



Top Guitarists Gather For JVC Jazz Tribute

June 17, 1999, 2:15 pm PT

Among the opening concerts of the JVC Jazz Festival New York was an all-star jazz guitar tribute to a little-known legend, Johnny Smith on Tuesday (June 15). Guitarists who paid tribute to Smith at Hunter College's Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse included Pat Martino, Russell Malone, Mark Whitfield, Howard Alden, Sal Salvador, Mundell Lowe, Joe Puma, Jack Wilkins, Ron Affif, Gene Bertoncini and many others.

Preceding Johnny Smith as honorees were Tal Farlow, Barney Kessel, and Herb Ellis in this JVC guitar series created by guitar maven Charles Carlini.

Smith left the New York scene (where he was a top studio man, eventually playing under the baton of Toscanini), when he moved to Colorado Springs in 1964. Until 1991 he operated a music store, but is now fully retired.

Smith's version of "Moonlight in Vermont," done with tenor saxophonist Stan Getz, was one of the two top recordings of 1952 in *Down Beat* magazine. At JVC, it was done with the proper serene beauty by guitarists Jack Wilkins and Jimmy Bruno, with tenor man Ira Sullivan shining his own lunar illumination in the Getz mode.

Other strong guitar duos (with or without the team of bassist Earl May and drummer Winard Harper) were Alden and Puma, swinging lightly and politely on "Wait Till You See Her" and flying through "Pow Wow" and Malone with Vic Juris, abetted by Sullivan's flute in a plaintive "Golden Earrings" and, with Sullivan on tenor, a smoking "Secret Love." The only acoustic guitarist was the unaccompanied Gene Bertoncini, who created magic with "How are things in Glocca Mora?" and a slowly drifting treatment of Claude Thornhill's "Snowfall." Mark Whitfield played the most burning blues solo of the night on Jimmy Heath's "Gingerbread Boy," jumping off rhythms that alternated between a hard backbeat and a kinetic 4/4.

Tony Mottola spoke from the stage of Smith's first New York job, subbing for him on NBC radio in the trio of accordionist Charles Magnante. "Recently, someone sent me a video of an old soundie – the MTV of the '40s," quipped the octogenarian. "And the guy told me that I not only sounded good, but that I looked so handsome. When he sent me the video and I put it in my VCR, it turned out to be on the night that Johnny was filling in for me."

At the beginning of the concert's second half, Smith, his Fonda-esque good looks intact, graciously and humbly thanked everyone. "I don't consider myself a jazz player," he offered, a thought he repeated to *allstar* the next day. A lot of people would dispute this. Smith was a fine, all-around musician – and that included his jazz work. He also stressed how seeing "so many dear friends of mine made the whole trip worthwhile." Judging by the number of those friends who came to see him and the fans who lined up in front of his orchestra seat at the end of the concert to get his autograph on books and old albums, the feeling was reciprocal.

Ira Gitler

Reviewed for CDNOW