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# COCO ROSIE

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It took a phone call to France for Brian Yaeger to catch up with sisters and kindred musical spirits Bianca and Sierra Casady. Ever-nomadic, that's where they wrote *The Adventures Of Ghosthorse And Stillborn*, though they traveled to Iceland to get it laid-down and fine-tuned. And once in a while, they return to Brooklyn to spread the spirit of collaborative art and music with *compadres* on the Voodoo-EROS roster. Feeling bored at your day job yet?

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A whole lotta Rosie: Bianca and Sierra get personal through storytelling on their ambitious new album.

# CHARACTER BUILDING

## CocoRosie's Nomadic Sibling Journey Finds Them Amidst Great Spirits, And Makes For Great Musical Folklore

STORY BY BRIAN YAEGER // PHOTOS BY SAMANTHA WEST

In late 2006, Sierra and Bianca Casady lit out under a cool French moon to record animal calls and other earth songs as the foundation for *The Adventures Of Ghosthorse And Stillborn* (Touch And Go). When Sierra says that she and her sister are constantly “recreating [their] personal myth,” it is no understatement. The half-Cherokee siblings have a litany of aliases apiece, with a corresponding biography to boot. Chief among them are Coco (Bianca) and Rosie (Sierra), hence their band name. Rather than settling into any pair of alter egos established on their previous two albums, CocoRosie dig their hands deep into the fertile Mediterranean soil to uproot new personas on their musical storybook.

“The idea is that we created a legacy for people that had very short lives or others who were living an active afterlife,” explains Sierra. “But we developed the stories for a bunch of characters that maybe came from the underground but a lot of their stories took place above ground, on earth.”

### GETTING OUT OF DODGE

To understand whose ghost or ghosts CocoRosie channel on their new record, a glimpse into their family tree is in order. Papa may have been a rolling stone, but on *Ghosthorse*, their father Timothy is represented by Laughing Crow (his Native American name). In the Casadys' real-life story, Sierra, 27, and Bianca, 25, are two of Timothy's nine children, six of whom are half-siblings. The first of their mother's offspring was stillborn, thereby providing the impetus for Ghosthorse's companion character.

Sierra and Bianca were raised in Fort Dodge, Iowa, where their dad remains. While Iowa may have produced a Field Of Dreams, Sierra was unable to reap her artistic yen among the unceasing cornland. Leaping from one boarding school to the next, and falling out of touch with Bianca in the process, at age 20 she fled to submerge herself in operatic training at the Paris Conservatory. After being estranged for nearly a decade, Bianca rapped on Sierra's door in 2003 and CocoRosie was born.

“Our mother is a gypsy,” Sierra says, “and she moved us around a lot. That shaped our sense of identity and our relationship to places.”

The Casady sisters' musical collaboration went from an idea hatched in Sierra's apartment to their debut album, 2004's *La Maison de Mon Rêve*, which was famously recorded in a Parisian bathtub over two months. A year later, *Noah's Ark* emerged, but on *Ghosthorse*, they have finally come into their own.

“Even though there are a lot of transcendent and transformative moments in the record, it is more grounded for us,” says Sierra. “It's really about mortality and human suffering and exploring the subterranean communities, underground bodies.”

The moonlit recording sessions for *Ghosthorse* took place not in a bathtub, but on their mother's farm in Saintes Maries De La Mer in the French province of Provence, famed as a Gypsy pilgrimage site. The howls and neighs and the songs of the spirits found their way onto most of the album, as if seeping



**“WE’RE NOT  
REALLY DOWN  
WITH THE IDEA  
OF ADULTS.”**

through the pores of the farmland’s skin.

The idea of Ghosthorse was born when a steed came to Sierra in a series of dreams about a dying horse. Upon arriving at the farm, they began fleshing out its story. Whether the Casadys develop their myths to give these souls new life or perhaps simply to pay their last respects is uncertain. And it’s not vital either way. “It’s who we are right now,” Sierra offers.

As for channeling Stillborn, in memoriam to her would-be sibling, Bianca says her voice “tends to be childlike. It’s not a stylistic choice, but the nature of my voice. It comes through as extremely young,” and she feels it complements the “little, tiny hero” that is the character.

