

**Orange County Performing Arts  
Center  
Segerstrom Hall**

**Plas Johnson & Friends**

**November 25-26, 2005**

**Founders Hall**

**Press Clippings**

**(as of November 25, 2005)**

# Plas Johnson & Friends

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By [Jim Santella](#)

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Plas Johnson & Friends  
Founders Hall  
Orange County Performing Arts Center  
Costa Mesa, California  
November 25, 2005

Plas Johnson and his all-star band of Los Angeles jazz veterans brought a session of standards with them for their Orange County performance: standards that rang true with the historic perspective of their collective years of payin' dues on the road and off, in order to further their artistic goals. These are the songs that we can always rely on. They represent the tried and true formula, and it works just fine. The leader's mellow tenor saxophone purrs with a delightful tone that lends itself to these familiar tunes.

Nearly 60 years in the jazz performance arena have given Johnson a feel for what his audience wants. This night, in the quaint intimacy of Orange County's best jazz spot, he brought his audience a mixture of jazz and blues that traced his career from New Orleans to Los Angeles with plenty of stopovers along the way.

In 1951, Johnson left The Crescent City to go on the road with Charles Brown. After a stint in the Army and formal training at the Westlake School of Music in Los Angeles, he settled in L.A. for a career that afforded him many opportunities in the studio. His is the tenor saxophone solo that brought us Henry Mancini's original "Pink Panther" theme. It's Johnson's piccolo that stands in for the bird call on Bobby Darin's hit "Rockin' Robin." With trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison, his tenor provided the signature music for *The Odd Couple* TV series. There's more, but what he does best is to carry the banner for jazz and blues, and to remind us that it's got to have soul.

The soulful funk of a James Brown tune, the swinging groove of a Count Basie song, and the mellow reflections of a Duke Ellington piece brought out the best from Johnson's arrangements. The program included standards such as "My Romance," "Time After Time," "I'm Just a Lucky So and So," "Jumpin' at the Woodside," and Phil Upchurch's own "You Can't Sit Down." With Johnson in this cohesive affair were: guitarist Upchurch, baritone saxophonist John Stephens, pianist/organist Art Hillery, bassist Richard Reid and drummer Garrick King.

Vocalist Spanky Wilson joined the band for eight more selections that allowed her to interact with the band as they interpreted jazz and blues with passion. In an aside, she related to the audience her own friendship with Esther Phillips, and it was evident from the start that she shared much of the heightened emotional persuasion that Little Esther carried with her

everywhere she went. They closed with “Goin’ Down Slow,” a Bobby Blue Bland song that allowed Wilson and the band to turn it loose.

Plas Johnson & Friends brought a marvelous concert performance to Southern California’s Founders Hall. As long as veteran jazz and blues artists such as this continue to bring good music into our neighborhoods, we’ll always feel the beat driving us as we work, play, or just relax.

Visit [Plas Johnson](#) on the web.

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*Jim Santella has been contributing CD reviews, concert reviews and DVD reviews to AAJ since 1997. His work has also appeared in Southland Blues, The L.A. Jazz Scene, and Cadence Magazine. [More about Jim...](#)*

Plas, as in jazz

The legendary saxophonist plays in Orange County this weekend, but squeezed in time to talk.

By BRIAN QUINES  
SqueezeOC.com

A jazz legend who was integral to many of the hits in American roots music came to Orange County in late November..

Plas Johnson, 74, is best known for his silky-smooth sax playing in Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther" theme song. He also played the piccolo bird sound on Bobby Day's "Rockin' Robin," and was in the horn section in Sheb Wooley's "Purple People Eater."

His list of song credits extend from Frank Sinatra to Frank Zappa and Johnny Otis to the "Tonight Show with Johnny Carson."

Plas, pronounced with a "z" instead of an "s," is also his father's name. Johnson, a New Orleans native, said "plas" sounds like a contraction of the word "pleasant"; it's the best explanation he's found.

The saxophonist now lives in Studio City and will perform in the Jazz Club Series at the Orange County Performing Arts Center this weekend.

SqueezeOC talked with the sax man by phone, just after he returned from a weeklong Caribbean cruise.

