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# BRAID X

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>>> THIS MONTH'S ART SAFARI

>>> PORN IN 3-D

>>> L.A.'S NIGHTLIFE TWINS — AND MORE

A new crop of female rockers emerges from L.A.'s indie club scene

## Lo-Fi and DIY

The cover of BRAID X magazine features four women and a wooden ladder. One woman stands on the ladder, another leans against it, and two others are positioned at the base. The magazine title 'BRAID X' is prominently displayed at the top in red and white. The main headline 'Lo-Fi and DIY' is at the bottom. Various teasers and a main article title are also present.

## COVER STORY



KIRK MCKOY >>> LOS ANGELES TIMES

**Energized:** Dee Dee, left, Skylar Kaplan, Ramona Gonzalez, Bethany Cosentino, Piper Kaplan.

# QUEENS OF THE LO-FI AGE

**Nurtured by the indie club scene, a new crop of female rockers with similar DIY aesthetics has emerged in L.A.**

**BY JEFF WEISS** It's the night after New Year's Eve and hundreds of kids are crammed into the Smell, the downtown DIY tabernacle of the Los Angeles avant-garde. A sweating mass of art students, skate punks and subterranean scene staples ecstatically moshes to a blistering set from Mika Miko, an (almost) all-girl punk rock quintet celebrating its dissolution the only way the group knows how: with a farewell performance heavy on serrated guitars, funky bass lines and one of the band's singers, Jennifer Clavin, screeching lyrics about turkey sandwiches into a Soviet-style red telephone doubling as a mike. ¶ In its six-year existence, the outfit emerged as arguably the city's most vital bunch of female rockers since the Go-Go's, a female analog to Smell standard-bearers No Age. Yet their demise inspired only a handful of respectful eulogies around the blogosphere and little of the hand-wringing about the state of women in rock that accompanied Sleater-Kinney's breakup in 2006. ¶ The reasons behind the differing reactions to the departure of two important female acts from the music scene are manifold, but one of the easier explanations is the vitality and breadth of Mika Miko's local heirs apparent. Over the last half-decade, a group of exciting artists united by their use of inexpensive home recording technology has begun to emerge out of the Silver Lake, Echo Park and downtown scenes. ¶ The performers on the next two pages rank among the brightest local talents continuing the female rock tradition — which, of course, dates back decades — though there are others, including Glasser, Warpaint, Julia Holter, Sarah Negahdari of the Happy Hollows and Annie Hardy of Giant Drag, to name a few. ¶ Mika Miko might be sorely missed, but no one's hanging on the telephone. [See Low-Fi, Page 14]

## Best Coast

This is the situation: Bethany Cosentino, 23, La Crescenta-raised with blond bangs, fled to New York City two years ago to attend Eugene Lang College. Studying journalism and creative non-fiction, she read Joan Didion, David Foster Wallace and other authors she enjoyed; she interned at the Fader magazine, where she penned a fashion column. But midway through her second semester, she realized she was miserable.

"Initially, being in a snowstorm was nice, but after two weeks, I started thinking about all my friends enjoying 80-degree sunshine in February," Cosentino said.

"New York is an amazing city with a wonderful culture and history, but I had to come home."

Returning to La Crescenta to finish the semester from her mom's house, Cosentino took study breaks by unearthing an acoustic guitar to relieve her anxiety over her departure. Obsessed with surf music, the Ronettes and the Angels, and Fleetwood Mac, the young woman who had spent plenty of time in high school sneaking out to see punk rock shows at the Smell started writing songs that conjured images of white sand, tall surf, strong sun and stronger smoke — all tinged with post-teen angst and her newfound ardor for L.A.

Cosentino aptly described the songs as "stoned love letters to imaginary boy-friends."

The name Best Coast seemed obvious.

When Cosentino passed her songs on to her friend and future bandmate Bobb Bruno, a well-respected fixture within the underground community, they quickly assumed a life of their own. Primarily recorded at Bruno's home studio, a trio of 7-inch records earned Cosentino instant acclaim, in-

cluding a coveted best new music designation from Pitchfork.

