

Epiphanies

Jace Clayton, aka DJ /rupture, remembers how a cassette of Japanese noise became the first music he could call his own

Yamatsuka Eye's artwork for the *Eat Shit Noise Music* cassette (circa 1988)



It was exactly the sort of thing that 15 year olds aren't supposed to hear: *Eat Shit Noise Music*. Late night college radio had introduced me to Japan's virtuoso bass and drums duo, Ruins, and my quest for material by the group was sending me down increasingly unusual paths. *Eat Shit* was my best lead – a bootleg cassette of Japanese groups compiled by RRRRecords, and available via their mail order catalogue. Ruins were on the tracklist and the price was cheap.

The cassette arrived suspiciously fast, just two days after I'd posted my cheque. I tore open the package, armed my tape deck, and cranked the volume. What I heard became my personal ground zero. Dynamic, lascivious violence poured from the speakers, courtesy of Yamatsuka Eye's pre-Boredoms outfit, Hanatarash. Simultaneously atrocious and amazing, the sounds defied me not to like them, yet somehow I did, turned on by flashes of anarchic joy amid the audio fallout. I think I may have blushed. It wasn't that Hanatarash were throwing music rulebooks in the trash – that would have been relatively simple, or at least recognisable. No, their opening track sounded like rabid forces tearing down a house, or attempting to build one with cracked power tools and constantly splintering lumber. Somebody had a heavy thumb on the pause button, for the song would periodically shudder, accelerate or drop out entirely. Not even the mic was exempt from abuse. Intermittent howls from Eye accompanied the bedlam. My teen mind melted.

I listened to *Eat Shit* over and over, extracting more meaningful signals from that noise than an optimistic chaos theorist would have thought possible. Other material on the comp was informed by a rampaging beat or sludge-filled guitars, always underneath screams, abject electronics and/or feral distortion, but Hanatarash's three contributions were constructed from excitingly literal, non-musical sounds lacking identifiable referent. Somebody's hitting... something. As something else collapses. Titles like "Frog Girl 90000" and "My Dad Is Car" offered little insight beyond 'English as a second language' allusions to mechanised and mutated humans.

Cryptic and deranged, yes. But also strikingly earnest. The anarchic, excrement-fixated music spawned a strangely demotic threshold for its enjoyment: you either like this shit or you don't – there isn't much room for debate. Issues of quality,

musicianship, fidelity, funkiness, lyrical content, rhythmic prowess, historical relevance, etc had no business here. This was stuff so ugly only a mother or close relative could love it, and thus I quickly found myself in the family.

For this was the first music that I could really call my own. Reaching literally across the globe, the most unmarketable sounds had located the right ears and transmuted into personal treasure. Nobody was telling me how to listen or what to listen for. I had discovered it unaided by recommendation, radio play or a journalist's review. *Eat Shit* slipped into my system like a carjacker, and the shock was total. My response was to make it mine – to approach the music on its own terms while fashioning my own yardstick for its enjoyment. Under noise's surface outrage lay a gambit for freedom.

The RRR cassette was polarising, but it was also personal and fragile; and I had the sense that if I didn't listen closely, it might pass unnoticed. I knew nothing about these groups, but it was obvious that an individual with photocopier access and a dual cassette deck could make a substantial difference in their world. This scene had a tangible scale. It stood within grasp, which suggested that I could actively participate in music – any music, especially the weird stuff – rather than remain a well-informed consumer. Precisely the sort of thing a resourceful kid in New England's whitewashed cultural landscape needs to hear.

And Ruins? Impressively, their rock histrionics held up against Hanatarash's ingeniously bent ineptitude. *Eat Shit* also featured relentlessly derailing anarcho-punk from Yamatsuka Eye's other group, Boredoms; Grim's Industrial primitivism; and the singularly inappropriate Gerogerigegege, among others. Gerogerigegege's tunes involved a man pleasuring himself between bursts of blistering, guitar-laced noise: onanism as public sport.

The casual listener might call this music repellent. But I thought of its force as centrifugal, pulling us towards uncharted perimeters and away from any stabilising centre. Contrast this with the many genres comfortingly stifled by subcultural mores dictating acceptable musical conduct.

Hitting these extremities at such a young age meant that everything else in my record collection – Mission Of Burma, Detroit Techno, Pere Ubu – got nudged a bit

closer to the middle. They weren't well known, but at least those cats had decent distribution! I grew curious. What other sounds lived in the undergrowth, off the map, in places you need an obscure catalogue to locate?

With its no-fi Xerox artwork and poorly typed tracklist, *Eat Shit* was a refreshing reminder that you didn't need money to make music or get it heard. "All song [sic] swiped from existing phonograph records, used without permission," the liner notes boasted. Of course, nobody minded this bootlegger. RRRRecords was making extremely hard to find material slightly less hard to find. This is the purest form of bootlegging – nothing to do with pirated major label releases or the tacky sheen of bastard pop mixes. On the contrary, RRR's unauthorised compilation had much more in common with bootleg moonshiners, random drunks and libertarians who brew high-proof firewater in jerry-rigged basement stills.

I would later realise that I'd stumbled across the experimental cassette circuit that flourished in the 1980s and early 90s. Prior to the Internet, grassroots noise culture was international by necessity – there simply weren't enough fans in any one place. And so it was held together by slow postal services and scrawled addresses, mail order catalogues and tiny labels and kids swapping tapes. A good zine was gold.

Just recently I had the privilege of performing in Osaka, hometown to Hanatarash and generally regarded as Japan's centre for both noise and comedy. An Australian expatriate outlined Osaka's noise scene for me. "It doesn't really exist anymore," he lamented. "There's just this thing called 'scum noise', where amphetamine types scream and leap around like mad. Sometimes there'll be jam sessions, where guys record the worst sounds they can find and play them over a massive sound system." If that's what happens during a downswing, then Osaka's still got a special wretched ringing in its ears. His Japanese wife strolled over. "I enjoyed your set," she said with an open smile, "especially the noise."

Noise appreciated as poetry becomes music. Foreign languages learnt grow familiar. Allegedly exotic sounds understood on their own terms – whether it's Nass El Ghiwane's epoch-making Moroccan chaabi or Hanatarash's calamity waltz – can reemerge as soul, and set up camp inside yours. □