

WAITING THE BLUES ♦ NOBODY KNOWS ♦ WHEN LIGHTS ARE LOW ♦ BLUES IN MY HEART ♦ DOOZY ♦ ONCE UPON A TIME ♦ ONLY TRUST YOUR HEART ♦ THE COURTSHIP ♦ BLUE STAR ♦ THREE LITTLE WORDS ♦ SURRENDER DEAR ♦ SYMPHONY IN RIFES ♦

**The King
And I**

Photograph by
Dennis Connors

ED BERGER
 was like the son that
BENNY CARTER
 never had.
 (BY BILL GLOVIN)

ED BERGER knew that day would come but dreaded it nonetheless. When it finally arrived last summer, he went to work. He phoned jazz performers and luminaries, found the perfect venue, and carefully crafted his remarks. His friend Benny Carter, one of the most influential composers and arrangers in the history of jazz and a virtuoso on the trumpet

BERGER, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF JAZZ STUDIES, AND JAZZ GREAT CARTER BROUGHT OUT THE BEST IN ONE ANOTHER.



Journey Down Jazz Lane



and alto saxophone, had passed away in Los Angeles at 95, and Berger was going to do everything in his power to make the celebration of his life a memorable event.

"Benny was like a second father to me," says Berger (GSNB'76), host of a three-hour memorial tribute held last September at St. Peter's Church in New York City. "He was so much fun to be around and so interesting to talk to. I can't even begin to measure how much I'm going to miss him." On and off for more than 30 years, Berger was Carter's biographer, discographer, road manager, producer, liner note scribe, photographer, and confidant. "I spent four days in the hospital with Benny the week before he died and he told me he couldn't have asked for a better life," says Berger. "He also said it was time to go; he didn't want to be a burden on anyone." Berger's office at the Institute of Jazz Studies in the Dana Library at Rutgers-Newark is dotted with Carter's images, including a 1996 photograph of the pair posing in tuxedos the night Carter received Kennedy Center Honors in Washington, D.C.

CARTER MEMORABILIA FROM BERGER'S COLLECTION, FROM TOP LEFT: VINTAGE RECORD LABEL; EARLY PUBLICITY PHOTO; AT THE SAVOY BALLROOM IN 1939; AN ALBUM COVER; WITH PRODUCER BERGER IN THE RECORDING BOOTH; PERFORMING WITH PAQUITO D'RIVERA, HANK JONES, AND DIZZY GILLESPIE AT THE SMITHSONIAN IN 1990; AN APOLLO THEATER POSTER.

For the memorial, Berger tapped the *crème de la crème* of the New York City jazz scene. Among the musicians were jazz trumpeters Wynton Marsalis and Clark Terry and pianist Kenny Barron. Rutgers' Dan Morgenstern, institute director and former editor of *Downbeat*, critic Stanley Crouch, and WKCR-FM radio host and historian Phil Schaap remembered Carter as one of the great masters of jazz music, a proud and dignified African American, and a mentor.

Two weeks later, Berger flew out to speak at a similar tribute at UCLA, hosted by Quincy Jones. "People have been calling me to tell me that they were overwhelmed by Ed's words," says Carter's wife, Hilma. "Ed is so modest and low key, I think he surprised some people a bit," she says. "But not me. Benny knew better than anyone that Ed was very smart and extremely competent, and he loved Ed's sense of humor. In many respects, Ed is as much a giant as Benny was, and I'll always be grateful for the role that he played in Benny's life."

Carter, who died on July 12, 2003, had one of the longest and most prolific careers in jazz history. Born in the San Juan Hill section of New York City, Carter began his recording career in 1928 in the age of 78s and didn't stop until 2001, when Berger and his brother Larry recorded Carter playing one of his own piano compositions. Though Carter never quite became a household name the way Duke Ellington or

Dizzy Gillespie did, his peers nicknamed him “King” and were awed by his accomplishments, from playing at the opening of the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1934, to scoring the music for one of the first major black films, *Stormy Weather*, in 1943, to his clean and melodic technique on both alto saxophone and trumpet.

