

GEORGE BENSON

with ALAN
GOLDSHER

BEN
SON

THE AUTO
BIOGRAPHY



SAMPLE
CHAPTER

foreword by
BILL COSBY

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY **George Benson**

with Alan Goldsher

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SUN CITY

I didn't know folks in South Africa listened to me until their local concert promoters begged my management team to schedule some shows down there....

"We would like you to play six shows at a resort called Sun City, located in the city of Bophuthatswana. Please look at these."

He pulled out a pile of photos of a modern-day castle, with hundreds of guest rooms, some opulent swimming pools, and perfectly manicured lawns. Man, it was a sight to behold. I said, "This all sounds and looks beautiful, but I don't know, I've got a lot going on here at home, what with this recording session and that gig, and . . ."

He then interrupted with an offer I couldn't refuse. Papers were signed, hands were shaken, and the ball was rolling.

Now, I wasn't a history major or a geography expert, so I didn't know South Africa was a country unto itself— I just thought it was the southern part of Africa. I also wasn't all that politically oriented, so it wasn't until about a week before we left that, for the first time, I heard the word *apartheid*. And then the floodgates opened.

First, I got a call from the head of publicity at my record label, Warner Bros. "George," she said, "you're not really going to South Africa, are you? Race relations down there are a nightmare. You'll be sending the wrong message. As a matter of fact, if you play there, your career will be over. *Over*."

I told her, "Wait a minute: This gig's been booked for weeks, and we're leaving in a few days, and you're asking me this now? Man, I never cancel gigs. All six shows are already sold out. They hired a sixty-piece orchestra to back me up. We're going."

"You know what, George," she continued, "you should probably know that there won't be any black people at the shows."

“Why not?” I asked.

“The tickets are forty dollars. Most black people in South Africa don’t make that much in a month.”

“Is that true, or are you just saying that so I won’t go? How can you know that for a fact?”

“Okay, I don’t know that for a fact,” she admitted. “That’s just what I’ve heard.”

“Listen, there are going to be plenty of black people there, and I’ll tell you why: If you tell a black man he can’t have something, that’s the first thing he’ll want. Like if you say, ‘You can’t have a white woman,’ he’s going out to get himself a white woman. If you tell him he can’t drive a Cadillac, the next time you see him, he’ll be behind the wheel of a Seville. And if you tell him, ‘You can’t have George Benson tickets,’ he’ll be sitting in the third row. Trust me on that.”

A few minutes after I hung up with her, my keyboard player called. “Man, I don’t think I’m gonna go to South Africa. I don’t wanna go to South Africa. South Africa, no way.”

I sighed and said, “Okay, man, you don’t have to go. I’ll find a replacement.”

He was quiet for a second. I don’t think he believed I’d bring in somebody else. Finally, he said, “So you’re going?”

“Yeah, man. I’m bringing my wife and my little boy. We’re gonna have a great time. Those people out there, they’re gonna take care of us.”

He was quiet for a second, then said, “I guess if you’re cool with taking your family, it’ll be okay.”

After that, my bass player called, and then my drummer, and then another Warner Bros. executive, all of whom tried to convince me to pull the plug on the trip. Finally, I came up with the perfect retort: Whenever one of them said, “I don’t want to go, and you shouldn’t go either,” I’d ask them, “Do you sell your records in South Africa?” When they said yes, I’d say, “Then what the heck are you telling me not to play there for? If you don’t want to do business with them, then get your records out of their stores.” That quieted them down quick.

Our plane touched down in South Africa at about 2:00 a.m. local time, and there were hundreds of people at the gate, waiting to greet me. Before I could even voice my appreciation to the crowd, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a young black man running toward me, followed by four white

police officers. I thought, *No, don't come this way. I can't have police attacking this kid. Heck, I can't have the police attacking me.*

The young black man came to a halt directly in front of me and wrapped his arms around my chest in what I guessed was a desperate attempt to avoid a beating. He said, “Mr. Benson, help! Please! Help! Don't let go of me! They won't hurt me if I'm with you!” I held on to this boy tight, because I knew in my heart and gut that he was right—if I let go of him, those officers would take him out behind the metaphorical shack and kill him. Once they realized I wasn't releasing the kid, the officers stopped the chase, then, after a loud discussion filled with curse words, wandered away. When he was sure the policemen were gone, the man let go of me and said, “Welcome home, brother. Welcome home....”

