

## Fresh jam

SF trio Mi Ami make it happen. Plus: The Ettes, Wavves, Azteca, and more

By Kimberly Chun

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**SONIC REDUCER** The perfectly passive postmodern approach to pop nostalgia? Allow the milky waves of 1970s, '80s, and '90s retro navel-gazer rehash to simply wash over you — like so many warm, narcotic jets of synthetic baby formula. The opposite tact is the one that San Francisco trio Mi Ami takes: reject the rockist, retread trappings of the old and stale and make new and likely original sounds from a place of authenticity and openness. Breathe. Good. An excellent example might be Mi Ami's recent spasm of songwriting after the completion of their debut, *Watersports*, out Feb. 17 on Quarterstick: the jams weren't quite "up to snuff," as vocalist-guitarist Daniel Martin-McCormick puts it. But the essential flow was restored after drummer Damon Palermo spoke up in favor of letting the songs flow and allowing the changes to happen naturally rather than getting clogged with details.



Three Mi Amigos

"We started opening the songs up and started letting the changes happen naturally," explains the clear-eyed Martin-McCormick on this clear-skied, brilliant, balmy winter day in the Mission District. "I feel like when it works, it's really great because it doesn't seem like something locked in by something like repetitions of four. But at the same time, when it doesn't work it can be kind of frustrating because it's just like trying to have a conversation when you're just not feeling it. It has to be like a lived experience. You can't fake it."

You might not know it from glancing at the tall, lanky, check-shirted bandmates stalking down Alabama Street in search of coffee and nutrients at Atlas Cafe, but Martin-McCormick — a former member of Dischord punk outfit Black Eyes along with Mi Ami bassist Jacob Long — and the soft-spoken Palermo are pop philosophers of sorts: amiable, laid-back, yet ready to hold forth politely and passionately on their favorite disco singles and free jazz LPs, the multiple meanings one might glean from the title *Watersports*, or the role African funk guitar might play in, say, pulsing workouts like "The Man in Your House."

It's easy to get lost in Martin-McCormick's high-pitched, keening vocals, equal parts no wave nervousness and androgynous nerve; his bursts of scratched-out guitar skronk; Palermo's primal-power beats; and Long's reassuringly melodic bass lines. But Mi Ami never over-thinks its lengthy forays into that anxious *and* pleasure-strewn interzone between improv and noise, space-is-the-place dub and never-ending party jams. Like groups such as !!! and the Rapture and locals à la Tussle and Jonas Reinhardt, which Palermo also drums for, Mi Ami sounds as if it was bred on hardcore's aggression and reborn on a seething dance floor.

Martin-McCormick and Palermo met two years ago, after relocating from the East Coast and Vancouver respectively, while performing at an Adobe Book Shop art opening. The one thing they were sure of: they didn't want to be a rock band. "Boring!" blurts Martin-McCormick.

"We are a rock band," says Palermo mildly in Atlas' noisy back patio. "But you know what we're talking about. There's a lot of cool bands that are rock bands but a lot of it is a default setup, the structure of the songs and instrumentation."

"I think we came to be a guitar, bass, and drums trio very much on our terms," Martin-McCormick offers. "I didn't want to play guitar when I started, but I realized that was what I'm best at and began to find ways to play it that suited what I was looking for." Their resistance to rock habit was helped by the fact that Palermo didn't own a drum set: at first the duo had only two drums between them. They acquired bits as they progressed, while relying on a janky drum machine prone to crapping out at crucial moments — like their September 2007 opening date for No Age at Bottom of the Hill.

The turning point arrived when the twosome ditched the drum machine and put out a Craigslist ad for a bass player in '07. "We got a few responses," says Martin-McCormick. "One was super confrontational. I wrote that we're into disco, gamelan, and no wave — and no old people. We wanted someone who was kind of our age-ish. I just didn't want an 48-year-old dude who was like, 'I just need to jam!' This guy wrote back and said, 'How do you think gamelan musicians learn? They respect their elders, blah-blah-blah. You should go fuck off and die!' Whoa!"

The second response: a hip-hop producer working with an "awful singer-songwriter." The third: Long, who happened to be roaming Craigslist during his day job.

"There was no going back after that," says Martin-McCormick. Listening to the forward-facing future-rock of *Watersports*, I'd say there's little fear of that scenario. \*

## MI AMI

**Fri/23, 10 p.m., \$10**

**Bottom of the Hill**

**1233 17th St., SF**

[www.bottomofthehill.com](http://www.bottomofthehill.com)

## ROCK FOR LOVERS

**THE ETTES**

The primal beat band got theirs — where's yours? Thurs/22, 8 p.m., \$10. Rickshaw Stop, 155 Fell, SF.

[www.rickshawstop.com](http://www.rickshawstop.com)

**E-ZEE TIGER**

One-man massive energy generator Anthony Petrovic rouses himself from dormancy. With Wooden Shjips and Hank IV. Thurs/22, 9 p.m., \$7. Eagle Tavern, 398 12th St., SF. [www.sfeagle.com](http://www.sfeagle.com)

**WAVVES**

Going big with bristly, lo-fi garage rock. Fri/23, 9 p.m., \$16–\$18. Great American Music Hall, 859 O'Farrell, SF.

[www.gamh.com](http://www.gamh.com)

**AZTECA**

The sprawling fusion combo including Pete Escovedo and Sheila E. rocks for autism awareness. With War, El Chicano, and Los Cenzontles. Sat/24, 7:20 p.m., \$45–\$75. Warfield, 982 Market, SF. [www.goldenvoice.com](http://www.goldenvoice.com)

**THE PHENOMENAUTS**

The selfless Oakland space-rockers dish out *For All Mankind* (Springman). Sat/24, 9 p.m., \$13. Slim's, 33 11th St.,

SF. [www.slims-sf.com](http://www.slims-sf.com)

**JAY REATARD**

He's watching you watching him. With Nobunny and Bare Wires. Sun/25, 9 p.m., \$15. Independent, 628 Divisadero, SF. [www.theindependentsf.com](http://www.theindependentsf.com)

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