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THREE'S THE CHARM!

Can house music's most unruly and passionate trio, SOS, take unimaginative DJs to task with their sweeping new double mix CD for Ministry of Sound, and rescue us from boring compilations?

Applying new techniques to old school values, they're raising the stakes and breathing new life into the format. DJmag investigates how Omid, Desyn and Demi are thinking outside the box...

Words: BEN MURPHY Pics: DAN REID

Three is the magic number. Or at least, it's a pleasing symmetry for the tripartite formation of tech-house DJs Omid 168, Desyn Masiello and Demi — who unite as SOS.

Each one is an electronic music heavyweight. Omid 168 has been a fixture on the UK dance scene since the early-'90s, first as producer of acclaimed 12"s like 'Paris' and 'Sex Drive' on tech-house imprint Alola, then of classic albums 'Sounds From Another Room' (Eye Q, 2001) and 'How To Live 100 Years' (Hooj Choons, 2002), and now for his label Sexorwax.

Desyn Masiello is a huge draw as a DJ in his own right, regularly touring the globe on a solo tip, and releasing rated mix CDs for Balance and Yoshitoshi, while Demi made an indelible print on dance music history as a producer and curator of the Deeper Substance label and parties of the same name. But it's together that the three of them are at their strongest, when their combined skills become greater than the sum of their parts. As a trio, SOS have become infamous for their monumental DJ sets, where all three have equal billing in rhythm voyages that traverse all manner of grooves, from disco to techno, progressive to breaks, leaving no stone unturned in a endless quest to uncover the funk in the most unlikely places.

Though it's sometimes tricky to get the lads together in one place at the same time, as DJmag discovers, when you do, they're some of the warmest, friendliest and funniest people you could ever want to meet.

"SOS is the umbrella for everything else," opines Greek-Cypriot Demi (real name Artemis Hajigeorgiou), whose normally wild barmet has recently been shorn back to a neat haircut. Today, he looks every bit the dapper gent, in a slick suit jacket for our cover shoot. "SOS is about making ourselves stronger as individuals. It's about getting together as a trio and being able to split apart and being just as strong on your own. Anything we do individually has the same effect towards us as a group."

United, the three form a spooky symbiosis, a telepathic link forged through years of practice and working together that makes them function as one three-headed DJ hydra behind the decks. SOS don't just pick the coolest cuts; they have an ear for what sounds right; an intuitive understanding of how to bridge musical divides, to mix records properly, find the common ground between them, an ability to fashion a kinetic, frenetic surge through electronic body moving beats, and make those blends come off correctly.

That, combined with their natural charisma, is undoubtedly why London's venerable clubbing institution, Ministry of Sound, has bagged them for a bi-monthly residency, and asked the amiable triumvirate to mix the first in their new mix CD concept.

'Ministry of Sound The Club Present SOS' (out 15th February on Ministry) is a sweeping, panoramic double CD mix, amalgamating their many influences

and favoured flavours. The first is intended as the most realistic reflection of one of their sets at the club, the trio at their most compulsive and fresh.

"The concept was really all about the club," says Omid Nourizadeh, an Anglo-Persian South Londoner, and the most outspoken and jovial of the three. "Ministry wanted to launch a CD series based on some of the great nights they have, and some of the DJs they're really into. Trying to get more interest in the club I guess, although I don't think they need it! We started doing a residency for them a little while back, and our nights were doing well so they asked us to start the series."

In a manner of speaking the elder statesman of SOS, with 20 years in the scene, Omid takes the role of lead spokesperson, throwing in jokes and comical asides. Despite the importance of all the members of SOS having equal billing, it sometimes seems that there's a deference to him; it may be his years in the game, it may be his more forceful character, but both the others seem to regard him as the lynchpin of the three. Italian-English Desyn Masiello — suited and booted, looking sharp — is a little more reserved today than his compadres. It transpires that he's got to catch a flight in a couple of hours, but fully engages with the interview, becoming animated when a subject fires his imagination.

"It's a good move of Ministry to do this compilation, especially tied in with the residency. That's why it makes sense, it feeds back into the club," he remarks.

