

## Jazzing the Music Mix

NASHVILLE- Two number one songs by Garth Brooks-and she's not even country! In the world of jazz, Benita Hill's one-two punch is hitting its mark. The former background singer for the Allman Brothers Band released her first critically acclaimed CD, *Fan The Flame*, and established herself as a silky-voiced stylist and hit songwriter. In addition to Brooks, Hill's songs have been recorded by Isaac Hayes and Kirk Whalum, among others. Her live performances regularly receive accolades and Hill has shared the stage with such jazz/pop luminaries as Boney James, Chuck Mangione, Kirk Whalum, Michael Franks and Yolanda Adams, to mention a few.

*Fan the Flame* elicited these raves:

"One of the top ten albums of the year" (Entertainment At Home), "An immensely involving vocalist" (Billboard), "Sexy enough to put a eunuch in the mood" (Charles Earle, In Review), "Music with a languid, timeless quality that draws on pop standards and cocktail jazz...a stylist on the order of Julie London or Peggy Lee" (Michael McCall, Nashville Scene), "An exquisitely crafted recording from an amazing talent" (Brent Clanton, KODA, Houston).

Her second CD, *Tangerine Moon*, features the title cut and fourteen songs ranging from the sultry Southern style "Dream About You" to a swinging "More Money".

Jazz from Nashville? Jazz at its purest freely interprets myriad influences. Benita's standard-sounding original songs crossed so many boundaries that even Garth Brooks is a fan and was moved to record three of her compositions. "Take The Keys To My Heart" and "Two Pina Coladas" (also a #1 single) were on his Sevens album and "It's Your Song" (renamed as a dedication to his mother) was the first single from his Double Live CD.

Benita's limited edition Christmas release, *Winter Fire And Snow* was one of the top selling CDs in Nashville and was the Tennessean's critic's choice as best album of the season. It has been re-released

Benita has brought her original music and vocal stylings to audiences everywhere from Chicago to New York, Houston, London, Dublin and Rome. Her road to success has been a roller coaster ride of the highest highs and lowest lows imaginable. The thrill of having Garth Brooks, one of the world's biggest recording artists, record her songs. At the same time, Hill, a single mom, was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Fully recovered now, with her music stretching the boundaries of country, jazz and pop, Benita is here to stay. She has proved her artistry and her mettle.

## Benita Hill: Her Journey to Tangerine Moon by Ardi Lawrence

With the release of "It's Your Song," Garth Brooks' first jingle from his Live album, and Tangerine Moon, singer/songwriter Benita Hill's second album, the story of this single mom and cancer survivor's extraordinary journey of the career and ultimately of the heart now begs to be told.

We could be in the deepest well, down in a hole, with little hope of seeing the light of day just one more time, then looking up, straining for light, the miracle. A tangerine moon slowly comes into view. A tangerine moon? It's shining down, warming us, something we've never seen before or even dreamed of, giving us hope. Benita Hill knows exactly how such a thing could happen.

It was at "Summer Lights," a very popular event in downtown Nashville during the early to mid-1990s, that I discovered Benita where she was performing on one of the six outdoor stages scattered along Deaderick Street from Capitol Plaza to the riverfront on the Cumberland. Her smooth and silky rendition of songs from the 40s and 50s delivered with torchy overtones had the audience all rapt and wrapped up in her little finger, which I'm sure was the intent. We were either feeling nostalgic or hearing something new. No matter. This performance would be unforgettable.

I didn't know then that Benita and I would cross paths in the future. However, one Friday night a year later, the music I heard from an upstairs room, Bennett's Corner in Franklin, Tennessee's downtown historic district, was irresistible. It was Benita again. This time a jazz trio provided the music, and Benita was jazzier and bluesier than ever. One of the numbers, "Old Love Letters," was a prediction of things to come. It would be a cut on Benita's first album, Fan the Flame, released in 1995. Here was another side of Benita. Modern and classic café jazz all at once, with all the emotions triggered by wistful longings, heart-wrenching sadness, frustration, and the happy side of love. One of those CDs you play over and over at midnight, then play again. A "Benita fix," I call it.

But this story should start at the beginning.

### **Carmen Revelle and Early Years**

Back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, before Benita was born, her mom was known as Carmen Revelle, a singer with the house band that broadcast live over NBC radio on Saturday nights from the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago. She worked with big names like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Carmen Miranda, June Allyson, and Danny

Thomas. Revelle (her real name was Ada Gooby) sang with big bands and Latin bands and also performed at a club called Chez Paree.

