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**MUSIC**

# The Shrieks of San Francisco

Mi Ami's Dynamic Post-Punk Theatrics

by [DAVE SEGAL](#)

## Mi Ami, Thank You and Pillow Fight Fight

at **Vera Project**

Tue., Feb. 24, 7:30 p.m.

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Mi Ami's guitarist/vocalist Daniel Martin-McCormick doesn't want you to mourn his former band Black Eyes. In fact, he'd prefer you blot them out of your mind for now and focus on Mi Ami, his current project with drummer Damon Palermo and fellow ex-Black Eyes bassist Jacob Long.

While Mi Ami will surely receive a boost in media attention and music-fan respect for their association with Black Eyes (who recorded for Ian MacKaye's revered Dischord label), they aren't the laurel-resting types, though you couldn't blame them if they were. Black Eyes' 2003 self-titled debut and the 2004 follow-up, *Cough*, abounded with jittery, strident post-punk songs that churned and burned with intense centrifugal force. Robust dual drumming combined with clangorous guitar in an earnest, kinetic attack that emphasized clamor over glamour and inspired more roughhouse dancing than romancing.

Black Eyes were one of those groups who blaze too brightly to last much longer than a few years. When Long moved with his girlfriend to the West Coast, Black Eyes decided they couldn't continue without him.

Following Black Eyes' split in 2004, Martin-McCormick embarked on an odyssey of self-examination that involved playing in a few other projects; touring solo; studying classical guitar; immersing himself in ragas, classical Japanese music, and American minimalist composers like Morton Feldman and Steve Reich; and moving to San Francisco to try to "[figure] out who I was/am and what's going on with me and music."

In the Bay Area, Martin-McCormick hooked up with Palermo, and they began a quest to create something that sounded like a *mélange* of what they outline on their MySpace page as "[eccentric nu-disco producer] Daniel Wang, African disco, and gamelan." The duo eventually enlisted Long in 2007, and Mi Ami coalesced into the dynamo that made the outstanding mini-album *Watersports* for Touch and Go subsidiary Quarterstick.

Martin-McCormick says that Mi Ami are able to thrive in San Francisco despite the high cost of living. "That people are willing and able to make stuff happen all the time without access to affordable living and without any strong record labels or general top-down support system is miraculous. The city itself is beautiful and full of life, and I think people draw on that ephemeral joy to keep themselves going.

"I have never been in a place where so many people are making music, which is both a beautiful thing and kind of a hassle," Martin-McCormick continues. "The upside is that creative energy is always there, available and open. The downside is that people get so saturated by all the different shows/bands/DJ nights that they end up just hanging with their five friends and keeping it pretty insular."

*Watersports* bears similarities to postmodern dance-floor agitators like fellow San Franciscans Tussle and !!!, but Mi Ami have also been influenced by some of the funkier post-punk bands of the early '80s (the Pop Group, 23 Skidoo, Bush Tetras, etc.). They've slightly toned down the guitar onslaught of Black Eyes and opted for a more spacious approach that's danceable and also texturally fascinating. The disc's seven tracks reveal Mi Ami's mastery of tension-and-release song structure. Dominating the foreground, Martin-McCormick alternates between fragile falsetto and primal-scream theatrics (think Ian Svenonius at his most unhinged).

"Some of those groups (the Pop Group, especially) stand out as pretty fucking stellar," Martin-McCormick says. "But I think what I've always taken away from that era [the late '70s/early '80s] was the free-for-all approach to genre and the general fearlessness with which people played whatever the hell they wanted. Dub, disco, Afrobeat, juju music, free jazz, etc. are all genres [that] remain fertile as fuck and continue to yield new, exciting sounds. We just dig all of it, and it naturally makes its way into our music."

With each member having broad and deep musical tastes, is it hard for Mi Ami to find common ground when it comes time to write material?

"We never talk about what we want a song to sound like, or what we want to copy or whatever," Martin-McCormick explains. "I often will start writing from a specific point of inspiration (a song I love, or a particularly cool part, or a weird idea), but it's nice to keep it a secret and let my own flawed, personal reinterpretation germinate and grow into its own thing. I don't know if that's how Jacob and Damon play or not, but I bet there's some of that at work. We try not to talk too much about it, though. It's good to have a little mystery, especially as we develop patterns and formulas and other stuff, which can harden into artistic traps."

As exciting as Mi Ami sound on record, they claim that they're most vital onstage. "Records are great, interviews are nice, and being recognized in the community feels great, but it's all hubbub if the shows aren't intense and real," says Martin-McCormick. "If we're playing and it's alive, then that's enough." ★

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