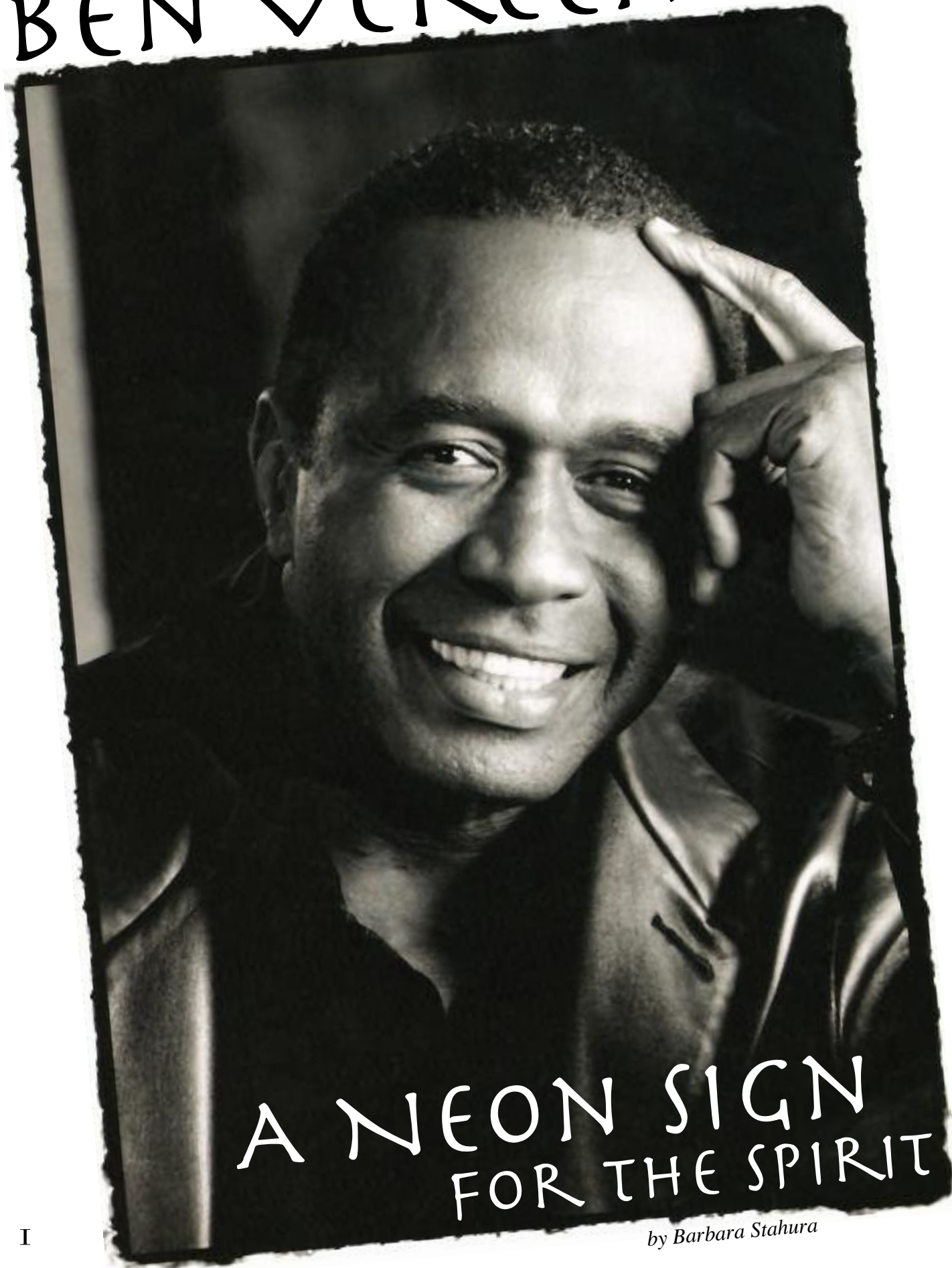


BEN VEREEN



A NEON SIGN
FOR THE SPIRIT

by Barbara Stahura

Ben Vereen laughs a lot. It's a rich, round, vibrant sound full of joy and wonder. That same vitality of spirit jumps out of his photos too—the gleam in his eyes, the beacon of a smile, the jaunty tilt of his head. Is this just a publicity pose or does he feel this way all the time?

