

VARIETY

CONCERT REVIEWS

Slow Train Soul

(Knitting Factory: 325 capacity; \$8)

Presented by Tommy Boy Records.
Band: Lady Z, Morten Varano, Peter Leth.
Reviewed Sept. 28, 2004.

By PHIL GALLO

A jazz singer and a Danish electronic wizard pair to create an intoxicating blend of down-tempo, funk and soul beats and melodies, but in a reach beyond most of their clubbing brethren, they have managed to put on a show as well. Celebrating the release of their debut, "Illegal Cargo" (Tommy Boy), Slow Train Soul is the rare electronically driven act with a focal point, Lady Z, who brings elements of Grace Jones, Ella Fitzgerald and a gangsta Big Julie (from "Guys and Dolls") to her persona and vocals.

Lady Z, given that name by folk-jazz legend Terry Callier, also possesses a Billie Holiday whisper — think "Lady Sings the Groove" — and a sultriness that floats above the electronics of Morten

Varano, who possesses an armload of credits on electronic compilations. Tailor-made for the Buddha Bar set, Varano twists knobs and tosses in occasional keyboard runs, mixing classic Fender Rhodes sounds with buzzes and washes and blips. It's as warm as electronic music seemingly can be.

A live drummer brings depth to the beats; when Lady Z joins in on a pair of snare drums and a cowbell, the music becomes wildly alive without overpowering the listener. The two know their '70s music, evoking the echoey patterns of blaxploitation soundtracks, big city balladeers and even, on "Stoned Rays," the opening piano riff of Traffic's "Low Spark of the High Heeled Boys." Lady Z, who ended the evening singing the line, "The blues is my only friend tonight" a cappella in the crowd, is daring enough to scat her way through sections without fully bringing attention to her vocal improvisation. The songs, many of them about four minutes long, always remain the focus.