

Interview: Mi Ami

Posted by [Cole Goins](#) on Mar. 10, 2009, at 9:45 am



If your scaled-back, ramen noodle budget allows for such luxuries as rock and roll shows on a week night, then the Velvet Lounge is offering up a doozy this evening: Not only are Baltimore hip-hop knob twiddlers [Food For Animals](#) and cacophonous a capella goddesses [Lexie Mountain Boys](#) on the bill, but San Francisco dub-punkers [Mi Ami](#) will also revisit the District (two of the band's members, guitarist/vocalist **Daniel Martin-McCormick** and bassist **Jacob Long**, were both in the raucous DC Dischord band **Black Eyes**).

Mi Ami is in the midst of a massive tour to support their new album, *Watersports*, which has been absolutely killing our stereos since it dropped in mid-February. Equal parts urgent and hypnotic, chaotic and funky, *Watersports* is a truly compelling, relevant rock record that goes well beyond the wealth of genres it references. You can preview a cut from the new album on [Quarterstick's Web site](#) via a [download](#) of the awesome track "New Guitar," which is discussed further in the following interview.

The band dropped off Baltimore tour-mates **Thank You** last night after a show at [Floristree](#), ending the co-tour and beginning the circuit back west on their own, stopping off at SXSW along way.

Washington City Paper recently caught up with Daniel while the group was on the road from the Northwest down into California, which didn't bode well for a cell-phone conversation throughout their mountainous trek. Despite a steady stream of dropped connections and static-laden reception, Daniel was kind enough to chat about the tour and the new Mi Ami record. Full text after the jump, details for the show at Velvet Lounge below.

Mi Ami
Food For Animals
Lexi Mountain Boys
@ Velvet Lounge
915 U Street, DC
9pm
\$8
18+

WCP: So you all started this tour with Thank You in early February?

DMM: Yeah, we played our first show in Denver on the 5th — last night [February 23rd] was our first night off. And we've got one more night off in March, but we pretty much have shows every night.

WCP: Well it's a pretty grueling schedule. Are you used to such an intense itinerary? How do you cope with so much time on the road?

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the road.

DMM: It's hard work, but it's good to play. Up until when we started getting the tour set up, I was getting nervous at home just wanting to go out and play live. In a way it's depleting, but it's also refreshing, because I think it's a really good thing to do. I dunno — it's fun. It's fun and hard and a lot of things. Day to day, it's been monotonous, but it's also really deeply satisfying in other ways.

WCP: What's been the best show so far?

DMM: We've had a couple really good ones — two really good ones in Chicago. We also had a good one in Denver, at this warehouse called [Rhinceroopolis](#). And there was a really great show in Ann Arbor, and Iowa City — I feel like those shows really stood out. Both the Chicago shows were at legitimate venues, but the ones in Iowa City, Ann Arbor and Denver were all in weird spaces, which I think gives us something. Sometimes clubs are really nice, but a lot of clubs are really shitty, or will be nice but have shitty sound men, or will have good sound men, but won't promote the show very well, so I dunno. We have better shows that have something a bit more personal going on. But the Chicago shows were really good, even though they were in clubs, but I guess that's just an exception to the rule.

WCP: So on your new album, *Watersports*, you pretty much set up and played most everything live in the studio, right?

DMM: Yep.

WCP: Is that an accurate representation of how you sound live? Are there any major differences between your record and your live show?

