

# Playing homage to a Chicago giant: Johnny Griffin

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**E**very jazz lover has a favorite tenor saxophonist, especially in Chicago, a universally admired tenor town where the instrument seems to embody the rough-and-tumble character of the city itself.

To many listeners, Sonny Rollins stands as the undisputed champion of the tenor horn. To others, it's Coleman Hawkins, beloved for his immortal, profoundly expressive recording of "Body and Soul." Or Gene Ammons, with that soulful, larger-than-life, deep-blues sound.

For me, though, it always will be Johnny Griffin, whose seemingly superhuman virtuosity in tenor showpieces and exquisitely ornate phrase-making in ballads made him the greatest tenor saxophonist I ever heard live. To behold Griffin at work was to hear the instrument achieving feats one had not thought possible before.

Anyone similarly smitten by Griffin's art will look forward to Chicago saxophonist Juli Wood's forthcoming tribute to him at the Jazz Showcase next Tuesday. For it will rekindle memories of those startling performances Griffin turned in at the Showcase and elsewhere, whenever he returned to the United States from the home he'd made for himself in France in the 1960s.

Griffin never received a fraction of the fame he deserved in the United States, in part because of his ex-pat status, but his art earned the admiration of connoisseurs everywhere, including Wood.

"I like that they called him Little Giant," says Wood, referencing a musician who stood just 5 feet, 5 inches tall but sounded bigger, sharper, faster and brighter than most.

"He was pretty short of stature, but his playing was so big and wonderful – that big Chicago tenor sound. ... And he could just whip off any kind of lick he wanted to."

Beyond Griffin's outsize talent, he was fortunate to have learned his art in one of the best places possible: DuSable High School, the musical hothouse at 49th Street and Wabash Avenue that launched no less than Nat "King" Cole, Johnny Hartman, Dorothy Donegan, Von Freeman, the aforementioned Ammons and scores more. The legendary Capt. Walter Dyett trained generations there, and Wood believes Dyett's insistence that his students attain a classical level of virtuosity helps explain why so many jazz masters came out of the school, none more technically brilliant than Griffin.

The saxophonist understood how fortunate he was to have studied music at DuSable under Dyett, who made extraordinary demands of his students.

"People don't realize how important it is having a foundation like the one I got there," Griffin told me in 1993, citing Dyett's inspiration. "He was one hell of a musician. He knew all the instruments, but he also was a strong man, a disciplinarian, a father figure. He would take no nonsense at all, he'd short-shrift anything disturbing in class.

"But that was good for the kids, because it gave them something, it gave them some support. Dyett taught dignity and honesty and, on top of that, music."

In Griffin's case, those lessons took hold deeply, the saxophonist hired at age 17 to go on the road with Lionel Hampton's powerhouse big band. Griffin quickly emerged a star attraction in the organization, throwing off thunderbolts opposite tenor master Arnett Cobb in "Flying Home" (a Hampton band signature that had made a star of another young tenor whiz, Illinois Jacquet).

By the late 1940s, Griffin had moved to New York to soak up the bracing new sound called bebop, a harmonically challenging, technically daunting idiom he was uniquely equipped to address. He learned from some of the originators of the music, among them trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and pianists Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell and Elmo Hope.

"Elmo, Bud and Thelonious really were like three brothers to me," Griffin told me, "and whenever I wasn't working, I'd just hang with them in New York, listening, studying.

"That was my university training, staying around those three musicians. Because I didn't want to sound like any other musician on tenor saxophone, so I spent my time around those guys and around Dizzy, who adopted me, and (trumpeters) Kenny Dorham and Fats Navarro and, later on, Clifford Brown.

"They were the ones who gave me a chance to peep at them and ask questions. That music was so tough that sometimes it would take me four or five months to understand something they were telling me about. And then it suddenly would hit me: 'Oh, that's how those (chord) changes work.'"

Griffin settled in France in 1963, deciding – like many American jazz musicians of the era – that the climate for the music and for its African-American practitioners was far more hospitable than back home in the States. When Griffin began touring regularly again in the U.S. in the 1970s, listeners were caught off guard by the stature and ferocity of his playing.

Chicagoan Wood, who had moved to the city from her native Wisconsin in 1996, similarly was struck by the force and technical acuity of Griffin's performances at the Showcase and began studying his work assiduously. She discovered that he was as compelling with a pen as with a horn, having written tunes such as the showpiece "Hot Saki" and the more melodic "Soft and Furry," many of which she brought into her repertoire.

Her fascination with Griffin and other Chicago tenors – such as Ammons, Clifford Jordan and Eddie Harris – prompted her last year to form a band she titled Chicago Calling (named for another Griffin tune). That's the group that will play music of both Griffin and Ammons at the Showcase next week, Wood joined by three comparably formidable musicians: bassist Harrison Bankhead, drummer Avreeayl Ra and pianist Leandro Lopez Varady.

All of which begs a question: How was Wood treated when she came to Chicago as a woman plunging into the macho world of jazz tenordom?

"Sometimes people my own age or younger were a little bit, 'Eh, a woman, we want to work with our buddies that we're used to,'" she says. "It was the older veterans that took me in. Like (pianists) Earma Thompson and Jodie Christian –

they were nice and offered me gigs."

Now, adds Wood, few make a fuss over gender: "If you can play, they're really just welcoming."

So Wood finds herself increasingly busy in her adopted hometown, carrying forward the legacy of Griffin, perhaps the greatest tenor saxophonist this town ever produced.

Juli Wood's Chicago Calling plays at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. April 28 at the Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Court; free admission; 312-360-0234 or [jazzshowcase.com](http://jazzshowcase.com).

### **Chicago Jazz Philharmonic**

Orbert Davis' distinctive ensemble changes size and shape to suit the occasion, and this time the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble will collaborate with Trio Globo in a program titled "Four Corners of the World." The repertoire will include a new version of Dvorak's "New World" Symphony. Trio Globo is staffed by harmonic whiz Howard Levy, cellist Eugene Friesen and percussionist Glen Velez.

The concerts will take start at 8 p.m. Friday at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie; \$32-\$62; 847-673-6300 or [northshorecenter.org](http://northshorecenter.org). Also 3 p.m. Sunday at the Beverly Arts Center, 2407 W. 111th St.; \$15-\$35; 773-445-3838 or [beverlyartcenter.org](http://beverlyartcenter.org).

For more information, visit [chicagojazzphilharmonic.org](http://chicagojazzphilharmonic.org).

"Portraits in Jazz": Howard Reich's e-book collects his exclusive interviews with Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald and others, as well as profiles of early masters such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. Get "Portraits in Jazz" at [chicagotribune.com/ebooks](http://chicagotribune.com/ebooks).

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