

And now for something completely different:



Band takes off in one fell swoop



Toronto band One Fell Swoop is made up of Dunniel Medina, left, Dean Medina, David Rakusin and Jason Pilarski.

By RITA POLIAKOV
Staff Reporter

It started with an African drum and a guitar. There were no speakers, no microphones, no expensive equipment, just two guys and their instruments playing on the streets of Amsterdam.

They had no idea that, a few years later, they'd be opening for Israeli musician David Broza and playing to crowds of hundreds.

"I got to Amsterdam and I kind of wanted to start on a completely clean slate," said Dean Medina, the co-founder of the Toronto band One Fell Swoop. Medina, who sings and plays guitar, used to hate performing in public.

"I would never want to play to people in my own household. Anytime people came in, I stopped playing. I was just shy to sing... I was afraid of criticism," he said. Everything changed during a trip to Amsterdam.

"I started messing around and playing for people. I figured I'll never see them again, if I perform in front of them and they don't like it, who cares? But people really enjoyed it," he said.

It didn't take long for percussionist Jason Pilarski, a friend of Medina's, to join him in Amsterdam with a jambi, a type of African drum.

"It was kind of scary at first. You're sitting in a foreign place, playing music just out of nowhere, not knowing what kind of reaction you're going to get.

But it turned out to be amazing," Pilarski said.

It was in Amsterdam that the two musicians wrote one of their first songs together, called *Origins*. *Origins* is also going to be the name of One Fell Swoop's first album, which they're hoping to finish by the end of May.

But there was never really supposed to be an album. There was barely supposed to be a band.

After performing in Amsterdam, Pilarski and Medina came back to Toronto and started playing at a few venues. It was a hobby, a good way to pass the time. Then Medina's older brother, Dunniel, 28, came to see a show.

"[Pilarski and Medina] played a few shows in Toronto. They had humble beginnings. They didn't have a plan at that point," said the elder Medina, who plays guitar and sings in the band. "I went to see them once to support my brother and I said, 'I think I can add to the band.'"

Before joining One Fell Swoop, Medina had been playing wherever he could, which included rooftops and beaches in Israel.

"I've been writing music for a long time. I wanted to [play with] like-minded people that want to create music and get a wider audience for it," said the older Medina. "As soon as you start thinking, 'I want to immortalize my music,' then you start thinking about promoting it... It moved from that fun hobby to where we want to play as much as we can."

The band's next step was to find a bassist, which is where David Rakusin came in. Rakusin, 24, knew some of the band members through school and was asked to join One Fell Swoop last July.

"I went to see their shows, and I really liked their music," said Rakusin. "We all get along really well. We have similar ideals about music. We all just really like performing together." After Rakusin joined, the band started to get serious, practising three times a week and performing anywhere they could.

Like most of the band members, Rakusin is shocked by One Fell Swoop's success.

"Some of the first shows we played, there were 20 or 30 people [in the audience]... Our last one had 250 to 300 people," he said. "We just want to go out and perform and try to put out a fun show. If people are out watching and dancing... that's the best thing."

The band's popularity is linked to their catchy songs, which the older Medina describes as polished pop music. His brother, on the other hand, is hesitant to define their style.

"We all write completely different songs. There's a lot of pop, a lot of rock. A lot of the stuff I work on is reggae and ska," he said. "We don't stick to one genre, that's for sure."

One Fell Swoop, which recently opened for Israeli singer David Broza at Artzy, a Hillel-sponsored art showcase, is known for mixing upbeat melodies with serious lyrics.

"It's a curious mix of dark and light. The songs can be very serious and sombre in their lyrics and very upbeat in their melody and the other way around, too," said Medina's older brother. An example of this is the song *From the Desert*, which is about the Jewish experience and has references to the Holocaust.

"That song has an uplifting chorus, and it should, but the verse itself is very sombre," Medina said. "That's an interesting aspect of the music that many people really like."

The band first started gaining fans by playing charity shows, something that they've continued to do. Recently, they started the Swoop Movement, which is when they dedicate shows to various charities. They perform charity shows every few months at the El Mocambo in Toronto as part of their Swoop for Soup series, which supports local soup kitchens and other organizations in the city.

"That's pretty much 90 per cent of what we do. Charity is a great way to get your foot in the door" said the younger Medina. "It's a great thing as well. We have something to offer. People really enjoy the music."

One Fell Swoop will be performing at United We Rock: The Concert for Human Rights on May 8 at Dundas Square and will also be playing at a Swoop for Soup show at the El Mocambo on May 28. For more information, visit www.swoop-music.com.