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LOVE INJECTION
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UNDERGROUND SYSTEM
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GE-OLOGY

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What are you?



How did you meet?

Peter Matson: I was in music school at the New School, and I met a couple of the guys in that band Antibalas, which is kind of the original Brooklyn [act] to play Afrobeat. I was playing a lot of jazz music at the time, maybe four or five years, and I was definitely open to escaping a little bit and looking for some other outlets for it. I met them and started playing a lot of Fela [Kuti]’s music with them and under their guidance, and it just sort of went from there. I got really obsessed with Fela for maybe half a year; it was all I was playing and practicing on guitar every day. Every day, playing for three hours along to, like, “Upside Down.” Then, I realized, in order to play this kind of music, you need to gather, like, twelve people and take it all the way. At the time, there were quite a few Afrobeat bands with rotating casts of characters, but there wasn’t really a group available for me to just jump in with. But I was also around musicians all the time, so it was like, I should just start doing it. We had one pick-up gig out of town and then, after that, me and Domenica [Fossati] met. We were working at a music publishing company.

Domenica Fossati: He was an intern at a company called Boosey & Hawkes and I was the assistant to the promoter, so we met through part-time office work. I play sometimes with the guys from Antibalas and I play in the lead singer’s side-project. I was playing a gig at Knitting Factory and he sent me an email the next day like, “Hey, I’m the intern at Boosey & Hawkes, but I saw you playing with [Duke] Amayo and I love Afrobeat. I have this band—would you be interested in maybe playing with us and sitting in on a couple songs? Here’s my Myspace.” I was like, I don’t remember this guy, but I’ll check it out. I told him, “Yeah, I’m down to play a song here and there on flute.” I went to the rehearsal and he was like, “Do you wanna play a little keyboard, too?” I said sure, so I’m playing shekere and keyboards and fluting it up, and I’m looking around, going, Man, some of these people don’t really feel like the Afrobeat thing as much, so I told him I thought I could help bring other characters into the group if he was interested. Then, even though I wasn’t helping lead the group with him, I was getting involved in it, and, next thing I know, he asks me to sing a Fela song, and I’m like, “I don’t sing.” And he goes, “Just sing one song” and I was like “Alright, I’ll sing one song” and I liked it a lot, and so I started singing more Fela songs. Next thing I know, I’m fronting the band, which was totally not what I expected. It was really quick and completely not what I expected to do.

Where did you come from musically? I saw your mom is a singer?

D.F.: Yeah, my mom’s a singer—a jazz singer. She was a pop singer in Venezuela, too. I grew up dancing, actually, before I started playing flute. I was gonna go to college for dance, and then I did this music program for one summer at Berklee and I fell in love with the flute, so I started playing the flute. I went to school to actually do chamber music. I went to undergrad for classical music and graduate school at NYU for contemporary abstract, weird flute shit. I was doing all that, but then when I met Amayo from Antibalas, who I was already a fan of, it totally opened me up to do other stuff outside of the contemporary music world. I still play with some groups every once in a while, but I just got obsessed with Afrobeat. I felt more comfortable with playing grooves and dancing—it was the best way to blend my two passions together. That’s kind of where I came from, and when I started playing with [Peter], I started focusing more on this world. My idea of coming to New York to play “contemporary” music is not at all what it is now, which is really interesting when you come here with an idea and then it’s like, completely different.

You also have a music background in your family, right?

P.M.: Yeah, so I was kind of destined to end up like this. That’s the weird thing! My parents were cool and didn’t force me to do too much on the musical end. When I was younger, I had one or two years of piano lessons and just shrugged it off. In high school, I [played] electric guitar.

I definitely have a strong musical family. My whole mom’s side of the family is from New York City, even though I grew up moving around a lot. It starts with my great-grandfather, who was Irving Berlin, a famous songwriter, an original Tin Pan Alley guy. That’s a huge legacy. For me, I’m the great-grandson, so I feel like I’m far enough removed where it’s more a fun fact than my reality as it was with my grandmother, who was like a celebrity kid.

