

Ambitious musician makes his mark locally

By Ron Wynn
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Alto saxophonist Joe Johnson has made his mark in Nashville's music community on two levels. He's a highly successful, fine soloist and session player, but he's also a busy producer and label owner. The prolific Johnson, who'll be appearing Saturday night at Café 123, came to Nashville in 1986 from Memphis to study music at Tennessee State University and liked things so much he decided to settle here permanently.

"It was either going to be Los Angeles, New York or Nashville for me in terms of the music business," Johnson said. "Once I got to TSU and got really into things, Nashville became really comfortable and a true second home." Since his graduation in 1990, Johnson has amassed an impressive list of accomplishments that blend both jingle and commercial work with live dates and recording sessions. He's done, by his count, nearly 350 commercial and jingle dates and has worked with such clients as Ford Motor Company and Taco Bell. He's been opening act on shows with Vanessa

Joe Johnson will be performing Saturday night at Café 123, 123 12th Avenue South, beginning at 10:30 p.m. There is a \$10 cover charge.

Williams, the duo of guitarist Ronnie Jordan and vocalist Gerald Levert, vocalist Peabo Bryson and the legendary soul group The O'Jays. Interestingly, Johnson pays as much credit for his instrumental prowess to his commercial background as his concert performances.

"When you get a call on a session, if you're not in charge of the writing or the production, you've got to give the client what they want. They'll tell you they want eight bars done this way or a few measures in that style, you have to be able to give them that. It puts a premium on your ability to interpret and perform on demand. If you're in charge of the writing on a session, then you can shape it the way you would like to as an artist."

Though he cites the alto saxo-



phone as his favorite, Johnson is a strong player on many instruments, among them flute and clarinet. A music major that was a member of both TSU's Aristocrat of

Bands and the school's jazz ensemble, Johnson's prime ambition as a player involves linking the audiences of two distinct, yet related idioms. "My main goal is to bridge the gap between the fans of hip-hop and R&B and those of smooth jazz." He accomplished that on his most recent release

Cover Story, but added that his newest disc *Life Of the Party*, which will be released next month, will contain more aggressive, energetic arrangements and playing.

However, his own records are only a small part of Johnson's overall music profile. He currently owns and heads three music labels. YASNY (You Ain't

See Nothing Yet) features jazz and R&B artists, and includes both Johnson's records and those of Marcia Butler. Balanced Praise Produc-

tions is the division for more traditional gospel and religious music, and has issued records from the Temple Praise Choir and Rev. Lawrence Thomason. Contemporary and instrumental gospel artists Regina McQuarry and pianist Luellen Peters are recording for the Faithworks division. If that weren't enough, Johnson also operates a consulting firm that advises clients and helps them find places and companies for their music.

But none of his other activities replaces playing music in terms of Johnson's first priority. He cites such players as former TSU saxophonist and jazz star Hank Crawford, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Everette Harp and Najee among his favorites, as well as longtime friend and fellow area star Kirk Whalum.

"I always tell people that the main reason I play the saxophone is because Kirk Whalum's grandmother and my grandmother attended the same church in Memphis, and she was always praising Kirk and ragging me, once she heard I played the saxophone. I tell Kirk today I'm still trying to catch up with him."