

Review in Clarinet Magazine
by Thomas W. Jacobsen
March 2007

“The clarinet was always my first love, then the alto saxophone,” Dick Johnson says. That’s an interesting statement since Johnson was heard on alto rather more than clarinet — on record, at least — until about 1980. It was at that time that his first recordings on the Concord label began to appear and were heard by Artie Shaw, leading to the latter’s high praise of Johnson’s clarinet playing. Soon thereafter Shaw named the clarinetist to lead his re-formed orchestra. And the rest is history.

Dick Johnson is no stranger to big bands, having worked with them both as a sideman and as a leader since the early ‘50s. So it is not surprising to find him in the context of this recording, backed by an excellent 17-piece outfit (plus two guests). It should be noted, however, that this is not the Artie Shaw Orchestra— though many of the band members have played at one time or another with that organization as well. It is a superbly swinging ensemble, revealing both tight section work and outstanding individual soloists. The arrangements by Bob Freedman (mostly) and Jay Brandford are fresh and tasteful.

But of course, it is Johnson who is the star of this show. He is a featured soloist throughout, revealing himself to be a product of his generation of jazz clarinet players, that is, those who grew up in the Swing Era and matured as the Bop Era emerged. He is clearly comfortable with both styles of playing and has the chops to execute well in both. At the same time, he shows himself to be a wonderful ballad player and, as the final track clearly demonstrates, still a fierce burner. There are hints here and there of Shaw, DeFranco and even Eddie Daniels, but Johnson’s sound is definitely his own.

This is big-band music at its finest, designed to showcase the fine clarinet playing of Mr. Johnson. His selection of tunes fits the bill perfectly: a mix of attractive standards, a couple of unexpected numbers for big band, and a couple of his own originals. There are, of course, the expected bows to Artie Shaw. Freedman’s arrangement of the first track, “In the Still of the Night,” opens with a clever reference to the Gramercy Five rather than to Shaw’s big band. “Grabtown Grapple” is another Gramercy Five number, and Brandford’s arrangement of it is said to be very similar to that played by the Shaw Legacy Band. Freedman’s updated arrangement of the Shaw orchestra’s 1940 classic “Star Dust” has several novel twists. Among them is the verse opening rather than the trumpet solo made famous by Billy Butterfield. Then follows the trumpet solo (played here by longtime Johnson friend and partner, Lou Colombo). Shaw’s classic solo should be next, but in this case there is an orchestrated version of it with Johnson’s clarinet riding above the sax section. Then comes Doug Elliott’s trombone solo, and so on out — an altogether refreshing treatment of one of the Swing Era’s true evergreens.

But this recording is much more than Artie revisited. It reveals Johnson as a talented and committed clarinetist despite times in the past when he seemed (to me, at least) more interested in showing off his considerable skills as a multi-instrumentalist.

It is difficult for me to believe that Dick Johnson celebrated his 81st birthday last December. He answers, when people ask him when he’s going to retire, “when it’s time.” Since he still plays so well and continues to front the Artie Shaw Orchestra, he concludes, “it’s not time yet!” This wonderful recording is solid evidence to justify his conclusion. For all who love the clarinet and the big band, this album is for you.