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RESONANCE

WIND SOUND + VISION ISSUE 53

THE (UNOFFICIAL) SURREAL ISSUE *

COCOROSIE

DAVID LYNCH

AQUA TEEN

HUNGER FORCE

BROS. QUAY



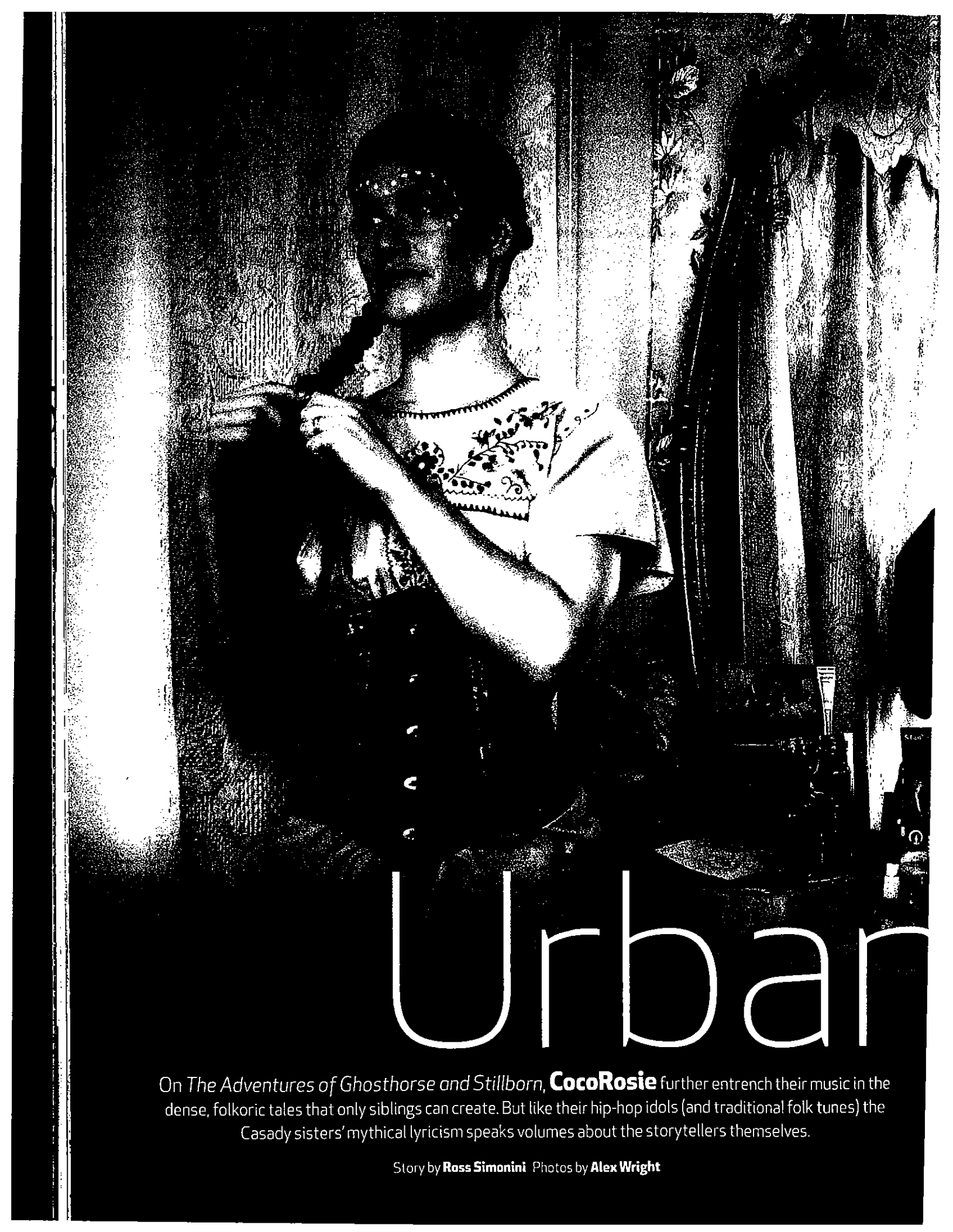
Freak-hop
ya don't stop:
CocoRosie's
Casady sister:

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Urban

On *The Adventures of Ghosthorse and Stillborn*, **CocoRosie** further entrench their music in the dense, folkloric tales that only siblings can create. But like their hip-hop idols (and traditional folk tunes) the Casady sisters' mythical lyricism speaks volumes about the storytellers themselves.

