

What the press has said about:

THE RICHARD LEO JOHNSON TRIO

POETRY OF APPLIANCE

2004

CUNEIFORM

“The space-age atmospherics of Ochoa and Ripley never overshadow Johnson’s playing; indeed, Ochoa’s theremin meshes perfectly with Johnson’s guitars on the simply lovely “Her To Hymn,” and Ripley’s almost dub-like waves of sound are a perfect counterpoint to Johnson’s overdubbed guitars on the driving “Glide Path,” Playing 6-, 12-, and 18-string guitars...Johnson takes his various influences – mostly Leo Kottke and John Fahey’s playful disregard for acoustic convention and John McLaughlin’s wide-ranging, cross-genre expressiveness – and distills them into a uniquely personal sound that’s rooted in folk and the more experimental end of new age music but doesn’t quite belong in either category. Difficult to categorize, then, but marvelous to hear.” -Stewart Mason, *AllMusic.Com*

“With only three records to his name...guitarist Richard Leo Johnson has managed to create a small but vital body of work that combines the best of Ralph Towner, Leo Kottke, Steve Tibbetts and Michael Hedges. Working mainly on acoustic guitar, and a double-neck one that has both six and twelve-string variants to boot, Johnson has evolved a self-taught style that, like the best of his influences, is intriguing in its orchestral scope and distinctive in its approach.

On *Poetry of Appliance*...the combination of wind instrument...violin and primarily acoustic guitar might lead one to believe this will be a somewhat chamber session, [but] the truth is that, along with a virtuoso technique and a bevy of found tunings, Johnson can be a percussive player who provides the rhythmic drive that such a grouping might lack. Tracks...trick along with plenty of forward motion, and an approach that resembles some of the best Newgrass work of artists including Bela Fleck, Sam Bush and Jerry Douglas.

On the other hand, the group is capable of elegant subtlety. “Charmin’ Carmen” begins with Ochoa creating a thick texture by feeding his violin through a delay. A precursor to Johnson’s entry with a harp-like tuning, and an uncanny ability to imply rhythm even while the track is filled with air. ...”Eulogy” sounds how Ralph Towner might if he were to tackle Americana music. ...

While Johnson covers much stylistic territory, his Arkansas roots are clearly evident throughout in the underlying folksiness of his writing. And as complex as his compositions are, as multihued the textures and as irregular as the meters can sometimes be, the entire disc flows with a purpose. ...the tunes seem to flow seamlessly from one to the next. The sequencing is simply so well thought-out...giving the album the feeling of a continuous suite.

Johnson’s innovative playing and vividly visual writing style elevate him to a place right besides his influences. Johnson has reached the point, with *Poetry of Appliance*, where rather than being “influenced by” he becomes plainly influential in his own right.”

– John Kelman, *All About Jazz*, October 2004,

“...on this superlative effort...the guitarist fuses a starkly organic foundation with ringing electronic overtones. ...Johnson and his trio intermingles lush melodies with sprightly choruses. Yet there’s a prevailing sense of movement and excitement that envelopes this gorgeously recorded production. The band soars into the red zone on occasion. And its partly rooted within an underlying sense of structure, augmented by the artists’ bursting dialogues. Dynamics abound, even within pieces that are built upon quaint melodies. Count this among the top ten productions for 2004, regardless of any rigidly defined musical classifications.”

– Glenn Astarita, *All About Jazz*, Nov. 2004, www.allaboutjazz.com

“There’s a pastoral sensibility to his acoustic guitar playing, reminiscent of the simple lyricism of jazzers Bill Frisell and Pat Metheny in gentler, unplugged settings. Other sections suggest a kind of alt-country-meets-new-age vibe. His electric guitar outings, on the other hand, have a fusion tinge. Overall, when teamed with the amplified instruments played by Ochoa and Ripley, Johnson creates a quirky kind of instrumental music that evokes all sorts of musical styles with fully inhabiting any of them...the trio demonstrates plenty of tension and interplay on *Poetry of Appliance*, making instrumental music that easily transcends the overtly consonant character of much new age. It’s nice to hear improvisers taking their time to weave a musical discourse, especially when they have as much to say as the Richard Leo Johnson Trio.

– Christian Carey, *Splendid*, 2/7/2005 www.splendidezine.com

“...*Poetry of Appliance* furthers his reputation as the modern heir to the greatest acoustic guitar instrumentalists such as late greats John Fahey and Michael Hedges. Johnson...strikes gold...assisted here by Ricardo Ochoa (electric violin) and Andrew Ripley (keyboards). Part of what sets Johnson apart is his sheer technique and audacious approach to acoustic music, which he structures more like electric chamber music than either bluegrass or jazz could ever imagine. ...Johnson’s ethereal acoustic/electric forays are greatly enhanced by some quirky keyboard electronica courtesy of Andrew Ripley and strategic theremin injections by Ochoa. Challenging the instrumental acoustic genre, Richard Leo Johnson takes the guitar into a brave new world.”

–Robert Silverstein, *20th Century Guitar*, Nov. 2004 / *Music Web Express* 3000

“...pleasant surprise to hear this set of original instrumentals, embracing such contrasts, dynamics, and brisk, colorful flights of virtuosity, from an American guitarist who has happened upon his own personal method of manipulating the strings. ...Originality seems to lie in how Johnson alternates constantly between heavy chordal strumming, and deft plucking, stretching and squeezing the guitar’s expressive capacity to its limits. He succeeds because his technique serves the music; not the other way around. Chords on violin and synthesizer ground the listener comfortably in the timbres typical of those instruments, while beefing up arrangements, giving the guitarist room to explore a multiplicity of expressive angles, without being drowned out. ...this trio does not belong in comparisons with the mostly lackluster background music Windham Hill made famous. At the end of the day – after Johnson’s technique has been assimilated and analyzed by imitators–POA will stand or fall based on its musical merits. And it deserves to stand.”