From the get-go, it was obvious even to me that Sun City wasn't representative of South Africa in that it was far more progressive. A cross between Las Vegas and Disneyworld (except smaller), Sun City had a snow-less ski resort, a pictorial safari, glitzy casinos, multiple state-of-the-art concert venues and discos, and—most importantly—a relatively positive vibe. You see, Sun City was one of the first places in the country where black people and white people could party together. And that was by design.

Sol Kerzner, the mastermind behind the resort, somehow convinced the South African government to allow Bophuthatswana enough autonomy to appoint its own president, a black man named Lucas Mangope. President Mangope, it turned out, was a huge jazz fan, and he and his wife came to each of my shows; they sat front row center, and were treated to what everybody agreed were six wonderful evenings of music.

The record company girl was wrong: The crowds at the shows were 50 percent white and 50 percent black, but this isn't to say we weren't touched by the country's innate racism and turmoil. The powers that be were so concerned for my safety that I was assigned a couple of machine-gun-wielding bodyguards, who followed me everywhere I went during the day and stood outside my hotel-room door every night. And the all-white orchestra from Johannesburg wanted nothing to do with our mostly black band, to the point that they wouldn't speak to us—the whole week, not a single word. But after those six wonderful shows, those orchestral cats finally came around. Before the final gig, each one of them tiptoed into my dressing room, one at a time, to thank me for the opportunity. I could tell it was a labor for them to say something kind to a black man, because they'd grown up under a dif-

-ferent set of rules. They were taught that blacks were second-, third-, and fourth- class citizens who should be treated as such. But music, as is often the case, transcended racism and so shed a lifetime of racist teaching. In the moment, I had mixed emotions, but later on, I realized that what they'd done required a ton of courage on their part: the courage to change.

At the last minute, Sol booked us a gig in Cape Town for my last night in the country, and that was a big deal, a huge deal, because that city had never—never—hosted an interracial concert. My manager wasn't concerned for our safety—there was too much light shining on us for something to go down. His primary concern was that all the black concertgoers would be stuck in the back while the white folks sat up front.

“George,” he said, “I don't want the only faces you see to be white ones, so we're doing this my way. Here's what's gonna happen: We're selling tickets in groups of four. So a group of four whites might be by a group of four blacks, whether they like it or not. Nobody will know where they're sitting. The only thing they're guaranteed is that they'll sit with someone in their party.”

And it worked. That night, the front row was white-white-white-white-black-black-black-black-white-white-black-black-white-black-white-black. Same with the second row. And the third. And so on. It was beautiful....

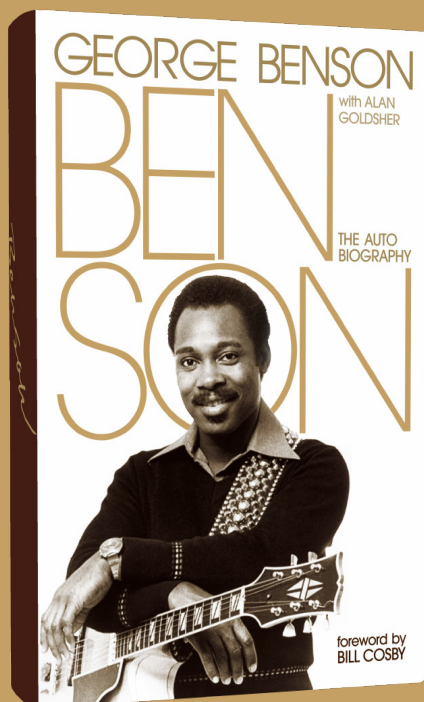
Near the end of the show—which, from where we were standing, felt like it was exceptionally well received—I eventually launched into “The Greatest Love of All”—a tune I'd recorded for a Muhammad Ali biopic, a tune that took my career to the moon—and almost immediately after the first bar, a couple of folks in the front row held up a lit candle. A couple more people followed suit. And then a dozen more. And then a hundred more. And then a thousand more. Soon, almost every one of the 8,510 people in the house was waving a candle. And locking arms. And swaying side to side.

Black and white alike.

The candles had lit up the hall to the point that I could see virtually everybody's face, and many of those faces were covered with tears. I'd only seen something like that once before, at a Mahalia Jackson Easter Sunday gig I played back in 1967—that wasn't a surprise, though, because Mahalia Jackson could make anybody cry—but this went beyond even that. This was about togetherness, and new beginnings, and love for your fellow man.

Little surprise that when I turned around, my entire band was in tears. At that moment, for the first and only time in my music-playing life, I almost broke down onstage. But I somehow managed to keep it together and finish the song. I had to, really, because those people deserved it. The next morning, I left South Africa a better man than I'd been when I'd arrived.

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