“How can I put this?” the award-winning entertainer queries. “We have a choice.” He laughs again. “Depending on your day is how you will deal with that day. You could deal with it from the high ground, or you could keep yourself in the middle of the marsh and be battling with it. I like to stay on the high ground. That way, you can see all things clearly.”

His hard-won clarity comes from the stillness of meditation, a practice he adopted years ago when he learned about New Thought philosophy, which professes that God is within everyone and that our thoughts create our reality.

“I find that when I sit in meditation and sort of surround myself in the light for that day—as Paul would say, ‘put on the whole armor of God’—then go through my day, I feel that I am better,” he explains. “And then my pictures are dull compared to what I feel like.” Another laugh.

Like many seekers of inner peace, Vereen fought his way through many struggles. His early family life was tumultuous and painful. His father, although a deacon in their Brooklyn Baptist church, was an alcoholic, and his mother, who sang in the church choir, “would drink just to be able to talk with him.”

Born in 1946, he found the drug temptations of the '60s hard to pass up. “The drug thing in those days...it seemed like everyone in my crowd was doing it. It was the thing to do. It was cool, you see?” he recalls.

He says using drugs was always a spiritual search for him, although he didn't know it at the time. “It's like what (the late Unity minister)

Eric Butterworth said: ‘Doing drugs is like trying to glimpse heaven on a trampoline.’ Because what happens is, you bounce up and you're in a place of euphoria, and you want to stay there. But you can't, so you keep bouncing on the trampoline.”

Vereen got trapped on that trampoline of illusion and “got caught up in the lower realms,” as he describes it, eventually becoming addicted to alcohol and cocaine in the 1970s and '80s.

In 1987, he suffered a gigantic blow when his daughter Naja, who was sixteen, was killed in a car accident. Vereen himself nearly died in 1992, although he remembers nothing of the events as they unfolded. His car struck a tree along the Pacific Coast Highway near Malibu, and his head struck the roof of the car, causing an aneurysm to form. Dazed, he began walking along the highway and suffered a stroke due to the aneurysm. He wandered into the road and was hit by another vehicle. The emergency medical workers pronounced him dead at the scene.

When he later woke up in ICU, he was “a real sick cookie. Really, really, really not well,” he says. He had a broken femur, which in itself could have caused serious problems for a professional dancer and entertainer like him. But in addition, his right side was paralyzed by the stroke, his spleen had been removed, he had a tracheotomy tube down his throat and a colostomy bag attached to his side. He had undergone brain surgery, and “they had things in my brain because they were trying to activate it.”

He was scheduled to perform in two days' time in Las Vegas. As is common after severe head trauma, though, he didn't realize the gravity of his situation. So it took some time before he understood his Vegas performance was one show that would not go on.

Fortunately, as had so often happened throughout his life, angels in the form of caring people had already given him the tools to rescue himself and rebuild his life.

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BEN'S ANGELS

By the time little Benjamin was six, his parents no longer attended church. "They spent Sundays recovering from Saturday night," he recalls. But a godmother appeared, Vereen says. "I was playing on the street one day, and this missionary came along, Mary Eddie, and she took me to her home. Her husband, Edward Eddie, was a minister. She would take me to church, and we would sing songs like *His Eye is on the Sparrow*. She taught me how to sing in the early days."

She was also the first to begin teaching him that life was an illusion and there was something greater within that motivates and moves us. "Getting to that something is the trick," he says, then quickly adds, "no, it's not a trick. It's a journey. It's *the* journey. Getting to that place within, and letting go and trusting. And then when you get there, surrender."

