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## FIRST HEARINGS IN JAZZ

# Johnny Smith and Ruth Price

**ITEMS:** To be chosen from three LPs: "Moods" with the Johnny Smith Quintet (no personnel available but group consists of two guitars, piano, bass and drums although on some tracks the piano is absent); "The New Johnny Smith Quartet" (Smith, guitar; Rae, vibes; Roumanis, bass; Lee, drums); "Ruth Price sings with the Johnny Smith Quartet" (Smith, guitar; Rae, vibes; Lombardi, bass; Lee, drums).

Johnny Smith is a self-taught musician with a flawless technique. Between 1947 and 1953 he was on the staff of NBC playing guitar and trumpet with both pop and symphony orchestras, taking part in classical recordings of the works of Berg and Schonberg as well as conducting, writing and playing on many TV and radio shows. While at NBC he began to experiment with a jazz quintet and his "Moonlight in Vermont" was voted one of the two top jazz records of 1952 in a *Down Beat* poll.

Ruth Price is a new name in the vocal field. Her style is still evolving but there are definite touches of the Carmen McRae influence. Unlike Carmen, however, she sings vigorously and forcefully, putting everything into every song. She pronounces her words confidently, putting each word in its proper place with rhythmic precision.

The "Ruth Price" LP is good. I will readily admit that on the first track I was unimpressed, but by the time the first side was played right through I was looking forward to hearing more. Here is an interesting singer with fresh ideas which leave you wondering what is going to happen next.

My only complaint is this. I played the LP right through and then replayed five tracks, a total playing time of 51 minutes and at the end of that time I found myself rather tired. This, I think, is due entirely to her forceful presentation which does not allow the listener's attention to wander even for a minute.

I would mention especially the following four tracks. I am looking forward to hearing them again. "It Never Entered my Mind" is subjected to an attractive arrangement. The chording behind the vocalist adds to the melody line and even though Ruth is a trifle harsh on some notes, it is obvious she has studied the song and is treating it carefully and thoughtfully.

"A Wonderful Guy" (from "South Pacific") is presented as a swingpiece. This is first-class despite the occasional lapse in pronunciation. "Until the Real Thing Comes Along" is sung most convincingly. Her voice fits every turn of the lyrics. Listen to the manner in which she inflects every word, each syllable and just about every vowel and consonant. Johnny Smith has a solo spot on "This Heart of Mine" which is a very pretty tune and usually associated with Fred Astaire. Ruth sings this one as though she means every word of it.

The "Moods" LP hasn't the sustaining interest of the "Price" one. The quintet centres around the guitar of Johnny Smith and that is not enough for a whole LP. Admittedly there are moments of sound that are beautiful, exciting and melancholy but his strength is in his lyrical quality. He seldom lets his hair down and rarely "goes to town." The exceptions, "Have you met Miss Jones?" and "How About You?" are good, in spite of the quote from "Comin' through the Rye" in the latter.

"The New Johnny Smith Quartet" is a different proposition. Through the years Smith has been demonstrating the great variety of which the guitar is capable, the variety of beats, the variety of textures. He plays with technical precision and splendour of tone. In this group he is surrounded by swinging musicians and accordingly, Smith swings also.

From this LP I choose as worthy of careful listening the following: "It Never Entered my Mind" with its tender chording and delicate balance. It's beautifully presented and is as fragile as a piece of Dresden china. Next, that blues of boppish association, Milt Jackson's "Bags Groove." This is a composition that I have come to like very much. It's unusual, yet its basic structure is quite simple and the group swings throughout. Finally, George and Ira Gershwin's "Swonderful" in up-tempo. There are solo passages for all in this five-minute version and some of the duet work between Smith and Rae is extremely fine.

On all the tracks that make up this session, Smith comes through as a lyric soloist and his jazz and guitar playing is without complication. The listener does not have to strive to understand the music; it's all quite simple and straightforward.

This is a rewarding half hour session.

**First Playing:** Station 2YA, August 5, 10.30 p.m.

## Repeat Playings

All programmes reviewed in this feature originate from Wellington and accordingly all "first playings" are from Wellington stations. However, at a later date every programme is played from Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin stations. To assist the jazz fan, details of these replays will in future be given as the information becomes available. Here is that information for the fortnight August 5 to August 18:

Station	Date	Programme	"Listener" Review
1YA	Aug. 5	Joe Burton	July 5
		Peanuts Hucke	5
		Julius Wechter (2)	19
		Billy Moxted	19
3YA	5	J.A.T.P.	5
		Grieg McRitchie	Apr. 12
		Bobby Enevoldsen	12
		Les Elgart	12
4YA	16	Red Norvo	26
		Georgie Auld	Mar. 29
		Teddy Buckner	29
		Lou Levy	29
	12	Jazz for Listening	June 21
		Billy Uselton	7

—Ray Harris

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 2, 1957.