On this balmy Sunday afternoon, jazz fans flock to a theatre on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. People are trying to get tickets to this afternoon's sold-out concert. "We don't have to sit together," a couple tells the young lady behind the counter. "How about standing room?" someone else asks. Minutes before show time, concert producer Ken Hanlon is still fixing tickets. "If anybody tells you a good story, and you have one, give it to them," he instructs the box office staff, adding, "A few tickets won't put a dent in the bill." Hanlon, trim, with steely gray hair, short beard, deep blue eyes and an affable demeanor, has brought together eight of the world's greatest jazz performers, and they are here to pay tribute to the life and legacy of a man who has profoundly touched their musical lives. At $25 a seat, it is the most under-priced ticket in town.

Shortly after 2:00 p.m., the lights dim and the auditorium grows silent. More than five hundred and sixty fans and friends fill each and every seat, as well as standing-room spots allowed by the fire marshal, in the Judy Bayley Theatre, part of the UNLV Performing Arts Center. I am seated with my husband in the eighth row, slightly off-center toward stage right. Our tickets read, "Arnold Shaw Popular Music Research Center presents Johnny Pate 80th Birthday Celebration Concert."

Johnny who? Johnny Pate and my husband are close friends, have been for more than 60 years, so I know the answer to this question. But we're acquainted with jazz aficionados who might ask, "Johnny who?" and wonder how someone so important in the lives of so many stellar jazz giants could slip beneath their radar. Monty Alexander, Kenny Burrell, Ron Carter, Shirley Horn, Harvey Mason, James Moody, Marlena Shaw, and Phil Woods, all on hand today, are but a few in a longer list legendary collaborators that also includes Ahmad Jamal, B.B. King, Wes Montgomery, Jimmy Smith, and Joe Williams.

Johnny Pate, mild-mannered and unassuming, has been slipping underneath the radar all his life. But not today. Today he has to face the music – his music – and accept the love and affection of those who have come not only to play his music, but also to say thanks. It's going to be an emotional afternoon.

The all-Pate program begins with the UNLV student Jazz Ensemble, conducted by band director Bruce Paulson, romping their way through "Moof's Blues," Moof being a high school nickname for Pate's now-grown son, Brett. Amidst applause, Hanlon emerges from the wings to acknowledge the band and Paulson, remembered by many as lead-trombonist with Doc Severinson's band. Hanlon, who is also the Director of the Arnold Shaw Popular Music Research Center, then reads the Governor's Proclamation naming today, March 30, 2003, in honor of Johnny Pate. His 80th birthday will not arrive until December 5th, but today we celebrate his musical legacy, and in keeping with his lifetime of accomplishments, the 'whereas' clauses go on forever, acknowledging his roles as bassist, songwriter, arranger, producer, teacher, composer and conductor of symphonic and film scores, and mentioning many of the great artists with whom he has worked.

The heart and soul of Johnny Pate is steeped in jazz, even if he did take a lucrative detour into the world of R&B in the early to mid 1960s, arranging and producing hits for Major Lance, Billy Butler, and Curtis Mayfield & the Impressions. "R&B music put three of my kids through college," Pate explains to anyone who asks. In the early 1970s, Pate dipped back once more into that funky Chicago sound to provide soundtracks for "blaxploitation" movies, including *Shaft In Africa*, *Bucktown*, *Dr. Black & Mr. Hyde*, and *Brother On the Run*. But

throughout, Pate remains a jazzman, from his own 1956 live recording, *Johnnie Pate at the Blue Note*, through the recordings he has produced for today's special guests, and beyond.

The audience is whistling and applauding wildly when Johnny Pate finally walks on stage, slender, and dapper in black slacks, black mock turtleneck, and light tweed jacket with boutonniere. In true Pate style, the first thing he does is to shift the spotlight away from himself. "Bring up the houselights so we can acknowledge a young lady, a living legend. We've got to salute Ruth Brown." Cheers, whistles, more applause. Ms. Brown, in one of her signature hats – this one springtime yellow and white – stands and waves. "Ruthie is a dear friend," Pate tells the audience.