"[Cosentino] has a great ear for melody, and being around the local punk scene has helped her style become more unique than others striving for a similar sound," said Dean Spunt, the singer-drummer of No Age, whose label, Post Present Medium, is releasing a forthcoming Best Coast 7-inch single.

In the middle of a Southern California winter, Cosentino has developed a new favorite obsession, MTV's reality series "Jersey Shore." While elitists might scoff at the lowbrow fixation, it's precisely Cosentino's ability to balance pop and underground sensibilities that has made her sound so unique.

"That type of person is unfathomable and almost exotic to my West Coast experiences," Cosentino said of the "Jersey Shore" cast members.

"But I respect that they've dealt with the winter and the cold months and are psyched that summer's finally arrived. I'm all about summer."

## Dum Dum Girls

It's a dumb move to call Dee Dee of the Dum Dum Girls "Kristin" — as in Kristin Gundred, the given name of the frontwoman for the all-female quartet. Should you make this error, you will be politely asked to address her by the pseudonym she adopted when she first named her group after an Iggy Pop song and a Vaseline's album.

Yet a gesture that should read as affectation comes off as appropriate. When the 27-year-old left the San Diego soul-rock group Grand Ole Party and moved to Los Angeles at the beginning of 2009 to write bedroom-pop songs, it marked a clean break with her past. Last year, a torrent of singles and EPs began dropping under the Dum Dum Girls moniker and attracting breathless online hype. But little was known

about the mysterious creator of the mesmerizing tunes that paired the dulcet girl-group pop of the Shangri-Las with the fuzzy distortion of the Jesus and Mary Chain.

Posing for press photos with a mask or a vinyl LP shielding her face, Gundred's alter ego simultaneously piqued interest and helped her cope with an inherent shyness.

"They were the first songs I'd written, but I'd always been in vocal groups and loved arranging and writing harmonies," Dee Dee said recently. "The songs carry the melodramatic weight of adolescence but deal with becoming an adult."

Shortly after being posted on MySpace, the songs attracted the attention of Dean Hudson from Seattle indie label Sub Pop, which is releasing the Dum Dum's debut, "I Will Be," in March.

"Within a month of recording and posting songs on their MySpace, someone might be discovered — in Dee Dee's case, she had perfect, well-written pop songs and an awesome voice. Everyone at Sub Pop agreed," Hudson said of his label, which footed the bill for Dee Dee to work with producer Richard Gottelher, the songwriter behind "My Boyfriend's Back" and a former producer of Blondie and the Go-Go's.

Recruiting three close friends, including Frankie Rose, the former drummer for the Vivian Girls and the Crystal Stilts, to flesh out her raw, lo-fi demos, Dee Dee put together an all-female backing band consistent with her girl-group inspirations.

"We had an instant camaraderie and chemistry," Dee Dee said. "I don't want to exist solely in the context of being a woman writing music, but it's so unbelievable the treatment you get for being a female musician. You're not supposed to be too attractive, or unattractive, or dress a certain way. But

this is exactly what I want to be doing right now."

## Nite Jewel

It's an El Niño year, and clots of kidney-colored rain clouds are deluging Los Angeles. A thunderclap sends Ramona Gonzalez's cat scurrying underneath a nearby table inside the Mt. Washington aerie she shares with her husband and collaborator, Cole M. Greif-Neill. The city might have inspired a spate of warm weather-influenced art of late, but Gonzalez's music — released under the Nite Jewel name — stands starkly apart.

Nite Jewel's alchemy of swirling noirish vocals, refulgent analog synthesizers and funky drum samples is best heard after-hours. Often labeled disco, partly because of her association with the dance-oriented Italians Do It Better imprint, Gonzalez's moody meditative songs bear lingering traces of Roxy Music, freestyle legends Lisa Lisa and Debbie Deb, '90s R&B performers such as Jade and SWV and hip-hop.

The East Bay-bred Gonzalez moved to Los Angeles several years ago to study philosophy at Occidental College, having loved the discipline ever since a Berkeley High teacher bestowed on her a copy of Friedrich Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals." Intrigued by underground icons Tom Recchion (the co-creator of the Los Angeles Free Music Society) and lo-fi visionary Ariel Pink, Gonzalez had long dabbled in visual arts and music. But when she was given a portable eight-track recording device as a present, she began booking her own shows and recording what became her excellent debut, "Good Evening."

