



JOHNNY SMITH
Tribute Concert
a player's account

by Richard Boukas © 1999

Those fortunate enough to attend the *Tal Farlow* and *Barney Kessel* tributes in the last two years (also produced capably by Charles Carlini) knew how rare an evening of music was in store for this once-in-a-lifetime tribute to a once-in-a-lifetime father of our instrument.

The Hang

The warm, celebratory atmosphere permeating backstage during the sound check at Hunter College's Kaye Playhouse was infectious- a virtual *Jazz Guitar Hall of Fame*, except alive and buzzing with excitement. Rolls of film were being burned like kindling as guys kidded each other, recanted old times and continually grabbed each other out of conversation to have timeless pictures taken.

The admiration exhibited among the players was very special to behold. *Pat Martino*, scheduled to play duo with the brilliant pianist *Jim Ridd*, was beaming like a kid who just got his first guitar; *Gene Bertoncini* was still telling the same old bad jokes and still expecting a different reaction; *Sal Salvador*, forever the teacher and student of the instrument, remained seated away from the din of activity like Buddha, quietly

studying a chart he was later to perform; *Jimmy Bruno* and *Jack Wilkins*, as dangerous a duo in the humor department as they are when they plug in together on stage, remained just a heartbeat away from cracking everyone up.

These distinct personalities blended into a vibration which was undeniably special yet understated in the informal way that everyone interacted. At one point *Russell Malone* looked intently through the crowd with his trademark furled eyebrow and, finally spotting the man of the evening, said to *Jack Wilkins*, "**Man...that's Johnny Smith- now how about that.**" The awe felt by all of us backstage came in waves of emotion; we all knew that such priceless moments had to be experienced fully to appreciate the historical significance of such an event.

This was a testimony not only to the integrity of all those about to perform in honor of this great guitar legend, but to Johnny himself. To this day he remains one of the most self-effacing masters Jazz and humanity has ever known. His shyness was remarkable, being almost uncomfortable with all the fuss and attention people were making about him. Visibly moved by each person who had come to say hello to him backstage, the first thing he'd say in his lanky vintage Colorado twang was, "Guys, I really don't deserve this." He would then gaze gently downward and off to the side as if to find someplace where he just might be a little less visible and out of the spotlight.

But this was no joke, no feigned attempt at lip-service humility. This was the great Johnny Smith we've always known and loved, the guitar pioneer, the person. The uncompromised dedication he brings to his craft, perennial self-challenge in stretching the instrument's boundaries and sincere humility required to pursue that noble mission set the standard almost fifty years ago for what was considered to be playable on the arch top guitar.

In fact, we are all still trying to catch up to him, remaining inspired and having a ball in the process. Before playing an

exquisite arrangement of *How Are Things in Glocca Morra*, Gene Bertoncini took the mike and in a very poignant moment his first words were: "I'm the luckiest guy here tonight- because I got to study with Johnny Smith. Johnny, you're the reason why I'm still playing the guitar." *Heavy*.

From the first downbeat of each artistic vignette, Johnny's profound effect on the four generations of players represented in this concert was evident in the character of how everyone played. Through the music they took pause from their own unique voice to allow Johnny's influence to more visibly govern their creative sensibilities.

In their offerings of repertoire which he so masterfully rendered, you could feel the heightened sense of restraint, clarity, sensitivity and total taste of what was coming across. This conveyed to the audience a sincere and true meaning to the notion of *tribute*- and for a few short but very rich hours of music, this singular focus of artistic continuity made it feel like there was really only one guitarist on stage all night. Given the stock of the seeds he planted, it was time for all of us to enjoy the fruits of his labors in spawning the modern Jazz guitar as we know it.

The Show

Ron Affif and *Paul Bollenback* kicked the festivities off with a take-no-prisoners tempo for *Pent Up House*. To both these guys, burn begins at the bottom of their VU meter. A brief but elegant version of *Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most* showed Paul's command of Johnny's patented closed chord voicings and attractive tenor voice passing movements. Their set closed with an original funk Blues head that got lightning drummer *Winard Harper* and bass statesman *Earl May* right into the meat of the action.

