

Extreme Noise Terrors

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From the smash-and-grab cut-ups of The Boredoms and Otomo Yoshihide to the psychedelic excesses of YBO2 and Ruins, the Japanese underground is a place of strange views and exotic intensities. David Ilic provides a consumer's guide

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The idea of handing over a £20 note for one CD and not getting any change used to be unthinkable. But for the last few years it has been my reality. Pursuing the Occidental's Orient via the Japanese import racks at Rough Trade's London shops (which still are the only retailers to give a damn about the more adventurous record buyer) is a bank-breaking business; and unless you're familiar with kanjii, Japan's complex form of script, you might not even be sure who or what is on some of the records you're buying. So why do it? And why this burning fascination?

Maybe it comes down to a sense of alien wonder. In the years following the end of the Second World War, Japan marginalised itself, then, as its economy grew, began greedily sucking up all manner of influences from outside like it had just broken a long fast. This apparent dichotomy gives a strange perspective to music which sandwiches old and new in a way that is uniquely provocative. Never mind that our own current crop of homegrown rock music is shored up by predictability; poke around in the psychedelic portals of the PSF label's series of Tokyo Flashback compilations (Volumes 2 and 3, PSFD 24 and 34 respectively, are still in print) and the sense of familiarity will floor you.

Take White Heaven, a group who could pass for a cross between Buffalo Springfield with transistors and The Grateful Dead; or the elegant psych-into-Progressive workouts of Ghost. And yet there's also room for Keiji Haino's magnificent Fushitsusha whose searing yet sublime forays into atonal hard rock push feedback into free space in a way that US and UK psychedelics never dreamt of.

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The developing interest here in the music of Japan is a world away from the continuing appetite for World Musics. Today's generation of technocrats may have rekindled interest in the formerly celebrated Yellow Magic Orchestra, but the rest of the Electro underground spearheaded by Sakamoto and co was already past its sell-by date when World Music campaigners were spiriting far flung beats on to British dancefloors.

In the UK, World Music, in spite of ethnomusicologists' best intentions, is most often served up as aural fodder, pre-washed and packed with its cultural husks removed. In contrast, the modernity of Japan, together with the country's First world credentials, feed our fascination with a culture we don't understand, even if the number of Japanese products in our homes make us think otherwise.

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Renowned for importing its music almost as aggressively as it exported its hi-fi, Japan became an obligatory port of call for Prog rock Brits and Heavy Metal dinosaurs during the 70s, the spoils of their journeys East including the ubiquitous live double album. Hardly surprising then that so much Prog rock apparel exists in the rock music coming out of Japan.

YBO2 - their acronym a cheeky slight on the slick, tasteful YMO - has become the stuff of legend. A trio featuring the unwavering presence of bassist/vocalist Masashi Kitamura, YBO2 was also the one-time home of Zeni Geva frontman KK Null and ruins' master drummer Tatsuya Yoshida. The trio's music combined King Crimson-style freeform flights, the compositional precision of Magma, austerity, and classic Industrial noise terror. Alienation (SSE 8011 CD), their 1986 debut set, sounds remarkably fresh eight years on, predating Grunge's angular, high-wattage apparel. Elsewhere, on both Greatest Hits and Whole Lotta Live Bootleg (SEE 8002 CD and 8014 CD respectively), they imbue the mix with 70s New Wave playfulness (close your eyes and you'd think it was early Wire).

Drummer Yoshida's own long-standing outfit, the bass/drums duo Ruins, moves the idea of punk classicism still further. The bracing energy and choppy time signatures harbour the musical essence of both Prog rock and punk. It's as if they've fed off both forms without having to swallow all the subcultural stuffing that we insist goes with them.

Like such 70s Euro-rock innovators as Magma and Faust, Japanese rock music is at its most potent when it manages to break the Anglo-American stranglehold, utilising rock's classic forms without reverence to its traditions. But having carved out a niche for itself. Ruins' music gets bogged down in its own repetitions. The punk invective may be stronger on a record such as Early Works (Bloody Butterfly ZIKS BB-004) but the recent Graviyaunosch (NG DO3) shows how little Yoshida's masterplan has developed Devil From The East (Bloody Butterfly ZIKS BB-014 CD), a 17 track overview of Yoshida's work over the last decade, is more approachable and satisfying, with offcuts from YBO2 and Ruins set alongside his work in other groups: High Rise's paint-peeling psychedelia; Torture Garden's stylistic grab bag of jazz and rock elements; Dissecting Table's Industrial mettle; and Malinconia's mock operatics. It's a testament to Yoshida's singularity of purpose and the diversity of his attack.

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More illustrious, and certainly no less prolific than Japan's rock underground, is the generation of experimental noise combos that have come to the fore during the last decade. Groups such as Solmania and Merzbow (the latter led by Masami Akita, whose writings on Japan's bondage traditions aren't entirely uncoincidental to his music) fashion the music of failure, fatigue, burnout and collapse by hotwiring cheap electronic gizmos, sampling test tones and the like. These groups take their cue from where Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music left off and turn YMO's strategy of tasteful perfection and the absolute control of electronic sound on its head.