**SqueezeOC: I heard you were on a cruise ship a week ago. Were you kickin' back?**

**Johnson:** (laughs) I was working ... with the Frankie Capp Big Band behind Marlina Shaw, a fantastic jazz singer. There were a lot of groups on the ship like Doctor Lonnie Smith, Red Holloway, Houston Person and some other people. It was stocked up with some talented musicians.

**SqOC: Some people say that you gain a pound a day on a cruise. Are you 7 pounds heavier?**

**Johnson:** No. I think I worked mine off. I was surprised because I thought I did overeat. There were many nights I stayed up late and slept over breakfast and my first meal was lunch. It evened out for me, which was cool.

**SqOC: Your first famous track was as the piccolo in "Rockin' Robin" and eventually the saxophone in the "Pink Panther" theme song. Were you ever worried you would be a name lost behind other headliners?**

**Johnson:** Everyone's goal is to become rich and famous and play music all over the world. I've done the play music all over the world. I just haven't become rich and famous

yet.

My goal wasn't to play as a studio musician. That just happened by accident. My goal is just to become good enough to travel and play music - jazz, rock or blues or whatever.

**SqOC: Did you always listen to such a variety of music?**

**Johnson:** Pretty much. When I was young, the first time I heard Charlie Parker and other different music was from songs playing on a jukebox coming from a bar room.

My first taste of East Coast jazz was from Norman Brown, who wouldn't travel to the South because of segregation. He didn't want to play a segregated audience, much to his credit. He eventually played at a local New Orleans high school and the whites were rockin'.

**SqOC: How do you implement your smooth style into all of the different styles, and how'd you develop it?**

**Johnson:** I listened to all of that music and played all that music. I related to players when I was coming up. Johnny Hodges was my first love.

I think you get the sound in your head and as you learn to play, you reproduce it. It becomes an imitation of all the players that have influenced you on the way up.

**SqOC: Dexter or Bean?**

**Johnson:** Dexter. I didn't hear much of Bean until later. I heard Dexter first and he's a giant in his own right. Now I can appreciate Bean's vast contribution to the tenor saxophone. Dexter had Bean and a lot of other people to listen to.

**SqOC: Any new up-and-comers we should look out for?**

**Johnson:** Joshua Redman, Eric Alexander and that Marsalis kid saxophone player. I can't think of this other kid's name. It's too early in the mornin' man.

There are young players that connect - off flying on their own, incorporating music from the past into their own playing. They're well-educated, well-practiced and creative.

**SqOC: What's your advice for all of those aspiring musicians out there?**

**Johnson:** Kids need to make a collection and mental collection of your favorite players, who they like. See them play live. Buy their records. Play their solos.

Teach yourself to play. Nobody can teach you how to play.

Jazz education is fine and theory and classical studies. They can't really teach you how to play jazz.

## The Plas panther

The magical solo he did for a Henry Mancini soundtrack has given saxophonist Plas Johnson a niche in music history

Paul Andersen, Correspondent

He may not have a household name, but there is little doubt that you've had the pleasure of the smile that is induced when you hear his tenor sax purr through a song, usually through an eight-bar solo behind any number of performers, from Frank Sinatra to Steely Dan.

It is the sound of one extremely cool cat, which is only fitting, as his most famous moment came under the baton of composer Henry Mancini during the recording of the soundtrack for "The Pink Panther." Plas Johnson's tenor sax statement of that movie's theme is perhaps one of the most important instrumental voices in cinematic history, a perfect marriage of performer and material.

Plas Johnson and Friends — featuring vocalist Spanky Wilson, guitarist Phil Upchurch, pianist/organist Art Hillery, bassist Richard Reid and drummer Gerryck King — will play two shows (at 7:30 and 9:30 p.m.) tonight and Saturday night as part of the Jazz Club Series at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa.

It will be a chance for Johnson to display his signature sound in a setting that will most assuredly delve into the blues that he absorbed while growing up in Donaldsonville, La., about 60 miles north of New Orleans.

"My dad was a sax player — he'd picked it up after playing the banjo for awhile — so there was always music in the house while I was growing up," Johnson said by phone on his way to a rehearsal for this weekend's dates. "He played alto, and when I was 12 he got me my first saxophone, a soprano sax. I really loved it, and every day I couldn't wait to get home from school so I could play around with it. It wasn't long until I moved on to the alto, and then, when I was 15, I got my first tenor saxophone.

