



## Concert Review

### Johnny Smith

June 17, 1999

By Robert L. Daniels

The annual JVC Jazz Festival kicked off with a tribute to the legendary Johnny Smith, the self-taught visionary guitarist from Alabama, famed for his lyrical ballad style. Winner of the 1952 Down Beat album poll, Smith's melodic structure became an inspiration to the jazz community. For a tribute to a musician who excelled in poetry on his instrument, it was a smoking evening of varying techniques, dominated by hard swinging stylings and aggressive musicianship.

But while all of the participating musicians declared the master's influence, the program with a few exceptions displayed little of Smith's economy and supremely cushy execution.

The modest, retiring, 77-year-old Smith was genuinely flattered by the tribute and shared some anecdotes with the audience overwhelmingly populated by young guitarists, students and devoted fans.

Opener framed Ron Affif and Paul Bollenbach with Sonny Rollins' "Pent Up House," displayed burning interplay and perhaps telegraphing an evening that could turn into a cutting contest. The pair settled down with a more poised and lyrical reading of "Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most."

Jack Wilkins and Carl Barry followed with a soaring turn for Smith's well-known twist on the chord changes for Sigmund Romberg's "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise," which later became a 1960 Ventures' pop hit "Walk, Don't Run."

Howard Alden and Joe Puma joined for a polite setting of Richard Rodgers' "Wait Till You See Her," which sparkled with Alden's gentle ideas and clean melodic structure.

Assisted by flute and tenor sax of Ira Sullivan, Russell Malone and Vic Juris went Hollywood with "Secret Love" and Golden Earrings," offering a smooth and imaginative exotic blend.

A surprise treat came with appearance of Mundell Lowe, who joined Sal Salvador for a sprightly “Strike Up The Band.” It’s unlikely Noel Coward ever expected “I’ll Follow My Secret Heart” to be played as a bossa nova, yet the pair turned it into a smoothly lyrical Brazilian setting.

Perhaps the most stunning nod to the honoree came from Gene Bertoncini, the only guitarist on the bill who had studied with Smith. The purity of the unaccompanied, acoustic performance brought rich color and voicing to “How Are Things In Glocca Mora?” And a plaintive picturesque reading of Claude Thornhill’s “Snowfall” displayed lovely restraint, economy and imagination.

Jimmy Bruno, a strong, assertive player with great bite and vigor, had the honor of playing the Smith trademark ballad “Moonlight in Vermont.” It was a supremely gentle setting, nicely framed by Sullivan’s tenor sax.

Mark Whitfield and Randy Johnston wound up the long program with Jimmy Heath’s racing “Freedom Jazz Dance,” balanced with forceful invention and some wildly diverse ideas that seemed miles away from the genteel execution of the honoree.