

An Interview With Benny Harrison

By Olinda Turturro



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This is a loosely translated, behind-the-scenes interview excerpt between Olinda Turturro and Benny Harrison, Singer, Musician, Composer, Arranger, Musical Director and known in the music industry as “THE LEGEND.” Benny’s bio reads like a “Who’s Who,” in the music industry. Currently on tour with Felix Cavaliere’s Rascals, Benny has worked with, played and sang with, arranged for and been an all-round inspiration to other legendary Icons, such as Paul Shaffer & Will Lee of The David Letterman Band, The Howard Stern Show, Vincent Pastore’s Gangster Squad, Bruce Willis, Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Richie Cannata, Corey Glover, Eddie Brigati, Kristin Chenoweth, Mickey Dolenz of The Monkees, Felipe Rose of The Village People, Tommy James & The Shondells. Benny has been my coach, arranger, keyboard player, musical director and back-up singer. Benny is the Man!

Olinda: Benny. Thanks so much for doing this interview with me.

Benny: I’m excited!

Olinda: I am so excited too. I know we talked a bit about how it all started for you. Influences, in your family and growing up in Harlem and what you’re up to and how you got where you are today. Let’s take a look at how it all began.

Benny: Alright. I was born in New York General Hospital on 96th Street and Lexington Avenue. And, my mother and father were living in Harlem, on 118th Street and Lexington Avenue. My grandmother, being of Puerto Rican descent, and that whole area was very much like “In The Heights” and “West Side Story.” You had a mixture of Italians, Latinos and Irish people, living in the neighborhood. And, in the summertime, I would always hear the people playing music, the sound of the congas in the streets and people yelling and fighting. It was just this crazy mixed lot of different nationalities. But, music and rhythm were all around us. You just walked the streets and you were walking in rhythm.

Olinda: Absolutely.

Benny: (Continuing)...My grandma had one of those old-school washing machines in the kitchen. The one with the ringer, you know? So, every time the machine was on and she was washing clothes, I would come up and start moving my hips, you know? So, the rhythm was always there.

Olinda: I remember how simple things were, back then. I was also close with my grandmother and spent endless hours, in the kitchen, with her.

Benny: Yeah. She was like my second mom, you know. I was a sickly kid, in the beginning of my life and my grandmother and my parents really nurtured me. I guess my family gave me more attention because of that, in the beginning. We're all still tight.

Eventually, my mother and father moved the family out of Harlem, because Harlem was going from a rich cultural experience to a socially unfortunate one. It was, at the time, in the sixties, going down the tubes. And, my parents didn't want to be involved in any of the darker side of what was happening at that time. Drugs and alcoholism permeated the neighborhood. They moved us all out to Clark, New Jersey; a little farm type of place, which is really about 20 minutes southwest of Newark Airport and they bought a home.

I went to school in a predominantly white school and I was the only Latino in my class. I didn't think much of it, at the time, but the culture, coming from the multi-ethnic culture of Harlem, was certainly different.

In high school I was always involved in musical plays. I had a great piano teacher, as well. My father often took the family to West Virginia, to see his relatives. And, culturally I'm Latino, although, my father was biracial. At that time, my grandmother and my grandfather were still living in Harlem. I was always conscious of that part of my upbringing, because it was all I knew and just the music...hearing the Salsa music all the time... and my grandmother and her sister would sing songs of Latin music.

Olinda: Yeah! Like Celia Cruz and Ray Barretto?

Benny: Yes. Celia Cruz, Just sort of folk songs. We were all singing harmony. I remember they would sing in harmony, just naturally. Untrained and natural. I used to also do that with my Aunt Terry. We always used to sing a lot of Beatles tunes.

Olinda: I know that The Beatles were a big influence of yours, but I want to get to the influences later, but I'm starting to get to know more of a feel of your family and how it started. Did you start singing, first or playing piano?

Benny: Can I tell you something, Olinda? It was the piano which I started first. And, I remember my friend, Tom told me... he had a band. He was in Newark and they were starting a band and the first song I ever sang was (BENNY SINGS) The Kink's "Tired Of Waiting." I was 12 or 13. I didn't even know that I could sing. It just came out.

Olinda: Hmm...So... I think you told me you did some plays in school?

Benny: Yeah. I was very active in plays, throughout my schooling. I even wrote a comedic play about Tarzan. It was sort of like a like Mel Brooks and Zero Mostel, meet "Blazing Saddles." People running back and forth. (We both laugh) It was like a farce. Very funny. The kids went berserk! I think it was my 10th grade class. My acting teacher was just great. And, around that time, I was then considered most popular kid in my high school.

