So after I left Detroit, I was getting ready to go into the studio to record the album *White Rabbit*, and I called Earl. I said, "Earl, how'd you like to make a record with me." He said, "Yeah, man, yeah." So I brought him into New York, and we rehearsed a song I wrote, *El Mar.* Now Earl reads music very well. So when they came out with all this, Earl didn't even blink an eye. And he played piano very well also.

So I said – after the session was over, I asked Creed Taylor, "Man, how do you like this kid?" He said, "He's all right." I said, "Don't sign him then, because unless you love him, don't sign him. I don't want him to sit in no record company on the back burners." So I went around.

I had him in my band. After we did – the album came out. It was very successful. I asked Earl to join my band for a little while, and he did, about 11 months. Then he worked with George Shearing. He was reluctant to take that gig. I said, "Man, you got to take that gig, because you'll get the experience of playing with a cat that uses that kind of harmony, and all of the things, the experience that he has over the years, you will get some of that. It will make you a much better player. So he did.

Now he wanted a record deal. He's 19 years old now, and he's calling me up in New York. I said, "Man, why don't you come to New York, and we'll put some things on tape," because I had my studio in my – in the Bronx, in my garage. We put four songs on tape, and we sent them around. I sent one to George Butler and a few other people.

George Butler called me up. He said, "George, I just got a tape from a guy. His name is Earl Klug." I said, "No, his name is Earl Klugh." "And he says he's only 19 years old." He said, "I don't believe that." I said, "Yeah, he's 19." "I don't believe that. What I'm hearing is not a 19-year-old." I said, "I know." He said, "Plus, he's playing classical guitar, and he says he's black." I said, "Yeah, that's right. He's African-American. That's right." He says, "I don't believe it." I said, "Send him a ticket, man." So he sent Earl a

ticket. Next thing I got back was a record. They asked me to do the liner notes. It came out just a little after *Breezin'*, and if *Breezin'* hadn't come out that year, Earl would have been the biggest thing in jazz, because he sold 300-and-something-thousand albums. He would have been the big talk that year. His first record sold 300-and-something-thousand albums. Creed Taylor was bumping his head against the wall. Yep. "Don't sign him if you don't love him, man. Don't sign him." There's nothing like having a person in your corner who thinks the world of you.

My manager Jimmy Boyd was like that. I used to think he was getting in the way when he said, "Yeah George, they're trying to get you to go to Europe on the CTI Summer Jazz Europe tour." He said, "But not for that same money. I'm not going to" – I said, "Wait a minute, man. If I don't go, they're going to get somebody else." He said, "Let them get somebody else." He said, "It ain't George Benson. They ain't got these hands." I said, "But man" – he said, "George" – he said, "Let them get somebody else." And he was right. People said that when they showed up in Europe, they said, "Where's George Benson at?" right when they come off the plane. The guy said, "No, he's not on the tour." "George Benson's not on the tour." It became mundane. It wasn't very successful.

It's not bragging, because that won't do me any good. I love those cats, all of them, Freddie Hubbard and all of them. I wanted to be on the tour, because I liked being with those guys, and every night was a spectacular night in music. It's probably the best time I've ever had on the road, with those guys.

Brown: Because you had done earlier tours with the CTI?

Benson: Yeah. We did the American summer tour. That was all super successful. That's how Kenny G started playing alto. He heard . . .

Brown: Soprano.

Benson: He heard – what was it? I think Grover Washington. He was at one of those shows. I've probably got him on a video. There's a video of us up in Seattle somewhere, where he's from. I bet there's a little – Kenny Gorelick is in that audience. He was only about 12 then.

Brown: I want to cover a couple things. I want to look at the t.v. special you did for Charlie Christian, and then later on hooking up with Benny Goodman and recreating the role of your original hero. But one of the things that people, when they look at your career, they say, George Benson is a vocalist and scatting with his guitar, *This Masquerade* is where that started. Well, no. They can go back. If they look at your discography, the recording you did live at Carnegie Hall, and you did *Summertime*, you

did all of that. You did all the scatting and singing. So you had been doing that for a while. But it was just the format of *Breezin'* that got you to international popularity.

Benson: The first time I did that was unsuccessful. I had asked Creed. I said, "Man, put a microphone on me. I'm going to do something." We were doing *Moody's Mood for Love.* In the middle of the song, the guys started, "Boo, boo." The guys in the band, "Boo. That won't work. Boo." So Creed said, "Let's go on to something else. This is not happening." So it didn't happen. But when I said that to Tommy LiPuma, "Tommy, there's something I've been trying to do. Put a microphone. When I sing this song, I want to do some scattin' too, man, with it." He said, "Let's hear it." The one take changed our whole lives.

So later I said I owed Creed – CTI Records – one more record. That was the *Good King Bad* record. He asked me to do those things on it. I said, "Fool, you don't like those things. Remember? You said no. Now don't ask me to do something that I already know you don't like." Then they wanted to know what kind of sound I was using. "What kind of amplifier – sound were you using?" I said, "You didn't want to hear that then. I'm not going to reveal it now." I wasn't trying to be facetious or anything crazy. I was just trying to let them know, why go down the route? Are we experimenting here, or what? So we stayed with the format that was a CTI format. The record was successful, and it won a Grammy, as a matter of fact. I always put my heart in everything I do, but I didn't want to make nobody mad, and I didn't want no controversy. So let's stick with what we've been doing. I'll save that for that.

Brown: If we could go and talk about your experience on that PBS series, *Soundstage,* where you came on and did a re-creation of the Benny Goodman sextet with . . .

Benson: Charlie Christian, you mean.

Brown: Charlie Christian.

Benson: Man, that was an incredible – Creed Taylor had been trying to convince Benny Goodman that I was the second Charlie Christian. I mean, I don't believe that, but he thought that I was a close second to Charlie. So he invited me out to the PBS special they had honoring Benny Goodman, and they tried to put together a band that was similar, or some of the guys from his alumni – alumni from his other band. I think we had Red Norvo. Norvo was playing the vibes, and my favorite, Jo Jones, playing drums.

Brown: Papa Jo.

Benson: Um-hmm. And what's the great piano player, his name? And was it Mule on bass? No. The band – the guys who used to play in his – oh, Edwards? Was it Teddy Edwards? No. I can't recall.

Brown: I've got a recording that you did for Columbia that had Benny Goodman on clarinet, Al Grey, trombone, John Bunch, piano.

Benson: No, no. That's the recording. That wasn't even a great one.

Brown: Let's just see if there are any . . .

Benson: No. On the PBS special, we had his – Wilson, I think was . . .

