BENNY GOLSON

'ART IS A LIFETIME COMMITMENT'

AS A RECIPIENT OF COUNTLESS ACCOLADES DURING HIS 70 YEARS IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS, BENNY GOLSON MIGHT WELL BE BLASE ABOUT HIS ELECTION TO THE DOWNBEAT HALL OF FAME. BUT THE 89-YEAR-OLD TENOR SAXOPHONIST AND COMPOSER CONSIDERS THIS LATEST HONORIFIC A CONSEQUENTIAL MILESTONE.

"In the beginning, I was much in tune with wanting to be a poll-winner," Golson said over the phone from his Upper West Side Manhattan apartment. "Then I stopped thinking about it, because I had other goals; what I was actually doing and creating was important. But now I'm overwhelmed. I'm glad it happened before I die. For all these years, DownBeat has been the bible of what jazz is all about, and I'm honored. I'm happy. It makes me feel validated."

The Hall of Fame designation makes complete sense to Quincy Jones, Golson's good friend since 1955 and, later in the ’50s, his neighbor in a West 92nd Street apartment building populated by a cohort of night people who inspired Golson's famous tune "Killer Joe." "As a composer and a player, Benny is one of the absolute backbones of jazz," Jones said via email. "He is almost 90, and that cat is still playing! Benny is a mad monster of a musician, and he always has been."

At the time of our interview in late April, Golson was focusing on a forthcoming 10-day tour of Japan with pianist Mike LeDonne and drummer Carl Allen, two-thirds of his working quartet since the late 1990s along with bassist Buster Williams, for whom Luke Selick would shoot during this occasion. The LeDonne-Williams-Allen trio joins Golson on the aptly titled Horizon Ahead (HighNote), a 2016 release that is the most recent of his 40 or so leader albums since Benny Golson's New York Scene, from 1957. That date featured a nonet version of "Whisper Not," which Golson also recorded that year with Dizzy Gillespie's big band. It's the most enduring staple of an oeuvre that includes such jazz lingua franca works as "I Remember Clifford," "Along Came Betty," "Stablesmates," "Blues March," "Sad To Say" and "Are You Real?"

Horizon Ahead includes three recent Golson songs and one less-traveled gem titled "Domingo," from a 1957 Blue Note date led by trumpeter Lee Morgan, then Golson's 19-year-old bandmate with Gillespie and, a year later, his front-line partner with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers on the iconic album Moanin', for which Golson served as music director. "It's one of those tunes that never made it like 'Whisper Not' did," Golson said. "I wrote 'Whisper Not' in 20 minutes. I was so plethoric with ideas, I could hardly write it down. Dizzy liked it and recorded it, and now it's a standard in the jazz repertoire."

"When you play 'Whisper Not' for 20 years, you've really got to dig deep to find new things—and we do," said LeDonne, referencing Golson's determination to avoid a by-the-numbers attitude interpreting good-old-good-ones in live performance. "His tunes are all very soulful, with beautiful melodies, and he's very sophisticated harmonic movement. He's written so many unbelievably beautiful ballads that people need to investigate, and those ballads are mostly in minor
keys, with a dark, romantic sound. And he's in
enthusiastic support of what you're doing all
the time. He takes off all the limits. He wants
you to go as far as you can with whatever it
is you're doing. He is an adventurer, and he loves
an adventurous imagination."

"Imagination" is a word that cropped up
when Golson uncorcked an eloquent declama-
tion on the title of Horizon Ahead, which he
traced to conversations with two fellow jazz
immortals: tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins
and pianist Hank Jones (1918–2010).

"Sonny basically said, 'There's no end to
this music we play.' He's right. We musicians
don't say, 'I know everything there is to know;
there's nothing else to discover.' We know it's
just the opposite.

"Hank Jones put it another way. He said,
'The horizon is ahead.' I didn't know what he
meant at first. But we're never satisfied. To
be satisfied is a caveat that we have to avoid,
because then you slow down. You stop stretch-
ing out. You stop reaching. It's like falling over-
board of a ship. The ship sails over the horizon
without you, and you tread water, and you're
existing for as long as you can, and then it's
ever. No, we have to stay on the ship. There's
always something to learn, so we've always got
something to aim for, to hope for. But of course,
we need the talent. We need the one thing
that's always axiomatic with the jazz musi-
cian: Imagination. Extrapolations. New ways to
do the old things. That's what we do. If there's
no imagination to create things that have no
prior existence—and that's what improvising
is—then you may as well get a job as a park-
ing attendant or a cook. When we go to sleep at
night and wake up the next morning, what do
we intuitively say to ourselves? 'What can I do
better today than I did yesterday?' Age doesn't
usually interfere with that, as opposed to an
athlete. I tell my audiences: 'Can you imagine
an 89-year-old quarterback?' I'm being ridicu-
ously when I say it, of course.

"I like to talk," Golson said, and his oratu-
lar soliloquies—delivered with an orotund
baritone voice in complete sentences and para-
graphs, even chapters, using vocabulary bed-
rocked in King's English—are a beloved staple
of Golson's performances.