He attended the New York High School of Performing Arts, but wasn't thinking about being a professional performer at first. He was already singing with a quartet at church on Sundays—they called themselves the Sensational Twilights of Brooklyn—even as he ran the streets the rest of the week after school. He played conga in those days, learned to dance at school, and was also singing in a duo—just having fun with all of it.

"I didn't really in those days think about, oh, when I grow up, I want to be as famous as Sammy Davis, Jr., or (singer and band-leader) Billy Eckstine, or James Earl Jones," he recalls. "It wasn't until I found out you can make money doing it, you can make a big career." He laughs at the memory. "I don't think my sights were set on that yet. My sights were set on enjoying each day and just learning what I could and applying it. And life showed up that way. Life showed up. As I went on, it began to unfold to me what it could be."

Shortly after graduating, he landed his first off-Broadway role in 1965, and in 1971, won his first Tony nomination for his por-

trayal as Judas Iscariot in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. His first major television role came in 1977, when he was tapped to play Chicken George in Alex Haley's *Roots*.

"I wanted to be part of *Roots* because I wanted to begin to crack the door on the truth of a people," he recalls. "It hadn't been told when I was growing up in school. In those days, there was nothing. There was, 'you're a slave, Lincoln freed you.' I knew that was not true, and I wanted to be part of the series."

At first, though, "I couldn't get arrested for that part," he says. "My agent told me, 'Ben, you're a song and dance man. They don't want a song and dance man. They want actors.'"

"I later got rid of that agent," he adds, with a bigger than usual laugh.

But Vereen was determined. He read *Roots* in book form and scribbled all over the pages that he wanted to be a part of the miniseries, and then put the book away while keeping the desire alive in his heart. Still he couldn't get an audition.

Then he played a gig in Savannah, Georgia, and sitting in the audience was Stan Margulies, the producer of *Roots*. After the show, Margulies came backstage and asked Vereen if he would like to take on the role of Chicken George.

"I didn't know what a Chicken George was, I didn't care, but I was going to be in *Roots*, so I said, 'You know it!'"

Since then, Vereen has won a Tony as well as a Drama Desk Award for his role in *Pippin*, and more recently won a Prism Award for his role as a burn victim in *Grey's Anatomy*. He has entertained as a singer, actor, and dancer, in one-man shows and in ensembles, on television, on Broadway, and elsewhere. He has received a number of humanitarian awards and honorary doctorates. He has served on the boards of many humanitarian organizations. In 1989, he spearheaded the creation of "Celebrities for a Drug-Free America," which raised more than \$300,000 for drug rehab centers, educational

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programs, and community-based projects. He is a Master Teacher in acting, voice development, and dance. He has become a sought-after motivational speaker with a deep sense of social consciousness. Among his topics: overcoming adversity, being a bereaved parent, arts in education, black history, and recovery through physical and occupational therapy.

But back in 1992, when he had to pull himself back from the biggest brink, other angels stepped forward. First of all, he had already been through drug rehab, although he claims he was not responsible for leaving his addictions behind. “God left them behind, Spirit left them behind,” he says. “The addictions, they peeled off. I was fortunate enough. I sat with people, you might say, and wallowed in self-destruction, and something in me was greater than it.”

As he says, finally he was able to “get off the trampoline and sit still, and be an elevator and lev-

itate up to where you were meant to be.”

Also before the accident, he had already been introduced to New Thought philosophies like Unity and Religious Science. “It’s interesting,” he muses, “how, if you listen, life prepares you for some things. I believe I was being prepared.”

He had met and become friends with Rev. Michael Beckwith, Rev. Johnny Coleman, and Rev. Helen Carey, all New Thought ministers, and discussed this spiritual philosophy with them and others. From them, he learned how God activates us from within, how our thoughts create our world, and about the power of positive thinking and affirmations.