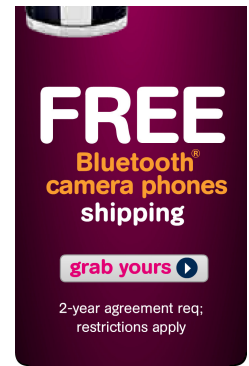
DMM: Yeah, we didn't really do anything different than we do live on the recording. We did overdub the vocals, but the only thing that's gonna be different live is that the rendition of the songs will be particular to that night. We do improvise a bit, and the songs and riffs grow and change over time. But I think the one thing that we're happy with about the record is that there's the sound of us actually playing together, and going into all the changes together. We don't have a lot of set changes — the changes in the song are set in that they go in a certain order, but they're not set as a certain number of repetitions per part, so we have to feel that out every time we play it and coordinate with each other. Part of that is eye contact, and part of that is just really listening to how the others build, and letting yourself be flexible when you're playing. Always knowing where you are and where the other people are, to some degree. Every performance of the song is just one performance of the song, and the song is sort of this loose structural concept with room for variation. And then there's an essence that you try to tap into through these constructs.

WCP: So the songs are constantly evolving?

DMM: Well, we don't really talk about it a whole lot — they kind of change on their own accord. A lot of it is about finding certain things that work or don't work, and exploring those to see how long they work for. Our songs aren't very complicated; there's not a lot of little bridges or anything, it's more down to the specifics of the performance, and the specifics are like what makes it come alive for us, the way we can really throw ourselves into trying to focus and play. It's a weird thing: you might might have a little movement in the song that really makes it that much more vibrant for you, and by being able to tap into that vibrancy, you discover more things you can do that change the song subtly, but also help you reconnect with what the whole point of the song is. I don't feel like we're the kind of band to write perfect little songs. For us, we're a live band, and we need to be able to have room to be present in the music every night, and it is gonna be different from night to night.

WCP: What's the significance behind the title *Watersports*?

DMM: We had a couple different reasons for the name: First, we wanted something that would be strong like a political statement. I liked the



something that would be strong, like a political statement. I liked the term Watersports a lot; it was already loaded with reading as a term for the sexual act. As a sexual practice, it seems really interesting to me as this way of deriving pleasure from this extremely humiliating thing — something that a lot of people consider deviant — but in a way, relates to a very powerful way with these forces that are running through your body. I was thinking a lot about how in some ways, everybody has these different forces moving through their bodies, informing their own actions — not any sort of really mysterious sense, but everybody has experiences of love, violent desire, and happiness, sadness, hunger, and all these different forces that you experience. There are ways of relating to them that can be — you could say positive or negative, creative or destructive — all sorts of different ways of engaging with or trying to deflect these experiences and these energies. It seemed to me that something like the sexual practice of Watersports was one way of relating to power, relating to violence, relating in a way that actually transforms these destructive forces into joy. But you know, only for a specific set of people. Not everybody is gonna want to use those those strategies; although deviant in one sense, it's almost beautiful in a way — you know, relating to what's often seen as the darker side of human experience.

At the same time in 2008, you also heard a lot about waterboarding as a torture practice, and you head a lot about water rations, like the depletion of the world's water supply — crisis stuff. And I felt like “watersports” then took on this new meaning in a way. It's not like a term in the same way as it is in the sexual practice, when you think about waterboarding and this torture dialog that was happening, “is it torture? is it not torture?” It most definitely is torture. And it felt like the dialog that surrounded it, the sort of general approach to the war in Iraq, or like world conquest, we felt like this weird, fucked-up game that these guys were just sporting, essentially. It felt like they were sporting with people as a game, like toying around, trying to decide the rules. It's like the same power that you're relating to in a way when you're engaging in watersports as a sexual practice, but its being enacted upon other people violently, rather than created reciprocally or something like that. And it became clearer and clearer, at least in some respects, that the war in Iraq was motivated and used as a way to make money by the people that engineered it all, and we felt like, you know ... fuck that, basically. Just like for a little bit of money — they don't need the money — it's just about winning, about being powerful, and playing this fucking game, so it's really disgusting and upsetting.

So there was that, and we wanted to reflect that. But at that the same time, we wanted the title to be flexible too, because the music is not a manifesto. It's a conversation, or a commentary, or a plea — it's many things. The lyrics are one part, and the music is another part. And it's material, so we didn't want to bludgeon you, but we wanted to stake our claim. I don't know if anybody's gonna pick up on that, but we put it there for ourselves at least. And the third part is that it sort of feels like there's an aquatic aspect to the record's sound from the way we produced it, so maybe that would be the more ... not “lighter,” like a joke, but maybe make it a little less heavy, in terms of an interpretation of watersports as this aquatic activity.