Story by **Ross Simonini** Photos by **Alex Wright**

IN FEBRUARY 2007, CocoRosie played among a handful of artists in David Byrne's "Welcome to Dreamland" showcase at Carnegie Hall—an event he created to formally inaugurate the new folk movement (sometimes called freak-folk or experimental folk, or New Weird America). Byrne's selected artists, whom he officially called the "genre's creators," included Devendra Banhart, Vetiver, Adem, and the crowned queens of new folk, CocoRosie. But when Sierra and Bianca Casady stepped onto the musically sacred stage, accompanied by two beatboxers and a table of noisy wind-up electronics, it was difficult to understand what they were doing there.

Not only do they consider themselves descendents of hip-hop, but they vocally reject the antiquated ideas at the very heart of folk. "We don't play folk music," Bianca says. "We play modern music."

The inability to pigeonhole CocoRosie's freak-hop-fantasy-opera is exactly what allows them to transcend their influences and create a complete otherworldly language. Since 2003, when the sisters recorded their debut album in a bathtub, their phantasmagorical lyrics and purposefully raw recordings have continuously drifted away from genres into a separate, sometimes impenetrable universe of their own making. With *The Adventures of Ghostface and Stillborn*, CocoRosie explore the outer bounds of their universe, turning themselves into bizarre, rapping mythological characters, while at the same time serving up their most likeable, candy-coated music yet. Finally, CocoRosie have let the rest of us into their fantasy.

THE CONVOLUTED FOLKLORE OF THE CASADY SISTERS

According to Sierra and Bianca, their strongest bond has always been through mythology, and *Ghosthorse and Stillborn* reveals the strange nature of this bond. Sierra, the softer-spoken, spiritual-seeming sister, relates her mythology to the flamboyant theatrical characters of opera while Bianca, the younger sister (known for painting a mustache on her face), relates her mythology—strangely enough—to hip-hop. "I fell in love with Wu Tang," she says. "And what's attractive about them to me is the way they recontextualize ancient mythologies." In this way, *Ghosthorse and Stillborn* isn't

and became a language through which the young girls could communicate. But not until *Ghosthorse* did they unveil the scope of the language with a set of characters and stories that reinterpret their lives through what they call a "self-exploitive memoir." "The other records were about putting ourselves in the shoes of people from very different time periods," Sierra says. "This record is distinctly autobiographical in a way where people could trace songs to family and situations." This can be seen clearly in the song "Werewolf," where Bianca refers

to her "schizophrenic father" and sings, "He's a black magic wielder / Some say a witch / wielded darkness when he was violent ... he was the bastard that broke up the marriage." Because their father was known to be involved with "shamanism and peyote religion" and because their parents actually separated when the sisters were young, the song's poetic power becomes even more complex through its autobiographical resonance.

In the same way that an artist like Matthew Barney translates his personal experiences playing football into creepy goat battles, CocoRosie turn themselves into characters called Rainbowards, who traverse fictional places with names like the Mechanical Forest of Feelings. Referencing the Native American Rainbow Trail, and describing them as both "anti-war" and "transsexual," Bianca says that she and her sister "take turns embodying these characters" (who are named Ghostface and Stillborn). Sierra describes them as "kings and queens of an underground realm" but then, immediately afterwards, makes it clear that Bianca is the primary writer and architect of their mythological world. These characters become especially interesting when Bianca and Sierra engage them in what they call "their fantasies," playing out in an international narrative that traces their own personal travels. "The time we spent with our father we literally lived out of a car, driving through the night, through reservations in the southwest," Sierra says. "We've continued that Gypsy-ish life. We're at home in movement." Though they often reference this Cherokee past, both sisters emphasize that they have no formal education in Cherokee culture, but have used

66 We were so unaware of the world that we actually thought the album was a hardcore, gangsta rap album. We were shocked when people called it soft and tender. 99

quite a "concept album" per se but a glossary to the girls' private mythology—a mix of personal interests, bedtime stories and Native American tradition.

Since the release of 2005's *Noah's Ark*, CocoRosie have dipped into their Native American roots. Their songs took titles like "Bare Hides and Buffalo"; their language was soaked in a symbolism of corn, canoes and Pocahontas; and they took on a fashion sense of tribal, tie-dyed clothing. Born into a Cherokee heritage, the presence of mythological tradition filled the sisters' childhood

what they know to craft a "really different twist on tradition."

