



Steel Appeal Pan Jazz Outpouring from Kalabash

by Sarah B. Hood

In 1998 Nigerian legend King Sunny Ade released a recording called "Odù", named for a ceramic container used "for storing important cultural items." In a similar spirit, Toronto's premiere pan jazz ensemble decided to name themselves "Kalabash" when they formed in 1993. As the band's website (www.kalabash.com) explains it, the Kalabash is the gourd from which good things are poured out in abundance, the "gift from Orehu the spirit of water, inside that sacred shell our souls dance, weaving Antillian rhythms and colors into the never-ending jazz fabric..."

Kalabash was, in a sense, born out of Caribana™, since the group was founded to perform at the festival's 1993 launch. But "We enjoyed playing so much that we decided to stay together," says percussionist Tony Pierre. All the members have other - and impressive - musical commitments, but they wanted to stay together as Kalabash to pursue a jazz sound inspired by the folk and popular music of the English-speaking Caribbean, and, in particular, to explore the possibilities of steelpan as a lead voice. "We don't limit ourselves to the eastern Caribbean," points out Pierre. "We have a Latin-tinged sound; we also have a funky jazz sound," he says, naming Grover Washington and Yellow Jackets as key influences.

Besides Pierre, the founding members were Wilson Laurencin (drums); Orin Isaacs (bass); David Williams (keyboard); Demo Cates (sax) and Darren Sheppard (steel drums). Today only Sheppard and Pierre remain of the original membership, although past members still contribute when they can. Largely because of Orin Isaac's commitments to Mike Bullard's television show, Richard Brown now plays bass with the band. Other substitutions include Colleen Allen on sax and flute ("Demo just signed a second season with *The Lion King*; he subs for Mufasa."); Andrew Craig for Williams, and Mark McLean for Laurencin. Music fans will notice that Kalabash alumni represent a heavy-hitting roster of music talent, all of whom have played with some of the best in the business. After several years of gigging at events like the du Maurier Downtown Jazz Festival and the Beaches Jazz Festival and in venues like Judy Jazz and the BamBoo Club, plus appearances on Bravo! and BET, Kalabash has finally acceded to the pleas of their fans and released a CD, the self-titled "Kalabash". If you had to pick one word to describe the sound of their first release, that word might be "insouciance". From the laid-back and sassy "Goat Mout" to the sultry and soul-tinged "Pan Tonite" (both of which were written by Sheppard and Williams), "Kalabash" lays out eleven original tracks of music that manage to be both complex and carefree: intricate, sophisticated and satisfying. It's available through www.indiepool.com.