Brown: Oh, Teddy Wilson.

Benson: I think that's him, Teddy Wilson.

Brown: Oh yeah. He was in the original trio with Gates – [Lionel] Hampton – and Gene Krupa. So that's Teddy Wilson, right.

Benson: Yeah, he was on there.

So John Hammond had been trying to convince Benny that I was the second Charlie Christian. Benny Goodman was, "No. You'll never be Charlie Christian." You know how he talked, the way he talked. So they let me come on the show, and we were doing *Seven Come Eleven* [Benson sings the melody]. I was happy. I said, oh man, I'm sitting in for Charlie Christian here. The guys in the band, I noticed they were very quiet, because during that era, Benny Goodman was considered a tyrant. So they couldn't say or do anything on their own. They had to wait until Benny told them what to do. They still had that leftover mentality. They respected the man. Don't get me wrong.

I didn't know nothing about that, because I don't know nothing about what happened 40 years ago. I'm just hitting it with the band. He had an unwritten law. When Benny Goodman goes like this [unseen gesture], that means, he's getting ready to play and everybody else got to shut up. Get low, and get in the background, because it's Benny Goodman time. But I didn't know that law. So we're playing, going along. Benny had already played his solo. Now it's my turn. He looks over. He had the – so I started playing my Charlie Christian style solo. [Benson scat sings a line.] I had my George Benson licks [He scat sings more.] Now John Hammond's [Benson snaps his fingers and laughs] – same thing he did the first night he met me. He was going to town. Now Benny's going to shut me down. He goes [unseen gesture], and I kept playing right

through it [Benson scat sings], and the band guys woke up. Now Teddy Wilson goes [unseen gesture]. Now he's alive. The whole band started looking at me now. Now they come alive musically, too. [Benson scat sings], and I'm playing [Benson sings], eyes half closed [Benson scat sings]. So Benny – it was the second time. He goes [Benson inhales], and I played right through that too. The band is going crazy. "Oh man, yeah man," and John Hammond's just going to the moon [Benson laughs]. I didn't know what was going on. I'm thinking they diggin' me, because I'm thinking I'm playing a hell of a solo.

That was only partial – part of the thing that was going on. Finally, Benny got smart. He joined me, and we did a fugue. That took the tune to the moon, because he's a great player, and he knows how to swing. He was the King of Swing for no – they didn't just throw that on him. He was the king. He started playing this incredible solo, joining me. We did a fugue. I started looking at him. [Benson scat sings.] He'd [Benson scat sings]. Then the place went to the moon.

So I had my day in court. I had my day with that one. If I never did anything else in my life, I would have been happy with just that. And then he invited me. I ended up playing with him on the road. Just before *Breezin'* came out, I was playing with the Benny Goodman Sextet. Had some good cats too.

Brown: Yeah, that's when I read the group with Al Grey and all those guys. So how did that relationship – did it develop, or did he keep you at arm's length?

Benson: Everything John Hammond had been telling me about him was true. He still seemed to have a mentality that was back a few years, a '40s mentality. Not even '50s. '30s and '40s mentality. When I went up to his apartment to rehearse – because he rehearsed all the time. I know why he was so good at what he did, because that's all he did. He rehearsed all the time – when I was coming up to his place, he said, "Oh, are you here?" We are [?] at all. [Benson imitates a high clarinet sound.] When I got in his room, he was playing. "Can you play" such-and such? "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think so. How do want to play it?" "Play it like it's written." I said, "I don't read no music."

Then he wanted to fire – Bucky Pizzarelli was his normal guitar player. I said, "No, man, you can't fire Bucky Pizzarelli. That's your guitar player." I said, "Because I can't do this every week." I said, "I can only do it when I'm not doing anything with my band." So he tried me out. We went out a couple weeks. Then a week came where I couldn't go out with him. I said, "No, I've got a – I'm sorry. I can't put my guys in my band out of work, four other musicians." His manager was a lady. She said, "If you" – she said, "You mess Benny Goodman up, you will never play another union gig." I said, "I ain't in no union now. I ain't been in the union in eight years. They kicked me out eight years ago. I stayed out." The law says you don't have to play – if you're a bandleader, you don't have to

belong to a union. So I said, I'll go with that, because I got tired of the union picking at me all the time. So I stayed out. Then I joined later, so that the other guys in the band could have the benefits, the union, and I got some great benefits too.

One time I went with a guy to pick up a check at the union office in L.A. He was picking up maybe $3- or $4-, $500. So I was there. I said, "Put my name in the system. See if I've got anything left over here." The lady came back about 15 minutes later with a batch of checks, $8,000. I said, what? I said, see, now I'm in the union. That's the union I'm talking about.

But yeah, that's what happened with Benny. But we finally – we made peace with him. I think they gave him a tribute at Lincoln Center. Me and the great guitar player that died in the helicopter crash – blues guitar player. Could play. Ray something, maybe. Stevie Ray Vaughan. He was part of the tribute that we did to John Hammond, a good gig. Oh, the tribute was to John Hammond, and Benny Goodman happened to be there. That's right. He played on the tribute to John Hammond. That's what it was. And Stevie Ray Vaughan was on the gig. So it was a nice night of music, but it's the last I saw of Benny, because after that he passed away.

I've got good memories of him. He lived up to everything that I had thought that he was going to be, and more. I knew he was a great musician, but I didn't know how great until I started working with him. Yeah, he was a consummate musician, and rightfully so. He came from the classical world. So he had classical technique. He had perfect technique, control of his instrument. He had one of the best sounds on the clarinet of anybody. So yeah, I gained another kind of respect for him. The stories John Hammond told me, though, were all incredible. So I heard all of that. It didn't lessen my like for him, but it made me see him from a different point of view.

I let everybody be who they are, because they ain't going to change me. I'm who I am. Whatever the heck that is, that's who I am. So when I see cats who have different quirks, I find that they're interesting people. We ain't the same. No two people are alike. So I leave them alone. I let them be who they are, and the things I can accept from them, if I want to be around them – when they start doing things I don't like, I just disappear. "Yeah, see you later."

When Miles started cutting the fool, I'd say, "I'll check you, man, next time. I'll see you." I just don't hang around. But when he's the Miles that everybody knows, and he's being the Miles that we understand, I let him be that, because we learn something from that. When he spoke – every time he spoke, I learned something. He told me who I was in history, and the part that we played in history, in this American classical music. It wasn't all that he said it was, but we did play a big part in something that became a worldwide

piece of art, and a very respectable art. So he made me see myself and my place in history as being different from what I saw it before. I was just trying to make a living.

