

DON DIXON



BENNY GREEN

PEACEFUL WARRIOR FOR THE MUSIC

BY TOM GREENLAND

Steeped in the hard bop jazz tradition, Benny Green began playing piano in 1970, at age seven. His exposure to jazz was shaped by his father, a multidisciplinary artist and professional tenor saxophonist. Raised in Berkeley, CA, Green's development was informed by the robust music scene of the San Francisco Bay Area; and while still in high school he was performing professionally at the renowned Bay Area club Yoshi's. He modestly describes his Q-rating as "medium-low hanging fruit...I'm known, but I'm not Lady-Gaga known." Jazz people, who know better, go gaga over him. They know Green as one of the greatest mainstream jazz pianists of his generation, a mentee of Betty Carter, Art Blakey, Freddie Hubbard, Ray Brown and Oscar Peterson, with two dozen recordings as leader and well over a hundred as a sideman.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: Can you talk about your relationship with Oscar Peterson?

BENNY GREEN: It's vast. A very big question, like "What kind of person was your mom?" I was so honored to meet the man, shake his hand and to be befriended by him. Oscar knew who he was and remained truly humble to his heroes and past masters. His sense of self and purpose as an artist was very much grounded in his love and reverence for his heroes. Alone with Oscar, I could see him laugh and also cry tears about his many friends in the music and things that he'd experienced, and how much the legacy meant to him. It was a very honorable experience for me just to get to be around him and feel his depth of love and integrity for the music. I saw how deeply he cared, getting to know him as a friend. He was a king, but he was also a peaceful warrior for the music. Oscar, like my own father, saw some of my frivolous ways as a youngster. And like my father, he spoke to me gently with a voice of concern. I can see now in hindsight that both my father and Oscar, along with other mentors of mine, were really thinking about the long term in ways that I couldn't quite understand as a young guy. But the beautiful thing is their words and their messages really endure and they take on new depth and relevance for me as I grow older.

NYCJR: What do you mean by "frivolous"?

GREEN: It's just the relative lack of value for the clock of life ticking that a younger person has compared to an older person, someone with parental perspective. So, to give a specific example, I was in my early 20s, already living in New York, but I was here [in Berkeley] performing with Betty Carter at the Great American Music Hall and we had a few days off on our West Coast leg of a tour. I was staying at home and had an electric keyboard in my bedroom. But this particular night, I wanted to make the hang at a club, which I used to go sit in at in Oakland, called Mr. Major's lounge. My teacher Ed Kelly used to play there. So my father drove me out to the club. Before I got out of the car, he visually assessed the whole scene and said, 'You could be home

practicing right now.' And I said, 'Aw Dad, I wanna hang! I wanna make this session!' And he said, 'This is nowhere, man!' —something like that. And I said, 'No, Dad, this is what I want to do.' And he said, 'Go live your young life,' and I felt this emotion in him. I heard his words, but at the same time I'm thinking 'Gee, don't be a downer, Dad, I want to go have some fun.' The session was a nostalgic thing for me because I used to do that in high school, but I sat around a long time. It was a bit of a jive scene in the moment, wasn't what it used to be. In hindsight, I could have been home practicing. But I was young, wanted to go out and be social, whatever. Describing that as "frivolous" may be overstating the situation, but it shows how my elders cared and looked out for me, wanted to gently encourage my focus on investing my energy, my work and my thought on things that matter, particularly as an artist, as a musician — not to get distracted by other shiny things.

NYCJR: Was your dad an artist?

GREEN: Big time [and] in numerous fields. He played saxophone and clarinet, painted, sculpted, drew, wrote — kinda multimedia. He was a true artist, because he didn't do it for an audience or applause. He just did it. He just created art all the time. Our home is filled with his paintings and beautiful, incredible works he's made, little sculptures out of sardine tins and other amazing things. He used to say, 'Art is the only thing that's real, because it lasts.' He left this for us, and he certainly gave me my love of the music.

NYCJR: And your mom?

GREEN: My mother was a writer. During my childhood and adolescence she worked as West Coast editor for *Interiors* magazine and had similar editing or advising roles for magazines like *Architectural Digest* and *Designers West*. Before she passed, she helped me edit essays that I've been writing, some of which I've been posting, things that are going into the book that I'm working on. Even at shows, people like hearing stories. I've been encouraged to do that more: don't just play, but talk. In the larger sense, an audience wants to feel who the performer is and connect with them, so maybe some good stories are helpful as a bridge.

NYCJR: What did you learn from your jazz elders?

