

story by GABRIELLA MARKS

Desert Dwellers



Photo: Kyle Robert



Photo: The Saucy Monster



Photo: Jill Southland

TREAVOR AND AMANI

Out beyond the borders of town, by the light of the full moon, there is a dance floor unlike any other—defined not by architecture but by topography and the volume of the sound, and both performers and attendees—DJs and dancers—complete a transformation musical cycle, energizing each other from sunset to dawn.

This is the setting where the Desert Dwellers, Amani Friend and Treavor Moontribe, first met. The specific desert for this event in 1998 was the Mojave Desert, but these events were, and continue to be happening, at deserts across the Southwest and beyond. This convergent event happened to be an anniversary event for the legendary full-moon gatherings in the 1990s known as Moontribe.

Amani, originally from Santa Fe, had been heavily involved in organizing outdoor electronic music gatherings in the deserts of New Mexico, working with a Santa Fe-based collective called the Cosmic Kidz. Amani and Treavor found common ground in their shared desert landscapes, and began producing music together under the name Amani vs. Teapot, a name alluding to their passion for combining ethnic styles of music within electronic “progressive-tek-house” tracks.

In 2001, Treavor and Amani began to transition their sound. Under the name Desert Dwellers, they eased the uptempo vibe of their psychedelic tribal dance style to produce a collection of eight tribal ethnic downtempo tracks that they gave away as gifts at Burning Man.

This music hit a nerve that resonated deeply with their audience and has amplified outward ever since. Over a decade later, what began as a “side project” to their main collaboration, a gifting gesture in Black Rock City (home of the annual Burning Man festival, held on the dry lake bed of the Black Rock Desert in northwestern Nevada), has taken Desert Dwellers around the globe.

In 2012 alone, they played at a festival in Australia for the solar eclipse, followed by a winter solstice performance in front of the great pyramids of Egypt for a festival called The Great Convergence in 2012. Epic gatherings like these are held annually around the world with names like Symbiosis, Beloved, SONiC BOOM, Enchanted Forest, BOOM in Portugal, Rainbow Serpent and Earth Frequency in Australia, and in the US, Burning Man.

For the uninitiated, this global musical ecosystem in which the Desert Dwellers thrive can be disorienting. There is the proliferation of genres and micro genres, with increasingly granular degrees of distinction applied to their music—terms like downTemple-dub, sacred-bass, psy-step, ethnic-psy-dub and yoga whomp. Despite how exotic and intriguing these names might seem, Amani and Treavor share the resistance that even mainstream musicians have to “gentrification”; they feel that putting labels on the music is a reductive act that fails to capture the true ethos of their music. Instead, they talk in terms of feelings, emotions, consensual spirituality.

“What brings us together to make the music we make is the urge to take the listener on a journey to deep inner spaces, whether it’s on a yoga mat or on a crowded dance floor. There

are always similar themes no matter what the genre we are producing in. It is psychedelic, cerebral and consciousness uplifting music,” explains Amani.

The Desert Dwellers’ uniquely geographic origins, in the deserts of the Southwest, also help to describe their sound. For Treavor, that desert defines the music to this day: “There’s also a particular perspective that being out in the Desert gives you: that only what is necessary should be there.” What’s fascinating is that there is so much there, flourishing in the musical habitats of their productions: sounds, beats, voices, rhythms, yet it all feels subtle, and essential: necessary.

In place of traditional guitars, bass and drums, they play instruments native to the electronic realm. As Amani describes, “Our primary tools are utilizing synthesizers and drum machines to create new sounds, and we often mix those electronic sounds and collaborate with vocalists and other instrumentalists in the studio to add an “organic” flavor to our compositions.” Found sound, or field recordings, adds a textured dimension as well. Amani continues, “I also love to carry a field recorder with me at all times and record the sounds around me in urban environments and the soundscapes of the natural world, adding even more diversity for our sound palette.”