But what of the other characters on the album; who are the people Ghosthorse and Stillborn encounter in their adventures? They can be found in song titles like “Rainbowwarriors,” “Bloody Twins” and “Werewolf.” Rainbowwarriors are “anti-war and anti-dictatorship,” says Sierra. They stand for “following one’s own rainbow trail.” Their namesake song is a polyphonic tune, replete with frogs croaking and DJs scratching—a soundtrack for marching through an enchanted jungle.

All literary license aside, “Werewolf” is the track that Bianca calls the most autobiographical, as it deals with the sisters’ relationships with various men, from their father to boyfriends to their half-brother who passed away last year. With dim piano notes as fireflies guiding the way through this gloomier world, Bianca chants, “A young brother skinny and tall/My older walks oceanward and somber/Slumber, sleeping/Flowers in the water/But I’m just his daughter,” followed by Sierra tilting encouragement to Werewolf, or possibly Stillborn, to get back on his horse and ride into the sunset.

The girls took their album to Reykjavik and, hesitantly at first, put it—and themselves—in the hands of Iceland’s most famous producer/mixer, Valgeir Sigurðsson (Björk, Sigur Rós). Though Sigurðsson is accustomed to working with international, innovative artists, Sierra and Bianca weren’t quite comfortable at first. After all, not only were they in *his* studio and not *their* bathroom or field, but would he really get *them*?

Committing to working in a “contrasting environment with distance during the final process,” Sierra says that “the beauty of his studio enchanted us” and that Sigurðsson gave them both the respect and freedom they needed. “He created a solitary environment where we got to play, be childish if needed. We could be uninhibited around him.”

Indeed, youthful, self-indulgent behavior characterizes the Casadys most. “We’re not really down with the idea of adults,” Sierra declares, claiming that she and her sister are prone to playing pat-a-cake when they want to, or not brushing their teeth when they don’t want to. Presumably, however, they don’t put themselves on “time outs.”

But for all their faux-innocence, the sororal songwriters have launched some impressive projects to propagate their guiding aesthetic. Two years ago, Bianca and Melissa Shimkovitz launched the Voodoo-EROS label, signing artists like Bunny Rabbit and Quinn Walker, and releasing a compilation titled *The Enlightened Family: A Collection Of Lost Songs*, which features Devendra Banhart, Antony (from Antony And The Johnsons) and Vashti Bunyan, among others. Voodoo represents a true collaborative, with everyone on its roster sharing what Sierra calls a “group soul,” the cornerstone of what makes CocoRosie tick.

“I feel like it’s my job, in a way, to present these underdog types of artists,” adds Bianca.

When it comes to their own music, the sisters aren’t reaching for any sort of commercial success, but rather for a record that fits into this particular sonic phase of their lives. “If there are elements that come across as accessible,” cautions Sierra, “we could easily return to something more abstract.” What abstract is, in comparison for them, remains to be seen.

As for the Voodoo clan, while they may not all record and tour together, there are certainly ideological roots to their ideas about a collective spirit. Frank Zappa’s Mothers Of Invention broke out with the ultimate hodge-podge of freak rock, 1966’s seminal *Freak Out*, which featured upstarts like Dr. John and Paul Butterfield. George Clinton assembled Parliament/Funkadelic, which introduced us to Bernie Worrell and Bootsy Collins. Keeping in line with this tradition is the Wu-Tang Clan, who CocoRosie are particularly inspired by.

“They are modern Shakespearean writers,” says Bianca, who studied linguistics and expresses a desire to collaborate with any of the members. “They are reinventing language, personalizing it, and building their own mythology and terminology.”

It’s no coincidence then that Jim Jarmusch, who’s worked with Wu members on both *Ghost Dog* and *Coffee And Cigarettes*, is also fanatical about CocoRosie and was initially attached to the first music video for *Adventures* (Kai Regan has since taken the reins). Sure, it might be a stretch to toss all these individuals into the same creative stew, but these concepts and souls are assuredly interconnected, in space and time.

