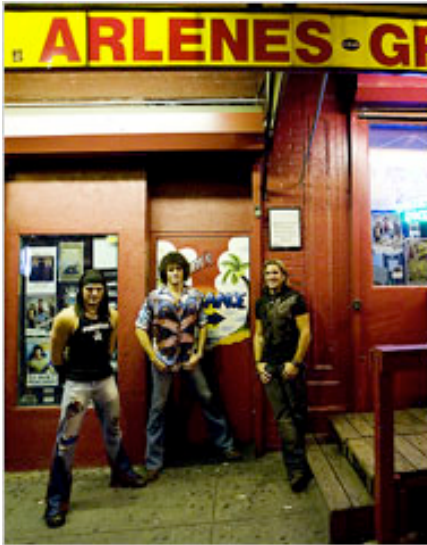


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Rock Trio's Double Life, Now Headed to Cable TV

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ZO2 (from left, David Z, Paulie Z and Joey Cassata) outside Arlene's Grocery in Manhattan. A new cable show is based on the band.

Patrons of Arlene's Grocery, the Lower East Side nightclub, have long known Paul and David Zablidowsky and their good friend Joey Cassata as ZO2, a shaggy-haired, heavy-metal trio whose set usually precedes the Monday night karaoke party. They might also know that in 2004 the band realized a dream when it was tapped for a 40-date tour, opening for Kiss and Poison.

But even the most ardent ZO2 fans may not realize that to make ends meet — even after that big break with Kiss — the three musicians moonlighted on Saturday mornings as a sought-after children's birthday party act called the Z Brothers. Had there been T-shirts for their dayside tour crisscrossing the metropolitan New York region, they would have listed dates playing for the children of Robert De Niro, Michael J. Fox, Chazz Palminteri and Al Roker, the "Today" weatherman.

With their Jekyll-and-Hyde repertory — Wiggles by day, Judas Priest by night — it was probably inevitable that television would come calling. And on Aug. 24 at 11:30 p.m., IFC will unveil "Z Rock," a 10-part comedy series based heavily on the real-life adventures of ZO2 and the Z Brothers.

In the show the band members play fictionalized versions of themselves, exaggerating their actual experiences — including a pitched rivalry with other New York-based children's musicians — pursuing the recording contract that long eluded them.

“Television is what radio used to be,” said David Zablidowsky, 26, who plays bass and who, like his older brother, Paul, is known professionally only by his first name and last initial. “If you’re anybody, you’re on television now. That really is the way to get your music out there.”

Viewers inclined to watch the series with their young children, beware: IFC likes to refer to itself as “always uncut,” and “Z Rock” is no exception. It features plenty of topless groupies and simulated sexual acts, between, among others, the band members and some of the young mothers seen doing the hokeypokey at the daytime shows. Which raises a question: Just how true to life were some of those scenes?

“There were always hot moms,” Mr. Cassata, 30, the band’s drummer, said wistfully over a recent lunch of steamed broccoli and seared tuna, alongside his bandmates at a theater district restaurant.

Paulie Z, 28, interjected: “They were all wealthy, good-looking and in shape. I don’t speak for anyone in the band but myself, because I don’t know what skeletons are in their closets. But I definitely took advantage of some of the nannies.”

Like the dialogue in “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and “This Is Spinal Tap,” much of that in “Z Rock” is improvised, though with the players working off highly detailed outlines. For the three band members, who had never previously acted, the approach proved a blessing. Most of the situations in which their characters are placed by the show’s writers and producers — who include Mark Farrell, a former producer of “Curb” — are adapted from tales the band told in hours spent sitting around a table.

“They created a world that was familiar to the guys,” said Lynn Lendway, who manages the real-life ZO2 with her husband, Bob Held. “Then they said, ‘Speak the way you speak.’ ”

For a supporting cast the producers surrounded the musicians with stand-up comedians and improv players, including Lynne Koplitz (who plays the band’s dedicated if addled manager, Dina); Greg Giraldo (as a powerful record producer, who delivers an endlessly profane reprimand to Paulie Z after the band is late for his son’s birthday party); and Jay Oakerson (as a club manager who repeatedly propositions Paulie, who is straight).

Among the many musicians playing fictionalized versions of themselves in cameos are John Popper of Blues Traveler (who agrees to sign the Z Brothers, not ZO2, to a recording contract, but only after Dina sleeps with him); Dee Snider of Twisted Sister; and Chris Barron of the Spin Doctors. Joan Rivers plays Joan Rivers, but reimagined as Dina’s aunt.

Where fiction and reality diverge most sharply in the series, Mr. Cassata said, is in the TV band’s propensity for being “very self-sabotaging.”

“It seems on the show like we’re reckless, but we’re not in real life,” he said. “We never put the ZO2 career in jeopardy. That stuff is definitely artistic license.”

The show is but the latest milestone in the rocky seven-year history of ZO2.

The band’s roots are in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, where the Zablidowsky brothers were raised by their mother, Doris, who worked in a hospital cafeteria, and their father, Marty, the manager of an electronics warehouse. Marty was also a guitarist who played in a rock trio, called Z, that included his brother.

“I honestly didn’t know any kids’ songs,” Paul said, “because we grew up listening to Black Sabbath.”

Among the brothers’ earliest memories were making cardboard cutouts of guitars and records. At some point in elementary school, their mother took the boys to a Sam Ash music store to buy their first guitars.

While in high school, the two brothers began writing their own music, which they infused with elements drawn from a variety of influences, including Def Leppard, Grand Funk Railroad, Soundgarden, Stone Temple Pilots, Guns N’ Roses and, more than anything, Kiss. The brothers’ first break came in 2001, when David answered an open call for a bass player in a blues act. While he didn’t win the job, he wound up getting much more: Mr. Held, the producer who conducted the audition, encouraged him to front his own band.

Eventually the brothers approached Mr. Cassata, whom Paul had played with in a cover band; in short order Mr. Held agreed to produce an album. It was called “Tuesdays and Thursdays,” and was financed entirely by the band’s earnings from its children’s-party business.

Mr. Held, who knew Paul Stanley of Kiss, eventually got the album to him; Kiss liked it so much that ZO2 was invited to tour with it in the summer of 2004.

The band drew standing ovations from Kiss’s audiences, but the months that followed served as a reality check. No one else in the music business came calling, so Mr. Cassata returned to his job as a medical-records assistant at a hospital, and Paul returned to the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, where he had first drawn notice as a performer for children, and to the birthday-party circuit. The following winter, David, who had found some success as a bass player, went on tour with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, a sprawling rock group known for, among other things, reworking holiday songs.

Still, it was the band’s birthday-party work that helped get it to the small screen. A parent in the audience at several parties in 2005 was Brian Stern, an agent in the television division at the William Morris Agency.

He later caught ZO2 in a show at the B. B. King Blues Club in Times Square; before long Mr. Held was pitching him versions of what would eventually become “Z Rock.” In approving the series, Debbie DeMontreux, a senior vice president of IFC, said she could relate to it, at least to the kid-musician part. (The mother of a preschooler, she has attended her share of birthday parties.)

With their series about to begin, and with a second album (“Ain’t It Beautiful”) out on Riker Hill, a label created by the band’s management, ZO2 is readying a fall tour of clubs and small theaters. But the band won’t be playing any furnished basements or living rooms.

“Fortunately, we don’t need to anymore,” Mr. Cassata said. “It was a means to an end.”

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