

Sisterhood is weirdly powerful It's a family affair for CocoRosie's Bianca and Sierra Casady.

By Johnny Ray Huston

IN CONVERSATION, CocoRosie's Sierra Casady is given to long pauses more than long answers. But bring up the subject of sisterhood – specifically the musical bond she shares with her younger sibling Bianca – and her hesitancy vanishes. One trip into the cloistered, perverse atmosphere of CocoRosie's debut album, *La Maison de Mon Rêve* (Touch and Go), suggests that the New York City-based Sierra and Bianca are, if not quite conjoined at the hip, at the very least in touch with each other on an intuitive level most bands can't match. "Absolutely – it's beyond that," Casady agrees. "It's very much a solitary experience, in fact. I feel this way, and I think [Bianca] feels the same. It's almost like working alone. We really tune into the same source, our inspiration streaming from one reservoir of thinking and feeling."

While it's easy to curl up beneath the loosely threaded quilts of sound on *La Maison*, the Casady sisters seem like the type of hosts who might slip a trippy narcotic into your tea. Their new album, *Noah's Ark* (Touch and Go), has a more restless feel than their debut – the scratchy, tiny, Victrola-sounding vocals of *La Maison* sometimes give way to a more naturalistic recording style. The album still doesn't quite capture CocoRosie's live spell-casting talents. Onstage, Sierra's classically trained voice is an apt counterpoint for Bianca's singing style, which suggests a cute-looking but fierce creature with spiky hair and sharp teeth angrily roused from hibernation. Her delivery adds humor and menace to a song like *La Maison's* "Madonna," which expresses a stalking sinner's lust for Jesus's mom while accusing her of smoking cigars in a preacher's car.

For older sis Sierra, CocoRosie has been an opportunity to step outside the strictures of operatic schooling. "Due to my age [Sierra is 25; Bianca is 23], there was a stereotype about what I should be singing," she says. "Just because I was young, people wanted to think of me in lighthearted Mozart roles." One can also rest assured that few of her former classmates employ toys as a major part of their compositions – both *La Maison* and *Noah's Ark* utilize children's trinkets as an odd strain of percussion, punctuating melodies with rusty-sounding squawks, gobbles, and cock-a-doodle-dos.

"When we started making music in Paris, we'd incorporate any type of object that was around us in the room," Sierra elaborates when asked about this instrumental quirk. "If we went out – which was kind of rare – we might pass by the antique flea market and see some little toy that caught our eye. Ever since then we've been collecting toys everywhere we go. We have some really romantic old Speak 'n' Spells from the '80s."

Needless to say, CocoRosie's influences and ingredients are disparate. The potency of cinema plays a role in one of *La Maison's* oddest, most effective songs, "Lyla." Partly inspired by Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya 4-ever*, the piano ballad is sung from the perspective of a bereft and exhausted woman who is propositioned by a man who thinks she's a prostitute from

Yugoslavia. "It's not Yugoslavia at all," she responds to his "where-you-from?" cluelessness, her answer doubling as a personal rejection and a reference to an eastern Europe lost to capitalism. The encounter reminds "Lyla" 's protagonist of a certain movie about a girl who "ate McDonalds all day," though CocoRosie slightly alter the spelling of her name. "It was a very impactful movie," Sierra says when asked about *Lilya 4-ever*. "At the time we lived in Paris, in the northern part of the city. My sister had bleached-blond hair at the time, and despite the fact that she wasn't dressed very provocatively, people often thought she was a prostitute – a prostitute from Yugoslavia."

A trick-turning outlaw sensibility reappears on *Noah's Ark's* "Beautiful Boyz," a duet in which Bianca growls and yowls around the overripe plum-pudding voice of Antony from Antony and the Johnsons. The track pays homage to a famous literary outlaw. "It was through our travels in Europe that we really got into Genet," Casady says. "With [*Noah's Ark*], he was maybe our strongest muse, if you could say we had one. We both love his writing so much, but it's the story of his life that really moved us."

One could argue that Genet's influence seeps out of "Beautiful Boyz" and into the next song on *Noah's Ark*, a portrait of a Brooklyn block beatdown titled "South 2nd." Both songs have a fascination with rough trade. "We feel like dangerous, beautiful boys ourselves sometimes," Sierra says. "Especially during the making of the album, we felt we were these rough sailors cruising the world looking for other beautiful boys. We had a few thoughts, like 'Damn, just because we don't have a penis, that doesn't make us girls.' We really feel that way."

Any San Franciscan can tell you that sometimes the most beautiful boys are girls. That might explain the mascara mustaches the Casady sisters have been known to sport onstage and in photos, just one of many humorously sexy, twisted elements in CocoRosie's sights and sounds. The cover of *Noah's Ark* is a painting by Bianca that calls to mind a recent booklet by local artist Sy, who is definitely too underground for Bianca to have stolen the idea from – rest assured that these two women's distinct depictions of unicorns fucking each other are an example of strange synchronicity. Whereas Sy's rutting beasts are accompanied by funny sound effects, Casady adds her own touch to a unicorn three-way: One horsey creature seems to be vomiting a rainbow of little tear-shaped droplets.

Noah's Ark features cameo appearances by some of CocoRosie's prime neo-folk contemporaries; in addition to Antony, Diane Gluck makes an appearance, and Devendra Banhart lends vocals – via phone – to a song ("Brazilian Sun"). Sierra views the kinship among these artists as "some kind of higher collective-consciousness thing," but there's no denying that CocoRosie – who tend to polarize audiences – possess an irreverence that's brasher than even Banhart at his goofiest. On tracks such as *La Maison's* "Jesus Loves Me" and *Noah's Ark's* "Armageddon," they derive a special joy from shining a harsh spotlight on, then mis- or reinterpreting, the racist and sexist prejudices bound up in Christian faith. If they have to get on their knees, it'll be to pray to Mike Tyson and Walt Disney in Madison Square Garden.

Just another pair of odd animals on Noah's boat, the Casady sisters have followed in the

world-traveling footsteps of their mom, who can be seen with them on the face of their latest album's jewel box when one pulls the CD out of its enclosure. For Sierra, CocoRosie has been a way to rediscover her family, and in the process, discover herself. "A lot of the time Bianca and I don't even have to verbally communicate about what's going on or what we want to happen next," she says. "Without Bianca, there's always been something that inhibits me, some kind of self-consciousness. When I'm alone, I don't have myself in the way I do when I'm with Bianca. Even with no one around, I've never felt available to myself like I feel now."

CocoRosie play with Antony and the Johnsons, Tues/20, 8 p.m., Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, 3301 Lyon, SF. \$25. (415) 421-8497, www.ticketmaster.com.