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Up Front:

A Family Affair | East Bay brother and sister musicians Zoë and Dave Ellis ramp up their solo and duo careers. | *By Andrew Gilbert*

By any reasonable measure vocalist Zoë Ellis and her older brother saxophonist Dave Ellis have attained an enviable echelon of musical accomplishment. Maybe it's a Berkeley thing, but just when it seems they've reached a new milestone, they set off for a new horizon.

For Zoë, a belter with a huge, voluptuously soulful voice, 2007 marked her coming out as a solo artist with an impressive catalog of original songs. For most of her career, rather than stepping into the spotlight on her own, she has gravitated to situations in which she's part of a larger musical collective. Steeped in gospel music, Zoë, 37, spent years performing with the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir and the last six singing at Glide Memorial Church on Sundays. She first made a splash crooning R&B with the Mo'Fessionals, and scored a gold record with The Braids' uproarious, hip-hop-inflected version of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," a tune featured on the soundtrack of the 1996 film *High School High*.

After honing her improvisational chops with the jazz-based a cappella ensemble SoVoSó and Oakland body percussionist Keith Terry's supremely creative a cappella ensemble Slammin, Zoë stretched her creative wings on *Live at Anna's Jazz Island*. Released last year, the album is both a major leap—her first CD under her own name—and a compelling expression of her enduring musical connection with her older brother.

The CD essentially captures one element of *Zadell*, the jazz/funk band that she and Dave, 40, created to blend their various musical interests.

"I'm making choices live that I would have never made last year or even six months ago," Zoë says.



Sibling synergy: Berkeley-bred Zoë and Dave Ellis enjoy solo careers, but have recently teamed up in *Zadell*, a jazz/funk band that's just released the acclaimed *Live at Anna's Jazz Island*. Photos by Aengus McGiffin.

A product of Berkeley Unified's celebrated music program, Dave grew up a year ahead of Joshua Redman in elementary and junior high and aspired to join the Berkeley High jazz band led by Phil Hardyman, a band bristling with talented players like multi-instrumentalist Peter Apfelbaum, saxophonist Craig Handy and pianist Benny Green (who are all now ensconced in the New York scene). The Ellis house in North Berkeley was suffused with Stevie Wonder and classical music, and the siblings often entertained their parents after dinner.

"We grew up playing air guitar and doing a lot of concerts," says Zoë, who also attended Berkeley High. "We had routines for our parents, a lot of Beatles tunes, lots of Jackson Five."

When they take the stage together, the sibling bond is apparent, as is their propensity to take risks together in ways they might not on their own. For the improvisation-steeped saxophonist, working with his sister means embracing his inner pop star. "I wouldn't say we're show-offs," Dave says. "But we have a showbiz side, and we're using these shows as a forum to define both of our styles."

Dave produced the album, while also contributing pithy tenor and soprano sax solos throughout the set. But he's entirely comfortable in a supporting role for Zoë, who delivers an infectious program of R&B and pop numbers that she composed while hanging out in Manchester, England, with Jonathan Musgrave and Chris Nicholas. It didn't take long for the album to make an impact, leading to a gig opening for Erykah Badu at the Concord Pavilion last fall. The CD has sold thousands of copies and garnered regular airplay on KCSM and KPFA, establishing Zoë's identity as a gifted songwriter as well as a killer vocalist.

"It was the best money I ever spent," Zoë says after a recent Anna's performance at which she concentrated on jazz versions of her original compositions and a few American Songbook standards, backed by a combo featuring her brother, pianist Maya Kronfeld and veteran drummer Eddie Marshall. "I'm really proud of the album, and it's the best calling card I could have. It's gotten me so much work. Mostly people know who the hell we are. We had decent names. But now we can really present what Dave and I do. People can come to us for a combination of jazz and R&B. It's a blend of music. It's never-ending."

What seems to be perpetual is Zoë's search for new sounds and information. Rather than building on her solo success, she immediately started heading off in new directions, her goal to draw sustenance from some of the deepest wells in the Bay Area, including the brilliant vocalist/musicologist Linda Tillery, Cuban-born "soulsa" vocalist Bobi Cespedes and the dynamic jazz singer

Rhiannon. And that's on top of the steady schooling she gets in Slammin, the East Bay improvisational sextet featuring four inventive vocalists, including Oakland scat singer extraordinaire Kenny Washington, beat boxer Steve Hogan and Destani Wolf.

"I always felt that David was the serious musician in the family and I never took time to study, but I'm on the attack for learning," Zoë says. "I woke up in January and said there's so much I want to know. I have a person like Linda Tillery around, who has all of the black diaspora in her head. There's the whole Cuban community here and I want to tap into that with Bobi Cespedes. I'd like to be a person in the Bay Area who carries on that stuff. I should be able to walk into any school and teach from A to Z."