Credited with helping lay the foundation for the swing era of the late 1930s and early 1940s, Carter composed arrangements for his own big band and the orchestras of Fletcher Henderson, Chick Webb, and Benny Goodman. From 1946 to 1970, he largely disappeared from the public eye when he moved to Los Angeles to write for films and television. He also made strides in tearing down racial barriers by taking the first interracial big band to Holland in 1934, crossing the Hollywood studio color line, and playing a key role in merging the black and white Musicians’ Union locals in Los Angeles. “The problem of expressing the contributions that Benny Carter has made to popular music is so tremendous it completely fazes me, so extraordinary a musician is he,” wrote Duke Ellington in *Metronome* magazine in 1943. Miles Davis later called Carter “a whole musical education,” while André Previn thought of him as “probably the most rounded and sophisticated of all the jazz composers.”

To tell Carter’s story is also to tell the story of Berger’s late father, Morroe, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Princeton and a jazz aficionado. “My dad was a big fan of Carter’s music,” says Berger, explaining that his father first met Carter in 1969 when Morroe flew to Carter’s home in Los Angeles to talk about their participation in a weeklong jazz seminar. “For someone of his stature, Benny was incredibly unassuming,” he says. “I had to pinch myself at times, thinking, ‘I can’t believe we’re sitting here with one of the most important people in the history of jazz.’” Carter soon began accepting Morroe’s invitations to lead jazz workshops and perform at Princeton. Says Hilma, “It was love at first sight between those two; they had instant rapport.” Before long, Morroe boldly floated the idea of writing a biography of Carter, a notoriously private individual. In Ken Burns’s celebrated 2001 documentary on jazz, Carter is barely mentioned because, as Berger *files* speculates, “he was more often than not a reluctant subject.” But Morroe gained his confidence, and Carter agreed to cooperate. In no time, the study in the Berger home in Princeton, which Carter visited often, came to be known as “the Benny Carter factory.”

Ed Berger, who got his first taste of Carter’s music listening to his father’s records as a teenager, got caught up in a fascination for the musician. After graduating from Indiana University in 1970 with a degree in



What Satchmo Said

LOUIS ARMSTRONG ON BENNY CARTER

One night in a Vegas hotel lobby, musician Willie Ruff overheard a conversation between Louis Armstrong and Benny Carter. Armstrong addressed his colleague as “King Carter,” then teased him that he was becoming so successful that “you might put old Pop otta woik.” The next day, the musician, curious about what Armstrong had said, asked the trumpeter about it. “That’s cause he *is* a king, man! You got Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and my man, the Earl of Hines, right? Well, Benny’s right up there with all them cats. Everybody that knows who he is call [*sic*] him King!”

Russian, Berger came home to work on a graduate degree in Slavic languages and literature at Princeton. His father entrusted him with the massive 700-page discography that would accompany Carter’s biography.

Berger took a job in the Princeton University library and later earned his master of library science degree from Rutgers. Around the same time, he started driving to the institute in Newark, searching for remnants from Carter’s past. Already known in New Jersey jazz circles, Berger joined the archive as a full-time staff member in 1978.

(continued on page 45)

The King and I

continued from page 35

"During this period, I flew out to L.A. with my father and we interviewed Benny many times," says Berger, now 54. "He allowed us to interrogate him for hours, and gave us access to his personal archives and recordings. It was the kind of thing where I'd play a recording from 1928 and ask him to identify the tuba player."

Morroe wanted the two-volume, 1,400-page *Benny Carter: A Life in American Music* (Scarecrow) published by Carter's 75th birthday on August 8, 1982. But months before the book was to go to press, Morroe died of a sudden heart attack at age 63. "Morroe completed almost all of the manuscript; one of the most important works in the history of jazz," says Morgenstern, who wrote the book's foreword. "Most jazz biographies deal very specifically with a topic and rarely involve the source. This one was crafted by a scholar with the help of its subject against a background of groundbreaking events in music, race relations, and music business politics."

