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Mi Ami weathers the slings and arrows of Touch & Go's (mis)fortune

Thick skin

By Chris Parker

You don't need Doppler radar to know which way the wind's blowing, but a thermometer can really put things in perspective.

In the ongoing immolation of half of the music biz—now there's only music, no biz—last week brought news that Chicago independent label Touch & Go, one of the underground's pillars for 30 years, was ceasing most functions. The largest of these was providing production, distribution and warehousing for a huge swath of small indies. The slack-jawed expressions of music-loving onlookers suggested they were witnessing a particularly impressive building implosion that empties the vista in moments: Now you see it, now you don't.



Mi Ami: No obstacle too high, even tall grass  
Photo by Jonathan Snyder

This is the space into which Mi Ami are born. The San Francisco art-punk trio released their debut, *Watersports*, on Touch & Go imprint Quarterstick last Tuesday, the same day the company announced its companywide layoffs. (Touch & Go owner Corey Rusk and his wife will be the only employees going forward, tending the back catalog and setting loose the many small indie labels whom T&G distributes to stores nationally.) It's an inauspicious beginning.

Yet Mi Ami are a quintessential Touch & Go band, and as such are built low to the ground to weather bumps that destroy less hardy acts. Like former musicians Rusk and label founder Tesco Vee, Mi Ami are a product of punk's revolutionary DIY spirit and are comfortable doing their thing by any means necessary. The label's been a home to visionary iconoclasts such as Will Oldham, Steve Albini and John McEntire; and like them, there's less emphasis on recompense for Mi Ami guitarist Daniel Martin-McCormick than on the excitement of doing.

"We're still a band, we're still playing music. We were excited to work on this label, but we'll still be playing," explains Martin-McCormick, en route from Portland, Ore., to Eureka, Calif., for another show. "It's upsetting, but we'd just started working with the label so it wasn't like it had become part of our identity or anything. It's sad to see [Touch & Go] go because it's so emblematic of this attitude that's about as righteous as it gets playing music. As a fan, it's strange. As a band, we'll figure out something else."

Their history confirms as much: This isn't Martin-McCormick's first go-round with bassist Jacob Long. They've played together in other acts, most notably in the dark, noisy D.C. band Black Eyes, who released a pair of albums for Dischord during their three-year run. They broke up when Long moved to California, their star still on the ascendance after the spazzy free-jazz anarchy of their 2004 LP *Cough*.

Martin-McCormick swapped coasts as well sometime later and started taking classes in classical guitar at San Francisco State College. There he met drummer Damon Palermo and jammed with him for about a year,

experimenting with electronics, as well as different instruments, before ultimately deciding to go with the standard rock lineup, drums-bass-guitar-vocals.

Around this time Long called. "I didn't even think he was available because he was in a different band at the time," Martin-McCormick recalls. "But he got in touch and said that he wanted to play, and it was immediately exactly what we were looking for."



*Watersports* arrives after a series of singles showcasing an exhilarating blend of atmospheric no-wave guitar dissonance, squealing vocals and chewy, rumbling percussion. Intoxicating rhythms, prickly guitar shards and sultry bass funk collide in a blend that's as entrancing as it is tonally confrontational. It's dance music for spasmodic paranoiacs, epitomized by "Pressure," a throttling discourse floating on spacey bass as Martin-McCormick atavistically howls about the pressure.

He faults competing aesthetics and stubborn wills among its five members for Black Eyes' dissolution. He's gone the other direction with Mi Ami, which, while similarly improvisational, is more harmonious than five people going their own way at once.

"I personally feel very free in this band to play what I want to play, and we support each other in our playing rather than pushing against each other. We push against each other too, but it's more like a challenge and not an attack," Martin-McCormick says.

The arrangements evolve out of jams that quickly codify but retain room for improvisation.

"We don't talk a lot about each other's parts, more overall structure of the song," he explains. "The way we play them, the sections of the songs are all in order, but we like to switch to each section at a point in the performance when it feels natural. There's always an understanding that this song should have breathing room, and so we're cuing each other visually and listening hard and just feeling it out."

They're looking forward to the trip east and touring for the rest of the year, while searching for another label. He dismisses the idea of putting out their next album themselves; he'd rather that they could focus on the music than get "bogged down" with retailing details.

Martin-McCormick illustrates the point later when he acknowledges that they're playing mostly new material on tour, having already grown tired of the stuff on the latest album. "It takes six months for a record to come out and there's no reason to wait around," he protests.

Of course not everyone's so sanguine. While music retail and labels' suffering is due in large part to the advent of digital, a huge distributor like Touch & Go can't be replaced—not immediately—by iTunes. And it certainly isn't good news for vinyl collectors.

"Physical retail—CDs and LPs—still constitutes 60 to 70 percent of what we sell of each release that we put out," writes Merge co-founder Mac McCaughan in an e-mail response. "The idea of abandoning it is insane. From an aesthetic point of view, LPs sound better than CDs, and both sound better than MP3s. Of course it's only a matter of time before delivery of large files makes hi-fi formats the standard rather than MP3s, but we're not there yet. So we don't want to, nor can we afford to, abandon physical retail, but the closing of a distributor like Touch & Go means that it's getting harder all the time even for those who are great at it."

So while Rome burns, the minstrels hit the road to fill the coffers, because while file-trading may be great, it can't replace a live show. For Mi Ami, it's a temporary setback because earnest DIY musicians don't have a lot of overhead, making them remarkably recession-proof—so long as they don't mind long van rides and Taco Bell bean burritos. Martin-McCormick is down with it. "The most important thing for bands to do is to play," he says.

The '80s underground didn't have the infrastructure in place that's here today, and they made some great music. Then again, most people didn't discover it until the structure was in place. There's a reason besides time and talent that Mission of Burma draws significantly more since reuniting than they did in the old days. Music may be free, but it's not self-sustaining.

*Mi Ami performs with Thank You, bETAVEG, DJ Nasty Boots and DJ Juan V, Saturday, March 7, at Nightlight. Admission for the 10 p.m. show is \$5.*

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