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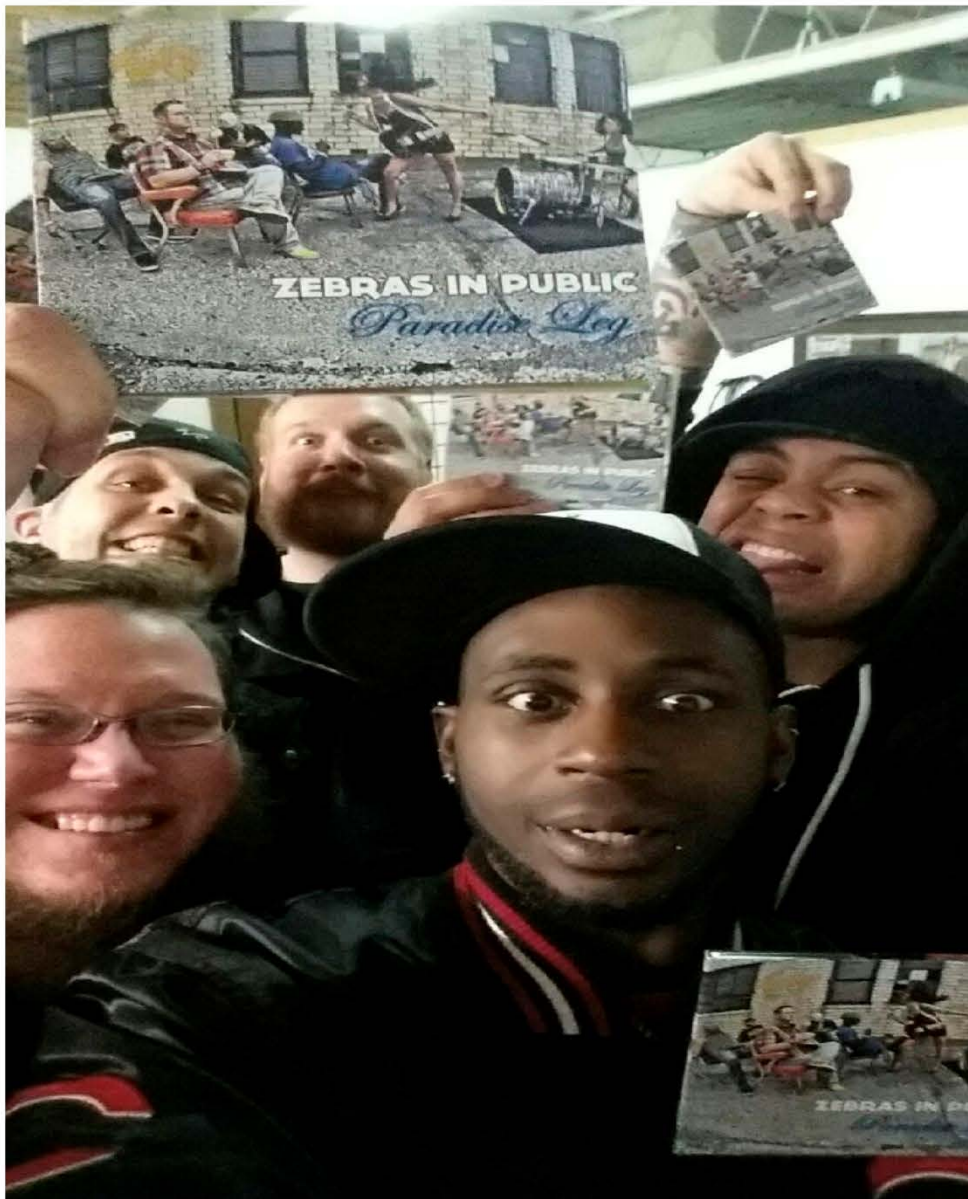
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True Stripes

Cincinnati's Zebras in Public don't preach unity — they live it

BY BRIAN BAKER · APRIL 30TH, 2014 · MUSIC



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"None of us say it with arrogance, but we're confident that we have something special," Zebras in Public drummer Chris Himes says over a pizza smorgasbord at Newport Pizza.

Zebras in Public (ZIP) is rightfully protective over their brand of juiced-up metallic Soul/Rock and the band-of-brothers attitude they've adopted to create it. Justin Smith and Brandon Masters, both making their recorded ZIP debuts on the quintet's freshly released full-length, *Paradise Leg*, know this better than most.

Smith's induction was perhaps most grueling; hired as ZIP's guitarist in 2010 just after the band's debut EP, *Scars & Stripes*, he downshifted from six strings to four when original bassist Chuck Kerns departed in 2011. Smith relearned the band's songs on bass

and maintained that role until Masters' 2012 arrival.

"I showed up to practice, put my guitar on, and they're like, 'Hey, Chuck quit,' and I went, 'OK,' took my guitar off and put the bass on," Smith says. "They said, 'It's gonna be temporary, we're gonna find somebody else.' A year goes by ..."

