

It's all in the

Mix

The  
pop  
potpourri  
of  
Casselberry-  
Dupré



Leigh H. Mosley

By Darcy DeMarco

FROM THE MOMENT THAT JUDITH CASSELBERRY and Jaque Dupré of Casselberry-Dupré take the stage, even newcomers to their show know that something special is about to happen. And it does. As soon as they launch into Dory Previn's "Did Jesus Have a Baby Sister?" people are on their feet, dancing and swaying in the aisles. In minutes, these two black women dressed in traditional African garments and armed only with a rhythm guitar, a gourd instrument called a guiro, and two powerful voices, have done what many performers are unable to do with electric guitars, laser shows, backup singers and video screens: give the audience music that moves their feet, their minds and their hearts.

Drawn together in their teens through a shared interest in music and social-political ideas, Casselberry and Dupré have been working ever since to prove that popular, danceable music needn't be synonymous with meaningless lyrics or limited to three electronically programmed sounds. Drawing upon diverse musical backgrounds and their own personal experiences, they have created a constantly evolving sound that shows that boogie and brains can go hand in hand.

Although the duo initially shared a common interest in folk music, each has her own musical background. "I grew up in the church," Dupré recalls, "listening to gospel and spirituals. I also listened to Claire Wood, the Staples Singers, Mahalia Jackson and James Cleveland. When I became interested in folk music, I listened to Odetta and Miriam Makeba." She was also influenced by Caribbean music, such as calypso.

Casselberry says she grew up listening to contemporary black music, such as "big band jazz, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Nancy Wilson and Sarah Vaughan. I also

enjoyed classical music. My older sister introduced me to Aretha Franklin."

**Musical communication:** When they met as students at Brooklyn's Erasmus High School in 1967, Dupré was the featured soloist in her church choir and considered somewhat of a ham. By this time, she had found that singing was the most fulfilling and rewarding thing in her life. Casselberry, on the other hand, had sung in church choirs, but had never gone solo.

Although they performed together in high school and immediately afterward with the New York Free Theater and at various colleges, much of their work was with other bands. It was not until 1979 that they decided to direct their energies into the duo.

"When you work with someone and you can communicate with them musically on different levels, you try to hang onto that," Casselberry explains. The communication often includes percussionist Annette A. Aguilar and guitarist/bassist Toshi Reagon, who have performed with them for the past two years. "We started working with Annette seven or eight years ago," says Casselberry, "and with Toshi three or four years ago. Annette plays Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban and classical percussion, while Toshi plays lead and rhythm guitar, folk, R&B and blues. We made the decision for that sound on the album, so now they tour with us."

That sound is a rich blend of reggae, soul, folk, African, gospel and jazz sounds (to name a few) that can be heard in every song. "The sound can be anything," says Dupré. "Our influence of who we are as Afro-American women comes through in the sound. We remain as traditional as we want to, and as contemporary as we want. The blues can bleed into the country and it's fine."

**Subconscious politics:** Casselberry says that they choose songs that they can feel, or that have a message they identify with.

If the lyrics of a particular song appeal to them, but the music doesn't, they will rearrange the song so that the music will have as strong an impact as the words.

While their material has always been political, Casselberry says that they never consciously decided to do political songs. As black women growing up in New York in the '60s, both she and Dupré had absorbed the tenets of social consciousness. "I'm sure it conceptualized in our subconscious," says Dupré. "Maturing during the Civil Rights movement, with the sit-ins, church songs in that role became political." Casselberry agrees. "The church in Afro-American culture has always been where we could say what was going on. We've always communicated with each other through music. A lot of people today don't know the real meaning of the old field songs, the old spirituals."

Despite the political vacuity of the mainstream culture in the past decade, Casselberry-Dupré has continued to gain popularity with both critics and the public. Their 1986 album, *City Down*, was chosen as a "Best of" by the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times* and Tower Records' *Pulse Magazine*. The National Association of Independent Record Dealers chose it as the Reggae Album of the Year. And performances at the Michigan Womyn's Festival and Sisterfire, and at theaters and clubs nationwide, have drawn standing ovations from an increasingly mixed audience of women and men of all races.

Although their albums can often be found in the "women's music" bin at record stores, Dupré says that they do not want their music to be categorized. "We don't like to be pegged into one type of music or sound," she says. "For a long time, we have done a crossover of different music that we like. We are not inhibited in what we can and cannot do.

"We are always aware of our audience," she continues. "We try to be sure that

everyone has been included. We want to keep that as a reality." Choosing material ranging from Bob Marley's "Positive Vibration" to the Eagles' "Take It to the Limit" to Yoruban spiritual invocations, and infusing it with a voice straight from the heart and soul keeps the duo from getting pegged into a specific genre.

"Our message," explains Casselberry, "is not really political, but personal and social: not buying what we [Afro-Americans] have been told about who we are as a people. We have an open message for everyone. We can talk about human rights, AIDS, across the board; we can play a women's festival and then play at Croton-on-the-Hudson, and the message is the same."

**Fame and content:** Both women believe that they can become well-known without compromising the message or content of their material. "I remember the first time I realized there was an audience for this kind of music," Dupré says. "I'd been to concerts—Mahalia Jackson, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary—and many people tried to give the impression that political music was just a passing thing. Then, in California, J. Casselberry took me to see Sweet Honey in the Rock, and they were singing these songs...and I realized that, yes, there is an audience, and that women can sing the [political] music too."

Although the Casselberry-Dupré message is for everyone, the duo does have a special commitment to people of color. "We also have to talk about the black issues, and they're not the dominant issues in the white women's music scene," explains Casselberry. "They're not a priority. I can't expect the women's music industry to want to hear reggae or gospel, or to want to hear about South Africa."

While the prospect of being a political black female duo in a notoriously sexist, white-male dominated music industry might seem daunting to some, both women say they have encountered few obstacles in their path. "I was always encouraged to use my head and my heart and to go for it," Casselberry says, recalling her childhood. This spirit led the women to move to Boston two years ago to attend the Berklee College of Music. While Dupré is studying songwriting and vocal techniques, Casselberry has decided to focus on recording.

Though they acknowledge the challenges before them, Casselberry and Dupré are optimistic about attaining their goals. "We plan to continue to perform, and to put out another album (tentatively to be released this spring). We also want to do some videos and children's records, and there's a filmmaker interested in doing a full-length film with us," Casselberry says. "And I want to produce 'Jaque Dupré, Great Gospel Songster.'" A long-term aspiration is to travel the world in search of music from different cultures. "We want to hear the real music, and not listen to the convoluted, watered-down versions we get here," Casselberry says.

She continues, "There are two kinds of music: good and bad. People like to hear all kinds of stuff. This idea that people only want to hear a certain thing comes from radio programmers and marketing people. The role of the artist in society is to be on the cutting edge," Casselberry says. "What the artists are doing reflects the cultural direction. It is important to resist falling into a mold."

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