But it's so important, what we do, because it affects everything around us, people. So that part, I let people – you ain't going to learn nothing if you shut people down, and if you avoid everybody, you ain't going to learn nothing. You've got to go out and say, I'm glad I'm around Thelonious Monk. I'm glad I got a chance to rub shoulders with Ron Carter. I didn't realize how important he was in my career. He dressed up all my music, because I'm a raw guy. I play baw, raggedy. But Ron dressed it. He put all that harmony underneath me. He had rhythms that led me from one thing to another and dressed it up.

Herbie Hancock, man. I didn't know how far – because he's so subtle with what he does, you don't realize how powerful he is. When I go back and listen to those records now, especially that one where he was playing them 4s on it, I said, man, somebody should have ran me out of town when they – but yeah, and all of the versatility that he has. You know what I'm talking about, Herbie Hancock.

Freddie Hubbard and all those guys, with their weird quirks. Stanley Turrentine, with his attitudes. Hey man, if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be George Benson, the one people know today. Know when to do what. That's important. Sometimes it's good to know when to back up. You ain't going to win every battle. I don't care who you are.

And do you have to look at everything like a battle? The minute Earl Klugh did the album called *Collaboration,* people were – they said, "George, why didn't you chop him to pieces on that?" I said, "Why? For what purpose would that – what would that mean or solve?" I said, "But listen at the collaboration, man" and that album went to the moon. That thing, we sold a million copies of that. You know? So now they try to talk me into going into contests with people on records. I said, "Naw, that's not me, man." I said, "Where was you at when I was Billy the Kid, when I was 24 years old and could play like Django almost?" Nobody was as good as Django. But I could play. Where was they at then? Now they're – Billy the Kid. He's 90 years old. Now they're all coming, to be known as the man who took Billy the Kid out. No. I said no. I said, "You're going to have to deal with your own career the way I did, not beating people up.

Brown: You mentioned talking with Miles. So you've maintained a relationship with Miles after the recording session with Miles. So . . .

Benson: Oh, but a loose one. We started doing a lot of the gigs, same gigs. Miles was mostly the headliner, because he could pick his spot on the gig. So they knew to get Miles. They have to let him go on the show where he wants to go. Sometimes that would

be first, and people would miss him, because they'd come, thinking he was last, and they, "Oh no, Miles was on hours ago." "What?"

Then, when I came into the picture, now he wanted to be on last. He wants to show, I'm the king of this theater. He probably – in the dressing room one time, he cussed me out. "What you stay on so long for, man?" I wanted to tell him, "Because I'm the star now," but I wouldn't do that to Miles. And I wasn't. Miles was still the star. He was still that person that everyone wanted to see, that mystic guy. I even enjoyed that too about him. He was unpredictable. Just didn't know what he was going to go do next. So we all went with that, and we loved him. When he passed away, I think it was – he lasted longer than anybody imagined he would. That's first of all, when you hear about his life style.

But the people who knew him, they drew close to him. He had a lot of people who just worshiped Miles. I met a few. Freddie Freeloader, a cat named [?Azzise]. These cats, if Miles say, "Go jump in the lake," they would have, and he would have did it casual, "Go jump in the lake, now." Miles.

We figured that, without Miles, the record world, especially the jazz world, would not be what it is. When he introduced John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley and people like that, and McCoy Tyner, and the great bass player who was my father's second greatest friend. What was his name? A little short guy. Played bass with John Coltrane.

Brown: Jimmy Garrison?

Benson: Jimmy Garrison was my father's – one of my father's best friends also, among that crowd. But when Miles introduced John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley and a few other people, it changed the whole world's opinion of music. It changed, flipped things over to a new era, like we moved into a new space, like what Charlie Parker did. Who believed that the man that Charlie Parker had in his group, who wasn't as good as everybody else yet, would actually turn out to be the greatest thing in the jazz world of his time, the greatest shaker and mover, and the slickest cat in the world at the time.

So that's why you can't shut people down. You don't know. And that's why I feel the same way about the guys I had in my group before. This little kid I used to talk about, Ronnie Foster. To me, he's one of the greatest musicians of all time, because he could do things that nobody else could do. He was a free thinker. He didn't make up no licks. He made them up as he went along, and it was always something different. You didn't know where he was going to end up. I don't think he knew either. But it would always knock you off your socks. So I would put him in a position where he had to do that. He does it. If the tune got dull, I said, "All right, Ronnie. Hit it," and he'd take it from here to like that. I said, now [?]. He even took them out of the grave.

What you got there?

Brown: I'm going to look at – you're talking about working with some of the greats in jazz. Let's talk about your work with Quincy on *Give Me the Night.*

Benson: Have to go back to the beginning of that. I had been bumping into Quincy Jones in various places in the USA. I remember one time, in Chicago, we were at the Hancock building at some party or something. It was the first time that we got an inkling that we might work together. I said, "Man, I'm looking forward to doing something with you." He said, "I got a thing coming up in L.A. We're having a battle of the big bands. I'm putting together a group. I got Jimmy Smith" and a few other guys, and so forth and so on. So I joined him. I joined his band on that show. It was very successful, and then we started talking about making a record.

After that time, *Breezin'* came out, went to the moon. Then, now was our time. "How would you like to work with Quincy Jones?" I said, man, nobody would turn that down. I had a meeting with him at his house, he and his engineer. He said, "George, I got a question for you. You want to make the greatest jazz record in the world, or you want to go for the throat?" I laughed. I said, "Quincy, go for the throat, man. Go for the throat, baby." I said, "The greatest jazz record's already been made. Charlie Parker put that stuff to bed years ago with *Just Friends,* Charlie Parker with strings." I said, "I'm not going to compete with that stuff."

So he put together his A team, with Gregory Phillinganes, whom I knew from Detroit, and he had been in my band – well, he joined my band later. No, he did – he sat in with me and played some with me. I knew he was going to be something special too. He was Earl Klugh's homey, and they were very – they grew up together, friends.

So he put together that team. I said, "Who is the great drummer you have?" He said, "George, you know he's white, don't you?" I said, "No." He said, "Yep."

Brown: John Robinson.

Benson: J.R. I said, "Are you kidding me?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "He's like a drum machine." I said, "Don't leave him out. Let's bring the A team in." And sure enough, that stuff went over like a fat rat, everything we touched.

