

Interview: Mi Ami

After Black Eyes faded, this trio drummed up a new vision



Photo: Jonathan Snyder

By Jason Heller February 4, 2009

Dischord Records' Black Eyes—a collective of Washington, DC art-punks with a lust for rhythm and abstraction—operated mostly under the radar in the early aughts before imploding in 2004. Two years later, singer-guitarist Daniel Martin-McCormick and bassist Jacob Long enlisted drummer Damon Palermo and began releasing vinyl singles under the name **Mi Ami**. The trio, now based out of San Francisco, releases its debut full-length, *Watersports*, on Touch And Go Records this month. The disc won't sound foreign to Black Eyes fans, but it's still a challenging piece of music: Amid throbbing, loping polyrhythm that draws from Afrobeat, jazz, and disco lies Martin-McCormick's echo-scrambled guitar and yelped, even animalistic vocals. Set to play the **Hi-Dive** on **Thursday**, Martin-McCormick spoke with *Decider* about his old band, his new band, and how classical guitar is like Antarctica.

Decider: What did the transition from Black Eyes to Mi Ami involve?

Daniel Martin-McCormick: When Black Eyes broke up, Jacob and I were really getting into more free jazz and avant-garde music. Not just noise, though. Jacob was also getting into drone stuff. We really wanted to keep pushing it. As much as Black Eyes had this really strong energy, I would never say that band had any clarity of purpose. There was constant bickering and arguing. One person wanted to make dub. One person wanted to play free jazz. One person wanted to be in Jawbox.

D: Which person were you?

DMM: I wanted to play free jazz. I just wanted to destroy all the time, pretty much. Everything that happened in Black Eyes did so through compromise and argument and sheer force of will. So when we broke up, Jacob and I were both were moving toward a more open approach. We played together for a little while in a free-jazz duo called White Flight, then he moved to California. He was living in Davis, and he started working on some drone music.

D: What were you up to at the time?

DMM: I started taking classical guitar lessons, actually. I started music school at San Francisco State. I'd never been trained; I'd never had any technical experience when it came to music. At some point it gets embarrassing, especially when you're listening to, like, [John] Coltrane. I had no idea how he made music, then I learned he knew a lot about how music was made, and that jazz uses all these theoretical principles and blah blah blah.

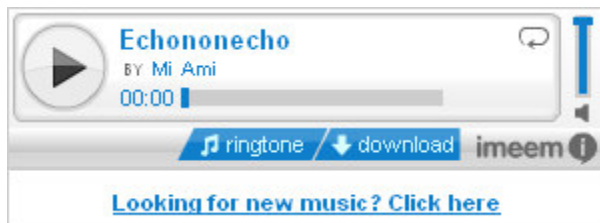
D: The whole “You need to know the rules before you can break them” kind of thing?

DMM: I hate that wording. To me it speaks of this kind of repressed mental state. It's not about rules. There are no rules. There never were any rules. But it's stupid not

to be curious about how your instrument works and how other people have used it. It's like if you were in love with somebody, but you were like, "I don't need to know what they do during the day when I'm not around. I don't need to know where they grew up. I don't need to know what they like or dislike. When we're together it's so pure." That's bullshit! You should know the whole thing. That's why I picked up solo classical acoustic guitar—it's the exact opposite spot on the globe from where I was at. It was like going to Antarctica for me. [Laughs.]

D: You've always been an extremely textural guitarist. Have you ever felt the urge to just sit down and write pop songs?

DMM: Yeah, very much so. There are examples of that, I think, on *Watersports* and some of the newer stuff we've been working on. I have sat down and tried to write pop songs by myself, but that's more of an exercise. But it's still really satisfying on a personal level. The guitar is a tremendously wide-open tool, but one thing it does really well is play chords and melodies. You can play those for days and days on the guitar, and a lot of the music I listen to uses chords and melodies. I listen to a lot more melodic music than noisy music or a lot of harsh guitar playing. I feel a strong desire not necessarily to play any certain way, but to relate and understand to tradition. Kraftwerk is not a normal band, but they use very traditional, melodic tools and make them exceptional. I don't want to feel alienated from melody.



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