Many of those stories appear in Golson's
2016 memoir, Whisper Not: The Autobiography
Of Benny Golson (Temple University Press),
which features a lovingly rendered portrait of
the young John Coltrane, his close friend. The
book also documents various encounters with
Tad Jones's Monk, eyewitness accounts of
trompet battles between Clifford Brown and
Fats Navarro and between Brown and Louis
Armstrong; what it was like to play the debut
engagement of the Jazztet at the Five Spot oppo-
site Ornette Coleman, when Coleman first hit
New York; and how it felt to be recognized by
Duke Ellington, who asked if he wouldn't con-
sider contributing something to the orchestra.

In the book's introduction, Golson com-
pares his journey to that of the hero in Homer's
The Odyssey, which itself represents a collective
consensus of orally related tales. "I'm sure the
warrior who invented the Trojan horse... was
too restless to keep his head on the pillow when
he got back to Ithaca," Golson writes. "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 cre-
ative person ever arrives home without imme-
diately beginning to long for the next gig. Art is
a lifetime commitment."

Golson's odyssey began in Philadelphia,
where he was born in 1929. "I've remained
until he matriculated at Howard University in
1947. Raised by a single mother, he took classi-
cal piano lessons from an early age, barely toler-
ating his mother's affection for "the low-down
dirty blues." His views would evolve. Now,
Golson writes, "I hug the blues to my chest the
way Whitman hugged the seashore.

"I had the classical thing to my mind, and she's playing Bill Broomsy and Lil Green,"
Golson reminisced. "When I talked to Sonny,
he brought up Romance In The Dark. I said,
'You remember that?' Boy, my mother used to
play that thing. And another tune, 'If you feel
my legs, you want to feel my thighs, and if you
feel my thighs you want to go up high.' I said,
'That's terrible music!' But she was also playing
Billie Holiday—'Mean To Me' and 'I'll Get By'
and things like that." Another connection to
jazz, well-depicted in the memoir, was Golson's
Uncle Ralph, a bartender at Minton's Playhouse
who allowed his nephews to be a fly on the wall
there on periodic visits to Harlem.

Golson's mother bought him a saxophone
after he heard Arnett Cobb play "Flying Home"
with Lionel Hampton at Philly's Earle Theater
in 1943. Two years later, Golson joined his
teenage friends Coltrane and Ray Bryan at
the Academy of Music to hear a sextet featur-
ing Gillespie, Charlie Parker, saxophonist Don
Byas, pianist Al Haig, bassist Slam Stewart and
drummer "Big Sid" Catlett.

"I started trying to play bebop for all I was
worth," Golson recalled. "I drove my neighbors
crazy, because I got my saxophone during the
summer, and the windows were open. When
John Coltrane joined me, they wanted to kill
two people. We were rank amateurs."

Golson credited a course at Howard,
"Vocabulary Building," as the starting point
of his enviable linguistic skills. "The professor, Mr.
Carroll, told the corniest jokes that he thought
were just hilarious—but he knew so much
about the English language," he said. "The next
semester, I was the only one who took him. I
learned so much about the English language from that guy, and I started to read."

The mandatory orthodoxies imposed by Howard's music department circa 1949 were less appealing. Golson left abruptly, launching the apprentice stages of his career, which included stints playing fourth tenor with Jimmy Heath's excellent Philly-based big band, and subsequent r&b sojourns with singer Bull Moose Jackson and alto saxophonist Earl Bostic. He acknowledges that his pianistic skills and knowledge of theory gave him a head start, even before he fully understood how to apply his knowledge to the saxophone, to which he initially sought to apply the tonal values exemplified by Byas, Lucky Thompson and Coleman Hawkins.

"Benny could read the music and he had a good sound," Heath, 91, said. "He was ready to enter the world with what he did, with a lot of determination—and his development was obvious. He's a very lyrical tenor player who found his voice and established a style."

Proximity to bebop poet Tadd Dameron during their mutual tenure with Jackson facilitated Golson's musical vocabulary building. "It amazed me what Tadd could do with a paucity of musicians," Golson said. "I made it a point to learn everything that each instrument is capable of, and the sound you get when you blend them in combination with the other instruments. What does the hi-hat mean? What does the ride cymbal mean? ... What does it mean when you're playing in the middle of the piano? What about the glassy sound in the upper part of the piano? The mutes. Louis Armstrong never played any mute but the straight mute. Dizzy Gillespie used a cup mute. Miles Davis used a Harmon mute. In the Jazztet, sometimes I'd tell [trumpeter] Art Farmer to use a little hat, which looked like a derby, which changes the sound. These things make a difference, and you learn to use them and combine them."

Golson was asked to comment on the parallels between the process of making music and the act of composing. "Anybody can write a tune that reaches the ear," he began. "But you want to go past the ear and touch the heart—though the head is involved, too. When I write, I go full-throttle, whatever I feel, and hope people understand what I'm saying."

Inevitably, they do.

"Benny wanted to be a composer, he wanted to be an arranger, he wanted to be a soloist, he wanted to write for symphonic orchestras and big band—and he did," Heath reflected. "I'm very proud to be his lifelong friend."