As a child, Benita would listen to her mother tell about those days. And there were photo albums, a photo gallery, and a huge record collection of all kinds of music including country and jazz as well as the pop and Latin tunes.

"Even after I was born," Benita recalls, "My mom would sing occasionally and wear beautiful gowns. It was all so glamorous, and I wanted to be that, too. Because of her, the early jazz and big band music are an influence to this day on what I do. Later, though, I acquired my own musical tastes. Blues, rock and roll, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones."

Her first "public" performance was for a Brownie troop on a hayride. Benita was nine years old.

"I just sang some folk songs a cappella, songs from Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary," Benita smiles, remembering the shy girl she once was. "My Brownie leader, Mrs. Moran, surprised me by giving me a badge in music."

### **A Budding Career**

That start led to other performances: singing at Italian weddings (always a band, and people would get up and sing with it), talent shows, and teenage coffee houses. After taking some college courses, Benita decided to make show business her career and embarked on a road that took her to England, a marriage, Kentucky, and finally Nashville.

It was a heady time. In Kentucky, Benita enrolled at Murray State University to complete her degree in psychology and English and was also writing songs and sending them to publishers in Nashville. On weekends she and her husband would come to the Grand Ole Opry where some of her favorite entertainers were Dolly Parton, Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson.

Benita continues, "I had a really good response from Audi Ashworth, a Nashville publisher. He got me a couple of cuts on Anita Ball, a girl Owen Bradley was producing. Owen produced Brenda Lee, Patsy Cline, and Loretta Lynn, and I thought I had hit the big time. Anita's project never really got off the ground, but Owen also encouraged my songwriting. In 1979, I decided it was time to move to Nashville."

In Nashville, Benita's husband was getting burned out on the music business while she was enjoying doing more writing and performing. A divorce soon followed. Even

with a writing deal with Ashworth, the road was not easy. It could be best described as hand-to-mouth, typical for Nashville writers in their struggling days.

### **First Flush of Success**

Then, one night in 1980, when Benita was performing at a Nashville club called Mississippi Whiskers, she met Pam Wolfe, an event that was to influence both of their lives forever. Pam had just been hired by Conway Twitty to travel to casinos in Reno and Lake Tahoe as one of three backup singers and to find the other two. That day, one of the others had quit. Listening to Benita, Pam offered her the job on the spot. Working with Conway was a joy. Benita says, "He was absolutely wonderful, encouraging the two of us to write songs together and giving us the title of our first song, "Tell It Like It Was."

The 1980s became a time of productivity and variety. In the early 80s, she went on the road as a backup singer for the Allman Brothers. It was a fun time, with immersion in high-energy rock and roll. In Nashville, Benita and Pam kept writing together and also performed as a popular club act called "Two Desperate Women." Making the rounds of the Bluebird Café, Bogey's, Cantrell's, and the Exit-In, their jazzy, cabaret style and humor-spiced lyrics attracted quite a following. Benita's songs were getting cuts with artists like Robin Lee, Ronna Reeves, Billy Joe Royal, Billy "Crash" Craddock, and Gail Davies.

### **Lessons of the Music Business**

In 1987, she signed a record deal with Polygram (Mercury) and cut a single ("You Make It Hard to Say No") that did well on radio and was in the top 10 videos on CMT. Just when it looked like success was truly around the corner, the unthinkable happened. The label, in an administrative restructuring, dropped their lower-level artists, including Benita. Never mind that she had a record going up on the charts. It's all part of the business, folks. The roller coaster was heading down.

In the aftermath of the Mercury debacle, Benita and her second husband, Bob Hill, decided to start a family. She became pregnant, and her son, Robert, was born. Benita also decided to quit writing songs in a formula style for other artists and concentrate on material that expressed her true feelings. During the early 90s, she was honing her artistry and writing songs that would ultimately be released on her first album, *Fan the Flame*. The album was critically acclaimed, but along the way her second marriage had ended in divorce.

From 1992 and into 1997, a "new Benita" was emerging in club acts, principally at Nashville's Mere Bulles, Merchants, and Trilogy. She interspersed her own songs

with those she knew from childhood days when she listened to her mother's collection of 40s and 50s swing and blues. It was music well suited to her voice and vocal styling. She had an appreciative following, but she was still far from hitting the big time.

