

# Passing Glances Warren Benbow

## **WARREN BENBOW**

**(December 22, 1954 - September 29, 2024)**

**By Nora McCarthy**

*Warren Benbow, Drummer-Songwriter/Producer/Educator/Bandleader/Photographer, Author, Father and Friend, received his wings on September 29, 2024. A painful shock to all of us who knew him and a loss to the music world, without question, he left too soon.*

Who was Warren Benbow? A world-renowned stellar artist and human being, Warren was full of life, love and music. He was involved with living – he cared about things, his family, his friends, his community, his music, his writing, his photography, his art; he was a very interesting man, and a kind man. For those folks who don't know who Warren Benbow was, I implore you to read his book, *A Drummer's Story*. You will learn about the man, the artist, the musician, and his magical musical life – all of his many accomplishments and all the greats he played with. Then listen to his music – he is his music. Google him, check out his YouTube videos, his FB page that is still up, and other social media hubs, read his posts shared by his many friends and followers, view his photos, the ones he took on a daily basis while walking around his neighborhood, the streets of Manhattan close to his home, capturing what he saw and turning them into works of art, and statements; the most recent being that of a pile of garbage on the curb - one of my particular favorites. Or the ones he took of himself, also among my favorites with the silly faces he'd make, in the dressing rooms and lobbies of the many places he performed. The ones of him on stage, or the ones of his latest recordings, and the one of him that he was so proud of, that was included in an exhibit in Poland of great jazz musicians. And last but not least, the photos of his drums—on display—in his living room—on stage—in crates before a tour; he was diligent in documenting his life. Yes, a drummer's story indeed.

Then there was Warren Benbow, the person, the father, the friend, the guy who, after you first met him, would make you feel as if you'd known him forever. Immediately open, immediately candid, he didn't exist in a box of his own making, he was accessible. A seriously caring, supportive, eccentric, total human being whose many friendships and the connections he cultivated are prime examples of his outreach and reciprocity and how he fully participated in this life experience both off and on the stage. He went that extra mile, and he showed up – literally and figuratively. If he extended his friendship it wasn't just some insincere gesture he performed like so many people in the music business do, he wasn't playing a role, he was for real. Genuine. That's what made him stand out, from all the rest, the others, the stereotypical ones. He was special and you could tell from the energy

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that surrounded him and that exaggerated smirky smile of his, also a statement that reflected more than met the eye – he had a theatrical streak as well in his DNA.

He played with music greats such as Nina Simone, Betty Carter, James Blood Ulmer, James Brown, Whitney Houston, Stevie Wonder - who also was his best man at his wedding, Jimmy Owens, Larry Willis, Eddie Gómez, Olu Dara, Michael Urbaniak, Sonny Sharrock, Teruo Nakamura, Luther Thomas, Gwen Guthrie, LL Cool J, SWV, and Mary J. Blige, and most recently with his Electric Jazz Project consisting of: Al MacDowell- Bass, Brandon Ross Guitar, Jay Rodriguez- Saxes and Flute, Graham Haynes- Trumpet, Chris Theberge- Congas and Percussion, Pete Drungle- Piano; and the Breath of Air Trio with Brandon Ross – guitar, and Charles Burnham – violin. Yet and still with all of the fame and fortune he was a part of, it never changed who he was at his core, his humanity, or his authenticity which always took center stage.

Shortly after I first met Warren in 2018, he showed up at my gig, at the Bar Next Door, surprising me. He listened intently, especially to the song Skylark which is a favorite of mine to sing and in retrospect I now understand what it meant to him. He sat close to the bandstand as I sang, submerged in the music and when I ended the song he let out a very audible moan of approval, like yeah, dig it, as if it were a part of the song, it fit right in, the timing was perfect. He owned that last statement. I'll take that I thought to myself from the drummer who played with the queens of jazz, soul and r&b. Later that evening when he got home he texted me this thoughtful message:

*"Nora, It was cool to see you and Jorge tonite at your gig at The Bar Next Store. You and your trio sounded great!  
WB"*

Always professional, always respectful and classy, that was Warren. After that evening, he came to several other performances of mine including one with the Jorge Sylvester ACE Collective. I then invited him to the Cadence Jazz Festival at the Arete Gallery in Greenpoint, Brooklyn where he sat in and delivered a totally funky avant-garde creative performance.