"I booked my first show as Nite Jewel at the Smell, and it was literally four songs played to three people with a

broken pedal,” Gonzalez, 26, reminiscenced from her home, which is stuffed with vintage recording equipment, vinyl records and copies of National Geographic. “I played dozens of shows after that, mostly to practice in front of friends. There were times when my cables weren’t working or songs would cut out, but no one cares. Other L.A. venues believe in blog hype and want you to sell tickets. [Smell owner] Jim Smith supports people trying to make something of themselves.”

Two of the three people at her initial show were Julia Holter and Jason Grier, who arranged to release her songs on their Human Ear imprint, which led to national media attention and fans in unlikely quarters. Hip-hop mogul Damon Dash invited Gonzalez to play a show in his New York DIY venue. Another advocate and eventual collaborator under the Nite Funk alias was Stones Throw-signed rapper Dam-Funk.

“Nite Jewel represents the future of L.A. She makes beautiful music and is willing to try new things and take risks that some musicians don’t take themselves seriously enough to try,” Dam-Funk said. “She’s one of my favorite artists recording today.”

## Pearl Harbor

It all started with a temp job at Disney, a crate full of records and a loosely monitored FedEx account. A few weeks prior, Piper Kaplan had contacted her hero, R. Stevie Moore, the godfather of home recording, to ask if she could DJ his show in New York City. He consented, but Kaplan couldn’t afford to ship the vinyl cross-country. The only logical solution was to mail it on Uncle Walt’s dime.

After traveling back East for the performance, Kaplan was asked by Moore to sing some lyrics that he’d composed. Though she’d been amassing stacks of vinyl since she started going to the Smell and getting into the Germs and the Adolescents at age 14, Kaplan had never created music before.

“It was a casual awakening,” the tow-headed 22-year-old said. “I knew that I needed to go home and form a band with my sister.”

Although her sister Skylar was only 13 at that time, she already was a nascent guitar talent who quickly improved. Pearl Harbor’s breakout Mexican Summer-released EP, last year’s “Something About the Chaparrals,” displayed a fully formed aesthetic. The EP was produced by Greif-Neil, an old friend from the Smell, and the songs amalgamated the Kaplans’ love of glossy ’70s pop acts such as Steely Dan and Fleetwood Mac, cavalier cult heroes such as Merrell Fankhauser and New Wave from the former Soviet bloc. They even enlisted Clavin, Mika Miko’s former bassist, to play guitar.

“It’s hard to predict whether success will be fleeting in the Pitchfork / blog era, but songs like Best Coast’s ‘When I’m With You,’ Nite Jewel’s ‘What Did He Say,’ Dum Dum Girls’ ‘Rest of Our Lives’ and Pearl Harbor’s ‘Luv Goon’ are timeless pop songs, regardless of Internet trends or whatever recording techniques are considered in vogue,” said Chris Cantalini, whose popular music blog Gorilla vs. Bear has steadily championed the L.A. acts. “Pearl Harbor captures a classic Beach Boys / Fleetwood Mac-inspired California pop that’s blissed out and dreamy but also distant and sad.”

“We’re striving for decadence on a budget, the nicest dinner \$6 can buy,” Piper Kaplan said. “L.A. is a treasure trove of insanity, inspiration, insidiousness and a million other highs and lows. It’s an enervation chamber disguised as a party. It’s flooded with ideas and situations; it’s a ripe place for writing songs.”

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**Piper Kaplan says there came a time when 'I knew that I needed to go home and form a band with my sister.'**



**Bethany Cosentino:** She tried the East but came back for Best Coast.



**Dee Dee:** Fuzz guitar and female group vocals mix in Dum Dum Girls.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIRK McKOY >>> L.A. TIMES

**Ramona Gonzalez:** As Nite Jewel, she mixes noirish vocals with sampled drums and synths.



**Piper and Skylar Kaplan:** The sisters serve '70s pop in Pearl Harbor.