## THE TIMES THEY ARE A-REPEATIN’

Of course, all art still has an earthly source. And, eschewing being from any one place or time, perhaps Bianca and Sierra draw from the well of the Verismo movement, which developed in late-18th century Italian opera. Italian *verists* (realists) believed that art should reflect the true, often alarming, nature of a character, from its inner fears to the scenery that informs it. Puccini’s *La Bohème* is a shining example, and a suitable comparison to *The Adventures Of Ghosthorse And Stillborn* specifically, and CocoRosie in general.

“That makes a lot of sense to me,” concurs Sierra. “I was seduced by the classical world, by Italian operas. There is a lot of death and suicide. A lot of discipline, training and perversion, too.” If life imitates art, she sees opera as a world where “human and a-human qualities constantly come through.”

Sierra’s opera training is just one piece of Coco’s cumulative creative puzzle though. The sisters aren’t merely musicians and poets, but also seamstresses and painters. Bianca, in fact, has her drawings and visual art on display in the nomadic Museum Of Nice Things, a part-Brooklyn-based gallery, part-globe-trotting installation for the Voodoo family and their friends.

“All art springs from the same well,” Bianca offers. “It is just being expressed in different languages.”

Are Sierra and Bianca, as a unit, capable of achieving as much for their idiosyncratic take on folk as Parliament did for funk or Wu did for hip-hop? As Louis Armstrong famously said, “All music is folk music. I ain’t never heard no horse sing a song.” Then again, ol’ Satchmo never heard the ghost-folk of CocoRosie.

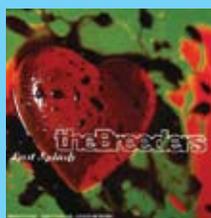
# SISTER ACTS

While there are no actual sisters in the Scissor Sisters, the charts have seen their share of female sibling duos. Here’s a smattering.



## Heart

Proof you don’t need cock ‘n’ balls to rock arenas, Ann and Nancy Wilson started belting hits in the mid-’70s. Once you’re finished posturing with your air guitar to “Crazy On You,” skip ahead on their *Greatest Hits* and wham, you’re right back at those junior high dances when you held your baby close—at arm’s length—to “These Dreams.” Just don’t call into the classic rock station asking for any of their *Lovemongers* hooley.



## The Breeders

Kim and Kelley Deal are indie-sibling royalty, holding court where Noel and Liam Gallagher are merely jesters. Though the identical twins formed the Breeders in their suburban Dayton garage, the world had to wait for their resurgence until Kim and the Pixies altered alt-rock forever. After 1993’s *Last Splash* and mega success, they (OK, Kelley) needed a time-out. With respective side-projects the Amps and Kelley Deal 6000 behind them, the Deals can reclaim their scepter.



## Tegan And Sara

The Quinn sisters, better known as Tegan And Sara, released their fourth album, *So Jealous*, on Neil Young’s Vapor Records. Since then, the bicoastal Canadian identical twins won’t have to fall back on childhood plans to be polar bear veterinarians. While landing on the *Grey’s Anatomy* soundtrack would propel even a recording of grass growing to some level of mainstream success, these adorable singing songwriters were born to pop out catchy songs one after another.



## The Pierces

Since having artistic, musical parents breeds talented kids, it behooved this pair of ballerinas to follow their dreams of singing. Catherine and Allison Pierce (see their *On The Verge* profile on page 12) create gorgeous folk harmonies, slightly poppier than sisters Emilie and Martie of the Dixie Chicks and, go figure, countryier than Carnie and Wendy Phillips. Slip on *Light Of The Moon* when it’s time to swoon with your schmoopy.



## The Pointer Sisters

Formed in 1969, Bonnie left to pursue a solo career in 1977. The remaining Pointer Sisters—Anita, Ruth, and June—got the country “So Excited” with their blend of R&B, pop and disco. In 1984, when brothers Eddie and Alex Van Halen suggested we all might as well “Jump,” the Pointers also wanted us to “Jump (For My Love).” With June’s passing in 2006, they just narrowly made the cut for this list.