The second selection, "Minor Detail," opens with Pate playing solo piano – the first of many pleasures yet to come. The solo introduction to this minor-key ballad is thick with rich chordal harmonies that weave through the reed and horn sections. Then an alto saxophone is heard in the distance, and it's Phil Woods, in his trademark black cap, who emerges from the wings playing. Soon a deeper horn sounds and James Moody wanders onstage playing tenor. Woods kisses the top of Moody's balding head, and the two go on musically conversing with one another. The jazz ensemble members are mesmerized, and though it is not discernable to the ear, they are so awestruck that they nearly miss their musical cue to come back in. Woods and Moody wander off the stage.

At the microphone again, Pate waits just a beat to compose himself, and tries to lighten the moment by joking. "An intrusion," he says, gesturing toward the wings. "They just let anyone wander around." He tells the audience about the day he heard Phil Woods playing alto on a Dizzy Gillespie recording, and how he thought to himself that if he were ever in a position to produce records, Phil Woods would top his list of artists. Bringing Woods back onstage, "all the way from Pennsylvania," his voice cracks with tears. A week earlier, Pate predicted this would happen, telling Spencer Patterson of the *Las Vegas Sun*, "I haven't been in contact with most of these people for years. Seeing them all at once, all together will be quite a thing. I'll need three or four boxes of Kleenex."

It may not seem like such a long way from Pennsylvania to Nevada, but for someone battling emphysema and down with the flu just days earlier, it is a very long way indeed. Still, Woods would not have missed today's events. Woods' handwritten note to Pate, reprinted in the program book, says, "Your faith in me long ago lives forever in my heart." Woods means it. He tells the audience about his life as a struggling musician in the 1960s. "I couldn't get arrested. 'Buy a flute, be a studio man,' they told me. I said 'forget it.'" Woods moved to Europe where he hoped the musical climate would be more hospitable to jazz musicians. But in 1968, salvation came from stateside in the form of Johnny Pate.

Then East Coast director of A&R for Verve Records/MGM, Pate *was* in a position to make Woods an offer. Tracking him down in France, Pate offered Woods a record deal with a dream rhythm section (Herbie Hancock on piano, Richard Davis on bass and Grady Tate on drums), augmented by a string section led by Gene Orloff. The album is titled *Round Trip*. "I'm talking the truth," Woods tells us. "I went back to France with a shitload of money, and a few months later I was invited to play at Newport. I was back, baby! I was back, and that's 'cause of Johnny Pate, and I want to say thank you."

Woods sounds breathless when talking, but not when playing. He is featured on the next two selections, "Carolyn" and "Fill the Woods With Laughter," both of which are on that 1968

recording. The first, a ballad dedicated to Pate's wife, is a simple theme with variations, rich harmonies, a walking bass line, and a sweet trumpet turn at the end. The students acquit themselves well, breaking into double time before the bridge, but it is Woods who plays with such love that my eyes tear up. Pate is standing on stage, bending backward from the knees as if the music is the wind and he is a sail. Much later, the only words Pate will be able to muster are "I love what he does with a ballad. I just stood there in awe." By the time they finish the second tune, the audience is cheering and all Pate can say now is "Wow!"

Phil Woods' *Round Trip* album was just one of the many great jazz recordings Pate produced during that period. Taking us back in time, Pate talks about scheduling his trips to New York so that he would be able to stop by the Hickory House. Why? So he could hear Billy Taylor's trio. "One night," Pate says, "the joint is rockin', but Billy is standing by the bar and someone else is at the piano. And once again I said to my self, if I am ever in a position to record someone, I've got to record this guy." That guy was appearing regularly at Jilly's and the Playboy Club, but he was still a relative newcomer on the New York scene. His name? Monty Alexander. With the release of two Pate-produced recordings – *This Is Monty Alexander* (1969) and *Taste Of Freedom* (1970) – Alexander's reputation grew.

