

## Solo Sax

### Plas Johnson and his eight-bar miracles

by Jonny Whiteside

*From a teenage start in New Orleans backing some of rhythm & blues' most formidable players, Plas Johnson's career has been an extraordinary one; by the late '50s, his ability to stroll into a studio and deliver a performance of supreme technical facility and context-ideal feel had made him one of the most prized tenor-sax soloists in Los Angeles. He has appeared on recordings by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Frank Zappa, Joni Mitchell to Screamin' Jay Hawkins, lending each date his priceless instinct and unmistakable velvety tone. Johnson's most high-profile recording remains his masterly purring strut through Henry Mancini's Pink Panther theme. Still active in local jazz clubs and on the occasional session, Johnson has, like the song says, forgotten more than we'll ever know. Listening to him recount his work is like peering into a kaleidoscope, each shifting image capturing a key moment in the lives of dozens of fabled performers:*

“**My brother and I** did a recording for DeLuxe Records in 1947, four sides. DeLuxe was one of those little record companies that came down to New Orleans with equipment in the trunk of a car and would record you, and then you never heard from them. My brother and I had a band around town, played the local clubs, and when the season was good we'd get jobs backing artists like Big Joe Turner, Big Maybelle, Wynonie Harris and Roy Brown. Charles Brown came to town and asked me to join his band; I was 18 or 19 and looking for a way to get out of New Orleans. “Black Night” was the big record when I joined Charles Brown; we worked 28 days out of a month, sometimes 30, and sometimes we'd leave for the next town right after the gig. Clifford Solomon was in the band — he was a hipster from the West Coast, and he gave me my first bebop lesson.

“I got drafted while I was on the road with Charles Brown, and after I got out of the service I worked around Monterey Bay for a year or two and came to L.A. in 1954. The union had a thing that kept musicians from working union jobs — you had to be in town for six months before they'd even accept you as a member. But we were young and dumb and didn't know how to get things done, so my brother and I worked anywhere we could, mostly for 5 or 6 dollars a night.



““Around ’56, I started doing record dates for the little rhythm & blues labels like Modern and Aladdin. At Modern I did my first date with B.B. King, and Amos Milburn — “Juice Juice Juice.” Then Johnny Otis did a record at Capitol, “Willie & the Hand Jive,” which was a hit, and I was one of the hands. And Dave Cavanaugh, a former tenor player before he was an A&R man, brought me to Capitol and got me on records with Nat Cole, Peggy Lee, a bunch of different people, many of whom I really admired. I did some early Sinatra at Capitol, with Nelson Riddle, Billy May. Sinatra was wonderful to work with; the music was always well prepared, and I was brought in as a soloist. I’d just go in, run over it two or three times, and usually start recording within 10 minutes. Once we did, like, 22 takes on a tune, then Sinatra says, “Let’s go back to take 2.” He did all those takes because he was looking for something that he didn’t find, but he wasn’t ashamed to go back and use a good take from the beginning.

““I began working a heavy schedule in ’56 to ’59. I was doing up to 10 or 11 sessions a week when it got real busy, doing a lot of rock & roll. I was lead tenor soloist on the West Coast — King Curtis wasn’t even around yet, so I was doing solos with a lot of the young L.A. artists: Eugene Church, Bobby Day, Larry Williams, Johnny Guitar Williams. And all the “bird” groups — that’s what we called the doo-wop acts, like the Robins. And the Platters. So many different things, like “You Are My Special Angel,” “Ramrod,” “Purple People Eater,” “Stranded in the Jungle” . . .

““I did Ricky Nelson’s first session. Ricky was not a natural performer; I don’t think Ricky wanted to sing, but Ozzie was making the best of it with his good-looking kid — that was the formula for success in those days. And Screamin’ Jay Hawkins? Crazy. But it was great. The stuff was all arranged — I played baritone and tenor on those, like ““Constipation Blues.”” He was a colorful character. I worked with Pat Boone, Fats Domino, and I did a lot of Motown stuff, like the Supremes; Marvin Gaye was great to work with — a good singer, and the stuff was well arranged.

““Henry Mancini was a working man, always writing, recording. With *Pink Panther* it kind of felt like it was going to be a big record at the time, it was so unique. It was a masterpiece, and the orchestra felt it too — after the recording, they applauded.

““All these times have a great nostalgia to me. I feel that the solo was a very important part of rhythm & blues and rock & roll: When the singer stops, you’ve got to not only keep the level up, but take it up some more — and you’ve got eight bars to do it in.””

Johnson appears at Charlie O’s, 13725 Victory Blvd., Van Nuys, on Saturday, April 10, at 9 p.m. (818) 994-3058.