Strangest of all, these folkloric travel stories are created through the sisters' love of prank phone calls. For them, calling strangers and creating false scenarios is their way of kindling the songwriting process. By putting themselves into what they call an "inspired, ad-lib, on-fire world," they can improvise ideas of characters, lyrics and voices that eventually find a way into their mythology. "We used the phone calls as little maps and stories for voicing ideas in our songs," Sierra says. "We do a lot of weird games to access our



Sierra (left) and Bianca doing their master-and-servant routine.

subconscious." Bianca refers to the fragility of their creative process and how arriving at a fertile mental state requires a delicate balance of work, play and "mischievous activity." "Prank phone calls are the best way to push yourself to having to live right in the moment," Bianca says. "It's just a good process."

THE LOST HIP-HOP ALBUM

By now, the backstory of CocoRosie is known by every half-interested fan: Two sisters grew up together (sometimes on reservations, sometimes not) but were separated in their youth when, at 14, Sierra was kicked out of the house and sent to a string of boarding schools. After 10 years apart, with Bianca in New York as a fashion/lingerie designer and Sierra studying operatic voice in Paris, they reunited in 2003 when Bianca showed up on Sierra's Montmartre doorstep looking for a free place to sleep. Though the two had never connected in their youth—they were "sworn enemies"—the reunited siblings spent eight months in that apartment recording their first album, without the intention of ever letting another person hear it.

What a lot of people don't know is that their first album wasn't *La Maison de Mon Rêve* (their 2004 debut on Touch and Go) but *Word to the Crow*, an hour-long, unreleased, a cappella "gangsta rap" album they recorded on a cheap tape deck. This improvisational rap album, recorded right before *Maison*, was the first time the Casadys made music together. Sierra uses terms such as "pure channeling" and "third eye" to describe the recording experience, which was

so profoundly intuitive that it led to the forming of CocoRosie and served as inspirational fuel for the following three albums. Fans on the internet refer to it as "the lost album" and ask questions about releasing the tape, but Bianca calls it "a real scab on the outside" and talks about shoving it into a time capsule. "If people think our first album is raw," she says, "this is raw in a whole 'nother way."

Here, in their earliest stage as a band, it's abundantly clear where the siblings' deepest musical connections lie. When describing their early influences, Bianca rattles off a list of solely hip-hop influences, with Wu Tang Clan and Notorious B.I.G at the top of the list. "Hip-hop is the most forward major music going on," she says. "And I think we're much more connected to that than folk." *Maison* came from this same sentiment, and at the same time as *Crow*, when the two girls were immersed in hip-hop. Filled with beatboxing, gravelly vocals, beeping keyboards, swirling harp strums and distorted Casio drum machines, the album was an anomaly in the 2004 music scene, with a feminine bluntness that further separated CocoRosie from the timid boyishness of

indie rock. After this album, Jim Jarmusch, the famed auteur director, described them as being "like two little Billie Holidays an octave higher if you were on acid in Tokyo in 1926." But the sisters saw *Maison* as a logical extension of *Word to the Crow's* hip-hop. "We were so unaware of the world that we actually thought the album was a hardcore, gangsta rap album," Sierra says. "We were shocked when people called it soft and tender." Even more surprising must have been the press' insistence on calling them the token female band of new folk, especially when the sisters completely reject that label. "I don't think you can even tell a lot of the people in the new folk thing apart from the thing going on in the sixties," Bianca says.

Noah's Ark, recorded only one year after *Maison*, sounded like an obvious sequel. If there was an evolution, it was towards toy animal sounds (mostly mooing cows) and darker, more controversial lyrics such as "All of the aborted babies will turn into little Bambies," which is sung in the first minute of the album.

On the surface, *Ghosthorse and Stillborn* seems to simply continue on the same path, but the album's successes actually come from a completely new aesthetic of beauty, clarity and precision, characteristics mostly buried in their earlier music. Previously, the duo's strengths were based on their stylistic tics and inimitable sound, and were covered in rough kind of distorted beauty. *Ghosthorse*, on the other hand, draws on the immediate appeal of pop records. "We wanted to present our fantasies in a more accessible way," Bianca says. "This album's not such a booby trap. The sonic qualities are

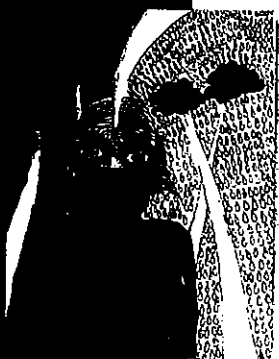


The Voodoo-Eros Empire

In addition to an insanely prolific career—four albums (one unreleased) and an EP in only four years—CocoRosie have branched out into the world of art galleries and record labels. Voodoo-Eros, a label founded by Bianca, releases an unusual spectrum of artists, including longtime folk artist Diane Cluck, Sierra's Metallic Falcons Project and a female hip-hop artist named Bunny Rabbit, who Sasha Frere-Jones describes as “deeply odd” and “occasionally obscene art rap.” Supposedly, the label was created to house Bianca's idea for a compilation of lost and unfinished songs by known artists (Jana Hunter, Devendra Banhart, etc.), but what now unites the label's artists is their subversive, rebellious quality, as evidenced by flashy drawings of hairy ponies on the opening page of the website.

