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## BROOK BENTON

### THERE GOES THAT SONG AGAIN

Gerry Stonestreet reviews a new biography/discography



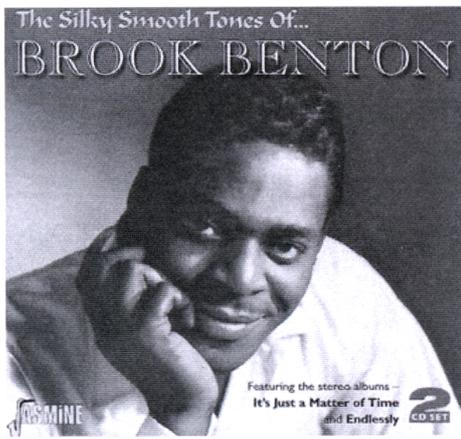
**BROOK BENTON:**  
**THERE GOES THAT SONG AGAIN**  
**Herwig Gradischnig & Hans Maitner**  
**ISBN-13: 978-0-9562679-8-6**

Originally published in Germany in 2010, this revised and updated version in English is now available for the first time from Music Mentor Books. Clearly a labour of love for its two authors, many will be delighted by this book's appearance. Certainly Brook Benton remains a popular figure, maybe a singer who never received due credit for some fine albums as well as an impressive run of hit singles. Often compared to Nat King Cole, while superficially his smooth baritone is similar, Benton was certainly no copyist. Perhaps he suffered from the same fate as many artists who achieved 'crossover' status, leaving audiences never quite certain of his position in the musical spectrum of the late fifties/early sixties. His hit singles, obviously aimed at the younger pop market contained much more overtly blues and soul styled vocals with a rock beat, whereas his albums tended to be more adult affairs with the emphasis on standards. When, inevitably, the hits dried up, his albums sales were never strong enough to warrant Mercury renewing his contract and thus began the label hopping that would be the pattern of his subsequent career.

As the book details, Benton, born Benjamin Peay, (the surname being a slave name harking back to the time when his ancestors worked on a French plantation in South Carolina) was no overnight success. Always wanting to be a professional singer, with musical roots in his church choir, he left his rural home for New York City, where one of his sisters lived, at the early age of 16. Although he returned soon afterwards, he tried his luck again a year later and became a member of a gospel group, Bill Landford & The Landfordaires. Touring with them for three years, the group made some recordings for Columbia before Benton left to join a couple of other gospel groups before rejoining Landford in 1953. They were recorded by RCA in Nashville but were not a great success, so Benton returned to NYC and worked in a variety of jobs, including driving a truck in the garment district. Joining another quartet, The Sandmen, he made some more recordings, including some as a solo, this time for Columbia, but again without any success. He later signed up to RCA and had some recordings issued on the parent label and their Vik subsidiary; again they were all flops. During this period he was also writing songs and it is estimated that he made over 500 demo recordings to try to sell them to other artists. It was his friendship and songwriting collaborations with Clyde Otis that eventually led to his contract with Mercury, when Otis became A & R man at the label. After a decade of trying, Brook hit the jackpot with IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME and thus ensued a golden period for him after a decade of struggle.

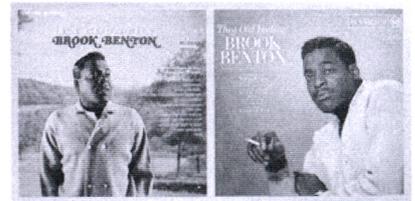
There have been many useful compilations of his earlier recordings. BROOK BENTON - THE EARLY YEARS (Jasmine JASCD784) compiles 62 tracks from the start of his career, giving plenty of attention to his gospel roots and his demo recordings. The late lamented Taragon label issued THE ESSENTIAL VIK AND RCA VICTOR RECORDINGS (TARCD 1082) in 2001.