During rehearsal the day before the concert, Alexander told me that even before he left Jamaica for the States, he knew about Johnny Pate. "'Pattin' With Pate' was getting airplay, an R&B flavored track," he remembers. Pate hired the top players for Alexander's sessions, people like Grady Tate, Bob Cranshaw, Jerome Richardson, and Kenny Burrell. "All the right guys," says Alexander. "Johnny gave me confidence way back when."

When Alexander comes on stage he says, "It is a real honor to be here to participate in this celebration." His words are proper, almost restrained, as he introduces "one of Johnny's beautiful ballads," but his solo playing gives it all away. A deft touch, a light strum of strings, one could drown in the depth of his sound. Months later, Pate will admit to being enthralled. "I had no idea what he was going to do. I'd just given him a very simple little take on the tune. Monty said that after he got here, he took a walk to decide just how he was going play it. I have a feeling that if he ever sets it down again, he'll play it entirely different. You know, he's just that kind of player." And, as with all of today's guests, the admiration is mutual. "Johnny is humble, modest. People like him don't blow their horns," says Alexander.

The concert continues with a big band arrangement anchored by Alexander on piano, who says, "I'm not really a band player, but anything for Johnny." The tune, "Sum Serious Blues," was the title track from an album Pate produced for organist Jimmy Smith. Today's version features Ron Carter, who was always the first one Pate would call when he needed a bass player. Not only does this ambling twelve-bar blues make a terrific vehicle for the bass, but also it's a tip of the hat to Smith, who couldn't be there. Introducing Carter, Pate says, "They probably told you I used to be a bass player, which I was. This next gentleman is one of the reasons I stopped. When I heard Ron Carter play, I said 'oops, wrong instrument.'" Carter is a man of few words, preferring to let his instrument to do his talking for him. Not every bassist can swing in slower tempos, play big fat bass goose-egg notes, chords too, and produce intriguing solos chorus after chorus. At the end, Pate says, "Now you know why I don't play anymore – after that, no way."

As Pate announces the next tune, a blues titled "My Man Monty," guest drummer Harvey Mason joins the bandstand on the second set of drums that so far have been untouched. "Right

now we're going to do a little blues, just swing a little bit," Pate says, and Alexander kicks it off with the rhythm section, Carter still on bass. Mason and a student drummer are playing in tandem, and their smiles get broader as the groove intensifies. The audience wants to participate and they start clapping on beats 2 and 4, but that soon gives way to yelps and cheers. The band is swinging, Alexander's left foot is stomping, and it looks as if he might levitate them all right off the stage. Self-proclaimed as not really a band player, Alexander 'goes to church' and ends with a Basie-esque plink, plink, plink. Mason shakes hands with the student drummer.

The audience is cheering and we haven't even reached intermission yet. "I promise you we won't play anymore lullabies," quips Pate. "It's smoking up here." A change of pace is in order, and a vocal selection is just what's needed. "I Was A Fool" is one of the first tunes Pate wrote with lyrics. He recorded it with singer Gwen Stevens on one of his Chicago trio albums back in the 1940s, but Joe Williams did the most notable rendition on a 1985 CD titled *I Just Wanna Sing*, also produced by Pate. Selecting Marlena Shaw to do the honors today is fitting. Not only does she have ties to Pate through her duet recordings with Joe Williams and her vocal tracks on Jimmy Smith's "Sum Serious Blues," but, as Pate points out while introducing her, "we [Las Vegans] call her our own." The band lays out on this one. Shaw begins, backed only by Burrell on guitar, and soon Alexander, Carter, and Mason join in to swing an easygoing quartet rendition.

The first half is almost over. "We're going to put the pots on," says Pate. "Don't go to sleep on this one." It's a blues that opens with a unison horn line and features Burrell, as well as Moody and Woods, both of whom meander onstage again. The band gets a taste of winging it, swapping fours, and they go out swinging –they have to when the tune is "Gotta Swing."

