

AROUND TOWN

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IT'S THE END OF FORMOZ AS WE KNOW IT

Taiwan's biggest rock festival has announced a hiatus next year because its venue is being shut down. But that's not the only reason

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

Freddy Lim (林昶佐), Formoz organizer and frontman of Taiwanese black metal sensation Chthonic (閃靈), got his first tattoo last week — a swirl of intricate vines and gothic symbols that wrap around his left arm from shoulder to wrist. It took 14 hours to finish.

Yet the pain from the tattoo doesn't compare to that of planning the Formoz rock festival, says Lim, whose company TRA Music has overseen the event's growth from a small party of metalheads to Taiwan's answer to the Fuji Rock Festival. This year's event features more than 70 bands on four stages, with two headline acts from North America and a handful from Japan. The music ranges from techno to punk to heavy metal to indie pop. Like last year, there will be a wrestling ring with live matches, food vendors and an outdoor movie theater showing documentaries on music and social issues.

But this year will be the end of Formoz as we know it. TRA announced earlier this week that it has decided not to hold the event next year because the usual venue, the Taipei Municipal Children's Recreational Center (台北市兒童育樂中心), is shutting down at the end of the year.

There is not enough time to find a suitable replacement and then book bands for next year, Lim says. It takes 15 months to plan and book bands for Formoz, and at the moment

there's "too much pressure, too much strain."

The organizers have been preoccupied with other setbacks — two highly anticipated music acts have backed out, and negative feedback has snowballed.

Among the complaints aired by Taiwanese music fans online: It's too expensive. There are not enough big-name foreign bands. There are too many unknown foreign bands. Why isn't Coldplay in the lineup? There are too many metal bands, punk bands, post-rock bands, techno bands (take your pick).

"All of these kinds of messages just annoy us ... we cannot concentrate on our goal [of putting on the festival]," Lim says.

The criticism has taken a toll on morale at TRA and has led to minor rifts among its staff of 20 or so people. TRA's staff, composed mainly of music fans, endures a lot of pressure to keep the festival running, Lim says. Many arrive excited to work behind the scenes but eventually quit saying that they "prefer to just be a fan." "I'm always the one to convince them to do it again," Lim says.

Enough is enough. It's time for Formoz to take a step back and "replan the whole thing, to research, to study the scene," Lim says. "It's not going to work if [every year we have to] fight bullshit on the Web sites."

Lim put Formoz on the map in 2001 when he booked Megadeth, Biohazard and Yo La Tengo for a memorable show

that left him in debt for the next four years. Over the years the festival grew to multiple stages, each devoted to single genres such as punk or electronica, and it continued to bring in well-known acts including Lisa Loeb, Moby and folk-rockers Michelle Shocked. According to Lim, audiences increased from roughly 2,500 people in 2001 to at least 15,000 last year.

Lim acknowledges that Formoz might have grown too fast, to the point where fan expectations have become too high. Now audiences expect to see bands like Metallica, Aerosmith and Radiohead but don't realize that even with current ticket prices it's not possible, he says.

Taiwan hasn't had enough exposure to "showbiz development," Lim says. "People just started buying tickets [to rock shows] five years ago." In the future, perhaps more people will understand that festivals "should be more expensive" than normal rock concerts, he says.

Lim suggests the future may lie in promoting smaller monthly concerts, a potential direction for TRA. Imagine promoting a show with just Moby, he says. It would be "much easier" in comparison to



Above: Japanese indie pop band 4 Bonjour's Parties mixes electronic sounds with acoustic instruments. Top: Formoz organizer Freddy Lim's band Chthonic plans to debut two new songs when they play the festival's Rock Stage tomorrow.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRA MUSIC

Formoz, and they could hold more shows.

Until then, it's time to "think deeper about what we want," Lim says. "We have to bring the passion back — so we have to rest a while." But not until this weekend of rock is over.

