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Sam Sifton:
Lobster Three Ways
To Sunday

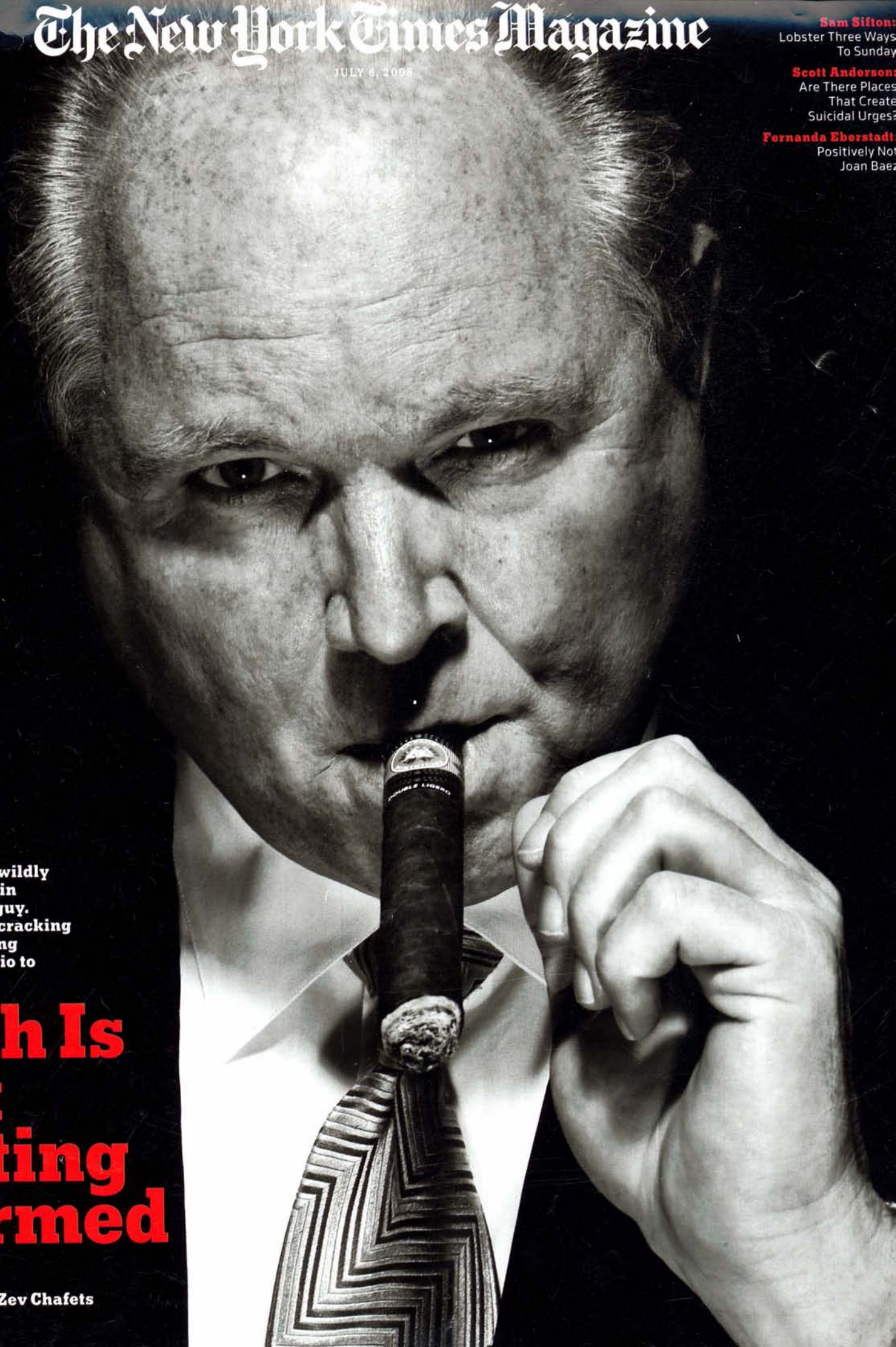
Scott Anderson:
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...the president is wildly
...popular. McCain
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...? Plenty.