But the first part of the meeting, where we were trying to find out what to put on this record, I told him – I said, "I like Latin-based things. Because the rhythm is so solid, I can go in between, do my thing, and end up – I know always where 1 is." So we put on

records from all over the world. He played me African records. He played me Latino records. Then he played stuff from Brazil. Then we heard this song. [Benson scat sings Ivan Lins's melody *Love Dance.*]. I said, "What in the world is that? That's mean." We put it on. Then he played another song [Benson scat sings Lins's melody *Dinorah, Dinorah*]. I said, "Man, that's the stuff I'm talking about." He called him up. "George Benson loves your music. Yeah, we're thinking about doing two of your songs." It was three of them. The next day, that cat was up here from Brazil, and he was directing them, because there was some way he approached harmony that was slightly different from the way we think. So he straightened out the harmonies for us.

We went in the studio. We worked for about – I don't know – maybe a month, every day for a month, all night in the studio. In all, we came up with – I used to ride around Beverly Hills at night in my rented car and play the stuff that we had just finished doing. I heard magic happening, because he had one of the greatest engineers on the Planet Earth, Bruce Swedien. Bruce made – he could make a cassette sound like a 5.1. I was listening. I said, man, this is what I call music, drive around.

Then Q would say – I'd come back the next day – "George, we're going to put some vocals on this." I said, "What? I like it already as an instrumental." "Yeah, but" – what's the arranger's name? I mean the writer's name? Rod Temperton.

Brown: Rod Temperton.

Benson: "Rod wrote some lyrics. He wants to try them out." See, we would do 10 sets of lyrics – different set of lyrics. I said, when is this going to end? I said, "Pick something, man, and let's do it." And Quincy was, "Well, it's going to be all right. Don't worry about it, George. We're going to get it right." So finally we got a set of lyrics that we liked. We labored.

Now the record's over. We're all congratulating each other and the whole trip. Then he calls me up the next day, "George, we have one more tune." First of all, I forgot to tell you. The first song that sounded like a smash was *One Hundred Ways.* We recorded that. I'll never forget. He says, "George, they're having a party tonight, Warner Bros., and they want to hear what the artists are doing. So I told them I'd be over with one of your cuts." He said, "I'm taking over *One Hundred Ways."* He took it over, and it blew the party away. They had already been playing half of the night. They'd been playing another song that had become a smash, with Larry Graham, *One in a Million.* He had just recorded that. They said, "Have you heard this song by Larry Graham?" "Yeah." Then they put on *One Hundred Ways.* They said, "Oh my. This is a smash."

But it didn't get into the album. But what he replaced it with was – I can't cry. The album sold five million copies. After we finished the whole record, he calls me up. "We got one more tune." I said, "No, Q, come on." He said, "No, George, I'm telling you. Rod wrote this one – it's one more tune. We just want to try it out and see if it means anything."

So I came in. He said, "We got all the tracks done. Everything's done. All you have to do is come and put your part on." So I came in. He said, "First of all, it needs some guitar licks." He had a name for the different formulas I had. I forget the one he used for this one. Some kind of squiggly. "Play that squiggly thing that goes like" – so I went [Benson sings the lick]. He had me and Lee Ritenour in the studio. Lee was supposed to play background, but I said, "Let's play this lick together. You play the upper part, and I'll play the down, in unison" [Benson sings the lick.] We had a little hook. I started doing the vocals. Rod Temperton was all over me about the vocals. "George, you just don't have the vibe. No, sing my melody. Don't sing your melody. Sing my melody." So I got strict with it. Then when I got strict with it, he said, "Can you loosen up a little bit?"

But here's the whole song, rested in this: after we did about 100 tracks, Q said – I said, "Q, I'm tired. That's it." He said, "I think we got it. I think out of all those tracks, we can piece it together." He said, "Can you do" – and I started – I said, [Benson sings with a raspy, trebly tone] "Whenever dark has fallen." "See what I mean? I'm tired." He said, "George, can you do me one like that?" I said, "What do you mean, do one like that?" He said, "Do one with that voice." I said, "Man, no. You'll put that out on a record." "No, I'm not going to put it. I just want to see what it sounds like." That's what he put out. I did the whole thing. [Benson sings] "Whenever dark has fallen," and he put that out.

To show how smart he is, though: he knew that was so different than the George Benson that people knew, that they wouldn't play that. So he put on the B side – he knew they was going to change over to the B side, because that sounded more like the George Benson they knew – he put an instrumental on the B side. It didn't make any difference. They still turned it over. And that became the song, except it was listed as a B side. So people who didn't realize that, played the A side, thinking it was that song. And by accident, they'd be in the middle of it before they realized, oop, oop, I've got the wrong thing on. They'd take it off, and people who heard the record, said, "Hey, what was that thing you just took off?" He said, "Well, I played the wrong side." "No, put it back on. That sounded great." The B side hit the charts first, boom, and then *Give Me the Night.* People started begging for it. They flipped it over, and the record went to the moon. That's how slick Q is.

Even when we went to present the record to the record company, and they wanted to hear what he was doing, they had all these bigwigs at the table. Not one of them got any ears. They wouldn't know a note this big from a note that big. So he plays – he says, "I want

you to judge and put down a number of where you think these songs are, from 1 to 10." They'd be – they'd put down. The one that came to the top of the list was *Love x Love.* He said, "Oh, I see you guys picked *Love x Love.* Okay, we're going with *Give Me the Night.*" They said, "Uhhhh, okay Q." They really respected him. They love him, because he had sold a record with Michael Jackson. He had sold seven million albums with Michael. They figured, oh man, we can't lose. So he convinced them to put out *Give Me the Night* first.

The experience with him was incredible. We had some hard points. Don't get me wrong, but I loved working with him, and I loved his – his whole machine that he had in process was great. He had a great engineer, great studio, great ideas. Q is an idea man.

What you got?

Brown: One of the things that people are going to look at throughout history, they're going to look at George Benson starting – making his recording career as – with organ, with Jack McDuff, working in the format that was really gaining popularity as soul jazz in the early '60s, and then crossing over to more of an r-and-b format in the late '60s with Verve, and then moving into the CTI – A&M, the CTI era of George Benson with all the real – the Don Sebesky sweetening and all of that. Then that leads up to the Warner Bros. The Warner Bros. is what launches your career to become an international pop star. When we think back about that trajectory of your career, it seems like – with receiving the NEA Jazz Masters award. I'm sure you're familiar with this. When you were given a chance to talk about your career, you talked about how important it was – how important jazz was to you, or is to you – not was, but is to you, because you received the award just a couple years ago, and that's one of the things you talked about, was how jazz is important to you. Is that something you still hold in your heart, as far as jazz?

