

FROM ORIGINAL ANALOG MASTER

Ben Webster



BALLADS



STORYVILLE

The identification of Ben Webster with slow ballads is so natural that it's surprising there have not been more albums like the present one. It seems the only previous ballad collections are Ben's three albums with strings, which obviously constitute a special genre of "mood music". The first of in fact was titled, with the naivety of the very early LP-era, *Music for Loving*.

This album on the other hand, represents much better the performances which were an essential part of Ben's live repertoire. Selected from the typical saxophone-and-rhythm format of his European period (1964-73), it deliberately places together a series of similar tempos and similar standard songs, each played during a longer set of big-band music or of Ben's own group. Unlike the with-strings recordings, it throws a clear spotlight on this remarkable aspect of the saxophonist's work.

Still, one might argue that such a selection process is also a falsification. That is, in live performance Ben's ballads were invariably part of a set, not the whole set, and therefore it is "unrealistic" to link a series of individual items in this way. But the most interesting side-effect of this album is to underline the split that Ben himself is said to have made between his ballads and the rest of his playing. It has frequently been observed that, after the ballads became prominent in the 1940s, he reserved all his romanticism for these pieces, which were progressively divorced from the forceful, driving and even gruff sounds he preferred at faster tempos.

If this is true, it's worth speculating about why this split came to be. It's well known that Ben's initial ambition, after taking up the saxophone in 1929, was confined to imitating Coleman Hawkins. Since it was only with '*Body and Soul*' ten years later that Hawk became widely recognised as a ballad interpreter, that was probably still Ben's aim in his earliest ballad efforts. But it was also through those famous early solos with the Ellington band that fellow musicians – and Ben himself, no doubt – first realised how far he was becoming a unique non-imitative stylist.

And there is an emotional dimension to this development too. While he was an Ellingtonian, Ben became a particular buddy of the young (and tragically doomed) bassist Jimmy Blanton; years later, in a fit of alcohol-induced depression, he explained his reaction with the words, "Blanton died". It might also be relevant that, although he often imagined

himself to be handy with his fists, he was devoted to his mother and aunt – and that those were his most enduring female attachments. The story reported by Digby Fairweather in *Jazz: The Essential Companion* (Grafton/Paladin) of Ben pretending to threaten a prostitute (“*I know you’re there, honey! Come on Out!*”) seems to illustrate the rather jokey aggression of his up-tempo work and the thwarted tenderness of his ballads.

In fact ‘*Stardust*’, performed with Teddy Wilson, was already a feature for Ben while he was with Ellington, although he did not record it in the studio until 1951, as a member of Johnny Otis’s band. Here it demonstrates all the pared-down ardour of his later years, with the opening chorus containing nothing but the exact notes of the melody modified only by timing and articulation – an amazing feat of subtle re-definition. This delightful directness is thrown into greater relief on the two tracks with the Danish Radio Band, ‘*Cry Me A River*’ deploying the brass and reeds in a dramatic arrangement which the tenorist fits into with ease, especially in the final half-chorus. ‘*Greensleeves*’, with the strings and woodwinds, affords also a useful comparison with two other notable versions, by Hawkins and John Coltrane.

The remaining numbers are all tenor-plus-rhythm, with either Kenny Drew or Ole Kock Hansen on piano, although ‘*For Heaven’s Sake*’ also has associations with a famous “with-strings” recording by Billie Holiday (even if the rhythm-section harmonies here are closer to Bill Evans). ‘*My Romance*’ shows Ben’s rhythmic freedom, with a basic behind-the-beat feel leading to unexpected accents mid-phrase. Both ‘*Willow Weep For Me*’ and ‘*Old Folks*’ are taken at the dead-slow tempo which only really became fashionable in the 1960s, and both allow Ben ample scope for his complex simplicity.

Not only is his timing full of the previously mentioned finesse, but the detail of his tonal variation is fascinating. The more or less pronounced breathiness on prominent notes, sometimes combined with slurs, contrasts with shorter and firmer tones and with the occasional piercing foray into the upper register. Which is, in the final analysis, not far different from the techniques he employed when not specialising in ballads.

