

WE DON'T WANNA MAKE YOU DANCE

Reviews from Chile – Translated by Mara Lethem

REVIEWS

WE DON'T WANNA MAKE YOU DANCE (2013)

By Camilo Rojas | December 8, 2014



Our coverage of the Festival In-Edit Nescafé continues with a documentary on a certain New York band that had fame in their grasp, but still it managed to elude them.

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Have you ever heard of Miller, Miller, Miller & Sloan? A band from New York's Upper West Side, composed of three brothers and a childhood friend, all of them white as the driven snow, who played a mix of funk, R&B and pop? Doesn't ring a bell?

Unless you are an exhaustive expert on the NYC underground music scene of the early eighties, it's unlikely that you've ever heard the band's name (much less one of their songs), a name that sounds more apt for a law firm than a ground-breaking group that challenged the musical and even social categorizations of the period.

Dan Miller (eldest brother; guitar and voice), C.B. Miller (also known as "Barney"; middle brother; guitar, voice and occasionally drums) and Mike Miller (youngest brother; voice and drums) founded MMM&S in 1979 with Blake Sloan (bass and occasional voice), a childhood friend who lived in the same building. What began as a hobby after listening to songs by the Beatles, Beach Boys and Black Sabbath along with Parliament and Wild Cherry, started to become something more serious over time: their first public appearance was a community event, from there they moved on to small shows in equally small bars, gradually gaining fans. Four white boys playing funk with catchy beats and funny lyrics wasn't something you saw every day back then. Before the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and before the Beastie Boys made the leap to rap, Miller, Miller, Miller & Sloan was already making a name for themselves in the underground circuit of their hometown. In fact, several press clippings from the period marked them as a band to watch, about to hit the big time as pioneers of some sort of musical revolution.

The film, directed by Lucy Kostelanetz, begins in 1983 thanks to the insistence of the director's stepson, a friend of the band who was convinced they were

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going to be “the next big thing.” So our first impression of MMM&S is at a point in their careers that seemed crucial –their reputation was growing, they had increasingly favorable word of mouth, everything seemed ready for the next step. And the interview with the band reflects that.

We meet Dan, the glue that binds the group together in his role as big brother (and Blake’s best friend), slightly more serious and less talkative than the rest but just as quick to find the humorous side of things; Barney, a joker with an artistic streak that transcended the musical; Mike, the youngest of them all who sang the highest parts, a handsome young man ready to take on the world; Blake, a chatterbox with a David Byrne-style nervous/hyperkinetic look, who took apart and rebuilt things including his own instruments. They are all portrayed in the exuberance of youth, their eyes filled with stars, bubbling with humor and charm, anxious and apprehensive about being able to make the big leap.

And what happened?



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Fast forward to 1988 and the band is still at it, without having made it. Lucy Kostelanetz interviews them again to see how things have changed. The dream seems to have faded a bit, contained by the reality of their day jobs, but there is still a spark. Dan and Blake have created a new instrument (the “bass-o-matic” or “basstulator”), bringing together the latter’s manual skill with the former’s intellect and technological genius. Barney is focusing on the band’s visuals, finding his passion for filmmaking. Mike, the littlest and originally the most easily manipulated, has become the band’s main composer and vocalist: gifted with a silky, emotive voice, he seems to be taking MMM&S towards more fertile pop ground without abandoning the funk energy that was their original strength.

More local shows in New York, the switch to mostly electronic instruments, and a sophistication in their sound towards synthpop– MMM&S seemed to be, once again, following a sort of reinvention, ready to take the leap. A bit older but still with the self-deprecating humor that characterized their earlier days. Now with girlfriends and jobs. All they needed was a record deal.

And then what happened?

The band broke up in 1993.

The last part of the documentary reunites Dan, Barney, Mike and Blake in 2009, 15 years after they stopped playing together, with a sigh instead of a bang. A footnote in the history of contemporary Western music history.

The protagonists are now adults, with a few more pounds and a bit less hair. Their rock-star dreams are behind them (all except for one), giving way to the day-to-day of a stable life with families to support. There is nothing glamorous here. No deaths, no bitter fights, no drug addiction, no Christian conversion: just relatively normal lives. Is that so bad? And yet, there is a certain touch of

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sadness to MMM&S when they talk about what they are and what they could have been and weren't. Perhaps not regret, but the inescapable question of "what could have been if..."

The greatest triumph of *We Don't Wanna Make You Dance* is Lucy Kostelanetz's skill at offering an honest, funny and emotional (but never overly dramatic) tale of a band that could have reached stardom but never did. Maybe their inability to function as a truly cohesive unit caught up with them. Maybe they were too slow and the musical landscape they seemed at one point destined to change had transformed without them realizing it. Maybe they prioritized live shows over working in the studio. Or maybe it was just bad luck that no record company ever really took an interest in them. You can pose and ponder those questions throughout the whole film and maybe you'll discover that, in some cases, becoming a rock star isn't the most important thing. And that there's nothing wrong with that.

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