

Paco

"Michael and Gary were working in the studio and I walked by and was really struck by what I heard," recalls Andy Chase, one of the masterminds behind the New York band Paco, which will release its debut album, *This Is Where We Live* (Unfiltered Records), May 18th.

"It created a very distinct mood, sort of sultry and melancholy but with unmistakable attitude. I said, 'This stuff is cool - if you write some melodies and find a singer, it could be something great.' They kind of laughed, like, 'Yeah, right.' But I couldn't stop thinking about it."

Chase, who happens to co-own the studio (Stratosphere Sound), had wandered into a session house engineer Gary Maurer was overseeing for composer Michael Hampton, a former punk guitarist who'd lately been working on scores and soundtracks. As it turned out, Chase's timing couldn't have been better.

The outfit he's most closely associated with, Ivy, was on something of a hiatus since member Adam Schlesinger had switched gears to concentrate on his other project, *Fountains Of Wayne*. Ivy had enjoyed significant acclaim over the course of four albums - including 1997's *Apartment Life*, which *Rolling Stone* called "a delightful line of vintage originals smartly modeled by alluring singer Dominique Durand," while applauding the band for "deftly garnishing top-shelf songs with horns and keyboards," and ultimately concluding, "Ivy put the fizz in cocktail culture" (Oct. 16, 1997).

"Adam was very busy with *Fountains Of Wayne* and Andy was producing other bands, so there

was a lot of down time," Durand recollects. "I have been 100 percent satisfied in Ivy, but I saw this was an opportunity to try something new. Though, until I heard Paco, I hadn't really been thrilled by anything. And then Michael came to me and said, 'Gary and I have all this music and we're looking for a singer. Will you listen to it?' I did listen, and I loved what I heard. I said, 'Yes, absolutely.'"

"It was different from Ivy," she explains, "but still the kind of music I feel most connected to. It had a pop spirit about it, but it was darker, edgier, and it had this intriguing electronic texture. It felt very exciting."

Says Hampton of the music's genesis: "Gary and I'd been putting together songs built on guitar, bass and drums, with an emphasis on technology - drum loops, sequencing, samples. But as we worked on them, they started to sound less like atmospheric soundscapes and more like traditional songs. I kept returning to choruses." He says he felt the sonic tug of sources as diverse as classic dub, reggae, R&B and bossa nova, but also the formal ingenuity of greats like Roxy Music, The Rolling Stones and The Beatles (note particularly the echoes of George Harrison's emotive slide playing).

The liberation Chase and Durand discovered in this new music is felt throughout This Is Where We Live. Says the former: "It's not so far from Ivy that we're changing our colors, but this was a much more visceral approach to pop songwriting." "We felt unlimited in what we could do," adds Durand. "Maybe we would start with a chorus instead of a verse; maybe there would be no solo, or we might have three solos. It's okay. There are no rules. We did whatever felt right. It was spontaneous and

anarchic.”

Still, there was a certain method to this creative madness. “For me, it was great because Michael had tracks that were well on their way to being finished,” says Chase. “They needed melodies and lyrics. So Dominique and I came up with something that would push the sound and feel and flavor of the songs ever further. Then the three of us would come back together and create the final shape. Gary [also a member of Brooklyn’s Hem] added bits and pieces. He was the bassist, co-producer, programmer, sounding board - he’s splattered throughout in drips and drabs.”

The result is consistently evocative. The songs seduce the listener, inviting entrée to a mysterious world that shimmers inside the subconscious like the moon emerging from a diaphanous veil of clouds. Chase says he’d been listening to bands like Zero 7, Air and Alpha and wanted *This Is Where We Live* to “sustain a mood, an environment, from beginning to end.”

His use of the word “environment” in this context suggests that the place conjured by the album’s title is more a space of the imagination than a physical location. Truly, for Durand, the “This” is much more expansive than a house or a studio or a set of coordinates on a map. “We all come from different places. I come from France, Michael and Andy grew up in D.C., and then we all met in New York. But the most important place for us is the home of our collaboration. This sound, this music, these songs - this is where we live now.”

The song “My Love,” for one, finds a willful soul on the premises. “Sometimes you find yourself in a relationship that is manipulative, and you know you shouldn’t be

there. But for some reason, you stay," she posits, "because you kind of enjoy it. We took that idea and gave it a tongue-in-cheek twist. It's overly dramatic, like a young girl talking to her best friend. Even though the lyrics are this desperate lament, there's a happy feeling about this song - the way it's sung, the sound of the guitars, the beat, the driving energy."

Chase calls another cut, "Shaded," "an invitation to shed your skin," to cast off the illusions that keep you from realizing your potential. "Everything, everyone, every word you've heard is a lie/ Don't buy the dream," Durand insists in an insinuating, syncopated refrain. Then there's a song called "Lie." The line "All you ever do is lie" popped into Hampton's head one day with melody attached (an outpouring presumably inspired by the track's mid-'60s-era vibes and organ). From there Durand extrapolated a song "about the way things look vs. how you really feel." "This one has a naïve point of view that I think is funny," she says. "It's something a child would say - 'All you ever do is lie.'"

Much of the lyrical content here is ironic. Reading between the lines is advised. But the lilting, languid "Adore" "comes from pure feeling," according to Durand. Says Chase: "This is the one unabashed love song on the album. We wanted to turn the traditional love song on its head, but it seemed kind of forced, so we just surrendered to it."

Some of the songs are less thematically specific, with only what Durand calls "a little vocal idea." Chase maintains: "Sometimes we focused on a simple phrase, the barest sentiment, that fit with the music almost like another instrument. The sound of the words became as important as their literal

meaning."