I will forever miss his texts, checking in to see how I was doing, or to share his thoughts and feelings on something, a current event, social injustice, politics, or to just simply share his news, an upcoming or just released CD, or recent photos he took, words of advice, encouragement, always positive - helpful information, or to offer me guidance and

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wisdom about publishing my book that I was in the process of finishing and dealing with. He never forgot my birthday, or to wish me good luck, or to have a good day, or to “be thankful for today simply because you woke up which made it a blessed day.” Warren was the real deal, a real friend. Now this sparks my need to tell the story of how we met.

As a member of the now defunct Actor’s Fund, I attended an event for new writers interested in getting information from authors, new and established, about publishing a book. Since I was in the process of finishing my book and in need of this information for the next step, I decided to go and check out the event especially when I saw that a jazz musician/author was one of the panelists. After listening to the other authors share their information, the second to the last speaker was Warren. I saw him, of course, sitting unassumingly on a chair alongside the others in the front of the room, he looked like a jazz musician. He stood up and told a very humble story about his book and how he wrote it. His egoless demeanor was that of someone who brought something personal and of value to the meeting, someone who was there to talk about his book and his journey as a new author, and to share his writing knowledge and publishing info in a very honest and unassuming way. He wrote a book about his life, he told his story and now he was watching it play out again in another format – a book, which added yet another perspective to his life experience. As he spoke, he appeared to be equally as amazed as any reader would be reading it for the first time.

Afterward, there was a question-and-answer segment and then after that an opportunity for networking. As I walked around the room, I passed Warren who was leafing through his book and he stopped at a picture of his earlier wedding, looked at me and said, “This is my wedding; Stevie Wonder was my best man,” which immediately got my attention. Then I introduced myself and we began talking. That book was like stepping into his life. I stood there listening to his anecdotes one by one as he turned the pages. My being a jazz singer prompted a conversation about Nina Simone, Betty Carter, and Dee Dee Bridgewater. Warren had worked with many singers, some of whom were among the top singers in the business. I told him about my book, we exchanged information, and we became fast friends. One night shortly thereafter, he surprised me by showing up at the Medicine Show Theatre to see the play I was in and support me – apparently he lived in the neighborhood, I didn’t know that then but afterward he walked me to the train to make sure I got there safely and on the way there he shared many stories with me about those people who most influenced and touched his life. He often referred to his last

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wife Kwan, her passing and his loneliness since. Without going into too much personal detail, he revealed what was clearly a very painful void in his life. But he also declared with conviction, “I will fall in love again.” He wasn’t throwing in the towel – always optimistic for what tomorrow would hold. He also spoke about his children and how great they were and how proud he was of their creativity and accomplishments.

I met Warren at the end of his life. Approximately five years before his passing. In that five-year period of time, I got to know the man who was the embodiment of perseverance and determination. He never gave up regardless of the circumstances, no matter how big or small the challenge, that’s what he practiced and that’s what he preached. Altruistic to a fault, a humanitarian who believed in hope for the world, who had a big heart, who was funny, creative, inquisitive, giving, smart, enthralled with everything around him; a God loving spiritual man who was also real and down-to-earth. A true friend. Warren was an inspiration to me and to the many others who spoke so highly and lovingly of him at his Celebration of Life organized by his two beautiful children Kia and Kenn on October 21, 2024 at the Ellington Room in Manhattan Plaza, New York City.

“DO THE BEST THAT YOU CAN”

Those were the words of encouragement Warren texted me a while back. He was a mentor to me and when it came to publishing my book, he gave me advice up to the end, two weeks before he passed and shared his information as well as his hindsight and missteps regarding his own publishing journey with me. He wanted to see me succeed.

Please take the time to check out all of Warren’s music, his various groups, CDs and videos and especially the last CD, Benbow Reunion Band. “A conceptual musical art project by Kia Michelle Benbow with creative collaborators Warren Benbow and Kenn Michael. An autobiographical album of original music by the father/daughter/son trio featuring remakes of their dad’s classic tunes.” <https://benbowreunionband.bandcamp.com/album/benbow-reunion-band>

Warren Benbow was creativity, life, and love all rolled into one. Warren Benbow left his mark on this earth through his family, his music, the many people he touched, his positivity, and the hope he had for the world. That is his legacy. I for one, am grateful to have known him and plan on doing the very best that I can, always, and in his memory.

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