

Youth and Truth

By Theodore M. Brown

For

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WILD

If you wander around Los Angeles for long enough you'll start to wonder if anyone actually gets old in this city. It's a neat trick that has a pretty intricate architecture holding it together: Every anti-aging clinic in Calabasas and Westwood has a full waiting room, every plastic surgeon from Van Nuys to Torrance has a busy operating table. Equinox memberships are compulsory. There are so many treadmills in Los Angeles that it seems like the city is trying to collectively outrun biology. There is an obsession with youth that's settled over the Southland like an ambient anxiety. It's Neverland with worse traffic.

Don't mistake that obsession for a fear of death. Angelenos embrace mortality. In Hollywood, starlets who died too young are frozen in adolescent amber, and their legends never got crows' feet or cellulite. Los Angeles, more so than most cities, is built on myth making and a lot of the time they find their genesis in death. Never think that people in Los Angeles are in some sunny denial about their eventual fate as especially synthetic wormfood. They know they're going to die at some point, they're just convinced that the best comments at a funeral have more to do with timing more than circumstances. "He was just so young!" If you're going to die, you might as well look good doing it.

Sydney Bennett, 21, and Matt Martin, 25, think that's bullshit. The duo—better known as Syd Tha Kyd and Matt Martians—front the psychedelic funk band, The Internet. (The group assured me people don't get confused when looking them up since they're the first result when you Google "The Internet," which kind of blew my meta circuitry). They know they're young in a city that fetishizes 20-somethings, but they seem separate from that ethos. They're friends making music, and that's enough for them.

Martians is waiting for Syd in his Koreatown apartment when I called him late this summer. Syd is running late, looking for parking. "I don't know if you're familiar with L.A. but parki—," I cut him off before he finishes to explain my adolescence spent zipping up and down Interstate 405 for Dodger games every summer. "Yeah man, then you know how it is! Syd lives like a mile and a half away from me and usually I go over to her place but we decided to switch it up this time for some reason."

We kill time talking about the music he's been listening to over the last few weeks: De La Soul, Jamiroquai, Sly and the Family Stone. Martians lights up talking about music. You get the feeling he could rattle off different artists for hours without saying the same name twice. "Both my and Syd's parents are really old souls and they raised her on Erykah Badu and Gil Scott [Heron], and my parents were all the Commodores, the Isley Brothers, the Ohio Players," Martians says, "They're kind of who we are. Those people are our heroes."

Martians is originally from Atlanta and still has that upright Georgian twang. He came out to L.A. at the behest of Syd a few years ago. MySpace—yes, MySpace, that half of a billion dollar crater of the Internet—brought the pair together and, I was surprised to hear, it's a huge conduit for collaboration between artists in their age bracket.

Syd walks in a few minutes after Martians and I begin talking. Her voice is quintessentially California: it doesn't come out of my phone so much as it pours. In interviews, Syd comes off as shy but she doesn't consider herself anything of the sort. "I'm just quiet," she says, "but I'm confident in everything I do." She speaks with deliberateness, the way people who understand that every word matters often do.

The stock answer you get when you ask someone about Los Angeles is, "Well, it's not really a city, everything is so spread out and you need to drive to get anywhere." And that's all true. It's a congested mess of materialism and asphyxiating car exhaust and empty sidewalks paired with fantastic weather and cheaper-than-Brooklyn living expenses. It's the weirdest coastal city in America, non-New Orleans division.

But the other thing about Los Angeles—something that's so inimitably L.A. that it often goes unnoticed—is that it's a place that caters to people who take nonlinear paths through life. Taking a desk job in L.A. is a pretty boneheaded decision. It's a place to be an actor that just happens to moonlight as a pizza delivery guy or a girl who spins Afro-funk at parties in West Hollywood when she's not working retail. That most American of vectors, college- job-retirement-death, seems to skip over Los Angeles, or at least makes it easier to dodge.

Syd says that she's already gone through that normal life that most people trend towards. "I think I came into [music] at sort of a perfect time," she says, "I was at the point where I had already lived a normal life. I know normalcy, I know what that feels like and what it is. It was at a time where I needed more self-confidence and self-esteem." Her performances are a testament to those gains. She has a bone structure most models would die for, but Syd still looks like a teenager until she you hear her sing. She doesn't have the preternatural gifts of Amy Winehouse or Alicia Keys, two women who combine unwavering pitch with overwhelming decibels. Syd has much more in common with Erykah Badu, the neo-soul doyenne who brought understated and syrupy crooning back into the fold over the last two decades.

