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Destined: Mi Ami



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Dusted's Michael Crumsho talks shop with San Francisco's Mi Ami.

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Late October 2007, and like any other human with half a brain, I'm four days into bailing on the empty, dying industry grope-fest that is CMJ, while others pack it in cheek to cheek to catch awful bands in Manhattan. On this given Sunday, however, I'm in a ground floor apartment in Williamsburg, eyeing a bagel spread while a crew of long-time "Friends" celebrate a digital download label of the same name and run roughshod over proprietor Matt Schnipper's living room.

As the afternoon show draws to a close, San Francisco trio Mi Ami set up and launch hard, careening through breakneck polyrhythms and slicing guitar, both goosed up and down by some brilliantine bass riddims. By turns menacing and discordant, yet still spry and occasionally melodic, the tracks swing intuitively, and for every jarring thrust of guitarist and vocalist Daniel Martin-McCormick's six strings and larynx, there's a deft parry from bassist Jacob Long and drummer Damon Palermo. A neat trick, indeed – as corrosive as it is propulsive, Mi Ami's music effortlessly toes that line between nuanced rhythm and barely restrained attack.

Formed out west in late 2006, the band's relatively low profile thus far is surprising given its members past history. After all, Long and Martin-McCormick were key components of Washington, D.C.'s

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celebrated but all too short-lived band Black Eyes. After that group wrapped in 2004, Long and Martin-McCormick knocked around DC in a couple of different ensembles before both making their way to San Francisco. Though they took up residence on the left coast within a few months of each other, it would still be another couple of years before they renewed their musical partnership.

In the meantime, Martin-McCormick turned his attention towards academics. “I went off and did my own thing for about two years,” he says of his earliest times in California, “studying classical guitar, going to music school, playing solo, working on techno tracks, and so forth. At a certain point, I found myself very inspired by Steve Reich, Morton Feldman, Japanese classical music, Indian ragas, gamelan, and other classical traditions that melt minds. I had no theoretical knowledge at all, no formal training, nothing. This made me decide to go to music school, with some semi-articulated ideas about becoming a ‘real’ musician or something.”

Once settled in the Bay Area himself, Long quickly turned to solo work, a marked departure from his days in post-punk and free-jazz inspired bands. Recording and performing as Earthensea, he dropped a series of CD-R and tape releases that documented ever-deepening excursions into guitar-centric drone mantras. While that material was all uniformly excellent, the itch for a more group-oriented creative outlet still grew steadily for a couple of years. “I really just realized that I did miss that communal relationship that develops when you play music with other people,” he offers. “Playing solo really helped to clarify some musical ideas for me and I really enjoy it, but I missed the bouncing of ideas off other people. Plus I missed playing in a really loud band.”

While Long began to satisfy his need for volume in a trio called Elders, Martin-McCormick started to pull away from the academy and improvisation. After meeting Palermo, a dedicated noisician growing more at odds with the continued pursuit of the abstract, during a shared a bill at a local bookstore, the two took refuge in dance music and formed Mi Ami. It would still take almost a full year to complete the line-up, though, as the nascent band worked as a duo for the better part of 2007 before Long offered to play along near the end of the summer.

Initially, he was hesitant about what his role in the band would be. “It is funny, though, that when I first started playing with Damon and Daniel, they had been doing this band for like a year and I had seen them so I had some idea what it sounded like but I really had no idea how the bass would fit in and all,” Long says. Ultimately, the addition of his low end would become a key component of the band’s sound, offering a rippling versatility that solidified Mi Ami’s pinpoint rhythms.

Given Martin-McCormick and Long’s past history, a casual listener might thus be inclined to assume a few similarities to that storied old quintet of theirs. Such associations, however, should be dashed within seconds of the needle hitting *African Rhythms*, the group’s debut 12” for the White

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Denim label. Though they retain a similar tension, there's a deeper attention to subtle, dynamic shifts in rhythm that have more to do with dub and techno than punk rock. "The techno influence is definitely there, although right now we seem to be in some kind of transition," admits Martin-McCormick. "This rigid, loop-based structure is somehow now subliminally part of the way I hear music in a way it most definitely was not three years ago. I didn't even notice that any kind of evolution or change was happening, but all of a sudden I'm playing and in my head I'm organizing the parts according to this weird, subjective personal logic, which is colored by this genre that I'm not a part of but somehow has infiltrated my mind."

"When I first met Daniel I was losing interest in playing improv music and re-exploring various forms of dance music," says Palermo. "Growing up outside of Detroit and having an older brother introduced me to music coming from that area – Plastikman, Robert Hood, UR, Gerald Donald's projects, Theo Parrish and all that. I was always into that type of music and its offspring but never got too into making music with a computer, and never thought of trying to bring it live."

Long, however, concedes that his rhythmic impetus has a different origin than that of his bandmates. "From my perspective, the dub element is more where I am coming from. And to me while dub is a production technique it is also about the band playing the music that provides the framework for those techniques," he says. "That is really something that drives me – to try and come up with parts that are simple and repetitive but interact with everything else going on in a way that they shift and vary subtly enough that you don't necessarily notice until you are taken somewhere else."

Even more apparent across the three tracks that make up Mi Ami's debut is the creeping influence of those titular "African Rhythms," an undeniable bounce and percussive cascade that, in large part, is moved along deftly by Palermo's percussion. "I love lots of the Kraut-like drumming in '70s Afrobeat," he says simply. "Unfortunately, we've taken away the whistle. I should take Too Short's advice and blow it!"

"A lot of African traditional music evolved into hierarchies where rhythmic complexity takes precedent over melodic/harmonic development," continues Martin-McCormick. "To most 21st century ears, then, this makes perfect sense. Polyrhythms, or even just layered drums, are so exciting and pleasing, [...] so we're just still reeling from hearing these deep, deep grooves, as a planet and as a band."

What makes Mi Ami work, however, is an approach that seeks not to pay an overt tribute to any influential style or sound. Instead, the band's attack is more intuitive, borne out of an obvious love of dub, disco, and drums that is refracted through each member's long history in and around the fringes of punk rock. Thus, while tracks like "African Rhythms" and the even more direct "Feel You" bask in that glow, they never pander, instead translating old spirits into whole new bodies.

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“I am not really interested in sounding exotic or even cross-cultural. We just play,” continues Martin-McCormick. “Whatever we pick up I think is more of an intuitive tribute rather than any kind of wholesale appropriation or copying. I feel like we are living inside this music, and it comes less out of any particular desire or will to sound like something or another and more just the natural dynamic that evolves out of the time we have spent together. That’s a very fortunate place for me to be in, and I am psyched to see what’s next.”

“I think the one thing that really ties the three of us together is that none of us just like disco, or just like punk, or just like Afrobeat,” maintains Long. “It’s kind of a constant ‘check this out,’ like a constant search for other things to hear and be inspired by from everywhere. It’s just that we are searching everywhere to find music that has those elements we love and, it doesn’t matter where it comes from.”

In 2008, the search for those elements will lead the band out on the road in February, as Mi Ami tour with friends (and, coincidentally, fellow Destineds) Food for Animals. And with one record on the horizon for early this year, there’s yet another single that could possibly see some light before the year is out. Though it represents yet another chapter in Long and Martin-McCormick’s long history of musical communion, Mi Ami’s music feels like a fresh start, and one that could transport the trio to wholly new content of their own creation at any given moment.

By Michael Crumsho

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