Cherry-picking

Ranging from the submersible house propulsions of new jack producers Andre Lodemann, Glimpse and Motor City Drum Ensemble, to deeper cuts by bigwigs Steve Angello and Bushwacka!, the first CD mix cuts a stylish dash from the opening synth, breaks-inflected 'Mauna Kea' by Satsuma to the Balearic trance-speckled 'Breakwater (EDX Ibiza Sunrise Mix)' from fellow MOS licentiate Funkagenda without breaking a sweat. The first disc demonstrates SOS's ability to bridge the chasms between underground and more commercial dance, and cherry-pick the best tracks regardless of their provenance — an all-too-rare thing in a dance music world where DJs too often play it safe, sticking to what they know and playing their own tracks, ad infinitum.

"We're simply sourcing what's good out there," shrugs Demi. "We can't be pigeonholed into anything. It's crazy when you have three DJs of a night playing the same thing, you might as well just have one of those guys play from beginning to end, at least you know that you'll get an interesting ride then."

"The great thing about there being three of us, is that there's more to put on the table. I must admit that I'm victim a little bit to DJ syndrome —

"Let's put it this way, you're not even allowed to film Deadmau5's hands. There is a reason for that!"

While they see Ableton as a great tool for production (it was used for editing the mixes after they'd been recorded), when it comes to playing out, they're CD stalwarts, and even insist on dropping a little vinyl into the mix from time to time. In fact, Desyn points out, if you're not playing vinyl at all, then you're missing out on some hidden gems and neglecting your duty as a true DJ. "Vinyl is still a source of music that you can't buy anywhere else. There's a lot of music that only comes out on vinyl, especially bootlegs," he reflects. "We play it at Ministry, quite a lot, because they've got decks. There's a big debate about vinyl versus digital, but I've been copying it to CD for eight years now, and I've gone into clubs where people have

heard me playing the vinyl rips off the CD, and they've actually said, 'I've never heard it sound that good!' I think that's because a mastered piece of wax copied to CD still has the same mastered quality. Digital's not all that bad, a lot of it's just unmastered."

Connection

Demi, Desyn and Omid have been friends as well as work colleagues for many years and that shows in their ease around each other — and in the constant joking, joshing and taking the piss that makes being around them a lot of fun. Desyn and Omid met 18 years back at a party, hit it off, and have been tight ever since. "Des was DJing at this party and I brought some records to play, but he was doing such a good job I just left all my records. He disappeared actually at one point in the night — I won't say for what — for a

good few hours!" Omid cackles mischievously. Demi met the two later, when he became a regular fixture at other parties where they began to play together. "Demi used to come down with his girlfriend who was also a DJ. Des went to me, 'That's that guy I told you about.' Demi would stand in front of the decks all night, transpotting everything almost! Before we knew it, we'd end up in the same parties together. He used to fall asleep a lot at parties and we used to muck around with him quite a bit." Omid grins. "It wasn't long after that we thought, 'This guy's so lovable, man'. There was an energy about him, that Des and I had, but we weren't as naive about it. We all had our own technique of playing, and it just felt right. We'd been in groups together before but nothing gelled together the same way. That became something accidental, we were friends long before the parties started."

Thus, the three were formed into SOS, The Collective, and set about combining their individual strengths into a towering musical triptych. With each of their ears finely tuned to certain flavours, they realised that they could bring each of their tastes to bear and create a more potent concoction as a trio.

"It's like a meal you're cooking, you bring in the different ingredients," Demi says. All that remained, then, was for the trio to invent an appellation for themselves. SOS seemed like an appropriate name — a fusion of Omid and Demi's label names, Sexonwax and Deeper Substance, became Sex On Substance.

"It sounds pretty bad!" grins Omid. "But it also stands out, you see it everywhere, emergency signs!"

Demi continues: "It's a global entity. We've all toured pretty much all four corners of the Earth so it is relevant."

Indeed, it's not just their melting pot of ethnicities that makes SOS such an atlas-spanning act. To say they're globe-trotters is an understatement — fast-forward to now and they're a regular fixture in the best clubs across Australia, South America and Asia; but their favourite place to play outside the UK is currently Japan.

"We had a very special night at Ageha in Tokyo, Demi remembers. "It was pretty spectacular, it was the benchmark. As far as a club space and the sound, it's the blueprint of what everyone should follow."