Olinda: You know, Benny, you're very easy to work with. I've worked with a lot of actors, singers, musicians and then in business, with different people and huge corporations. And, you're one of the easiest people to collaborate with. You are genteel. You don't judge and I think that it is your charisma, which draws people to you. I remember when we started working together and we sang together a few times, at some concerts at the Cutting Room and other clubs we sang together in. And, you'd walk through the door, and they'd say, "There's The Legend." (Benny chuckles). Did you know that they call you "The Legend"?

Benny: (Laughing) I never got that. The keyboard player, in Tommy James' band, Mike DiMeo, who's fabulous... he calls me that. He's a great singer and player and he works with me on my projects. He always calls me "The Legend". (Benny laughs). I'm not always conscious of my aura. I just wanna be real. I think that it may be the confidence I exude, which makes me feel and look like the star that I would like to be.

Olinda: I get it. You want to walk in and make an impression. I got the name "Diva" from my vocal coach, Marlon Saunders and from you.

Benny: Well, you, Olinda...You are strong. You are a strong entity. You have a good sense of who you are. And, your husband, Enzo, adores you. So, that's why you are a Diva. (We both laugh.)

Olinda: Let's talk about playing with Felix Cavaliere and The Rascals.

Benny: I saw The Young Rascals, when I was a kid, with my cousin Joey, at the RKO Theater on 58th Street and Third Avenue, in New York City. It was a Murray The K (He was a DJ on AM Radio) extravaganza. He presented multiple acts. It was the first time The Who, Cream, Mitch Ryder and The Detroit Wheels and other acts performed in New York City. He even had Wilson Pickett, singing, with Buddy Miles, on Drums. Wilson had on burgundy iridescent suit and white Go-Go boots.

Olinda: I love it!

Benny: And, they were saying that Simon and Garfunkel were supposed to be performing there but for some reason, I guess they were on tour or something, so they couldn't do it and the Rascals were called to fill in. I had to be around 15 and The Young Rascals come up and they were in their knickers, doing the mashed potatoes dance. Eddie Brigati and Gene Cornish were up front, Dino Danelli, on drums, doing his Italian Paul McCartney with an attitude of "Look at me I'm playing." Then you have Felix Cavaliere, behind that beautiful Hammond B3, playing the bass foot pedals and he was just so ***** amazing! They were tight and it was the first time I saw them. They hit me as hard as The Beatles did. And, having the honor of being a part of his current band; playing keyboards and singing with him, is surreal and at the same time, a dream come true. Felix has become a mentor and a friend.

Olinda: Again, I am so happy for you, Benny! See... dreams do come true! Do you remember your first gig?

Benny: I was in a band from the Bronx, called Street Kid. Which was "Rascalesque". It was a combination of The Rascals, Orleans and Hall & Oates. We met this guy, Stan Penridge, who was working with Peter Criss, from the band Kiss. Stan co-wrote "Beth", with Peter Criss, of Kiss. At the same time, I was jamming with a band called The Blue Sparks From Hell.

Olinda: Catchy name! (We laugh).

Benny: (Continuing) Stan was also a jammer, with them, as well. The guys were crazy! It was the first time I think I drank alcohol.

Olinda: How old were you the first time that you drank alcohol?

Benny: I was a sophomore in college. I ended up being part of this band. I would sing "Lucille"... that's where I got the nickname "The Screamin Rican" And, I would do that Little Richard scream. (Benny does a Steven Tyler/Little Richard scream and we laugh).

Olinda: Speaking of screaming...you know Benny, i think you sing James Brown better than James Brown! I have always loved your "Sex Machine." It's like none other.

Benny: Thank you! James Brown is a God, to me! That time was a magical period, for me. I was in Street Kid, who were playing at Vinny Pastore's (aka Big Pussy, of The Sopranos) club, in New Rochelle, called The Crazy Horse. Many celebrities would stop in and get up and sit in with the band. Buc Dharma, Daryl Hall and members of his band, Lester Chambers, of The Chambers Brothers band, to name a few. Vinny always welcomed musicians, of all genres, at his club. And, Vincent is still a good friend, to this day.

Olinda: Benny, what was your first professional touring gig?

Benny: Talk about creating lemonade, out of lemons! While I was still living in Clark, NJ, my brother, for some reason, sold my piano!

Olinda: Oh dear!...

Benny: And, I was traumatized, because I was practicing all the time. So, I ended up at Newark State College, and, back then, behind the stage area was about 30 pianos. So, I would sneak in there to practice. I had over-heard some students saying "Hey, The Beach Boys are jamming in the dressing room..."

Olinda: (Incredulously) No!...

Benny: ...Yes! ...so... you know me... I'm walking and I go around the corner, by the stage and I'm hearing music coming out of the dressing room. I poked my head in and it was Henry Gross of Sha Na Na, who was the opening act, for The Beach Boys. He was just warming up before the show. Henry Gross had the hit single out "Shannon." I saw a piano in his dressing room.

