

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

"Keep Them Close": The Musical Melange Of Kalabash

By Dwain Wellington Rattray
Guest Writer

Imagine an ambrosial initial note of brush caressing cymbal, followed by the infusion of bongos, congas and a synthesizer; coat that sound with steelpan, drums and electric bass; add a saxophone, to the stew and serve hot!

This is the reality of the first few minutes of "Mina" – it is the introductory tune on *Keep Them Close*, the newest album by the jazz sextet known as Kalabash.

The seven-minute opener also serves as a microcosm of the ten-song album, which was launched at Jazz Bistro, located in the heart of downtown Toronto.

Kalabash is self-described as "a contemporary jazz sextet that focuses on us-

group, he points out that Kalabash is "able to give a broad perspective of music of the Caribbean."

Fearon goes on to praise the "sophistication of the composition" found on the album. "It takes the audience through a variety of moods and sentiments," he says. "Each of the musicians are outstanding in their own right," says Fearon.

In bringing them together, he points out that "the sum of the parts exceeds the totality of each individual performer, allowing them to crescendo as a group."

Culture and art and varied music are not strangers to the multicultural city that is Toronto, neither is great jazz in any of its forms.

What is unique about Kalabash is that it is the only jazz sextet that uses the steelpan as a lead voice, sometimes in combination with other instruments. The resulting notes are nothing short of euphoric.

The group's leader, Anthony Pierre, says, that Kalabash "Sees itself as representing all the jazz fusion forms."

Taking us along for the journey, the group "explore[s] all the genres of jazz that have come out of Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America," says Pierre.

Crossing cultural lines with syncopated rhythms, Kalabash treated a mixed crowd with the pieces from the album during the launch. While Jazz Bistro is relatively new to 251 Victoria Street, the location is certainly not new to jazz, having served as a popular jazz haunt since as early as 1990, when it was called, Top o' The Senator.

Now revitalized by part-time jazz crooner, Colin Hunter, and his wife, Joan Hunter, the venue is poised to revitalise what is seen by many as a waning jazz legacy.

In speaking with Mrs. Hunter (who plays congas under the tutelage of Kalabash's Joaquin Nunez Hidalgo), it is clear that she is excited to have the CD launch at Jazz Bistro, and her emotions can be summed up in one simple phrase, "I love it," she says.

Her sentiments were echoed by all with whom this writer spoke. "I think I've learned a little bit of the variety of jazz music," says Damon Allen, former CFL quarterback and member of the Canadian Football Hall of Fame. "The timing and the smoothness of the music, I loved it."

Therein rests the beauty of this night of musical bliss, which is duplicated from the album. The repertoire range is all-encompassing and "pleasantly surprising," according to pianist, songwriter, arranger and producer, Eddie Bullen. "They did a wonderful job," says Bullen, who went on to point out that, there were "some really great musicians on stage." In speaking about the CD he says, with smile, "I think I'm going to be enjoying this."

The question though is this: "How does steelpan, in jazz, fare when critiqued by another player of pan?" A product of pan legacy and accomplished pannist, Earl La Pierre Jr., is visibly excited when he says,



Kalabash in action: from left to right -- Colleen Allen on saxes, flute and clarinet; Andrew Stewart on electric bass; Gareth Burgess on tenor and alto steelpan; and Joaquin Nunez Hidalgo on drums, cajon, timbales and percussion. Missing from photo are band leader, Anthony Pierre, on congas, bongos and percussion and Michael Shand on acoustic piano and synthesizers. Photo by Avital Zemer.

"Excellent show; fantastic show! I have my CD, I'm gonna be jammin' it in the car as soon as I [am going] home."

The list of accolades could, and does, continue. What is certain, is that Kalabash cannot wait another decade before releasing a third album – we hope, we beg. As lovers of music in general and admirers of jazz in particular, we must demand to see more of this group on stage and hear more of them on our CD players. Whether we are connoisseurs or lay-people of jazz, and regardless of our genre preference, this

album serenades the soul.

If, as a city, we want to foster the creation of new material every few years, we must support groups that continue to bless us with their individual and collective talents. The artistry and the music is not only for our entertainment, but also for our education.

Let us then take pride in our heritage and ensure our legacy by embracing those who create it on a daily basis. Kalabash has given us a simple task in the album title -- let us *Keep Them Close*. **PRIDE**



In the groove: Kalabash leader, Anthony Pierre. Photo by Avital Zemer.

ing the steel drum as a lead voice in a jazz ensemble, and experimenting with the layering of rich jazz harmonies over the folk and popular rhythms of the English-speaking Caribbean, like Calypso, Soca, Rapso and Reggae."

Existing in one form or another since 1993, this is the group's second album – the 2001 album was called simply, Kalabash. Their honed craft and obvious expertise shines brilliantly in this new album, which will leave listeners in awe and admiration.

Keep Them Close features musicians who are far from novices with their varied instruments. The players are Anthony Pierre on congas, bongos and percussion; Andrew Stewart on electric bass; Joaquin Nunez Hidalgo on drums, cajon, timbales and percussion; Michael Shand on acoustic piano and synthesizers; Colleen Allen on saxes, flute and clarinet; with Gareth Burgess on tenor and alto steelpan. Together, these six create a musical melange worthy of any musical library, and certainly worthy of consideration for any jazz anthology of note.

Quietly enjoying the night was Gervan Fearon, Ryerson University's dean at The G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education. A longtime follower of the

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