My dad’s a Bay Area kid. Berkley in the sixties... went to Monterey Pop Festival, grew up with the Grateful Dead sort of guy. He was definitely responsible for... nudging me in a really cool direction. He showed me one of my favorite live rock albums ever, the Who’s Live at Leeds. That one definitely changed my life. Mahavishnu Orchestra when I was getting into jazz. All the Miles [Davis] stuff. I’m super lucky in that way. I haven’t met a whole lot of people from families who only did music or art stuff.

How quickly did it take you to decide to record an EP?

P.M.: It happened pretty quickly—[after] about a year. For the first few months, we were basically just covering Fela stuff and the whole group was learning how to play it well together. It’s totally all ensemble music—every single person has to play one thing really well. That’s so much work. After the first few months, we started sketching originals totally in that straight-up, classic Afrobeat mode. I think we were lucky that we were both learning it as we went, and Domenica was learning how to be a frontperson. Aesthetically, it wasn’t experimental at all, but it was experimental to us. There was an urgency you felt because of that.

Fronting a band is incredibly difficult! Who did you look to?

D.F.: I was paying attention a lot to Amayo because he has a presence and the gift of gab. I started paying attention to a lot of friends who are just very good at talking to an audience and who know how to... not control, but how to direct an ensemble while presenting something to people. Me, at that time, it was Amayo. After that, I would look at YouTube videos of my favorite artists. I would look at Prince a lot—I started doing that a lot a couple years ago. At that time, because it was mainly Peter who was in charge of the thing, I was mainly trying to figure out how [our] balance was working out. I was trying to understand what my role was.

So it was two of you, then people came in and out and you were trying to find the right combination. How did that work out?

P.M.: Domenica was a big part of that, too. It was just our whole extended network of people. A never-ending series of phone calls, meeting people randomly [through] their peripheral involvement in our scene.

D.F.: From my side of bringing in some of the people, they were people I played with and was comfortable with, that I knew could do well. I think it was the same for you and your crew. I think it was eventually a combination of that and then blending in both our families together. They’re all comfortable with us anyway, so then at the same time, being comfortable in playing together, comfortable expressing creative input in the music, which is how the music evolved.

P.M.: One nice point that stands out to me is it’s all people we’ve met because of this band in New York. For me, at least, nobody’s from my past. This is the first thing that I did like this, and everyone that’s a part of it is [in it because of it]. That’s a nice thing.

Getting people to musically jibe on a project of this scale is incredibly important, and when you get to the point where you’re recording, you get to a whole other level of commitment.

How many people were in the band total by the time you got to the first EP? How did the duties get divided?

D.F.: With the first EP, it was, like, twelve. It was a big group.

P.M.: The first one was straight-up, classic Afrobeat instrumentation, so it would’ve been a lot. Eleven?

D.F.: It was basically everyone we were playing with. It was people we still know. At the time, the people moving the recording process along... it was mostly you and Dave [Cutler].

P.M.: Although that’s been pretty constant. On that end of it, I’ve mostly been the guy who’s like, “Let’s produce a record,” who’s nudging that along. But me and Domenica, we’re definitely the songwriters, and then the band has its own presence since we’ve known each other for a while. A little bit of the arrangement stuff we work on collectively, but, yeah, it’s definitely me and Domenica on that end of it.

So you’re more on guitar and rhythm and you’re more on flute and vocals?

D.F.: Kind of. Most of the time, he’ll bring a track that he’s been messing around with or he’ll have a guitar thing, and then I’ll come up with a lot of melodic ideas and lyrics. But sometimes I’ll present it to him as like, “I really feel like a rhythm like this.” That’s how “Three’s a Charm” started—I was in pursuit of something in triplet form.

