

CocoRosie

Words by Joseph Ragusa · Photos by Sean McCabe

Look past the legions of cloned alt-rock bands making the indie-music rounds today. There's something else happening in the shadows, in the wings where the stage's spotlight doesn't really shine so bright. People like Devendra Banhart, Joanna Newsom, Deerhoof, and Antony and The Johnsons have molded their own unique sound—a sound that puts no boundaries on its inspirations, a message free of all the stupid sarcasm and quotation marks that plague the indie-rock scene and its ironic t-shirt wearing followers. It's one face of America's new music—exciting without the buzz, referential without the bald pastiche, and free of the strangling effect of record industry marketing.

Add to these artists CocoRosie, who are set to unveil their second album, *Noah's Ark*, at the end of summer. You may have heard CocoRosie from 2004's *La Maison de Mon Reve*. The story of estranged sisters Bianca and Sierra Casady finally coming together after years of leading separate lives has been told and retold by the music press. Using little more than an acoustic guitar, a drum machine, and sounds culled from everyday objects, their collaborative recording efforts over a spring in a Paris apartment gave birth to that debut record, a startling collection of songs that manages to hark back to American blues and folk while maintaining a thoroughly modern edge.

Now based in New York City, CocoRosie—a name that compounds the sisters' childhood nicknames—use *Noah's Ark* to move further down that path of off-the-cuff recording tactics. "More of a quilting process" is how Bianca describes the making of the new album. Recorded in sporadic bursts when the sisters found time while touring, it took about a year from the winter of '03 before the tracks were deemed ready to compile onto an album.

"Beautiful Boyz," one of the outstanding tracks on the new record, is a rerecording of a previous CocoRosie single, this time featuring Antony of Antony and The Johnsons as co-vocalist. "It's a song about Jean Genet the writer," Bianca points out. "We sang it together when we toured on the road... Jean Genet really was kind of a muse for a lot of the period of time when this record was being written and recorded." But expect their first single to be the album's title track, a lovely duet between the sisters that showcases the soothing croon of Sierra's classically trained voice combined with Bianca's utterly unique, primal vocals.

Both songs, like many on the rest on the album, owe their success at least partially to the fantastic, dreamlike worlds each one encapsulates in its own figurative snow globe. "That's sort of how we create music," Bianca says. "We're trying to create a scene often that

stands on its own, that doesn't necessarily have to tie into anything else. It's like an entire world in and of itself. We're very moody about recording because we're trying to connect that space and really articulate that vision."

When comparing the writing and recording of both albums, Bianca voices her preference for the dedicated focus surrounding *La Maison de Mon Reve*. "I like to just set aside some



timeframe and do it in a really concentrated way, now that I've experienced both," she says. "I feel like you can just get deeper into the song if you record it when it's really fresh, like when you're still kinda amazed by it, and when you're still having an epiphany."

To illustrate their creative process, Bianca chooses the song "Bear Hides and Buffalo" from *Noah's Ark* and describes the initial vision, which bloomed into the final result. "Often, there's a really specific vision for a song that tends to be kinda abstract, and it's more of a poetic vision, like an image or a short film," she explains. "And we're trying to conjure that up with the songs that we're creating, in other words, a really specific image to me of a sort of gypsy caravan passing each other. And you're creating the music. And it was trying to literally depict these poetic images: The sound of horse hooves when they hit wet ground and go underneath underpasses. The sound of an opera singer just passing you in the caravan and sort of echoing down in strange ways."

The song is also a fine example of how Bianca's singular voice can channel naked emotion from abstractions like childhood and the subconscious. Often crackling and wobbly, but always on key, it's a voice that cuts away any unnecessary embellishments, dictated less by conventional vocal standards and more by the words—and if the emotion behind the

words happens to not be pretty, then the vocals will reflect that. It's an approach that requires total disposal of inhibition to successfully convey a song's mood. And it's a style that too few vocalists are bold enough to pursue.

"My sister had a lot of opera training; she kinda helped shape my voice," Bianca explains. "I think she could listen for what she thought my strongest voice was. But, she really pushed me in ways I didn't know I was capable. She kinda drew the voice out of me, in a way."

With the need to tap into a delicate mental space, CocoRosie are adamant about recording their material without outside input or distraction. "We definitely don't have anyone around that is anything more than a robot. We're really strict about not wanting creative input from anywhere," says Bianca. "So we recorded [*Noah's Ark*] ourselves in the same style as the first one... There's some engineers around setting up microphones and stuff, but we mixed the record and did pretty much everything."

Now that the album is complete, CocoRosie are again on the road to promote the new material. A run through various summer festivals in Europe, followed by more European dates and a North American stretch, are planned for September and throughout the fall. Some of those dates may be sharing a bill with Devendra Banhart and Antony and The Johnsons, two artists whom Bianca holds as close friends as well as mentors. "I don't like listening to hardly anything," Bianca reveals. "And I even went a couple of years without listening to any music—in my own control, in my own space. Devendra and Antony's music kinda made me fall back in love with music. They're sorta my standard in terms of new music."

Although wholly distinct, CocoRosie share with those artists an ability to create an honest form of music, stamped with an individuality that defies all the conformist trappings in an industry that may tempt an aspiring young artist. "I don't really connect to a lot of artists about that so much, other than my sister," Bianca reveals. "But these are sorta like my kindred singers. Whenever we're with Antony, we always end up singing some corny Baroque four-way harmonies and just really enjoy singing with each other."

To listen to CocoRosie's music is to enter a world of disparate influences, a world where refinement meets the vulgar, where the impersonal shapes life's most intimate experiences. But at the bottom of it all is an unadulterated sincerity. Bianca's impressions of those she meets reflects this. "I'm highly suspicious of people who are in any way insincere. It's like my big phobia," she says. "I think people that are really in the moment attract me."



L to R: Sierra Casady, Bianca Casady



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