The amount of soul Syd brings to the mic at her age is staggering. "Yeah, I'm pretty young, I guess," she says. It's the kind of comment she's probably had to make dozens of times over the last few weeks, and she doesn't want to dwell on her being successful at 21. When talent starts to flower so early, age becomes a parallel storyline that sometimes rivals whatever the individual is actually doing. Age starts to become an excuse for sonic missteps or a megaphone for exceptional singles. Young artists that hit escape velocity have to become famous enough for people not to care anymore. Syd understands she's not quite there yet: "It's kind of scary, because I know I have so much longer to go."

"We kind of came up at the perfect time," says Martians. L.A. is going through something of a musical resurgence. Acts— especially hip hop acts—are popping up all over the city for the first time in what seems like decades. For a long time, L.A. was the place you signed your deal, played a show on Sunset, maybe grabbed a drink at Chateau Marmont, and went back to wherever the hell you felt more comfortable. It was the necessary capital of musical administration, its own private Sacramento. But with acts like Odd Future—of which Syd is a member; her affiliations with artists like Earl Sweatshirt and Frank Ocean are well-known—and the Kendrick Lamar-led Black Hippy putting out some of most interesting music in a decade, Los Angeles is swimming with young artists. Martians, the Atlanta transplant, tends to agree: "I think it is an L.A. thing. The way the city is

setup makes it a lot easier where you'll run into Mac Miller or Odd Future or people like A\$AP Rocky who don't even live here."

You'll also notice that all those artists are barely old enough to set foot in the venues they play. Mac Miller and Syd are both 21, Martians is 25, most of Odd Future are between 18 and 25, Kendrick Lamar is 26, Flying Lotus and Thundercat—two musicians and producers with deep L.A. roots—are practically ancient at 29. The concentration of young talent isn't particularly strange or even that unique, but the volume of musical cross-pollination across genres in Los Angeles is something that is only happening in Southern California.

You can hear those hybrid sounds fully formed on The Internet's second full length LP *Feel Good*. Mac Miller pops up on "Wanders in the Mind," a smooth, subaquatic track that brings to mind another monumental funk collective in the Soulquarians. "Dontcha," a bonafide hit that registers the joy of the summer smash "Blurred Lines" with none of the hit factory hangover, gets an assist from Neptunes producer Chad Hugo, a guy who knows a little something about laying down funk-heavy basslines.

"I think bands like us are coming back," Martians says when I ask about how unique they think they are in looking backwards to find their sound. It's not hard to see why he thinks that: the two biggest hits of the summer—Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" and "Blurred Lines"—are rooted in music made 40 years ago and, in Daft Punk's case, actually made by musicians from that era.

In the two years since their debut album, *Purple Naked Ladies*, The Internet has made a leap from making their music behind the boards to employing a full time band with friends Patrick Paige II, Christopher Allen Smith, and Tay Walker. PNL had high moments but it's an album that wanders and forgets what it's doing from time to time. Singles like "Cocaine" stood out but they were just cairn stones on a random path. "We don't even think we could make a song like 'Cocaine,'" Martians said, "we get why we made that song but we also get why we needed to go this route. Our maturation and mindset comes through on *Feel Good*."

The growth is obvious. *Feel Good* is a proper album that asks to be played front to back. The siloed separation of tracks is gone, though the band definitely still strays into absentmindedness from time to time and you're left wondering if some songs were written spontaneously during an especially tight jam session. Still, Syd and Martians crafted a throwback to the days of Side A/Side B and an unimpeachably soulful piece of work.

After our conversation, Syd and Martians are off to play a show at Low End Theory, a weekly event at The Airliner in Lincoln Heights. Low End Theory has become somewhat Delphic in recent years, providing the launching pad for acts like Odd Future and Flying Lotus, hosting DJs like the Gaslamp Killer, and attracting luminaries like Thom Yorke who came away singing the praises of the Wednesday night project. "It's a family atmosphere, you almost feel like you're part of a club when you go, like you're a member," says Syd.

The pair sound relaxed with *Feel Good* finally out of the booth and into the charts. They're confident but not jaded, and are eager to go play their set at the nexus of the Los Angeles music scene. They know they'll be playing in front of friends, most of whom just happen to be making exceptional music themselves.

When they play they'll remind people more of Earth, Wind, and Fire or Sly and The Family Stone than anyone else. A tight band, a smooth, crooning singer, a funky essence. It's not something you see everyday in L.A.; it's not new or shiny or young. Syd and Martians don't really care, they'd rather sound like the bands they grew up listening to with their parents. They understand history in a city that fears getting older, and that suits them just fine. Apparently if you can't see the old souls in Los Angeles, you're just not looking hard enough.