Rush Is Just Getting Warmed Up

By Zev Chafets



HOW
TWO GIRLS NICKNAMED
COCO AND ROSIE
GREW UP TO BE THE
FREAKIEST
FREAK FOLK BAND
OF ALL.



TWISTED SISTERS

By Fernanda Eberstadt

PHOTOGRAPH BY VALÉRIE BELIN

Sierra (Rosie) and Bianca (Coco) Casady, dressed to trill.



SIERRA AND BIANCA CASADY, the two sisters who form the indie-rock band *CocoRosie*, were playing dress-up in Sierra's apartment in the Montmartre district of Paris one afternoon last fall. They were preparing for a concert later that week at the Paris Olympia, which marked the end of a four-month European tour. Splayed open on Sierra's living-room floor were two large blue Samsonite suitcases that spewed forth, rummage-sale-style, some of the outfits and stage props Bianca had brought back with her from New York for their Olympia gig.

The music of *CocoRosie* (the band's name is an amalgam of their mother's nicknames for the girls) is most often categorized by critics as "freak folk," placing the two sisters in a new wave of 20-something singer-songwriters like Devendra Banhart or the harpist Joanna Newsom, who have revived the '70s culture of homemade authenticity with at once more wholesomeness and more joyous perversity than their elders. Freak folk is not a bad label for *CocoRosie*, as far as labels go. But *CocoRosie*'s sound — the effects they deploy include windup toys and a kitten's mewling, as well as more conventional instruments like a snake charmer's flute, an out-of-tune ukulele or a beat box — is a little freakier, even, than that of most of their colleagues. It's no accident that their professed patron saints are drag queens from the 1970s: the German countertenor Klaus Nomi, who became an East Village cabaret star, or the Cockettes, a San Francisco-based operetta troupe whose most famous film was a transvestite version of Tricia Nixon's wedding.

As was true for their cross-dressing heroines, costume is an essential part of the performance. Both Bianca (Coco) and Sierra (Rosie) are exquisitely beautiful, but their habitual get-up is so in-your-face ugly you'd think the aim, as with primitive warriors, was to scare away the enemy. Bianca, 26, who is tall and curvy, with an Artful Dodger swagger (she quite often wears a black mustache penciled on her upper lip), tends to dress in a rather sardonic takeoff of homeboy style. That day, she had on a pair of supersize purple-and-gold Adidas sweat pants in velour, with matching sneakers, a black XXL T-shirt bearing the logo Black Pit Bull and a riding coat constructed from two quilted nylon dressing gowns, one of them red tartan, the other pink-and-green-flowery, with large Japanese Manga-esque appliqués sewn on them. Her headdress consisted of waist-length artificial black dreadlocks, surmounted by a crushed velvet mobcap with gold studs. Her face was adorned in white pancake makeup and turquoise eyeliner — and one fake pink eyelash.

Sierra, 28, with olive skin and slanting pale green eyes, has the long blue-black hair, jutting cheekbones and turbo-sculptured body of a Marvel Comics superheroine. On this particular afternoon, she was wearing striped boxer shorts with a pair of thigh-high cream leather stiletto boots, and over them a wasp-waisted rust-colored bathrobe with a kind of lining/train that consisted of a child's teddy-bear-patterned flannel bottom sheet that Bianca had designed especially for her.

"Bianca is so totally creative," Sierra informed me. "Even when she was a little kid, she was out there with her sewing machine, cooking up these really wild concoctions."

"I've been making my own clothes since I was, like, 15," Bianca confirmed. "I used to wear this rainbow Afro and these periwinkle vinyl bell-bottoms: this was when nobody was into baggies yet, or the idea that vinyl could be anything but skintight. In high school, the principal and vice principal were always getting me to make them, like, these sequined bell-bottoms. 'Sew for me and I won't kick you out.'"

