

Gentle Ben

Ben Webster

Tete Montoliu Trio



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1	BEN'S BLUES (Ben Webster)	9:04	BEN WEBSTER , tenor sax
2	THE MAN I LOVE (George & Ira Gershwin)	5:34	TETE MONTOLIU , piano
3	MY NEPHEW BENT (Ben Webster)	5:21	PEER WYBORIS , drums
4	HOW LONG HAS THIS BEEN GOING ON (George & Ira Gershwin)	8:03	ERIC PETER , bass
5	SWEET GEORGIA BROWN (Bernie-Pinkard-Casey)	6:32	Recording location: Casino De L'Alianca Del Poblenou (Barcelona)
6	DON'T BLAME ME (Fields-McHugh)	8:00	November 28, 1972 Cover photo:
7	DID YOU CALL (Ben Webster)	8:41	Magnum / Zardoya Cover design:
8	BARCELONA SHOUT (Ben Webster)	4:39	Llorenç Martí Producer: Antonio Armet



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GENTLE BEN

One day, Ben Webster got into the same lift as Joe Louis, at that time world heavyweight champion. On the spur of the moment, Ben wanted to show he was able to do anything and he punched Louis, who returned the compliment. In the hospital where the foolhardy musician had to be brought back to his senses, Louis apologized and explained that had he realized who Ben Webster was, he would never have returned the punch.

Ben Webster outlived many trials of strength, but where he really triumphed was music. Unlike his illustrious colleagues Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, the passing of the years made Webster's discourse deeper, calmer and more precise at the same time as it became livelier. In the former two, time played bad tricks on them: Hawkins spiralled into a dramatic

decadence and Young drained his own life, until it ended in silence when he was forty-nine. These three make up the unassailable triad of tenor sax in the classic era of jazz: the era of swing and of the great soloists. All later tenor sax performers, all tendencies, stem from these three. Hawkins gave rise to the expressionist school whose great representatives were Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane; Young, from tranquillity and relaxation, started another tendency, whose leaders were Stan Getz, Warne Marsh, Bill Perkins, Brew Moore, etc. Balanced between the two and included in both trends was Ben Webster, whose secrets in the art of performing ballads and blues were requisitioned by both sides.

When Webster became a member of Duke Ellington's orchestra in 1940 (where he stayed till 1943), he contributed to the regeneration

of a collective sound that has not yet been surpassed and which, by virtue of its strictly human provenance, cannot be repeated. More than his contribution as a soloist, Webster brought with him the originality of his sound. As a soloist, he was subject to the dimensions of his time, particularly those laid out by Hawkins, but he moved away from them with the deepening of his instrumental voice. Ben Webster's true art is in slow time ballads and blues. The other Webster – who seems to be another person, playing another instrument in another time – moves in a rough, almost violent territory with practically no relation to the romantic, reflexive Webster. He was the greatest specialist in the history of jazz in the art of ballads, greater and deeper than well-known masters of later generations (Stan Getz, Dexter Gordon or Sonny Rollins himself, playing the same instrument).

It was Webster who gave the tenor sax the mission of keeping this difficult tradition alive. His style was not limited by eras and was able to insert itself into any context, although in the final fifteen years of his life he was most comfortable as the only wind instrument, accompanied by a basic trio. However, his recordings in quintets (with Tad Jones), sextets (with Benny Carter), septets (with Oliver Nelson) or accompanied by strings, as he was in the famous ballad sessions for the Verve label, are also extraordinary.

Despite being a respected, much-admired musician in his own country, and a point of reference for many of the emerging young performers – even for the most radical tendencies, such as the saxophonist Archie Shepp who still considers him his mentor – Webster left the United States in 1965 to settle in Europe, first in

Copenhagen and later in Amsterdam. In both cities, he became a revered figure, and local fans deemed it a privilege to have him living amongst them. In Copenhagen, he used to play with the basic trio in the famous Café Montmartre, with Kenny Drew or Tete Montoliu at the keyboard. His understanding with Montoliu stemmed from some years earlier and the pianist attributed his final preparation as a jazz musician to Webster and Don Byas.

This record was made ten months before the saxophonist's death, during a visit to Tete Montoliu's Barcelona. There he met the pianist's regular trio and from their understanding sprang one of the finest moments recorded in Ben Webster's maturity. The huge amount of recorded material from the same period in Copenhagen and Amsterdam (where there are recordings of a recital he gave a

week before his death) could lead one to think that they all have the same lively tone.

However, the fact that Tete Montoliu was playing in his home town worked as a balance, and one could almost say that *Gentle Ben* is a shared work, as were Webster's famous sessions with Art Tatum twenty years previously. Both musicians understood each other so well and so deeply that it is hard to accept that these encounters, although they added up to many over the years, were actually more of a coincidence than planned. As far as Tete Montoliu is concerned, this recording is one of the best in his whole career, and whenever he is not fully in the spotlight, he absorbs Webster's projection of energy. Both create common lines that are more viable in friendship than in professional contacts.

Carlos Sampayo (1998)