–Michael Ezzo, Roundtable Review, *Exposé*, March 31, 2005

“Known for his unique self-taught picking style and his twin-neck, Johnson covers a lot of stylistic territory on the eight tracks herein. Almost a one-man band by himself, his playing pulls every last bit of power and passion out of the entire fretboard... on the more aggressive pieces Ochoa and Ripley tend to drive the entire melodic end while Johnson handles just about everything else, while on the softer more dreamy cuts like “Charmin’ Carmin” the melodic and support roles are shared. There are no easy comparisons to be made here, Johnson and company cover way too much area to be easily pigeonholed, though folks who appreciated Pat Metheny’s ‘s New Chautauqua...the first two Steve Tibbetts albums, or guitarists like Leo Kottke or Michael Hedges will probably find plenty here to get excited about.”

–Pete Thelen, Roundtable Review, *Exposé*, March 31, 2005

"*Poetry of Appliance* is part Mahavishnu Orchestra, part semi-classical... Two former members of the Savannah Symphony Orchestra have melded their talents into the band with Ricardo Ochoa on violin and Andrew Riply on synthesizer. "Charmin Carmin" recalls Jan Hammer's best early solo tracks meshed with a moody Bill Frisell stylized passage. In contrast "Eulogy" is Johnson's elegant pastoral piece that evokes guitarist Ralph Towner with Ripley's melodica adding an extra layer of comfort. ...Across the eight songs on the disc, a trio camaraderie is created that balances acoustic dexterity with an intuitive accompaniment,"

– Jeff Melton, Roundtable Review, *Exposé*, March 31, 2005

"Another of those impossible-to-categorize albums. It's really New Music with an accent on both acoustic guitar work and electronics. Cuneiform is known for its embrace of the minimalist esthetic and this album in no exception, and it strikes me as possibly appealing to adventurous jazz fans. ...The blending of the acoustic string sounds with the electronic instruments comes to the fore as some of the primary attractions of this trio, and the minimalism is tempered by quirky variations and ornamentation that prevent overload...the overriding slant is tonal. Truly a unique musical outing for the sonically adventurous. 4 /5 stars."

–John Sunier, *Audiophile Audition*, June 22, 2005

"Somewhere between Leo Kottke, Oregon, and a displaced Fripp, exists the virtuoso trio led by guitarist Richard Johnson, riding the range in search of a new form of fusion. ...the downright weirdness of some of the instrumental voicings, the astonishing tonal colors achieved, and the ease with which they achieve fierce aggression without percussion. Effortlessly transitioning from delicate pastoral poems to souring anthems, Johnson and cohorts are at their best when eschewing easy harmonies and shimmering new age gloss, opting instead for...quasi-Western country-jazz and space-age acoustic bluegrass. Fusion? Yeah, I guess! Nobody understands the power of the slow build to roaring climax better than these guys, but they also know that every high-flying arrow to the sun must be balanced by something sorrowful and earthbound for contrast. The sheer beauty of this album is overwhelming. It is just about as perfect as a collection of tunes can be within its chosen style and sound. total rating: 16 – Steve Davies-Morris, *Progression*, #48 Spring 2005

"Performing his incredible double neck McCollom acoustic guitars, RLJ first came into focus on a pair of cutting edge, impossible to categorize albums he recorded for Blue Note records in the late '90s but he really hits his stride with the 2004 Cuneiform Records CD release of *Poetry of Appliance*. Featuring his new ensemble, the Richard Leo Johnson Trio, *Poetry of Appliance* offers a fine compliment to the adventurous guitar spirits like California Guitar Trio and the rural Americana of acoustic legends like Leo Kottke.

–Robert Silverstein, "Glide Path...An Interview With Richard Leo Johnson", *20th Century Guitar Magazine*, Jan. 2005

"A complex – and often stupefying intricate – instrumental amalgam of the American acoustic folk idiom, the late-70's heyday of electric jazz fusion, the psychedelic backwash of Krautrock avatars CAN, and the type of hypnotic Eastern drones favored by such '60s avant-garde archetypes as La Monte Young and Albert Ayler, Johnson's pocket guitar symphonies are often so cerebral and idiosyncratic as to defy categorization. ...In fact, it's worth notice that when esteemed music journalist Vic Gabarini opined in *Playboy Magazine* that Richard Leo was "the most innovative guitarist since Jimi Hendrix," such outpouring of rapturous praise was essentially par for the course...It was this desire to expand his musical palette which led to his current project...The Richard Leo Johnson Trio. ...Before long, the three were hard at work adapting Richard Leo's new original material – initially conceived as solo works for electronically treated guitar – a task made difficult by the very nature of his songs, in which the musician usually handles all rhythm, melody, harmony and counterpoint in a dazzling display of ambidexterity. ...Johnson says it's one of the few things in his entire career that he's "pretty satisfied with," noting, "Many of the critics that have reviewed my other albums think this is the best thing I have put out."

– Jim Reed, "Portrait of the artists," Savannah Connect.com, Nov. 17. 2004