Jack Wilkins and *Carl Barry* followed with Johnny's famous hit *Walk Don't Run* (based on *Softly as in a Morning Sunrise*), Jack using a fingering across consecutive strings which allowed melodic seconds to ring in typical bell-like Smith fashion. The ease of accompanying each other and blowing lines together at the close showed the camaraderie these two great players have enjoyed since their fledgling teenage years in Brooklyn.

Sal Salvador and *Mundell Lowe* offered a smooth Bossa Nova rendition of *I'll Follow My Secret Heart* and closed with *Strike Up the Band*. Tuning the low E down to D in Johnny's honor, Mundell's tone was unmistakably fat and clear, identical to even his earliest recordings with Bird in the 40's. Sal was swinging hard, lacing every measure with a big kid smile and the linear clarity for which he is so well known.

Gene Bertoncini followed with fantastic solo renditions of *How Are Things in Glocca Morra* and *Snowfall*. His arrangements are polished musical sculptures, each note imbued with a meaning in service of the bigger musical and emotional picture he aims to project. His ability to achieve complex finger style textures with contrary moving bass lines and lush impressionistic reharmonizations that support lyrical melodic statements never disappoints the listener who seeks a fresh, innovative approach to repertoire commonly viewed either as rhythm section material or inappropriate for solo treatment.

Russell Malone, *Vic Juris* and the tasty alto flute/tenor of *Ira Sullivan* continued with the rhythm section, offering a Bossa Nova version of *Golden Earrings* followed by a blazing version of *Secret Love*. Russell bolted right out of the starting gate with burning bop lines and a rich, swinging tone. Vic's affinity for exploring some serious substitution alchemy and superimposed melodic-rhythmic groupings gave the tune a very modern harmonic and linear edge. These guys took turns raising each others eyebrows in a series of playful and very musical exchanges.

After intermission, *Charles Carlini* read wonderful statements from *Barney Kessel* and *Chet Atkins*, both of whom unfortunately could not be in attendance due to failing health. Carlini, a young and increasingly important impresario for monumental guitar events such as this, took great pains to document this JVC Jazz festival concert by videotaping the performance and individual artist tributes to Johnny. Hats off to him for making this as classy an event as the Tal and Barney tributes he produced.

He then introduced one of the all-time greats: *Tony Mottola*. He related fascinating anecdotes including his earliest days knowing Johnny in the broadcast studios. One story told of the time when a fan commented on how handsome and movie star-like Tony looked on the television- only to find out that the program in question was taped when he had sent Johnny in as a sub!

His account of this golden era, one full of work for musicians and "when everything was recorded live, even the commercials" was closed with a heartfelt tribute: "Many say that a man's true wealth and success is measured by the number of good friends he has- well, that being said, Johnny is one of the richest and greatest men on the planet." The sincerity and vitality Tony brought to this event was so entertaining and sweet, and this really set the tone for the second half of the program.

The Second Chorus

Tony then introduced **Johnny Smith**, and the audience immediately shot out of their seats in a long and resounding standing ovation- one whose intensity and passion was exceeded only by the brilliant legacy he has given us. Once silence was finally restored, Johnny opened with a typically humble remark: "I was hoping there would be a big rock on stage so I could just crawl under it."

He continued, "I never considered myself a Jazz player- just a guitar player who tried to supply what was missing." After expressing his sincere appreciation to the audience and the artists participating, he proceeded to introduce *Pat Martino* and *Jim Ridl*, an introduction that was indeed a thrilling moment to experience.

Emerging with his new black signature model Gibson, Pat took off immediately into the zone where only he has a passport for entry. This rare duo performance highlighted the more intimate, lyrical and bluesy side of Pat's playing - one that can often be obscured even with the most sensitive rhythm section support. This night he was able to contrast this approach so dramatically with his more stratospheric linear journeys. His tone was generously fat, smoky and dark.