GREEN: I'm so grateful that I was born into a time when folks like Betty Carter, Art Blakey, Ray Brown, Oscar Peterson and Freddie Hubbard were around and accessible as mentoring bandleaders who actually had an M.O. of finding young talented players and then helping them really develop their voice. There was definitely more of that. The learning process used to take place person-to-person on the bandstand and our experience of hearing and learning about music happened in this live setting, not in an institutional

setting, where there's these rules being enforced, where students get to say how the teacher can teach them. That was unheard of [back then]. I talk with my contemporaries about this all the time. We loved it when our elders were gruff with us. We might laugh about it a little bit to ourselves, but they actually cared. They were talking with us; they were being real. Something that was very prevalent back then, that doesn't exist now, was this face-to-face, eye-to-eye culture, with the elder looking the young person in the eye and saying 'Do you hear what I'm saying?' And then you looked them in the eye, and you say 'Yes!' This sense of value

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

for the fact that our elder, whoever it was, was actually giving us their time and their sincerity in this moment has just shifted exponentially. It's no individual's fault, but [comes] with the advent of jazz in academia and all the constraints that the well-intended system imposes situationally.

NYCJR: And what have you learned from audiences?

GREEN: Music is this living, breathing art form that takes place person-to-person—it's *social!* Our orientation was always playing person-to-person, not through a screen, not in an institution; we got to experience how the music affects people. If you can hear that woman in the front row sigh, you want to try to lay into that vibe, whatever that is. *We're on to something here!* It can't be taught through a system of 1s and 0s in an institution. You've got to actually live it. Comedians talk about the value of bombing in front of an audience, how that helps them develop their mettle. So, if you've been practicing an idea, but somehow you notice it doesn't really translate in live performance: maybe you don't abandon it, throw out the baby with the bath water, but you've got to go back to the drawing board and think about, 'What is it?' You learn through the process of playing music *for* people, *with* people, because that's what the music actually *is*. It's not theory, it's not technique: it's expression, it's emotion, it's emotional transference. So, this is totally about one musician and one audience—even if it's just one-on-one—just being in the room feeling their vibe and seeing if you have their attention, if you can keep them with you, if you can take them somewhere. For me, this is the primal musical education.

NYCJR: And from musicians?

GREEN: I remember playing in Japan with a trio: Gregory Hutchinson was playing drums, I forget the name of the local bassist. We were playing for a social club or something. There were some people there that were hip to the music, because it's Japan, of course, but it was a general audience. We were playing a medium tempo and the audience started clapping on 2 and 4 but at a little slower tempo. It was kind of heavy, and I started to tighten up and get kind of: 'Oh man, they're dragging us down.' But Gregory was 'Oh, no! *That's* what's happening!' and he just went with them, and it was great! He decided to go with them instead of fighting them. It was really powerful. I can't explain how something like this gets cultivated, but there's beautiful visual evidence on YouTube. There's a video of Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Billy Cobham playing a live performance of "Speak Like a Child", and there's a moment when Herbie plays something dissonant and you see the camera's right on him, really close to his face, and you see his facial expressions. Just for a second, he almost winces, but not with disdain. It's almost like it was salty or something, like it stung a little, but he doesn't dismiss it. And then you see, almost in the same instant, that he's sort of inquisitive, so he does it again, and then he makes a pattern with it, he makes music with it. It's a beautiful lesson to me in non-judgment: no mistakes, let it be. It's beautiful, because what he does with this thing is amazing, whereas he could have just judged in that moment. So I feel like that was born of a lot of experience.

NYCJR: What would you offer to younger musicians?

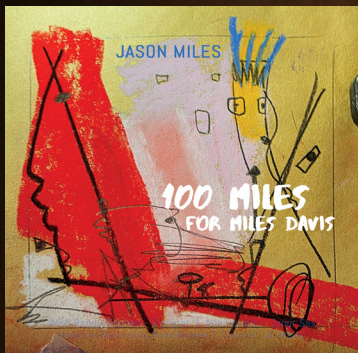
GREEN: These young folks are coming on and it's

their time. I feel like a younger older person now, but the middle stage was a little uncomfortable, being in denial of getting older, wanting to defend whatever I had. Now I'm happy to say I can listen to the kids play circles around me and love it. I see we can inspire one another to take better care of ourselves, of what we've been given, and reach more deeply towards a personal best. I'm kind of old school in terms of my tastes and orientation, what I like to listen to, my concept, and I'm very much at peace with that. Anyone can go on YouTube, just click and hear incredible pianists, from all over the world. Kids are actually playing Art Tatum transcriptions, which didn't exist when I was coming up, but now they can do it. It inspires me to see the human achievement and makes me want to rededicate my work. But I think we have a responsibility, as communicators—in this time when there's an onslaught of AI and other aspects of the internet and cyber world that are dehumanizing—to see what all the young folks, with all their brilliance and soul, *don't* see, in terms of what's happened to humanity in the course of our very lifetimes.

For more info visit bennygreen.net. Green is at Rose Theater May 8-9 (part of "Oscar Peterson: A Centennial Celebration"). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers – *I Get A Kick Out of Bu* (Soul Note, 1988)
- Benny Green Trio – *Testifyin'!* (*Live at the Village Vanguard*) (Blue Note, 1991)
- Ray Brown Trio – *Live at Scullers* (Telarc Jazz, 1996)
- Benny Green – *Green's Blues* (Telarc Jazz, 2001)
- Benny Green – *Source* (Jazz Legacy Productions, 2010)
- Benny Green – *Solo* (Sunnyside, 2022)



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