

Benny Benjamin

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MAY 27, 1964: IT'S A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON at Motown's converted garage studio on 2648 West Grand Boulevard in Detroit. Cutting tracks for the Temptations is producer Norman Whitfield — young, ambitious, confident — a protégé of company head Berry Gordy. But Whitfield is nothing without a hit, and he badly needs one. Looking for an undeniable intro, he focuses his attention on the far corner of the room, where master drummer William "Benny" Benjamin is poised behind an acoustic baffle waiting for the count-off.

Whitfield ends up with much more than he bargained for. Benny kicks off "Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me Blue)" with a fill that's nothing short of musical arson. Machine-gun-precise eighth-note triplets travel around the snare and tom-toms like napalm. The entire band catches fire.

It was the groove of a lifetime for Whitfield. Yet this display of musical virtuosity was just another day at the office for Benny. He was the creator of the renowned Motown drumbeat and was hands down the most beloved musician within the chart-busting Hitsville U.S.A. studio band known as the Funk Brothers.

Having worked on Berry Gordy's earliest productions in 1958, Benjamin continued through Motown's mid-Sixties Detroit-era glory years. His deft brushwork, Latin-influenced beats and explosive drum fills are heard on thousands of sessions that define the Motown Sound. With a big-band and jazz background honed in the fertile Detroit club scene of the Fifties, Benny swung much harder than the R&B and blues drummers who rode other record labels' hits. The effortlessness of his playing made Motown's grooves irresistible, and Benny's time was impeccable.

But the same couldn't be said for his promptness. His drug- and alcohol-plagued lifestyle drove Motown producers and executives to distraction. Yet according to Motown arranger Gil Askey, Benny's erratic behavior never affected the music out on the floor. "Benny would show up at the studio sometimes looking like he'd slept in a coal bin," says Askey. "Sometimes he might have even snuck into the building the night before and pawned the studio drum set. So he'd just go

into the storage room in the back and come out with an old snare with a busted head, some drumsticks with no tips, and a high hat with some cracked cymbals. He'd just turn the snare over to the other side, turn the sticks around to the fat end and he'd count it off — 'One, two, three, *let's go!*' And he'd play the hell out of that half-assed setup and make a hit."

Supporting Askey's claim is Benny's legacy of recorded masterpieces: the youthful innocence and spirit of "Shop Around" and "Too Many Fish in the Sea." The simplicity and elegance of "My Girl" and "Ooo Baby Baby." His trademark power and insistent drive on "Going to a Go-Go," "You Can't Hurry Love," "Bernadette," "I Can't Help Myself" and "Get Ready." Benjamin's combination of finesse and fire places him in the rarefied company of Hal Blaine, Earl Palmer, Al Jackson Jr. and other world-class drummers of his era.



As celebrated as his playing and eccentric antics is the origin of his nickname, Papa Zita. Bandleader and keyboardist Earl Van Dyke once explained, "Benny was born in Alabama [in 1925], but he tried to buffalo everyone into believing that he was from Bimini in the Bahamas. He talked that island shit all the time."

Motown's recording schedule became a runaway freight train, with sessions around the clock. Neither equipment breakdowns, personnel changes, nor even the Detroit race riots of July 1967 could interrupt the flow of hits. But the production line ground to an abrupt halt on April 20, 1969, the day Benjamin's heroin addiction finally caught up with him and ended his life. After Benny had supplied Motown's heartbeat for so long, no one could muster the heart to play that day.

Stevie Wonder, one of Benny's drum students, couldn't make it through the song he sang at the funeral. Benny's soul mate, Motown bassist and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member James Jamerson, went into a deep monthlong depression. Other Motown drummers like Uriel Jones and Richard "Pistol" Allen, whom Benny trained, picked up where Benny left off. But as Earl Van Dyke pointed out, "That innocent, family-atmosphere type of thing disappeared after Benny died. It became all business after that. You just couldn't replace a guy like Benny Benjamin." □

