

Klezmer At The Apollo?

David Krakauer and ex-James Brown alum Fred Wesley meld Jewish music and funk at famed concert hall.

by George Robinson 04/30/2008



Apollo bound: Fred Wesley and David Krakauer team up with SoCalled (left) to form Abraham Inc., a funk-klez fusion.

In a city full of iconic venues, places whose names are filled with magic, there are few New York locations that resonate as powerfully as the Apollo Theater. The Apollo has been the launching pad for countless great careers in jazz, soul, rhythm and blues, musical theater, gospel and klezmer.

Klezmer?

OK, the Apollo hasn't been known for its role in klezmer in the past, probably because it likely hasn't had one. Until now, anyway.

On Saturday, May 3, when David Krakauer, SoCalled and Klezmer Madness hit the fabled Apollo stage with one of the great figures in African-American music, trombonist-composer-arranger Fred Wesley. The rafters of the old house will rock to the sounds of Jewish music.

"I'm sure there are a lot of ghosts wandering around backstage at the Apollo," Krakauer says, sitting back in a booth in a Midtown diner on a sunny spring morning. "I'm thinking of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald at the Apollo Amateur Night. And I know that when we hit the stage for the sound check, Fred will offer a lot of spontaneous remarks and reminiscences."

Wesley is always happy to offer some recollections of his many years of work as James Brown's musical director, his stint with George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, his time with the Count Basie Orchestra and, most recently, with his own jazz combo. And, yes, the Apollo does open the door to his memory quite nicely.

"I've only been at the Apollo with James Brown and a couple of other times," Wesley said in a telephone interview from his home in South Carolina. "With JB it was always a happening. People would line up around the block. We did six shows a day. I remember I got fined for having blood on my shirt once. I was playing so hard, I blew a blister on my lip."

Wesley will be forever identified with the funk sounds of Brown and Clinton, although his musical home is more in bebop. Klezmer, on the other hand, is terra incognita.

"It was brand new to me," he said jovially. "David came to me and said, 'I want to do something funky and klezmatic.' I was considering how it would work with funk. It was different. I was trying to put funk into klezmer but the way he explained it, you do funk for funk's sake and klezmer for klezmer's sake. It works out real good."

Krakauer is just as enthusiastic of the collaboration between him, SoCalled and Wesley.

"As in all collaborations, when it's someone you don't know there's a certain amount of nervousness," the clarinetist said. "But when we met for the first time in October 2006 there was an incredible chemistry between the three of us, and we just started playing. It has been a very easy-going musical process."

The genesis of the project, now called Abraham Inc., was a conversation that SoCalled, a popular deejay and hip hop artist, had with a drummer friend who mentioned that a mutual friend had been gigging with Wesley. When he heard that name, SoCalled's ears pricked up. He suggested a possible collaboration to Krakauer and the clarinetist left at the idea.

"We tracked down Fred, who was coming to New York in December '05," he says. "We met at the Carnegie Deli. Fred had seen our Web site and liked it, but he told me, 'I have no idea what this is about.'"

By the following October, they were playing together and, David recalls laughing, "Fred said, 'Wait 'til Maceo [Parker, his longtime collaborator in the James Brown band] hears about this!'"

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The trio has performed together with Krakauer's band Klezmer Madness several times since then, but the Apollo gig is its first official appearance as Abraham Inc.

"I want to stress where this project is coming from and going to," Krakauer says. "When I heard Socalled's Hip-Hop Seder for the first time, in 2001, I was skeptical. But I was blown away by how funky it was, how interesting and inventive. I brought him on board because I felt we were heading in the same direction musically. This seems to me a natural extension of that. This is a process that's been going on for seven years."

As Wesley noted above, it's not just a matter of slapping two (or three) disparate, dissimilar styles together with some kind of musical scotch tape.

Krakauer says, "We are very conscious of not pasting styles together. This is about making a creative synthesis. And that's a question of making the right choices of repertoire. It's a great meeting of different people, cultures and points of view. That's the message I want to convey to the world."

So Abraham Inc. is definitely going to be more than a one-time event, although the choice of May 3, which would have been James Brown's 75th birthday, is particularly serendipitous.

Wesley said, "We look to tour with Abraham Inc. We do want to do some tours next year. With the new album coming out it should be a good tour."

But first they have to conquer the Apollo. On that score, Wesley is optimistic.

"You have to work hard at the Apollo," he said. "But you have great audiences and they drive you to go farther."

And, of course, there are all those friendly ghosts listening in.