

James Zito, the youngest member of the Dr. Phillips Center Jazz Orchestra, was a student of the arts center's Jazz Summer Program just two years ago.

FEATURED PROFILE

THE NATURAL

HE'S YOUNG, BUT JAMES ZITO CAN PLAY WITH THE PROS.

Sporting a crisp black suit, black tie and black spectacles, James Zito could have passed as the peach-fuzzed version of Tommy Lee Jones' Agent K from *Men in Black*.

Only Zito was wielding a jazz-producing Ibanez GB40 guitar instead of an amnesia-inducing neuralyzer. When his time came to star on "Teri," trumpeter Gerald Wilson's requiem to a daughter lost to cancer, Zito summoned his inner Wes Montgomery.

In concert with his Dr. Phillips Center Jazz Orchestra bandmates, the young man in black delivered a haunting elegy that the audience in the Alexis & Jim Pugh Theater wouldn't soon forget.

Yet, with his preternatural jazz chops, it's easy to forget that only two years ago Zito was a teenage summer camper, learning at the feet of bassist Rodney Whitaker at the arts center's Jazz Music Intensive Week.

Two years later, the native Orlandoan is the guitarist and youngest player in the world-class jazz orchestra that Whitaker now leads. Heady stuff for a 21-year-old, who, in some ways, isn't far removed from the 7-year-old whose guitar love affair began at a Toys R Us during a family road trip.

Among the aisles, the youngster spotted a \$50 First Act guitar that he "just had to have." After some begging and some sisterly lobbying, the instrument was his. "I've been infatuated with the guitar ever since," says Zito.

That passion for music comes honestly. His parents are self-taught musicians, and his grandfather played the six-string banjo. Yet, while grandpa's musical tastes leaned a little bit country, Zito was more than a little bit rock 'n' roll.

Early note-perfect takes on Guns 'N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine" suggested Zito stepping into rock guitarist Slash's boots, not jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt's monk straps.

"I was a rock guitarist at heart," he says.

That changed in high school, at the Osceola County School for the Arts. Listening to piano virtuoso Oscar Peterson cracked the jazz code. "It really spoke to my soul," says Zito, a super-achiever who also reached Eagle Scout status.

Yet, Zito's high school jazz band director, Miguel Alvarado, proved the most important catalyst. He recognized Zito's potential and "took me under his wing and guided me on the path I was looking for."

That path — with the encouragement of his parents — led to a tryout for the newly forming Dr. Phillips Center Jazz Orchestra. "We weren't expecting much," Zito says. "But we decided it would be worth it to throw my hat in the ring and see what came of it."

What came of it was astonishment.

"James has great potential to be one of the best," Whitaker says, noting how the young man outplayed more experienced professionals. "He can swing, he's very soulful and was very prepared for the audition. He has a promising future."

Age is nothing but a number when you can play with the maturity of Zito, who's currently studying in New York at the Manhattan School of Music.

Still, despite his world-wise tone and precocious embrace of swing and blues, sometimes that 7-year-old Toys R Us kid still resurfaces.

In his off moments during *Ellington for Lovers*, Zito sat digging the other performers, his head seesawing to the beat — a young man enraptured in Christmas-morning glee at where his toy-store infatuation with a \$50 guitar had taken him.

"No one forced me to do music," Zito says. "The music found me, and I had no choice but to lose myself in it." ■

— Darryl E. Owens

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