



H. Johnson Has a Cold

THE LEGENDARY RADIO HOST of “Jazz Classics” on WABE 90.1 FM coughs midsentence: “Excuse me, I have a slight cold.” Unlike Frank Sinatra, to whom a young Herman Johnson once said, at the end of a long night bussing tables in New Jersey, “I’ll wait till you finish being a big shot”—earning the kid a \$60 tip for his “chutzpah”—the sniffles don’t sour H. This year marks Johnson’s thirtieth at the station, where the seventy-one-year-old is the humble, baritone arbiter of jazz sounds between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. on Saturdays. Visit him at his day job, running M&H Gifts & Video, located at 3024-B MLK Drive. There you’ll find some of the wonderfully obscure recordings he plays on his show. In an interview with **Charles Bethea**, Johnson reflected on his career:

» I was a little boy, and I remember Count Basie would come to the house. We had an old grand piano, and he would play there. My mother wanted me to stay and listen to him and learn. But I’d rather play baseball. When you’re enmeshed in something, you get used to hearing it. So I got used to hearing that jazz.

» I haven’t gone by Herman since high school. I was watching some jazz show in an auditorium and they just gave the first letter of each musician’s name, and I liked the way it sounded.

» I’m a very lucky person. I can pick and choose what I play and present it any way I want to. And for some strange reason it works, and people support it.

» There’s a method to my madness. I might play Barbra Streisand—not a jazz singer—and that’s because it’s fantastic, it’s beautiful. And then I might turn around and play “Stella by Starlight” by a jazz pianist named Hampton Hawes. It doesn’t take away from the jazz feeling. I’ll play some Frank Sinatra. He swings! My program isn’t all for diehard jazz musicians.

» Rap doesn’t tell a story for me, personally.

» This is what a jazz master does: He takes a song and makes it his own.

» It’s getting lonesome out here.

INDIE MUSIC STORES

LAST OCTOBER, Eric Levin moved Criminal Records, the independent music store he founded almost twenty years ago, to a roomy space on Euclid Avenue in the heart of Little Five Points. More than doubling his square footage was a risk; the economy was (and is) tanking, and Levin makes his living in a business that, as observers point out, is on borrowed time as music lovers eschew CDs for downloads, legal or otherwise.



That perception rankles Levin, who is also president and founder of the Alliance of Independent Media Stores. “We were treated as horse-and-buggy dealers,” he says. “The perception that we were on the verge of extinction was insulting.”

Levin is no Pollyanna. Record shops are closing all the time, with plenty of local victims—Eat More Records, Ear Wax, Vibes. But others, Levin says, are doing just fine, diversifying their inventory (Levin stocks tons of comics and sells as much vinyl now as he does CDs) and hiring a staff that knows the difference between Deerhoof and Deerhunter. Last April, along with other AIMS members nationwide, Criminal hosted the first annual Record Store Day, hosting bands, giving out free stuff, and reminding shoppers that there are alternatives to Best Buy. Levin saw his best one-day sales ever. This year’s Record Store Day is Saturday, April 18. Go to criminal.com or recordstoreday.com. —STEVE FENNESSY

NEW RELEASES BY LOCAL ARTISTS



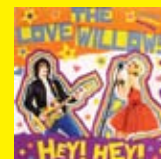
Michelle Malone
Debris
(SBS Records)

Listen to this blues rocker’s tenth album—especially “Undertow,” full of slide guitars, raspy vocals, and bitter lyrics—and ask yourself again why Sheryl Crow hit it big and Malone hasn’t. There’s no justice. Malone celebrates the CD’s release with two shows on April 4 at Eddie’s Attic.



The Coathangers
Scramble
(Suicide Squeeze)

Formed when they shared a ride to an anti-Bush rally two years ago, this Atlanta post-punk quartet is poised to hit the road in support of their second album, full of in-your-face two-minute gems that ask to be taken as seriously as these ladies take themselves—as in, not too seriously.



The Love Willows
Hey! Hey!
(Decca)

If your daughters are growing out of Hannah Montana, they might find solace in this duo’s peppy and utterly unironic debut. For bubblegum pop about shoes and boys, look no further.

H. JOHNSON: COURTESY OF WABE

» For the full interview with H. Johnson, go to atlantamagazine.com.