During the brief intermission, I overhear comments about what an amazing opportunity it is for the students in the UNLV jazz ensemble to play with these jazz legends. For these giants in jazz, it's an opportunity to say thanks; for the jazz ensemble students it's an opportunity of a lifetime. And everybody talks about how happy they are that Pate is sharing with them a few tears and laughs and stories, complete with the occasional digression. The audience is here for intimacy, not for the super-package ultra-show of glitz and tromp d'oeil that would be found on the strip. In such a special setting, when everyone on both sides of the proscenium is there solely in the name of love, the performances are transcendent.

Easing into the second half, the band, this time led by Jazz Studies director Dave Loeb, opens with a tune called "Cinco Quatro." The title refers to the five/four time signature, and the arrangement showcases Pate's harmonic ensemble writing. After thanking Hanlon for arranging this afternoon's concert, Loeb introduces each band member by name. By the time we meet the rhythm section, their fellow students were making their approval known even above audience applause. When Pate comes back out, he, too, compliments the band, invites Loeb to come back out for another bow, and formally introduces guitarist Kenny Burrell.

While Moody and Burrell were featured in the first half, Pate has not yet shared their stories with the audience. Now, as Woods and Burrell come out to join the band, we learn that Burrell was not only Pate's first-call guitarist on recording sessions in decades past, but Burrell's *Asphalt Canyon Suite* recording for Verve in 1969 was arranged and conducted by Pate. The next tune, "Chateau Bellevue" is dedicated to saxophonist Johnny Griffin, Pate's second cousin, to commemorate the two hundred year old chateau that the Griffins refurbished and made their home. Pate takes over the piano and kicks off the band. The arrangement includes solos by

Woods (I hear a few chuckles from the audience when he quotes a melodic line from Gershwin's "It Ain't Necessarily So"), a nimble guitar solo, and an all-too-brief solo piano interlude.

Moody is featured next, playing two ballads, "Yvonne" and "Why Don't You Try." Before Pate brings up the house lights to introduce, "my favorite daughter, my only daughter, Yvonne," we learn that Moody's 1958 recording, *Last Train from Overbrook*, was not only arranged by Pate, but that it contains four Pate compositions and is one of the last recordings Pate made playing bass – "Moody insisted." On the original recording, made for the Chess brothers' Argo label, Moody played tenor on these two songs. Today we hear a different arrangement, two songs woven into a medley featuring Moody on flute, backed by the band.

Moody exits to much applause, and as Ron Carter and Harvey Mason take up their positions on bass and drums, Pate starts telling a story about hearing a female singer on the radio. She was singing "10 Cents A Dance," and he wanted to know who it was. The audience laughs knowingly when he says that, once again, if he should ever have the chance, this was someone he would want to record. He found out that the singer was managed by his old Chicago friend John Levy, and Pate now digresses into a story about how Levy (my husband), who played bass with and then managed George Shearing's career, was responsible for Shearing being the first to record a Pate original, a tune called "Minoration." "But back to the lady managed by John Levy. It was Shirley Horn."

As Shirley emerges from the wings in a wheelchair, Pate is saying, his voice cracking again under the strain of unshed tears, "and she flew all the way out from Washington DC just to be here with me today." Due a recent partial leg amputation, Horn has not been playing piano in public. But today, for Pate, she has her prosthesis in place and is going to play and sing two songs from her 1965 album *Travelin' Light*, produced and arranged by Pate for the ABC/Paramount label and later reissued on Impulse (1995).

Backed by the band and anchored by the first-class rhythm section of Carter, Mason, and Burrell (who was also on the original recording), Horn begins "Yes, I Know When I've Had It" with a bossa nova feeling, and cruises straight ahead after the first chorus. Then, slowing down the tempo, Horn breaks our hearts with her trademark laid-back phrasing on "Someone You've Loved," a ballad with flute lines that tug at the soul. Whistles and cheers erupt from the audience. "What a lady!" Pate says. The applause continues and Pate says, "That's one of those you just want to push the button again," a phrase borrowed from a fellow disc jockey on KUNV. As Shirley leaves the stage, the audience rises, almost in unison, to give her a standing ovation.

