

# Two 'Heads' Are Better, Musically, Than One

By Conrad Silvert

It was a fortuitous coincidence that produced the audio-visual pun that is this week's booking at Keystone Korner. Alternating sets through Sunday are a pair of Texans, both saxophonists, both steeped in the tradition of the blues: Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson and David "Fathead" Newman.



'FATHEAD' NEWMAN  
In fine fettle

To get the whys and wherefores behind the nicknames out of the way: "Cleanhead" derived from Vinson's premature baldness, while "Fathead" stuck with Newman after a grade-school teacher chastised him with that particular Charlie Brown-like moniker.

Though both are from Texas, and both grew up in the milieu of jazz and blues, what the gentlemen are playing this week presents a healthy contrast.

Vinson is a basic bluesman with a twist. He is rare in that he sings and plays saxophone, rather than the guitar most singing bluesmen have chosen for their instrument.

Another thing that marks Vinson as unique is his composing ability, which has transcended the realm of shouting Texas blues. He is singing and playing his own blues numbers such as "Cherry Red" ("rock me pretty mama till my face turns cherry red"), but he is also playing "Four," which, like the composition "Tune Up," he allegedly wrote, only to have Miles Davis snatch it up and put his own name on it. (This is a trick Miles has pulled on many, e.g., Josef Zawinul and Bill Evans.)

Vinson, now 61, is a pure, no-frills entertainer with a subtle wit and a flair for potent understatement. He is not a modernist in any way, but his art is timeless. He doesn't wow you with his technique, but he definitely makes you feel good.

(Vinson is backed for this engagement by Bay Area stalwarts Larry Vuckovich (piano), James Leary (bass) and Eddie Marshall (drums). Marshall and Vuckovich have smartly pared down their usual vocabulary to effectively underpin Vinson's lean and mean sax and vocal lines, but Leary's busy bass could stand a bit more thinning out.

David "Fathead" Newman, like Vinson, has that tangible Texas feeling, but his, as heard Wednesday night, is a far more "contemporary" sound. I am not altogether sure it is Newman's most personally expressive sound. He is playing his tenor, alto and soprano sax (and the flute) well enough, but the style of music and the arrangements are too homogenized to allow all of Newman's personality to shine through. He needs more breathing space (and more space for unadorned improvisation than he is getting), and he needs more variety than the material he has chosen.

Having brought a good backing rhythm trio (pianist Claude Johnson, bassist David Leone and drummer Ted Wasser), Newman has the equipment for a dynamic show. His sweet tone, most especially evident on the alto, and his Dr. Feelgood phrasing are in fine fettle. But similar tempos, similar funk beats and similar melodic ideas made one tune blend into another, until the stew was entirely overcooked.