

THE ROYAL POTATO FAMILY



Billy Martin & Wil Blades Duo *Shimmy*

Medeski Martin & Wood's beat scientist Billy Martin was on the look out for new collaborations when he encountered Bay Area Hammond B3 wizard Wil Blades. They first played together in January 2011 at San Francisco's groove emporium, The Boom Boom Room. They followed that auspicious bandstand introduction with an even more promising meeting at JazzFest in New Orleans, which led to a series of duo gigs culminating in a Berkeley recording session last December that would ultimately become their debut album *Shimmy*.

The recording captures their electrifying chemistry and go-for-broke aesthetic. Earthy and exploratory, steeped in funk, but open to a myriad of rhythmic currents, the duo is still very much a work in progress.

"We're building our vocabulary together," Martin says. "What's great about Wil is there's nothing clichéd about his playing. With the B3 you can definitely get caught in a rut, but Wil is always inventive. He's not going to just play some riff that went over well back then."

Martin has never been one to cotton to clichés. Long before he joined forces with organist John Medeski and bassist Chris Wood, the drummer had established himself as a vital force on New York City's burgeoning Downtown scene. After a music obsessed adolescence in New Jersey, he hit the Big Apple in the early 1980s and quickly became a rhythmic muse for an array of rising stars and established masters, including John Scofield, Bob Moses, Bill Frisell, Cyro Baptista, Dave Liebman and Jerome Harris.

Martin deepened his knowledge of Afro-Brazilian rhythms as a co-founder of the group Batucada, a fixture on New York's Brazilian scene for two years. After touring and recording with Chuck Mangione for two years (1987-1989), he journeyed back to the cutting edge, participating in Cobra, John Zorn's improvisational game pieces, and performing with John Lurie's Lounge Lizards.

He found an ideal outlet for his far-flung rhythmic investigations with Medeski Martin & Wood. Formed in 1991, the trio famously built a national following through a decade of relentless touring.

Recordings for Gramavision and Blue Note cemented the group's status as an improvisational powerhouse, while their music's intoxicating grooves attracted an audience far beyond the usual jazz suspects.

Over the past decade, Martin has increasingly sought creative outlets outside of MMW, though the group remains his primary musical commitment. In 2006 he released *Riddim: Claves of African Origin*, an unorthodox instructional book detailing his singular musical philosophy, and *Starlings*, a ravishing album of chamber works on John Zorn's Tzadik label.

After directing several music videos, he premiered *Life on Drums*, his feature-length directorial debut. Another unorthodox instructional project, the film combines conversations with solo and group performances (both improvised and composed) detailing Martin's evolving musical aesthetic. Much like the new duo with Blades, these projects came about when MMW decided to cut back on their notoriously hectic touring schedule.

For Blades, the connection with Martin completes a musical circle. As a senior in high school with a newfound jones for funk, he stumbled across Medeski Martin & Wood at exactly the right time. The trio was still in the early stages of its ongoing mission, melding old-school gear and volatile improvisation with a global array of grooves. It was also around this period that Blades, a guitarist and drummer up until that point in time, discovered the mighty Hammond B3 organ through the music of Jimmy Smith. MMW not only solidified his interest in the Hammond, but the trio served as a gateway to the wild and woolly world of jazz.

"They incorporated a lot of what I was listening to--electronic music, jungle beats, dance hall--into this heavily improvised musical situation," Blades says. "At the same time, they really opened the door for me to start digging into jazz. I'd buy a Medeski Martin & Wood album and they'd play an Ellington or Wayne Shorter tune, so I'd check out that music too."

As the Bay Area's most prodigious young B3 champion since relocating from his native Chicago in 1998, Blades has blazed an impressive trail. Like Martin, he decided to forgo the music school path followed by so many of their contemporaries. Instead, Blades sought out knowledge directly from the source, most importantly from the B3's cagiest master, the inimitable Dr. Lonnie Smith, who said of Blades: "He is the future to carry on the legend, the legacy of the organ."

Given his background as a drummer, it's not surprising that Blades has thrived in the company of some of the world's finest (and funkiest) trap set stars. New Orleans drum legend Idris Muhammad played on Blades' stellar 2007 debut album *Sketchy* and he's performed widely with Galactic's Stanton Moore. But his most important percussion partner is Scott Amendola. In the duo Amendola vs. Blades they've honed a capaciously ambitious repertoire, including a full-scale interpretation of "The Far East Suite," a late-career masterpiece by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn.

With Martin, he's found another ideal partner, an improviser who's skilled, self-assured and patient enough to let things evolve on the bandstand. The result is a captivating, free-flowing, relentlessly grooving conversation. No matter where it ends up, they've always made a few interesting points along the way.

"Musically, we've tried to stay as loose as possible," Blades says. "Often we get onstage with out a plan and just throw different ideas at each other. It's rare to have that kind of trust with other musicians, where you can make something out of nothing and just see what happens. Some of the songs on the record, like 'Deep In a Fried Pickle' and 'Give,' were born out of these live improvs. I think our overall concept is to stay in the pocket and groove, but keep it open and loose at the same time."

Shimmy is available on LP, CD & MP3 from The Royal Potato Family

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