In this respect, producing electronic music parallels both classic musical composing and collage—it’s an act of curating as much as creating. “We often think of ourselves as sound weavers similar to a symphonic composer who is thinking about how all the parts fit together as a whole, and we have virtually any sound we want at our fingertips to weave our sonic tapestries,” muses Amani.



Photo: Zebbler

Yet another distinction for this realm of music is the way in which the act of creation continues to ripple out, even after the original musicians have “finished” a track. “An interesting aspect of the electronic world is the collaborations that happen between producers from different parts of the globe. Our tracks are often “remixed” by other producers and vice versa, creating a hybrid between the sound qualities of those two artists, and resulting in a third entity. Often times, these remixes are the sweetest tracks because of the collaborative effort that went into them,” Amani says.

The live experience of a Desert Dwellers performance amplifies the creative kaleidoscope of collaboration. The current tour in support of their latest full-length album, *The Great Mystery*, features live singers, instrumentation and performance: including aerialist, acrobat and fire performer



Photo: Will T.

Symbiosis 2015

Desert Dwellers

Tammy Firefly, visionary artist Anthony “Flowers” Ward, and vocalist Meagan Chandler. They travel with an intricate structure designed by visual artist Carey Thompson that sets the stage for the performance.

As with the nomadic nature of the scene, there are often other participants as well, like when they teamed with a company called Seedles and gave out their “Seed Bombs” to everyone at the events. “These little round packets of dirt and wildflower seeds can be tossed outside or planted in a garden and they will grow the native wildflowers of each region,” Amani recalls, “in an effort to help the bees.”

At its very heart, the music—and the producing duo of Amani and Treavor behind it—is intrinsically connected with a sense of consciousness and environmental awareness—from using found sound samples recorded in nature to distributing seeds at a concert. Amani’s reflection on this captures the music—the experience of writing it, performing it, dancing to it—better than any label ever could: “It’s genre defying music for healing a culture looking to root down in a time of great transition,” Amani says.

Given that perspective, it’s entirely intuitive that Desert Dwellers began making music expressly for yoga. With the *Muladhara Yoga Dub* and *Anahata Yoga Dub* albums, they forged the shared resonance between the grounding flow of vinyasa yoga practice and the fluidity of the music. The music harmonizes with the practice of vinyasa yoga, in which practitioners coordinate movement with breath to flow from one pose to the next.

Emily Branden is a Santa Fe-based yoga instructor and “public yogi artist.” Amani studied with Branden, and they have been collaborating as artists for over nine years. “He developed a vibrational template for my vinyasa class I still use today,” Emily says. “A slow build to a peak, and then a gradual winding down into pure ambient sounds for sava.”

For Amani, this interwoven nature of his spiritual and musical paths is a natural evolution of his upbringing in Santa Fe. “I was born to a musical father who was a multi instrumentalist and who to this very day still has a collection of instruments literally from all over the world, and to a Buddhist mother who has spent the past 30 years putting her spiritual practices of compassion and kindness into the world as a personal shamanic healer. So growing up in Santa Fe with these kind of parents resulted in a lot of very unique experiences for me at an early age.”



Photo: Will T.

Symbiosis 2015

For those interested in experiencing this music-an- dance experience, a relatively short road trip around the Southwest yields numerous opportunities: Head south to Tucson for Gem and Jam (gemandjamfestival.com) or north to Colorado for SONic BOOM (facebook.com/sonicboomfestival/).

Their festival schedule keeps them on the road much of the year, but the Desert Dwellers will be returning to New Mexico this summer to perform at an event produced by Startribe production collective at the Taos Brewery May 21-22.

Local collective Lightlab, and Santa Fe-based producer Charles Johnston, also create events across the epic New Mexico landscape. Check out Johnston’s website at techniuevents.com/events for upcoming events.



Photo: Brendan Jaffer-Thorn



Photo: Andrey Khromov

Desert Dwellers in Goa India 2015