



## Jessica Johnson

### NOTHING BUT BLUE SKY

www.jessicajohnsononline.com

*Till It Happens To You; Summertime; Blue Skies; Ordinary People; All Because Of You; I Believe In You And Me; You And I; I've Got It Bad; Yesterday's Rain; Cry Me A River; Broken Wings; Song For You.*

**PERSONNEL:** Jessica Johnson, vocals; Tom Tomasello, piano, bass, drums; Joel Wilson, bass; Frank Cavazos, drums.

By Clive Griffin

Jessica Johnson started singing and appearing on stage early in her life. If you go to her website, you'll see an impressive, and long list of professional sports events—baseball, football, hockey games and so forth—at which this 20 year old has already sung the National anthem. The melodic range of the National Anthem is, of course, truly an ideal vehicle for a singer to show off his/her vocal chops; and the well-known melody offers ample opportunity for embellishment. With that history and the sound at hand, it is evident that Ms. Johnson has been influenced by the melismatic stylings that are so prevalent in R&B and pop vocal performances, including renditions of “The Star Spangled Banner.”

*Till It Happens To You* is the debut album by Jessica Johnson. Produced and arranged by her keyboardist Tom Tomasello, the album features twelve tracks including originals and standards, that are each three to four minutes in length. The first two songs, including the title track, an original, “Till It Happens To You” and Gershwin’s “Summertime” are both stylistically down-tempo, backbeat, R&B groove-styled arrangements. Johnson’s vocal talents are abundantly clear. She sings with centered intonation, clearly articulates lyrics, and has a well-supported, rich sound. Her affinity for R&B and pop music shines through from one end of the recording to the other. Her natural energy for the expression of this style is clear. Indeed, while this is released as a jazz album, the overall flavor of this debut release sounds like its roots are more firmly planted in the R&B and pop universe.

“Blue Skies” is approached with a straight-ahead swing-groove. Johnson offers an enjoyable rendering of the lyrics. Her sound is once again rich, deep, attractive. She also scats very briefly after Tomasello’s piano solo. While her scat offering was simple, it shows promise, especially given the appealing nature of her voice. Her continuing study and assimilation of the approaches of Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Betty Carter and others who have contributed to this grand tradition, would go a long way toward

helping her realize her dreams in these clearly heartfelt pursuits. It is evident that Tomasello is a competent pianist, with a good grasp of harmony. His solo while very much musically correct, suggests that his approach to jazz improvisation is adequate and still developing. Of course, on the other hand, what dedicated musician isn’t constantly working to improve his or her skills?

Johnson offers a magnificent rubato rendition of Duke Ellington’s “I Got It Bad” - which was for me the most impressive track on the album. Johnson’s sensuous, after-midnight, pop ballad performance of “I Believe In You and Me” is stunning as well.

The album recording, the balance and audio fidelity are commensurate with industry standards. It would have been helpful for listeners, however, and a gesture of common courtesy to both the well-known composers (Ellington, Berlin, Gershwin) and the emerging ones who contributed to this project, to identify who they are on the album packaging.

Jessica Johnson’s youthful enthusiasm is written all over this release—in the smiling photos of her that adorn the printed materials and the jewel box packaging, and in her inspired vocals. With her energy, there is clearly a lot more to come from Jessica Johnson.



## Diane Hoffman

### MY LITTLE FRENCH DANCER

www.dianehoffman.org

*Gone With The Wind; Well You Needn't; Close Enough For Love; When Love Was All We Had; Blackberry Winter; You're My Thrill; Sunday In New York; Two Years Of Torture; Yellow Days; Farewell Noelle; When Did You Leave Heaven.*

**PERSONNEL:** Diane Hoffman, vocals; Oliver Von Essen, piano, organ; Ulysses Owens, drums; Peter Martin Weiss, bass; John Hart, guitar; Don Militello, Fender Rhodes; Jerry Weldon, tenor sax.

By Winthrop Bedford

The opening several measures of the first track on Diane Hoffman’s new album release, *My Little French Dancer*, provide all the evidence necessary to understand that what we are about to hear is an impressive swinging recording. Her sound and delivery are all at once robust, full, confident and sensual. Performed as an up-tempo samba, the groove locks right in. She floats effortlessly over the light and airy accompaniment. Hoffman is surrounded by a host of impressive soloists—including guitarist John Hart, and tenor saxophonist Jerry Weldon. Weldon is featured on this first track and delivers a delightful solo to complement her vocals.

Pianist Von Essen is a superb accompanist, with impressive technique. If there is one criticism at all about this entire album, it is Von Essen’s solos on the up-tempo pieces. His improvised solo excursions are overflowing with harmonic mastery and impressive technical skills—and he employs those to the extent that he leaves very little space, and ultimately is out of sync with the simple purity of the groove, which bassist Martin and drummer Owens maintain regardless.

Bassist Peter Martin Weiss opens Monk’s “Well You Needn’t” all alone. It’s a relaxed swing tempo. Hoffman jumps in and it’s just the two of them, gently pushing the music with her magnificent voice and his big bass sound. The band follows.

John Hart gets a brief moment to shine on the Johnny Mandel composition, “Close Enough For Love.” They take the tempo back up on this one, returning to the samba groove of the opener. Later in the album, on “You’re My Thrill,” another up-tempo samba, Hart solos more extensively, dealing the full-Monte.

Hoffman rolls out the quiet in her lush rendition of the ballad “When Love Was All We Had.” At the beginning, she enters softly, accompanied only by Von Essen’s piano. Bassist Martin and drummer Owens, with brushes, enter as the music evolves into tempo. Von Essen offers apropos responses to Hoffman’s vocals.

As a change of pace, Hoffman performs “Blackberry Winter” by Alec Wilder and Loonis McGlohon. Underscored by a pop ballad, straight 8th-note groove, Hoffman is in fine form. As on the other tracks on the album she is consistent in many respects. Her intonation is perfect. She delivers the music with emotion and great command of the language and melody. She uses vibrato and bends notes with superb taste, pointing to her depth of experience with this music. At certain moments, I heard a glimpse of Carmen McRae—but Hoffman clearly has her own voice. Her articulation is bell-clear and consistent, and she is lithe as she dances through the various styles and tempos embodied in the songs on *My Little French Dancer*.

“Sunday In New York” is a medium groove featuring the traditional organ trio sound. Von Essen does an admirable job supporting Hoffman. Weldon turns in a swinging solo. And, Von Essen’s solo is right in the pocket here, by comparison to his piano work.

Hart delivers a beautiful introduction to the Bossa-Nova styled “Yellow Days.” Hoffman sounds happy and locks-in with this solid groove. Von Essen offers a delightfully lyrical solo.

By way of background, Diane Hoffman is not only an experienced vocalist, but an accomplished painter as well. Her work has been displayed in an array of solo exhibits. She grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the California College of Arts—while playing guitar and singing.

The eleven tracks on *My Little French Dancer* provide a bit under an hour of memorable, toe-tapping, finger-snapping mainstream jazz, driven by the compelling vocals of Diane Hoffman.