Jasmine issued IN THE SILKY SMOOTH TONES OF (Jasmine JASCD687) which contains 5 of his Mercury albums, while LET ME SING AND I'M HAPPY (Jasmine JASCD744) has four more albums and some non album singles. Both these sets cover the bulk of his early Mercury output, but unfortunately the copyright extension law is likely to deprive us of ever seeing his subsequent Mercury albums like BEST BALLADS OF BROADWAY, ON THE COUNTRYSIDE and THIS BITTER EARTH released on CD. When he moved on to RCA, this association produced three albums, MOTHER NATURE, FATHER TIME which I do not think has ever made it to CD, next, a fine album of standards, THAT OLD FEELING and finally, MY COUNTRY, these two being coupled on a CD as part of RCA's short lived two on one series about ten years ago. A brief interlude at Reprise yielded one album which sunk without trace (LAURA, WHAT'S HE GOT THAT I AIN'T GOT before he moved to Cotillion, cutting a series of soul based albums, one of which TODAY, contains his last big hit, RAINY NIGHT IN



# BROOK BENTON

MY COUNTRY  
THAT OLD FEELING



TWO ORIGINAL ALBUMS ON ONE CD

GEORGIA. There were more recordings on minor labels, remakes of his hits for TV promoted packages but his glory days were well behind him and his recording career sadly petered out before his untimely death in 1988.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first, by Herwig Gradischnig, is biographical, but not in a strict chronological sense. It is divided into chapters which are devoted to particular aspects of his life such as his childhood, a survey of his recording career with analysis of his albums, his stage appearances and other headings such as his personality, social commitment, civil rights etc. This non-linear approach has the merit that it is easy to dip into certain parts of the book in any order the reader chooses. The writer has some interesting points of view, whether he is examining Benton's vocal technique in some detail, explaining the celebrated rift between Benton and Dinah Washington or offering his opinions about why Benton's stint at Reprise did not work out.

This format is also sensible because Benton appears to have led an unremarkable existence - he came from a large, closely knit family, there were no scandals, drink or drugs, and the story of an exemplary family man married to the same woman from 1955 until his death in 1988 and with three sons and a daughter, all of whom he was devoted to, would not necessarily make very interesting reading, for all its perceived rarity in the world of showbusiness.

This part of the book takes up the first 212 pages, with the remaining 200+ pages given over to a discography and other statistical information by Hans Maitner.

I must confess I turned to this part of the book first because I had lost track of much of Benton's post-Mercury career and found a veritable mine of information here. I did not know, for example, the full extent of the sessions for RCA with Billy May in Hollywood in 1966 which yielded an album's worth of material, most of which has never been released, although five alternate takes did emerge later and appear on the RCA Camden CD THAT OLD FEELING (74321 423542) What would fans of Benton (and Billy May for that matter) give to get their hands on those recordings!

Apart from that revelation, the authors have established that there is clearly a great deal of Mercury material that has never been issued and which I do not suppose will ever see the light of day now, together with some sporadic late recordings which would be interesting to hear. A career which involved more than 600 recordings certainly deserves to be taken seriously. Who knows, perhaps Bear Family might be interested.

Following on from the discography there are lists of USA, UK and worldwide releases in all the various formats - 78s, 45s, LPs, cassettes, tapes, eight track cartridges and CDs, along with copious photographs of record sleeves etc. There is also a section on chart positions in the various categories in the USA, from which I was surprised to see how little success his albums had in terms of chart positions. There follows a list of his recorded compositions and his songs recorded by other artists, all an indication of what a prolific composer he was, providing Nat King Cole with LOOKING BACK, BECAUSE YOU LOVE ME, NOTHING IN THE WORLD and THANK YOU PRETTY BABY for example, Clyde McPhatter with A LOVER'S QUESTION and Johnny Mathis MAY I.

This is an impressively researched and constructed book which will afford endless pleasure to those who admire this artist. It will almost certainly send you, as it did me, to examine your collection of Benton's records, to play some Brook Benton music not heard for a long time and to check what you have and have not got from his discography. Searching the internet proved rather frustrating - those post 1962 Mercury albums are elusive, his Cotillion recordings are not all available and bits and pieces of his later work are poorly represented. And it turns out, I think I have a remake, not the original of A RAINY NIGHT IN GEORGIA!

It would be nice to think that this book will lead to an upsurge of interest in a singer who now seems sadly neglected. Whether or not it does, his fans will no doubt be delighted with this impressive and fact-filled volume, packed with photos, memorabilia and easy to follow information. Well recommended.