BRIAN PRIESTLEY
(Author of *Jazz On Record: A History* (Elm Tree Books))

BEN WEBSTER BIOGRAPHY

The nickname "The Brute and the Beautiful" was aptly given to tenor saxophonist Ben Webster. He became famous for his beautiful sound which gave his ballad playing a unique touch of tenderness, while his playing in faster tempos was virile and filled with growl, and when sober he was the kindest and gentlest man, witty and entertaining and the natural center of the gathering, while he was unpredictable and violent when he had consumed too much alcohol. Despite this Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde-personality he was a much loved musician and recorded a fair amount of excellent albums of which most still are in stock, due to the fact that he is the best-selling tenor saxophonist in jazz.

Ben (jamin Francis) Webster was born in Kansas City, MO on March 27, 1909. In elementary school he studied violin and taught himself piano, inspired by the nearby Pete Johnson who taught him to



play the blues. In 1927 he played for silent movies in Kansas City, but left town a little later to play with a small territory band, but in the spring of 1928 he was again playing for silent movies, this time in Amarillo, Texas. Here he met Budd Johnson who taught him how to make a sound on a saxophone, and Webster got so interested that he borrowed an alto saxophone. In 1930 he left Amarillo with Gene Coy's Happy Black Aces, and after a few months Coy bought him his first tenor saxophone, because "I couldn't express myself on alto. The tenor had a bigger sound."

From then on, Webster's career took some fast leaps forward. After Coy, he joined first Jap Allen's band and then Blanche Calloway's before he became a member of Bennie Moten's important band and contributed some fine solos on the band's famous marathon recording session in

December 1932, such as *Moten Swing*. Shortly afterwards, Webster returned to Kansas City where he got hired by Andy Kirk, and in June 1934 he went to New York to play with Fletcher Henderson's famous orchestra, actually switching job with Lester Young who in turn went to Kirk. The next few years were spent with Benny Carter (late 1934), who was the first to see Webster's potential as a ballad interpreter (*Dream Lullaby*), Willie Bryant (1935-36), Cab Calloway (1936-37), before he rejoined Henderson in July 1937 for a short year after which he joined first Stuff Smith and later Roy Eldridge in New York. During these years, Webster also participated in some small group recording sessions, notably those led by Teddy Wilson and Billie Holiday e.g. *What a Little Moonlight Can Do*.

In April 1939 he became a member of Teddy Wilson's big band and was its most important soloist, but a dream came true when he was offered a permanent job in Duke Ellington's orchestra. He therefore left Wilson in January 1940 and went to Boston to play his first job with Ellington. (Actually he had subbed for Barney Bigard on two short occasions, in 1935 and 1936).

Webster stayed with Ellington until early August 1943, and it was during these years he gained national and international fame with recordings like *Cotton Tail* - which became his signature tune - *Jack the Bear*, *Harlem Air Shaft*, and *Sepia Panorama*.

Webster started out as a Coleman Hawkins disciple, but under the influence of Ellington his style matured and became more personal. In quick tempos his solos contained great rhythmic momentum, a rasping timbre and an almost brutal aggressiveness, while his ballad playing was breathy and sensual, delivered with one of the most beautiful sounds ever captured on a tenor saxophone.

After leaving Ellington, Webster formed his own small groups or played with other small ensembles, e.g. John Kirkby in 1944 in New York. In late 1948 he rejoined Ellington for a short year, after which Webster returned to Kansas City to play with Bus Moten, Bob Wilson and Jay McShann. From 1952 he spent his time between Los Angeles and New York playing with his own groups, freelancing, or recording with a variety of soloists, among them singers like Billie Holiday, Ella

Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae, Frank Sinatra, Joe Williams, and Jimmy Witherspoon with whom Webster toured regularly around 1960.

Webster toured with Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic in the fall of 1953 and 1954, and it was also Granz who was instrumental in giving Webster a recording contract that gave his career a new lift with excellent albums such as *King of the Tenors* (1953) and *Ben Webster Meets Oscar Peterson* (1959).

In early December 1957 Webster took part in the now legendary CBS TV broadcast *The Sound of Jazz* where he both performed with Count Basie and with Billie Holiday, and in the latter he was united with the other two swing era tenor saxophone greats, Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, the only occasion they played together ever. Everyone played excellently on *Fine and Mellow*, Young very moving, Hawkins with self-confidence, and Webster intense and emotional.

Despite fine reviews of his albums, it was difficult for Webster to find steady work in New York during the early 1960's, and

when an offer to play for a month at Ronnie Scott's Club in London turned up in late 1964 he accepted and sailed to England.

