



DENGUE FEVER



With *Cannibal Courtship* (Fantasy Records/Concord Music Group), their fourth album, the Los Angeles based sextet – singer Chhom Nimol, guitarist-singer Zac Holtzman, keyboardist Ethan Holtzman, brass and woodwinds player David Ralicke, drummer Paul Dreux Smith and bassist Senon Gaius Williams – has reached a powerful new plateau, deftly balancing the wide-ranging influences that inform their sound and songs.

“Before it was partly Cambodian and partly indie rock,” explains Williams of the band’s evolution. “Now it’s 100 percent both.”

From snaking, driving rock (“Cement Slippers,” “Family Business,” “2012,” and the title track) to Cambodian dub psych-groove (“Uku”) and everywhere in between (the bilingual, gear-shifting tour de force “Only a Friend,” the mesmerizing “Mr. Bubbles”), *Cannibal Courtship* is, like the tropical malady that gave the band its name, wildly catching.

Longtime fans will get their required dose of Nimol’s haunting vocals and the band’s otherworldly, mood-swinging musical experimentation on the new disc – their first studio album since 2008’s *Venus on Earth* – but the group, which produced the set together, has upped the creative ante.

The seamless musical chemistry evidenced here is a reminder that the band is celebrating its 10-year anniversary in 2011. The seed for the project was planted when Ethan Holtzman traveled to Cambodia in 1997; during that trip he fell in love with the country’s take on rock music (Khmer rock as it came to be known) – and saw a friend suffer through the illness that would give Dengue Fever its moniker. He and his brother, who’d also fallen in love with the subgenre entirely on his own when living in San Francisco, assembled the other musicians. But when they heard Nimol, a star in her home country who’d performed for the King and Queen of Cambodia, sing at Long Beach venue the Dragon House, the collective’s sound came together.

Their eponymous debut disc found them covering their favorite Cambodian rock tunes from the 60s & 70s; they immediately won a rabid fan base and were named *L.A. Weekly*’s Best New

Artist in 2002. Their follow-up albums, *Escape From Dragon House* (one of Mojo's Top 10 World Music releases of 2006) and *Venus on Earth* (2008) offered mostly band-penned tunes. This natural evolution from Cambodian covers to original material continues to this day with the band recording more songs in English as Nimol's grasp of the language improves. The band toured Cambodia for the first time in 2005, a revelatory experience chronicled in the documentary *Sleepwalking Through the Mekong*, a film-festival favorite (the DVD and soundtrack were issued in 2009). The band also curated an anthology of vintage Cambodian rock tracks, *Electric Cambodia*, which was released in 2010.

In addition to attracting a rabid international fan base, Dengue Fever has gained considerable attention – fittingly, for a band that generates such a beguiling soundtrack – in film and on TV. Their work has been heard on HBO's smash series *True Blood* (they're a favorite of lead vampire Bill Compton) which named the episode after the band's "Escape from Dragon House", Showtime's *Weeds*, a National Geographic documentary, *Dirty Sanchez* (the British equivalent of Jackass, which used them for a main theme) and an eclectic batch of films, including Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*, the John Cusack rom-com *Must Love Dogs* and the Cambodia-based drama *City of Ghosts*, for which star Matt Dillon invited them to contribute a version of Joni Mitchell's classic "Both Sides Now." They also earned a high-profile fan in Peter Gabriel, whose Real World label acquired foreign distribution rights to *Venus*.

All these adventures have culminated in what the band considers its most focused music so far. "We've been friends and a band for a long time," Williams reflects, "and everything has led to this moment. It's all us and all focused; that's the vibe, from beginning to end."

"Things are just going through our filter now and we're no longer questioning what the filter is," notes drummer Smith, who also mixed the album. "The result is music that does have a distinct feel and sound but still encompasses what people know us for." Much of the album was "written to tape," workshopped in jams and rehearsals and refined over time. And the bottom end got deeper than ever.

"Senon and I made a concerted effort to get to the rhythmic essence – even more than in the past," the drummer explains. "We felt like stripping everything down and trying to create a really strong foundation. "Not making it simple, per se, but getting to the heart of the groove and letting that shine." The international toolkit of beats and syncopations on display (echoing Afrobeats, surf, 80s new wave and Bollywood) combines with the atmospheric, often minor-key melodies to create a dynamic, cinematic whole. "We're sort of addicted to minor chords," Smith says.

"The minor key is more universal to me, emotionally," Williams chimes in. "I relate a lot more to it. Nimol's style has all these dissonances – the microtones – and I find myself thinking, I don't know what note that is, but it's beautiful! It's nice that we're taking this Cambodian voice way out of context. The bed it sits on is completely different."

Still, Williams admits, the hermetic process of building the tracks at times led to a lack of perspective – what he and his bandmates refer to the dangers of looking at songs through "the microscope," or, in Smith's phrase, "going down the rabbit hole." At times, he admits, "I obsess

and worry and stay up late over the parts. But it's like growing a garden: "You put in all this work and then all at once it just bursts into bloom. That's what it was like at the end of this record, when we added vocals and horns and other parts." Among the aural garnishes: backup vocals by beloved L.A. trio The Living Sisters, whose sweet harmonies add a new dimensions to Dengue's already potent flavor.

"You finally get the pieces together and holy shit, it works," agrees Smith. "You think, that's the song we were all thinking about but hadn't heard yet."

As satisfying as the end product was, the band has particularly relished the opportunity to escape the confines of the studio and play live. Their recent foray to France— their first ever — at the well-respected Transmusicales Festival, proved especially gratifying, as the country's substantial Cambodian community came out to support the band. "All these people came up to us after the show and said, 'Why did you take so long to come to the second Phnom Penh? We've been waiting for you,'" Williams recalls.

With *Cannibal Courtship* ready to make new converts, Dengue Fever are prepared to hit the road hard in 2011, starting in the U.S. and then jetting off to Europe.

"With this new material, we've really found the space to be ourselves without worrying that things have to be this or that," exults Smith. "That's what allowed us to unleash what we had inside. We can't wait to see how that translates onstage."

If experience is any guide, audiences can expect their symptoms to become more acute than ever.