P.M.: And there’s a little bit of electronic music processes. I learned how to make beats on a sampler while I was in college. I stopped for a few years because I got really serious about guitar, but it circled back when I got Ableton, back in 2010, 2011. All our tracks do start in that mode, on the grid in Ableton, as a beat in Ableton, and then we layer out from there.

It seems like a good process.

D.F.: I don’t think there’s ever been a time when we just sit and improvise. Maybe a couple times, but... most of the time, there’s at least, like, some beat.

P.M.: It’d be fun to do that, for sure at some point. But mostly, there’s a contextual idea or theme.

Do you guys get together on a weekly basis?

D.F.: We were doing that a lot when we were writing this last album. This time, creatively, it hasn’t been as much, only because we’ve been so focused on putting out the album, but, usually, whenever we get in this creative mode, we do meet up as much as possible.

Where’s your studio?

D.F.: It’s been all over the place. [Laughs] We used to have a studio in downtown Brooklyn, but it’s more like bedroom recordings.

P.M.: Pretty hole in the wall until we expand to produce the actual record itself. Then it’s a different thing.

There’s a very danceable aspect to the music you guys make, but also because I see the band dabbling between the DJ production world and the live music world, how did the Leo Mas

A Q&A with

UNDERGROUND SYSTEM

Interview: Barbie Bertisch
Transcript: Nik Mercer

remix come about?

P.M.: It was Alfredo [Fiorito]. He and Leo Mas had played a Boiler Room Ibiza legends sort of thing together, and someone had found “Bella Ciao,” our track, which is a total rework and rewrite of this old Italian anti-fascist tune. I think it just took off from there.

D.F.: It was given to Leo as a gift afterward, but he was like, “I recognize this song, but I don’t know from where.” He’s very much into these songs that are anti-fascist, so he fell in love with it and wrote us a note on Facebook [to say] he loved the music and that he’d think about remixing it. We looked him up and got interested and built a relationship. We’re good homies now and he’s very supportive of everything we’ve done.

How long has the album been in the making?

P.M.: Couple years, start to finish. We were casually writing stuff for quite a while, and then it was a year, to produce it, start to finish. We’ve been sitting on it for the past year, getting it set up. Almost three years, the total process.

What’s behind the name, What Are You?

D.F.: It’s one of the names of one of our songs, and it’s basically an identity song. Literally, it’s more about ethnicity and the way people question that to a person who might be ambiguously ethnic instead of just asking, “Hey, what’s your ethnicity?” “Where are you from?” It’s more like, “What are you?” Well, I’m a human being on Earth. It kind of sometimes bugs me a lot. That title was written because we had a gig at Rockwood one time, and this girl... she was just yelling at me while I was trying to talk to people and sing. “Oh, my God! But what are you, though, like what are you!?” She was wasted. For half the set she was doing this and was up in my face. I was so annoyed. Our Barry sax player at the time was yelling, “She’s a Jewish girl from Brooklyn!” She goes, “What!? That’s crazy! You look like Colombian or Spanish or some shit.” That just stuck to my mind a lot—

P.M.: And we had to run with it. It was pretty set up.

A lot of the musical references that you hear in the album are like that. It’s a double meaning.

P.M.: Double or triple or quadruple!

D.F.: As an album title, for sure. As a song, it means this one thing, but why we put it as a title is because people ask us what is the genre of the band.

P.M.: We have an identity crisis.

D.F.: We do! I think it’s a good thing, actually.

And the EPs were more classical Afrobeat, more reverent, and then the album comes in and totally breaks from that. Was that intentional, this new sonic identity, or was it something that came together sporadically?

D.F.: I think for you it might’ve been intentional, but for me, I feel it was gradual. There were moments when we were having discussions about this, actually, because we love the Afrobeat music—we love it—but we wanted to explore other things. I was being a little stubborn, I’ll admit, because I like, “No, we gotta stick with it!” He was just getting influenced by a lot of other

stuff—a lot of electronic stuff, new wave—and for him... I think he wanted to step it up and do something more different. But through the writing process and all the music we were playing and improvising, it was a gradual thing.