So, I said "Hey, can I play with you guys?" I played with them, in the dressing room and it was a blast! Eventually, Henry invited me to be a part of his touring band. Having the opportunity to be on the same stage as The Beach Boys, The Doobie Brothers, The Band, Charlie Daniels band, Aerosmith... I felt like I was in a movie. Imagine being asked to sit in, opposite Mike McDonald, of The Doobie Brothers, playing and singing "Taking It to the Streets." Imagine... being a school bus driver, one month and on tour, with Henry, the next.

Olinda: Wow! (Surprised and excited). That is some story, Benny! Look at how, sometimes, all of the stars line up! I guess, your brother selling your piano was a blessing, in disguise. It's like the old adage "When one door closes, another one opens." In your case, you got to sing with The Doobie Brothers! I know that they were so huge, in rock and roll. Tell me about doing a concert with them... the crowds... the rush?

Benny: The rush of performing in front of crowds, ranging from 500 to 15,000 people... is unreal! The energy that comes from an audience is what it's all about. It's what I live for.

Olinda: Amazing! What are you up to lately?

Benny: I just finished my album called "Pages."

Olinda: That's so fantastic, Benny! You know how much I adore your singing and your original songs. Tell me about how this album came about and how you got the inspiration, for the songs?

Benny: Well, basically Mike Ciro, one of the top musical directors, in the business, said to me "Hey, Benny, why don't you finally do a record, since we're not working, during the pandemic? And, I'll do it for you 'cause we worked together for the last 40 years. And, it has to be all new material."

Olinda: I love it, Benny!

Benny: Thanks. I basically presented 16 new song ideas, to him. He liked 13, we took 11 and 10 are making it on the CD. It's all new stuff. I have a few musician friends that I collaborated with, such as Simon Kirke, who's the drummer and one of the writers for the band "Bad Company." The songs are different snapshots of my life. And, that's also where the title of the CD comes from, the "Pages" of my life. The music is sort of a rock, soul, pop, country with some Latin-esque vibes.

Olinda: So, Benny...that's sounds as if it is all "right in the pocket"! (We laugh). I remember you telling me, when we worked together, that when it's right, it's "right in the pocket!" And, you, my friend, are right in the pocket, in your career and in your life! And, I couldn't be happier for you!

Benny: (Benny gushes) Thank you! I really appreciate that.

Olinda: Continuing) Let's talk about your preview of your soon to be released album, "Pages" at the Bitter End on February 15th at 8!

Benny: Yes! It's gonna be outrageous! I will be with my all-star dream band, the most amazing musicians, vocalists, playing these new tunes, from my album. And, I'm opening for Corey Glover (lead vocalist of Living Colour), "Vice." Just go to bitterend.com, for more info.

Olinda: I can't say enough about seeing you and your band live. I remember the first time that my husband, Enzo and I met you and heard you sing at the Bitter End. That was 13 years ago! You were on fire! And I knew, with every fiber of my being, that you were the guy, for me, to collaborate with. Enzo and I just fell in love with your talent and your manner, and it has been such an incredible journey, learning from you and laughing with you! Today, we celebrate your achievements and our friendship! Cheers, Benny!

Olinda: Let's talk about New York City! What is your favorite restaurant, neighborhood, and favorite thing to do in NYC?

Benny: The restaurant I love is Veselka, in the East Village. I just love that place. I always go there, whenever I can, during the day, for a late breakfast. I love their latkes. And, of course, I always bring the latkes and other stuff back home, for my Aunt Terry, 'cause she really likes them!

The neighborhood I like best, would have to be The Village. Both East and West. And, as far as what I love to do in NYC goes... of course, I love to hear live music or go to a Broadway show. Hanging with friends, in bars and

restaurants and meeting new people, is always an adventure, in New York City.

I remember when my mother took me to see a Broadway musical. We were invited to go backstage and then I walked onto the Broadway stage and it was at that moment that I said to myself, "This is what I'm gonna do."

Olinda: What do you think makes a true New Yorker?

Benny: You know what? My whole thing really is that I'm a New Yorker! Everything that I'm working on is always a reference to NYC. I'm very blessed to be doing what I do. I think being a New Yorker is the determination to deal with any circumstance and turn it around. It's a kind of we don't roll over determination! If you tell us we can't, we tell you we can!

Olinda: That's perfect, Benny. I second that! Thank you, Benny! Here's to life, to music and to friendship!



Photos Courtesy of Benny Harrison:

1. The Bitter End Flyer
2. Benny Harrison
3. Felix Cavaliere, Tommy James & Benny Harrison
4. Olinda Turturro, Benny Harrison & Enzo Carlino (courtesy of Olinda Turturro)
5. Benny Harrison & Sheryl Crow
6. Benny Harrison and Jason Aldean

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