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## Where Feet, Beat and Joy All Soar Funkily

By Alastair Macaulay

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At the end of a day of perfect New York summer weather on Thursday, the mood established by the Lincoln Center Out of Doors two-part event of dance and live music at the Damrosch Park Bandshell was just right: generous, warm, high-spirited real entertainment for a big audience. But while the first half of the evening — featuring Debo Band with the special guests Fendika — was characterized by startling and thrilling particulars, the dance and music in the second half — David Dorfman Dance with the Family Stone — was little more than exercises in mood.



*Photo by Ruby Washington*

Debo Band is a Boston-based collective, founded in 2006, that cultivates “the vintage sounds of 1970s Ethiopian pop,” which, according to its program notes, include “the searing horns, crooning vocals and slinky funk grooves that brought renown to the Ethiopiques series.”

Every number it played deepened my delight. The sound is wind-weighted: trumpet, two tenor saxophones, trombone and sousaphone all swing in together alongside accordion, five-string violin,

electric violin, electric bass, drums and — less regularly — vocals and bongos. The rhythm alone is so layered that you can hear some numbers as fast and slow at the same time.

Two pilgrimages made by the band to East Africa have led to [collaborations with the traditional Ethiopian artists Fendika](#), described as “a group of young torchbearers led by star Ethiopian dancer Melaku Belay.” They regularly returned, individually or together, to the stage in Thursday’s performance. The singer Selamnesh Zemene always enriched the spell; Asrat Ayalew’s playing of kebero (traditional drums) had complexity and brilliance; and Mr. Melaku and Zinash Tsegaye, the two dancers, provided most of the program’s most remarkable highlights.

Their several costume changes alone were vividly entertaining: Ms. Zinash at one point wore a large, funnel-shaped headdress, and Mr. Melaku, in the same dance, a bright yellow pajamalike

suit. It was a delight to watch them both, and the [rhythmic virtuosity of Mr. Melaku](#) was often astounding. He can turn either the upper or the lower body into an electrifying vehicle of rapid pulsation. One dance was all to do with his throwing his feet out before him (as if on hot coals). Sometimes the feet alternated, sometimes he hopped, and on one occasion, while hopping brilliantly, he mimed strumming on the other leg, which he kept stretched out like a guitar.

In later dances he showed how he could play his shoulders, his neck, his head and his whole torso like percussion instruments. In one number his shoulders kept chiming in like chords in music. Elsewhere he shook or vibrated muscles at the base of the neck — together or with left and right playing against each other — and he also isolated and vibrated his head.

At the climax of one amazing dance cadenza, his own body became a trill — initiated, it seemed, from somewhere around the diaphragm and midspine, but with the whole body shaken into a blur — and then he began to turn in a traveling diagonal across the stage.

All these were dazzling bravura touches. Mr. Melaku's dancing, however, didn't consist just of stunts. Simply to see him sway his body to the music was a marvel: the angle of his out-held elbows, the pliancy of his spine, the rhythmic point of those shoulders all made their sensuous contributions. A happily superlative artist.

The general impression of David Dorfman Dance with the Family Stone — in what was the world premiere of “Prophets of Funk, Concert Edition” — was one of good-time funkiness. Every so often, for dramatic effect, someone (often Mr. Dorfman himself) would continue moving when there was little or no music, or stand still while the music was going, or talk to others onstage or in the audience.

These essays in contrast or paradox were, however, merely arch, unserious, posey. In a closed theater they might make more of an impression, but for Thursday's open-air audience nothing sullied the bright, rock-concert atmosphere.

Mr. [Dorfman's dance style](#) was all thoroughly appealing but in a very generalized full-bodied way; the dancers were adult and strikingly diverse. The rotating pelvises, swaying spines, rippling torsos, strong leg extensions: who could object? But the dance itself had no particular shape. Though the sequences of talk or stillness or against-the-music movement were flimsy effects, it seemed that they had been added to give the show an architecture it otherwise lacked.