P.M.: It was gradual, but it was also kickstarted by me basically becoming a professional DJ several days a week. DJing around New York... that changed my perception of everything and how people receive music. But then, not very long after that, I started seeing all those parallels because it’s not like we’re the first generation to be influenced by Fela. And then all roads lead to 1980. [Laughs] And we’re like, “Oh, there’s this band ESG! We should cover one of their songs!” “Yo this dude Sal [Principato]’s from the band called Liquid Liquid!” We’re doing this! Our approach route started in a different place.

That’s kind of the beauty of NY. These bands from New York in the 80s where all influences were clashing and thrown into one pot, and whatever came out on the other side was incredibly interesting (Liquid Liquid, Talking Heads, ESG). You can kind of distill all these different influences, but then you come out with your own sound in the end. And speaking of New York, but on the DJ tip, I wanted to touch upon Soul Clap Records. How did you approach them? Did they approach you?

P.M.: That was another pretty organic one, I think. It was actually at The Lot Radio. It was after Eli [Goldstein]’s show in September or October of last year. We came out and Eli recognized me from the studio on Greenpoint Avenue where we finished this record, Morgan Wiley’s spot. This other engineer that we work with, Abe Seiferth, works there. He was like, “You’re Morgan’s friend!” We sent him the record the next day—

D.F.: When we sent it to him, it wasn’t like it was to listen to it for Soul Clap. It was like, “Let’s us know what you think! Please give us some recommendations for labels that might be interested in this.”

P.M.: He wrote back and was like, “This music is amazing and really special.”

D.F.: He was actually gonna partner with José [Luis Pardo], a former player in Los Amigos Invisibles, and was like, “Oh, we’ve been thinking about maybe starting a label and this is exactly the thing we want to try to do.” For him, he was freaking out because it was Eli. I’m still learning about Soul Clap at that moment, so I’m freaking out because it’s Los Amigos Invisibles from Venezuela, so I’m like, “This has to happen! We have to do it!” Eventually, we just did it through Soul Clap, but [that’s where it began].

Was the album finished at that point?

P.M.: Not mastered, but mixed. We toured a bit then in the summer of last year, right after we finished, and the logistics of that swamped us to the point where it wasn’t until October that we started sending the record out and aiming at putting it out about now. It developed pretty steadily from there.

The way that Soul Clap started, how it’s kind of growing from the inside out, is really positive and inspirational. Thinking of New York on a global landscape, there’s a lot of talk about New York techno and other scenes, but this is totally fresh. Soul Clap owns this space of the

multicultural, live band, dance music and it’s awesome that you guys are part of it.

P.M.: There’s a lane we’re creating I think. I was already pretty close to a lot of the Midnight Magic guys, and that was definitely like [Soul Clap’s] flagship live band. Now, we’re kind of doing it together—and we’re literally doing it together in a month. We’ve been buds for a minute.

Speaking of this multicultural show you’ve guys put together, you did Summerstage and are being exposed to bigger and bigger audiences... how do you see people receiving this information you give them? Politically, especially now that we’re in a very transitional period.

D.F.: I think it’s been a pretty positive response. A lot of time, people’s faces are like ‘What is happening?! Like, what the f—’...like, they don’t know how to accept it. Not only are they seeing literally every person from another country—

P.M.: Like a UN meeting.

D.F.: Then there’s, like, these women up front that’re wilin’ out, and then there’s singing in all sorts of different languages and saying stupid shit to the people. Their faces... it’s like, What is happening!? I think they freak out, but then, at the end, I think they’re happy that they were able to freak out and do whatever they wanted to do. I always talk about the fact that the one thing I really love about the response of the audience is that they don’t just stare—they let go and lose their inhibitions, lose their minds, and dance. It’s a really good response because they eventually let it out and feel free to do whatever they wanna do in response to the music.

