

"YOU'VE GOT TO MAKE SOMETHING
YOU CAN STILL BE PROUD
OF IN TEN YEARS."



Keyboardist Philippe Saisse defies musical categorization. He's recorded with rock icons David Bowie and the Rolling Stones, and played with jazz giants like Bill Evans, Al di Meola, David Sanborn, and Al Jarreau. He was a solo artist on New Age label Windham Hill, yet has played pop sessions with everyone from Donny Osmond to Tina Turner. He contributed to Rod Stewart's American Songbook albums and worked with rai stars Cheb Mami and Faudel in his native France. And now his Philippe Saisse Trio has a smooth jazz hit: an instrumental version of Steely Dan's "Do It Again," from their recently released CD, *The Body and Soul Sessions*.

There's something special about playing with a trio, says Saisse. "We take up less room than the solo records I used to make, which were very dense, with lots of keyboard overdubs. With a trio, all three instruments can be loud, and nothing gets in the way. That was an epiphany for me—the fewer things you have, the louder they can be in the mix. And it's fun to play live because of the interaction between the three of us. [Drummer] Scooter Warner comes up with these cool, twisted grooves, and [bassist] David Finck has this amazing bottom. Playing a melody on top of the foundation, these guys provide is like driving a big Cadillac!"

Saisse commenced his career as a protégé of vibraphone legend Gary Burton. "I came from France specifically to study improvisation and four-mallet technique with Gary at the Berklee College of Music," he says. "He's been an incredible mentor. Everything I know about improvisation comes from his concepts and his classes."

But fate intervened in the form of an irresistible gig. "I was studying piano, vibes, and drums simultaneously," recalls Philippe. "Three percussion instruments! I told Gary I didn't know what to become, and he said, 'Just continue what you're doing, and the choice will happen naturally.' It was true—I got hired as a keyboardist in Narada Michael Walden's band. That was the natural selection!"

Saisse became a solo artist in the late '80s after years as a first-call sideman, arranger, composer, and producer. "When you're a gun for hire, you serve the vision of the producer and the artist," he explains. "You try to come up with parts and arrangements that fit their project. So it was liberating to come home and do something else. At first, I wasn't even sure it was a solo project—I was just laying down grooves and melodies I liked."

I was starting from a blank canvas, as opposed to coming up with things that met someone else's vision."

Saisse formed his trio seven years ago, releasing three albums in Japan. "This is our first release in the US," he says. "We didn't even have a deal—we just made the record we wanted to make in our basement. I never thought "Do It Again" would be a radio hit. The fact that it was so well accepted was kind of a shock to me."

Currently Saisse is finishing a project called Paris Faubourg, featuring a guest appearance by Michel Legrand, at New York's Avatar Studios. He's working in engineer Roy Hendrickson's penthouse mix suite, which features a Yamaha DM2000 digital console and a view of the Manhattan skyline. "This studio is my second home," he says.

Philippe is a longtime fan of Yamaha keyboards, including the AN1x and W5 synthesizers and the P3000 digital piano. His latest acquisition is a Yamaha S90ES keyboard. "It sounds great!" he exclaims. "It has all the Motif sounds onboard, and it feels great as a controller. It's the perfect master keyboard in the studio. It doesn't look like a cheesy plastic box. But what I really like are the sounds."

KEYBOARD CHAMELEON

PHILIPPE SAISSE

Perhaps the one constant in Saisse's career has been variety. "I've been involved in completely different genres," he notes. "I've been very interested in pop since I was a kid, and I have very eclectic taste. My last electronic record experimented with some of the Arabian-type flavors you're starting to hear now on some rap music. I did a song with Angelique Kidjo, and I was also really into the London drum and bass sound."

But, he observes, there's only one way to succeed musically: "You can make records for you without thinking about their commercial viability until doomsday, and they'll just sit on the shelf in your studio. But you can knock out something absolutely targeted to a specific genre and also fail. At the end of the day, you've got to make something you can still be proud of in ten years. You don't want to sell out too much or over analyze what you do."