

Preface

FIRST HEARD Benny Golson's exotic sound my freshman year at Princeton when *Meet The Jazztet* was published. Two years later, *Turning Point*, his classic Mercury album with Miles Davis's rhythm section—Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, and Jimmy Cobb—appeared and I became a lifelong admirer. Across more than five decades my respect has grown exponentially. In human terms, that's a long time, merely a blink in eternity, which is what Benny Golson's music addresses with relaxed, artistically precise lyric means. Maestro Golson is a deeply philosophical man. When you know him—and readers of his autobiography will learn from and about him in greater detail than the majority of his peers and predecessors have revealed about themselves—you soon recognize that the serious, contemplative fellow is counterbalanced by a jubilant, at moments hilarious, fellow. For a good chunk of his eighty-six years, Benny Golson was a prankster extraordinaire, the guy in the hood and in road bands who kept things on track by keeping everyone loose. Someone has to do that, and our man was among the comically best at making a positive difference with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers as well as with The Jazztet, which he co-led with Art Farmer. His presence was decisively felt, also, in Dizzy Gillespie's late 1950s big band and, before that, in Earl Bostic's aggregation.

For anyone not yet aware of the profound and seminal friendship that Benny shared to the very end with John Coltrane, the narrative of two

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young musicians who matured together across their formative years is utterly beguiling. The path here chosen to plot the swerves and unceasing surprises of Benny Golson's exceptional life is episodic. It traverses a kind of odyssey in which each part fits in place with the gentle click of unforeseen precision reminiscent of W. B. Yeats's definition of poetic elegance. Despite momentary setbacks and traumas, Benny's life is a study in human elegance. *Whisper Not* begins with the career-shaping, life-changing relationship between two adolescent saxophonists. It explores the urban setting where family and personal energies were constrained by Philadelphia's Depression and war years during the 1930s and 1940s. Benny's life has interacted with so many talented and influential people that we've grouped them into separate sections that reflect (a) intimacy, (b) professional significance, and (c) iconic partners and acquaintances who helped to make Benny's life and career adventurous without equal.

Born on January 25, 1929, Benny Golson has been alive almost from the outset of the de facto inauguration of the Jazz Age, when Louis Armstrong's mid-1920s Hot Fives and Hot Sevens emerged to create the genre with its ever-evolving ensemble protocols and improvisational expansion. Pops was twenty-seven and a half years older than Benny, but "jazz," as we know it across the past century, officially gained archival roots with Armstrong's November 12, 1925, recordings for Okeh Records. The art form that has consumed the whole of Benny Golson's life was barely three years old when he popped into the world in Philadelphia as an only child of a soon-to-be fatherless household. Benny's mother made his musical future possible by paying for piano lessons, buying his first saxophone, and tolerating the interminable (no doubt, at first, infernal) jam sessions that he and his musical pals honed their chops in. However, the prevailing truth of *Whisper Not* resides not merely in its hero's vastly successful and wildly eventful life, but in that life's significance beyond itself.

When you've known a genuinely self-effacing man like Benny Golson for as long as I have (fifty-five years of spiritual partnership; thirty years of shared experience in Los Angeles, New York, San Diego, Washington, D.C., Vienna, Pittsburgh, and La Jolla), you find yourself looking at it all closely. How can years disappear so quickly as joy becomes memories that haunt delight? One might take for granted so many good times as well as arresting moments of intimacy. That has never occurred between us. Benny Golson is so woven into my life and inner being that, more sobering than his constancy as a friend and mentor (as a colleague and a "party of