Until his introduction to these ideas, “I thought it was outside of me,” he says. “You know, there was this guy up in the sky with a microscope looking down and saying, ‘OK, if you do that, I’m going to do this to you.’”

But New Thought made sense to him, and he

began practicing these ideas in small ways in his own life. When the accident happened, he began putting them to work in the huge undertaking of getting well.

When news of his accident broke, many people around the country began praying for him. His family, New Thought minister friends, and many others appeared at the hospital.

“Remember that prayer changes the energy factors of what we receive,” he says. “I was laying in the belly of prayers. The people who pray for you, they take you home with them, they sit with their families and talk about you, and think about ‘what can I do to bring you along?’”

Sometime after he awoke in the ICU with so many dire injuries, he realized he would not be able to recover on his own. However, he did understand that something within him would guide and pull him through, so he surrendered to that.

“My job was to let and allow. And so once I let go and then allowed the Spirit to do its things, the angels showed up”—doctors, nurses, aides, and therapists all dedicated to helping him get well.

of his medical situation and possible loss of a career he held dear, he thought, “Thy will be done.”

“And from that place, I began to work,” he says, his voice soft but determined. “That doesn’t mean I say, ‘Thy will be done’ and give up. No. That means thy will be done, activate what you need to activate, and I will be there.”

He meditated often in the hospital and later in Kessler Rehabilitation Institute in New Jersey, focusing on a small altar he asked to have installed in his room. Constantly, he talked to his body, encouraging it to recover, and let God speak to his body. He joyously and gratefully accepted all the prayers and good wishes that came his way.

Another angel came into his life at Kessler. This young man’s spinal cord had been broken in a rugby game, producing instant quadriplegia. Every day in physical therapy, Vereen, who by then could use a walker and make a few squeaking sounds, saw this man smiling all the time, despite being able to move nothing but his head.

“I’d go up to him and say, ‘Are you OK?’ and

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The trauma and subsequent battle to heal took its emotional toll, however. On his way to yet another of several surgeries, he thought how he did not want his loved ones to have to endure any more pain on his account, and he accepted that he could let go of life. He turned to a nurse and because he could not speak yet, mouthed the words, “Am I going to die?” She looked at him and said, “No, you’re not going to die. I’m not going to let you die.”

“These are the angels who watch over us when we fall through the cracks,” he says quietly. “With love and tenderness and compassion, they watch over us. And that encouraged me.”

For a while, Vereen did not know if he would ever walk or speak again, let alone dance or perform. Some of his doctors said his recovery could take three years and suggested he should find another line of work. Faced with the enor-

he says, ‘Yeah, Ben. Yeah, Benjamin. I got *life*,’” Vereen whispers, and then goes quiet for a minute. “Wow. That made me work even harder.”

He later learned that that young man went back to school, graduated high in his class, got married and had a family, and is now a partner in a law firm.

“See? If you’re open and receptive to the Spirit, Spirit will take you through,” he says.

Within two years, Vereen had made a full recovery. He says his accident was truly a blessing. Before that time, he had been angry about a lot of things, including the tragic death of his daughter, which he could not understand or accept. His anger “was going off on its own tangent, and the accident kind of slapped me back to center,” he says.

Even so, for a time after his recovery, he tried going back to his old way of doing things—“run-

ning around, going crazy,” he calls it—but that way of life just didn’t fit any more. He asked his spiritual mother, Rev. Johnny Coleman, about it, and she replied, “That’s because you’re a new creature of God. You’re a new creature trying to put on an old suit, and it doesn’t fit. Hang the old suit up. Put on this new suit. Be this new creature.”

Seeing the truth of her words, that’s what he did.

PUTTING ON A NEW SUIT

Vereen explains that the old suit of our mental conditioning, usually accepted unconsciously and without question, keeps us stuck in the same old grooves, no matter how disastrous they may be. To become a “new creature,” we must make a concerted effort to recondition our thoughts. He has found that the stillness of frequent meditation, combined with mantras and affirmations, works best for him. Some of his favorite mantras include “The Lord is my shepherd,” “I am One with the One,” and “The Father and I are One.” He uses many types of meditation, whichever one works best at the moment, and he often uses prayer beads as a physical way to stay focused in the stillness—they appear in many of his photos, around his right wrist.