"The idea is of this kind of fashion that you want to die in," she continued, "that you could wear equally well to an awards ceremony or around a campfire in the Grand Canyon." Her ethic is "to put on the things you like least, things you hate the most. Things that give you pain. It's the same thing we do with the language we use in our songs: making ourselves use words we hate."

"Sierra's anti-humanity, into nature, lightning, physical endurance. I'm into hustling, selling, cheating people, creative vandalism."

"I wanted to go into the Army!" Sierra said.

"You love training," Bianca teased. "You like to be bossed around."

Fernanda Eberstadt is the author, most recently, of "Little Money Street: In Search of Gypsies and Their Music in the South of France." Her last article for the magazine was on the novelist José Saramago.

"Even hit! I was a boxer, a runner all my life."

"She likes humiliation, she likes hazing herself. She used to haze me, too, when I was a kid."

The girls maintain that in recent years they've switched roles.

"Before, Bianca was really fragile. ..."

"Yeah, and you could walk through the snow barefoot and never get cold. Now I run hot, and you're the one who gets sick."

"I've transsed a little," Sierra admitted. "We've both transsed each other."

"If there's a poetic to our work, a weird continuity of deliberate mis-translation, it's what comes off the streets and is purified and reduced by the dollar stores," she said. "I've been reborn by the idea of artificial paradise, an urban hustle. We are finding our way to God through the dollar stores of this world."

"Amen."

COCOROSIE FIRST HIT the musical scene in 2004 with a CD titled "La Maison de Mon Rêve," which was released by the Chicago-based label Touch and Go Records. As a debut album, it was uncompromisingly original, a throwback to the musical tradition Greil Marcus describes as "the old, weird America." Bianca, who is the band's lyricist, sang Beat-style songs in a scratchy little baby voice that made her sound like Billie Holiday doped up on infant cough syrup. Her lyrics included refrains like "Jesus loves me/But not my wife/Not my nigger friends/Or their nigger lives." Sierra, who is a classically trained soprano, could be heard somewhere in the background hauntingly trilling operatic scales and arias of her own composition. Although the album's musical palette also included hip-hop, Hawaiian folk and techno, the prevailing note was of early-blues-era American primitive.

FANS LOVE THE STORY OF HOW THE TWO SISTERS HOLED UP IN SIERRA'S COLD-WATER GARRET AND DID WHAT THEY LOVED TO DO AS CHILDREN: DAYDREAM ALOUD, TELL EACH OTHER SCARY STORIES, MAKE UP SONGS.

The effect was electrifying. You might have been listening to a field recording of some lost tribe who never intended the sounds they were making to be heard by outsiders. And the "outsider" response can be visceral. When I first heard *CocoRosie* perform two years ago at a benefit for runaway gay, lesbian and transsexual teenagers, the songs felt as thrillingly far out as punk in the mid '70s. Since then, I've played the music to broad-minded friends who have put their fingers in their ears, walked out of the room or even ripped the CD from its player and threatened to destroy it. "It's like chalk squeaking on a blackboard," was one verdict.

The legend surrounding *CocoRosie*'s first album only served to confirm the band's otherworldliness. Fans love the story of how Bianca, who was then 22 and living in Williamsburg and hadn't seen much of her older sister for the better part of 10 years, showed up in Paris in 2003, where the 24-year-old Sierra had come to study voice, and how the two sisters then holed up in Sierra's cold-water garret and did what they loved to do as children: daydream aloud, tell each other scary stories, make up songs. How Bianca, who had brought with her some kind of rinky-dink recording device, then taped their song sessions in the bathtub because it gave a nice echo.

Back in Brooklyn, she played the songs for a friend who happened to know Corey Rusk, ex-bassist from the hardcore group Necros, who now runs the label Touch and Go. According to Rusk, the friend called him up and said, "Give me your FedEx number, you've got to hear this!" In an e-mail message, Rusk told me: "I was blown away. I couldn't stop listening to the CD over and over again. I just knew I had to release that record."