one” beyond compare), I experience his presence in my existence the way I feel my hands and rely upon sight. He is naturally here like breeze in the cypress hedge around my waterfalls. My experience of Benny is defined by mutual understanding and overlapping sympathies. If I became angry or irritated with Benny Golson, it would be exactly as I irritate or anger myself, but I cannot recall once being irritated or angry with Benny. More than anyone I’ve known, Benny Golson approaches whatever secular sainthood may truly be. I do not know how else to characterize his humility and sensitivity, his glorious companionship and disarming candor. Was it Dwight Eisenhower who insisted that no man is a hero to those who know him well? As another eponymous guru once said, I resemble that remark. But Golson is not like the Ike some admired and others vilified. He’s not like yours truly, who could irk a convention of undertakers just by showing up. Benny Golson makes people smile the moment he walks into a room. He lends something of his subtle but contagious karma to others. That’s a good trick and likely draws its seduction from the joking prankster he was as a younger man. Benny’s special quality of making people feel better for his proximity, the sense of blessing he seems to confer without effort or ambition, doubtless derives from habits he gave style to back in the ’hood. Street savvy was the coin of the realm in Philly, where he hung out with Trane, Jimmy Heath, Philly Joe Jones, Ray Bryant, and Bill Cosby. Those talented kids shared energy held in common as fledgling jazz cats.

This mysterious but affirmative influence that Benny Golson has enforced over the course of his ample life extends past borders of affiliation and friendship. He reshaped Art Blakey’s professional *modus vivendi*. The Jazz Messengers and Art Blakey’s unique pedagogical career were both strengthened by Golson’s firm but gentle touch. Dizzy’s big band songbook came to life with Benny’s compositions and arrangements, which, together, crafted the emotional allure of that orchestra’s sonic landscape. The Jazztet, which he and Art Farmer created and sustained in tandem, remains one of the most loved and respected “mini big bands” in jazz annals. The group was founded as a sextet to create space and harmonic layers for complex sonic colors beyond the possibilities of traditional quartets and quintets. These and other instances of Benny Golson’s musical influence do not fully account for the larger significance of his life’s work.

Whisper Not documents a long life’s iconoclastic adventure. Benny Golson’s memoir of an almost constant sequence of dramatic events traces the thrill of a protracted adrenaline rush punctuated with breathtaking

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climbs and gasping plunges. Rather than follow a worn-out chronological path, this narrative mirrors Benny's vivid recollection of his sustained roller coaster ride through a Technicolor global amusement park. The difficulty with that cartoon synopsis is its reductive shorthand. Unlike many in his generation, Benny disavowed drug use. In part that accounts for the good fortune of his healthy long life span. Seldom does anyone negotiate the zigzag course of a successful life's ups and downs by himself. For fifty years, Benny's wife, Bobbie, has shared the bracing ride. Their partnership is remarkable for its tender solidarity, which invokes Tolstoy's sardonic insight that all happy families are the same. Novelists characteristically search for malaise and purgatory. Lives such as Benny's with Bobbie do not attract novelistic suspicion. And yet what we find here is a tale defined by challenges endured, problems overcome, risks ventured, friendships celebrated, insights gained, hopes accomplished, and the unsuspected chaos of life's endless surprise steadfastly integrated with grace and artistic wisdom.

The large number and rare quality of the many people who've experienced Benny Golson's disciplined optimism emerge here as a veritable who's who of jazz masters along with seventy years of cultural cognoscenti: accomplished luminaries in cinema, sports, entertainment, and international business. Benny still flourishes and the startling aspect of his youthful geriatric-hood is the maniacal fact that he lustily seeks further, deeper confrontations with unknown waiting discoveries that (he feels in his bones) lurk at the edge of his awareness. Benny has both a child's affinity for mysteries and the confident abandon of unself-conscious genius. At the midpoint of life's ninth decade, which of us would not enjoy his undiminished glow against the horizon of the world's confusion? The survivors of a truly spectacular jazz generation still with us now—Sonny Rollins, Jimmy Heath, Kenny Burrell, Bucky Pizzarelli, Wayne Shorter, Charles Lloyd, Mundell Lowe, Ahmad Jamal, Benny Golson, and others (such as Phil Woods, Ornette Coleman, Gerald Wilson, and Joe Wilder, recently lost)—advance Zen-like artistic authority.

