Grover Kemble and Za Zu Zaz Reunion

May 27 at Minstrel Coffeehouse/part of the Folk Project, Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, 21 Normandy Heights Road, Morristown

Story by Linda Lobdell | Photos by Tony Mottola | Co-Editors Jersey Jazz

In a room that’s not too big, not too small, every seat was filled May 27 for a rare reunion of Za Zu Zaz, a group that existed for about six years starting in the late 1970s. In spite of that relatively brief existence, this band became legendary, playing in local nooks and crannies as well as opening for the likes of Count Basie. Swing classics form a core of their repertoire, but their range is much wider in both original compositions and covers of classic pop and jazz and more. That’s why they were invited to show their wares in a space that hosts 200+ mostly acoustic Folk Project concerts each year. So many people have memories of seeing them, not sure-where and not sure-when, but they had a way of sticking with us, and were ahead of their time. They eased out just before the swing “revival” officially swept in.

This band includes Grover Kemble and Machan “Margaret” Taylor on guitar and vocals, Dave Miller on bass and vocals (lush three-part harmonies are a trademark), and for this reunion, sitting in for John Gatti on keyboards and Tim Solook on drums, were our friend pianist Jerry Vezza and drummer Jay Dittamo. Each has an impressive resume of solo work and significant collaborations.

Kemble’s endearing personality and the comfortable wise-cracking of old friends set the tone as they launch with “Jersey Bounce” (Kemble lives in Morris County.)

Kemble, in white Cuban shirt, white slacks, two-toned shoes and stingy brim white hat, declares, “We need to shake off some rust. We did this song 33 years ago. It’s a Cab Calloway tune: “I Wanna Rock.” Its “za zu

Grover Kemble, Machan Taylor, David Miller

zaz” lyric suggests where the inspiration for the band’s moniker. We’re hooked.

“This is a real reunion. When I first got the call, I called everybody, and everybody was like ‘Fun!’ ‘Outrageous!’ I love you, man!’ but then when it came time to rehearse all the old tunes, it was like ‘is that really an E7 minus 13 minus 9…??’”

Machan, lithe and stunning in a black dress, is a gifted songwriter. She introduces “our smashing world hit record:” “Everywhere I Go” — a bossa nova song of devotion with an oceanic vibe. In “Outside In” Machan’s multi-octave vocal riffs soar. Grover says “Machan is letting it all hang out.”

He’s jealous of Machan’s echo effect on the prior song and boasts he has something better than that. “Now, this is a folk club (“It used to be!” — rowdy shouts from the crowd)... I want to enrage Mike Agranoff (Minstrel bookingmeister) so I brought a toy... it’s called the Saturator! It has a button on it that says DISTORTION. And the button on the right of that says “MORE.” As he strums the opening riff of “In A Gadda Da Vida,” he claims it “increases your testosterone level, no need for pills.”

“Here’s a Beatles song that we’ve messed up pretty good” — a winning swing arrangement of “The Things We Said Today.”

Grover: “This is one of my favorite songs that Machan wrote when we were going together” — he chokes back only half-feigned sobs — and she slides into a cha cha rhythm for “Daydreaming.” Hand-played drums, a soulful Jerry Vezza solo on the Yamaha keyboard, and Kemble plays a heartfelt guitar solo.

“This is a folk club! We’ve gotta do a little singalong. But you Folk Project people have to help because the Zaz people are slow on singalong. Machan quips, “This is turning

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into ’A Mighty Wind.’” He tests us with a
lyric: “I’m gonna lay down my burdens...”
“Down by the riverside,” we correctly
croon. This song’s about a wife and a
mother-in-law being on vacation and he’s gonna roll back the rugs
and invite some cats over to go wild — the hard-driving “Swingin
’Til the Girls Come Home.”

“This is one of my tunes,” says Grover. “I am putting on a capo on in
a folk club. This is not allowed in a jazz club!” They take a moment
to practice the lick and then treat us to the Latin-flavored “Love is
Just a Game Some People Play.”

The second set brings more treats. “Jumpin’ at the Woodside” has
Grover singing “I wanna blow, I wanna blow” and staggering as he
grips his heart Jimmy Durante-style. Someone has requested the
gorgeous Lambert Hendricks and Ross number, “Centerpiece.”

Grover explains he’s retired from 25 years of being recreational
director at Greystone Park, the now-closed Morris County
psychiatric hospital. “It has an effect on one. I’m not doing much of
anything. Looking at scrapbooks from my glory days:”

A song “written before the women’s movement,” “Home Cookin’”
is loads of fun, and a Machan Taylor composition “Every Day I
Love You More” features lush atmospheric chords in a pop-jazzy
cha cha rhythm.

“We used to play a lot of strange places, like in 1978. I barely
remember it, a disco and punk place — we didn’t fit in. It was
called Guido’s or Julio’s.” Grover also recalls a scary biker bar in
Maine. “We had a lot of fans, a cult following. The owners said
‘What IS this stuff, man?’ — but you guys would come!”

“Twenty Years Ago” is a Kemble song written for a prior
reunion more than a decade ago. Kemble sings it wistfully —
his clowning is more than matched by his depth of feeling
— a sweet, genuine bit of work.

Kemble steps down from the stage and works his way through the
crowd for “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing).”
An encore is called for. Machan jokes, “We can use the practice,”
and they wish us so long with “This Could Be the Start of
Something Big.” Grover says, “We’ll do this again some time.
It gave us a big lift.” We hope!