

Alpha

Nomadic noise pop duo **Group A** blend performance art and DIY post-punk in defiance of economic constraints

Flight



Group A's Tommi Tokyo (below) and Sayaka Botanic

Group A have been playing their mix of spiky noise, no wave minimalism and sinister cabaret on the road for the last four years. It's taken them from Tokyo to London and their present home in Berlin. After the glass-shattering energy of "Rodchenko" that opened the Japanese female duo's self-produced debut album *A*, they took an underworld sci-fi trip on their second album *Initiation*, and added a jagged techno pulse to their recent release *70 + A*. All this, plus vocals soaring from a whisper to a scream, and spare violin lines.

Visceral and innovative, they are largely self-taught. Sayaka Botanic was a music fan and schoolfriend of members of Bo Ningen. Her mother wanted her to be a classical violinist, but she stopped playing the instrument when she was six years old and only picked it up again in Group A. Tommi Tokyo was inspired to take up bass while listening to punk and post-punk, and she taught herself to play along to reggae, dub and early PiL. Moving to London she joined the band Happy Bunny with members of The Horrors, then led post-punk band DAnCer DAnGer back in Japan. She added synthesizer to her vocals when she and Sayaka formed Group A.

Much of their DIY punk style is visually led, incorporating a cohesive collaged landscape of sound and visuals. Sayaka is a London College of Fashion graduate in textile and graphic design; Tommi is a graphic designer and photographer. Both are influenced by dadaism, surrealism and constructivist art, traces of which run riot across their record sleeves, publicity photos and onstage presence, complete with performance art trappings like pointy lampshade hats and white bodystockings. "When we started we weren't doing it as a band," says Tommi Tokyo. "It was just

going to be one thing for this exhibition opening party. But then, how we approached making noise – I wouldn't call it music – we just thought, let's just go to the studio. Sayaka had a violin, I'd bought my synthesizer and the other girl just brought herself, and then we just started making noise. But we couldn't play anything so we thought OK, let's just be half-naked and then paint each other, and then we could do a 15 minute set."

What finally pulled the whole Group A dynamic and sound together is place, determined by where these two Japanese women did – or didn't – want to be. "Neither of us likes living in Japan," says Tommi. "We love living somewhere else so that was actually one of the reasons to start making music together, so that we thought we could get out of the country."

But why move from Tokyo to London? "As much as we worked on this project spontaneously in Tokyo, we did always see there was a limit, whatever we did," Tommi continues. "Financially, the government or art council grants aren't common. Everything costs so much money in Tokyo. If you were an underground musician you wouldn't get any money from that so you would have to work hard to continue. Most of the people quit when they turn about 30 and get a real job and get married, you know. Same old story. And since we were getting more and more offers in Europe after the tours, we thought 'Well, fuck this. Let's get out of here!'"

London was Tommi's teenage mod dream; meanwhile Sayaka's interest in the Arts and Crafts movement brought her to the UK. Do they see themselves as part of the tradition of Japanese bass and drum duos like Ruins, or female duos like Coa and Afrirampo? "I don't know them, never heard any of their stuff either actually," Tommi says. "I mainly listen to European

music from the 70s to 80s, I don't have much clue about bands that came after the 90s."

"I've seen Ruins play at Cafe Oto a few times, love their music and the energetic vibes," comments Sayaka, "although I never thought we were influenced by them. I've been into the Japanese underground and free jazz scene from the 70s to the 90s, also krautrock and the recent electronic/experimental music. The path we are going through would inevitably be a blend or a mutation of two different personalities and backgrounds, so we never had certain goals – who we want to be like or our sound to be like."

The duo have since ridden the twin currents of creative possibilities and cheaper housing to Berlin. "London was very much fun back in the mid-2000s when we were hanging around there, but it's been changed a lot, and we have changed too," Tommi says. "I'm not interested in the music scene there any more, and it's far too expensive to locate your base for creations. And the UK government doesn't want any more immigrants. We aren't welcome."

"In London there's Cafe Oto but in Berlin there's so many Cafe Oto venues around, but much more underground," adds Sayaka. "It's happening everywhere, every night."

In Berlin they've set up their own studio, and they've already begun working on new ideas with local film makers and artists. "I feel like there's so many more opportunities to get involved in interesting projects or even meeting some bands or labels that I've been listening to in Tokyo," concludes Tommi. "It really feels like I'm living in a dream world." □ *70 + A* is released via Bandcamp
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