### **1997, the Year of Sevens**

That year started with a jolt when her publishing company dropped her with the comment that her songs "weren't country enough." It was a short-lived disappointment, though. Fortunately, Benita had been working in the office of Allen Reynolds, Garth Brooks' producer, and one day she gave Garth a copy of *Fan the Flame*. He listened, thought it was fantastic, and in February told her he would cut one of the songs on it, "Take the Keys to My Heart," for his *Sevens* album. Soon after, Benita asked him to listen to a song she, Sandy Mason, and Shawn Camp had written. It was "Two Pina Coladas," which he cut for the same album and also released as a single.

Her career was on the rise bigger than ever now, the roller coaster headed uphill full-throttle, but who could know that just around the corner was the bombshell that would drop Benita down the well and shake her to the core?

### **The Greatest Test**

In May, 1997, just two weeks after Garth cut "Pina Colada," Benita was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Chemotherapy treatments had to start immediately. She tells it like this:

"Being told you have cancer is devastating. I couldn't believe that just when all this great stuff had started to happen, now I was going to die. My first thought was How am I going to take care of my son? It was a very, very hard time involving an intense chemotherapy. I lost all of my beautiful, long hair, lost 40 pounds, and was hospitalized most of the time. I was so dehydrated and so frail. I couldn't eat or even keep liquid down, not even water, so I was on an IV tube most of the time.

"But it turned out to be a blessing. I had wonderful friends, great medical care, prayers, and so much love. I believe all those factors combined to help me recover. I never knew before how much I was loved. After being in this town almost 20 years, writing songs and trying to be recognized as an artist and feeling rejected as someone who didn't really fit in, at last I could see the love. So it became a time to sit back and evaluate what I had in my life that was wonderful rather than being caught up in the struggle. I looked at the years of living hand-to-mouth and being a single mom and trying to forge a career. Getting a cut on that big record album and getting a record

deal had been all-consuming. I hadn't been able to understand why, since I am good at what I do and have an audience that likes my work, I just couldn't make the right connections.

"Cancer made me realize the importance of just letting go. I came to see that the universe was going to support me in my dreams. I would be taken care of. I had lots of caring friends around me in the form of Allen Reynolds, Garth, and my two co-writers, Sandy Mason and Pam Wolfe.

"Garth is a wonderful person, very kind and thoughtful," reveals Benita. "He sent me huge amounts of roses when I was in the hospital. Then, when I didn't have any hair and was wearing a wig he sent me flowers and with them a note that said, 'I want to rub your tennis-ball head.' Little things like that kept my spirits up."

### **Tangerine Moon**

During her chemo treatment, while Pam and Sandy were visiting her regularly and being her "little handmaiden angels," the three went to work on the song, "Tangerine Moon," now the title cut of her second album, released in December 1998.

"The song was about looking up and seeing the light, just seeing something you had never really noticed before. Would you ever think of "tangerine" and the moon going together? And the sense of turning sorrow into a joy. It is about what my life became from that point on - victory and starting all over again."

Benita completed treatment at the beginning of August, 1997 and a month later was clear of the cancer (and has been ever since). It was time to go back to work.

### **"It Was Your Song"**

For Benita, the most exciting event of her career was yet to come, and it had to do with Garth, too, although what happened just seemed to unfold by itself without any pre-planning.

"In making my second album," she says, "I wanted to include something for my mom because she was such an influence on me, and I also wanted to dedicate the album to her. My first thought was to do one of the old Italian songs she used to sing, but Pam liked the idea that it was 'her song' that made me sing. After we talked about that, one morning it just came out in an emotional burst. We finished it up and the next day went into the studio and recorded 'It Was Your Song'."

Benita knew that Garth's mother had been fighting throat cancer for some time and was about to undergo a 12-hour surgery, and she asked Allen if he thought Garth would like to hear the song. Garth's mother had been a singer, too, and had encouraged his singing career.

Garth was so emotionally touched by the song that he went into the studio and cut it on the spot, calling it "It's Your Song" to dedicate it to his mother. It would be recorded again for his Live album. Afterward, hugging Benita, he said through tears, "I know why God kept you around. You had to write this song. It says everything that I've ever wanted to say to my mother."

A gift for Benita's mother had become a gift for Garth's mother as well. Now, with Garth's Live album out, the hearts it is touching cannot even be counted.

"That's the beauty," says Benita. "And it's humbling to know that there is some greater plan at work than we can ever dream."