George Benson – The Other Side Of Abbey Road (1970)



A1 Golden Slumbers 2:35 A2 You Never Give Me Your Money 3:07 A3 Because / Come Together 7:25 A4 Oh! Darling 3:55 B1 Here Comes The Sun 2:25 B2 I Want You (She's So Heavy) 6:20 B3 Something / Octopus's Garden 4:30 B4 The End 1:55 Guitar, Vocals – George Benson Alto Saxophone – Sonny Fortune Arranged By – Don Sebesky Baritone Saxophone – Don Ashworth Bass – Jerry Jemmott, Ron Carter Bass Clarinet – Don Ashworth Cello – George Ricci Clarinet – Jerome Richardson Drums – Ed Shaughnessy, Idris Muhammad Flute – Hubert Laws, Jerome Richardson Flute, Oboe – Phil Bodner Percussion – Andy Gonzalez, Ray Barretto Piano, Organ, Harpsichord – Bob James, Ernie Hayes, Herbie Hancock Tenor Saxophone – Jerome Richardson Trombone, Euphonium – Wayne Andre Trumpet – Freddie Hubbard Trumpet, Flugelhorn – Bernie Glow, Marvin Stamm, Mel Davis Viola – Emanuel Vardi Violin – Max Pollikoff, Raoul Poliakin

Just three weeks after the U.S. release of the Beatles' swan song, Abbey Road, Creed Taylor ushered George Benson into the studio to begin a remarkably successful pop-jazz translation of the record (complete with a parody of the famous cover, showing Benson with guitar crossing an Eastern urban street). It is a lyrical album, with a hint of the mystery and a lot of the cohesive concept of the Beatles' original despite the scrambled order of the tunes. Benson is given some room to stretch out on guitar, sometimes in a bluesy groove, and there are more samples of his honeyed vocals than ever before (oddly, his voice would not be heard again by record-buyers until he signed with Warner Bros.). Don Sebesky's arrangements roam freely from baroque strings to a full-throated big band, and Freddie Hubbard, Sonny Fortune, and Hubert Laws get some worthy solo space. Yet for all its diversity, the record fits together as a whole more tightly than any other George Benson project, thanks to his versatile talents and the miraculous overarching unity of the Beatles' songs. One wonders if the Fab Four liked it, too. ---Richard S. Ginell, AllMusic Review

I first heard The Other Side Of Abbey Road at a cozy coffee shop in Hollywood, California, early in my jazz discovery days. At the time, I was just recovering from a heavy overdose on the Beatles, having listened to all their post-LSD records almost exclusively for several months. I was ready for something new, and an album of Beatles covers was not exactly what I had in mind. Nevertheless, my curiosity was aroused once George Benson's velvety voice rang out across the cafe singing "Golden Slumbers" against Don Sebesky's schmaltzy backdrop of strings.

"Hmmm..." I thought somewhat dismissively, as the song transitioned into a borderline musak version of "You Never Give Me Your Money." The lush baroque string arrangement on "Because" had me reaching for my magazine when Idris Muhammad and Ron Carter intervened, knocking me out of my chair with their swampy, indestructible groove on "Come Together." As George Benson tore into his fluid and funky solo, I was lifted. I wandered over to the counter and asked who they were playing. "George Benson?!?" I responded in disbelief. My mental scheme was thrown into disarray...I had already pegged George Benson as the King of Slick, so what was THIS I was hearing?

My prejudices shattered, I went to the record store for a copy of this quirky jazz-pop album of Abbey Road covers. "Out of Print!?!" I asked, again in disbelief, not realizing that I had just acquired my very first hard-to-find CD obsession. I spent the next 5 years scouring the "B" section of every used record store for this elusive gem. Then one day my luck hit. My girlfriend and I were at Moby Disc in Santa Monica (check it out!) when I finally found myself staring at a picture of Benson in parody of the Beatles, guitar in hand, crossing an urban American street. I had finally found The Other Side Of Abbey Road.

My girlfriend smiled indulgently as I skipped to the register, commenting that the album cover looked cool. (This concept would be more fully realized a year later, when Booker T. & The MGs posed for the front photo of their own classic Abbey Road cover album, McLemore Avenue.)

When we brought the prized disc home and put it on, it was my girlfriend who now looked on with disbelief. "THIS is what you've been obsessing over for so long!?!" she exclaimed. She still doesn't get it...but that's okay. While the record did sound a little more cheesy than I had remembered (in fact, it started sounding better in my head each year I didn't have it), I was still completely blown away as soon as I heard Benson's jazz-funk treatment of "Come Together" and "I Want You (She's So Heavy)." His soulful singing on "Oh! Darling" put the glide back in my stride. I really wanted to call up Paul McCartney and ask him if he liked it too. Recorded just

three weeks after the Beatles released Abbey Road, George Benson's set of Beatles covers are the best ever recorded by a jazz artist. And Benson had lots of competition, as many talented jazz improvisors and composers resorted to pillaging the Beatles songbook, hoping to make a living in those trying rock and roll times of the late 60s and early 70s.

While commercial success eventually did come to Benson, it came mostly at the expense of his brilliant guitar playing. The Other Side Of Abbey Road predates Benson's notorious 70s sellout. This is an incredibly tight and cohesive album, filled with great solos by Benson, Herbie Hancock, Freddie Hubbard, and Sonny Fortune. Creed Taylor really hit his stride with this record, laying the blueprint for his classic CTI-label formula: top-ten pop covers, top-flight musicians, tight arrangements, atmospheric Don Sebesky strings, and superb Rudy Van Gelder sound quality. All these winning elements come together here, making this the most moody, melodic, complex, and funky of the "good" George Benson records worth owning. ---John Ballon, allaboutjazz.com

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