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January/February 2016: Seamus Blake

Benny Green

Written by: Mike Manny

One of my favourite piano players is the brilliant jazz pianist, Benny Green. If you haven't checked out Mr Green, go listen to him. Wait—maybe read this first!

Born in 1963 in New York City, Benny Green grew up in Berkeley, California where he started taking piano lessons at seven years old. He moved back to New York in the early 80s and he has been on the jazz scene ever since. Quickly recognized for his musical talents, he was asked to join Betty Carter's band, and after a stint as a Jazz Messenger with Art Blakey, he spent time in Freddie Hubbard's band. Among Benny's many accolades, he was chosen by Oscar Peterson to be the first recipient of the City of Toronto's Glenn Gould International Protégé Prize.

Benny is hailed as the most exciting, swinging, hard bop pianist in the last 30 years. His mastery of the ivories illustrates his consummate love of the art form of jazz. Some qualities of his playing that leave me in awe are his perfectly executed block chords, his fast and flowing two-handed octave displaced lines, and his beautifully smooth and colourful harmonic approaches to melodies.

One of his best recordings is *Testifyin'* (Blue Note 1992), recorded live at the famous Village Vanguard in NYC. It features the Benny Green Trio, with Christian McBride on the bass fiddle, and Carl Allen on the skins. This has gotta be one of the most swingin' jazz recordings you will ever hear! From the onset, it grabs you and takes you on musical ride you will never forget.

"Don't Be Shamed" opens the recording with some classic block chords from Benny, and we're off! Next thing you know Christian and Carl have entered the musical airways, the three of them like a well-tuned jet engine powering forward and forward still.

Punctuated left-hand fifths begin the second track, "Humphrey." After some opening musical paragraphs between the three musicians, Benny's melodic piano solo takes you on a well-formed adventure. Later on in the track, we hear some wonderful stick-work by Carl Allen who definitely gives listeners a taste of what is still to come.

The third track, an original named "Bu's March," pays homage to one of Benny's musical influences, the great Art Blakey. From the quiet solo piano to the loud, big band chording, you can hear the classic Jazz Messenger sound and the Art Blakey drum march influence. The first time I heard this track I almost fell off my seat—it swings that hard!

After the opening statement of the gospel-influenced title track, "Testifyin'," we get to experience the magic that is Christian McBride's bass fiddle bowing. Carl Allen's tambourine on the hi-hat stand keeps the time feel, and when Benny's piano solo kicks into gear, he whips you back into the saddle of swing with his full eight-fingers-two-thumbs Basie-style big band chords. Testifying is right!

The driving swing is apparent in the wonderfully-arranged spiritual, "Down by the Riverside." Benny's low register block chords give the statement of the melody a powerful, dirty feel. He once again shows his vast knowledge of the piano, literally playing every note in perfectly placed glissandos. Towards the end we hear the return of the big band influence with the addition of some heavy shuffle feel—you'll want to have some space around you, cuz this track will have dancing off your feet!

"I Should Care" is a beautiful solo rendition of the well-known standard. True to form, Benny manipulates the harmonies with ease in his block chords, then in the improv portion, he shows his skill with stride piano techniques, an early jazz piano style that many modern pianists struggle to perfect. His facility with these classic piano techniques is one of the reasons I admire Benny's playing so much.

"Billy Boy" is the closing track, and the trio introduces the traditional nursery rhyme tune at an upbeat tempo! Benny's large piano chords declare the melody, and his piano solo showcases his clean, flowing hard bop lines. And—wait for it—his killer two-hand octave lines will blow your mind! The driving bass lines and colourful drumming are flawless. Man, I just love it all!

The internal time clock of these three gents is, simply put, remarkable. And I just can't help but mention the swing that just gushes out of this whole recording! I hope you're racing to check out Benny Green right now—trust me, your musical palate will love you for it! Learn more at his website, bennygreenmusic.com.

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