Determined to fulfill his father's wish of meeting the deadline, Berger and his brothers put the finishing touches on the manuscript and bundled it, with some of his own photographs, off to the publisher. Soon after, Carter surprised Berger by asking him to be his road manager. "Ed had reservations because he hadn't had any experience," says Morgenstern. "But Benny gently, but firmly, insisted." In the end, Carter took Berger on 10 tours of Japan. Hilma characterizes Berger as "laid back, but some-

one who knows how to take charge." She remembers her husband feeling weak one night on the road because he had run low on potassium. Berger volunteered to hit the streets to find some. "Ed came back a few hours later with a bunch of bananas," she recalls. "He told Benny, 'Take two and see me in the morning.'"

In 1987, Carter asked Berger to begin producing his recordings, two of which won Grammys—*Harlem Renaissance* in 1993 and *Elegy in Blue* in 1995. Carter also enlisted Berger to help him create new music and stay current, and Berger was invaluable in that regard, says Hilma. "If Benny expressed interest in some new musician, Ed would get the CD for him and they would discuss it. Together they surveyed the jazz scene constantly." As his peers passed away, Carter stood almost alone, besieged by writers, filmmakers, and scholars seeking an eyewitness account of jazz history. Says Berger, "He made it abundantly clear that he would rather spend his time creating new music than discussing old music."

A close relationship with Rutgers (see "Making Music Together" below) gave Carter the opportunity to talk rap music and politics with students. "Benny felt he could learn as much from them as they could learn from him," says Hilma. Berger, often at Carter's side when he met with students, says, "Benny didn't have much of a formal education. He was one of the most well-read people I've known. With students, he had no set

spiel, no office hours, no set agenda. He would ask them what they wanted to know and stay engaged for hours."

By 1997, Berger realized the biography was already out-of-date. "Benny had received a prestigious lifetime achievement award in 1987 [from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences]," says Berger. "But Benny had continued to write, arrange, and perform at an extremely high level. Benny and I started Evening Star, our own recording company, and my brother Larry built a

web site dedicated to Benny" (www.bennycarter.com). Berger began gathering information about Carter's accomplishments of the 1980s and '90s with the goal of publishing a new edition by Benny's 95th birthday. "This time I wanted to include more about Benny's personality and character," he says.

Berger met his deadline. Now he's thinking about a comprehensive book of compositions and another with arrangements. "It was hard to do with Benny around; he was a self-critical perfectionist who didn't like to commit a composition or arrangement to its final form," says Berger. He plans to continue to devote his energy to making sure his friend's remarkable accomplishments live on forever. After all, Berger says, "Benny helped make jazz the consummate American art form." □

Bill Glovin is senior editor of RUTGERS MAGAZINE

Making Music Together

BENNY CARTER AND RUTGERS WERE IN TUNE.

One of the Institute of Jazz Studies' biggest fans, Benny Carter believed in preserving the legacy of the music he loved and contributed to the institute in many ways:

★ As chair of a fund-raising appeal to his fellow musicians, he helped create an endowment. In 1987, Carter's gift—which

was matched by members of the Berger family—created the Morroe Berger-Benny Carter Jazz Research Fund, which awards annual grants for jazz research.

★ Rutgers awarded Carter an honorary doctorate in 1991; that same year he delivered the commencement address at the Mason Gross School of the Arts. He was also a Mason Gross artist-in-residence.

★ Carter's Grammy Award-winning *Harlem Renaissance* was recorded live with the Rutgers University Orchestra and

premiered at the State Theatre in New Brunswick in 1992. Two years later, Carter gave a concert to celebrate the expansion of the Dana Library and the opening of the institute on the library's fourth floor.

★ Carter enhanced the institute's collection with unissued recordings; original music manuscripts; his C-melody saxophone, trumpet, and clarinet; and his participation in the jazz oral history project. His career is a highlight of the digital exhibit *Jazz Greats* at newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs.