

KAHIL EL'ZABAR

# A LONG FRIENDSHIP GROWS DEEPER

**K**ahil El'Zabar and David Murray have been exchanging spiritual energy for more than 40 years. When they met in 1975 in Chicago, El'Zabar was a percussionist and vocalist deeply involved with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, and Murray was a tenor saxophonist on a road trip as part of an independent study program at California's Pomona College.

"We met on a basketball court, and it was just a real good vibration," El'Zabar recalled during an early July video chat that also included Murray. "From the first time we met, we were able to play together on the same team. We had the ability to see each other's spaces."

Murray has vivid memories of that initial meeting, and of the first time he saw El'Zabar perform. "He had that beam up to the universe, that beam of stream-of-consciousness," Murray said before directing his comments directly to his friend. "Sometimes, you get on that wavelength, when the words are hooking straight up with all the universe, and you're like the guy that gets struck by lightning."

It was years later that El'Zabar, now 66, and Murray, 65, would record together, but their discographies eventually became heavily intertwined. Among the many projects on which they have collaborated are the duo albums *Golden Sea* (1989), *One World Family* (2000) and *We Is: Live At The Bop Shop* (2004). They also have logged thousands of road miles as a duo.

That shared history certainly informs their musical rapport, as evidenced on the new album *Kahil El'Zabar's Spirit Groove Ft. David Murray*, released by the London-based label Spiritmuse. For this quartet project, the veterans teamed up with musicians from a younger generation: Emma Dayhuff (bass) and Justin Dillard (piano, organ, synthesizer).

The program—which includes live and studio recordings made in Chicago during 2019—mainly consists of El'Zabar's compositions, with an emphasis on extended jams. In addition to his authoritative vocals, the leader utilizes an array of percussion instruments, including a drum set, cajon, kalimba and foot tambourine.

The band burrows into a deep groove on "In The Spirit," with Dillard's poignant piano lines and Murray's potent tenor gracefully complementing El'Zabar's passionate vocals: "In the spirit/ Opening your third eye/ Let your dreams, let them fly." Elsewhere, Murray fuels his tune "Necktar" with an insistent tenor riff as the leader chants, "Open up the door." The longtime collaborators conclude the program with a transcendent concert version of "One World Family," which they co-wrote years ago.

"When we decided to do this *Spirit Groove* record, it seemed like ['One World Family' conveyed] an appropriate message for a higher ideal," El'Zabar said. "Some people think it's too lofty to believe that there can be any kind of collective empathy in the world—where we can't see that we actually are all connected, when it's obvious by the history of DNA that we all come from the same ancestors. We are connected biologically. And [we wanted] to create a spiritual connection using art as that bridge and anchor. That's why we thought 'One World Family' would fit for this project."

Murray discussed the adrenaline rush he felt during the live, 15-minute rendition of the tune. "You think the song is going to end, as I'm kind of going in and out, and in and out," he said. "But it just *can't* end, because there's just too much feeling, too much spirit groove going on. It just brings

Kahil El'Zabar (left) enlisted David Murray for his latest leader date.



AVE PILDAS PHOTOGRAPHY

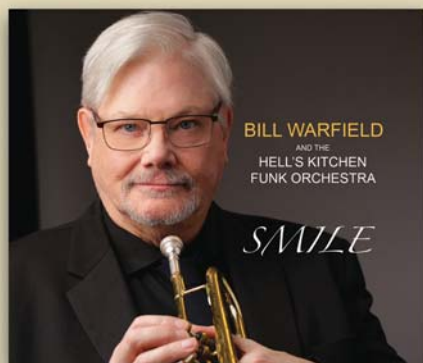
me back and I have to play a little more, and then I pushed Kahil to do a little more singing."

Whether they are onstage or in a Zoom interview, these two longtime friends radiate a deep mutual respect. "I enjoy working with David so much because it makes me prepare, musically," El'Zabar explained. "I work hard, in terms of practicing and being ready for the telepathy, because in the moment, we don't know exactly what's going to happen. But the more that you prepare—and work on your abilities as a musician—it helps you adapt. So, I'm thankful for that relationship, because I'm always growing musically inside of it."

Thea Ioannou and Mark Gallagher, the producers of the radio show *MadOnJazz*, founded Spiritmuse in 2018, and they consider El'Zabar to be the label's flagship artist. In addition to the 2019 release of *Be Known: Ancient/Future/Music*, by El'Zabar's Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, the label plans to reissue a Ritual Trio disc recorded by the percussionist alongside his now-departed AACM colleagues Lester Bowie (trumpet) and Malachi Favors (bass). Also in the works is a disc by vocalist Dwight Tribble's band Cosmic Vibrations, as well as a project from multi-instrumentalist David Ornette Cherry, the son of trumpeter and DownBeat Hall of Fame inductee Don Cherry.

—Bobby Reed

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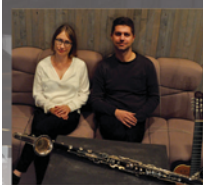


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## INDIE LIFE

### JOYCE GRANT



# EMBRACING FAMILY HISTORY

For 22 years, vocalist Joyce Grant had a nearly uninterrupted weekly engagement at Zingari Ristorante, located in San Francisco's Club Donatello hotel. Then the global landscape shifted, due to the twin upheavals of the coronavirus pandemic and the public protests over the killing of George Floyd on May 25.

"This hatred has always been there—it's been going on my whole lifetime," Grant said, referring to racist attacks on African Americans. "You would think in 2020 that we would have gotten passed this," she continued, via phone from her home in Vallejo, California. "But, nope."

Four months prior to that interview, Grant and her pianist/music director Doug McKeehan were onstage at Zingari, entertaining a steady flow of regulars and tourists with an ease cultivated during more than two decades together on the bandstand.

Music has always been a part of Grant's family life. She is the paternal great-great grandniece of Scott Joplin (c. 1868–1917), her sister was a music major and her cousin worked as a music teacher. Even today, Grant's mother occasionally comes out to sing guest duets. Gifted with a flexible mezzo-soprano range, Grant's vocal style lives up to the tagline of her 2010 album, *In The Morning*: "a little jazz, r&b and a little bit of me."

Following the first of three sets of standards, pop hits and originals—including the melancholy title track to her new album, *Surrounded By Blue*

(Blujazz)—Grant and McKeehan sat down to discuss the disc.

"I've worked with Joyce for a long time, and I had some songs that were in the back in my head that I always wanted to hear her sing," McKeehan said.

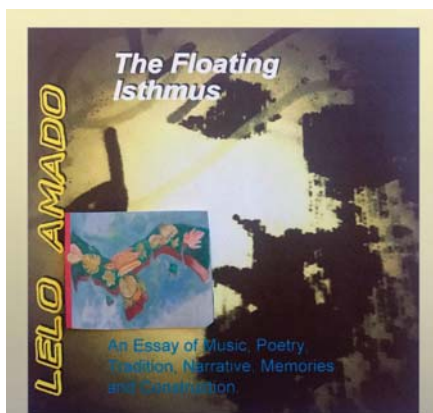
Regarding a dramatic rendition of The Beatles' "Help," McKeehan said, "I wanted to arrange that as a slow, gospel kind of song, like Aretha [Franklin] might have done it. I also had a couple of my originals I could hear her singing." From a version of "(Back Home Again In) Indiana" that incorporates modern vocal processing to an unexpectedly breezy reading of "Tenderly," Grant and McKeehan offer fresh interpretations of familiar favorites.

Growing up in the East Bay, Grant first sang in church. But it was a pair of Hollywood movies that sparked the idea of seriously pursuing performance as a career. Grant recalled that seeing Diana Ross portray Billie Holiday in the 1972 biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* made her say to herself, "This is what I want do."

The soundtrack to the 1973 film *The Sting*, which featured Marvin Hamlisch's versions of Scott Joplin compositions, was also key to Grant's aspirations: "My father would tell us about Scott Joplin from the time we were very, very young. I'd just go, 'OK. That's nice. Whatever.' Then that movie, *The Sting*, came out, and that's when it clicked."

—Yoshi Kato





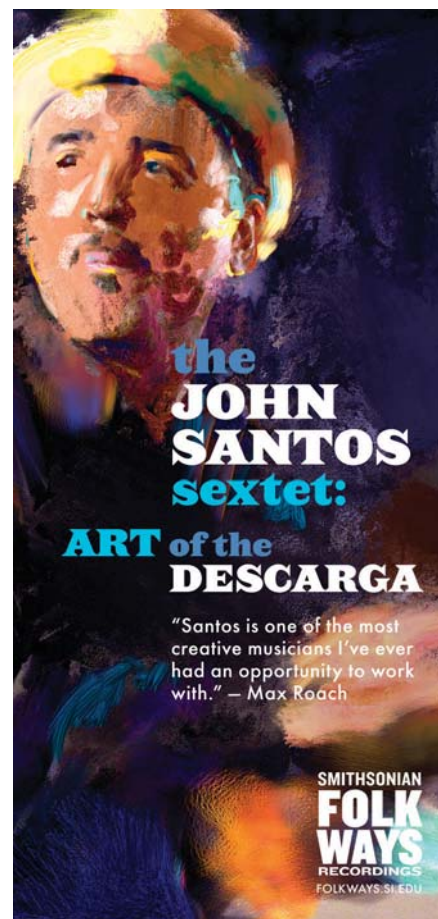
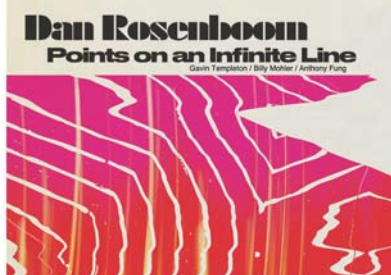
Being a newcomer and doing everything on your own is a big task, but the end result is one's own personal and spiritual growth. This work is an essay of music and poetry laid in narrative and tradition from the arrival of workers who built the Panama Canal. This is also extended to the fauna and flora from the tropics, who reached to the Goddess of the Amazon, whom called at the waters that protect the Earth.

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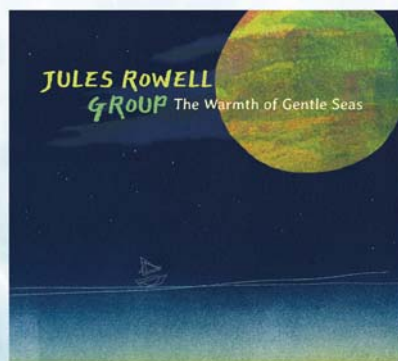


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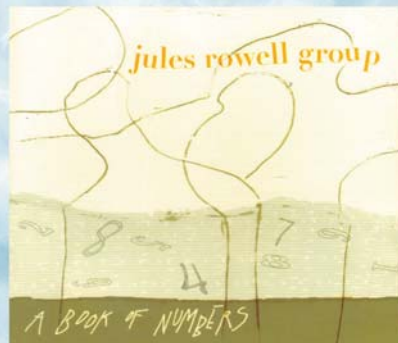


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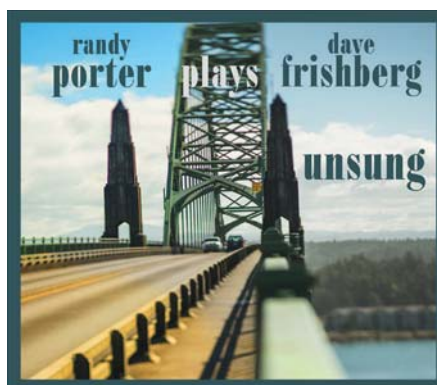
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