Webster never returned to the United States. In Europe he found plenty of work, and after the successful London gig, he flew to Scandinavia for weeklong residences in Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Oslo, settled in Amsterdam (1966-69) and then in Copenhagen. He toured frequently, mostly in Northern Europe, playing in clubs or at festivals with local bands or with expatriate or visiting American musicians, such as Benny Carter, Bill Coleman, Don Byas, Kenny Drew, Teddy Wilson, Red Mitchell, Charlie Shavers, Carmell Jones, Brew Moore, Dexter Gordon, Clark Terry, and Buck Clayton.

Even if his body declined during his last years, his playing never did. To the last day Webster played with passion and intensity, and his ballad playing became even more beautiful and tender, simplified almost to the laconic and delivered with weight on every note. He never launched into double-time while playing ballads, as was the custom with most tenor saxophonists at that time, but maintained the

song's feeling throughout while staying in the slow tempo. Webster was one of the unique jazz musicians whose presence came through on every recording.

Webster is regarded as one of the three foremost swing era tenor saxophonists – the two others being Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young. His ballad playing and sound inspired such later fellow saxophonists as Paul Gonsalves, Harold Ashby, Archie Shepp, Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Frank Foster, Sonny Rollins, Flip Phillips, Georgie Auld, John Coltrane, Scott Hamilton, and Branford Marsalis. His rough playing with growl was emulated by Charlie Ventura and David Murray, and it also inspired R&B and rock saxophonists, who often combined the use of growl with altissimo notes.

Webster is the subject of two documentaries, *Big Ben. Ben Webster In Europe* (1967) by Johan van der Keuken (on DVD by Eforfilms), and *The Brute And The*

Beautiful (1989) by John Jeremy (on VHS video by Koch Entertainment), not yet on DVD.

A collection of his solos has been published by John Alexander: *Ben Webster's Greatest transcribed Solos* (Lebanon, IN, Hal Leonard, 1995).

Two biographies have been published on Webster, the first by Jeroen de Valk: *Ben Webster. His Life And Music* (Berkeley, CA, Berkeley Hills Books, 2001), and the second by Frank Büchmann-Møller: *Someone To Watch Over Me. The Life And Music Of Ben Webster* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2006).

The Ben Webster Collection, including rare private recordings, photos, films, and memorabilia, is held at the Music Department of the University Library of Southern Denmark, Odense.

BEN WEBSTER BALLADS

1	STARDUST (H. Carmichael – Parrish)	6:24
2	CRY ME A RIVER (Hamilton)	4:14
3	FOR HEAVENS SAKE (Meyer – Bretton – Edwards)	7:50
4	GREENSLEEVES (Traditional)	2:26
5	MY ROMANCE (R. Rodgers – Hart)	8:37
6	WILLOW WEEP FOR ME (Ronnell)	5:21
7	OLD FOLKS (Robinson – Hill)	7:33

Liner notes: Brian Priestly

Biography: Frank Büchman-Møller, Board member of the Ben Webster Foundation

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Additional photo: Storyville Records archives

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THE 2xHD FUSION MASTERING SYSTEM



In the constant evolution of its proprietary mastering process, 2xHD has progressed to a new phase called 2xHD FUSION, integrating the finest analog, with state-of-the-art digital technology.

The mastering chain consists of a selection of high-end vacuum tube equipment. For the recordings on this album, the original 1/4" 15 ips CCIR master tapes were played on a Nagra-T tape recorder, modified with high-end tube playback electronics, wired from the playback head directly to a Telefunken EF806 tube, using OCC silver cable. The Nagra T, with its four direct drive motors, two pinch rollers and a tape tension head, has one of the best transports ever made. A custom-built carbon fiber head block and a head damping electronic system permit 2xHD FUSION to obtain a better resolution and 3D imaging.

The resulting signal is then transformed into high resolution formats by recording it in DSD11.2kHz using a Merging Technologies' Horus A to D converter. All analog and digital cables that are used are state of the art. The 2xHD FUSION mastering system is powered by a super capacitor power supply, using a new technology that lowers the digital noise found in the lowest level of the spectrum. A vacuum tube NAGRA HDdac (DSD) is used as a reference digital playback converter in order to A and B with the original analog master tape, permitting the fusion of the warmth of analog with the refinement of digital.

2xHD was created by producer/studio owner André Perry and audiophile sound engineer René Laflamme.