

Sonya Jason

saxophonist

*"She's a hundred pounds of rompin' stompin' sax.
She's so hot her horn smokes."*

– Jan Holland for The Los Angeles Arts and Entertainment Magazine
Photos by Nano



There is no doubt jazz has been a man's world for sometime. Be it due to a lack of credible women musicians or outright bigotry we may never know, but the tide is certainly turning toward more women being accepted into the jazz realm.

The biggest gains for women have been in the smooth and contemporary jazz arena. The imminently talented Sonya Jason is part of the new woman instrumentalist insurgence. A musically adept saxophonist, she is able to play with the verve and panache equal to smooth jazz's Walter Beasley, as she does on *Tigress*, yet also able to turn standards into vehicles of straight-ahead emotional singularity, as on *The Supper Club*.

Originally born in Wayne, Nebraska, she was playing piano by the age of four. At the age of ten she took up the saxophone. When the family moved to the Phoenix area she joined the Apollo High School band, considered at the time, to be Arizona's leading jazz band. Two years of liberal arts study at Mills College in Oakland, and the experience of playing with the UC Berkeley big bands, led her to win the revered Phil Woods Scholarship at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. A *summa cum laude* graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Performance and Arranging, she originally moved back to Phoenix following graduation, then paid her dues in the Los Angeles music scene. Today, Jason makes her home in the San Francisco Bay area, runs a thriving teaching studio, is offered more gigs than she can ever possibly accept, leads a number of jazz workshops every year and truly lives the life of a working musician.

With three recordings as a solo artist under her belt, Jason has performed on recordings with Sheila E., the Yellowjacket's bassist Jimmy Haslip, Pete Escovedo, Alphonso Johnson, Vinnie Colaiuta, Bill Cunliffe, Joyce Cooling, Grant Geissman and John Beasley to name only a few. Live she has appeared in more than 4,000 concerts with artists like The Brothers Johnson, Ray Anthony, Narada Michael Walden, Debbie Reynolds, Barry Manilow, Shirley MacClaine, Mary Tyler Moore, Dick Van Dyke and Nelson Braxton of the Braxton Brothers. In addition, Jason has appeared at more than 50 music festivals including the Golden Jubilee International Jazz Festival in Bangkok where she played for the King of Thailand.

As impressive as all of this is, when you note all of the great artists she's been paired with as the opening act you start to see how she is perceived within the musical community. Included in this list are Earth Wind and Fire, Ramsey Lewis, Smokey Robinson, Natalie Cole, Lionel Hampton, Lou Rawls, Tom Scott, Stanley Clarke/George Duke Project, Diane Schuur, Spyro Gyra, David Sanborn, Tower of Power, Jeff Lorber, Bobby Caldwell, and on and on and on. Just one of her many honors was being asked, in 2005, by the Grammy Foundation to perform in Los Angeles with the Montclair Women's Big Band, Monica Mancini, Mindi Abair, and as opening act for Diane Schuur in "Mavericks of Music: Celebrating the Contributions of Trailblazing Women."

If this was all you were to know of Jason you'd know she's accomplished, but when Phil Woods, an artist for whom giving compliments comes only once in a blue moon, said of Jason, "The lady can play! Emotion and fire well-tempered by a sensitive, warm approach. And she's funky as hell," well, you know the lady is special.

– *Biography by Thomas Erdmann for Saxophone Journal*



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