Benson: Definitely. Let me tell you. I talked about a young man named Larry Smith who took me to his house. I drove him home from a gig. We were both kids, 17 years old. He said – he offered me a cup of coffee, so I'd stay awake, driving back home. Then he played Charlie Parker. I said, that's it. That's the way music should be. That is the epitome of music. As far as I'm concerned, that's what I think music should be.

I played that record, *Just Friends*, because it happened to be on the jukeboxes all over the city. So every time I got ten cents, I'd play *Just Friends.* I knew the solo backwards. You know what that did for me? It made everything else easy, because that's one of the most sophisticated solos you will ever play, or hear. So, whenever it came on the jukebox, I started humming the solo to it. [Benson scat sings.] Nothing was hard after that.

So when I started doing those little things that people think is hard, you know, *On Broadway* [Benson scat sings], that ain't nothing compared to *Just Friends*, because it had all the great, correct chord changes, all the harmony – the harmonic concept that he built during the solo. That stuff was outstanding.

So yeah, jazz is the one that paved the way, that put me in a position to do things that nobody else was doing. When I start doing the thing that identifies – when they hear, they [say], "Oh, that's George Benson," it's because – that's because of Charlie Parker and because of jazz. I can play things on the guitar that I would never be able to play as an r-and-b player. Years ago, I couldn't think like that. I wasn't exposed to anything, until I got into the world with jazz. With Jack McDuff, he was cussing me out every night, and the guys in the band stayed on my back about getting it right. When I had my own group, I experimented, and I got thrown into the company of Miles Davis, Freddie Hubbard, Hubert Laws, and a lot of other great musicians who demanded – they had a vision of George Benson or concept of me that I could never live up to, but I tried. If it wasn't for jazz, I wouldn't have been able to come close.

So, like Louis Armstrong, who owes his great popularity to jazz, it made everything else so simple. He handled everything else like – with kid gloves, like it was nothing. *Hello, Dolly* was nothing to him. That's why he didn't fall head over heels in love with the stuff. It was nothing. But his experience at those kind of things made that fall out of his mouth like he wrote it. It was like nothing to him. He made you believe it, every word.

That's what happens to me. When I record today, I make things sound so simple that people think it's easy. It isn't. I still have to imagine it first. Then I have to make it sound interesting to my listener. That takes thought. It has to be thought out. It ain't no haphazard – it ain't a jam session no more. Those days have gone by, at least the jam sessions I knew, where they played the same song. They still play *Now's the Time*, 65 years later, and I think that's the biggest argument that people have, that jazz musicians don't have the glue, because you could go from New York to Los Angeles, and the guys knew – they all what each other were into, and they just said, "Hey, we're going to jam on" this here. "We're going to jam on" that. There was probably maybe 20 songs, 10 to 20 songs that everybody knew very well, and you could always jump on a blues. You could jump on 10,000 blues tunes, if you wanted to. Make up a lick as you go along.

But I think those days are getting far and fewer in between. That's why we tried to make our experience affect all music, not just jazz music. The world will never be one thing. That much I know. It ain't going to be classical. It ain't going to be hip-hop. It ain't going to be jazz. It ain't going to be nothing, no one thing. It's going to always be – they're going to have their areas, but they got to touch. They have to talk somewhere along the way. You have to speak to a person. When we pass a person on the street, we at least say

hello, even if they don't understand it. You know, domo arigato, or whatever it is. [?]. So we still have to understand something about each other, and then we find we got things which are compatible. "I like your rhythm," Americans say to the Cubans. "I like your jazz," the Cubans say to the Americans. So they get together, and they make some exciting music.

Do we have to divide it up? You get your credit for your jazz. I get my credit for my Latino. No, man. It's music. The world gets the credit. The world gets the benefit of that, and music itself gets the credit, because it wasn't invented by us. We didn't invent music itself. We took the elements and used it the way our God meant us to use it, in a way hopefully that's beneficial to yourself and all. That's the way I look at it.

One day – the arguments that we had and the bickering that we had about music is going to be in the past. We're going to say, man, what in the heck were we arguing – were we fighting about? If we had stopped fighting, we would be much better today, because only when that part is gone and we realize we are part of the world, are we going to benefit, because jazz music is a great form of music, and it has power far beyond anything we imagined yet. I'm still thinking about the one tune. I'm still hung up on *Just Friends*, even after I heard John Coltrane and gobs of other great musicians, and I worked with a lot of them. I still – I think we have not explored it, what's – the power that was in that one song or that one performance by Charlie Parker 60 years ago or whatever it was. Yeah, '49? '52? Something like that.

Brown: That's over 60 years ago.

Benson: 60 years ago. So I still think, once we get past this, musical prejudices, we're going to use what we have, that power stuff that comes from jazz, which I think really dominates more than anything else, because it's more creative. It allows you more room to breathe. That's what I love about jazz. I can be this way today, and I can change and wear blue and green tomorrow and make you like it, with jazz. Play it different than I did yesterday. I think I'll play it slower, a little more funk on it. Tomorrow I'm going to have – it's going to be all technique. I'm going to wow – knock them out with my technique. They ain't going to believe what I'm going to put on them tomorrow. That's the craziness that'll be going on in our minds.

Brown: When one looks at your career and compares it to the way jazz musicians are coming into this community, this family, these days, we see that you were nurtured. You were mentored. You came – you learned jazz from the streets, in the clubs, from master to pupil. You were encouraged. Earlier on in the interview yesterday you mentioned that – I think it might have been your father – said, "Son, always play the blues, because blues you can hear everywhere in the world."

Jazz has that power too. All three of us sitting at this table are jazz – we're all jazz musicians, if I can use that category so broadly. We have discovered that through our travels. Everywhere we go, people want to listen to jazz. Some even want to try to play it.

You were honored as an NEA Jazz Master. One of the quotes from the booklet from the NEA Jazz Masters that you said, "I'm just so glad to be included among all my heroes and all the people who made this music great." This music is great, because it has touched people, and it continues to touch people. There's something, if I can use the term, magic about this music. You've talked about it. Your life has basically been a personification of that magic from somebody coming from the ghetto and now an international pop star, but still valorizes this music we call jazz. So what does this award figure into you now? You've got a Hollywood – you've got a star on the Hollywood walk of fame. You've gotten multiple Grammys. You're recognized the world over. But you still say jazz – my heart – jazz is important to me. So does this award mean something to you?

Benson: I'll tell you what jazz has done. For the black race, it did this – African-Americans, and maybe others too – because we weren't looked at as intellectuals. Jazz changed all that. You had – if you were going to keep up with Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, you – first thing you had to recognize that these cats were giants intellectually. You had to be.

Brown: Can we go back before that and look at Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington?

