

Benny Green

Benny Green grew up in Berkeley. He began classical studies at age 7, and by 12 was playing jazz, urged on by his father, an amateur jazz saxophonist who taught Benny tunes and exposed him to such jazz giants as Powell and Thelonius Monk. After studies with such Bay Area jazz pianists as Ed Kelly and Dick Whittington, Green moved to New York in 1983. There he worked with Betty Carter for four years and with Art Blakey from 1987-89.

During his first year in New York, Green found elders such as Walter Bishop and Walter Davis to guide him. On an evening when he sat in with the Messengers Betty Carter stopped by to check him out. She was impressed, and within a week he had auditioned and immediately won a spot in her band joining drummer Lewis Nash and bassist David Penn. "Betty had provided a window into a whole world of arranged stories and emotions and life experiences at a really profound level through music. She paid a lot of attention to the lyrics in the song and would remind us not only to think about the chord changes and the harmonic changes, but also to really relate the story the song told to our own personal experiences and deliver that through the music", remembers Benny Green, "also, she demanded from me to give her Benny, and, if necessary, put away all my records and work on developing my sound."

Green left Carter to join the late Art Blakey in 1987. He had followed the Jazz Messengers closely since his California days, and even while with Betty, he kept abreast of the Messengers' songbook. It was, to drop a cliché, a dream come true. "I learned so much with Art. One is consistency. Consistency in art and performance is a reflection of consistency in spirit and attitude. As a bandleader, one of the most important things I've experienced with Art is how to pace a set. When you've heard a set of music from Art, you felt like you've been cleansed or washed over with the spirit of the music. When you add that to the vast numbers of great musicians who got started in his band, you see that he was really a prophet for jazz", Benny explains.

In 1989 he left the band to prove himself. That mission led him first to Freddie Hubbard's group, where he and his future bandmates, McBride and Allen, discovered a deep rapport, and to Ray Brown, through whom he has picked up an appreciation for one of his current idols, Oscar Peterson.

"With the Ray Brown gig I'm getting a heightened appreciation for my role in the rhythm section as a time player, and not just a soloistic voice piled on top of bass and drums. I've been able to edit and trim down the rhythmic aspects of the music so that the pulse is more predominant. I'm a firm believer that music doesn't have to be complicated if it feels good", says Green.

Green's idol Oscar Peterson received the 1993 Glenn Gould Prize, a prestigious live-time achievement award given away by a Canadian organization formed to perpetuate the ideas and accomplishments of Glenn Gould. So far the prize has been given away three times. In 1987 to R. Murray Schafer, in 1990 to Sir Yehudi Menuhin and now in 1993 to Oscar Peterson. Starting with 1993 the winner of the prize is asked to name a young musician to have great promise. Peterson's choice of Benny Green makes the pianist the first young artist ever to receive the Protégé Prize.

Another dream come true!