The Pyschology of a Smiile

How a souful Austin pop band makes transcendence feel like dancing.

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Jake Miles used to go to hippie church. “Every single Sunday I went to this place called Maria’s Tacos and there was this gospel group,” he tells me. “It was basically a group where everybody could get free tacos and listen to this really hodge-podge psychedelic version of a gospel band ... I think that is one of the most Austin things that I can remember.” Now, as the frontman for the experimental pop group SMiiLE, Miles uses the harmonic sensibilities and joyful vibes of his childhood traditions to inform his music, something that can only be described as a kind of surreal musical adventure.

Miles, like the other female vocalists of the band Annie Long and Mary Bryce, grew up in Austin, Texas. In fact, their upbringings were so similar that the band mates even speculate they could’ve crossed paths as toddlers and not even realized it. Miles, specifically, found himself at the heart of the South Austin hippie scene.“Things were pretty real back then,” he says. “I have most of my memories of growing up at various hippie functions where there’s free food and musicians hangin’ around, and then going between here and Louisiana where all my extended family is, hangin’ out in New Orleans.”

Being surrounded by the hippie scene and the comforts of Austin’s bluesy country tunes meant that music came from every direction; becoming a musician seemed almost unavoidable, but certainly not unwelcome. Miles’ love for vocal harmonies came from the sweet, soulful vocals he heard every single Sunday at hippie church, later finding inspiration from bands like The Beach Boys. His own father is a musician, and he got his first drum set when he was only 3 years old.

When I asked Miles if he was always interested in music, he shared with me a a thoughtful and rather surprising anecdote. “I actually just found a box of cassettes from when I was 7 that were recorded on a four-track cassette machine. I’m pretty surprised honestly, I was layering harmonies.” He went on to tell me that he quickly picked up the guitar in his high school years, all of which lad up to his almost instinctual drive to start throwing bands together as he got older.

“Fresh outta high school I started putting bands together, basically trying to be as avant-garde as possible. We were like, ‘We can’t do anything that’s already been done!’ … ‘We gotta explode everybody’s mind with every single note because it’ll be so unusual!’” he tells me, adding, “I’ve never been afraid to just throw people in a room and start making music, that’s always felt super natural to me.” Nowadays, Miles confesses that he’s been more focused on creating music that’s not so much about being completely unfamiliar, but about making people feel “good and groovy.”

Nevertheless, what Miles and the rest of SMiiLE have created is something that manages to balance both sides of the spectrum with impressive finesse. The whimsy and playfulness of the harmonies and instrumentation transport you to an otherworldly space, but the simple and profound lyrics keep you grounded in the songs. SMiiLE achieves what some other bands have struggled to do: merge transcendence with compassion to create something that is, quite frankly, incredibly rare.

Part of the uniqueness of SMiiLE’s sound comes from the band’s emphasis on experimentation and a guiding principle to never shoot down any ideas, no matter how wild they may seem. The members of SMiiLE are all great friends now, though it was a process to get the lineup to where it is today, a story Miles gave me between laughs and long contemplative silences.

“It centered around this one coffee shop called Texas French Bread,” he starts. He tells me how SMiiLE’s lineup has gone through a long series of evolutions to get where it is today, but it began quite simply with a girl singing along to some music. “One of the singers in the band, she was literally singing along to a song that was playing over the speakers in the coffee shop and another guy heard her and was like, ‘You sound really good!’”

They formed a band filled completely with leaders, a concept that sounds great in theory, but ultimately creates a space where opinions can do nothing but clash. “It was a band of six people, and they all are now leading other bands because everybody in the band was a visionary,” Miles tells me. Today, SMiiLE is composed of some of the original bands’ members. On the present lineup, Miles notes, “Everybody is a lot more congruent … and we know how eachother operates … everybody just wants to have their ideas tried out.” These days, Miles tends to make the demos for the songs, pitching ideas to the band and watching them unfold.

The name SMiiLE — notable for its two lower case i’s — has an interesting backstory as well, one that perhaps informs the psychedelic roots of the band’s sound. On the surface-level, SMiiLE is an anagram for Miles. Inspiration, as Miles tells me, also came from Brian Wilson’s acclaimed album “Smile.” But upon further digging, the band members discovered an even deeper connection, one that links the band’s name with Timothy Leary, the psychologist most well-known for popularizing and advocating for the use of LSD.

“There was this acronym of S.M.I.I.L.E, and it stood for Space Migration Increased Intelligence and Life Extension,” Miles tells me, informing me that the band was researching the idea when they were trying to decide whether or not to add an extra “i.” He adds, “It was kind of this utopian idea of us being aliens: space-traveling, super-smart, long-living people.” Long story short, the name was too strange and too awesome to be passed up. Thus, SMiiLE with the extra “i,” was born.

You could say the name SMiiLE is also derivative of the kind of desired vibe of the band’s music. Regardless of historical or personal origin, the word “smile” communicates an idea of exuberant, addictive happiness. Miles himself finds it difficult to label the band’s sound, though he’s settled on “adventurous pop with soulful and joyous inflections,” a phrase I believe to be quite fitting. SMiiLE is dedicated to producing a space of total ecstasy, for themselves and their fans. Not only is this apparent through the music, but through the band’s out-of-this-world performances.

If you are ever lucky enough to wind up just feet away from the stage at a SMiiLE concert, or happened to catch them on their most recent tour, you’ll know exactly the kind of craziness I’m referring to. Following in the often unhinged footsteps of their eclectic music, SMiiLE shows feature the kind of stimulus overload that is unforgettable.

