

Breezin' Benson plays sophisticated jazz for PSU

By LYNNE MARGOLIS
Daily Collegian Staff Writer

There's no getting around the fact that I am a confirmed George Benson fan, and have been ever since I first heard him play. Just thought you should know right now where I'm coming from, before I attempt to give you a review of his concert. With that out of the way, let's carry on.

I thought the concert Benson and his band put on Friday night was, in a word, tremendous. Though they played hit after hit, it didn't seem at all like they were mechanically running through a worn-out repertoire of tired tunes.

On the contrary, each song seemed to send a new current of energy pulsing through the audience. From the very first song, everyone was keeping the rhythms alive, and that just fed more juice into Benson's performance.

In a post-concert interview, Benson said he never plans his shows, preferring to pick up his cues from that audience current. He said he used to plan his shows, but felt that they were never any good when he followed a formula.

So what you heard Friday night was guaranteed spontaneous performance. If a couple of late chords bothered you, maybe you're being too critical. After all, the beauty of a live performance is in the spontaneity of the music — something impossible to capture in a "perfect" studio recording.

It took a little while for the band to loosen up onstage, but once they did, they cast an unbreakable spell over everyone in Rec Hall. When Benson came out and broke into "Breezin'," that was it — I was totally under his power. And I didn't mind one bit, either.

When Benson launched into his instrumental, "White Rabbit," the man and his music were bathed in a pool of yellow light. At that moment, the vivid images his music always created in my brain were brought to life right there in front of me. Perfect — just like I thought it would be.

Watching Benson and the band play was an experience. There's something so sensuous in the way they move; in the way they caress every note of each song. Especially Benson; when he glides his fingers so smoothly along those guitar strings and soothes you with his voice, it reminds me of slow-dance music. Even when he does a faster tune, like "The World Is a Ghetto," you know that the lights should be soft and low, because this is "mood music" — intended for lovers.

It's time to mention keyboardist Ronnie Foster here, because his synthesizer work on "The World Is a Ghetto" was just fantastic. If I remember correctly, somebody in WAR played harmonica during that song. There was harp playing during Benson's version too, but it was all the work of Foster. Dennis Davis, the drummer, seemed to get better once he let himself go for this song, and Stanley Banks finally got his tambourines to stand up for some fancy footwork as he simultaneously got down on his bass.

And it was so nice to be able to hear the acoustic piano and clavinet artistry of Jorge Dalto instead of the usual Rec Hall smothering of all but the loudest instruments. Of course, I did have a front-row seat. But it seemed like his beautiful piano playing reached even the back rows, judging from the response he got.

Granted, jazz (and Benson's brand in particular) is not really a large crowd medium, but when you can't have the intimacy of an Eisenhower Auditorium or Syria Mosque, you do the best you can. Benson's performance didn't seem to suffer at all, in spite of the Rec Hall disadvantage.

Benson is undeniably one of the greatest jazz performers around. Those who think he "sold out" for commercial popularity must be forgetting the fact that he deserves every bit of recognition he earns.

It's not as if the guy has been "promoted" like so many other so-called "artists"; he's been playing a long time, but has just recently become appreciated by the masses.

Benson didn't have a fancy lighting show (with his lighting technician, Benson was lucky when the lighting was even on cue); he didn't even change guitars once during his two-hour performance. Why should he, when he can skat sing with his voice AND his fingers, and reach so deep inside you with his melodies? He did all that and more with his music, which is really what it's all about in the first place.

Benson said that "jazz offers a musician a chance to be himself." That's what was so great about his concert (and the whole Jazz Festival weekend). It was remarkably free of contrivances, because jazz is a down-to-earth medium. Jazz is sophisticated music, and George Benson plays excellent jazz. Maybe the fact that the audience loved him so much goes to show that, as far as good music is concerned, Penn State has finally come of age. It's about time.



George Benson

Photo by Pat Little

Taylor Trio: Virtuosos of jazz

By STEVE LESTER
Daily Collegian Staff Writer

The Billy Taylor Trio last night illustrated better than words ever could why Taylor is so "appalled" at the lack of jazz instruction at American schools of music.

"Jazz is America's classical music," he often says. At a workshop at the HUB yesterday he said today's music requires more than what is learned from studying only European music.

"Most teachers come through a conservatory training as I did," he said. Then when they get a teaching position "They say 'I don't want to mis-educate someone.'"

Mis-educated or not, Taylor's trio reflected the expertise of any classical virtuoso as it generated enough appeal to earn a standing ovation after almost every song.

The highlight of the first half may well

have been "Echoes of Ellington," a medley of variations on several of the Duke's works, such as "Sophisticated Lady," "Mood Indigo," "Caravan," "Take the 'A' Train," and others.

Taylor's own dedication to the black church, "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free," followed the medley. The song, which Taylor describes as "something very meaningful," has become a theme song for the civil rights movement.

Next came "One for the Woofers," which featured bassist Victor Gaskin, followed by a piece giving the "multiple percussionist," Freddie Waites, the spotlight.

