

Interview with Shonen Knife

by Edward K. Chan

Faculty of International Communication Aichi University

e-mail: echan@vega.aichi-u.ac.jp

Preface

This interview is the third in a series on Japanese “underground” music. The interview was conducted in English (my thanks to Naoko Yamano for her English fluency and her willingness to conduct the interview in English). The interview was conducted at Club Rock’ n’ roll in Nagoya after a live show. Shonen Knife is typically a trio of Japanese female musicians, but the band during this show consisted of Naoko Yamano, Emi Morimoto, and Atsuko Yamano (Naoko’ s sister and co-founding member of the band in the 1980s).

This project was inspired by two books: Peter Belsito’ s *Notes from the Pop Underground* (1985, Last Gasp)—which features a series of interviews with underground artists such as Survival Research Laboratories, the Church of the Subgenius, Diamanda Galas, Jim Jarmusch, among others—and Julian Cope’ s *Japrock sampler* (2007, Bloomsbury). Like both of those books—more the former than the latter—I am trying to capture aspects of popular culture that are not well known and to some degree ephemeral. My objective is to introduce readers to this somewhat esoteric music and capture a snapshot of some stories from the Japanese underground. The selection of interviewees is somewhat idiosyncratic based on my own tastes.

Although they are part of the less well-known Japanese underground music scene, Shonen Knife has been relatively popular with underground music fans in the United States and other countries outside Japan since around the late 1980s. While working as a college radio DJ in the late 1980s, I clearly remember the appearance of one of their early U.S. releases, *Pretty Little Baka Guy* (1986). At that time Shonen Knife were embraced by big name bands in American underground music like Redd Kross,

Sonic Youth, and so on. They rocked in a similar way as the Ramones, to whom they are inevitably compared, with infectious power pop chords and songs about ice cream, public baths, choco bars, and other elements of Japanese pop culture.

It may very well be that Shonen Knife is more popular outside Japan than within. Part of what made and makes them popular in underground music circles outside of Japan was, I think, a simultaneous ingenuousness in their music with touches of what would eventually be recognized outside Japan as *kawaii* (cute) culture. In terms of the cross-cultural reception of their music, we should also probably consider the role played by exoticism that is inevitable, though not always or necessarily in a negative way, in this reception. Exoticism is always a messy process. As I have argued about the reception of Bollywood film music in the United States elsewhere, no matter how much we try to protect ourselves from the negative aspects of exoticism during cross-cultural consumption, the dirtiness and negative aspects of exoticism are inseparable from this type of consumption (Chan, 2008).

Edward K. Chan : So you' ve done many interviews in English. I read many of them on the Internet. But I' m going to try to something a little bit different because this is for an academic book. So, we' ll start off with, What is your musical vision for the band?

Naoko Yamano : Musical vision?

EKC : Yeah, so what' s your, what do you see the band as, how would you describe the band? Like, what is special about Shonen Knife?

NY : I think Shonen Knife is very enjoyable, happy, a fun band. And my purpose to play music is to make people happy through our music. And if people get happy, I can be happy.

EKC : And tonight the band rocked [playing live at Club Rock 'N' Roll in Nagoya, Japan, 29 March 2015], very tight, very good. So, the first time I saw you was actually in Los Angeles in 1989; I think your first American concert. So, do you have any ideas about why you became so popular outside Japan, because with many people, in America especially, you' re very popular. Do you have ideas about why?

NY : I think I' m inspired by American and British hard rock, or music, rock music, and I think my melody lines are very much like Western rock music than Japanese. And I don' t listen to Japanese pop music and also my lyrics are written in English and also it' s very simple. And the themes of my lyrics are very universal, like delicious food or cute animals. And everybody, all over the world, people can understand. And I think also I write songs—at first I write English lyrics and then put melody lines. So, I think English is the language of rock music for me. Japanese is not like that. So, Japanese pop music or J-rock, J-pop, is a little different from Western rock music. Anyway, I' m inspired by Western music. And that' s why Western people can understand our music.

EKC : Yeah, that seems right to me. So the next question is, I think part of what makes you very popular, especially in America, has something to do with the kawaii culture, kind of like the cuteness of animals, delicious food. Do you see kawaii culture as part of Shonen Knife?

NY : Yeah, yeah, of course. I like kawaii things a lot. I had a part-time job at an imported goods store, and the shop deals with very kawaii, cute things. And also I usually design our t-shirts, or my younger sister Atsuko designed our stage costumes. I think the concept is kawaii.

EKC : Yeah, very much. So, you sort of talked about this a little bit, but would you consider your music to be particularly Japanese? Do you feel like it' s Japanese, or do you feel like it' s more like Western kind of music.

NY : Our identity is very much like Japanese, and we like Japanese culture and Japanese food and Japanese people, but for music I like American or British rock better than Japanese.

EKC : Yeah, I agree. I don' t like J-pop very much, like AKB48.

NY : It' s not bad, but it depends on people' s taste.

EKC : So some of the songs on the new album, Overdrive, seem more inspired by

1970s rock, like Thin Lizzy and things like that. So, what do you think, is there going to be a new direction for Shonen Knife, like for your next album? Have you started thinking about the next album?

NY : In these ten years or eleven years, I like to listen to British hard rock from the 70s, and our last album, previous albums, were inspired by punk music and pop songs. And now I like hard rock, 70s hard rock, so I decided to write 70s hard rock songs for the Overdrive album. But for the next album, I have no plans so far. I just want people, I want to make people surprised. So maybe something new, or more hard rock or I don't know [laughs].

EKC : Like Black Sabbath.

NY : More Black Sabbath or more death metal or rock music, I don't know [laughs].

EKC : OK, that's great. So, part of this book is, I'm interviewing many Japanese underground bands. How would you compare the Japanese underground music scene, like in Osaka and Japan to what you know about the American underground music scene? Do they seem different to you or the same?