"It was what I was on the way to all that time," he remembered with a chuckle. "That was it — all my heroes became tenor sax players. I went from listening to Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson and Benny Carter to studying Illinois Jacquet, Don Byas, Gene Ammons and James Moody. Dexter (Gordon) would come later.

"Ah, Moody," he said again with a laugh. "He was a different animal altogether. I loved his spontaneity, but he was very hard to copy. I learned his "Moody's Mood for Love" and then I had to turn him loose, because at 15, I had to find someone easier to study."

The young saxist and his father weren't the only musicians in the household. "My younger brother, Ray, played piano — the blues were the first music we played together — and he was into boogie woogie. It was great having a pianist in the house; all we'd need to do was find a drummer and we'd have a band.

Then, when I was 16, 17 years old, we began getting into bebop, learning some of the orchestrations that Dizzy Gillespie did for his six-piece band, which we'd adapt to our band, which featured (my) tenor and a trumpet player. But New Orleans has always been a blues town, with the main jazz being Dixieland. My tastes were developing as I was hearing these other things, but it always came back to the blues there."

The Johnson Brothers Combo began playing gigs around the Crescent City for a few years before Plas left to join the Charles Brown Blues Band in 1951. It was the kind of life where the band would play 30 shows a month in 30 different towns.

"Being on the road with Charles was a true education," he said. "The band, though it was a blues band, was full of these really good jazz players, and Clifford Solomon, who was this hipster from California, began teaching me some more bebop. Then I got drafted while I was on the road with them, and the army brought me out to California. When I got out, I stayed there, settling in and playing around Santa Cruz and Monterrey. In 1954, my brother came out west to join me, and we ended moving to L.A. so we could starve for a couple of years like everyone else.

"Those were some hard, painful times," he reflected quietly. "We'd go play at all the jam sessions we could, because that is how all the bandleaders would go out and find players. We'd play bars downtown for three, four dollars a night."

Then one night, he met R&B star Johnny Otis, and soon began subbing in his band. He began doing recording sessions, including the one for Otis's classic hit, "Willie and the Hand Jive." It wasn't long before the saxophonist began appearing on all sorts of records.

"At the time, there were these R&B labels in L.A., like Aladdin and Modern, who were making a lot of money off

of people like Charles Brown and Roy Milton through what were then called "race records," he said. "They were for the black community, but they found that white teenagers were buying them, too, which of course was the market of the major labels. That is when a lot of things changed, though you still can't sell a true R&B devotee from that time on rock and roll. And I was in the middle of all that, even before I hooked up with Johnny."

Johnson's tenor sax was soon finding its way onto recordings by a who's who list of artists, from Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Rosemary Clooney to B.B. King, Nat "King" Cole and Frank Sinatra. He became a master of the eight-bar solo, providing just the right embellishment to the proceedings.

"I'd just go in and do what they asked for," he said modestly. "It was kind of like acting, where all you want to do is make sure you don't fall over the furniture. It was easy for me, and they liked what I played. You just have to know when to start and when to stop."

It is an art form based on the economy of notes played, and knowing the right ones to play, and Johnson is a true master of it, no matter what situation he would find himself in.

"(Composer) Les Baxter heard me play, and realized that I could do a bit more than I was doing, so he began using me on movie calls," he said. "He was known for his exotic music, and he was the one that wrote 'Quiet Village' (which would become a big hit for Martin Denny)."

Then along came 'The Pink Panther,' and Johnson's name would be forever linked with the music of Henry Mancini. By this time he was also making his own occasional records, having been signed to a contract at Capitol Records by a sax player who had become an A&R executive, Dave Cavanaugh. One of those was a 45 single of the "Pink Panther Theme," recorded with Johnson backed by a small combo, with another Mancini tune from the soundtrack as the B-side. Everyone involved realized that this was a special song, but unfortunately the single never made it to market.

"The movie came out, and the soundtrack was a hit, so they never released my version, though I have a copy of the 45 somewhere around the house," he said. "I've never tired of playing that song, though for a while I did try to avoid it. In 1983, I did a tour with (trumpeter) 'Sweets' Edison, and the promoter insisted I put it in the repertoire. Our pianist, Dolo Coker, didn't want to play it, but our guitarist, John Collins, said he'd be happy to, so we worked out this nice little arrangement of it.

