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What Makes a Legend: Shonen Knife

by Denise Sullivan



Classic Track: "Bear Up Bison." Before Hello Kitty was a cliché, before anime and manga warped your mind and the minds of your children, and before there was J-Pop as we know it, there was Shonen Knife and the 1989 tribute album, *Every Band Has A Shonen Knife Who Loves Them*. Featuring contributions by "of the Knife" artists like Redd Kross, [Sonic Youth](#), Das Damen, and Pat Smear, the actual Shonen Knife was founded in 1981 by sisters Naoko (guitar) and Atsuko (drums) Yamano, and their friend Michie Nakatani (bass). Back then, Shonen Knife was the only Japanese, all-female pop punk band that mattered; today Naoko is all that's left of the original Knife and as ever, she's leader of the band.

Inspired by the first wave—the [Ramones](#) and the [Buzzcocks](#)—Yamano's and Shonen Knife's original music first reached wider US audiences when a cassette of their *Burning Farm* EP was released by Olympia, Washington's K Records. Catching the attention of Kurt Cobain among others on the '80s Amer-indie underground, the rest is J-rock herstory.

Career High: After having their innocent songs about public baths and chocolate recorded by the indie rockers they adored, Shonen Knife were championed by British tastemaker DJ John Peel and [toured England with Nirvana in 1991](#).

Career Low: Critics and fan snobs trashed them with sexist and xenophobic slurs, suggesting women "can't play," denoted their "funny accents," and suggested their outfits and girlish demeanor was "too cute." Detractors must not have actually put the needle to the record and listened to the trio buzzsawing their way through "[Antonio Baka Guy](#)."

Essential Listening: *Pretty Little Baka Guy*, their 1986 breakthrough, contains the rock 'em sock 'em "Bison", along with the "Beat on the Brat"-ish "Devil House", the swinging '60s-styled "Public Baths", and the headbanging Japanese language version of "Riding on the Rocket."

And if you like that: You'll love their covers of the Carpenters' "Top of the World", AC/DC's "Who Made Who", and their song for the *Power Puff Girls*, "Buttercup (I'm a Supergirl)." The Knife is at their best when they are performing Yamano originals about animals ("Elephant Pao Pao"), food ("Flying Jelly Attack"), and girl things ("Twist Barbie").

Shuffling Off to Buffalo: English language versions of their last two Japanese-only albums, *Free Times* and *fun! fun! fun!*, have just been released via Goo Goo Doll Robby Takac's label, Good Charamel. Shonen Knife (now featuring Ritsuko Taneda on bass and drummer Emi Morimoto) are on a coast-to-coast US tour which ends in Buffalo (where they enjoy a strong following thanks to Buffalo native, Takac) on October 2nd. They also celebrate the release of *Live at Mohawk Place* (in Buffalo, of course), a performance DVD from 2009. Bear up Bison and Buffalonians, the Knife are back in town.

Quotable: "Shonen Knife is our life's work. So we shall do it as long as we live." – Naoko Yamano.

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