Here is an aural picture of another Japan, the inversion of something its trade base relies on. Like AMM, Merzbow's albums are as alike or unlike as trees - dense, cathartic, drawn from different times and locations and yet seemingly part of a single work in progress. Great American Nude (Alchemy ARCD-035) is culled from seven American performances and one studio session, although only the CD counter tells you that you've left New York and are now in Chicago. Solmania's Metaphor Chorus (Alchemy ARCD-020) is

more given to light and shade, but the overall effect is no less daunting, inviting your imagination to run loose among the sonic decay.

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Noise gathered momentum in Japan as much for its contribution to performance art and sensationalism. Merzbow made music for bondage performance; Juntaro Yamanouchi's Gerogerigege went a stage further, generating sound from and around the ecstatic grunts and groans of one of their number, the notorious drummer and public masturbator Gero 30, guaranteeing maximum cult status around Shinjuku's gay bars and SM clubs. The UK release of The Gerogerigege Singles 1985-1993 (Work In Progress WIP 003CD) shows off the extremities of Yamanouchi's manipulative techniques but the sound of Gero continually working out with his right arm is plain irritating all the same.

Live performances by Hanatarash, a now legendary noise troupe led by The Boredoms' extraordinary lead 'singer' Yamatsuka Eye, have also been caught on record but to rather better effect. True, the terror and splendour of performances which one critic described as the "virtual experience of war", played out with all manner of industrial junk, buzzsaws, mechanical diggers and urban trash, seems rather distant and one-dimensional on CD, but the recent spate of Hanatarash CDs on the Mom & Dad label, including Live 82 Apr. 12 Studio Ahiru, Osaka (MoM 003), harbour other tricks. The junk they utilise includes other people's music which they relentlessly plunder with abandon. Here they 'disc rape' voodoo music and jazz; other releases in the series feature cheesy Moog music-cum-muzak, turning sweet, antiseptic sounds into credible sources of noise pollution.

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Plunderphonics runs life in Japan. Violent Onsengeisha's Otis (Endorphine Factory EDP-006) and Golden Wonder's Vaseline (VN-1 CD) are both surrealistic collages and celebrations of the art of kitsch, neither of which attempt to make any real point other than the ribaldry of their smash-and-grab attack on the issue of copyright ownership.

Otomo Yoshihide's The Night Before The Death Of The Sampling Virus (Extreme XCD 024) is altogether more discriminating and purposeful, pooling 77 snippets from radio, TV and the vocal improvisations of leading avant shouters Tenko and Yamatsuka Eye, even though its political subtext (the condition of prejudice in Japan) is lost on Western ears because of the language barrier. Consequently it becomes a musical work by default.

Yoshihide's concrete experiments with sampling technology and turntables provide the most eminently coherent and malleable example of the plunderphonic aesthetic to emerge from Japan. His skittish turntable interjections on Lithuania And Estonia Live (Trigram TR-P903) lend a new direction and inventiveness to his collaborators, the rock-Impro band Altered States, forcing them away from the sub-Power Tools inflections of the group's rather mannered, self-titled studio collection (Zenbei ZEN-001). With Ground Zero (God Mountain GMCD 002) Yoshihide whips up a tornado of jazz and rock impulses that is a masterwork of musical friction rather than fusion.

Here is a performer who can orchestrate both from the edge of the precipice and from the centre of convention too: The Blue Kite (S&T 001), the soundtrack to Tian Zhuangzhuang's film on post-revolutionary China during the 1950s and 60s, has the episodic charm and strength of sonic character to give the music a life away from the big screen.

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Like the Japanese underground caught by Fred Frith back in the mid-80s on his Welcome to Dreamland compilation (Celluloid CELCD 5013), today's other Japan is just as small, fragmented, contradictory, imitative and innovative. Stranger still, given the feverish activity of the Japanese independent labels which document the scene, is the fact that many of Japan's prime movers are better known abroad than at home. Older hands such as Keiji Haino, KK Null and Tenko have established themselves internationally and their work provides a focus for Japan's new generation of rock musicians and improvisors.

If there is one band that brings the multifarious innovations of the new Japan on to one broad canvas, though, it is the Boredoms. Having recently signed to WEA Japan, the group now threaten to rise above their long-held status as cult curios.

Their early works, Onanie Bomb Meets The Sex Pistols and Soul Discharge 99 (both newly available in the UK on Earthnoise EN-001 and 002 respectively) were ebullient masterworks combining fearsome punk invective, noise aesthetic and both the sublimation and detonation of form. Boredoms' offshoot projects such as bassist Hira's Hanadensha, a stout, disciplined Metal outfit with a double CD, Bless All, on Alchemy ARCD-051/2, the aforementioned Hanatarash, or guitarist Yamamoto Seiichi's broadly eclectic but rather more leisurely and lateral experimentation with Omoide Hatoba (check out their US-released Mantako on Public Bath PBCD-5), are pointers to the multifarious forms which find their way into The Boredoms, but nothing will prepare you for the complexity and intensity with which the group bring order from apparent chaos, fashioning wild aural collages from the spoils of their smash-and-grab raids on popular genres.

Their recent UK appearances were extraordinary, and their newly released Chocolate Synthesiser (WEA Japan WPC2 7508) is undoubtedly their best record yet - postmodernism was never quite this exhilarating or provocative.

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