Carter, Benny,

byname of BENNETT LESTER CARTER (b. Aug. 8, 1907, New York, N.Y., U.S.), African-American jazz musician, one of the most original and influential alto saxophonists, who was also a masterly composer and arranger and an important bandleader, trumpeter, and clarinetist.

Carter grew up in New York City and attended Wilberforce College briefly before joining, as alto saxophonist and arranger, a series of big bands, including those led by Charlie Johnson, Horace Henderson, Chick Webb, and Fletcher Henderson. While leading McKinney's Cotton Pickers (1931-32), he began playing trumpet as well; he then led his own big band in 1932-34. He spent most of 1935-38 playing and arranging in Europe. When he returned to the United States, he formed big swing bands in New York and California. After settling permanently in Los Angeles in 1945, he concentrated largely on composing music for films and television, though he sometimes played alto saxophone on jazz tours and recordings.

Carter's alto saxophone work at its best is characterized by purity of tone, elegant ornamentation, rhythmic precision and swing, and diatonic phrasing; often it features closely constructed lines based on the development of simple musical motives. As an arranger he was especially noted for his scoring for woodwind sections, and he composed attractive songs such as "Waltzing the Blues," "Blue Star," and "When Lights Are Low."

Among Carter's most acclaimed recordings are "Six or Seven Times," "Dee Blues," and "I Can't Believe You're in Love with Me," all of which were performed with the Chocolate Dandies; "Crazy Rhythm" with Coleman Hawkins; "Shoe Shiner's Drag" with Lionel Hampton; and a 1961 album led by Carter, Further Definitions.