After several fruitless auditions, Smith approached Masters, a longtime ZIP fan, and tutored him on the band's songs to ensure his acceptance. The current lineup — Himes, Smith, Masters, vocalist Zebediah Williams and founding guitarist Ian Zwosta — has since gelled into a formidable live presence. That performing fury is brilliantly channeled into the 16 tracks that comprise *Paradise Leg*.

"On *Scars & Stripes*, we were writing what we liked," Williams says. "With *Paradise Leg*, we have a feel and a sound. We know what it sounds like when we hear it, and if it doesn't sound like us, we don't play it. We feel like these are our songs, this is us. This album has more direction."

"At practice, we have our little warm up to shake off the cobwebs and we start playing," Smith says.

"The first thing we ask is, 'Is this us?' If it's us, we hit record."

As Zwosta points out, ZIP's song catalog is not extensive, but that reflects the band's willingness to discard new songs that don't seem right or old songs that don't work anymore.

"We have a whole rap sheet of songs," Masters says. "What we prefer to play is specific."

Zebras in Public are a study in perseverance and hard work. Zwosta founded ZIP in 2008 with Kerns and drummer Blake Nolan, adding jobsite pal Williams on vocals. Initially, Zwosta didn't take Williams' offer to sing with his band seriously, but changed his perspective when he heard his voice.

After nearly two years of work, ZIP began recording *Scars & Stripes* and quickly realized they needed a more accomplished drummer, so Himes, a longtime ZIP fan, was offered the job. The turmoil in the bass position actually helped Smith become a more dynamic band member, with his transition from guitar to bass and back again.

"Justin had a chance to open up his personality because he didn't have as many strings," Williams says. "He started to do a lot more onstage. When he went back to guitar, he wasn't a statue, he was a Rock star. That was huge."

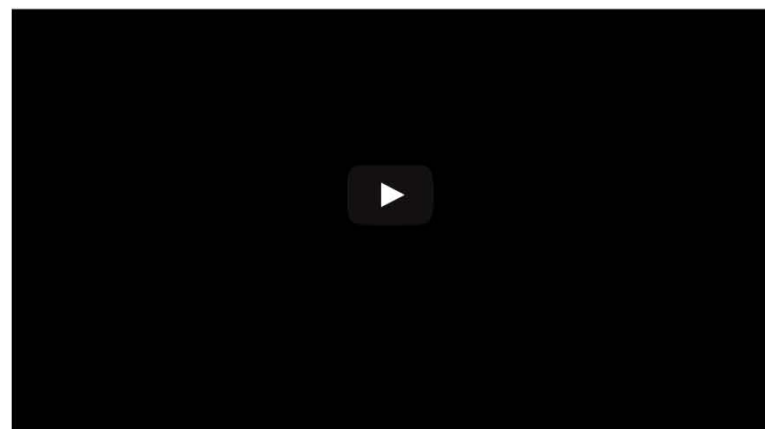
The band's grueling work ethic has certainly paid off on *Paradise Leg*; the album is a throbbing Rock testament to the effort that ZIP has expended from the beginning.

"When you're trying to make it from the ground up, it's hard," Williams says. "People still ask us, 'So where are you guys from?' Man, we've been here for five years, we've played every bar you can play. How did you miss us?"

"I've been playing in bands since I was allowed in bars, but we were never to this level," Zwosta says. "There's a lot of pressure. You hear people quit because of pressure, and I'd be like, 'You're a musician, what are you talking about?' I see it now. Things are starting to go good for us ... we've fought damn hard for it."

Although Zebras in Public's dedicated members still balance day jobs with band activities, their biggest personal success is perhaps a moral victory rather than a notch in their commercial holster. ZIP's ethnically diverse lineup and soulful approach to Hard Rock has meant their audience reflects a similar demographic range.

"Growing up, I listened to a lot of different kinds of music," Williams says. "When I watched Def Leppard and AC/DC videos, I loved the music but I'd go, 'I just don't feel like I'm invited.' My purpose, for the band and for people who like Zebras in Public, is this is music that everybody is invited to. Our fan base is ridiculous, it goes from 21 to like 60 or 70; it goes from middle class to upper class. And we're not Rap Rock. There's no pressure in this band to be anything but who you are."



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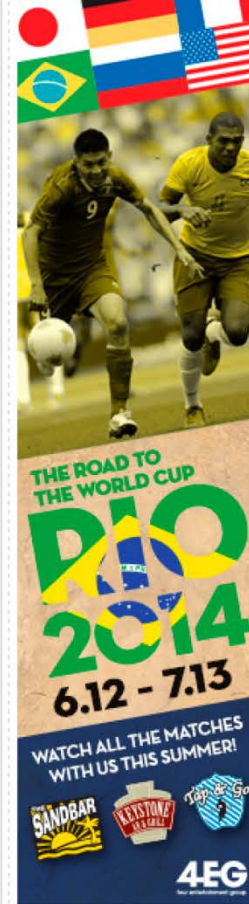
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