

BY KIP BRANCH

Some children are born with silver spoons in their mouths.

George Benson was born with a guitar in his hands. The jazz guitar sensation cannot remember a time when he did not play one.

Benson's first electric guitar was made out of his mother's hope chest with a used tape recorder for an amplifier. At 19, he hit the road traveling with Jack McDuff playing down-home jazz in greasy spoons and other places higher on the hog on the chittlin' circuit.

Today, Benson is traveling a road that leads to the land of jazz greats. Two albums "Breezin'" and "In Flight" together have sold more than 4.5 million copies. The former being the first by a jazz artist to go platinum. Live album "Weekend In L.A." is already platinum.

Singles such as "The Masquerade," "The Greatest Love Of All" and "On Broadway" seemed to live forever at the top of record charts.

Three Grammy's

Awards in 1976 and practically everything else accorded to Best Jazz Artist and Best Jazz Album in 1976 and 1977.

Last month he won four more accolades from the music industry bible, Cash Box. They were: Number - one R and B Male Crossover, Pop singles; Number One R and B Male Crossover, Pop albums; Number One Male Crossover, Pop albums; Number One Male Crossover, Pop album and Number One vocalist, Jazz.

Benson has spread his guitar magic internationally to Europe and Far East. And as far as other places, he just completed two sold-out weeks on Broadway and played a concert on the White House lawn for President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter.

The story of what happened to Benson between the early lean years of makeshift guitars and top selling success of today could be titled America's Great Jazz Revival. George Benson is the star of the great jazz cross-over to popular music.

Ten years ago, jazz music and its finest interpreters were in a state of stagnation. There were little signs of progress and the musicians had limited commercial visibility. Jazz music served a tragmented sophisticated cult adult audience.

Dropped Word

The Jazz Crusaders after 21

SONG "ON BROADWAY" SAYS

HE CAN PLAY THAT GUITAR



years of creating memorable music even dropped the word jazz from their name in 1974. Stix Hooper said at the time that the group made a metamorphosis to The Crusaders, "Unfortunately it's still true that too many people—and radio stations—listen by name and not by music."

Hooper felt that occasionally a jazzman would break through, such as Ramsey Lewis, but that was rare. The jazz handle placed artists on the outside of the

"cultural stream, creating social outlaws to a degree living out legends that eventually caused so many deaths," he said.

"So now by dropping the word 'jazz' even though we're playing some of the same kind of music, we're getting a broader audience," said Hooper.

That was before Benson.

New Attention

Now, after Benson, jazz is receiving new attention from the masses. He is raising the jazz

and moving into the contemporary mainstream of popular music.

"Jazz has a dinstinct sound" said Benson in an early morning, for him, interview. "When you hear it, you know it. When you hear Louis Armstrong, you know it's Louis Armstrong."

"I'm not the first artist that's gone away from strict jazz," he

"It doesn't mean that I don't play jazz anymore," he said.
"When I'm doing a jazz concert with jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Rollins, I play what they play.

"I'm aware of the limited audience for real jazz music. I play something that my audience wants to hear first and I play jazz in between. As my audience responds to it, I play a little more. We're bringing the audience along slowly but surely."

First Priority

When selecting music for a concert, Benson keeps his audience in mind. He feels his first priority is to turn the concert into an event.

"Because I've played the guitar so many years without vocals, I go by how I feel when I play," he said. "I can't make you believe if I don't believe it, so I play the devil out of everything."

Six months ago, Benson moved his family into a large Tudor style home in Tenafly, N.J. It's set off the street to provide more privacy for his wife of 13 years, Johnnie, sons, Robert, Marcus and George Jr.

He's bought a home in Hawais as a retirement base and is quite popular with the local Mercedes Benz dealership. He owns three, all bought in one year.

"It all feels like I'm in a dream world," said Benson. "When you work for something all your life, you can't play it down. I worked for this for a long time."

Still The Same

Despite the star trappings, instant recognition, popularity and musical respect, Benson says, he's still the same.

"I still consider my audience the reason for playing music," he said.

After his step-father taught him to play the ukelele and first chords on a guitar, Benson became a local child prodigy in Pittsburgh. He had an agent and did a round of

(Continued on Page 28)

PAGE 23