Benson: They were first. They were still doing a raw – well, Duke Ellington, forget it, man. Duke Ellington showed the world something about African-Americans, from every point of view. His compositions, his writing ability – songwriting ability, his arranging ability, his ability as a piano player, his harmonies that he – man, he – and his different styles of music that he was in. Yeah. That's the thing I'm talking about. He made people look at us from a different point of view, that the African-American element was a major part, or a great part, of what we call jazz music today.

People who thought we could never muster up that kind of intellectual prowess were pleasantly surprised about people like John Coltrane, who took it over the top. Charlie Parker introduced it beautifully, and the world loved him. The jazz world did. Not at first. They learned to love him. Some people will never love him, because he changed the whole world, like that woman said, like that woman who brought her dad to meet me at a club. He said – her dad said, "There was a guy who was going to change – who was going to destroy jazz. He had a name that sounded like an animal." I said, "You mean

Bird?" He said, "That's it." I said, "Charlie 'Yardbird' Parker." "Yeah, that's the name." He truly did. He destroyed jazz as they knew it, and he turned it over to something else.

Dizzy Gillespie had the right answer, though. He said, "Why is it we keep saying our music is bebop, and you keep saying it's jazz?" See, they had no identify. They lost it's – they buried it in there. They lumped it in with jazz. That hurt, because now, people go to a concert. They don't know what they're going to hear. Is it going to be avant garde? Is it going to be smooth jazz? Is it going to be traditional jazz? Is it going to be modern jazz? Dizzy was right. He said, "Our music is bebop."

Well, it's jazz. It still – it had the one element, which is improvisation, yeah. But rock musicians improvise. I say, if that was the case, Jimi Hendrix would be considered one of the greatest jazz artists on the planet Earth. My father said I got him with that one. I said, no, jazz is not just improvisation. They do that in every form of music. Not as well, because they don't understand harmony and theory like we do. They don't understand the possibilities like we do, and they're blocked in by traditional thoughts and desires of people who listen to the music, which jazz really isn't blocked in that great, like other music is. They know jazz musicians will take chances and go to the moon.

But it did exist. Charlie Parker was not accepted at first. Now, after he died, then they – now he's a wizard. That's the way that happens. That's the way it goes. But intellectually, jazz music has put us into the world. It caused the whole world to see us from a different point of view. When we started going to countries like Japan, they [said], "Are these the ones they said were not so great? Are these the ones who were slaves? What?"

[door bell rings]

I have to answer that door, gentlemen.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: One of the things that I learned from studying Charles Mingus is that he said this music is passed from mouth to mouth. That's what we were talking about, from master to pupil on the bandstand, working with the greats and learning the music. Nowadays, the majority of people who are coming into this profession we know as jazz are learning it in the academy, in the institutions. Do you see a difference in the music itself, insofar as the players or the direction of the music?

Benson: They have different sects of the music, or sectors. We've got the technicians over here. We've got the soulful artists over here. They both belong in the same category,

but they're approaching it from different points of view. Everybody seems to be trying to prove a particular point. But until you stand in front of an audience, all of that, the things you learned, won't mean anything. Even the soulful ones. Sometimes they just go someplace else that has no meaning. They're just rambling. The technical people, they're exciting. They take what they know works, and they use it. It hits a certain part of their audience, and they get their due. But to excel in that music, sometimes you have to go to that extra mile. That takes another kind of knowledge. You have to take everything into consideration, and they have to – when you talk to somebody, in order for the person to understand what you're talking about, you have to communicate to them. You've got to speak a language they know. You can't speak to a Chinese man in English. He just doesn't know what you're talking about. You're making all kinds of gestures. He's responding, yeah, you clown. Okay, yeah, bye. But he's not getting the message.

To get the message, you've got to speak a language, speak in a story that they can understand. Lay it out. Even if you're doing an instrumental, some things suggest certain things. When you heard the great saxophonist who went to jail, in Joliet – what was his name?

Brown: Joliet. That's back there.

Benson: One of the most fantastic. Remember him and Gene Ammons – oh, that's his name. Gene Ammons

Brown: Gene Ammons. Yeah, okay.

Benson: When he played, every bar, every note, and he didn't care who he was playing with. He blew everybody away, because his notes related. They could understand him. He didn't have no tremendous thing. He had enough technique to say what he had. That's where your technique is important. Can you say what you want to say in your technique? Do you have enough to say – do you master the language enough to say what you want to say? Then that technique is all right. I learned that from Andrés Segovia.

On the other hand, if you put too much stuff in, they can't absorb it. You can't play 100 years of intellectual into the mind of a person who never – you leave him boggled. Oh yeah, he's mesmerized by what he heard. "Oh, I didn't know men could do that. Wow." But did he get the message? No. Because his next gig, he's going to hear a country player down the street or a guy who – which there ain't nothing wrong with it. That he can absorb. He understands that. Until we learn to do that with our music, then jazz is going to be meandering, with all of its greatness. With all of its greatness, it's going to be meandering.

Where do we go from here? Our biggest enemy is the lack of exposure. I – they've come to me many times. "George, what are we going to do for jazz?" I said, "The answer is so simple, I don't even know why you're talking to me." Of course I'm there to help too, but help I can do. Fix the problem? No. The fix is this: you've got all these people who are now – they grew up with jazz when they were young entrepreneurs. Now they're wealthy. They own things: construction companies, medical firms, medicines. They made billions. They love jazz, they say. Go get a quarter of a billion from them. Get a couple hundred million dollars from them and put 20 stations in America, two in New York, one in Chicago, two in L.A., one in Florida, one in Seattle. Cover the country, and in 10 years, jazz will skyrocket to the moon, because nobody can compete with it.

Who can compete with jazz music? Nobody can. I hang out with soul artists. I hang out with B. B. King. I hang out with the hip-hoppers. I hang out with the rap guys. They all know me, and they love me, because they know I respect them. I make records with them. Can they hang out with me? Uh-uh, no. Not when I go off on my tantrums, they can't, because when I start talking about chord changes and play things they never heard of, then it's a whole different story.

We're not bragging when we say that. I'm just showing you the flexibility of what you learn when you learn jazz. You learn music from the inside out. Now I can take it anywhere I want, because now I understand the insides, the guts of the music. It's not just a house where you're standing on the side and you're looking in, "Oh, that's a nice house." You don't know what it's made out of until a storm comes along.