The elaborate label stems from a course Waites teaches called (are you ready?) "An Introduction to the Multiple Percussion Instrument." (Drums, in other words.)

Taylor's composition "Suite for Jazz

Piano and Orchestra" highlighted the second half of the program. Like most of the other pieces, the suite lasted for about 15 or 20 minutes but seemed like less than half the time.

It's amazing how three musicians can mesmerize an audience for such long periods and then generate so many standing ovations.

Taylor probably is the most vivid example of a virtuoso to have appeared at Penn State in recent years.

Among other things, he composes, records, writes instruction books, lectures at colleges, appears on radio and TV (he used to be the music director for the David Frost Show), and his dissertation on "The History and Development of Jazz Piano, a New Perspective for Music Teachers," earned him his Ph. D. in Music from the University of Massachusetts in 1975.

the daily Collegian arts

'Preservation' sparks joyous crowd

By DAVE SKIDMORE
Daily Collegian Staff Writer

"Jazz is the expression of one's animal self," says Narvin Kimball, banjo player for the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.

That animal expression was joy last night in Rec Hall as the band played to a Penn State crowd for the third time in as many years.

Since 1961, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band has been spreading their foot-stomping brand of music around the world.

The band which spends five to six

months a year on the road and the rest of the year at Preservation Hall, New Orleans, has been instrumental in keeping New Orleans jazz alive, says the band's founder Allan Jaffe.

Preservation Hall has toured the world from Europe to the East, but band members have had to come a long way to reach world wide fame.

The band's piano player, Sing Miller, recalls playing for \$4 a week in the '30s. "Rent was 60 cents a week and I couldn't make it," he said.

For the low pay, the band members

had to develop many skills on many instruments.

Band leader Percy Humphrey, born in New Orleans in 1905, started his musical career as a drummer. He now plays trumpet for the band.

"I started beating my way through the world and ended up blowing my way," he says.

Last night, Percy Humphrey's trumpet blew the crowd away.

As he led "When the Saints go Marching In," the aisles and stage thronged with ecstatic listeners.

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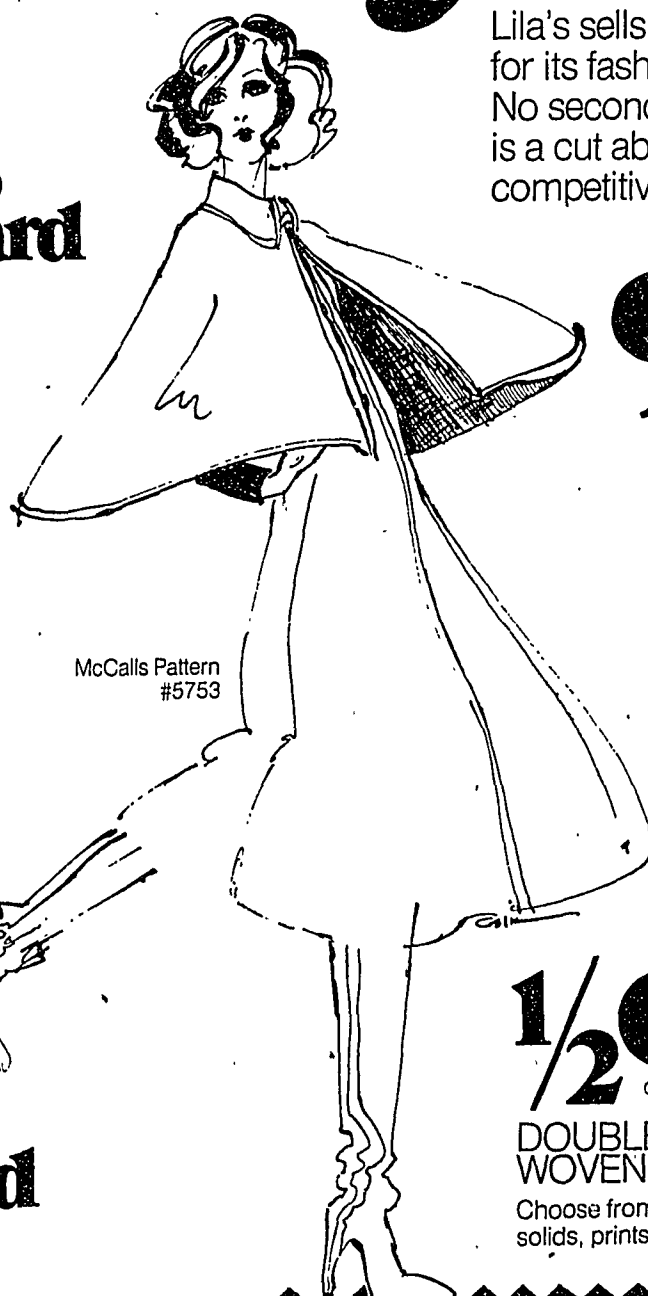
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