Throughout 2010, they've plans to step the SOS DJ sets up to the next level, incorporating live instruments and blurring the boundaries between DJing and live performance.

"The idea is to mix DJing with live material. We're using more instruments, not being a traditional band, but making it a bit more interesting for the crowd to watch. It could be something quite exciting!" Omid notes, and mentions that his label Sexonwax is due to be re-launched with a series of new tracks from him, as well as upcoming artists Da Billa and fresh Macedonian producer Latenta Project. His original label Alola has been brought out of cryogenic storage too, and re-releases of his classic albums and singles are promised in digital format.

We're also one step closer to seeing that much-mooted, and anticipated, SOS artist album.

"I don't think that SOS should keep doing mix compilations. We're a bit more adventurous than that. An artist album is the next stage, but it has to happen naturally," Omidponders. Meanwhile, Demi signs off with a pearl of wisdom.

"We don't talk about the future that much," he says. "There's a chaotic element to the group — and we like that chaos!"



"For two thirds of an SOS set, we leave the original productions alone," Devyn reckons. "But what we try to do when we mix is create two to three minutes of something new, which is made from merging two or three tracks together. So a third of our sets tend to be something new that we haven't prepared. That's part of the excitement of coming to hear us, and for us to play — we never know what's going to happen. Over the last few years we've started to learn how to do that, for it not to sound too messy, be in key, that's kind of the art of SOS, that creation. It's finding the balance between letting the original producer's tune play and doing a bit of our own creation."

Brand New

How music is where the second disc of 'Ministry of Sound The Club Present SOS' comes in. Largely composed of fresh creations from Omid 16B, two tracks —

"Patient Release" and "Best Things In Very Short Time" — see the trio working together as a production team. If the first mix is an audio montage of SOS working the Ministry club system, dropping upfront sonic bombs left, right and centre, then CD2 offers another kind of snapshot, a different perspective of the SOS sound.

Ranging from the sub-low acid basslines and progressive synth sweeps of Omid's 'Can't Deny The Three', to the more epic, pneumatic motions of his 'Same As You (Saxophone Reprise Dub)', it taps into another area of the trio's eclectic tastes. While still rooted in dancefloor dynamics, it's more of a multi-layered headphone listen, and demonstrates SOS's art as music creators as well as selectors. "CD two is what made the experience quite fresh," Devyn notes. "It was more like telling a story. Not typically like a set you'd hear us play in a club."

Omid adds: "We suggested the second CD idea to Ministry, and luckily they went for it. They only wanted one CD. We knew they had the tools, and we thought we could provide something extra, of more

value, and also we wanted to add something more personal, our own material.

"I knew the guys liked my tracks, it just made sense putting some of the flavours from one of the guys in SOS on there, rather than just filling it up with other stuff that's out there."

Versatility

It shouldn't really be a surprise that they're so versatile. SOS's last mix album, 2008's 'Balance 013: SOS', was an entirely separate prospect, three discs that took in everything from The Cure's eerie post-punk to Lindström's galactic disco taking a more leftfield tack. With each new project, they set themselves a challenge of doing something different to before: with the Ministry mix, it was to recreate a live SOS DJ set, and capture the recording in a way they'd never done before.

Despite the editing and fine-tuning, the trio approached the mixes in the same way as when they play at the club, using CD3s and FX. The warmth and human touch is palpable; you can hear the physical heft of the three's intense concentration, and appreciation, as they become lost in the mix.

In this respect, despite their adoption of new technologies, SOS value the old school ways, believe that there should be some blood, sweat and tears, some true work and application to the effort of DJing. They're none too impressed by the new digital DJing breed whose sets, they say, isn't real DJing at all. "A lot of people are mixing off their computers now, and they don't need monitors 'cos they don't really mix. The computer does the mixing. We're still using CDs to mix, that's very important to us," opines Devyn.



having to play new music — but Omid doesn't look at music like that. He'll listen like a producer, he'll be like, "This track's rocking, so we should be playing it." Our combination of techniques make us stronger."