In the chaos of our era's interminable distractions—where we're perpetually at war, ensuring the constant waste of natural and human resources sacrificed to endemic paranoia; where fame is largely a product of promotional hype; where journalistic objectivity is a rumor within the self-deluding conformity that permeates too many professional enclaves—pretense and bombast often substitute for innovative creativity. Benny Golson's long-gestating artistic integrity exemplifies how one might confront the

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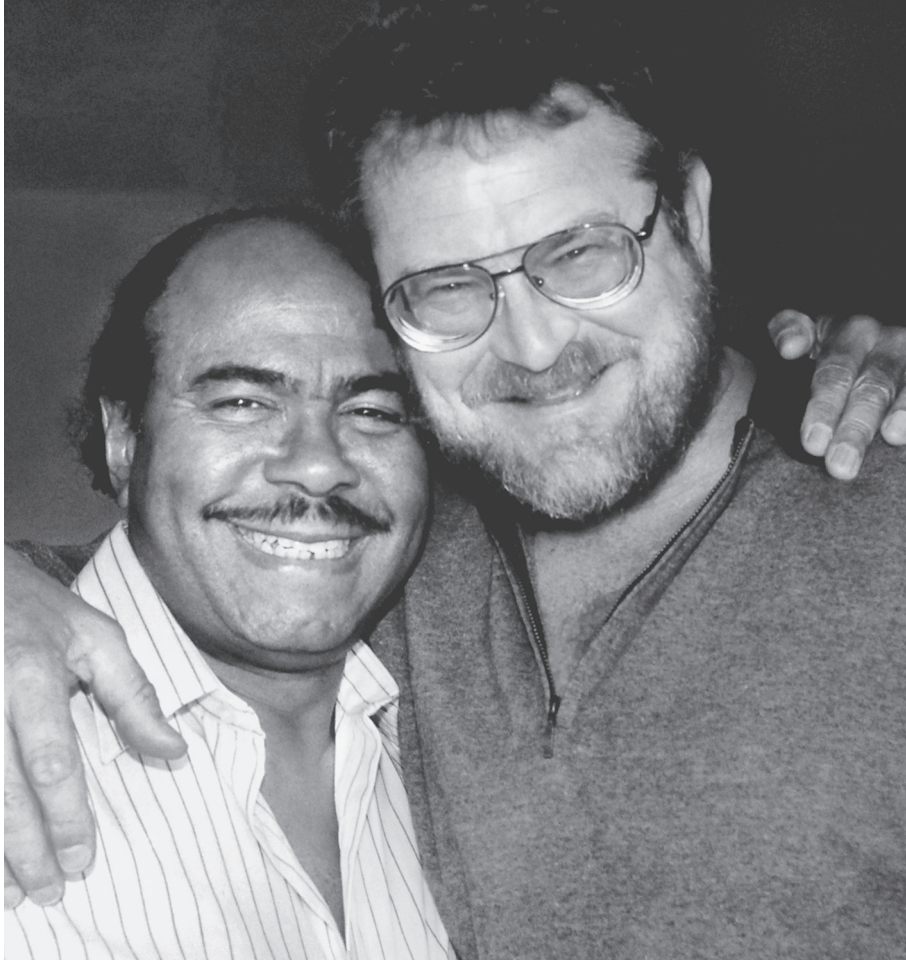
future—not with idealized hope or self-justifying farce or philosophical tragi-comedy, but with the flow of imagination’s river of rivers, with spring’s ageless welcome regardless of politics and place.

As a writer, no less than as a saxophonist, bandleader, and intervening collegial *tour de force*, Golson defied the odds of race and class. Growing up in a Philadelphia ghetto, he succeeded despite implacable impediments. He became increasingly relentless in pursuit of his goal: to make an archive of songs with indelible permanence. My belief that Benny Golson’s life and work offer a viable model to encounter future challenges is not zeal in behalf of a friend. I’ve glimpsed the future. Civilization is vulnerable to false values, incalculable discord, and collapse. As Joseph Conrad noted without irony, civil society is the thinnest possible veneer of courtesy and reason protecting us from the worst in ourselves.