It’s rare to see a full-on ensemble, too. What are some of the elements of Afrobeat that have stuck the most with you guys?

D.F.: Besides the rhythmic elements, topic-wise, the songs I’ve been writing have been a lot about identity, about being a woman, a mixed person. For me, it’s been a lot about that. Cultural topics. A couple of politically charged songs as well, but I think mainly for us, it’s been more about identity. Who you are in the United States or in this world and as a woman, for me personally. In the sense of keeping what has been from the past, it is more of that sense of “this is who we are” [message]. Even though it was male-driven in the past, this is the modern version for us.

P.M.: It’s production, but it’s also songwriting. It’s this idea of juxtaposition or a subversion of the aesthetic of the music. Fela would sing a song about carrying the coffin of his deceased mother over this track that you wanna get down to. It’s playing with that kind of emotion that’s a huge part of what I loved about Fela’s stuff so much, and we try to maintain that as a thread in any song where we feel it’s lyrically or conceptually charged. There’s always gotta be a push and pull, like maybe things aren’t always as they seem. That’s a big part of what was so strong about Fela’s music. Not to explicitly talk shit, but it’s certainly gotten lost by the way a lot of American groups interpret Afrobeat or they just don’t have a vocalist in the first place or they’re not trying to write songs with lyrical content. But yeah, that’s a really powerful part of Fela’s music and others’ music that we’re trying to keep intact.

A lot of music we hear in clubs today has no lyrics. What’s the message in the music when

you don’t have lyrics? Yes, there’s a lot of feeling that can happen in instrumental music, but in matters of identity, politics, social commentary... Patti Smith and Bob Dylan did it by including poetry... but what are some of the ways you do it? Where do the lyrics come from?

D.F.: They come from living in New York, basically. “Rent Party” is a perfect example. It’s about having a party because you can’t afford rent. You don’t have time to come up with money. I literally do that sometimes at my house, or I become the super of the building. It’s New York life, really! Those were the lyrics that came up for me. Just experiences of again, walking down the street and somebody asking you “what are you?” or having a fight on the Brooklyn Bridge and letting go of that person [you’re arguing with]. Lyrically, it’s an homage to New York life, and even sonically, too, that was the idea.

There’s more disco-infused songs, post-punk-infused songs, dance floor tracks.

P.M.: We’re definitely borrowing from a lot of decades, including the one now.

So it’s album release, then a show at Music Hall of Williamsburg with Midnight Magic on a Soul Clap bill, and then you’re off to a couple cities?

D.F.: Yeah, we’re off to a couple cities. Chicago, D.C., Detroit, Burlington, Boston, Philly. Some others in there. Basically, up the East Coast with [some Midwest]. Oh, we’re going to Present Present, this festival in New Lebanon.

P.M.: Shaker Mountain? That same area.

D.F.: We did it last year on our tour. It’s basically a private festival that’s run by friends, but they always get these crazy bands.

We’re doing this tour [with Midnight Magic] just because, when we opened for them at Rough Trade, it was a really great marriage—

P.M.: That was the spark. We did a show with Midnight Magic and Eli DJing in January or February of this year, and it just went off, so we were like, “Oh, right—we have to do this a lot more times.”

D.F.: A few of the band members of Midnight Magic play with us, like Morgan and Carter [Yasutake]. Morgan plays keys and Carter is the trumpet player. We’re just mixing and mingling.

P.M.: And we literally couldn’t fit anybody else in the Sprinter van! We can’t actually move [more people]!

It’s also really awesome to be able to share players and resources.

P.M.: Totally. It’s all incestuous in a positive way.

D.F.: The personalities work perfect.

And it makes for more fluid collaborations.

P.M.: We’ll get everyone on stage, for sure. It’ll be fun.

What are you looking forward to the most in terms of touring?

