

kinda something I did as my cool-out. Once I started going to clubs and performing, that flipped around... I really found my direction playing with Sonny Fortune. It was an opportunity to stretch out in a straightahead jazz setting. After that, I was playing small clubs on my own, and I played the Breezin' Lounge. [George Benson] took me under his wing. At the time, Columbia had Miles and Freddie Hubbard, and George felt I'd get lost in the shuffle. He thought GRP would concentrate on me more... Dave Grusin shaped *Browne Sugar*. I had very little say. But I brought Bernard and Omar Hakim into the studio, and they did tracks here and there... On [*Love Approach*], I was writing songs. We were basically through making the album. I vividly remember being in my parents' attic, and this bass line just kept sticking out in my head. In the studio, I showed Bernard the line and started grooving on it. We built "Funkin' for Jamaica" up concept on top of concept. I laid a foundation, Bernard picked up on it, and it built from there. Everyone involved put their flavor on it, and, without their flavors, I don't believe that song would have done what it did. Dave Grusin's style of playing acoustic piano was unique. Bernard's style of playing bass on the [synthesizer] was crucial. The fact that it was a down-tempo song with rap, it reflected a whole new era. And, right at the time when Chaka Khan didn't have product out, Toni sounded like Chaka.

**Wright:** Everyone walked away from the studio feeling like they had done some of their best work. I remember everyone clicking and feeling unusually wonderful about their parts and the whole project.

**Browne:** I didn't plan it as a Jamaica, Queens, tribute. The whole spoken-word aspect reflecting the street scene in Jamaica came from Winky. I remember Winky saying, "Hold up, let me take one more toke of this joint." It all flowed from there... All the jazz players of that scene were very much into the Coltrane thing... We called it "the cosmos." When the music reached that level of being free, when you lose musical form and just go for expressiveness and energy, that's the cosmos.

**Wright:** We thought we were cosmic warriors. It's a trip when you spar with cats and get high with them and then play. It's on some other shit. Fighting and creating jazz together creates another kind of bond.

**Browne:** No one expected it to do anything. The label said, "What is this? This doesn't [fit] the record." When it came out, the reviews were horrible. It was making noise down South before New York. I think it had D.C. and worked its way north. I was in disbelief that it was that popular. I still can't understand why the doggone song won't just die, but I'll take the check, thank you.

**Wright:** "Jamaica Funk" wouldn't have come out if not for

George Benson. And you would not have heard of Tom or us. That needs to be recorded. Clive Davis thought it was too commercial, believe it or not, for a jazz artist. George went to bat for us and said, "You can't deny an artist a hit record."

**Miller:** Jamaica, Queens, loved it, because all the sudden they're on the map. Yeah, people thought they were talking about Jamaica, West Indies, [but] eventually the word got out. It was nice to see a big van driving through Queens, and his license plate said "Jamaica Funk."

**Browne:** We did an outdoor concert in Jamaica, West Indies, because of "Funkin' for Jamaica." I didn't have the heart to tell anybody. They didn't really care. They knew the words and it said Jamaica, so that's fine. Roll with it.

## 'NARD AND BLACKMAN

After finding success with Browne, GRP signed Bernard Wright. Released in 1981, *'Nard* pursued multiple directions, including street funk ("Master Rocker") and straightahead jazz (a cover of Miles Davis's "Solar"), while paying tribute to the Queens scene with the "Funkin' for Jamaica" sequel "Just Chillin' Out," as well as recordings of songs by Weldon Irvine ("Music is the Key"), Henry and Howard Grate of local band the Firebolts ("We're Just the Band"), and Don Blackman ("Haboglabotribin"). Just as Bernard Wright's work with Tom Browne led to his deal with GRP, Blackman's contributions to *'Nard* landed him a contract with the label. Unlike Wright, Blackman was a seasoned songwriter with a uniquely funky sound and aesthetic, having already penned tracks for both Irvine (*Sinbad's* "I Love You"; *The Sisters'* rare-groove classic "Morning Sunrise") and Lenny White/Twennynine (the comic "Peanut Butter" from 1979's *Best of Friends*). Blackman's self-titled 1982 LP blended raunchy funk and offbeat humor with gorgeous acoustic piano playing and sublime harmonies. Though under-promoted and underappreciated at the time of its release, the album has aged into a classic.

**Wright:** The midwife that delivered me told my mother I'd be a musician. I was born with an extra finger on my left hand, and it's an old wives' tale that people with an extra finger were born to be musicians. I have a half brother that wasn't raised with me that also has extra fingers that plays piano, I'm told. So maybe there's something to it.

**Browne:** That Bernard was so much younger was almost irrelevant. He went from being a young boy to a man almost overnight. When you're twelve and playing like you're thirty, and getting into clubs, age was almost never a factor. I just looked at Bernard as one of the Kats.