But if I had my choice, I'd play jazz every night, if I had my choice. But I'd be playing to about 10 people in a year's time. It already happened to me. I went on the road, took the best jazz musicians I could find. Went on the road in a place that I had played a year earlier. I had 23,000 people. I couldn't even fill 1500, because the word went out: George don't play none of his hits anymore; he only plays jazz music. That's all we played, and it was all over. It took me five years to recover.

Not because I'm worried about – just, that's the statistics or the semantics, if I may use that word. That's what's involved. They can't respond to something they don't know. They know my other music. They don't know jazz, or what they know about jazz is so small, it all sounds the same to them. [Benson scat sings a rhythm.] "My cousin plays jazz." He's 17 years old. What the heck does he know? I thought I knew jazz at 17 years old. What did I know? Nothing. And they're calling it jazz. Do you know some of the fabulous musicians from the '50s and '60s, who made jazz what it is today, who sharpened it up and took it to another state? You ever heard of Cannonball Adderley? You ever heard of" – what's his name, who was to take John Coltrane's place? Hank – Hank Mobley. The most underestimated musicians. When I played – I didn't know how

good they were either, until I played with them. You can't measure. So they need exposure. Once they get that exposure, they'll be just like me being exposed to Charlie Parker. It only takes one song, one lick, and the cat is hooked for life. You say, I want to be like that. I want to do that. But they can't do something that they don't know. So it's all about exposure. I think they need to buy some radio stations, t.v. too. That's my answer.

Brown: That's a great answer. Let's hope somebody does get this out to everybody.

You mentioned – of course, Charlie Parker. You've mentioned him several times – you mentioned John Coltrane. How do you feel he figures in this trajectory of the evolution of the music? What did he bring to it?

Benson: I got the story from John Coltrane's friend that he grew up with, Benny Golson. They were in Philly. They hung out every day, he told me. He said one day they got the news that Charlie Parker was coming to town. The baddest cat, he was coming to Philly, playing at the music hall. So they went down and caught the show. He said the next day he couldn't get in touch with John Coltrane anymore. This is Benny Golson talking to me. He said, "And for weeks I couldn't get in touch with him," he said, "and that's what's strange, because him and I were together every day before that." He said when he finally did catch up with him, he was a totally different cat from every point of view. His music changed dramatically. His whole demeanor changed. He was never that same John Coltrane. If you can imagine, John Coltrane used to be a rootin' tootin' saxophone player. Used to walk bars. [Benson scat sings an r-and-b saxophone lick.] One note – Johnny one note [Benson sings further]. Compare that with *Favorite Things, Giant Steps.* Is this the same cat? Yeah, it is. Same, but different. Educated, has a direction, but was given that tool by jazz. Couldn't do it – he didn't wake up no little kid who used to play country music and be no – uh-uh. You got to live it. You live the life. You borrow from everyone you can. Like you said about borrowing, somebody's handing it to you. I asked all the questions to all the people I thought were the right people. I learned bits and pieces, and that's who I am today. I'm made up of all my experiences. I'm not a guy who, all of a sudden, God came out of Heaven and say, "You – from now on you are George Benson, and these are going to be your favorite licks, and your tone will improve masterfully. Your technique will go to the moon."

Brown: How come God talks like . . .

Benson: People think God . . .

Brown: . . . talks like Catfish?

Benson: I'm doing mankind's impression of who God is. No. I'm a Bible man. No. First of all, he doesn't speak to man directly. He doesn't do that. So we don't know what his voice sounds like. But all the voices we know, and in the imagination of men, they imagine this person sitting on the throne with his hands folded up, passing out orders. No, it's not like that at all. So excuse my impressions.

Brown: I was just pulling your leg. It touched something in my – to hear that Catfish.

Benson: You heard it many times before that.

Brown: Oh yeah. Along this – we're going to wrap up here shortly. Because people like Wes Montgomery encouraged you, other folks have encouraged you along your way, are there people coming up now that you feel are deserving of that encouragement maybe? Or that maybe have even sought your advice or your blessing? Or just other musicians, say young – well, not young any more, but say a Mark Whitfield or any of these folks?

Benson: Definitely. I love that young fellow. I heard him in his budding years, when he first came to New York and he was part of what they called the Young Lions. He lived up to those things. I think he has some ways to go. I think some things, some realizations, and need a producer and a manager who understands him, understands who he is, and who can give him some direction, so that he can have one direction and not be all over the place. Don't get me wrong. I don't think he's all over the place, but I think there's some things that he could do that would be more beneficial to him. That's all. I love him. I don't care which way he goes. He's just my kind of guy. He's a personable guy, great musician, got wonderful technique. He loves music. He loves everybody in the music world. And he's a great family man. His boys, he turned them on to music, and it looks like they're going to be fabulous. At least one of them, going to be a fabulous musician.

So yeah, people like that. What's his name that used to play with the girl from Canada. What's her name, who's the number one jazz singer in the world right now?

Kimery: Russell Malone.

Benson: Russell Malone. Same thing. They both came along about the same time. Russell may be a year or two older than Mark.

They used to come to my house. I was working on some new theories. One day, I said, "I want to turn you to something, a great idea, I got. I think this will revolutionize the world." Then I heard them playing. I said, "No, you're already on the right path. I already like what I'm hearing. I ain't going to throw no wrench in that – in the cogwheel." I said, "Man, keep doing what you're doing."

But in matters of life, because I've been through experiences, all kinds, I can help. So when they get to a snag in the business wheel, or something like that, they call me. I always pass out what I consider my best advice, and those cats are doing well. So I'm proud of that. I wish more cats would call me, but you know they're afraid they might get the – the commercial bug might hit. Somebody might connect them to the commercial bug that they think hit me. I say, no, no, you can't worry about things like that. If you do, you'll never get anywhere. Can you imagine Einstein worrying? "I got this theory, but I know that if I ever let this be known, anybody will think I'm a nut." Why? Because it don't fit into their way of thinking. "Everybody knows the world is flat. Come on, man. And I don't want to mess that up."

It seems to be that way for people. I always tell my friends. I said, don't worry about those things. Worry about it after you get rich. When you get rich, you can help somebody and do something. Maybe you'll be the guy to buy those 10 radio stations I was talking about. Then you can do jazz some good. But don't worry about it while you're poor, or broke and hungry. Stop worrying about that stuff. The same people who are saying that you ain't no good, that you're commercial, are the same ones that were talking about you when you get the other way. When you're on top, they'll say, "You know, he used to be really great." They like to talk about B. B. King, the baddest cat that ever done it, as far as I'm concerned. They talk about, "When he had the blues years ago, I mean, you could tell he had the blues." I say, "Man, get out of my face with that bull crap." B. B. King is cultured everything. If you want to learn about blues, he should be the first school you go to, at least among the first cats.

