

Posted on Sun, Nov. 28, 2004  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ANDREW GILBERT: JAZZ TALK

**She's a little bit R&B and soul; he's a little bit jazz**

By Andrew Gilbert

TIMES CORRESPONDENT

Finding common musical ground wasn't that hard for jazz saxophonist Dave Ellis and his younger sister, soul singer Zoë Ellis. All they had to do was go back home.

They perform together at Yoshi's on Monday in their new project ZADELL, which combines their various musical passions under a rubric of pop and funk, the music that provided a soundtrack for their childhoods. In a recent conversation in the living room of the North Berkeley house where they grew up and where their parents still live, the siblings talked about their separate careers and the sounds that unite them -- in between a steady flow of affectionate sibling banter that could make for some hilarious stage repartee.

"That David has a career in straight-ahead jazz to me has always been amazing," said Zoë, 34. "Because over here, in this house, it was drum machines and funk."

We grew up here, playing air guitar and doing a lot of concerts to that window there," she continued, pointing toward the living room's large picture window. "We had routines for our parents, a lot of Beatles tunes, lots of Jackson 5. So we might do songs like that. We've got a giant book of tunes we might call."

"It's a vehicle for us to do original music and music that we like," Dave added. "I booked this gig in January just knowing I wanted to do it. It's taken 34 years for me to get to this point, where I can actually deal with her. I feel like I've had my training. We've got good players, good music and lots of ideas."

Joining the Ellis' in ZADELL (which is pronounced with a long "a") are guitarist Cedricke Dennis, bassist Nate Pitts, drummer Tommie Bradford, Mike Aaberg on piano and keyboard, and vocalists Bryan Dyer and Kisha Griffin. An earlier version of the project had a brief run in 2000, but other obligations short-circuited the band. In its new incarnation, ZADELL is a vehicle for bringing together their seemingly disparate musical worlds.

A product of Berkeley High School's vaunted music program, Dave first gained widespread attention in the early '90s as a founding member of eight-string guitar ace Charlie Hunter's trio. He spent the late '90s touring with the Grateful Dead alumni bands Ratdog and the Other Ones, road work that he says eventually left him burned out.



One of the reasons ZADELL didn't get off the ground its first time around is that he retreated from the music scene in 2000, taking off almost two years to recharge his creative batteries and spend time with his wife and infant daughter.

He resurfaced last year with a splash when his third album, "State of Mind" (Milestone), garnered strong reviews. Shepherded by jazz producer Orrin Keepnews, it's a superb straight-ahead session featuring a cast of jazz luminaries, including pianist Mulgrew Miller, bassist Christian McBride and drummer Lewis Nash.

While he was making a name for himself in jazz, Zoë was honing her wide-ranging talents as a singer. Steeped in gospel music, she sang widely with the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir, and continues to perform on Sundays at Glide Memorial Church, where she also helps lead the teen choir. She gained widespread exposure singing R&B with the Mo'Fessionals, and scored a gold record with the pop/hip-hop outfit the Braids when their irresistible version of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" was featured on the soundtrack to the 1996 film "High School High."

"I'm supposed to be the first one with a gold record," Dave wailed in mock agony when she pointed to the gleaming award hanging on the wall. "Mom, I tried!"

In recent months, Zoë has tiptoed over to her brother's musical territory in Keith Terry's wildly inventive a cappella ensemble Slammin.' While at first she was intimidated by the prospect of improvising, she has thrived in the group, stretching out while not diluting her tremendously soulful sound. "Keith is a really talented dude," Zoë said. "It's really kind of complicated what's going on up there. I don't pretend to get it."

In joining forces with her brother, Zoë isn't necessarily looking to get further into jazz. She sees ZADELL as an opportunity for them to both draw on their strengths, and maybe explore some new musical dimensions.

"Here's what people don't know: Dave's actually a really good singer," Zoë confides. "He has a better imagination for vocals than I do. I think there's something about playing the saxophone that builds that.

"Whether she can coax her brother into putting down his horn and belting out some soul with her remains to be seen. But ultimately, ZADELL is about creating a musical meeting of minds, a challenge that's more logistic than stylistic for the Ellis'.

"If you listen to his originals, the R&B stuff is obviously in there," Zoë said. "I'm making R&B or soul, and he's making jazz, but they're not very far apart.

WHO: ZADELL, featuring Dave and Zoë Ellis•

WHEN: 8 and 10 p.m. Monday•

WHERE: Yoshi's at Jack London Square, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland•

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