"La Maison de Mon Rêve" met with an enthusiastic following — the duo's records sell around 100,000 copies each — and *CocoRosie* was soon collaborating with some of the finest musicians in indie rock. In 2005, the girls released a second album, "Noah's Ark," and last year, a third, called "The Adventures of Stillborn and Ghosthorse," which was produced by the legendary Icelandic sound engineer Valgeir Sigurdsson, Bjork's longtime collaborator.



Sister Hood In Holland, from left: Sierra in a singalong with her friend Danielle Stech-Homsey; Sierra and Bianca in front of Bianca's installation at Wall House, where she is artist in residence; Bianca preparing for her installation; laying the foundation (in this case, actual soil).

In addition to their band, the Casady sisters preside over a cottage industry of their own, drawing on an informal collective of alternative musicians, visual artists and clothing designers. Their subsidiary enterprises are multiform: Sierra has put together what she describes as a “baby metal” band called *Metallic Falcons*; Bianca, along with the artist *Militia Shimkovitz*, owns the record label *Voodoo-EROS* and runs a “museum” on the Lower East Side; last fall she had a one-woman show of her artwork at *Deitch Projects* in SoHo and has just opened an art gallery and tea shop in Montmartre, which exhibits works by *CocoRosie* friends and protégés. In Paris, where they regularly make the covers of style magazines, the sisters are revered as fashion icons, queens of a vegan generation who find their inspiration in a Salvation Army bin rather than on the *Rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré*.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE the Olympia concert, I met them in their Paris apartment. Over a picnic lunch of hard-boiled eggs and spiced tea custom-blended for Bianca at an East Village tea shop called *Podunk*, the girls told me about their childhood. The Casady sisters’ way of talking to outsiders is oddly formal: sometimes Bianca will tell you about Sierra, sometimes Sierra will tell you about Bianca, always in the somewhat stylized manner in which a transvestite describes his or her alter ego. The rest of the time, they address each other in the intimate shorthand of childhood or married couples, an “Oh-did-I-tell-you-my-dream” sort of drift and patter.

Sierra and Bianca’s upbringing is emblematic of a certain kind of rural-nomadic Great Plains America, in all its restlessness and hunger for religious rebirth. Their mother grew up in small-town Iowa in the 1950s. Their maternal grandfather was a Native American “who left home pretty early”; their grandmother, Syrian Orthodox. “Our mom’s a seriously beautiful woman; she looks like Cher *after* the surgery, but growing up, she was ashamed of who she was,” Bianca said. “Nowadays, who would want to be white? But back then, in farm country, anything other than button-nosed blonde didn’t fly.”

The Casadys’ father came from an Iowa farm family, and he himself started out as a farmer. “When we were little, we kids used to work in the fields at harvest time,” Sierra recounted. “I have this really strong memory of Bianca, when she was 4, 5 years old and too small to detassel the corn husks. It was over 100 degrees, and she’d be lugging this great big water jug, bigger than she was, bringing water to everybody working in the fields.”

Their father was trying to farm organic in a distinctly nonorganic culture. “He always said the F.B.I. ran him out of town because agro-business felt too threatened by his finding all these herb-based pesticides,” Bianca added, with a certain skepticism.

The two girls have two full brothers (one left home at 15 and started farming in the California mountains) and an indeterminate number of half- and stepsiblings. “Our dad has a total of, like, 12 kids, including one

on the way,” Bianca said. “That’s his mission in life, getting women pregnant. Pretty interesting, when none of the kids he’s already got will even return his phone calls.” (It’s some indication of the family flakiness that neither Bianca nor Sierra, nor their mother, whom I would meet later, could readily pin down the number of children in their tribe.)

Sierra and Bianca’s parents split up when the girls were still young. Their father, whom Bianca describes as “schizophrenic” on the group’s recent album, went on to become an anthropologist-cum-shaman. (He could not be reached for comment for this article.) “He was into the Brazilian church, Haitian voodoo, Native American culture, the New American church,” Sierra said. Sierra remembers being taken much too young to peyote ceremonies, where all the adults were completely whacked-out. “I reacted strongly against it,” she said. “I realized I needed to create my own boundaries, with a lot of privacy and solitude, and my parents learned to respect that.”

