

*The
Good
Life*

George Freeman

George Freeman: guitar
Joey DeFrancesco: organ (tracks 1, 2, & 3)
Lewis Nash: drums (tracks 1, 2, & 3)
Christian McBride: bass (tracks 4, 5, 6, & 7)
Carl Allen: drums (tracks 4, 5, 6, & 7)

"It's not that George is as great as he ever was, which is great indeed, but even greater! Thanks, George, for sharing your wisdom." –Dan Morgenstern

- 1. IF I HAD YOU** (James Campbell / Reginald Connelly / Ted Shapiro) (Campbell Connelly Inc. / EMI Robbins Catalog Inc.) ASCAP **11:04**
- 2. MR. D** (George Thomas Freeman) (Calumet Ave Publishing) BMI **7:39**
- 3. UP AND DOWN** (George Thomas Freeman) (Calumet Ave Publishing) BMI **6:04**
- 4. LOWE GROOVIN'** (George Thomas Freeman) (Pork Pie Music) BMI **5:53**
- 5. 1,2,3,4** (George Thomas Freeman) (Calumet Ave Publishing) BMI **3:56**
- 6. SISTER TANKERSLEY** (George Thomas Freeman) (Calumet Ave Publishing) BMI **9:47**
- 7. THE GOOD LIFE** (Jean Broussolle / Sacha Alexandre Distel / Jack Reardon) (Intersong USA Inc / Prosadis) ASCAP / SACEM **6:30**

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The gene pool of the Chicago Freemans is a remarkable phenomenon. Drummer Bruz (1921-2006), tenor saxophonist Von (1923-2012) and guitarist George (1927-) came of age during the be-bop revolution of the '40s. Each had his own distinctive conception and an arrestingly original sound on his instrument. Von added to the legacy with son and fellow tenor saxophonist Chico (1949-).

In 1950-51, the three brothers worked together in the house band at The Pershing Ballroom from which remarkable live performances with Charlie Parker later surfaced. In his 1998 liner notes to "Charlie Parker: The Complete Live Performances on Savoy," Loren Schoenberg, one of the producers of this album, wrote, "There is virtually no precedent for the outrageously experimental music that George Freeman creates throughout this set. Other guitarists with a pronounced sense of humor and a penchant for 'effects' were certainly around — Tiny Grimes and Les Paul were big influences at the time — but to me George Freeman here is in a league of his own. His *Keen and Peachy* solo is unlike anything I have ever heard and seems much closer to what John Scofield and Bill Frisell have brought to the electric guitar in the '90s than to anything from his own contemporaries. The passage, built around a long, slightly distorted note in the lower register, seems to presage Jimi Hendrix. On *Hot House* he steps tangibly into [Lester] Young/[Charlie] Christian territory, but quickly finds his own way to conclude what at first appear to be well-worn phrases. Freeman also possesses a sophisticated way with chromatic chord changes, which when married to the Young predilection for pentatonics results in some breathtaking moments. His rhythmic feel is rock-solid, with an even eighth-note approach that swings."

In 1950, the history of the electric guitar was a little more than a dozen years old. Kickstarted by the innovative genius of Eddie Durham, T-Bone Walker and Charlie Christian, a small army of brilliant virtuosos like Barney Kessel, Oscar Moore, Les Paul and Tiny Grimes soon swept the modern jazz scene. Joining the New York-based band trumpeter/vocalist Joe Morris with former high school classmate Johnny Griffin in 1947, George, though woefully unrecognized, became a charter member of the next wave of guitarists, using his eclectic style and unprecedented originality to rewrite the instrument's ground rules. Moving into free territory with explosive, avant-garde solos became a trademark, which delighted some and baffled others.

My own George Freeman epiphany happened in 1968 while I was a college student in Philadelphia. Pat Martino was a neighbor on Pine Street and I spent more time in his apartment than mine. Jerry Field, who managed Richard "Groove" Holmes as well as Pat, asked me to write the liner notes for an album he made with Baltimore tenor saxophonist Mickey Fields backed by Groove's trio with George and Billy Jackson. That was my first healthy dose of George Freeman, and it was a revelation. His sound and his solos were explosive and unorthodox. Holmes's superb "The Groover!" with George and Billy, which came out on Prestige that year reinforced his startling presence.

Since I had long wanted to get into record production, I asked Jerry if I could take the \$2500 that I had inherited from a relative a few years earlier and make an album with George on spec. In March '69, Jerry, a couple of friends and I piled in my car and drove to Chicago where I bluffed my way through the album project at Chess's famed Ter Mar studios. This was also my first introduction to the work of brother Von.

Despite my complete lack of experience, the album came out a lot better than I had any right to expect. But the jazz record business was ailing, and it took almost three years to place the record with the Delmark label. Although Von Freeman and I crossed paths infrequently over the next two decades, George and I fell out of touch. He went on to high profile gigs with Gene Ammons, Jimmy McGriff and Johnny Griffin and ultimately over a dozen albums of his own on Groove Merchant, Savant and Southport among other labels.

On April 10, 2022, George turned 95 years old. A handful of friends and fans decided that it was time to celebrate that milestone with an album bringing George together with some contemporary jazz all-stars. The project kicked off at Chicago Recording Company on May 7th with Christian McBride on bass and Carl Allen on drums. Although the years have slowed George's velocity, his creativity and originality remain intact.

The session was a truly spontaneous affair with the guitarist and the rhythm section meeting for the first time in the studio. *Lowe Groovin'* was a tune that George wrote in the mid '40s and was a huge favorite with the dancers when his band at the Pershing would play it. After recording it as a member of Joe Morris's sextet, the song became a minor hit. Unfortunately, it was credited to Joe Morris although the credit and copyright were later restored to their rightful owner.

1,2,3,4 was a studio creation built off George's guitar riff with a great bass line and a dancing backbeat. It's a perfect blend of the strengths of three masters.

The slow and soulful *Sister Tankersley* is named after George's mother, Earle Freeman-Tankersley, who survived to the age of 101. George and Christian feed off each other's ideas and intensity in their solos.

George fell in love with Sasha Distel's *The Good Life* when a local singer sang it frequently at Cadillac Bob's. After playing the song "as written" the trio moves it though a variety of rhythms and abstractions featuring one of George's great "outside" solos. The mind boggles at what this trio could achieve after gigging for five or six nights.

The second session took place at the same studio under similar conditions on June 13, 2022. The instrumentation was George's favorite setting: organ and drums. The casting was impeccable: Joey DeFrancesco and Lewis Nash. Joey was one of just a handful of Hammond organ greats that George had not yet had the opportunity to work with. George and Joey shared the same birthday, April 10th, though 44 years apart. On August 25th, just 10 weeks after this session, Joey died suddenly at the age of 51.

The 1928 standard *If I Had You* was a favorite of Von's that he and George would often play at the family home. The trio takes its time on this sensual 11-minute meditation.

Excited by the prospect of playing with Joey, George fashioned the loping original, *Mr. D*, in his honor for the occasion. Incidentally, *Mr. D* was the identification that would appear on George's phone when Joey called.

Up and Down is a jubilant jump tune that George crafted in the studio on which all three musicians get plenty of space to stretch. The inspired support of Lewis and Joey propelled George into one of his trademark unorthodox solos. Those are the "outside" solos that have prompted people since 1945 to ask, *Who is this guy?*

In jazz parlance, legendary is a euphemism for innovative but terribly overlooked. Jazz has got a very select list in that category. George Freeman is prominent among them.

— MICHAEL CUSCUNA



**Joey DeFrancesco
George Freeman
Lewis Nash**



**Carl Allen
George Freeman
Christian McBride**