

All About Jazz

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Playing With Chuck Johnson and the CJS Quintet

by Ollie Bivins

With an array of artists performing everything from country and western to punk rock and everything in between, it can be easy to take the Los Angeles music scene for granted. Los Angeles audiences have a longstanding reputation for being some of the hardest listeners to please—simply because we think we have seen it all. But when a band is chosen by in-the-know local radio station personnel, jazz musicians, promoters, critics and jazz lovers alike as the “best,” then that group must have hit on more than a chord. Such is the case with the CJS Quintet, which in 2002 was selected as the “Mainstream Jazz Artist of the Year” by a local competition. Over five weeks of competition, the CJS Quintet received the highest scores for improvisational ability, stage presence, musicianship and ensemble ability. Since then, the band has steadily been gaining in notoriety among local jazz fans. The quintet is led by Chuck Johnson (saxophones) and features James Smith (trumpet), Al Daniels (piano), Wendell Williams (bass), and Anthony Davis (drums).

Born in Kentucky, Johnson (49) has been living in Los Angeles since ‘84. Reflecting on his background, the saxophonist recalls that he grew up in a very musical family. “Both my parents played instruments. I have two older brothers that play. My oldest brother is a pretty well known bass player. He’s worked with The Crusaders, Kenny Burrell, The Mingus Dynasty band and Harold Land. And although I was around a lot of music, I kind of had a one-sided view from my brothers being gone all the time and on the road a lot. That kind of turned me off,” he asserts. “It didn’t really appeal to me. It was a while before I decided on music. I started studying piano at six. It wasn’t until later that I picked up the saxophone, after going to college at the University of Evansville in Indiana.”

Like many twenty-somethings in the ‘70s, Johnson was a fan of the big pop and rock groups of the day. “The first influences as far as becoming interested in the saxophone really began with groups like Chicago, Earth, Wind & Fire and Kool & the Gang - the horn oriented groups. From there, I got into the Brecker Brothers, David Sanborn and especially Grover Washington, Jr. The more jazz oriented players I dug were Dexter Gordon, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers and Stanley Turrentine.” Gordon is a special favorite of Johnson. “The players that I really enjoy, it’s about their sound,” he amplifies. “With Dexter, no matter how fast the tempos is, his sound is always big and full. Every note that he plays speaks very clearly.”

Over the years Johnson has performed with Albert “Tootie” Heath, Buddy Collette, Billy Higgins and Francisco Aquabella. But like so many musicians these days, Johnson moonlights as a graphic coordinator. On any given night though, he and the CJS Quintet are likely to be performing somewhere in the Southland. Throughout January they will be performing at the Bel Age Hotel every Friday evening. Now a veteran of the local

jazz scene, Johnson notes, “There’s an enormous amount of talented musicians here. The pool is wide and diverse.” But it is not without its challenges. “Getting actual bookings definitely is a constant challenge. Trying to get people to return your calls, trying to get people to consider you as an artist for their venue can be a struggle. Also, the patrons in Los Angeles tend to be a bit geographic. They don’t get much out of their general vicinity even if it’s a good group. It’s hard to get people to go out of their territory.” Is this due to the infamous traffic congestion in Los Angeles? “The traffic is getting worse and worse, but even before that, people tend to stay in their comfort zone,” Johnson laments.

The second recording by the CJS Quintet has just been released. It is available at cdbaby.com. Johnson opines that the new release “is a very wide reaching CD - a wide variety of material covering many aspects of jazz.” And like the quintet’s live performances, the band members are each given plenty of solo space. Commenting on his own improvising Johnson contends, “I’m mostly influenced by the moment, the reflection of my sound back to me and what’s going on with the rest of the band at the time. With jazz music, you’re always trying to reach for something better. It’s a lifelong learning experience.” The 10 tunes on *Let’s Play!* are almost evenly split between standards and originals. “I’m usually attracted to melodic songs, things that catch my ear. I try to pull things out that fit our sound and style. For example, the tune ‘Star Eyes’ on the album, James and I reworked it and came up with the arrangement. We made it our thing. The band tries to do the recognizable standards. Yet we also delve into a lot of material that you don’t hear played by other groups. There’s a lot of great material that doesn’t get played. That’s one of the magic things of having a group that tries to rehearse and capture good sound, as opposed to hearing a lot of groups that are pick-up bands. They do all the typical standards. I find these are the typical things you hear out on the gigs. I look for a different flavor. I want to expose the listener to different things, broaden their horizons.” And the CJS Quintet does just that. *Let’s Play!* is certain to remain one of the best albums released by a local group this year.