“Sierra needs to be in control,” Bianca confirmed.

Their mother, Christina Chalmers, an artist who today divides her time between Santa Fe and a farm in the Camargue, in the South of France, was equally New Age. She became a Rudolf Steiner teacher and married a fellow teacher, but neither family life nor teaching jobs slowed her nomadic drive. “Our mom never stayed anywhere longer than a few months,” Sierra said. “We grew up in Hawaii, all over California, New Mexico, Arizona. She always said her Syrian ancestors must have had a lot of Gypsy in them. Some people criticized our mom for moving her kids around so fast we never had a chance to make friends or finish a school year in one place.”

What’s certain is that the extreme nature of their upbringing drew the sisters into a shared dream world that is still at the heart of their creative endeavor. “I always feel like an outsider,” Sierra confessed. “I need to be alone. I like hiking and camping by myself, solitude to stimulate me towards God.”

Danielle Stech-Homsey, a folk singer and founder of the band *Rio en Medio*, has been friends with the Casadys since she first met Bianca, age 10, on a Santa Barbara school bus. She described to me the secret kingdom the three girls concocted. “We were all of us very solitary,” Stech-Homsey said. (Her father, who was a member of the *Cockettes*, had just died of AIDS, and she remembered assailing her classmates for their casual disparagement of gay men.) “I moved into the apartment above them, and we formed this huge connection that hasn’t changed,” Stech-Homsey told me. “The landlord let Bianca have this room in the basement that became her own special world: she kept a chili plant there that we’d do voodoo spells on and sing songs to. We were always writing novels together, interwoven stories.

“When we were 12, 13, we had a lot of homeless friends, and we used to stay with them out under the freeway,” Stech-Homsey continued. “Later on, we joined the rave scene in L.A. We’d go down in platform shoes, giant wigs, drive five hours into the desert, end up at these crazy raves in the wilderness.

“We were very sober people,” she hastened to add. “Sierra was *always*

singing. When you have nothing in the world in terms of civility, singing is something to hold on to. It's Sierra's spiritual connection to meaning in the universe — very core. CocoRosie's music is a pure reflection of Bianca and Sierra's relationship with each other — that's what makes it so magical. It's just a vehicle for the strong and complicated energy between them."

The Casady sisters spent their early adolescence in what Bianca describes as an "anti-school environment," even though their mother and stepfather were teachers. "We didn't turn out so scholarly," she said. "Of all the kids in our family, none went to college, less than half finished high school. I pretty much dropped out after third grade."

Sierra, on the other hand, claims she "wanted to finish high school, go on to college, but my parents wouldn't let me. They said it would destroy my creativity. They were so right." Instead, she went first to New York, in 1998, and then to Paris to study opera. "I cheated. I pretended I could sight-read when I couldn't. You learn a lot from the faking-it process."

AFTER THEIR PICNIC of hard-boiled eggs and tea, the sisters were due for a rehearsal at a studio in Saint-Ouen, a grungily chic neighborhood of flea-market stalls on the northern outskirts of Paris.

When we got there, the French band members were already assembled. I was introduced to Gaël Rakotondrabe, a cherubic-looking youth from Réunion who plays piano and keyboard; to Ben Molinaro, who plays bass; to Spleen, a muscular young hip-hop artist who specializes in comic voices; and to Tez, a geeky white boy with a crewcut who has gained a national following as a human beat box, churning out noises that sound like a continuous belch.

"Suddenly there are a lot of *boyz* in our lives," Sierra remarked, with a radiant surprise.

"We've found them all girls' names," Bianca added. "It took a while for Spleen, then suddenly we discovered he was Ronda. I picture her as a really built lesbian."

In the rehearsal studio, the producer and sound engineer, Valgeir Sigurdsson, was playing one of Martin Luther King's speeches to see if it could be profitably added to CocoRosie's habitual blend of barnyard noises and broken toys. The rehearsal was somewhat tense. The band was giving a pre-Olympia concert the following night in Rennes, and the Casady sisters had clearly expected everyone to be more prepared.