NY : Recently, it's getting close. But I think, sou da na, the type of music is different, but the scene is very similar.

EKC : Like small clubs?

NY : Oh yeah, small clubs and many people come. But I think American people, American audiences, drink more alcohol. They are very tough [laughs].

EKC : So slam dancing.

NY : Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EKC : When I saw you in Atlanta, there was slam dancing. Do you think it's difficult to be an underground band in Japan? Because you've been around for a long time.

Has it been difficult to be underground rather than mainstream, like AKB48?

NY : Of course mainstream bands can use the bullet train or a touring van, but we have to use a tiny car. But, for us, we have other ground, like foreign countries. We can go tour outside of Japan, so not only Japan. If we can be an underground band in Japan, I don't mind that. I'm enjoying that.

EKC : I think I read, did you tour in India?

NY : Oh yeah. Last year.

EKC : That's amazing.

NY : Last November [2014]. We played at a big festival.

EKC : Ah, I see. That must have been amazing.

NY : So good!

EKC : So, this is an odd question, but are you able to make your living by just doing Shonen Knife, or do you have to do other things? Like in America, underground bands usually have to have another job. Unless they're like Nirvana or really really popular, most underground bands have to have another job in addition to the music. Are you able to make a living in Japan just on Shonen Knife?

NY : If [laughs] I only spend money from Shonen Knife, it must be a little bit difficult [laughs]. But I don't have any other job. But I can do it.

EKC : That's great, that's great. So, in America college radio and fanzines often help expose people to underground bands. And of course, there are the small live houses where bands like Shonen Knife play. So how did Shonen Knife get exposure to people in Japan? Is it just like small shows like this [at Club Rock 'N' Roll]?

NY : Shows and It is not so often but we sometimes will be on the radio, a radio

program. And also, not so many times, but sometimes play on TV programs. Or mainly the Internet is the main way to expose.

EKC : So many people watch your videos on YouTube?

NY : Yeah, yeah.

EKC : Last question: So are there other important Japanese underground bands that I should interview? I've done some electronic musical artists. I want to do Melt-Banana, and maybe Merzbow and some other Japanese underground bands, but do you have any suggestions about what you think are important Japanese bands, underground bands?

NY : My favorite band is called Extruders. They are from, I think, Tokyo or Yokohama, I don't know. But their music is very special. And also I like Papa Lion. They are from Tokyo and they are more organic music.

Further questions (sent: 2015 April 17; reply received: 2015 April 21)

EKC : What do you think it takes for underground bands to become successful in Japan? In other words, how can underground bands become successful in Japan?

NY : Picked up by a major record company. The band members should be young, handsome, cute boys and girls and making typical, average popular Japanese style pop music. It needs good fortune, too.

EKC : How has the underground music scene in Japan changed since you started Shonen Knife in the 1980s?

NY : The numbers of the bands have increased and using computer technology and networks, it got easy to make albums or doing publicity activities by themselves. It depends on bands but I think the number of audience decreased because there are many options of amusement now.

EKC : Were there other, older Japanese bands that influenced Shonen Knife when you first started the band?

NY : I might have listened to Japanese bands through radio but I didn' t listen to Japanese music actively.

EKC : What has been the biggest or most impressive thing that has happened to Shonen Knife?

NY : Everything is big and impressive. I can' t remember.

References

Belsito, Peter, ed. 1985. Notes from the Pop Underground. Berkeley: The Last Gasp of San Francisco.

Chan, Edward K. 2008. "Food and Cassettes: Encounters with Indian Filmsong." Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance. Eds. Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 264-87.

Cope, Julian. 2007. Japrock sampler: How the Post-War Japanese Blew Their Minds on Rock' N' Roll. New York: Bloomsbury.

Shonen Knife. 1986. Pretty Little Baka Guy. Ft. Lauderdale, Florida: Subversive Records.

Zimmerman, S., and Hutchins, C. (2003). *7 keys to comprehension: How to help your kids read it and get it*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Children's Books

Bee, W. (2005). *Whatever*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Browne, A. (1984). *Willy the wimp*. New York: Knopf.

Bunting, E. (1991). *Fly away home*, illustrated by Himler, R. New York: Clarion Books.

_____. (1994). *Smoky night*, illustrated by Diaz, D. San Diego: Harcourt Brace.

_____. (2001). *The Wall*, illustrated by Himler, R. New York: Clarion Books.

Lionni, L. (1975). *In the rabbit garden*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Muth, J. J. (2002). *The three questions*. New York: Scholastic.

Newman, M. (2002). *Mole and the baby bird*, illustrated by Benson, P. New York: Bloomsbury.

Reynolds, P. H. (2003). *The dot*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

_____. (2005). *Ish*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

_____. (2006). *So few of me*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

_____. (2009). *The north star*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

_____. (2012). *Sky color*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

_____. "Playing from the heart."

<http://www.fablevision.com/place/library/HEART/playingfromtheheart.php>, accessed on January 2, 2015.

Rosen, M. (2004). *Michael Rosen's sad book*, pictures by Blake, Q. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Rylant, C. (1998). *Scarecrow*, illustrated by Stringer, L. New York: Harcourt/Voyager.

Shannon, D. (1998). *No, David!* New York: Blue Sky Press.

Silverstein, S. (2003). *The giving tree*. New York: HarperCollins.

_____. (2004). *The missing piece*. New York: HarperCollins.

Whelm, H. (1985). *I always love you*. New York: Crown.

This article expands upon the authors' presentation in the workshop "Book Discussions and Book Introductions in EFL Classrooms" at the 38th Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials Exhibition held at Act City Hamamatsu, in Hamamatsu, Japan, on October 14, 2012.