

Johnny O'Neal



Johnny's enormous musical gifts were immediately apparent to jazz icon **Ray Brown** and led to his 1983 debut album *Coming Out*. Stints with **Ray Brown**, **Milt Jackson**, and **Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers** soon followed. **Dizzy Gillespie**, **Joe Pass**, **Nancy Wilson**, **Anita O'Day**, **Lionel Hampton**, **Kenny Burrell**, **Sonny Stitt**, **Benny Golson**, **Eddie Lockjaw Davis**, and **Clark Terry** among others, have



tapped Johnny for appearances. Performances on the festival circuits in Europe, Australia, Japan and a recent tour of South Africa have gained Johnny an international following.

"Johnny is outstanding in his ability to interpret a wide range of material with ease and sensitivity," according to Parkwood Records' **Hugh Leal**. This versatility was showcased on his debut recording for Justin Time Records, *On the Montreal Scene*, which soulfully interweaves gospel, blues and mainstream jazz. **Jim Little**, who writes regularly for the *Montreal Weekly Hour*, proffered, "O'Neal offers up a serving of the blues and gospel ingredients that help make him such a tasty player."

Astonishingly, Johnny is largely self-taught. His playing evokes the influences imbued in him by his idols Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum, and he has reshaped these elements into his own very swinging and melodic approach. In live performances, he is apt to catch his audience off-guard with his soulfully rendered yet unpretentious vocalizations.

Johnny admits to loving to shout the blues but calls himself a piano player first. There have been three notable events in Johnny's career that continue to inspire him: an appearance at Carnegie Hall early in his career when he was the opening solo pianist for Oscar Peterson, his 1998 induction into the **Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame** and playing the role of Art Tatum in the award-winning feature film "*Ray*".

Johnny explains, "I'm a tune guy. I know 1,500 songs. My father was a pianist and singer who emphasized that learning lyrics creates dynamics and a better interpretation of melody. I rehearse so that the bassist, drummer, and I can get familiar with each others styles, not to set the songs we'll play. Jazz is the highest level of performance because it's instant composition. I like to be spontaneous and respond to cues from the audience."

"I just want to play and preserve the style of the jazz masters", emphasizes Johnny. Dedication to that mission statement is evident in his innovative interpretations of the jazz classics, and his own lyrical compositions.

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