

The

ALTOSAX

of

**HOWARD WILLIAM
JOHNSON
“SWAN”**

Born: Boston, Jan. 1, 1908
Died: No info

Introduction:

Howard Johnson's beautiful altosax sound on the Dicky Wells recording session in Paris is reason good enough for introducing him into jazz archeology!

History:

Brother of 'Bobby' Johnson (guitar/banjo). Howard Johnson worked with bands in Boston before moving to New York, played with 'Fess' Williams, Billy Kato (1930-31), and James P. Johnson. With Elmer Snowden before joining Benny Carter's orchestra (October 1932), then several years in Teddy Hill's band (including trip to Europe in 1937). Spell with Claude Hopkins in the early 1940s and regular work as an arranger. With Dizzy Gillespie bigband from 1946 until 1948. Continued to play through the 1950s and 1960s, working regularly in Lem Johnson's band (ref. John Chilton).

HOWARD WILLIAM JOHNSON SOLOGRAPHY

BENNY CARTER & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. March 14, 1933

Personnel including Benny Carter (tp, cl, as), Howard Johnson (as).
Four titles were recorded for Columbia but 'of course' no HJ.

SPIKE HUGHES & HIS NEGRO ORCHESTRA NYC. April/May 1933

Personnels including Benny Carter, Howard Johnson (cl, as).
Fourteen titles were recorded for English Decca, but no HJ.

TEDDY HILL & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Feb. 26, 1935

Bill Dillard (tp, vo), Roy Eldridge, Bill Coleman (tp), Dicky Wells (tb), Russell Procope (cl, as), Howard Johnson (as), Chu Berry (ts), Teddy Hill (ts, dir), Sam Allen (p), John Smith (g), Richard Fullbright (b), Bill Beason (dm).
Four titles were recorded for Melotone, one has altosax, probably HJ:

16925-1 When The Robin Sings His Song Solo 8 bars. (FM)

Howard Johnson takes his first recorded solo as the bridge in Bill Coleman's fine trumpet solo on "... The Robin ...". It is pretty staccato but confident and with a fine sound in his horn.

TEDDY HILL & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. April 1, 1936

Personnel as above except Frank Newton, Shad Collins (tp), Cecil Scott (ts, bar) replace Eldridge, Coleman and Berry.
Two titles were recorded for Vocalion, one issued, with altosax, likely to be HJ since there also is a (cl)-solo:

18911-1 Uptown Rhapsody Solo/straight 16+8 bars, orch on bridge. (F)

NYC. May 4, 1936

Same. Three titles, two have altosax soli, one by HJ:

19176-1 Blue Rhythm Fantasy Straight duet with (cl) 8 bars. (M)

19177-1 Passionette Solo 16 bars. (FM)

On "Passionette" HJ gives the first really convincing example of his qualities as a real improviser on his instrument, this sounds good, and swinging too! Some quite competent work on "Uptown ..." should also be noted.

TEDDY HILL & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. March 26, 1937

Personnel as above. Teddy Hill, Beatrice Douglas (vo).
Six titles were recorded for Bluebird, but no altosax soli.

NYC. April 23, 1937

Same. Six titles, but no altosax soli.

NYC. May 17, 1937

Similar. Six titles, three have altosax soli, all by HJ:

10207-1 I'm Happy Darling, DWY Straight 4 bars. (SM)

10210-1 King Porter Stomp Solo 16 bars. (FM)

10211-1 Blue Rhythm Fantasy Straight duet with (cl) 8 bars. (FM)

Again it is good reason to be amazed by HJ's liquid flowing and well conceived soloing, as demonstrated so well in "King Porter ...". Why was featured so very modestly, the band really had an asset with HJ?!

