

Janice-Marie Johnson of A Taste of Honey

“Still Oozing Boogie,” September 2000

By E.E. Bradman

“I’m practicing my heart out every second I have, because I’m enjoying this.”

Watching Janice-Marie Johnson perform may make you tired. In between working both ends of the stage—singing, dancing, and playing bass—she simultaneously manages an onstage costume change while talking to the audience and playing acoustic guitar, one foot on a volume pedal. Although she’s currently on tour to support a new album, you can bet that at some point in the show she’ll launch into the chorused bass intro and disco funk riff of A Taste Of Honey’s “Boogie Oogie Oogie,” the #1 R&B and pop hit that gave her a 1978 Grammy.

Johnson, a singer since age ten, picked up bass while she was a business major in 1971. Although she took private lessons at L.A. City College, she credits bassist/keyboardist Perry Kibble with teaching her theory basics. “He would run over scales, reading charts and intervals. He would say, ‘Learn your neck—don’t be askin’ me.’” She also listened to plenty of Willie Weeks, got pointers from Rufus’s Bobby Watson, and hung out with Charles Meeks, Chuck Mangione’s bassist. “Two weeks after I started learning from Perry, I was working nightclubs, playing stuff like ‘Let’s Stay Together’ and the Isley Brothers’ ‘It’s Your Thang.’ I wasn’t making any money, but I was gigging. I was making all kinds of mistakes, but the musicians would encourage me—‘Keep on going, try it again!’”

On one of these gigs Johnson, faced with an audience of apathetic military personnel, improvised the words to “Boogie Oogie Oogie.” The groove came later, co-written with Kibble, and the bass intro was a chance recording of Johnson warming up. The buzz

around the band—led by two women who sang, danced, and played their instruments well—earned them a meeting with Capitol producer Larkin Arnold, who was still skeptical of Johnson’s instrumental skills. “We weren’t the greatest musicians, but I was doing my thang. I was holding my own, and we were already playing all our songs live.” *A Taste of Honey*, released in 1978, eventually sold more than a million copies; two subsequent albums also produced successful singles, but most of the key members had left by 1983. (*A Taste of Honey* and its follow-up, *Twice As Sweet*, have been re-released on Capitol/EMI.)

As one-half of A Taste Of Honey’s front line, Johnson gained valuable experience singing and playing. “I don’t know any other way, because I was singing before I was playing. My concentration always had to be completely split. When you’re singing lead and playing a completely different line, it can be complicated. But it’s like driving a stick—you get used to it,” says the 46-year-old. “And I keep that in mind when I record, too—if I record something I can’t play and sing, I’m in trouble.”

Don Patterson, who has played bass with Bob James and Kirk Whalum, serves as Johnson’s musical director. He also doubles her lines on a Yamaha KX5 keyboard and plays bass when she switches to acoustic guitar for two songs each night. “She’s great to work with,” he says. “The songs pretty much play themselves. Most bass players don’t sing and play like she does, and she has choreography, too! It’s hard enough to sing harmonies and play bass.”

Johnson’s Nady Platinum 802 UHF wireless has two channels, one for each SWR SM-400/Goliath 4x10 setup at stage right and stage left. “I’m all over the place, and if the bass is on only one side, I hear it only when I’m on that side. I wouldn’t know how to stay in one place—I figure those people over there paid their money, too, so let me go over here.” Johnson’s primary basses—stock ’62 and modified ’75 Jazzes—have recently been retired in favor of an Andreas Basking Fin 5-string (www.andreasguitars.at), and she likes the change. “You know I must love this new bass to put down my Fenders!”

she laughs. “What I like about the Jazz Basses is the way the necks feel in my hands. It was important to find a 5-string with a slim neck that wasn’t too heavy. I’m wearing high-heel shoes and moving around, so if I’m carrying 20 pounds on my back, I’m paying the price. This bass is perfect—it’s got a great design, it’s got bottom end, and it’s bright when I need it to be.” Throughout her show, Johnson uses a Boss CE5 Chorus Ensemble, a Boss oC-2 Octave, a DOD X53 Classic Tube Overdrive, and a Boss FV volume pedal. She’s also planning to get re-acquainted with her old plywood Kay upright.

Ever the performer, Johnson relishes being back in the spotlight after stints as a limo driver, a copyright paralegal, and a toy designer. Royalties from national commercials for Coke, Burger King, and Frito-Lay and sampling of her catalog by hip-hop artists have enabled Johnson to release a new album, *Hiatus of the Heart*, on her own label, Tastebuds Records. “Thank God I own 100% of my publishing,” she says.

So how does she feel about being labeled as the “Boogie Oogie Oogie” woman? “I understand that. People who come to see me are going to hear the new stuff right before they hear ‘Boogie.’ They’re going to be listening for ‘Boogie,’ and I don’t worry about that. I love playing that song. Right now, I’m practicing my heart out every second I have, because I’m enjoying this. I’m better than ever, and I want to be better than this—and the only way to do that is to put the time in. So I’m practicing my songs and trying to grow.”

“Listen To My Bass Play . . .”

“Boogie Oogie Oogie” is much more than its signature lick. The chorused intro—recorded by chance while Janice-Marie was warming up in the studio—moves upward along the *G* string (Ex. 1). Do it right by letting the *G*-string notes ring as you bounce off the open *D*'s. For most of the song, the signature riff (Ex. 2) keeps things moving. (Fingerstyle only, please—no thumps and pops.) Remarking on the *A* in bar 3, Johnson says, “Most bass players make it harder than they have to—they think that’s a *Bb*. It’s just an *A*.”

On “Vamos a Boogie Oogie” (*Hiatus of the Heart*) Janice-Marie uses the same line over a different feel. During the chorus (Ex. 3) she approaches each chord’s root chromatically—sometimes from above, sometimes from below—before popping that *C* trill on the *G*-string.

These days, Janice-Marie performs a 5-string update called “Shock Rock Boogie 2000” (Ex. 4) that gives the classic line a harder though still disco-based rhythm. *Viva la Boogie!*