

# The San Francisco Bay **GUARDIAN**

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## **ZÄDELL**

Yoshi's, Nov. 29, 2004

Selling out Yoshi's on a Monday night ain't no easy thing, particularly when the weather's chilly and practically no one has heard of your band. It helps, of course, to have family and friends. Dave and Zoë Ellis had a whole bunch of both turn out to hear them co-lead an ensemble they call **ZÄDELL**. And there were lots of fans who may not know the siblings personally but have been following their music over the past decade. Tenor saxophonist Dave has garnered a big-time rep through his straight-ahead jazz gigs and recordings, as well as his work with the original Charlie Hunter Trio and Grateful Dead alumni bands Ratdog and the Other Ones. Zoë's resume as a vocalist includes stints with the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir, the Mo'Fessionals, Cleveland Lounge, the Braids, and, currently, both Slammin' and the Glide Ensemble.

"I'm just the nice Jewish girl at the Methodist church," she quipped during the performance. "That's what you get when you're raised in Berkeley."

She was referring to members the choir at Glide Memorial Methodist Church who'd come to see her and her brother's band, as well as to a multicultural upbringing, which began at birth. Their African American dad and English Jewish mom, both retired from UC Berkeley, were also in attendance.

**ZÄDELL**, which was making its first appearance in four years, combines the Ellis kids' names as well as the musical cultures with which each is associated. The band mixes Dave's jazz perspective with Zoë's grounding in R&B. Such fusion is nothing new; one hears it every day on KKSF and KBLX. "Smooth jazz," as radio calls it, often features jazz instrumentalists and soul singers performing together, though too often watered down to a thin pabulum. In Dave and Zoë's hands, however, the blend proved plenty powerful.

Dave, his clean-shaven head, shirt, and slacks all radiating an orange glow under Yoshi's yellow and red stage lights, kicked off the set with the band's four-man rhythm section on an original tune titled "King of Things." With bassist Nate Pitts and drummer Tommie Bradford locking into a fat funk groove, the saxophonist negotiated the song's serpentine head in molten tones. He paused at times for guitarist Cedric Dennis to answer his cries with volume-warp moans, then ripped into a series of improvised choruses filled with impassioned Coltranesque overtones.

The opening selection briefly segued into Weather Report's "Teen Town" before Dave brought his sister and harmony singers Bryan Dyer and Kisha Griffin to the stage for "Could You Ever," a rumba-flavored soul song from Zoë's Cleveland Lounge days. Nicely color coordinated with her older brother in a dress of orange, auburn, and black, her hair a yellow and brown frizz, Zoë sang in a resonant contralto reminiscent of English R&B singer Des'ree. "Could you ever be a mountain watching over me?" she asked urgently, adding different gospel melismas with each repetition of the hook, though her intonation occasionally faltered. The rhythm section then dropped suddenly, as Dave tore into a tenor solo and Zoë clapped a clave before pianist Mike Aaberg began pumping a salsa pattern. Zoë eventually added some scat to the syncopated fury.

The set also included two originals by Zoë, two by Stevie Wonder -- "Contusion" (a largely instrumental number with tricky shifts of time signature) and "Shoo Be Doo" -- and "I Can't Make You Love Me," a Bonnie Raitt ballad with lots of sustains that allowed Zoë to showcase her warmth of tone. Dave switched to soprano sax at times and on a couple of tunes to EWI, a wind-blown synthesizer from which he produced a deep, annoying buzz. (A baritone sax would have worked better.) **ZADELL**'s brightest moments came on the vamps of many tunes. As Dave blew with abandon, Zoë joined in wordlessly, leaping registers with ease and landing on pitch each time - achieving a rarefied form of musical interaction in which common blood is surely a major factor.

-Lee Hildebrand