2-Way Street: As CrossRhodes, an Eclectic Poet and a Streetwise ...
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The Washington Post (1974-); Nov 9, 2002; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post
pg. C1

BY MARVIN JOSEPH—THE WASHINGTON POST

Raheem DeVaughn, left, is going major-label, while W. Ellington Felton is staying independent, ending their successful collaboration.

2-Way Street

As CrossRhodes, an Eclectic Poet and a Streetwise Falsetto Traveled Far Enough to Find Their Own Musical Paths

By NATALIE HOPKINSON
Washington Post Staff Writer

The bass player was having car trouble. But nobody missed him as the Art!Hurts band played in a secret after-hours joint.

Hard to imagine one more body squeezing into the room on the third floor of a D.C. rowhouse, down the hall from the porn and video game rooms and up one flight from the poker room.

Everyone from Prince to Coltrane to Miles has swung by the invitation-only club for impromptu jam sessions in its 40-year history. But the "concert hall" is still basically a glorified attic, and on this night it is packed, as one patron joked, slaveship-tight.

The audience searched for seats on the floor, bumping heads against the angled ceiling covered with a heavenly mural with nude figures and giant eyes staring down.

"Hello. How y'all feeling. My name is W. Ellington Felton," the singer said. "I just released an album called 'Soul Sonnets,' and—"

Someone interrupted from behind the doorway jammed with the spillover crowd. "I'd like to make a request," the heckler said.

It took a few beats for Felton to recognize the voice: Jive Records' newest recording artist was fresh off the road from a jam session in Philly.

"Oh," Felton said. "That's just Raheem DeVaughn."

DeVaughn, wearing neat cornrows and sneakers, grabbed a microphone and took his place on a stool. Felton, sporting a curly 'fro, khakis and a vintage-style "H" letter jersey in deference to the weekend's Howard Homecoming activities, stood beside him.

The odd couple. One the eclectic poet, the other the streetwise falsetto. They riffed and whirred over nearly a dozen original compositions they'd recorded as the duo CrossRhodes, an independently released tour de force ti-

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CrossRhodes: Pulling Away From a Creative Intersection

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tled "Limited Budget Unlimited Quality."

As 3 a.m. approached, Felton announced their last song. One song turned to two. Two turned to three. Three turned to four and when their repertoire ran out, the pair freestyled over a Roots beat to oblige the crowd that by now was dancing hunchback. When management finally pulled the plug, Felton ended the performance without sentiment: "Okay, get out."

But both singers gripped their mikes as if a good thing was ending too fast.

Synergy

The Felton-DeVaughn duo has become a common sight in Washington over the past few years. Both have made a living leading popular neo-soul bands: Felton's is Art!Hurts, while DeVaughn's is Urban Ave 31. But for years they've also been piggybacking on each other's gigs, demonstrating a powerful chemistry onstage.

Felton, 26, compares his collaborations with DeVaughn to what Gil Scott-Heron and Marvin Gaye might have sounded like if they'd joined forces. DeVaughn says their chemistry is on a Redman-Method Man vibe.

"It's tapping into your creativity," DeVaughn explains. "Knowing that someone has your back and vice versa. You can't lose."

A natural progression of those live shows was recording the "Limited Budget" album, which since its summer release has sold out several pressings and has generated considerable industry buzz. It combines harmonizing, rhyming and spoken word that fans of the Philadelphia neo-soul sound or hip-hop acts Slum Village and Black Star would love.

The album's success has solidified the duo's place among the artists to emerge from the U Street scene—a vibrant collection of poets, musicians and deejays that has asserted itself as an alternative to the mainstream music industry.

Each has taken radically different approaches to making art in today's climate, which is why they called their union CrossRhodes. (The spelling was in tribute to a piano maker.) At the time they had no idea they'd be reaching one so soon.

Man of Letter

The name is, in fact, W. Ellington Felton. Dub for short. Don't even think about calling him Dubya, or getting cute with the punctuation, as in wellington.felton, although he is kind of a music soul child.

In 1976, Cynthia Felton wasn't prescient about the gimmicky labels that soul singers of her son's generation would affix themselves. She named the child W. in tribute to her father, Wesley. Her husband, the legendary Washington jazz pianist Hilton Felton Jr., thought the single initial had a stately ring to it. He added Ellington for obvious reasons.

