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Music

Back to the Beat

A score of percussive tongues inform the Mi Ami sound machine

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Mi Ami plays with Thank You | [The Floristree March 9](#)



Mi Ami works hard at not sounding like any other band you've ever heard.

"Some people say we sound like African music, which is absolute bullshit," says Mi Ami's Daniel Martin-McCormick by phone from a rainy highway in Washington state. It's the blog buzz about his San Francisco-based band, and he's not fond of it. In an interview with the Parade of Flesh web zine earlier last month, he went further: "The biggest complaint I have about terms like African and tribal being used to describe music like ours is the undercurrent of racism and ignorance that allows them to slip by unnoticed . . . To play that music well is to devote your life to a style that, while not exactly, can be seen as a parallel, and certain equal, [one] to the virtuosic classical traditions of the colonizers. It's not people chilling out in a drum circle in the park."

It's true, the rhythmic aspect of the band is the sound that tends to get focused on, and talking to Martin-McCormick, you get the impression he frequently gets asked about Mi Ami's "African"

and/or "tribal" influences. One particularly bad blog post exclaimed Mi Ami's new record, *Watersports* (Touch and Go/Quarterstick), to be "the music going through someone's mind when their plane crash lands in African country x's remote wilderness."

This impression is probably an attendant risk when you name your first single "African Rhythms" and ground the track in circular polyrhythms. (Martin-McCormick explained in the Parade of Flesh interview that the title is political and doesn't refer to the music within.) The most immediate and striking thing on the track, though, is Martin-McCormick's banshee vocals, strung out into a high effeminate wail that's, at turns, undecipherable or just plain preverbal. (If it has a current contemporary, it's Ponytail's Molly Siegel.) Joining it in the three-piece mix is a guitar that veers between dubbed out glaze and mathy crags and, yes, drums that spend a striking amount of time at the front of the mix.

Mi Ami is one of those bands that doesn't get any kind of justice served by breaking it down into components. Martin-McCormick's old Dischord band Black Eyes was a riot and was capable of a good racket, but it still more or less followed postpunk's rules. "I feel like at one point in [Black Eyes], everybody had a music that they were trying to hear," he says. "And instead of having a support system for making that happen it became like a funnel, this really compromising machine where it was going to come out really different. It might come out good, but different. I feel a much more immediate connection [with Mi Ami]." And the band's pull is how it plies the line between rowdy, cathartic, and very deconstructed punk and drifting, space-born dub, a blasting off from every direction. It's the audio equivalent of a speedball--breathless, racing, and slowly rippling with back-of-the-lids chill.

Mi Ami's music suggests an improvisational element, or at least jamming, far beyond what's becoming the norm in underground or indie band culture. Nothing about it feels rigid or formulated, particularly given that it is, ostensibly,

dance music--about any Mi Ami live performance confirms that. When band founders Martin-McCormick and Damon Palermo met in San Francisco "both playing noise music or something like that," it was an instant click, two people with a next-level understanding of band/arrangement dynamics, and how to liberate them. "We were both mostly listening to dance music, so we started talking about that," Martin-McCormick recalls. "I think we should jam and try to explore this."

The duo's first song was actually a neo-disco number, according to Martin-McCormick. "Starting we had the idea that we would be a disco band," he says. "It was cool and I liked it, but the emphasis now is on what's idiomatic to our personalities. If one of us has an idea and wants to explore it, there's a general openness to that. It's not like being in a band that's trying to sound like any other band.

"At this point, I feel like everybody has developed a very personal way of making music," Martin-McCormick says. "It's about giving as much expression to their playing as possible."

That's the thing you're trying to put your finger on when you listen to Mi Ami's music--what does make this so, so different, idiosyncratic in a landscape where every band that pops up on the blog landscape is trying to be different in some way (which leaves so many bands trying to be different in the same way). The rules of the band are violently skewed toward a certain kind of internal anarchy. If people say that this is a rhythm band or tribal band, it might be because so often percussion in Mi Ami is the most immediate, approachable thing. It speaks our language in a band whose music so often speaks past it.

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