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God the Silent Partner Zilla members play music between playing music in jamstar-studded side project.

by John Hult

A list of side and main projects from members of the 1-year-old band Zilla would be long enough to fill about half of the words needed for this article, so let's keep this as simple as possible:

Michael Travis plays with Zilla when he can find time away from his main project, the hugely popular Boulder-based jam band The String Cheese Incident.

His pal and roommate for eight and a half years, Jamie Janover, is a multi-instrumentalist and the go-to guy for the hammered dulcimer. He's released seven CDs of dulcimer music, two CDs with Zilla and has appeared on eleven other albums collaborating with other artists, including G Love, Butterhead, SCI, Keller Williams and Wendy Woo. He and Travis also play in a band called Zuvuya.

Aaron Holstien joins with Janover (on drums) in his band Vibe Squad, and when he's not recording his own music or music with any number of his other bands (including the Future Jazz Project), he's taking care of business at his record label, Vibesquad Recordings. He's even released a children's album called Kids Are Funky, Too.

Steve Vidiac, who spends more time at his main instrument (the keyboard) during performances than any other Zillian, has played with The Motet, Sucker, Mission Control Labs and the Open Air Ensemble.

Whew.

The point of this is to let you know one thing: These guys play. They don't write a song, tweak it in the studio, then take time out of a heavy party and promotional schedule to re-create the studio experience. Like any respectable group of organic musicians, they play music all the time.

In that way, Zilla represents one of the defining aspects of "the jam-band thing." They spend so damn much time playing music they don't have time to worry about rock stardom—even if, like drummer Travis, they become rock stars.

Since everyone in Zilla plays in several bands already, however, the obvious question would be what niche is filled by this one.

"The thing that's different about Zilla is that there's hammered dulcimer in the band," Janover says from his home in Boulder. "There's a lot of bands out there that play the kind of improvisational, groove, electronica, jam type of genre, but no one's doing it with hammered dulcimer."

Frequent instrument switching also makes for a different sound, and that openness means opportunity for the band's busy members.

"Travis will play drums for about 60 percent of the show and then for 40 percent of the show he's playing bass or guitar," Janover says. "That's another unusual thing. Most bands stick to one instrument per person, and we switch instruments. It's totally free; we get to do whatever we want."

Looking at the list of credits on his websites, it's easy to imagine an artist like Janover—the hammered dulcimer monster and professional photographer who does his Zilla-work between it all—has a tie-dyed PDA as full as Donald Trump's gold-inlaid version. He flips it on, and the schedule looks something like this: An avocado-omelet power breakfast followed by his nine o'clock with Wendy Woo in a Boulder studio, a 10:30 photo shoot for Colorado Triathlete magazine, a MetRX bar, a meet-and-greet with a possible collaborator (a random jam session with some guy he met in the music supply store when he stopped in to buy a tuning peg), maybe a beer or two and so on and so forth.

"Can he fill you in for a photo session at 3? He's booked, but if you beep him [with your car horn as he rides by on his bike] you might get lucky. He's very busy, but very accommodating," his imaginary secretary would say.

Of course, it's nothing like that. Janover does all his own booking with an old-fashioned calendar; some of his days are wide open and most of the fans who would recognize him on the street probably knew him before and say, "Great show last week," instead of asking for his autograph.

"It's not always like that, but I do jump around and do different things," Janover says. "Next week, in the same day I'm playing for a school to a bunch of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds, and then later in the day I'm playing at a retirement home for a bunch of old ladies. Then later in the summer I'm playing the High Sierra Music Festival and the Oregon Country Fair and things like that."

Again, Zilla is an outgrowth of openness. Jam bands always adhere to a more organic sound by the nature of improvisation and spontaneous composition, but Zilla ("kind of like Godzilla, except God's our silent partner," Janover says) takes the organic feel to the next level. The players hold onto grooves for twenty-plus minutes at a time; some songs start from a simple melody instead of a practiced song and evolve around a feeling instead of a set pattern. The result is often as much soundscape as sound-system thumping.

"It usually starts with just one person in the band starting to play something," Janover says of spontaneous composition. "Whatever they're playing, everyone else reacts. From there, it's just being in a certain kind of mindset and a certain kind of level of awareness where you're reacting to the music and playing your own music simultaneously."

As any fan of this open musical style knows, the crowd also makes a difference in how the songs end up.

"It's very much a cyclical process, where the music goes out and then the energy is received by the crowd, then they give back the energy and then we re-process that information and send it back out," Janover says. "In the best of circumstances, that's what a really good show is."