

# Up-and-coming singer Jessica Johnson is winning over South Bay audiences

By Andrew Gilbert  
for the Mercury News

Posted: 07/23/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 07/24/2009 04:30:41 PM PDT

San Jose native Jessica Johnson still lives in the house where she grew up, "between [Willow Glen](#), Almaden and Campbell, on the border of everything," the 21-year-old vocalist says.

On the border of everything is a pretty apt description of her music, too. While Johnson makes her musical home in jazz, her taste is broad and populist, which is one reason she's become a ubiquitous [South Bay](#) presence. With her big, warm voice, well-honed sense of drama and ingenuous stage presence, she's a singer who wears her feelings on her sleeve.

"All the songs I've ever sung are songs that I love," Johnson says. "It doesn't matter what the genre is — jazz, country, R&B or pop — it's got to have a lyric that touches me. A lot of those old classic songs from 1920 through the '50s have really beautiful stories."

Johnson's need to win over an audience has turned her into the South Bay's singer for every occasion, a performer capable of transforming a prosaic gig, like opening a hockey game, into a memorable event. She can add a jolt of romance to a restaurant, and turn a nightclub into a smoldering, soul-drenched hothouse.

In a fairly typical week for Johnson, she performs on Saturday at Santana Row's Park Valencia, and sings the national anthem at the Bank of the West Tennis Classic at Stanford University next Sunday afternoon. She performs at Citrus Restaurant in Hotel Valencia on Aug. 4 as part of San Jose Jazz's Flavors of Jazz

Advertisement



FREE Pillow  
CLICK HERE!

Randy Mancini  
President

Tax Free  
Mattress

Click photo to enlarge



Jessica Johnson. photo by Dan Kutler.

## Find things to do

- ◉ [Browse our event listings](#)
- ◉ [Restaurant listings](#)
- ◉ [Movie listings](#) | [Movie theaters](#)
- ◉ [Concert listings](#)
- ◉ [Performing arts listings](#)

series, and returns to the Hotel De Anza on Aug. 8 for her monthly second-Saturday gig at the Hedley Club Lounge.

Jazz/cabaret singer Wesla Whitfield has often talked about how the dues she paid as a singing waitress proved invaluable in learning how to gauge an audience's reaction to a song. Johnson describes her childhood experience performing in vocal competitions as similarly enlightening.



"You have to pick songs that win the crowd," she says. "The song has to have something that grabs you, a powerful moment."

Hollywood musicals inspired Johnson to start singing as a child, and by the time she was attending Castillero Middle School she was soaking up jazz, listening to [Billie Holiday](#), [Ella Fitzgerald](#) and [Sarah Vaughan](#). She cites the late, bluesy singer-songwriter Eva Cassidy as her favorite vocalist.

Johnson attended a session of the jazz camp run by San Jose Jazz in her sophomore year at [Lincoln High](#), but she's mostly honed her style through a rigorous performing schedule. Very much a work in progress, she's still integrating her various interests and influences, particularly her love of [country music](#), which is filtering into her song writing.

"I love the old twangy stuff, which reminds me of my grandpa," Johnson says. "But I mostly listen to the radio, people like [Rascal Flatts](#), [Miranda Lambert](#) and [Keith Urban](#). It's so relatable. (On) every single song I totally know what they're talking about. I have sung a couple of country songs in my set, but they haven't gone over well, I think because of how we arranged them."

Johnson released her first album in 2007, "Till It Happens to You," featuring arrangements by her longtime pianist and music director Tom Tomasello. An impressive debut, particularly for a 19-year-old, the album features her original songs and R&B-tinged interpretations of standards like "Blue Skies," "Summertime" and "Cry Me a River."

She's gathering material for her second album, but Johnson's plate is overflowing. After studying business and music at [San Jose State University](#), she's considering a new major. And she works as an itinerant fitness instructor for Club One, teaching classes around the South Bay, from Apple and eBay to the [Jewish Community Center](#) of Silicon Valley.

Considering that her parents met while dancing at the 1821 Club, an old disco in Sunnyvale, Johnson's twin passions for music and movement make sense. Her Panamanian-born father can often be seen at her gigs, ready to start dancing whenever the tempo picks up. And her mother keeps all the moving pieces in Johnson's career meshing smoothly, managing her schedule and accompanists. She also serves as an advance guard, prying open venue doors that Johnson has proved remarkably successful at keeping open.

Johnson says of her mom, "She's the most optimistic, happy lady in the world. She's worked a lot with concert promoter Matt Beasley, who's given her a lot of tips. She'll call places and convince them to book me. A lot of times people don't want to give you a chance. But I know once they hear me they'll want me back."

## Jessica Johnson

**When:** 7-9 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Park Valencia (near Maggiano's Little Italy) at Santana Row, Winchester and Stevens Creek boulevards, San Jose

**Admission:** Free, 408-551-4611, [www.jessicajohnsononline.com](http://www.jessicajohnsononline.com)

**Also:** 6 p.m. Aug. 4, Citrus Restaurant in Hotel Valencia, 355 Santana Row, no cover charge, 408-423-5400, [www.jessicajohnsononline.com](http://www.jessicajohnsononline.com)