The kids in Felton's Northeast Washington neighborhood near Marvin Gaye's childhood home didn't get it. For a while, he just told everyone to call him Wesley. By high school he'd made peace with the initial, only to relinquish it when cast as a member of the Posse on BET's "Teen Summit." During the four years he appeared on the program in the early 1990s, the producers insisted that Felton be known to national television audiences as Wesley.

W. started sounding good again by the time the budding poet and activist found himself auditioning for Carnegie Mellon's famous theater program. Maybe it was the cachet, the suggestion of grandiosity—along with a beatnik-style Shakespeare reading—that earned him a spot as the only black man in his class.

In Pittsburgh, Felton recorded three basement hip-hop and spoken-word albums in which he "basically told all my business." Business mostly involving his heart scattered in little pieces around his dorm room. People bought albums at live shows.

Four albums later, Felton hasn't stopped telling his business. Or getting his heart broken. He left Pittsburgh after four years and no degree, and since then he's been doing the independent-artist thing.

Relaxing on a plaid couch at an Adams Morgan coffee shop recently, he brandished a shiny CD that held a brand-new song he'd recorded the night before.

The song sounded like he's in love.

"I'm always in love," Felton agreed, sighing. "I'm in love with being in love. I've been singing about that girl for, like, the last year and a half."

He rolled his eyes dreamily.

He fills his fridge and gas tank by hustling acting gigs and basement recordings. He also traveled with an experimental hip-hop theater troupe a while back. He self-published a couple of books of poetry and short stories and three plays. He played the lead this summer in Arena Stage's production of Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman."

Friends like to tease Felton about his healthy output, which sometimes hits the mark, and sometimes misses. He shrugs it off as the nature of being an artist. He doesn't take direction graciously when it comes to his music. He figures his temperament is unsuited for the compromise necessary to make it in the mainstream.

His band is called Art!Hurts and that's pretty much his philosophy. "Artists are literally unzipping themselves and spilling their guts out on stage," he said, wrapping an errant curl around a finger.

"They are exposing themselves and when the curtain comes down, they have to figure out how to put it back inside.

"When someone can't afford to go to Congress, you can make a play about it. When you can't control a company, you do a song about it. So you are hurting the institutions, the machines that are most oppressing you. That's where the art begins to hurt. That's why I create. If I can put a record out and the child of that racist is feeling my music, that hurts. I'm going from the outside. I'm like a disease that is spreading, and that hurts."

A theater friend was sitting near Felton. He leaned back and said hello. The friend, a thirtyish white woman, held in her hands her latest play, a work-in-progress.

"Got a part for a sexy black man?" he asked, flashing a smile.

She said nope, not this time. Just a Jew.

"Sammy Davis was a Jew," Felton pointed out.

The Conciliator

Raheem DeVaughn has done the independent-artist thing, too. Partly on purpose. Mostly not.

He also graduated high school in this area in the 1990s, is the son of a musician, the jazz cellist and music teacher Ronald E. DeVaughn. He tried college, two years at Coppin State as a criminal-justice major before dropping out to pursue his music.

Although his music, like Felton's, is preoccupied with world politics, healing humanity and relationships, darker forces inspire him. Like the time years ago, while doing "the wrong thing at the wrong place at the wrong time," he was shot five times. And the months he spent taking care of a baby he later learned wasn't his.

He sees himself as a conciliator, and has put considerable energy into shopping demos and building music industry contacts.

He's tried out a variety of styles and musical vehicles to take him there: In college, it was gospel and New Jack-style R&B groups. Back in Washington he sang in another soul group, then a rock band called Tree of Soul, and most recently was lead singer and writer for the neo-soul band Urban Ave 31.

Years of work, false starts and straight-up shady dealings went into getting the call from Jive Records three months ago. But he's glad it came when it did. The years he spent as a regular at the U Street club Bar Nun for its Monday open-mike night, he says, were invaluable.

PHOTOS BY MARVIN JOSEPH—THE WASHINGTON POST

As CrossRhodes, Felton, left, and DeVaughn made the independently released album "Limited Budget Unlimited Quality," which since its summer debut has sold out several pressings and has generated considerable industry buzz.