DICKY WELLS & HIS ORCHESTRA Paris, July 12, 1937

Bill Dillard, Shad Collins (tp), Dicky Wells (tb), Howard Johnson (as), Sam Allen (p), Roger Chaput (g), Bill Beason (dm).
Four titles were recorded for French Swing:

1894-1 I've Found A New Baby Solo with ens 32 bars.
Solo 32 bars. (FM)

1895-1 Dinah Solo with ens 32 bars.
Solo 32 bars. (FM)

1896-1 Nobody's Blues But My Own Solo 24 bars. In ens
4 bars to coda. (SM)

1897-1 Hot Club Blues Solo 12 bars. In ens 12 bars. (SM)

Without this session, Howard Johnson would only have been a 'name', even with the few but promising contributions on the Teddy Hill sessions. However, here we get a solid shock by hearing an altosax player giving us some of the nicest altosax playing of the 1930s, not inferior to anybody!! Already in the opening ensembles of "... Baby" and "Dinah" he is wailing, and his soli are singing in a most personal way! Equally astonishing is his beautiful blues playing in the two slow medium titles, "Hot Club ..." and "... My Own". This session is already well known for being one of the most important ones for jazz trombone as such, but the occasion also seems to inspire the other participants to offer their best, and this is also to a high degree true for Howard Johnson. If he could play like this, why didn't he become famous? With a few exceptions later, his time was unfortunately already over with this European session.

CLAUDE HOPKINS & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. prob. March 4, 1940
Albert Snaer, Russell Jones, Herman Autrey (tp), Ray Hogan, Norman Greene, Bernard Archer (tb), Howard Johnson, Norman Thornton (as), Bobby Sands (ts), Benny Waters (cl, ts), Claude Hopkins (p, arr, dir), Walter Jones (g), Elmer James (b), Walter Johnson (dm).

Six titles were recorded for Ammor, one has HJ:

604 Yacht Club Swing Solo with ens 32 bars. (FM)

Almost three years have passed since the famous Paris recordings, and HJ is still in very good shape, as is clearly demonstrated by his fine solo on "... Swing".

HORACE HENDERSON & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Oct. 23, 1940
Emmett Berry, Nat Bates (tp), Harold Johnson (tp, vo), Leo Williams, Archie Brown (tb), Howard Johnson, Charles Q. Price (as), Bob Dorsey (ts, arr), Lee Pope (ts), Leonard Talley (bar), Horace Henderson (p, arr), Israel Crosby (b), Debo Mills (dm, vo), Sir Charles Thompson (arr).

Four titles were recorded for Okeh, two have altosax soli, "Smooth Sailing" seems to be by CQP but:

28958-1 You Don't Mean Me No Good Solo with orch 24 bars. (FM)

Two clean and well conceived blues choruses, HJ is still an excellent swinger in the old tradition! However, this is his last appearance, too bad, because he really was a highly competent performer on his instrument, deserving much more opportunities and recognition.

DIZZY GILLESPIE & HIS ORCHESTRA June 1946 – May 1948
Bigband personnel including Howard Johnson, John Brown (as).
Large number of recording sessions and broadcasts. Those which have been found to have HJ are listed below with proper dates:

NYC. late June 1946
Dizzy Gillespie (tp, vo), Dave Burns, Elmon Wright, Johnny Lynch, Talib Dawud (tp), Alton "Slim" Moore, Leon Comegys, Gordon Thomas (tb), Howard Johnson, John Brown (as), Ray Abrams, James Moody (ts), Sol Moore (bar), Thelonious Monk (p), Milt Jackson (vib), Ray Brown (b), Kenny Clarke (dm).
Recorded at The Spotlite Club by Jerry Newman:

'Round Midnight Solo with orch 16 bars. (S)

Lazy Mood Solo with orch 20 bars. (S)

"... Midnight" has the most beautiful slow and elaborate soli, showing that HJ is a much more important musician than we could have guessed without learning his important role in the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra! "Lazy ..." is of the same kind.

COLEMAN HAWKINS ALL STARS NYC. June 1947
Miles Davis (tp), Kai Winding (tb), Howard Johnson (as), Coleman Hawkins (ts), Hank Jones (p), Curly Russell (b), Max Roach (dm).
Four titles were recorded for Aladdin, but no altosax soli.