"Satie," the track that opens *This Is Where We Live*, needed no lyrics at all. Named for one of Hampton's favorite composers, it "works well as an introduction to the record," he notes. "It has a simple, three-chord structure. It's all dubbed out, with this recurring guitar lick. It didn't need anything else." "That's the first song I ever heard of Paco," Durand remembers. "That's when I fell in love."

Another standout, "Who Do You Think You Are," conceals an inside joke harking back to Chase and Durand's earliest work together. "I had that part, 'You think you're the only dart/ That's been thrown into this heart,' and I'd been dying to put it in a song sort of as an homage to ABC's [1983 Top 40 hit] 'Poison Arrow' - 'Shoot that poison arrow to my heart.' Of course Dominique said, 'Absolutely not.'" In the end, though, they "pushed and pulled" on the lyrics until they achieved a thematic heft certain to banish any hint of cheese. In fact, the couplet is a wordsmithing highlight of *This Is Where We Live*.

"Your songs are not cool. The keyboard is not cool. The guitar is cool. You should learn how to play the guitar because you're a good singer-songwriter, but you're influenced by the wrong stuff." Durand broke this news to Chase shortly after they met. He concedes he was a sucker for the bands of the New Romantics era, among other '80s stalwarts. How did Chase manage to overcome a lifetime of keyboards-based bad influences? "I was in love with her and willing to do anything to get the girl, so it was a good motivator." (He did, in fact, get the girl, who is now his wife.)

He says of his contrarian development as a musician: "My parents forced me to play the

piano when I was 10. Anything I was told to do I rejected, so I played the piano very reluctantly for about a year and a half. Then, when I was forced into trumpet lessons, I naturally began to enjoy the piano. When I was 13, I just started creating my own chords and writing my own melodies. I was never really interested in learning other people's songs. I was a keyboard player until I met Dominique."

Durand had come from Paris to the U.S. to study English after an education in film and philosophy. Her brother had been in a rock band, and her cousin was the founder of Les Inrockuptibles, the highly regarded French music magazine. "When I was around 13, my brother, my cousin and I started going to all these concerts," she reminisces. "I remember seeing The Smiths, New Order, The House Of Love ... and hanging out backstage with the musicians.

"I moved to New York because it was a place I'd fantasized about, the place where The Velvet Underground and Blondie and Talking Heads and Television had all started. I didn't know anyone - I could barely speak a word of English - but every night I'd go to CBGB's or Brownies or one of the other clubs to see my favorite bands. When I met Andy, he was in a band, but I thought the music he was into was too slick. I liked more direct, gritty guitar rock. I started to push him in new directions, he began playing guitar, and we eventually wrote a song together."

Durand recalls her rebirth as a singer: "Andy said, 'Why don't you sing this song? You wrote it with me, and it's in your key.' And I said, 'Are you crazy? I've never sung in my life. I can't sing.' But he said, 'Well, try.' So I got completely drunk and we went to the studio. I went into the vocal booth and just

sang it. We didn't really know what to think of it - we were too close to it. But we asked our friend Adam [Schlesinger] to play on it, and he said, 'This is so great. I love Dominique's voice. I want to be involved in this. Let's do more.'" Et voila - Ivy.

Meanwhile, in a galaxy very, very nearby, Michael Hampton was pursuing his own muse. He'd cut his teeth as part of Washington, D.C.'s seminal hardcore scene, which revolved around the Dischord label. Hampton played guitar in bands with Henry Rollins and Ian MacKaye, as well as other members of Fugazi. He picked up the instrument in imitation of a close friend (who went on to join Bad Religion) and because he "wanted to be like The Beatles."

Paco bears a certain post-punk ethos, but its character is more precisely explained by Hampton's involvement in an après-hardcore band called Manifesto that he describes as a "poppy, electronic-influenced guitar thing." By the time he found himself working with Gary Maurer at Chase's Stratosphere Sound, he was much more interested in creating atmosphere through technology, "guitar-based, but not really like a rock band. I just didn't want to do that anymore," he says.

Thus Chase bumped into the musical idea that would become Paco. None of this, however, explains how the band got its name. A smile is audible in Durand's voice as she reveals: "When we started Paco, I was pregnant with our first child. For some reason we were convinced it was a boy, and when we'd talk about him, we'd call him Paco. People would ask how I was doing, and I'd say, 'Great - Paco feels fine today.' Of course, when the baby was born, it was a girl, and since we couldn't name our little girl Paco, we gave that name to our project." She illuminates further: "When I was

six years old, I was in love with one of my parents' friends, a very handsome architect named Paco. I've just always loved that name."

An architect named Paco who designs shelter for people. A band named Paco who conceive a sanctuary of ideas. Both are distinguished by the fundamental human impulse to create, to collaborate, and to draw upon whatever artistic means are available. "We recorded This Is Where We Live in many different formats," Hampton points out. "Parts were in and out of computers, chopped up, cut and pasted, tried out in all sorts of variations. It's a very creative way to do music," he concludes, "as long as you make sure the human element is there."

In some ways, however, the making of This Is Where We Live transcended the conventional boundaries of human interaction. "There was an unusual level of trust among us," Durand attests. "We know each other's sensibilities so well, and there was no ego involved, which is very rare and special. The experience of Paco turned out to be something I hadn't anticipated; it is so much more than just a departure from Ivy. I'm very happy that Andy overheard what Michael and Gary were working on in the studio that day. We can't wait for people to hear this music."

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