

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.