D.F.: I’m mainly looking forward to releasing the album. We’ve been with it for so long! I’m just excited to have it out in the world and play some of these songs that we haven’t done live yet. I’m really looking forward to this album release.

P.M.: The Music Hall show is an obvious one because it’s a home show. Midnight [of that day] is when everything will be up online. It’ll come out on the seventh [of August]. It’s the real release show, for sure, and then we’ll do a bunch more in September. Another really exciting point is we’ll go to France this fall, in December, for Trans Musicales, which is the big one over there. We just got that and that’s really exciting. Taking this over to Europe is high on our priority list. I think people enjoy what we have over there, so that’s an emotion as well.

Having an album out is amazing, just in the scope of seeing a project that you guys started three years ago coming to this conclusion. Now there’s the touring part, but—

P.M.: Yeah, it feels like we definitely took our time with it, but it was pretty necessary I think. It’s all kind of winding up at this point because we didn’t rush it. It feels good.

Now you’ve made an album.

P.M.: Oh yeah, and we’re gonna have to do it again.

D.F.: Basically, I was like, once this is out we’re gonna have to keep writing. But at least we’ll have a little more time now, spend a little more time creatively.

P.M.: It’s gonna be a lot of work coming up, but I’m also excited to start making music again. I didn’t really have any studio space to write, but now that me and Cesar [Toribio] have that spot, we’re already cranking out more stuff.

D.F.: And more experimenting on things. That’ll be fun.

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UNDERGROUND SYSTEM, ‘WHAT ARE YOU’ OUT SEPTEMBER 7 ON SOUL CLAP RECORDS. THE SCR REVUE TOUR KICKS OFF AT MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG ON SEPTEMBER 6 FEATURING UNDERGROUND SYSTEM (LIVE), MIDNIGHT MAGIC, LONELY C OF SOUL CLAP (LIVE), HOSTED BY BAMBOOZLE AKA ELI (SOUL CLAP).

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BRYCE DAVID BLACK FLAMINGO

Paulinho Da Costa, “Terra” (Pablo Records, 1977)

A little slice of paradise on this one from esteemed Brazilian percussionist Paulinho Da Costa, where he focuses on what he knows best: drums. Off his first solo album Agora, “Terra” is the stand out, stripped back track where he shines brightest to me and I love how this song fits into the LP.

Cynthia Griffin, “Rejuvenating Season” (Boo & Demarkus Original Reckless House Mix) (Trippin Records, 2005)

House heaven right here. I heard this down the street at a friends shop and he was more than hesitant to let go of the title (he’s notorious for this) but after a little convincing he flashed me the sleeve. Big ups to him for that, this track builds you up, melts your heart, and releases you from its grip feeling 100x better than you did before you never heard it.

Patience Dabany, “Dis Moi” (Dabany Productions, 2014)

Gabonese Boogie that’s got soul coming out of its ears. Not that easy to find, but real easy to move to.

DJ Sotofett & Jaakko Eino Kalevi, “Main Bar Mix” (Honest Jon’s Records, 2015)

This is a breezy, sleazy party igniter off the Drippin’ For A Tripp (Tripp-A-Dubb-Mix) release from 2015. Perfect for lighting off the onset of a party or putting one in the air on the way to the beach. I started re-listening to a ton of JEK and fell in love with it all, all over again. Also the artwork is too sick, deep south mixtape shit.

John Makin & Friends, “No Lie” (Music From Memory, 2018)

There are honestly so many compilations being released every month that it’s overwhelming to try to keep up. SO much amazing music, a lot of it I’ve never even heard before. This track is off Uneven Paths: Deviant Pop From Europe 1980-1991, but it originally appeared on John Makins live album recorded at the Planet in Brussels on April 27th, 1985. Tear-jerking folk-soul at its finest and the feeling of the track takes me out of NYC if I need to close my eyes and slip away to somewhere with green grass, tall trees, and crisp air.

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