KENNY HAGOOD ACC. BY JOHN LEWIS' ORCHESTRA NYC. Aug. 27, 1947
Elmon Wright (tp), Howard Johnson, Ernie Henry (as), Cecil Payne (bar), John Lewis (p), Nelson Boyd (b), Kenny Clarke (dm), Kenny Hagood (vo).
Four titles were recorded for Savoy, three issued, "Goodbye To Love" has not been available, no altosax on "The Way You Look Tonight", while the solo on "Baby, I'm Coming Home" is by EH.

DIZZY GILLESPIE & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Sept. 29, 1947
Dizzy Gillespie (tp, vo), Dave Burns, Matthew McKay, Ray Orr, Elmon Wright (tp), Taswell Baird, William Shepherd (tb), Howard Johnson, John Brown (as), James Moody, Joe Gayles (ts), Cecil Payne (bar), Milt Jackson (vib), John Lewis (p), Al McKibbin (b), Joe Harris (dm), Chano Pozo (cga), Lorenzo Salan (bgo), Kenny Hagood (vo).

Recorded at concert in Carnegie Hall:

Nearness Soli with orch. (S)

Ithaca, NY. Oct. 18, 1947

Personnel as Sept. 29 except Ted Kelly (tb) replaces Baird.

Recorded at concert in Cornell University:

Nearness Soli with orch. (S)

Obviously HJ's role in the Gillespie orchestra is to play softly in the beautiful ballads, something he executes to perfection!

DIZZY GILLESPIE & HIS ORCHESTRA **Paris, Feb. 28, 1948**

Dizzy Gillespie (tp, vo), Benny Bailey, Lammar Wright, Dave Burns, Elmon Wright (tp), William Shepherd, Ted Kelly (tb), Howard Johnson, John Brown (as), Joe Gayles, George "Big Nick" Nicholas (ts), Cecil Payne (bar), John Lewis (p), Al McKibbin (b), Kenny Clarke (dm), Chano Pozo (cga), Kenny Hagood (vo).

Recorded at concert in Salle Pleyel:

'Round Midnight Solo with orch 16 bars. (S)

France (Paris?), May 29, 1948

Same/similar. Recorded at concert, broadcasted in "Club de Jazz", June 8, 1948:

'Round Midnight Solo with orch 16 bars. (S)

Additional beautiful versions of "... Midnight!

SY OLIVER & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Aug. 1957**

Charlie Shavers, Bernie Glow, Paul Webster, Ray Copeland (tp), Frank Saracco, Elmer Crumbley, Frank Rehak (tb), Howard Johnson (cl, as), George Dorsey (as), Sam "The Man" Taylor, Lowell "Count" Hastings (ts), Dave McRae (bar), Edwin Wilcox (p), Everett Barksdale (g), Georgie Duvivier (b), Joe Marshall (dm), Sy Oliver (vo, arr), Joe Bailey (vo).

Five titles were recorded for Decca, no altosax soli on "Dream Of You", "My Blue Heaven" and "I'm Walking Through Heaven With You" but:

103100 Margie Possibly solo 32 bars. (M)

103103 Rhythm Is Our Business Possibly solo 16 bars. (F)

Whether HJ or GD plays these conventional soli in a true Jimmie Lunceford atmosphere is difficult to say, but there is no particular resemblance to the former's style of the 1930s. Any suggestions?

EDDIE BONNEMERE **NYC. 1971**

Bigband personnel including Howard Johnson (as), Eddie Bonnemere (org, comp, cond).

Fifteen titles were recorded for Fortress, issued as "Missa Lactare" ("Mass Of Joy"). This seems to be far from jazz, and although not available, no altosax soli expected.

BENNY CARTER'S SWING MASTERS **NYC. July 2, 1972**

Jimmy Nottingham, Carl Warwick, Joe Thomas, Taft Jordan, Harry Edison (tp), Benny Morton, Tyree Glenn, Dicky Wells, Quentin Jackson (tb), Benny Carter, Earl Warren, Howard Johnson (as), Budd Johnson, Buddy Tate (ts), Haywood Henry (cl, bar), Teddy Wilson (p), Bernard Addison (g), Milt Hinton (b), Jo Jones (dm).