If Zoë is more visible on the Bay Area scene than she's ever been before, her brother is rebuilding his career following several quiet years. After making his own mark at Berkeley High, Dave went off to the East Coast and graduated with a degree in production and engineering from Berklee College of Music. When he returned to the Bay Area, the brawny-toned tenor saxophonist quickly became one of the brightest stars of the Bay Area jazz scene. Along with childhood pal Charlie Hunter, he played a key role drawing national attention to the burgeoning funk-influenced acid jazz movement that took root in San Francisco nightspots like the Elbo Room and Cafe Du Nord in the early '90s.

He recorded two albums of his own for the Palo Alto-based Monarch label, including 1998's impressive *In the Long Run*, a session overseen by legendary producer Orrin Keepnews. Dave spent the second half of the decade touring with former Grateful Dead guitarist Bob Weir's band Ratdog and the post-Dead reunion band The Other Ones, and then took a few years off to recharge his creative batteries.

He resurfaced in 2003 when his third album, *State of Mind* on Milestone, garnered strong reviews. Originally produced by Keepnews for E-Music, the album languished for several years when the high-tech meltdown led to the label's demise, which left the project in limbo. A heavyweight session featuring a cast of top-shelf New York players such as pianist Mulgrew Miller, alto saxophonist Vincent Herring, bassist Christian McBride, and drummers Carl Allen and Lewis Nash, it raised Dave's national profile and led to a spate of work.

But it's only now that he's working on a follow-up with Keepnews, who has been an ardent fan of Dave's since he first heard the saxophonist while working on Red Reflections, flugelhornist Dmitri Matheny's 1994 album on Monarch. Keepnews recalls that the saxophonist made a powerful first impression. As the producer responsible for numerous classic albums by a tenor sax pantheon

including Sonny Rollins, Joe Henderson, Johnny Griffin and Jimmy Heath, he has more credibility than most when it comes to spotting promising young players.

"I spent two or three days listening to him and was blown away," Keepnews says. "It's as simple as that. I've seen and heard and been creatively involved with enough tenor players, so when a tenor saxophonist makes me pay attention, I've learned to trust my gut instincts. And as I got to know him, I liked his whole personal ethic, his approach to his instrument and his life."

Rather than pursuing work as a leader, Dave has spent much of his time in recent years as a sideman. He spent several years on the road backing Donny Osmond, and lately he's been performing regularly with pianist/composer Muziki Roberson's quartet, a player best known as the longtime keyboardist for the jazz/funk/Latin/poetry group Mingus Amungus (led by Miles Perkins, another Berkeley High product). He's also been working with bass star McBride's Situation, an ad hoc free-funk combo that played a four-night run at Yoshi's last July. Featuring keyboardist and erstwhile pop hitmaker Patrice Rushen and DJ Jahi Sundance, the drummerless quartet took the stage without any tunes and elaborated on a series of grooves.

"It's the most fun I've ever had on stage," Dave says. "Christian gathered people he knows and musically trusts and we just go. No structures, songs or set lists. It was a stage full of people with the biggest ears. It can't get old, because there's nothing to get old. You have to concentrate so hard, maintain your awareness. It's a real test. I was very much in my element. Everybody has a fundamental jazz knowledge, but with the funk, pop and R&B mixed in."

McBride had been looking for an opportunity to collaborate with Dave for years, and seized the opportunity when the Yoshi's gig came up. He hired him again in April for a concert at the Monterey Jazz Festival's Next Generation Festival. "When I was coming up as a young player, I heard about Dave through Josh Redman, and he was one of the cats I looked up to," McBride says. "I figured the Situation gig was a good chance to work together. The thing about Dave is his amazing musicianship. He's a guy who takes his time to evaluate what's going on and adjust. Dave has every right to be considered one of the best saxophonists on the scene. I firmly believe if he ever moves to New York or puts himself in the position to be in the national spotlight, he'll get that recognition. Actually, the whole family is pretty amazing."

Like his sister, Dave is rooted in the Bay Area, and has no plans to leave any time soon. But the gigs with McBride and Zoë have set his creative wheels in motion. He's planning a new project with Keepnews that will draw more on funk and R&B rather than

straight-ahead jazz, grooves reminiscent of an earlier era on the Bay Area scene.

"The stuff I'm writing is jazz-based, but it's a little more danceable, a little funkier, hearkening back to Charlie Hunter days," Dave says. "I have a long history of R&B stuff that I can express with my sister. Fans of mine from jazz radio might be a little surprised about what I'm going to express next, but it's time to break free a little bit and grow and change."

Andrew Gilbert is The Monthly's music critic.

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