There was a truly different sense in the air, a riveting intensity as he filled the hall with his musical presence. Jim Ridl's crisp, always inventive accompaniment showed the fruits of his five-year tenure with the guitar legend, remaining totally tuned into the delicate balance between Pat's needs for strong support and improvisational space.

To accomplish both, he deftly avoided the inescapable trap of left-hand *walking bass lines* by articulating up-tempo textures in a more two-handed double-time funk approach. The time never lost its swing, rhythmic drive or rich harmonic interest. This was a "visit" that no one at this concert will ever forget.

Jimmy Bruno, *Jack Wilkins*, and *Ira Sullivan* then came out to perform one of the evening's real highlights and the namesake of the performance, *Moonlight in Vermont*. With Sullivan playing the reserved subliminal role of Stan Getz' commentary under the melody, both Bruno and Wilkins demonstrated their mastery of lush, pianistic chord melody, rapid linear soloing in parallel triads and thirds, and an almost effortless spanking-clean execution- all qualities for which Johnny was so highly known and respected. Jimmy's 7-string Benedetto permitted him to begin his solo with a tribute *four-octave* CMA7 arpeggio, one more octave than the famous staggering solo entry that Johnny had engraved in Jazz history almost fifty years ago.

Joe Puma and *Howard Alden* offered a smooth and tasteful duo set with *Wait Til You See Her* and *Pow-wow*, Puma's clever bop line written over Cherokee which I'm sure for many in attendance brought back bittersweet memories of his duo days with the great *Chuck Wayne*. Alden's 7-string playing is wonderfully clean, orchestral, and close in holistic concept (more than in actual style) to Bertoni- integrating incisive melodic lines, intricate inner voice movements and independent bass lines whose harmonic integrity and melodic contour are as solid and interesting as any bass player on the scene.

Joe was in great form, weaving fluid, swinging lines with Howard in a sinewy texture that never got heavy and always felt like it was moving forward with clarity and development.

The final miniset (with rhythm section) was offered up by *Mark Whitfield* and *Randy Johnston*. They played a fiery half Afro-Cuban/Swing version of *Invitation* and closed with the '60's funk-shuffle Blues classic *Gingerbread Boy*. Whitfield's playing was energetic and driven by an exploratory athleticism. His darting, wide melodic shapes and relentless positional risk-taking showed a clear Benson influence but taken in his own personal dynamic direction.

Sporting a rich tone on a Guild 335-style semi-hollow, Johnston showed great poise and focus in his building of larger formal dimensions in his soloing. His ability to develop distinct motivic ideas to their full musical potential was very satisfying, particularly in view of the II-V patterns in *Invitation*'s B section which a lesser player would handle with more

predictable cookie-cutter riffs.

His strong time and fluid left-hand phrasing shows the effects of his frequent work in meat n' potatoes organ trio settings. *Winard Harper* wooed the guitarist-heavy crowd with an intense open solo that had everyone turned around in the form trying to figure out where "1" was. He and Earl May offered sensitive support with personality, but never compromised the soloist's mandate to establish the improvisational space.

Closing A section and Coda

All in all, as a fellow player and friend of many who performed, it was a real treat to share this special evening with the Jazz guitar community. This was a onetime opportunity to pay tribute and honor a great man who has done so much for our instrument. I have to rank this concert among the most memorable I've heard in the last 25 years- including the first time I heard *Joe Pass* play solo, *Hendrix* at the Fillmore East, *John McLaughlin*'s first NY club appearance with *Mahavishnu* and *Jack Wilkins* in super duo with bass phenom *Eddie Gomez*. Apart from the sheer brilliance of the music and boundless inspiration gained through these experiences, all these events and players share a common thread in how they stretched the instrument well beyond perceived limits dictated by the stylistic conventions of their time.