CocoRosie's management style is firm. There were plenty of hugs and back rubs for the "boyz," encouragement and gentle flattery to dispel any sulks, yet there was no question of collective decision-making: when the other band members tried to argue for the original version of a song Sierra had just revised, Bianca jumped in with a cheery "I'm really excited about these changes we've made."

I watched Sierra coax Bianca through a rendition of her eerily beautiful song "Terrible Angels" — "If every angel's terrible/Then why do you welcome them? ... Well the flowers have no scent/And the child's been miscarried/Oh every angel's terrible" — and then I headed back into central Paris in the pouring rain.

In listening to music by CocoRosie and their artistic "family," what's most striking is its Lost Child quality, its air of having been composed by waifs trying to create what the musician Antony, of Antony and the Johnsons, described to me as "a secret garden inside their own hearts in which to grow." For CocoRosie, this waifishness is an extreme political stance, a way of countering everything from consumer capitalism to the war in Iraq to environmental collapse: if mainstream rock 'n' rollers play at being perpetual teenagers, the Casady sisters' "secret garden" is by contrast almost prepubescent, Edenic, a place where the subversively marginal can flourish and be free. In "Sunshine," one of their most touching songs, Bianca is offering the other "boys and girls" a ride "round the block" on her roller skates. The risk is that the group's feyness, their semi-ironical invocations

of fairies and angels, can seem a dodge, a way of not talking about what comes closest to the bone.

But with "The Adventures of Ghosthorse and Stillborn," the third and latest album, released last spring, most critics agreed that CocoRosie had entered a new realm of emotional rawness and musical complexity. In New York magazine, Karen Schoemer wrote that the band, though "less wiggly and hand-hewn," was now transformed "from self-conscious oddity into an actual songwriting force." Other reviewers likened Bianca's unashamedly poetic lyrics to those of Beck, while the scurries and pauses, the breathless gasps of her delivery won comparisons to Bjork's. The consensus was that CocoRosie had joined the musical mainstream while losing nothing of their stubborn particularity.

They began work on that CD after the death of their older half-brother Simon, and their subject was their own sweetly messed-up family. "Ghosthorse and Stillborn," which was written at Christina Chalmers's farmhouse in the Camargue, is constructed like a novel. Throughout its "chapters," certain spectral characters recur: their mother (the opening title "Rainbowwarriors" evokes a Native American spiritual tradition), their shaman father ("he's a black-magic wielder, some say a witch ... and he was the bastard that broke up the marriage, evildoer doing evil from a baby carriage") and, above all, a "young brother skinny and tall," for whom, a listener suspects, the paternal magic may have proved too heady.

"The first time I heard the album I cried like I hadn't cried in years," Danielle Stech-Homsy told me. "I had to leave the room where we were all listening to it. Bianca's not someone who's eager to delve into painful aspects of her family. All my life I've known her to walk away from painful situations or go dead silent, hold it all in. Her open emotiveness on those subjects took my breath away. They are heavy stories indeed. I knew something had turned inside her toward acceptance, and that grace was astounding."

TWO DAYS LATER, on the morning of their Paris gig, CocoRosie was backstage at the Olympia. The band played in Rennes the previous night, and both sisters said they felt the concert had gone well.

"There was no downtime; we were totally on target," Bianca said. She especially enjoyed the "junkiness" of the live concert footage, which they projected against the stage's backdrop. "It was really hot, really messed up black and white, like a surveillance video."

By the time they got back to Paris, it was 4 o'clock in the morning and way too late even to think of going to bed.

"I was just waiting until it was time to get to the Olympia," said Bianca, for whom lack of sleep only seems to intensify her air of dogged calm. "Sierra is supersick, it's just ridiculous, but if anything, she's singing *better*. You resonate differently when you have a cold."