"So many people have heard it, even when they were real little, that I sometimes get people coming up and telling me that I sound just like the original version, and their eyes get real big when I tell them that was me on the original. They never knew who it was that did it, and they always get that look of recognition when they realize it."

Over the years, Johnson has recorded some CDs on his own, available at shows and through his website, as well as through CD Baby. Among them are a set of ballads and a set of Christmas standards, all done in the indelible Johnson fashion, cool and hip. Soon, he hopes to re-release on CD an album he did with a group he had together in the '80s called the Grease Patrol. Few groups have been better named, and this weekend should be as equally soulful as that band.

"I headed to our first full band rehearsal, because Phil (Upchurch) has been out of town, and Spanky has been busy recording, but you know what to expect," he said as he pulled into a parking space at the rehearsal studio. "It isn't like we're all just meeting for the first time onstage; this is a truly talented group. And I want to put together some things to feature the bassist and the drummer. Gerryck (King) may not be a name a lot of people recognize, but he's played behind folks like Joe Williams, and he's really special, one of those well-hidden talents that isn't a household name."

It may just be a case of taking one to know one.

— Paul Anderson is a La Canada freelance writer.

# In the pink

'Pink Panther'  
saxophonist  
wraps up tonight.

**COSTA MESA** • Ever hear the slinky, purring saxophone solo in the original recording of Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther" theme?

That famous strut is tenor saxophonist Plas Johnson. One of the best tenor sax soloists in Southern California, Johnson comes to the Orange County Performing Arts Center's Jazz Club Series at 7:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. tonight. The musician will bring friends to his Founders Hall appearance, including vocalist Spanky Wilson, guitarist Phil Upchurch and pianist Art Hillery.

A native of Louisiana, Plas Johnson formed the Johnson Brothers Combo in his teen years with brother Ray Johnson. The band played New Orleans before Plas Johnson joined the Charles Brown Band. While on tour, Johnson was drafted into the Army. He left the service in 1954 and eventually moved to Los Angeles, where he at-



Plas Johnson concludes his two-night gig tonight.

tended Westlake School of Music. He only stayed for a year, though, because of his success as a studio musician.

Johnson's first solo of note was the short piccolo figure that stands in for the bird call on the Bobby Day hit "Rockin' Robin." He quickly became a regular session sideman and soloist during Capitol Records' heyday, recording with such luminaries as Frank Sinatra, Nat "King" Cole and others. In 1970, the sax player joined the Mort Lindsey Band on

## Plas Johnson

Tickets cost \$52 for the 7:30 p.m. show and \$47 for the 9:30 p.m. show. They are available at The Center's Box Office at 600 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa, by calling CenterTix at (714) 556-2787 or online at [www.ocpac.org](http://www.ocpac.org). The Center's TTY number is (714) 556-2746.

The Merv Griffin Show. He stayed with the band for the next 15 years, joined by such all-stars as Jack Sheldon, Herb Ellis and Kai Winding.

**PLAS JOHNSON AND FRIENDS**

*AT THE ORANGE COUNTY PERFORMING  
ARTS CENTER*

Tenor sax man Plas Johnson and Friends performed at the Orange County Performing Arts Center on November 25 and 26. In the early show on the 25th Johnson was accompanied by guitarist Phil Upchurch, Art Hillery on piano and organ, Richard Reid on bass, drummer Gary King, and baritone sax man John Stephens. Vocalist Spanky Wilson joined the group about half way through the set. They performed a very entertaining set of about a dozen numbers in a bluesy and soulful mode.

Notable among the tunes was "My Romance" which featured Johnson's lush and sensuous tenor sax, backed by Reid's big round bass tones. If Johnson's playing would have been a voice instead of a horn, it would have sounded like Johnny Hartman. Guitarist Phil Upchurch was turned loose on James Brown's "I Feel Good" and burned like mad. And drummer King turned in a great solo on "Jumpin At The Woodside."

Spanky Wilson sang an emotion-packed version of "Lover Man" on which Upchurch's guitar sang and cried. Wilson also did a fine job on "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down And Write Myself A Letter" which featured introduction and closing lines from the melody of "Straight No Chaser." The only disappointment was that Johnson didn't play the theme from the Pink Panther — but that can be heard on TV commercials from time to time.

Judging by the enthusiastic applause, the audience loved the performance.

—Fred Eckstein