“It’s blow-your-brain-out-the-back-of-your-head-and-splatter-them-on-the-ceiling types of guitars and synths,” Miles tells me. In addition, Annie Long and Mary Bryce, the two female vocalists, sport iconic, alien-inspired matching outfits and display their wicked singular dance moves. The result is a super fun, fan-interactive show where everyone can get down and have a good time.

The inspiration? None other than the performance king himself, Queen’s frontman. “I love watching videos of Freddie Mercury being the most amazing performer ever, and just realizing that this stuff really touches people,” Miles says, adding, “I still talk about shows that I saw 10 years ago because I’ll just never forget them.” For SMiiLE, a memorable performance is necessary to secure the love and respect of fans. Without it, SMiiLE could simply be just another band.

The Austin-based group had the chance to showcase their renowned stage performances while on tour this past fall. Their full-length, six-track album, “Like a Diamond in the Rough, You Shine,” lit up venues across the East Coast. Unlike the majority of records released today, the album was recorded entirely on tape, a process facilitated by a friend of Miles’ who operates an analog studio and repairs gear, like old ’50s Neve boards, himself.

On the recording process, Miles tells me, “It was really really cool, but it meant that we couldn’t edit anything. These days, if you screw up a take, you can really quickly just edit it. You almost don’t even have to try to sound good because it’s so easy to edit stuff, but with that album we literally had to get everything perfect the first time.” Without the handiness of computers, the operation was extremely challenging, though for the band, it still proved to be fruitful.

The concept for the album was also a place of intrigue for me. As previously mentioned, it functions like a bolt of lightning, providing electrifying and angelic harmonies, warped instrumentations, and exhilarating melodies. At the same time, “Like a Diamond in the Rough, You Shine” features surprisingly candid lyrics, juxtaposing the musical twists and turns with a palpable experience of falling in love.

The song “Something” begins: “Something has happened to me / Something is changing / As I approach you / I notice as I do / This feeling of being so new,” echoing the beginning feelings of a blossoming romance. “Must Be Something Pt. 1” explores the dark uncertainty of love with lyrics like, “Shackled ankles got me feelin / Hollow / Do you see things the way that I see them / Hollow.”

Love manifested itself into the record almost naturally, as Miles found himself at the center of it during the writing process. “I was falling really deeply in love around that time,” he says. “I was 23 when we wrote it, so my brain was just going crazy and spinning with all of the struggles; just trying to understand who you are as a person, as well as understanding somebody else and how you interact when you don’t have very much experience.”

However, what most excited Miles about the record was how alive the music ended up being. Despite some underlying heavy tones, the album remains a piece of positivity and warmth for listeners, a fact not necessarily ironic, but rather moving. Perhaps the album alone is a diamond in the rough. Joy can come from complicated places.

Debuting the album on tour was an incredible experience for the band, though considering the roughness that comes with living life on the road, it was not without obstacles. “Tour is my favorite thing in the whole world,” Miles tells me. “We definitely all get really excited about going on tour, but then three weeks in everybody gets kinda tired, because it really is exhausting.” He then went on to explain the hilarious notion of “party prison” to me, a phrase him and the rest of SMiiLE use to describe the circumstance of being invited to stay at a fan’s house, only to be swamped by unexpected party guests and generous offerings of drugs.

“Every touring band knows about this, it just happens everywhere. And it’s like, ‘Sweet a free place to stay! Thank you so much!’ And you get there, and you’re putting your pajamas on, and then they end up inviting every single person. Like, ‘Dude, there’s a band in town at my house! Let’s party!’ And then you’re like, ‘No dude, I’ve been partying every night for the past three weeks I actually just want to go to sleep!’”

Regardless, the band is of course grateful to anyone who offers them up a place to stay, even if it does mean being trapped in a sea of intoxicated, happy-go-lucky bodies while you’re trying to get some much-needed rest.

Aside from party prison, the touring experience, as Miles recalls, is extraordinary. “It’s like crowd surfing through space and time, and if anybody fails you, you’ll fall and hit the cement,” he says. Sometimes, the unknown can bring the most delightful of surprises, including a crazy amount of support from people who simply love music. SMiiLE witnessed this when their car broke down while on tour. The owner of the auto shop they went to had a drum set set up, and he was so excited to learn that he was helping out musicians that he fixed their car for free.

On the experience, Miles says, “That’s just an example of the serendipity of being on the road. The magic just unfolds because you’re going out into the world with open arms, full of love and excitement, so the universe is kinda just like, ‘Hell yeah! I love that!’ and throws you the support that you need.”

So what can listeners expect from SMiiLE in the future? Luckily for fans, the band will be releasing two brand new tracks and one music video during every month of 2019, eventually compiling everything into an album that will be unveiled at the end of the year. Complementing their new music will be more touring and more opportunities to catch the band in action. Additionally, SMiiLE has plans to work even harder on establishing a deeper intimacy with their own identity, as well as the relationships they have with their fans.

If you haven’t had the chance to listen to SMiiLE’ music yet, I highly suggest it. Yes, perhaps I’m partial because I had the chance to talk to the band leader himself. But it is also true that what this groovy, joyful and wonderfully strange little band from Austin has managed to do is undoubtedly one of a kind, and therefore should be recognized. It is not everyday that you come across a band whose foundations start at a soulful taco joint and a charmingly quaint coffee shop. So go give their music a listen to, it might just make you smile.