After a run-through with the tech crew, the two sisters settled themselves in a dressing room to eat hard-boiled eggs (again), screen the videos they would be projecting that night and relax with their friends. Bianca was already preparing for her art exhibition at Deitch Projects in SoHo the following month. Seated on the floor of their dressing room was an elfin-looking fair-haired youth in a pair of powder blue sweat pants and knee-length striped basketball socks, who was doing warm-up exercises. His name was Cohdi Harrell, and he was a Jennifer Aniston lookalike.

"We call him Mate Man, because he always travels with his green tea, only this time French customs tried to confiscate it," Bianca explained.

Harrell turned out to be a friend of Sierra's from Santa Fe. Like other people who knew Sierra as a teenager, he remembered her chiefly as a dancer. "I used to see her at raves out in the desert, dancing by herself right in front of the speakers."

"Techno Sierra," Bianca said.

Harrell is now an acrobat who runs what he describes as "a minimalist contemporary circus company" out of an adobe ex-movie theater in a tiny town in New Mexico. He and Sierra recently reconnected, and he was going to perform a trapeze act during tonight's concert. By now, certain members of CocoRosie's inner circle had arrived from New York. I met Leif Ritchey, an impish Midwesterner who has a clothing label with his wife called "Leif and Tooya" and who helps Bianca design CocoRosie's

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outfits, and Militia Shimkovitz, the artist who is Bianca's business partner at Voodoo-EROS records.

Shimkovitz, a cheerful, wiry young woman in a baggy black sweatsuit and a black dreadlock wig, seemed to be acting as CocoRosie's technical troubleshooter, running through what the girls felt had worked and what hadn't worked about the previous night's lighting, sound and video projections, and acting as liaison between them and the Olympia's backstage crew. Periodically she would return to recount her latest head-to-head with the French technicians. "Even though it was super, super talked about, the Olympia is suddenly freaking out about our using our own fabric onstage," she reported, amusedly exasperated. (She and Bianca had brought from New York a gigantic, glow-in-the-dark spider web, in which they intended to wrap the set.) "Apparently you're only allowed to use fabric from one store in Paris that's officially certified as flame-retardant. Do I get to pull my The-Girls-Won't-Play-Unless-They-Have-Their-Fabric?"

"Totally," Bianca replied.

Eventually, Shimkovitz and the Olympia's crew forged a compromise whereby CocoRosie could install the Bianca spider web, so long as it was first sprayed in flame-retardant. In the end, the fabric was too wet to be used.

The Olympia concert opened with a *tableau vivant* of the two sisters, sitting at the tea table, sipping from china cups. The effect was Victorian Gothic: they might have been two spinsters in their Bloomsbury drawing room. By the end of the concert, Sierra, stripped down to a sports bra, was belting out a hip-hop song whose lyrics were as X-rated as anything by Snoop Dogg, and the rest of the band were loping about the stage in black robes and death's heads, looking like Harry Potter's Dementors.

This clash of fairylike and raunchy is the kind of cultural disjunction that CocoRosie fans thrive on. The Paris audience was noticeably more clean-cut than the mohawked transgender ragamuffins who make up CocoRosie's American following, but it was nonetheless wildly enthusiastic. As soon as the curtain came down and the auditorium cleared, Bianca was back onstage, already packing up props and costumes.

"Don't worry; we'll take care of that," the stage manager assured her. "Go enjoy your guests!"

"What guests?" Bianca wondered, a bit scornfully.

Bianca, after all, is a hard worker (I was reminded of Sierra's story of her as a 5-year-old lugging water to the field hands at harvest time), and what she really wanted to do at that particular moment was get the set packed away and then maybe slip home for a few hours' sleep, before tomorrow's flight back to New York for her SoHo exhibition. Instead, after a brief round of socializing with the French and American well-wishers who came to congratulate them, Bianca, accompanied by Leif Ritchey and Militia Shimkovitz, made her way onto the loading platform, which the band was told was the only place in the Olympia where you could still enjoy a smoke. There, among the cranes and pulleys, they floated in a kind of postperformance euphoria. Bianca had a bottle of Heineken and a clove cigarette; Ritchey was swigging from a can of orange soda, Shimkovitz from a Coke; and suddenly Ritchey was twanging the aluminum flip-top of his can like a zither, Shimkovitz joined in, Bianca started clattering her bottle and Ritchey, blissed out, beaming, began improvising a song that rhymed "rave in" and "cave in."