WCP: One of the things that you employ throughout the record is echo — it's something that you use in the lyrics, the effects, and the production. Especially with the lyrics, is there an underlying theme that you're trying to get at with the association of echo?

DMM: I can count two uses of it on the record off the top of my head, and they're very different. The first is in “Echononecho” which is sort of about a raw music experience, like alienation or something like that. It started with this article I read about parenting, and how it's a really formative experience for children to have an emotional reaction and seeing that echoed in their parents. It treats the experience as an acceptable and normal thing, if the parent is blasé or removed, then it can be an emotionally hampering experience. I read that one day in the *New Yorker* or something — it was mentioned in passing. But it struck

new Yorker or something — it was mentioned in passing, but it struck me as really interesting, because it's something that I see paralleled in the adult, while it's not like everybody is just having these isolated experiences — people are really searching all the time for confirmation that whatever they're experiencing is ok, and real. And at the time, I was really struggling in a personal relationship with somebody who I wanted very deeply to connect with, and in a sense it was the same, wanting to have your experience echoed and not just in a narcissistic way, but just to feel that you're understood and accepted by people.

The other reference is in "New Guitar": (*sings*) "Everybody's talking to me, but I can't hear the words they're saying. Only the echo of my mind." Yeah ... that song, to me, is really touching. It's just one of the ones that throughout it, or every time I hear it, I just think it's a great song. I really like that feeling of isolation that mostly got expressed there ...

—cellphone reception cuts out—

... But yea, it's just like trying to understand one's personal experience in the world, where you feel like a lot of other people are probably having like parallel experiences, but at the same time not always being able to connect ... I don't know, I'm not trying to write a Morrissey song. But it's like, there's a lot of stuff about life that's pretty scary and a lot of stuff that's pretty exciting, and how do you understand your place within this whole chaotic thing, I dunno ...

WCP: Well I wanted to clarify one thing in particular about your lyrics in New Guitar; in the breakdown, do you say: "It's 2008, we're moving under the wall"?

DMM: Oh no, it's "We're moving up in the world." That was kind of a riff on the anxiety about the coming election, because there was a lot of hope and excitement in the air, and I definitely could feel it too. But it's also a certain wariness ... I mean, it's hard to get too excited about a politician, even though we wanted to so badly, because we needed change so badly, about the way we exist in the world. And really hoping that all the promises weren't just a bunch of hype, I guess.

WCP: When was "New Guitar" written?

DMM: We wrote the bulk of it in late 2007, but that part came about last Spring — late Spring, I think.

WCP: Throughout Watersports, you seem to cultivate a feeling of paranoia and anxiety ... is this a personal sentiment that you were trying to convey on the record, or were you trying to reflect the instability and unrest in today's broader social/economic climate?

DMM: I think it just came naturally. We wrote most of the album in kind of a weird stretch for me. It's very natural and acceptable to be worried about the state of global and political affairs, and also personally it was a pretty dark time for me, so it just came out very naturally. At the same time, I also didn't want to just make some party record. Like a lot of bands just write some whatever lyrics and blow it off, and just write fun music, and that's cool. But I felt like I just wanted to be real ... I take art pretty seriously, and growing up in DC, it was definitely expected that you were gonna be intense about music. You know, if there's one thing about the "DC sound," it's that I feel like you're supposed to be intense, and not, you know ... what's the word I'm looking for? Uncompromising, or something like that. And although I don't necessarily want to sound like that, it's kind of a lesson in a way from living there ... like don't just make some light shit or something, you know?

WCP: Like you need to have a message?

DMM: Yeah, or just be real, I guess. Make as much as you can, and be real about it