

Magic Misik

Zili Misik set to party at the Dyke March

by **Brian Jewell**
arts editor

Some traditions are the result of planning and hard work, like the 14th annual Boston Dyke March. Others arise by happy circumstance, like the continuing, growing presence of the joyful music of Zili Misik at the march. For six years, members of the all-female ensemble have helped set the tone with their celebratory sound of African roots music. Now, for the second year in a row the beloved band is the headlining act.

"We just started showing up with some drums," recalls band-leader Kera Washington. "We played percussion as we marched. Then the next year there was a generator, so we brought our guitarist. Every year we just brought more of the band."

Playing at a grassroots community celebration is in line with Zili Misik's mission of bridging cultures through

the music of the African diaspora. "This is all about bringing people together through music," Washington continues. "Even if you know nothing about this music, it hits you and you open yourself up to it."

A teacher with degrees in ethnomusicology, Washington has studied music from an early age. But it wasn't until college that she fully understood that she wanted to be a musician. "I was taking a class on folk music of the Caribbean," she explains, "and my professor gave me drum lessons. Once I heard those Haitian rhythms I knew this was the instrument for me."

Washington soon made another important connection with the music. "I didn't know much about the history of Haiti, but when you learn the traditional music you learn about the culture. You learn what cultural riches Haiti has given to the region."

Exploring cultural heritages, particularly the cultural connections sown by the African diaspora, became a passion for Washington and eventually the founding principle



HELLO WORLD MUSIC The women of Zili Misik

of Zili Roots, the predecessor of Zili Misik.

"The rhythms that went to Brazil also went to Cuba and Haiti," she explains, "and you hear that in the music that has come along since. So there are natural connections to be made." Drawing on West African traditions that were fragmented by the slave trade, Zili Misik weaves together reggae, mizik razin, son, blues and more to create a sound that's both traditional and contemporary.

Despite the group's creativity in uniting these geographically disparate sounds, Washington shies away from labels like songwriter or composer, stressing that Zili Misik's music is folk

and roots based. "I think it's important to start with traditional songs," Washington says, "because it's important to be part of a continuum that began before us and will continue long after us. So most of our songs will begin with a traditional song as a foundation, and we create more contemporary sound around it."

Taking inspiration from groups like Sweet Honey in the Rock, Washington's original vision was for an all-female group. In an industry where women may be told they "play well for a girl," Washington sensed that Zili could serve as a safe harbor

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for women. In fact, she and lead vocalist Radjulaïr got so comfortable that they felt no qualms in adding men to the group when the lineup changed. Sadly, that led to another revelation.

"At one point Rajdaulari and I were the only female musicians in Zili," Washington sighs. "I still remember a rehearsal where we were working out the changes on a melody, and the guys just ignored the two of us. I thought, wow, this is my band. Why am I invisible?"

Dissatisfied, Washington effectively ended the group when she went to Brown for grad school. But those Haitian rhythms were still playing in her head. Two years ago she set out to reform the group and started looking for accomplished female musicians. Crediting "Berklee and Craig's List," Washington found that in just a short period of time the Boston music scene had changed.

"It was just the right time," she marvels. "It used

to be hard to find really good female musicians, let alone ones interested in this kind of music. Then I met these Berklee students and alums who were excellent musicians and wanted to learn new things. And they've come also with their own musical specialties and desires."

Since then the path has been surprisingly smooth for the group, renamed Zili Misik to signal its newfound vitality and commitment. The ensemble plays around town regularly, is recording its second CD, and was recently voted Best World Music Group in *The Boston Phoenix's* Best Music Poll.

"I feel really blessed," says Washington, who is eager to get the party started at the Dyke March this Friday. "If you don't like our music, just wait for the next song," she laughs. "We have something for everyone. We'll get people dancing. I pass percussion instruments out to folks. It's fun!"

Wrapping up the sales pitch, she quips, "And we're not bad looking, either!"

For more information on *The Dyke March* visit www.bostondykemarch.com. Visit Zili Misik online at www.zilimisik.com.



"NOT BAD LOOKING EITHER" les belles femmes de Zili Misik