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## **Musicians Gather to Perform at Benefit For Legendary Jazz Guitarist Barney Kessel** Daily News Headlines

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New York's jazz guitar community rallied around one of its own last Wednesday, June 12, in a strong show of support for the ailing jazz guitar great Barney Kessel. A host of the genre's finest pickers and burners, including George Benson, Les Paul, John Scofield, Larry Coryell, Russell Malone and Jim Hall, turned out for the gala benefit concert held at Birdland to pay tribute to Kessel and speak about the profound influence he had on their own musical development.

At age 78, Kessel was diagnosed late last year with an inoperable tumor (anaplastic astrocytoma) requiring 24-hour home care and therapy. He is partially blind but is still able to talk on the telephone. He receives visitors and enjoys listening to music at his home in San Diego. Sadly, Barney has no life insurance and has not worked in more than 10 years due to a massive stroke he suffered in 1992. His social security check covers his rent and his wife, Phyllis, works full-time just to cover Barney's medical care.

A perennial poll-winning guitarist from the '50s and '60s, Kessel was renowned for his brilliant harmonic improvisation, bluesy and hard-driving earthy style. Widely regarded as one of the swing-iest players in jazz. He recorded several classic recordings as a member of the Oscar Peterson Trio followed by a long string of recordings as a leader in his own right. He also worked for almost 40 years in Hollywood as an arranger and freelance musician for radio, film and TV, performing and recording with such diverse talents as Fred Astaire, Lawrence Welk, the Beach Boys, Barbara Streisand, Liberace, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Maurice Chevalier, Gene Autry, Sonny and Cher and the Righteous Brothers. He was on many of Phil Spector's pop records and served as an A&R man for Verve Records where he produced Ricky Nelson's first big hit and also produced the records Woody Herman sang on. He has also played and recorded with a long list of jazz greats including Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Ben Webster and Sonny Rollins. A legend in the history of jazz and one of the most original voices ever to play the guitar, Kessel is the guitarist who came closest to the pioneering jazz guitarist Charlie Christian in sound and spirit.

Born on Oct. 17, 1925, he hailed from Muskogee, Okla., not far from Christian's hometown of Oklahoma City. "Charlie Christian has a special place in my heart, if only because he was my first source of inspiration," he once told an interviewer.

The cream of New York's jazz guitar crop participated in this worthy event, which included heartfelt performances from Rodney Jones, John Scofield, Jack Wilkins, Jimmy Bruno, Howard Alden, Vinny Valentino, Vic Juris, Gene Bertoncini, Mark Whitfield, Ron Affif, Gray Sargeant, Russell Malone, Larry Coryell and Jim Hall, who reminisced about his days of touring Japan with an affable Kessel. Other non-guitaristic highlights of the

gala evening included inspired performances by tenor saxophonists George Coleman and Eric Alexander, Latin percussion masters Candido and Ray Baretto with drummer Bobby Sanabria, bassist Harvie Swartz and pianist John DiMartino, and a rousing solo drum performance by the youthful 80-year-old drumming legend, Chico Hamilton. The evening reached an ecstatic peak with guitar great George Benson, who opened with a driving, intense rendition of Duke Ellington's "Cottontail" before segueing to a soulful vocal treatment of "Moody's Mood For Love" and closing with Sonny Rollins' buoyant calypso flavored theme, "St. Thomas." The facile hands of Peter Washington on bass, John Hicks on piano and Jimmy Cobb on drums supported Benson.

"Barney Kessel stands tall as one of the dominant pillars of this music we call jazz," said benefit organizer Charles Carlini. "His contributions are inestimable. He was a master at pulling every last bit of emotion from a beautiful ballad, and at the other extreme setting an audience on fire with an up tempo jazz standard, he has also delighted audiences with his natural talent for standup comedy."