The Voodoo-Eros Museum Of Nice Items, an itty-bitty art gallery/performance space/store in New York City (123 Ludlow St.) serves as an extension of the label, selling albums and handmade tie-dyed clothing, not unlike the kind Sierra and Bianca typically sport. Recently, the gallery showed “Red Bone Slim VS. Itself,” an exhibition of Bianca's own drawings, some of which have been publicly viewed on the cover of *Noah's Ark*, where three of her Basquiat-style unicorns make beautiful, doggie-style love. Behold the empire of CocoRosie.

“Militia,” by Bianca (aka Red Bone Slim).



bigger so people can get the fantasy more.” The best example of this might be the album's closer, “Miracle,” which uses the sort of unambiguous songwriting and arrangement that works in the directly emotional ways their previous music avoided. With rounded bass-heavy beats, lush electronics and an uncharacteristically clear-sounding recording, *Ghosthorse and Stillborn* shows that beneath the haze of their lo-fi style, CocoRosie have been experimenting with hip-hop since the beginning.

COCO and ROSIE

As children playing in their hermetic, hyper-imaginative worlds, Bianca took on the nickname Coco and Sierra took on Rosie; at their Parisian reunion, the two dipped back into that world and rediscovered their alter egos. But as the compound nature of the name suggests, CocoRosie's music isn't the sound of a band whose influences are swirled into a big soupy mass, but two distinct personalities juxtaposed, preserving the clashing-and-bonding, love/hate dynamic of the sibling relationship.

In the past, Bianca's position in this relationship was the wild, almost abrasively raw style of torch singing that people associated with the duo. But since then, she's slowly grown out of her jazz-age influences and into a more personal, subtler voice, with hints of a New York street dialect, R&B ornamentations, some actual hip-hop rhyming and a bold lyrical style that can pull off flat, masculine imagery like “basketball courts” and “cereal.”

pinpointed as the prettier, more languorous moments of the record, when wide vibrato and wordless humming takes over. Multiple times, she has been described as “a church mouse singing gospel”; in her voice, one can hear the type of training that rarely appears in the purposefully unpolished world of freak folk.

This musical division can also be spotted in the instrumentation of *CocoRosie*. Bianca controls the synths, broken-sounding children's toys and distorted beats, while Sierra plays harp, piano and sometimes even flute. On stage, the girls even seem to draw the imaginary line of a shared childhood bedroom, remaining doggedly on their own sides, producing musical ideas that could conceivably come from separate stages. Bianca stands at her mic, spitting lyrics and bashing at a table of what she calls “object-oriented noise makers,” while Sierra sits with pristine posture at the piano bench, singing her pure, unwavering tones. In many ways this musically divided relationship parallels the kind you see in hip-hop, with MC and DJ. Even their creative processes follow a similar pattern, with Bianca describing her own method as “a mess” versus her sister's “regimented maths.” Yet despite all these musical opposites, on the phone the sisters sound like variations of the same person, talking with eerily similar vocal patterns and on a few occasions using the exact same sentences to describe their music.

This duality goes all the way down to the core of CocoRosie's music into the great divide between the folkloric and the urban. While the world sees these as opposing

“We literally lived out of a car, driving through the night, through reservations in the southwest. We've continued that Gypsy-ish life. We're at home in movement.”

Some of this style can be attributed to her hip-hop roots when she spent time around NYC at “Kill Whitey” parties, which she describes as “all about booty bass and dancing,” but her rhythmically attuned style is an undeniably unique adaptation of rap's poetry.

Sierra, on the other hand, went to Paris to study voice at the prestigious Paris Conservatory. Her vocal contributions can usually be

genres, CocoRosie has come to understand the inextricable link between them. “Hip-hop is actually the most folk music,” Bianca says, “because folk is about politics and people and making music with what you have.” Here, in this synthesis of cultures and musical labels is where Bianca and Sierra have built their eccentric, personalized world—at the heart of modern music. ©