Jazz has provided humanity a century of profoundly annealing art. Nothing is certain as earth’s exploding population collides with unremitting economic and territorial rivalries. Our collective need for examples of artistic power and human integrity seeks both intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. With the exception of Louis Armstrong, no one rivals Duke Ellington in jazz history. Like them, Benny Golson’s time on earth has embodied nobility, generosity, and eloquent aesthetic feeling. *Whisper Not* reveals the courageous complexity of a uniquely elevated life.

—Jim Merod

May 2015, La Costa, California



Benny with Jim Merod. (Photo by Joe Wilder.)

Introduction

THIS BOOK'S INTENTION is not in league with the many volumes that have been published describing the errant behavior of some jazz musicians. The proliferation of such accounts is overwhelmingly depressing. They do not represent the complex humanity of the music and the people who create it. There are stories to tell of much greater consequence in the world of jazz than vivid recollections of the lapses, degradations, and unfortunate circumstances that often dog talented people whose success is thwarted by poor judgment. The human condition is a continual test of individual and collective will power. In telling my tale, I proceed in hopes that the reader agrees that people are free to decide their life's course as best they are able, consciously trying, with sustained energy, to attain their goals and avoid the pitfalls.

Why revive tales of deceased musicians' detrimental habits? When we think of extracurricular drug use, we are usually aware of the deleterious outcomes that often follow. When we think of jazz musicians, a doleful parade of negative clichés confronts us. The jazz lineage is dotted with tragedies rationalized with somber platitudes. And yet, if you lined up everyone who ever drifted from the straight and narrow—breaking laws or engaging in other destructive behaviors—standing before you would be people from every profession and persuasion, many holding important positions and held in high esteem by their peers. Dante's *Inferno* is popu-

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lated by this comical, sad cast: religious leaders, doctors, lawyers, learned men and women of every rank, venal politicians, judges taking bribes and payoffs, business leaders and military leaders vying for power. Our public “watch dogs,” journalists, succumb to these temptations, as do the overseers of charities who siphon funds to benefit themselves instead of those in need. Defense lawyers and prosecutors include many who supplement their already large salaries with dirty tricks. Are we to believe all lawyers and judges are committed to justice?

Perhaps the most despicable in our desultory line-up would be the “religious leaders” who perpetrate covert sex acts against the children they have sworn to protect and mentor. Big-name sports figures would also appear, as would individuals from all strata of police and law enforcement. Not to be overlooked are those we would least suspect, the grandmothers and occasional “nice neighbors” who give you hope the world is not as scarred by fraud and evil as it may seem on your most pessimistic days.

Given the prevalence of dereliction, and worse, all around us, time is wasted chronicling the deviance of musicians in particular. The world of jazz resembles any other human arena, peopled by the good, the bad, and the not so ugly. And so my book, like my life, chronicles music and events across more than half the length of jazz history to date. This is my world, what I have done, where I have lived, and the people I have come to know with varying degrees of care and solidarity.

Why did I write this book? Because I’m a jazz player, a jazz composer. I’m still ensconced within the richly divergent, often glorious jazz world, where I came to know a large contingent of its most significant members. I’ve passed my time with and worked alongside many of its characters, some of its charlatans, but also, serendipitously, most of its luminaries. Because for more than six decades I have functioned within a shared and frequently intimate artistic realm (partly public, mostly private) where I see and hear everything, I have stories I want to bring to light for the benefit of those who are truly interested. So, to clarify my authorial position, let me point across the human spectrum to the ubiquity of those who do terrible things in the name of false ideals. My task is not to single out people I have known, and sometimes admired, for vilification. If my assignment were only to expose or belittle musicians, my pen would refuse to move. This is not a book of titillation and exposé. I’m aware that these prefatory comments may sound dark, despite the fact that, across the span of my long life, fun and good luck have prevailed for me over disappointment and lament. I do not feel

