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D.C.-BASED REGGAE GROUP SEE-I CREATES A SOUND ALL THEIR OWN

By Alfredo Flores

While many of the music students at the prestigious Laurinburg Institute in North Carolina would have been thrilled by the frequent visits from alumnus and be-bop jazz trumpet pioneer Dizzy Gillespie, not so much for brothers Zeebo and Rootz Steele. The most vivid memory for the front men of D.C.-based reggae band See-I was how their Virgin Islander friends at the school opened their minds to a new world of music.

"We both grew up in the country back woods of North Carolina," said Zee. "But it was the students from the Virgin Islands that would come to our room with stacks of Bob Marley and Peter Tosh records, all of the great reggae artists of the 1970s, and we'd have all-night DJ jam sessions. After I heard [Marley's] 'I Shot the Sheriff,' that was it. I was hooked."

Zee and Rootz Steele have collaborated with world-renowned D.C.-based DJ duo Thievery Corporation since the late 1980s, when Thievery's Eric Hilton saw See-I perform at a local D.C. reggae club. Since Hilton opened Eighteenth Street Lounge in Dupont Circle, the brothers have been drawing head-bopping crowds to its Gold Room for their weekly late night reggae fests.

It was in the lounge's famed Green Room—the original smallish studio for ESL Music that now serves as the lounge's backstage—that See-I and Thievery recorded ".38.45 (A Thievery Number)" in 1996. It was one of Thievery Corporation's first hits, but Zee didn't know it at the time.

"Eric is very modest," said Zee. "He didn't tell me that the song was blowing up. He just said it's nice. The way he put it, I figured a couple of his buddies DJ'ed it. When we started touring with Thievery we knew that it was far more than just a couple of people who liked it."

Rootz and Zee continue to tour with Thievery all over the world, playing to crowds reaching tens of thousands. While most of the local reggae bands were Jamaican-bred, Hilton discovered that See-I had a different sound, blending in all types of 1970s funky beats.

"They're great people. They just really love music," said Hilton. "They were completely immersed in reggae for many years, but their roots are in American classic soul music like Sly & the Family Stone. I think they're starting to incorporate a lot of those roots into their reggae performances. And when you go see them at the lounge, you go see a reggae soul funk band, which I think is a lot more interesting than