

"I started meeting thugged out house producers and thugged



**was the one playing drums and there were dancers hanging
this white dude, but slowly I started to win them over and they**

out gay dancers and everyone was just rocking out and

N

at too long ago, a self-styled downtown New York legend was quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* in an article about streetwear as saying, "I'm so downtown I don't go above Canal Street." It was a hilarious and surprisingly subtle moment for the *Times*, a paper that would often have you believe that, because of rising rents and changing neighborhoods, the loose scene that is generally known as downtown New York moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn in the early '90s and onwards and onwards from there—to Greenpoint, Bushwick, Long Island City, Red Hook and even to East New York. But what the "Canal Street" comment touches on is that, really, the heart of "downtown" has stayed put. The Lower East Side—condos, hotels and all—is still the cultural epicenter of the now-sprawling, multi-borough downtown grid, which means not only that the outer boroughs tend to choose you, but also that downtown, like the cost of living, has gone up.

At a recent photo shoot, Lizz Bougatoss of the New York-based band Gang Gang Dance got an eyeliner pen out of her bag and wrote "ziz" on the cheekbone of her bandmate Brian DeGraw. When asked half-jokingly about it a week later, DeGraw offered a mostly musical explanation, saying, "That 'Brooklyn band' tag is something that we don't want to be associated with because it's become this pigeonhole label—it's like a genre of weirdo music: 'Brooklyn noise, blah blah blah, fuckin' knob twerkers.' I've never considered Gang Gang to be a part of that. I guess our friends are partly responsible for the creation of that thing, which is cool, but we've always just lived on the Lower East Side." Although DeGraw's intention was to demand a certain amount of factual correctness and perhaps respect for Gang Gang Dance's trajectory as a New York band, there is also a status claim of sorts buried in there. Gang Gang Dance isn't just not a band of noxious weird-for-weird's sake knob twerkers. It is also, more importantly, a Manhattan band born out of the final throes of one era of downtown New York that is now awkwardly, finally maturing in another era of downtown entirely. It has proven to be a grueling position to occupy.

Vocalist and percussionist Lizz Bougatoss, keyboardist and electronic percussionist Brian DeGraw, guitarist Josh Diamond and drummer Tim DeWitt formally created Gang Gang Dance in the early 2000s. Their first release *Gang Gang Dance* came out on a label called Fusetron, then they released an LP (*Revival of the Shitites*) and an EP (*Milulala*) on the Brooklyn-based label the Social Registry. Finally, their semi-breakthrough album *God's*

Money came out on the Social Registry in 2005. *God's Money* was the first recording that reflected what the band's sound has become, born of a tension between tumultuous world-futurism abstractions and a dirty, rhythm-heavy sound that knocks. The band's bizarre musical vocabulary definitely takes some getting used to, but the rewards are one of a kind—frantic, corner-bending, electro-acoustic rhythms and lush, left-hook melodies. Gang Gang is hyper-aware of the breadth of music bubbling out of all corners of the earth not just in eras past but also right now, and each band member has an active relationship to big swathes of sounds. It is evident if you go hear DeGraw DJ at the wildly popular Morrissey party at Soxy on Sunday nights, where he sandwiches all manner of hectic electronic and street music between his DJ partner Benjamin Cho's plays of "Shoplifters of the World Unite!" and "The Boy With the Arab Strap." And his band is actually pulling from all those sounds, from the skittering clomps of grime, the queering vocal lines of Hindi film music, the slick club bounce of hip-hop, the pillow-y synthetics of new age and the frantic booms and one-hand keyboard twinkles of dancehall. But even before all that, Gang Gang Dance's story is a New York story, beginning with the fact that, like much of New York, none of the four band members are from the city.

Bougatoss is from Long Island where, as a kid, she devoted herself to modern dance, then moved to West Virginia for an art degree and earned a reputation opening for punk bands with spoken word performance art. Diamond had a high school band in State College, Pennsylvania, moved to DC for a year, then moved to New York in 1995, where he worked at the Pink Pony on Ludlow Street, hosting avant jam sessions, playing violin and supplying then broke downtowners with free caffeine. DeWitt grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he was an indie rock singer-songwriter. After high school—inspired by *Teen Beat* records—he moved to DC. DeGraw grew up a New Heaven hardcore kid who ended up at Corcoran College of Art + Design in DC because of *Ulysses* was from Washington. He enrolled to study fashion photography, but his two favorite professors told him to leave. At school, they said, is for people who want to learn how to be artists, not for those who already are.

Josh Diamond had left DC by the time Brian DeGraw and Tim DeWitt arrived there separately, but the magnetic pull of the capitol as an imagined underground utopia for an entire generation

Opening spread: Brian DeGraw. This spread: "There's no hormone for what we do," says Tim deWitt. "Ultimately that's the biggest problem."

**off poles and lesbian DJs who hated my guts because I was
were in my face freestyling like, 'Uh! Keep it tight!'" —TIM DEWITT**

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