"I'm peeled!" he crowed, waving his Orangina.

CocoRosie's manager, a quiet, nervous young man named Simon Guzylack, came to report that the Olympia said everyone had to be out in five minutes but that there was an after-hours club to which they might repair.

"Why do we need to go to an after-hours joint?" Bianca demanded. "The party's right here!"

IT WAS FOUR MONTHS before I next saw the girls, at the Valentine's Day opening of Mad Vicky's Tea Gallery, the storefront in Montmartre where Bianca is exhibiting work by various artist-friends while serving up to customers her own blend of sweet milky chai.

The room was packed. There was the photographer Nan Goldin, who has a base in Paris. There was the French filmmaker Claire Denis (director of "Chocolat" and "Trouble Every Day"), who described herself to me as a "longtime" admirer of CocoRosie's. There was a Dutch curator named Kie Ellens, who



Cosmic Thing

Above: An installation view of Bianca's "Lil' Girl Slim 'Cosmic Willingness' Pipe Dreamz A Revelation," at Deitch Projects in SoHo; right: the sisters on Opening Night.

had arranged for Bianca to be artist in residence in Groningen. ("As soon as I heard her music, I realized it was sound sculptures," he told me.)

There were TV cameras, a team from the prestigious French culture magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, which was shooting a cover article pairing CocoRosie with a Paris-based fashion designer named Gaspard Yurkievich. There was CocoRosie's usual gang of inseparables. Leif Ritchey was there, with his wife, Tooya. Danielle Stech-Homsy was brewing tea over a tiny stove, and a young conceptual artist named Vlad Kromatika, who helped design the sets, was serving it from Thermoses.

But the star guest was Sierra and Bianca's mother, Christina Chalmers, a strikingly tall woman in leopard-skin cowboy boots, with Goth-black hair, the craggy profile of an Indian chief and a guileless air. Chalmers had just come from her farmhouse in the Camargue, where she paints and studies bullfighting and flamenco. "I had a dream last night that my mom came to the opening, so I called her up this morning and said, 'You've got to be here tonight,'" Bianca explained. Chalmers, having hopped on a train at short notice, was dressed far too lightly for a raw northern late winter's night. Sierra, having commandeered somebody's coat to wrap around her mother, was now engaging her in a passionate tête-à-tête. "Sierra's trying to convince her she's a multiple tranny — female to male and back again," Bianca reported dryly. "My mom always believed that Sierra was butch and that I wasn't!"

When I asked Chalmers how she would describe her daughters, she replied simply, "Angels." Out of the many kids she raised, she said, "I never heard a squawk out of those two."

The "angels" both looked a bit worn. They had just come back from a series of concerts in Argentina, and they were about to leave for an Australian tour that would then mutate into a late-spring tour of 11 European cities. In the meantime, they were releasing a single from a new album that Sierra described to me as "less personal, more cosmic" than "Ghosthorse and Stillborn." They had been composing in an inspired frenzy, and each had the slightly dazed, reluctant air of someone who has been snatched away midflow. "All I want to do is keep on writing," Sierra confessed to me, but, she said, she figured they could steal snatches of time in rehearsal studios across Brisbane, Athens, Budapest, Nice and Porto.

Bianca joined us for a moment of calm. Reaching out a willowy arm, she turned down the volume on the hip-hop that pounded from a neighboring set of loudspeakers.

"People think we're alien because we don't really like music," she said. "We never listen to music. Maybe, like, Arvo Pärt, Nina Simone, but that's it. Music's just our ticket onto the rollercoaster. We don't understand people who always have music blasting in the background. What we like is silence." ■