



EVERYBODY LOVES JOHNNY O'NEAL

BY MARILYN LESTER

Pianist-singer Johnny O'Neal's latest recording, the aptly-named, *Everybody Loves Johnny O'Neal* (Cellar Music), is a declaration hard to disagree with. In his liner notes, saxophonist and label owner Cory Weeds declares he is "one of THE finest entertainers in the business. There is not enough room in this package to expound on the virtues of Johnny O'Neal."

Truly unique, O'Neal offers a singular pianistic virtuosity melded with heartfelt vocalizing—and he's collaborated with a veritable who's who of jazz, including a short list of Art Blakey, Nancy Wilson, Ray Brown, Joe Pass, Kenny Burrell, Barry Harris, Dizzy Gillespie, Ron Carter, Harry Connick Jr., Wynton Marsalis, Roy Hargrove and many more. Saxophonist Jean Toussaint, who worked alongside O'Neal deems him "a rare talent who has always been an astounding performer. During our time with (Art Blakey's) The Jazz Messengers, it was sheer joy to witness his features while he sang his heart out and played the keys off the piano." And what Toussaint also observed was that O'Neal had a depth, knowledge and understanding of the rich history of the music, which allowed him to push forward with "great creativity."

Born in 1956 in Detroit, O'Neal, like many Black artists, was informed by growing up with gospel music from the church. He was also fortunate to have a singing, piano-playing father who appreciated jazz, gave house jam parties and loved the music of pianists Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson—two icons that O'Neal's work has often been compared to. (Later, O'Neal came to know Peterson, who recommended him to portray Tatum in the 2004 film, *Ray*, with Jamie Foxx in the leading role of Ray Charles.) Inevitably, many musicians find themselves standing on the shoulders of those who've gone before. "I heard so much as a kid," O'Neal says, "and what I would try to do was not play like them, but *think* like them." Ultimately he developed a playing style with roots in bebop that was not only technically dexterous, but fluid, harmonically rich and delivered with a natural feeling of swing. Unsurprisingly, he began playing and moving in the music world early. As a young teenager O'Neal won the 2nd Annual James Cleveland Youth Gospel Piano Competition in Kansas City and by 1974 he was working as a full-time musician in Birmingham, AL.

But it was a 1981 gig at E.J.'s in Atlanta that changed the course of his life. There he met trumpet-flugelhorn master Clark Terry. Thinking about moving to NYC, Terry told O'Neal, when you get there, give me a call. "I took the train from Atlanta," he recalls, "and when I got to New York, the first thing I did was get a copy of *The Village Voice* to see who was playing where." Terry was at the Blue Note with a small group, which O'Neal attended and was subsequently invited to join. That encounter led to a regular job at the club. One night, Blakey came in, another fateful encounter. "I want you to join the band," the drummer-bandleader said on the spot, and so in 1982, O'Neal became a member of The Jazz Messengers, a gig that lasted about two years. "Blakey would say," O'Neal remembers, "this isn't the Post Office" meaning no lifetime civil service jobs. But that was the ethos of Blakey: since founding The Jazz Messengers in the early '50s (then co-led with pianist Horace Silver), it was a training ground for

young talent (including O'Neal predecessors that occupied the ensemble's piano chair—from Bobby Timmons to Cedar Walton and James Williams), fueled by Blakey's demand for high standards of professionalism and focus on the Messenger mission. Right up until his passing in 1990, Blakey maintained the Messengers' consistent sound and roots in hard bop and acoustic, swing-based music. So, turnover was expected, and O'Neal was hip to this dynamic, an opportunity he nonetheless seized without hesitation. "But Blakey had so much love for me," O'Neal says. "It was one of the greatest parts of my career."

Tenure in the Messengers meant members had to compose, but O'Neal had no real experience in that area and had to quickly learn some rudiments and find his way. He was worried that he had "no notes." Blakey was understanding. "He told me 'there was music before there was notes' so I did compose some at that time." Since, O'Neal has composed occasionally, but it hasn't been a focus. One of his fellow players during the Messenger years was bassist Lonnie Plaxico, who'd met O'Neal in Chicago in 1980 at a jam session. "He was already regarded as a legend," Plaxico says. "Johnny asked me to perform with him. There's so much to say about Johnny, he's been a blessing to my life. So much of my destiny is because of my friendship with him." Plaxico prizes a meeting he had with Ray Brown via O'Neal and the gig he scored with Wynton Marsalis after sending him a tape of a performance with O'Neal.

