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# GenEc DVD Review

## Tuesday, November 1, 2011 "Live From Tokyo" (MVD)

Contemporary Japanese popular music, if known to most Americans at all, is associated with teen-girl-sounding J-pop, boy bands, Visual Kei arena-rock/hair-metal bands, and so on. And certainly that image is by no means totally inaccurate, it is simply very incomplete. "Live From Tokyo" is a fascinating documentary look at the "underground" side of modern Japanese music, featuring clips of and interviews with a lot of people you've never heard of, but whose musical acquaintance is well worth making.

The point is made by a number of interviewees that young Japanese people are bombarded with information and influences - aren't we all? - which then come together in a wide variety of unexpected ways, from J-pop on one hand to various sorts of progressive/experimental sounds. The latter, rather than J-pop, are the focus of this film. The problem is that there are so many bands in a shrinking scene that no one is being financially rewarded the way they used to be. One could make the same observation about progressive music anywhere, to be sure. But at least the Japanese musicians have apparently decided that since they're not

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## About Me

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going to become wealthy anyway, they may as well do what they want to do, in the way they want to do it. Thus, the lack of monetary enticements has made for a scene that is very healthy from a purely artistic viewpoint, resulting in fresh, new sounds far from the pop-music norm.

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We get to sample a goodly number of these artists and hear a wide array of styles, most arising out of recognizable starting points, ranging from post-punk rock to jazz-rock fusions, which then head off in highly individual directions. These bands thrive on the Internet, where they have no need to wait to be “discovered”, no need to wait for a record contract. Instead, they can quickly and inexpensively disseminate their music far and wide. Thus, while the mainstream record industry continues to recycle the same few sounds over and over again, the Japanese underground bands can dare to be daring.

There’s a lot of fascinating music heard in this DVD, much of it utilizing machine-like repetition in a techno sort of way; not surprising for a country heralded for its technical know-how. There is also a considerable reliance on visuals interacting with music as an integral part of some of the stage shows shown here. It is worth noting that there is no narrator to set up contexts for the music, or to tell us what we will be hearing. This may well be the ideal way to produce a film of this sort, as the viewer may experience each new band without having

ready-made expectations set up before. We thus approach this music in a tabula-rasa manner, and can judge it on its own terms.

We are also given insight into the Japanese way of presenting live music. Japanese live bands are required to pay the club-owners in advance, then sell the tickets themselves. This, of course, negatively impacts many artists, as they need to attract a sizable following on a steady basis in order to simply survive. Ticket prices tend to be high - it can cost \$25-\$30 to go see a band no one has ever heard of. Thus, while there is no pressure to make commercial music that will sell to the masses, it is also difficult for bands to stay together long enough to reach their full artistic potential. A couple venues are profiled in some depth. However, these cannot be considered typical, as their colorful owners seem much more open than most, and less profit-motivated.

In all, this 78-minute film is an eye-opening - and generally quite ear-satisfying - glimpse at a scene most of us know nothing about, featuring many creative musicians most of us will never get a chance to hear otherwise. As such, I recommend it highly.

*Posted by Tom Bingham at **4:46 PM***

*Labels: **experimental rock, Japanese music, jazz-rock, progressive rock***

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