

the pillows



daniel ostrander

I recently asked a group of fellow expats who their favorite Japanese bands are. The responses varied from the easy-to-remember-band-with-which-to-impress-the-J-girls to the obviously-trying-to-appear-hip-with-the-band's-obscurety. My favorite falls somewhere between those two categories (though, admittedly, I never impressed a woman with a mention of their name). I speak of **the pillows**. Having been a fan of theirs since before my time in Japan, it wasn't until I moved here that I learned there is a name for people like me, besides "otaku". Turns out I'm a "Little Buster"!

One of the longest-running alternative rock bands still together in Japan, the pillows got together back in 1989, and have steadily become one of the most popular indie bands in the country. Their large army of hardcore fans are known as the "Little Busters" and take their name from the title of the band's sixth album. In their illustrious career, the pillows have achieved fame here and around the world, mostly due to the soundtrack that they provided for a cult anime series called *FLCL*. On the coattails of that work, they managed a series of global tours and twice played at SXSW. 2009 marked their 20th anniversary, and was a year of significant milestones that included a new *Best Of* album and a concert at the Budokan (which is available on DVD this month).

I recently had the privilege to sit down with the three principal members of the group right before they played at Diamond Hall, one of their first stops on a Japan-wide tour for their latest album, *OOParts*. Admittedly, I was quite nervous to be interviewing easily the most famous people I have ever met. However, Sawao Yamanaka, Yoshiaki Manabe and Shinichiro Sato were friendly and professional, if not a little distracted by the more than 700 screaming fans waiting for them to take to the stage. I only had 20 minutes, so forgive my brevity.

Daniel Ostrander: First off, congratulations on your recent anniversary. When you first started back in 1989, did you think that you would still be rocking out [Yes, I actually said "rocking out" - ugh!] 20 years later?

Sawao Yamanaka: I knew that I would still be playing, but I didn't expect that the pillows would last this long.

DO: There are so many Japanese bands trying to make it big outside of Japan, many with no success. Why do you think your music was able to break that barrier?

Shinichiro Sato: [Laughs] That's what I want to know.

SY: It's just good music.

DO: You've toured all over Japan countless times. Which city has the best audience?

SY: Well, every time is different. It's not always bad or always good. We like Nagoya. The audiences here are crazy.

DO: How about your favorite audience in the world?

Yoshiaki Manabe: [Without a pause] Mexico City.

SY: No, they were crazy!

YM: And dangerous.

DO: Is there anywhere you haven't visited that you hope to one day?

SY: England. We've played there twice before, but I feel like we weren't well received. This was before *FLCL* helped us to become famous overseas, so now I hope things would be different.

DO: You once turned down an opportunity to open for Oasis in Japan just to have a fun story to tell. How did your friends and fans feel about that?

SY: Everyone, including the label, was OK with it. Mostly they just laughed. However, my brother, who is an Oasis fan, kept asking me, "Why did you do that?!"

DO: Speaking of fun stories to tell, what's one of your favorites from your many years spent on tour?

SY: The first time we played SXSW, we were at this tiny

venue. I don't remember the name, but there was a toilet just backstage and it had no door. [Laughs] The audience and the person using the toilet could clearly make eye-contact with each other. It was the worst.

DO: Yeah, that sounds like Texas to me. You just re-released your 16th album, *OOParts*. How does it stack up compared with your past efforts?

SY: There are very subtle differences from our previous albums. We placed more emphasis on the guitars for *OOParts*, but, really, only a professional would be able to tell.

DO: Back in September you also released a fun single with Ben Kweller called "Lightning Runaway". How did that come together?

YM: That was all done through the Internet. We did our part, sent it to him, and he recorded the vocals.

SY: We'd met Ben three times before when he came over here to play, though. We drink together when he's in town. That's how the whole project started. He's a fun guy! Very funky.

DO: A lot of foreign musicians living in Japan are trying very hard to find their place here. As a band that has had a lot of success here and abroad, what advice can you give to them?

SY: Don't break up. [Laughs] Keep at it.

YM: There is someone out there who'll like what you have to play. You just have to find the people who like your sound and play for them. I believe that.

DO: So, what's next for the pillows?

SY: It's a bit up in the air. Since this year was so busy, we're thinking about taking it easy after this tour, but not too much. More than three months is too much.

SS: [Laughs] He's a workaholic.

SY: This year we were very busy in Japan because it was our anniversary. But in 2010 we are looking to play abroad again.

DO: Where would you like to play?

SY: We're going to play in San Francisco and L.A., but we also want to play places that we've never been to before, like Paris.

If you want to catch the pillows live (I've seen them twice, and they totally rock out!) they are currently in the middle of their OOParts tour with stops all over Japan through to the end of February. All concert details are available on their website: www.pillows.jp.

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