superior to anyone, and I refuse the role of moralizer. Instead, I note this divergence so that I can focus unobstructed on the wealth of talent I have encountered among the amazing people who have defined my life's trajectory. As I recall events and experiences, I witness again my life's blessings at every point. My aim is to recount moments and events with my peers that few others have had access to: serious and humorous events, happy times and sad, triumphs and failures. When I have encountered some in our profession who present themselves as self-affirmed "geniuses," I indict the unnamed posers with conviction. It is not for Benny Golson to harm or destroy anyone. Time is a corrosive to falsehood; lies cannot live forever.

Too frequently jazz has been treated as an inferior stepchild to supposedly "elite" art forms. But it has overcome profound problems without disguising lies as truths. Jazz is a relatively small community, but the art of jazz possesses an extraordinarily large democratic spirit. Jazz is inclusive of everyone with talent, regardless of social taboos and prejudices. I have aimed at total candor here. I originally wrote more than is offered here, but tact and discretion demanded courtesy. Bulk has not been my objective. The truth of the music's many parts and elements, as I have lived with them, is my focus in this volume.

In sum, I present something negative here only if it is not harmful. If it bears upon me directly, I have sought to take complete responsibility for my actions, good and bad. I have done things that few would easily suspect. While I am not proud of these actions, I must be honest or why bother to write this book at all? Why bother readers with evasions?

Youth carries enormous ignorance. But ignorance is not to be confused with stupidity. Ignorance indicates only that one does not have information or knowledge that might be useful. I now see that, as a young person, I did not have access to information and knowledge that would often have made things better or easier. I thought I already had everything needed for my journey. Time proved me wrong. I was not able to make consistently grounded decisions with adequate judgment. I made many mistakes. Thank goodness, however, for blind luck. Experience turned out to be a harsh yet loving teacher. My tenacity and ferocious determination to mature overcame my ignorance. Eventually, I learned what to do and what not to do, and knowing how to make such distinctions shaped my adulthood.

Looking back, I see that my life was a continuous struggle, and yet it was neither cruel nor excessively difficult. My life never seemed fundamentally unfair or too much to bear. I understood early in life that the

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rewards I sought depended wholly on my own efforts. Maybe that belief rendered me impervious to bodily hurt, mental pain, and spiritual grief. Then, too, when I was young, my mother was an analgesic. Lovingly, she absorbed much of my pain (alas), preventing me from developing an accurate sense of life. I see now that whatever I endured was worth the difficulties imposed. I eventually arrived where I wanted to be. Perhaps I can be considered a successful musician. My dream was not the age-old quest for riches. I would not turn my back on wealth now, nor would I had wealth come to me earlier. But my dream was simple: to play my B-flat tenor saxophone and write and play my music for the entire world. And that has happened. I was one of many who aspired to such heights. That banal fact makes my success not so special, after all, but that is as it should be. Cumulative success over a life's duration is one's greatest victory.

I hope the reader will come to appreciate the musicians who emerge in these pages as ordinary human beings who just happened to pursue the innocent endeavor called jazz, encountering inevitable failures, frustrations, triumphs, and rewards. When I was a boy, my heroes inspired me as I moved forward, gleaning scraps of musical insight wherever I could. I dedicated myself to jazz with my whole being. Such inspirations and opportunities were rungs on a ladder I climbed to accurately survey the landscape of my profession. In the beginning I made advances and suffered setbacks, but my burning desire—shared by a gaggle of musically dedicated kids, aspiring jazz novices in 1940s Philadelphia—drove me on with continually fresh strength. My mother, who was truly great, is now gone. She was always my champion. She made me and my teenage buddy John Coltrane feel as if we were her heroes. Musicians never stop needing encouragement. My wife, Bobbie, and our daughter, Brielle, have lived with me through the good, the bad, and everything else. Their love and encouragement have been infinite. The successes I have been able to share with them mean the world to me. I never take any of it for granted; I remember everything that made it possible. The long trek required strength from me, but also from those who traveled alongside me. For me, the ultimate reward has been the appreciation and acceptance of my writing and playing from audiences. If I became arrogant about even a small slice of this, I should be eligible for banishment.