Pate turns up the house lights again. "This will be hard," he begins. "Yesterday was the fourth anniversary of the death of Joe Williams." His voice cracks, but he pulls himself together. "Of course, you know, Joe was a very dear friend." He introduces Jillean Williams, Joe's widow, and she stands to warm applause. Over the years Williams not only recorded many of Pate's songs (including one that Horn just sang, "Someone You've Loved"); he also requested Pate produce several of his recordings, and insisted Pate conduct whenever he worked with a symphony. Williams just wouldn't let Pate retire. "It's very hard for me to talk about Joe," Pate continues. "I wrote a tune for Joe that describes him to a T. It's called 'Rather Laid Back.'" The title describes the composer as well as it does his friend.

It was Joe Williams who introduced me to my husband, whose friendship with Williams dates back to the 1940s in Chicago. As soon as the band starts to play we know immediately how much Joe would have loved this subtle arrangement with its ensemble lines in rich harmony and

its feeling understated. It is a perfect slow dance tune where, as Joe would have said, you can "hold close to the one you love, sway together and stay together."

"We're going to conclude—" The audience protests loudly. Pate continues, talking about Harvey Mason, who is the last special guest to be formally introduced. It was Pate's oldest son, Donald, who, while studying bass at New England Conservatory, introduced the drummer to his dad. The house lights come up again and Donald stands. "I don't think Donald would leave New York to go to heaven," quips Pate. Mason became Pate's first-call drummer, and when he got the contract to score the movie *Shaft In Africa*, Harvey was on the date.

Pate has assembled a few cues from the score, featuring Mason. This eight-and-a-half minute selection begins with a virtuosic drum solo – a one minute and forty-five second lesson in what one man can do with two hands, two feet, and a drum kit. Then the band kicks in and the music gets as hot as a noon sun in Africa. Once again, the student drummer is playing in tandem with Mason, the grin on his face reaching literally from ear to ear, and I hope that his parents are in the audience to see this. Even I, a total stranger, can't help but feel proud of all of these students.

"Harvey Mason, Phil Woods, James Moody, Monty Alexander, Kenny Burrell—" Pate is acknowledging his special guests. The concert can't be over. The audience will not allow it. "You're asking for more?" Pate asks the audience, affecting incredulity. "Well, we'll try to accommodate." The drums kick off an up-tempo number titled "Kudos for Ken," in appreciation of producer Ken Hanlon.

Pate is wooing his special guests from the wings to play one more solo. First Moody, then Burrell. After Alexander's piano solo, Woods comes out. Mason takes the drum break, the band whips the audience into frenzy, and then, with a rousing ending chorus, it's over. Again Pate names his colleagues and praises the band. The audience is on their feet and the applause is thunderous. "Thank you. Thank you so very much," Pate says, and then, one last time, he tries to divert the spotlight. "You've got to give a big round of applause to the guy who put this all together, and it wasn't me. Ken Hanlon. It's been a very happy afternoon and let's hope our kids over there come home real soon." The applause begins to die down, but not because the audience is ready to leave. Applause gives way to a spontaneous audience rendition of "Happy Birthday, dear Johnny, Happy Birthday to you."

No one could be immune to the outpouring of love and appreciation that filled the theater today. It's only been ten days since America invaded Iraq and people are still glued to the news reports, but for a few hours at least, all of that was put from our minds. Ten days after the concert, columnist John L. Smith writes in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, "…I found myself not thinking about war," and he thanks Pate "for reminding us of the beauty that is still in the world." I like to think he speaks for everyone who hears this live commemorative recording.

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Devra Hall, author of *Men, Women, and Girl Singers* (a jazz biography), is a prolific chronicler of jazz luminaries. In addition to her work on the printed page that includes liner notes for recordings by Oscar Peterson, Joe Williams, and Jim Hall, among others, Hall is also a writer and music/talent coordinator for jazz videos.