

Plas Johnson in the Spot

Concert Review by: [Molly Feathers](#)

Venue: Jazz Spot (Los Feliz, CA, USA)

The Plas Johnson trio played May 27th and 28th at the Jazz Spot in Los Feliz, with special guest Herman Riley joining in on Saturday night. Johnson and Riley dueled on their tenor saxes with a range of blues and jazz standards. The audience enjoyed the old-time blues sax sound with the organ shivering underneath it, and clapped and called out, "take it, Plas!" and "tell me 'bout it!"

Riley complements Johnson nicely; he knows how to play just behind the beat to make it really swing. This subtle syncopation effect makes for a teasing anticipatory feeling. Throughout the evening his tenor sound laid back just enough, while the organist and drummer hit the beat straight on. His more biting tonguing set off Johnson's smooth style, especially in the many unison intros.

Johnson, meanwhile, is the master at mellow running-eighth-note improv. His rhythm may not swing as much as Riley's, but he keeps up a pitter-patter of boo-be-doo-be-doo-be notes for five, ten, maybe twenty minutes. And all the time one wonders, "How long he can keep this up?" Johnson plays with such intensity it often sounds like he's playing on top of himself, or like Riley is coming in behind him.

Both Riley and Johnson are masters of the pianissimo end of their instrument, able to fade off into nothing and bring it back up. Their control extends to note bends, turnarounds, and falls which all sound graceful and bluesy. They were relaxed not only in unison but in passing the lead back and forth, sometimes noodling offside while the other took the center stage.

Aside from one bebop standard, Yardbird Suite, the music was straight ahead. The two tenors were at their best in "In a Sentimental Mood," which gave each a chance to pull out all the stops. Riley took the melody apart in rough trills and Johnson stretched it out into deliciously long and languid vibrato swells.

One slow number made for good smooching music for the lovers in the audience. Riley played caressingly soft tenor filled with ghosted love-notes rising into almost out-of-tune sobs. Johnson echoed these sentiments with weeping glissando falls.

The sax masters were accompanied by Art Hillery on B-3 organ and Johnny Kirkwood on drums, so it truly was (as emcee and club owner Jim Britt put it) a "festival of giants." Hillery's organ was thick and full-flavored as a hero sandwich, giving the tenors something strong to play against. And Kirkwood kept the band tight with an intense, steady time.

The Jazz Spot cover is \$15, and if you're not a big drinker take a look instead at their dessert menu, which features such exquisite homemade treats such as Tahitian vanilla bean ice cream in a caramel sauce.