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### Ambiance par excellence

By Dwight Hobbes

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Looking for a new and improved, most relaxing way to spend your Sunday? Swing by South Minneapolis' The Favor Cafe any weekend when Wenso Ashby, featuring Zsame, provide the live entertainment. Actually, it's called Soul Food Sunday (complete with biscuits and grits) and goes from Noon until 3 pm with mellow music against an artfully appointed backdrop. This is ambiance par excellence. Here's the real good news. Unless they're playing someplace else, pretty much every Sunday you get to enjoy sets by Wenso Ashby featuring Zsame, laying down about as splendid a smooth jazz groove as you're ever apt to come by.

A week or so ago, my first visit to Soul Food Sunday indeed was an encouraging one. I'd never been to the restaurant and was pleased to encounter such an establishment

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where the chef definitely knew what he was doing and the superb wait staff -- courteously attentive, never pushy -- personified understated professionalism. I'd also never caught Wenso Ashby featuring Zsame in person. And I am pleased to report that they could conduct a clinic on delivering sophisticated soul at its finest.

Ashby, strapping and dapper, opened with a solo set of instrumentals on piano, creating a sublime mood out of thin air. Nodding now and then, tickling riffs from the keys, he was cool as air-conditioning. Every now and then it'd get good to him and Wenso would just go off into it -- his usual poker-face visage giving a slight grimace, shoulders leaned down a little and beautiful music just flying.

Joining him after a few numbers, the lady herself, Zsame, made her presence known. Talk about class. With angelic, earthen elegance, she exudes flawless poise, natural grace and personal warmth. And that's all before Zsame opens her mouth. When she sings, suddenly you have nothing more important in the world to do except sit there, spellbound. About a week before, Wenso Ashby described the first time he heard Zsame sing -- on the radio, doing a commercial. "I loved the voice. I felt it'd be a great voice to work with. I said, 'Wow, if I had that voice, I can make it all the way.'" Don't be the least bit surprised in the event his enthusiasm prove prophetic. Singers of her caliber simply don't come along everyday: we're lucky when they show up at all. Bell-like clarity, nuanced shading and signature phrasing her trademark, Zsame summons with a siren's call all her own. Add the world of charisma she effortlessly brandishes and, well, does the term star quality ring a bell?

Among the selections performed were, from the new album, *Love Is So Amazing*, a pair of sparkling gems -- the Ashby-penned "Heavenly" and Brian McKnight's ballad "Anytime". Beautifully done as these cuts are on the disc, there is nothing like catching top-flight talent in the very act. Wenso Ashby had the true fire in effect, fingers tripping the proverbial light fantastic. Zsame nailed every note, shade and phrasing dead-on.

There are three CDs out, each one of them a hands-down winner. You have *Midnite Walkin'*, *Wenso Ashby Live featuring Zsame*, *Q' Aisha and TaVanni* and *Love Is So Amazing*. Hard as it may be to believe, there isn't a single throwaway cut on any of the three. They really could change their name to We Got Chops. It's just not as tasteful as Wenso Ashby featuring Zsame.

Wenso Ashby featuring Zsame, regularly gracing Soul Food Sunday at The Favor Cafe, 913 Lake Street in Uptown Minneapolis, are on the bill for 2008 Selby JazzFest, September 13. Festivities kick off at 11 am and go through the day. That's at the intersection of Selby Ave and Milton Ave in St. Paul, right outside Golden Thyme Coffee Café.

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