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GOSPEL OF GOOD AND EVIL

Rachel Z and Her Trio Embark on a Fervent Jazz Caravan

Rachel Z wears all black. Purple angel wings jut out from her back as she stands in front of an ominous sky. With her pasty white skin and dark eye shadow, the pianist resembles late-night horror TV host Elvira or Siouxsie Sioux of the '80s alternative band The Banshees—an image a bit more macabre than that of a traditional jazz artist.

“Jazz is not dead!! It is alive and well right here!!”

The paradox between the words and imagery on the promotional flyer for Z’s new eponymous CD from her trio, *The Dept. Of Good And Evil*, offers a bold and brash invitation to discover what possible musical inventions Z and her group have in store. Z serves as the musical temptress, so to speak.

“A lot of people were looking at the flyers and wondering what to make of my band, my look,” Z said before a March show with the trio at the Firefly Club in Ann Arbor, Mich. “I had to laugh because my friends who know me would see the humor in it right away.”

The inside joke lays in Z’s penchant for layering dark chords and ominous 20th century classical harmonies—dubbed playfully as the “evil” by a fellow musician—over the upbeat and swinging “good” grooves of her rhythm section.

The Dept. Of Good And Evil includes drummer Bobbie Rae and bassist Maeve Royce. “We wanted to go with the Dept. Of Good And Evil because the Rachel Z Trio implied only jazz and that scares the

kids,” Z said. “More kids find they might like this music if they give it a chance. I’ve had a lot of kids sign up to my MySpace page because they saw that we did a cover of ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ by Joy Division.”

The juxtaposition of modern pop and alternative rock with mainstream jazz is as natural as slipping on a pair of well-worn gloves to Z and Rae. Having jelled as a working unit, the band is on a mission to spread its gospel of jazz to as many people as possible. This year, the group has been on the road, virtually nonstop, delivering its doctrine of “music without prejudice” with the fervor of a well-oiled political campaign or religious caravan.

“It’s been great. However, an average day has us driving six hours to get to the next town,” Z said. “We’ll usually get to the hotel and be there for a half hour, then drive to the club, set up, sound check, play the gig and then do it all over again the next day.”

The tour, which started in early January with a showcase at the IAJE conference in New York, has been five years in the making. It has taken Z this long to conceive and fully develop the group’s musical concept. “It’s taken years to build up to a point where we have a pretty good tour,” Z said. “There are people coming to the venues.”

From the Firefly in Ann Arbor and Pacchia Jazz Room in Dayton, Ohio, to Steamers in

Fullerton, Calif., Yoshi’s in Oakland, Calif., and Jazz Standard in New York, the trio is hitting traditional jazz hubs and cities that rarely feature national touring artists.

“We have a lot of support in the Midwest,” Z said. “When we played Dayton we had everyone there from 20 to 80 years old. The 80-year-olds told me that music feeds their soul. An older couple came up to Bobbie and told him our show was a life-changing experience. When we played in Louisville a young girl told me that when she heard what we did with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ song it made her understand what she needs to do with [Jerome Kern’s] ‘All The Things You Are.’ She said she understood what jazz is by hearing us.”

That girl had a musical epiphany not unlike Z had five years ago. In 2002, the pianist was entrenched in the jazz world, with a pedigree that included stints with Steps Ahead, Al Di Meola, Wayne Shorter, Stanley Clarke and Lenny White.

“All of these artists mentored me. I always considered the apprenticeship process in jazz something important,” Z said. “Guys like Mike Manieri helped me because I was a bit raggedy, having had a lot of my own bands. I didn’t know when I was messing up. He’d let me know when I was rushing the beat or needed to comp better in a section. I went from playing small clubs to

1,000-seat venues with [Steps Ahead], which helped me become more of a professional.”

Z worked closely with Shorter on his 1995 Grammy-winning album *High Life*. Beyond the technical and mechanical aspects of the music, Shorter touched her in a spiritual way.

“I learned the history,” Z said. “Wayne is detailed. Everything he did was from his heart, and his chord choices were based on how he felt. It was this great creative school I was going to every day with him. He and Mike helped me grow up. By the time I played with Stanley Clarke and Lenny White, I was comfortable.”

She went on to lead a series of record dates for labels such as Columbia, Chesky and Tone Center. These further prepared her in terms of documenting her talents as a fine straight-ahead jazz soloist, composer, arranger and vocalist. However, Z never felt completely comfortable with the music she was producing.

“I was paranoid living in a jazz shell,” Z said. “I remember hearing Nirvana and wanting to check that music out further and see what was happening. I was also moved by listening to Nine Inch Nails and Smashing Pumpkins.”

Then, in 2002, she embarked on the first of two world tours backing Peter Gabriel, which enriched her knowledge of and affinity for rock and pop music. It proved to be an eye-opening experience.

