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From Cult Figures to a Band of the Moment

By MELENA RYZIK

The members of the band Gang Gang Dance never wanted to be a band exactly, let alone a trendy band. Formed around 2000, incubated on the Lower East Side, they were opposed to the new wave of downtown rock having its New York moment at the time.

“We were really grossed out by a lot of the guys in leather jackets walking around Ludlow Street, and the aesthetic of [the Strokes](#) representing New York,” said Lizzi Bougatsos, Gang Gang Dance’s lead singer. The group — Josh Diamond, the guitarist; Brian DeGraw, the keyboardist and electronic maestro; and Tim DeWit, the original drummer — saw themselves as experimentalists, building a cult following over the years for their largely improvised shows.

They had an obtuse, multicultural sound — in The New York Times in 2005, Jon Pareles described them as “a groove band dissolving in a hallucinatory haze” — and connections to other creative worlds. Ms. Bougatsos and Mr. DeGraw are visual artists, and Mr. DeGraw is also an in-demand D.J.

But it is an indication of the fractured state of the music industry, and the rock scene here, that not only is Gang Gang Dance now identifiably a trendy New York band, it is also signifying its status in a very visible, of-the-moment way. On Tuesday it will release its third full-length album, “Saint Dymphna” (Social Registry), and then play an after-party organized by the music blog [stereogum.com](#) at Webster Hall in the East Village, as well as a downtown show at Santos Party House on Friday, as part of the annual CMJ Music Marathon.

“Saint Dymphna” may be the band’s crossover record, Amrit Singh, the executive editor of [stereogum.com](#), wrote in an e-mail message. “They’ll be a hot ticket this week.” He added that the group typifies the city’s current scene, in which bands like TV on the Radio are able to filter their avant-garde approach “through a more pop-oriented prism.”

“It makes their sound at once accessible,” he continued, “while also fresh and inspiring.”

Ms. Bougatsos is ready for the attention. “There’s no such thing as selling out in my mind,” she said, adding that she would love to have her music featured on a TV show soundtrack: “A Jeep commercial, a tampon commercial, anything,” she said. “We’re a band, we make music, and that’s what we want to be known for.”

The CMJ Marathon, in which nearly 1,200 bands will perform at more than 75 clubs Tuesday through Saturday, is a way for music insiders and media to play catch-up, network and try to spot the next breakout hit. (Last year the unsigned but hyped Florida group the Black Kids emerged as stars, eventually landing a contract with Columbia.)

This year, said Robert Haber, chief executive of the CMJ Network, which oversees the festival and its namesake,

the College Media Journal, the schedule is “a bit more eclectic and a little bit more international.” It includes George Clinton and the Nashville bluegrass act the Del McCoury Band, as well as showcases of Israeli and Norwegian groups.

But there seem to be fewer must-see shows, though the Swedish singer Lykke Li, the Memphis garage rocker Jay Reatard and the Brooklyn musician Miles Benjamin Anthony Robinson are generating hype. And concerts, like the blogger BrooklynVegan’s at the Music Hall of Williamsburg on Tuesday, with Jens Lekman and Ponytail, and unofficial parties are sure to be packed. CMJ will again include panels, film screenings and, for the first time, a comedy festival.

“Obviously the goal here is to make sure, especially these days, that the folks who are buying a badge are getting real value for what they’re paying,” Mr. Haber said. (Conferencewide badges cost \$495; clubs also sell individual tickets at a range of prices.)

That industry angle has long been anathema to the members of Gang Gang Dance, who are playing CMJ for only the second time. Dissatisfied with their first appearance, they turned down requests to perform for years, Mr. DeGraw said. That they acquiesced is part of their evolution and, perhaps, the inevitable mellowing of age. (Most of the members are in their 30s.)

They trace the change in their trajectory to the death of an unofficial member, Nathan Maddox, who was struck by lightning on a SoHo rooftop in 2002. “Becoming more serious as a band was a homage to him,” Ms. Bougatsos said. One of their highest-profile performances, at the last [Whitney Biennial](#), was dedicated to him. This summer they also led the East Coast end of 88 Boadrum, a cross-country drum circle organized by the Japanese band the Boredoms.

Since the release of their second album, “God’s Money,” in 2005, the members of Gang Gang Dance have also ramped up their ambition: they opened for TV on the Radio at the Hollywood Bowl in 2006, just returned from a tour in Japan and will hit the road again this month, beginning in Toronto. With the addition of Jesse Lee as a drummer to replace Mr. DeWit, now a producer, they will begin recording a new album early next year, a much quicker turnaround than usual.

Not to say they are ever going to have mainstream appeal. Ms. Bougatsos likes pygmy, Ethiopian and Bollywood music. Mr. DeGraw listens to [Brian Eno](#)’s album “Another Day on Earth” daily, and dub and reggae are band favorites. The members are unabashedly superstitious: they wear Moroccan hand pendants as good luck charms.

And contrary to popular belief, they are part of the Manhattan, not Brooklyn, music scene. Though for a while they shared a rehearsal space in Williamsburg with [Animal Collective](#) and Black Dice, and all have lived there over the years, Mr. Diamond is the only one who does now — “unfortunately,” he said. (The others live near Chinatown.)

Mr. DeGraw attributed the band’s longevity to creative necessity — “it’s medicinal to us,” he said. But even after many years together, the members still struggle with money — subletters and happy hours are also necessities — and have an energy that will be recognizable to the thousands of less established musicians who are descending on New York this week.

“We still have this yearning kind of element,” Ms. Bougatsos said, “this urban feeling of being in the city and trying to survive and getting kicked out of our apartments.”



Robert Wright for The New York Times

From left, Lizzi Bougatsos, Jesse Lee, Josh Diamond and Brian DeGraw of Gang Gang Dance will perform this week as part of the CMJ Music Marathon.