> *"It's tapping into your creativity. Knowing that someone has your back and vice versa. You can't lose."*
>
> **Raheem DeVaughn**, *talking about his collaboration with W. Ellington Felton*

"It was like a playground for me," DeVaughn said recently over lunch at a U Street restaurant. "I could do what I want, when I want, for how long I wanted."

Using the proceeds from a $2,000 talent contest at Bar Nun, he built a basement studio and pressed his first independent project with Urban Ave 31. DeVaughn and his partners all quit their jobs and started doing live shows, selling their recordings "out the backpack," making a living.

DeVaughn's first major-label release is still nearly a year away, but his work is already getting attention. He appears on three tracks on Jazzy Jeff's latest album, "The Magnificent," among them "My People," the single DeVaughn wrote and sings that is getting spin in Europe. He's also written a song for Broadway star (Disney's "Aida") Heather Headley's first album.

These days DeVaughn thinks a lot about the "pimp game" he's about to enter as a major-label artist in an era when music buyers are less than supportive of progressive soul. But he's optimistic.

"I have faith in my art," he said. "I could get dropped tomorrow and be cool with that. The bottom line is, I can go in my basement with Omar Rednuh or whoever has a dope beat. Get Dub or whoever and when we leave out that basement we're going to have something called 'product.'

"I'm confident I'll be able to pay the rent and still have my dignity and know that if something happens to me, I did my part. I will give them something they can talk about. Something they can play for their kids that makes sense."

He thinks the songs he's writing for his solo project will make sense, too. Still, he's glad to have had the opportunity to experiment, push boundaries, and extend himself creatively in the Urban Ave 31 and CrossRhodes projects—far from the specter of music-industry oversight.

"Those projects are my babies," DeVaughn said. "A mother will sacrifice themselves before they sacrifice their child."

Team Playas

Felton and DeVaughn prove themselves a formidable writing team on "Limited Budget." The poem-song "Liquid Lady" gallantly gives a heroin addict back a humanity forgotten both by the world and herself. In "Woke Up," the duo paint a utopian vision of a "beautiful dream of peace," line by line. They show the many ways in which the post-9/11 world isn't there yet in "Balance," a song that Hidden Beach Records has tapped for a compilation set for release next year.

DeVaughn's sultry contralto stands out first. It is the album's most consistently evocative element, whether he's moaning in progressively higher octaves over a scratch-and-spin track in "Dreamin' " or showering sweet layers over Felton's rhymes on "Ms. Smartypants."

Felton fills out the melodies when called for, but that isn't his function. He is the trickster, a charismatic narrator, a theatrical provocateur—and a nice emcee besides.

The collaboration was fruitful while it lasted. But when DeVaughn got signed, they both realized that it was the beginning of a new phase.

Felton hopes to be able to continue exploring a variety of artistic genres. "I'm looking for the capital or the means to have as many people as possible to hear my music or witness my art without boxing myself in or giving up my soul or my art," Felton said.

Mainstream backing is tempting, but invariably he concluded that as long as he can do a few plays a year, a few albums, write a couple books, keep hurting, he'll be happy. "I can screw my life up all by myself," Felton said. "What do I need to sign my life away to do that for?"

If there's anyone who can rise to the challenge, Felton believes it's his friend and brother in music. "Raheem is the type of artist that the industry fears," he said.

DeVaughn walks toward his future with no apprehensions. "You gotta have resources that come from you or somebody else," he said. "When you are dealing with somebody else's money, you've got to deal with the way they want it to go down. . . . In the end it's all about the messages you choose to put out."

He sees good things coming his friend's way, too. "I see Dub continuing to develop as an artist. I see Dub in films. I see him doing whatever he wants to do. That's how he rolls."

In one interlude in the CrossRhodes album, DeVaughn and Felton call their relatives and friends for advice and words of encouragement.

"If you came to the CrossRhodes," Felton asks a female friend they called on the phone, "which road would you take?"

"And why?" DeVaughn adds, laughing.

The woman stalls and stammers before finally blurting out: "Can't I have both of you?"

DeVaughn gently informs her that that's the "wrong answer."

The Felton-DeVaughn duo has been a common sight in Washington.