'Panther' tune has 9 lives for visiting sax cat Plas Johnson

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It's impossible to think of the Pink Panther -- that sly cat who starred in the opening credits of the classic 1963 Peter Sellers comedy of the same name and in scores of Saturday morning cartoons -- without hearing the sensuous sound of Plas Johnson's tenor saxophone.

Johnson's warm, bluesy tone and fleet phrasing gave Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther" theme its seductive flavor and made it one of the most memorable tunes in movie history. It's the sound of a masterly musician whose deft solos -- often no longer than eight bars -- have enriched reams of jazz, blues, pop and rock recordings by a remarkable range of artists: Charles Brown, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Frank Zappa, Little Richard, Peggy Lee, the Platters, Duane Eddy, Ella Fitzgerald, Marvin Gaye, Tina Turner, Screamin' Jay Hawkins and Steely Dan, among many others.

"I've been very fortunate. I guess I had good judgment about what to play, and what they wanted," says Johnson, a modest gent who makes a rare Bay Area appearance Jan. 12-14 at Pearl's in San Francisco, fronting a quartet with ace keyboardist Dave Matthews on the Hammond B-3 organ.

For years a first-call Los Angeles studio musician, Johnson grew up in New Orleans playing R&B and jazz. His father, Plas Sr. -- the name, says Johnson, is probably short for plaisant, French for pleasant or amusing -- was an alto saxophonist. Johnson played soprano and alto before picking up the tenor at 15. He loved the sound of the bigger horn and fell under the sway of full-toned tenor men like Gene Ammons, Don Byas and Illinois Jacquet. New Orleans tenor player Lee Allen was also an influence.

"All the saxophonists would go out to hear him at jam sessions. He had finesse and could play great ballads," says Johnson, by telephone from his Studio City home. His speech has the relaxed cadence and casual wit of his playing.

At 76, Johnson is semi-retired, working when he wants to. He recently played on a jazz cruise to Mexico with the great trumpeter Clark Terry, and he has a gig in Paris next month with organist Rhoda Scott.

He cut his teeth playing blues-based music with his pianist brother Ray. They had a band that worked around New Orleans and backed visiting artists like Big Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris. The elegant bluesman Charles Brown came to town and took the 19-year-old saxophonist with him when he left. Brown's saxophone soloist Clifford Solomon fueled Johnson's interest in bebop. He learned to improvise by doing it, on the job and at jam sessions.

There are two ways to get a musical education, going to college for four years or, as he did, "working four years on the road in clubs, learning about 5,000 tunes, playing behind singers and strip-teasers, and for dancers," he says. "People got up and danced, or rocked in their chairs. That was your applause." When you took a solo, "whatever you did, you had to learn to do it in one chorus or two, or else they'd push you off the stage," he says with a laugh.

Johnson was drafted into the Army while touring with Brown and stationed at Camp Roberts in Central California. When he got out, he played around Santa Cruz and Monterey. He and his brother moved to Los Angeles in 1954 and scuffled for work for a few years. Then Johnson hooked up with R&B bandleader Johnny Otis, with whom he recorded the hit "Willie & the Hand Jive" on Capitol Records. Through Otis, he met Capitol A&R man Dave Cavanaugh, a one-time saxophonist who hired him to play on records by Sinatra, Cole, Lee and others.

Johnson recalls one of his first sessions with Sinatra, a perfectionist who'd sometimes do as many as 25 takes searching for that magic something. "I sat in the hall for two hours, and then Dave Cavanaugh brought me in to sit with the band," says Johnson, who can't recall the tune. "I played something like an eight-bar solo and that

was it."

He became a master of the short but potent improvisation, providing the sax solos on dozens of pop and early rock 'n' roll records. When rock hit in the mid-'50s, he was tapped to back Duane Eddy, the Robins, Gene Vincent, Ricky Nelson and others.

"They needed musicians to reproduce the R&B sounds," Johnson says. "Hot tenor solos, drums with the backbeat, blues guitar." He played on everything from Bobby Day's "Rockin' Robin" to Sheb Wooley's "Purple People Eater." He was also busy playing jazz and movie soundtrack sessions. He could groove in any setting.

"You have to key into the style of the music, and the singer and the arrangement," says Johnson, whose rich sound and melodic solos appealed to arrangers such as Nelson Riddle and Mancini. Mancini was an assistant conductor at Universal when Johnson first worked with him. When it came time to record the "Pink Panther" score, Mancini knew whom to call to play the signature sax part.

Johnson didn't know the theme would become so famous, "but I did feel that it was something special, like everybody else. It was a great arrangement, with a huge orchestra, a jazz band with strings and French horns. It just came off. Very seldom do things just come off. We recorded two takes. That's my memory of it. The band was fascinated with it. After we finished, the string section applauded. When you get the string section to applaud, you've really done something."

When the movie came out "you heard that music behind that (pink panther) character on the screen in the opening credits. I was thrilled," says Johnson, whose small-band recording of the theme, recorded before the hit soundtrack album, was never released. He played on some of the later sessions for the "Pink Panther" cartoons, but he didn't like the pressure of playing all the written cues -- as well as having to double on piccolo and clarinet -- and begged off after a while.

"I couldn't just go in and play the solo," he says with a laugh.

He still plays the "Pink Panther" at his gigs, along with bluesy ballads like "Please Send Me Someone to Love," standards such as "Georgia on My Mind" and Ellington numbers (he loves the sublime playing of Ellington alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges).

Johnson, who listens to younger saxophonists like Joshua Redman and Michael Brecker, has yet to see the "Pink Panther" remake starring Steve Martin that came out last year, even though he played the opening theme. After learning that Johnson was still alive and swinging, the film's musical arranger asked him to reprise his original improvisation. Johnson, who'd transcribed that solo long ago, was happy to oblige.

"I considered it a classic," he says. "Something that lives that long has to be a classic."

Plas Johnson: The tenor saxophonist will play at 8 and 10 p.m. Jan. 12-14 at Jazz at Pearl's, 256 Columbus Ave., San Francisco. \$25. (415) 291-8255, www.jazzatpearls.com.

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