A highlight of the '80s included *Soulful Swinging* (Concord, 1988), a *USA Today* pick for Best Album of the Year, but there was a cool-down in the next decade due to health challenges that included a mugging followed by an HIV diagnosis. (It wasn't until around 2010 that O'Neal was able to robustly pick his career back up.) He has been open about his sexual identity. In 2016 he performed with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in *Lush Life: Celebrating the Life of Billy Strayhorn*, a centennial tribute concert to the legend who was openly out at a time when doing so could be dangerous. In attendance was Strayhorn's niece, Alyce Claerbaut. "She asked if I was gay," he says. "She said I reminded her so much of Billy."

In his revitalized career, O'Neal has had residencies at major jazz venues and in 2014 was the first performer at the then just-opened Village club Mezzrow, working in trio format. Among his fairly recent bassists, Ben Rubin considers playing with O'Neal influential and meaningful. "He is extremely demanding of his band members musically and provides unparalleled performance and educational experiences for them if they can work to meet those expectations," Rubin says. "What I learned about repertoire, presentation and more has helped me with all of the future pursuits in my life." Among a generation of outstanding young pianists, Emmet Cohen considers O'Neal "a true legend" who has taught the world at large so much about the deeper essence of jazz itself. "He carries the rich Detroit piano tradition with extraordinary dignity, soul and poise," Cohen notes. "He has been so generous with his time, knowledge and experience to younger musicians."

Touring, an activity he enjoys, has also been a significant part of the pianist-vocalist's career. In earlier

days he was on the road extensively with Blakey, of course, but also in stints with Lionel Hampton, Milt Jackson, Buddy DeFranco, Carmen McRae and as the lead singer with the Ray Charles Band following Charles' death. Beyond many domestic residencies, he's proud of his international gigs across Europe, South America and Asia, including the Blue Note in Beijing. International festival appearances also include the Esplanade "Jazz in July" residency in Singapore. He is so loved, he's had to turn down offers to tour through his career, notably with the Count Basie Orchestra and Betty Carter's band. Currently: "June is always a busy month," he explains. "I'm waiting now to hear about some European tours." In the meantime, New Yorkers this month can enjoy his three-night residency at the still-newish, Lower East Side venue Jazz Genius in addition to a one-nighter at the Village's Cellar Dog.

As for vocals, O'Neal, who's often been tagged as a singer in the Nat King Cole tradition, says he's leaning more to vocalizing now in his performances. He also adamantly insists he's not a vocalist who plays the piano or a pianist who sings. "What I do, those two things are one," he says. "There's no separation." And his command of storytelling, even when he's playing and not singing, comes from a deep dive into lyrics and their meaning, resulting from good advice from a father to a son who liked to sing from his earliest days. "He told me 'learn the lyrics.'" O'Neal senior was also practical-minded about his son's ability. "He advised me not to give up singing. He said 'you'll get more work that way.'" This proclivity is also what made O'Neal a sought-after accompanist. A wise father knew best.

Ultimately, what O'Neal gives is the truth of who he is. He takes pride in being an entertainer: "There's no business without the show," he says. He believes in presenting himself honestly and with sincerity, allowing audiences to see his vulnerability, which, he says, draws them into the performance. "I'm not one [of those entertainers] who needs to read the audience," he declares, explaining that the room has its own vibe, one created by the interaction of the performer and the people in the seats. In other words, O'Neal prefers that the artist-audience relationship be organic. And he loves being a storyteller as part of his end of that social contract. But most of all, he says, "It's really about how you touch people's hearts." And that he does; it's no wonder everybody loves Johnny O'Neal!

For more info visit johnnyoneal.net. O'Neal is at Cellar Dog Jun. 1 and Jazz Genius Jun. 26-28. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Johnny O'Neal—*Coming Out* (Concord, 1977)
- Art Blakey and The Jazz Messengers—*Strasbourg 82* (Gearbox, 1982)
- Ed Thigpen—*Easy Flight* (Reckless, 1990)
- Johnny O'Neal—*On The Montreal Scene* (Justin Time, 1995)
- Johnny O'Neal—*Live at Smalls* (smallslive, 2013)
- Johnny O'Neal—*Everybody Loves Johnny O'Neal* (Cellar Music, 2018)