We know where he got it from. He told me that T-Bone Walker was there. I knew T-Bone Walker too. He told me that was his mentor. He wanted to be like T-Bone. Everybody got a mentor. "Can you" – and he said – the same thing happened to me – he said he had a band, and people were asking him, "Can you sing something, B. B.?" He said, "No, I can't do that, baby." "Why?" He said, "My drummer don't like singers." He said, "If I sang, he was going to leave the band." So – he said he woke up one day. He said, wait a minute, man. This is my band. Then he started singing, and his career went to the moon.

I had a guy do that in my group, same thing doing. And guess what he does for a living? Sings. And Oscar Moore told that to Nat Cole. "I don't want to be in no band with no singer." So he left the band. The last album he made before he died, about eight years ago, all vocals. So you can't rest your career on what a critic is thinking about you. We don't play for critics. We play for them. And they said, boy, you play that song one more time, I'm going to buy you a house. I'm going to play it one more time.

Brown: George, I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you about this. One of the things that Gil Evans said about Miles – and I know you were quoted also. They had footage of you saying – and to be a jazz musician when I was in high school, and to be a black jazz musician, whoa – *Miles Ahead*, that documentary on Miles, Gil Evans said Miles changed the sound. He changed the sound of his trumpet.

When I think about the guitar, there have been virtuosos, and I have to bring up Jimi Hendrix, because you actually mentioned him earlier. He changed the sound of the guitar. He changed a lot of things. A lot of people come behind him. Maybe you could – if there was any – your impression or feelings about Jimi Hendrix, and then, the whole school of musicians coming behind him who have gone on to try to change the sound, like Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell. But if you could talk about Hendrix, that would be, I think, valuable.

Benson: He had a great advantage – several advantages. His biggest advantage was his left hand. He was left-handed. That always changes the tune, even in a boxing ring. Joe Frazier beat Muhammad Ali because he switched to right-handed just to get the fight. Cats don't agree to fight left-handers, because they always have trouble with them. So Joe Frazier switched to right-hand, so he could get the fight. Then, when he knocked Muhammad down, he switched to left, caught him off guard, and knocked him down, which caused him to win points and win the fight.

Left-handers, when they strum the guitar – we strum it down. We strum it from low string to high string. Left-handers strum from the high string down to the low string. That's the way harps play. That's a whole different mentality. You don't know why it sounds different, but it sounds different. It's different from a technical point of view.

His other great thing is the thing I mentioned yesterday about his environment. I think his mother was Chinese and his father was African-American. But he went to a white school in Seattle, because that's what that town was, basically. So he got all that vibe from the people around him, what they liked to hear, the kind of things – then you wonder, why do they want to hear that crap? Because it's part of who they are. It's their history, and it's their folklore, and everything else. So I can live with that. But let me add this to that [Benson imitates Hendrix's guitar sound], because we have that creativity. That is the thing that black people have. They have the ability to improvise. It's a great gift that we have. You find the same thing with Prince.

Brown: With Hendrix, he – for me, I hear the blues in Hendrix.

Benson: Oh, definitely.

Brown: So he comes out of that tradition. So like . . .

Benson: He's B. B. King with a fuzz tone and a sustain pedal . . .

Brown: And a wah-wah.

Benson: . . . and a wah-wah, but knows how to use it. Because everybody around him was using that stuff. B. B. King don't use wah-wahs and stuff, because nobody around him was using it. They was all the same, playing straight blues guitar. Then he saw this, T-Bone Walker, playing with his teeth. Jimi Hendrix did not invent that, but he took it to the moon, though. If you add a little stardust to that stuff, your mind goes to the moon, then you're going to get moon down here on your instrument. I mean, I really don't know that. I'm not going to mention those things in a serious way, because I did not know Jimi Hendrix's lifestyle.

I met him once. I think Ronnie Isley told the story. I told the story, the other day, about Ronnie Isley. They did an article on him. They said, "How did you meet Jimi Hendrix?" He said, "One of my guys called me up in the middle of the night. He said, 'I heard the baddest guitar player in the world. His name is Jimmy James'," or something like that.

Brown: Um-hmm. Jimmy James.

Benson: He said, "Yeah? Why do you think he's so great?" He said, "They say that about everybody. Everybody's great." He said, "I'll tell you how bad he is. I took him by to see George Benson, and George Benson wouldn't even let him sit in," because I was the hottest thing in New York at the time. Ronnie Isley had heard me too, because he came down from the Apollo Theater. He said, "Now I know you're lying. Nobody's as bad as George Benson." That's what he told him.

I had heard about Jimi Hendrix, but I knew he didn't play no jazz music. He couldn't have sat in with my band, because my band played uptempo all night [Benson scat sings]. Or we're playing – we played [Benson scat sings the melody of *Cottontail* at a very fast tempo]. That's not Jimi Hendrix's music.

Years later – I didn't pay any attention to Jimi Hendrix. Because he wasn't a jazz player, I didn't pay him any attention. I said, well, he's just some fluke that everybody done fell in love with. Then one day I heard a record, and I said, man, who in the world is that? I said, it can't be but one person. It's got to be that Jimi Hendrix cat. He was playing the *Star-Spangled Banner*. I said, yep, that has got to be him. Messing this melody all up, but somehow I could hear even while he was messing with it like that. He's probably the first

musician in history that messed with that song and didn't get arrested, because everybody else, they throwed them in jail, instantly.

You have to have respect for him, because he – in a short time, he raised the whole world's attention. I respected him. I saw him once after that. He was at the Apollo Theater. They were having – I mean, not the Apollo Theater. Madison Square Garden. They were giving a concert. He had on the weird hat with the feather in it. He walked up to the bandstand. He gave Aretha Franklin a check for $10,000. That's like 100 G's at least today. They were having a benefit, and he walked up and gave her a check for $10,000. I said, whoa, that's my retirement money. If I had that, I wouldn't have to play no more. That's my life. But that's what he did. From that moment on, he was a positive in my mind.

And his music, once I heard it, later, makes him another positive. As a musician, he's got the respect of everybody around him. So I got to do that too. He made the whole world love him, and I found out it's legitimate. I've got to fall in line with that. So yeah, he deserves his popularity.

I got to go, Montgomery.

Brown: Yeah, we all got to go. George Benson, thank you so very much. I want to say on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Endowment for the Arts that you have helped the world to understand the humanity of this music, the greatness of this music. I just want to thank you for participating in this, and please continue to do what you do.

Benson: Thank you my friend. I appreciate it.

Brown: Thank you, George.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)