

KINDRED MAKES THE '70s R&B SOUND ITS OWN

by Al Hunter Jr.

Daily News Staff Writer

The dark little furnace of a club called the Five Spot is crammed with dreadlocked, ethnic-cool 20-somethings who, as best they can, jump up and down to the music that enraptures them. And the weary dance floor undulates in kind.

Singers Fatin and Aja don't feel the earth move, for they are moving the earth. From the club's small stage they lead the funky anachronism known as Kindred, a live 11-piece band - with trombone, trumpet and saxophone players no less! - that unabashedly channels the sound of self-contained R&B bands of the '70s. Groups like Earth, Wind & Fire, Parliament/Funkadelic, Rufus featuring Chaka Khan, Pleasure, and Philly's own Breakwater.

It's sweaty, deep-in-the-pocket soul, where background vocals are more important than background dancers and the horns can deliver tight on-the-one James Brown "hit me" blasts right on cue.

And when their set, featuring Kindred originals like "Far Away From Here" and covers of the JB's ("Doin' It to Death") and Maze Featuring Frankie Beverly ("We Are One") is over, when the vocal harmonies and on-stage vibrancy of Fatin and Aja have settled upon the still-frenzied crowd, the mistress of ceremonies takes center stage and nearly blows out the sound system.



"I told y'all about that spontaneous combustion up in here!"

Indeed Kindred is hot, and not just among those who attended that recent weekly Black Lily concert at the Five Spot in Old City. Its sound and style are a welcome change in a sample-happy, pre-recorded track-dependent world.

"It's fresh," said David Ivory, a Gwynedd Valley-based producer and engineer who has worked with the Roots, Erykah Badu, Jazzyfatnastees, D'Angelo, Patti LaBelle and now Kindred. "It's an older style as far as the soul music goes. It fills a great gap for a wide audience."

And a growing audience. Philadelphia-based Kindred is starting to get national attention. The group has been signed by Hidden Beach Recordings, whose roster includes singer/songwriter Brenda Russell and Philly friend and native Jill Scott. They just finished opening for Musiq Soulchild in California and will open for Scott tonight and tomorrow at the Tower Theater in Upper Darby.

Their music can be just as romantic as it is funky.

"It's not traditional 'booty on the Corvette' " music, said Steve McKeever, who founded Hidden Beach Recordings (distributed by Sony Music Entertainment/Epic Records) as an outlet for artists doing top-quality work outside the mainstream. He heard Fatin and Aja at a couple of Black Lily shows. He was also bugged by their fans in the industry - one of the biggest being Scott.

"They're exceptional," Scott said. "The lyrics, the singing, the fact they look at each other while they sing with such love. I believe in that kind of talent when it comes from the soul and the heart."

"It seemed they were a perfect fit for what our company's mission was," McKeever said. The album, with a working title of "Surrender to Love," is planned for a fall release.

And the thought of opening for a major R&B act in their hometown is just sinking in. "We're still looking around like we are on a field trip," Aja said.

Inside David Ivory's Dylanava Studios, minutes before a session to clean up the hooks to a song called "Rhythm of Life," Fatin, 27, recalled how after being introduced to Aja, 22, at a New York City loft where the Roots held jam sessions, he wrote a song called "Start of a Beautiful Affair."

"The song was completely about me," Aja said. "I was such an idiot, I didn't realize it."

Fatin asked if Aja remembered it. "Love is such a tender thing. . .," she sings. Indeed she remembers.

Fatin and Aja married in September 1998 and have a son, Aquil, 1.

Aja Graydon of Washington, D.C., was "priming for the pop princess stardom thing" in the early '90s. At 15, she was already signed as a solo artist with Delicious Vinyl Records (Tone Loc, Brand New Heavies) as its answer to the cutesy singer/dancer/actress Brandy.

At 16, Aja left home and went to New York, then Jersey City, N.J., then to Los Angeles to record. She finished high school through a tutorial service, and never had an album released. She and Delicious "parted ways," Aja said. Besides, she had matured, and cotton-candy love songs didn't interest her. "I wanted to do more R&B soul music," she said.

Fatin Dantzler attended the High School for the Creative Arts in ninth and 10th grade. The school at the time was a storehouse of talent - jazz organist Joey DeFrancesco, bassist Christian McBride, R&B drummer Lil John Roberts, the Roots, Boyz II Men. But Fatin paid more attention to his music than his studies and was soon transferred to "the neighborhood school." Living with an older cousin at 59th and Jefferson, Fatin went to Overbrook High.

An R&B singer and songwriter, Fatin would work in the Roots circle, with the Jazzyfatnastees he moved down to Atlanta, then the hotbed for R&B music, cutting his teeth there for about five years. He toured with Parliament/Funkadelic as part of the Smokin' Grooves tour.

Both Aja and Fatin find music from the '70s most compelling. It's the music their parents listened to and that they emulate.

"When you look at old footage of Sly & The Family Stone, it's not perfection, but there's a vibe," Aja said. "That's why the energy at the time was electric."

Since they are husband and wife and write as well as perform, Aja Graydon and Fatin Dantzler are often compared to another married songwriting/performing duo, Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson.

Fatin proposed to Aja at 30th Street Station, while waiting for a train taking Aja back to Washington. A few weeks later, after Fatin met Aja's mother, they bought their silver wedding bands at a shop in the Washington train station. "I didn't have no diamond money," Fatin said.

But that all seems to fit the philosophy and belief of Kindred. It's about substance, not trendiness.

"Kindred is a concept," Aja said. A family-oriented way of musical life where friends and other acts can grow and develop, where having 11 people on stage at one time is comforting, not confusing,

"It's so much fun," Aja said.

By getting their personal lives together and bonding as one, Kindred plans to approach the rest of their lives and career the same way.

"This is just a beginning," Aja said. "But it's moving the way it was intended to move."