Several titles were recorded in Carnegie Hall at "Newport Jazz Festival" in New York 1972, one has HJ:

Blues For Beginners Solo 24 bars. (SM)

Two fine blues choruses here!

RED RICHARDS **NYC. Feb. 21, 1974**

Bill Dillard (tp), Howard Johnson (as), Red Richards (p, vo), Johnny Williams (b), Ronnie Cole (dm).

Three titles were recorded for RCA:

I've Got The World OAS Solo 16+8 bars, (tp) on bridge. (SM)

Ain't Misbehavin' Solo 32 bars. (SM)

Red's Blues Solo 24 bars. (S)

Three very pleasant items here! Two nice blues choruses in very slow tempo on the highlight "... Blues". Fine playing also on the two other items, although a bit more energy would have made it even better.

PANAMA FRANCIS & HIS SAVOY SULTANS **Paris, Jan. 31, 1979**
Francis Williams, Irving Stokes (tp), Norris Turney (cl, as), Howard Johnson (as), George Kelly (ts, arr), Red Richards (p), John Smith (g), Bill Pemberton (b), Panama Francis (dm).

Nine titles were recorded for Black & Blue, issued as "Gettin' In The Groove", three have HJ:

Song Of The Islands	Solo 32 bars (1 st (as)-solo). (M)
Frenzy	Soli 32 and 8 bars. (F)
Boats	Solo 48 bars to coda. (FM)

This session has highly enjoyable mainstream jazz with in general very nice soloing by all participants and swinging controlled but enthusiastic by the famous drummer. It is a pleasure to hear HJ again (together with Turney whose style is quite similar but can be identified by a closer resemblance to Hodges). Of course time has taken its toll and occasionally there are problems, like in the third eights of "... Islands", but on "Frenzy" he takes the high tempo with utmost elegance. On "Boats", a blues, the liner notes says: ... finally Howard on alto, whose fresh inspiration is to be admired. This septuagenarian plays with the spirit and spontaneity of a young man".

Paris, Feb. 11, 1979

Same plus Chuck Green (tap-dancing-"Take The A Train").
Nine titles, three have HJ:

Shipyard Social Function	Solo 24 bars (1 st (as)-solo). (FM)
Norfolk Ferry	Solo 36 bars. (F)
Looney	Solo 32 bars. (FM)

Almost two weeks later with the same personnel and same joy and quality. HJ's three altosax soli are all quite impressive and elegant, and note as an example how competently he handles the high tempo of "... Ferry". One should not however forget Turney who also is a remarkable mainstream altosax player and slightly more featured than HJ.

GEORGE KELLY **Nice, France, July 9&10, 1979**
Francis Williams, Irving Stokes (tp), Bobby Smith, Howard Johnson (as), George Kelly (ts, arr), Red Richards (p), John Smith (g), Bill Pemberton (b), Panama Francis (dm).

Six titles were recorded for Black&Blue, one has HJ:

D. T. Blues	Solo 36 bars. (M)
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Fine and swinging sessions here! HJ however only gets one solo opportunity, but his three blues choruses are nice.

PANAMA FRANCIS & HIS SAVOY SULTANS **NYC. 1982**
Francis Williams, Irving Stokes (tp), Gene Ghee (sop, as), Howard Johnson (as), George Kelly (ts, arr), Red Richards (p), John Smith (g), Bill Pemberton (b), Panama Francis (dm), Julia Steele (vo), Billy VerPlanck (arr).
Ten titles were recorded for Stash, issued as "Grooving", five have altosax soli but only two by HJ:

In A Mellotone	Break to solo 32 bars. (M)
Panama	Solo with orch 16 bars. (FM)

This is probably the last time HJ's altosax can be heard, and on "... Mellotone" he plays a nicely constructed solo, a fine farewell. "Panama" is more ordinary.

JULIA STEELE **NYC. prob. early-mid 1980s**
Personnel is based on Panama Francis & His Savoy Sultans above with others added. Julia Steele (vo).
Ten titles were recorded for Dery, but no HJ.

No further recording sessions.