In the early years, negative criticism caused me stress, until I understood what the criticism meant. Critics, some good, some bad, do what they do, just as musicians do. I needed to learn how to overcome negative dis-

course directed at my self-centered expectations. Some critical comments were useful. Others I discarded because the critical energy was (at least in part) mistaken or degrading. One status-seeking writer found an opportunity to gain advantage at my expense. No artist has time to linger with hurt feelings. I moved on, a useful habit that brought with it both emotional refinement and comfort.

Whatever accolades I receive today, whatever elevated names and titles are conferred on me, whatever awards are granted, I cannot permit myself to bask in their well-meant momentary glory. It is dangerous to do so. I never want to feel comfortable with praise or glory. That erodes creativity. I'm not exaggerating. My imagination must be kept free, to permit me to move in any direction at any time. Praise and glory are shackles.

Students often ask me which of my own compositions is my favorite. My answer is always, "I haven't written it yet." I doubt I ever will. The horizon is ahead. My skiff, like Odysseus's, knows no other destination but the next one. I hear the Sirens calling. They never tell the truth. Creative work is often lonely and wearying, a test of endurance not unlike an aging warrior's ennui. Perhaps a sense of renewed embattlement is inevitable. I do know that seductive diversions are strewn along the route home, wherever self-doubt and exhaustion are most likely to find them. After two decades away, Odysseus arrived home to rout pretenders vying for his wealth and authority. The *Odyssey* had no sequel, but I'm sure the warrior who invented the Trojan horse, permitting his army to enter Troy's gates with the adversary's help, was too restless to keep his head on the pillow when he got back to Ithaca. I'll bet that Odysseus—who tricked the Cyclops, faked out Circe, avoided the Sirens, and rafted the hellish seas between Scylla and Charybdis—had one more adventure in him. No truly creative person ever arrives home without immediately beginning to long for the next gig. Art is a lifetime commitment. It is the beautiful agony of striving to discover new things. Like Odysseus, an artist tries to improve on his best achievements, to outrun his own shadow.

Now I push my book into the world, while moving onward. *Whisper Not* is me here today, and it is also the other "me" who lived it. Everyone is a potential book. The writer and his text are the same and also different. Any well-lived life furnishes a trove of material for stories, recollections and accounts of improbable events that make up any life worth living—lives lucky enough to reflect on their own experience. Funny stuff: survival, wonder, and knowledge.

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Just to be alive, to have been alive at the peak of one's best energies and inspirations, is everything to be hoped for: a dream worth dreaming and reliving. This book is my testament and my pledge to the future. I have chosen to recall my life as vividly and honestly as I can, to include details that may seem excessively bold and sharp, others edged in periwinkle. I've done my best. I now go on. I cannot reasonably think I know all there is to know, even about myself and my voyage through life. My views in this book are far from sacrosanct. I do not present them as a covert argument for any outlook or ideology, unless it is the transcendent fact of artistic power, of imagination's unfettered participation in a universe that allows humans to thrive, if they know how, on our much besieged, but still gorgeous orb. Is not life, at its deepest, about knowledge and creation? Should not that awareness enlarge fellow feeling and strengthen what is best in us as individuals?

My sincerest appreciation goes to Jim Merod. Our shared feeling has grown deep across many decades. I am proud of our work together. *Whisper Not* accurately presents the people, events, and aspirations that shaped me. One last wager: time will bear the truth of what I tell here.

—Benny Golson,
2015