Omid chips in: "You could play as good a set as another DJ without playing a single record he or she is playing. If you do look a little bit further afield for music, have an idea of what you're really looking for, tracks start to come looking for you in a strange way. It's the law of attraction."

Balancing the credible and commercial is something that Ministry of Sound excel at, too. In this respect, *SOS* mixing the first of their new compilation series couldn't be a more snug fit.

"Ministry have always got their eyes on their image being perceived in a certain

way, so they're trying to take some of the cool factor from *SOS* and mix it with their more commercial focus, and make it into something neutral," Omid says. "But without trying to say that we're really cool, we're taking what we do and somehow crossing the boundaries so people don't just see Ministry as this greatest hits compilation series."

"That's why they've taken the risk as well. I don't know how long they intend to keep putting those comps out, probably forever. In the process of doing that, it would be good for them to put some cool stuff out as well."

They're effusive in their praise for the club itself, and single out the soundsystem as being one of the reasons why they enjoy playing there on a regular basis.

"It's a privilege to play on a soundsystem like that. You forget sometimes, with some of the soundsystems around the world, what you've got to put up with. It's hard to have a sound that makes you feel that great when you're playing," Desyn enthuses.

Omid adds: "When we've had interest from other clubs, Ministry seem to get the jealous girlfriend thing, which is a healthy relationship to have. They're like, 'I thought you loved me?' And then we're like, 'Okay, let's talk about it! Let's do a residency.' They're quite flexible with us, but at the same time, it's the soundsystem that makes it such a pleasure to play there."

Un-blinkered

SOS aren't simply eclectic for the sake of it — rather, they see dance music as a vast continent of rich resources to be plundered, with the borders between regions removed. Un-blinkered, they're able to nab the best bits of everything and make them fit into their sound.

"We're not real trainspotters, and because we want to keep our variety as flexible and open as possible, we don't really chase any particular genres," Omid points out. "We try to focus on everything that's out there so we don't miss anything out. The genres are what the digital outlets are labelling it as. It's a pizza or a hamburger, as Des puts it. That's the way we genre our music, not techno or garage or house. No-one's that consistent in this music anyway. It's not like bands in the '80s or '70s, where they put out classic album after classic album."

Desyn agrees, adding: "Our job is not to follow one person who keeps delivering. There isn't a single place or store or promo company [that we follow]. I

personally don't listen to my promos that much. I spend most of my time looking out in the second stores. There's like 2000 tracks released each week, and that's where you're randomly gonna find the magic if you spend the time. And we all do that."

Stylistically, the first disc hangs together brilliantly; despite the variety of their selections, there's a distinctive, bright, vivid electronic funk that seems to cohere their sets into an unmistakably *SOS* sound. Whatever they play, they make their own, which often extends to fashioning their own edits of tracks in order for them to be compatible with that sonic signature.

"It's trying to take what the producers have done to another level," says Desyn. "When we're playing, we mix loops, tracks and acapellas. We're using what they've done in the studio to create more layers. It becomes a live re-edit while we're playing, and we've applied that idea to the compilation too."

"With people like Aeroplane, sometimes you need to add a little extra kick to it," Omid suggests. "The music's great, but you can turn it from an opening track into a peak-time track by dropping a gated kick in there. That's not ruining it — it's putting it into another area that it probably would never have entered otherwise. You can make the track bigger by doing the right edit. People come up to you and go, 'What was that?' The original version was at 115bpm, we've sped it up to 125bpm and put a heavier kick into it, now you're paying attention!"

But it's not enough for them to play the tracks: *SOS* are in the business of making new music during their DJ sets, several tracks bleeding into one to create a new piece of music.

CAN'T DENY THE THREE!

Three essential tracks from *SOS*.

Omid16B

"The Epic" *Sexonax* (2009)

Part of the "Sequential" series, this post-punk guitar-laced, piano house jewel lives up to its lofty title.

Demi Presenta Toby Flowers

"Ether Leak/Space Bass" *Dutchie Music* (2009)

Two deep electronic house missives from Demi's latest alter ego.

Torley Wong

"Kristophan (Fair & Masello's Jumbo Prawns Remix)" *Alternative Route* (2005)

More known as a DJ, Desyn occasionally turns his hand to production too, as this killer collaboration with Luke Fair demonstrates.