By using a mantra, regardless of the one used, “you remind yourself constantly who you are, and *whose* you are. And pretty soon, that activates itself within your system. A whole other level happens,” he explains. “And the wonderful thing is, you don’t go into it with expectations. You go into it with acceptance.”

Although the most durable transformations usually happen by tiny increments, our egos tend to desire instantaneous change announced by sizzle and flash, akin to Saul on his way to Damascus—dramatic but requiring no real effort.

“We keep waiting for the seas to part, for the building to levitate,” Vereen explains. “But what

is happening is that the grass is growing by itself, and when you realize the smallness, if you sit back and look long enough, you will actually begin to see the grass grow a little bit. It’s like that with us—that little bitty change is a monumental change in our lives if we can but behold it.”

One of the more recent changes in Vereen’s life was becoming a nondenominational minister. While he respects those who follow a particular denomination, he doesn’t believe in that path for himself. The Kingdom of God is within all of us, he says, so we should believe in the God within us, whatever we call God. The point is to “get there in peace and love, because we’re going to the same place. There’s no getting out of this alive. And I don’t believe in getting hung up in one particular definition of God. You know, if you keep telling me God is love and then beat me up about it because I believe a different way...” His voice trails off.

He didn’t intend to become a minister. After his recovery and accepting himself as a new creature, he set out to inspire and encourage people, and as he says, “to spread the good news about life as I began to live it myself.” He became a sought-after motivational speaker in secular forums and also began speaking at many churches about “Spirit...the power of Spirit or God in our lives. God, Allah, Buddha, Elohim, the Divine Divinity within. Sometimes I call it the Nameless One because we get hung up on names.” Before too long, Bishop Townsley in Brooklyn, his hometown, heard about his speaking and told Vereen he was going to ordain him.

Vereen didn’t warm to the idea right away, saying he didn’t walk that particular path. He says the bishop answered, “It doesn’t matter. You walk it for God. And if you’re going to drive, you might as well have a driver’s license.”

That was about two years ago, and since then, Rev. Ben Vereen has officiated at several wed-

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dings and one funeral, or transition as he calls it. He is working with the newly formed Angels of Love Spiritual Center in the Los Angeles area as they establish their center. He says they welcome all people who praise the Spirit. In his best reverend voice, a combination of his boyhood church services and his New Thought enlightenment, he says, "Whoever you are, as long as you're praising the Spirit, come. You can praise the Spirit here and nobody's going to judge you because you didn't say a certain word a certain way, or you didn't get on your knees, or you didn't jump up and down. No! Come! *Come!* Because the Word says, 'If I be lifted up, I will draw all unto me.' *Come!*"

Yes, he laughs again, exuberantly.

"I get so excited," he says with a chuckle. "I'm sorry."

At age 62, Vereen is still enjoying his flourishing entertainment career, although he regrets not having done Shakespeare. He recently spent time in Canada filming a movie for the Hallmark Channel, and he is never far removed from appearing live on stage. He is starting to write, to "get these things inside of me out." In short, he's willing to do whatever the Spirit wants to express through him.

But whatever else he does, "I just want to keep praising," he says. "Just keep praising. And when people come to see me, they can see a testimony to the Light. I'm a neon sign for the Spirit. I'm a neon sign for the divine God within us all, and forever and evermore we all are. Shining lights. Wow. Beautiful."

See more about Ben Vereen at benvereen.tv and benvereenministries.org.

*Barbara Stahura has been a freelance writer since 1994, and she has covered topics ranging from high-tech to spirituality for a variety of publications. She is thankful to be able to make her living with words. Her new collection of personal essays is *What I Thought I Knew* (Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, Inc.).*

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