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and jazz gigs," Z said. "With jazz you can rely on the fact that you're so great technically and people will be amazed by your chops. But sometimes jazz can be devoid of emotion. It wasn't like that with Coltrane or Miles; it was more of a rock show. A great rock show has a heavy emotional element and the song structures are refined with great melody."

Since her time with Gabriel, Z's concept behind the Dept. Of Good And Evil has gestated, and the group's new disc maintains a vintage and reverent nod to jazz masters while honoring fine examples of contemporary pop and rock. It

spans the gamut from the Dave Brubeck-inspired operatic piece "Lakme" to a faithful rendition of Joe Henderson's "Inner Urge." They take a song like "Maps" by New York rockers the Yeah Yeah Yeahs or "King Of Pain" by The Police and reharmonize and reconstruct it, while remaining true to the composition's spirit and melody.

"We want to acknowledge the legacy of American jazz," Z said. "Some people are doing modern covers and have no knowledge of the roots of jazz—and that's totally cool—but we do. We want to root these tunes in that



tradition."

Live, the Dept. Of Good And Evil is like a group of alchemists taking seemingly disparate elements and creating sophisticated and engaging arrangements out of them. At the Firefly, the band delved into alternative rockers Death Cab for Cutie's "Soul Meets Body." "Under The Milky Way," an atmospheric and reflective piece by the Australian band The Church, was given a facelift. The group retained the song's romantic and dreamy spirit and transported it into the jazz stratosphere via Rae's tasteful brush work and Z's Bill Evans-like lyricism.

The band also tapped into more mainstream jazz fare with a burning take on "Inner Urge" and Shorter's "ESP." "Last night we played 'Love Will Tear Us Apart,'" Z said. "If you're into Herbie Hancock it went into 'One Finger Snap'—those are the blowing changes. We wanted to go to another level with 'One Finger Snap' so we went into that because the two songs seemed to go together."

The group was more than three musicians on stage. It was a cohesive working unit, one component of which was Rae, who wears many hats. As Z's primary collaborator and the band's producer, the Philadelphia-born percussionist comes by rock as honestly as he does jazz. Early in his career, he immersed himself in the study of Philly Joe Jones while also apprenticing in studios and playing with the likes of Lynch Mob, Simple Minds and Terence Trent D'Arby.

"My tastes are all over the map—as we feel are most people's—and unlike the majority of the jazz community we feel the joy of great songs should not be restricted by fear or snobbery," Rae said.

Z and Rae have forged a close working relationship. "Bobbie did all the production on the new album," Z said. "He's good at picking out

the things you do well and constructing a solid part from that. I always want to change levels in my playing and not repeat the same crap I did last year. Bobbie will say, 'Check out this McCoy Tyner' and find something I won't find. He's been busting his butt for four years doing so much for us. I finally wanted to give him that acknowledgement of producer on our latest disc."

The band became complete with the addition of 23-year-old Royce in 2005. The Baltimore native possesses chops well beyond her years, channeling the spirits of bassist forefathers like Scott LaFaro and Jimmy Garrison with aplomb.

"She can go between things and has a lot of facility with using the bow in a Celtic style," said Z, who was one of Royce's instructors at the New School in New York. "I invited her to come out on a little Midwestern run. Well, she came out and threw down. It was good training for this new record because she had to go from school directly to working in the studio."

The business of the Dept. Of Good And Evil expands beyond concerts and nightclubs. The band believes one of its main objectives as ambassadors of jazz is to educate, enlighten and inspire.

"We offer clinics, private tutorials, group interactives, lectures and discounted admissions for students whenever possible," Rae said. "With the clinics we want to take the fear out of music. Our concepts are so audacious that it makes perfect sense. Kids are learning the bridge between how a modern tune can be connected to hard-bop or swing. It's a matter of voicings and knocking down walls for learning so that it may be a fun experience.

"You've got to realize that these kids living in 2007 don't have flying cars and jet packs readily available yet but, with the Internet, video games and such, there are a lot of distractions out there," Rae continued. "Those distractions take them away from delving into any kind of music, let alone jazz. One of the things we emphasize is faith in their ability to be little maniacal geniuses."

While student lectures contain the nuts and bolts of music theory, their approach to voicings, textures, harmonies and rhythms always includes a spiritual or humanitarian component. "If there's a beautiful melody in a song it can be reharmonized and reexplored," Rae said. "The classes are about letting kids know that liking modern music is not a crime. Kids want to learn, but if they don't have it in front of them, how are they going to know?"

Z and Rae's rock and pop backgrounds, combined with their deep jazz roots, cast a refreshing spin on how contemporary jazz can be presented. It has also provided Z with an unjaundiced perspective to music.

"We're not trying to destroy our roots," she said. "We're trying to build on them. We want to be influential as players and teachers. We will throw down for jazz! We want to get people excited."

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