A Formoz alternative: the 'Trash Stage'

At Formoz, you have the Wind (風舞台), Mountain (山大王), Fire (火舞台) and Rock (石敢當) stages, but a parody festival across the river near the Yuanshan Hotel offers a free alternative. Eighteen bands play on the "Trash Stage" (爛舞台) tomorrow and Sunday.

The event was started last year as "a spontaneous event," said Ah-Chang (阿強), lead singer of Taiwanese rock band 88 Balaz (八十八顆芭樂籽) and one of the organizers. "It was just for fun." Part of that fun for 88 Balaz last year was when the electric generator backstage caught on fire during their set.

But that won't happen this year — the equipment will be better, he promises. Bands this year include 88 Balaz, Children Sucker (表兒) and Freckles (雀斑). They play from 3pm to 10pm, after which DJs take over.

It's free and bring-your-own-beer. The spot is located along the riverside just across from the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. To get there by the MRT, get off at Jiantan (劍潭) MRT Station and walk to the Zhongshan Bridge Riverside Park (中山橋下河濱公園). A map can be seen here: ratgroup.blogspot.com/2007/07/blog-post_24.html.

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: Formoz Festival 2008 (野台開唱)

WHEN: Today through Sunday, from 5:30pm to 11:30pm

WHERE: Taipei Municipal Children's Recreational Center (台北市兒童育樂中心), 66, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段66號)

GETTING THERE: The venue is across the street from the Yuanshan (圓山) MRT Station on the Danshi Line (淡水線)

TICKETS: NT\$1,600 per day or NT\$3,000 for a three-day pass

ON THE NET: www.formoz.com

Shoegazers believe in miracles

BY DAVID FRAZIER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Tonight the Japanese instrumental rock band Mono will return to the 14th and possibly final Formoz music festival as headliners of a segment billed as a "post-rock paradise." This year, Formoz is putting out its biggest ever post-rock lineup, with at least half a dozen bands specializing in intense and inward-looking music set to perform. In addition to Mono, these include Te, Hyakkei, Ovum and Naan from Japan and local group Aphasia.

Mono's first visit to Formoz came in 2002, just as the post-rock wave was beginning to break over Taiwan. The band's set in Zhongshan Hall, along with another performance later that year by the Austin, Texas group Explosions in the Sky, marked a dramatic and unexpected shift in both local rock and the way kids listened to it. Suddenly, entire audiences of college students were sitting cross-legged on the floor and wagging their heads in a kind of spacey rapture, almost like they were listening to the band through headphones, even though the group was right in front of them and wailing away on their instruments.



At that time, Mono was just three years young and playing one of its first international gigs. Since then, the foursome has toured through at least 25 countries, last year performing more than 100 shows in six months of touring through the US and Europe. This summer, they've played festivals in the US and Estonia and done a quick tour of Southeast Asia before playing Formoz and Fujirock — Japan's largest music festival — in the same weekend.

"Local kids, especially Taipei kids, like this music because they're too repressed," says Wu Yih-chunn (吳逸駿), Aphasia's guitarist, who's championed post-rock locally both as a recording engineer and head of the Taipei indie label White Wabbit Records (小白兔唱片). "Kids are becoming more like otaku, just playing computer games and not dealing with real people. They're hiding their inner selves away, so they need this kind of music to experience these kinds of strong emotions."

Takaakira Goto, one of Mono's two guitarists and the band's driving creative force, agreed that the music arises from a



new type of emotional neediness. "Recently in Tokyo, there was a cruel random killing," Goto said in an e-mail interview. "It seems the number of murders without any reason is increasing. Society seems to be filled with information, and the virtual world of the Internet gives us an illusion you can get anything you want, but it's not true. I think our hearts are not fulfilled at all."

Mono's sonic vocabulary, like much other post-rock, consists of dreamy soundscapes, guitar crescendos that rise into monumental walls of noise and slow tempo drumming, often with a tragic feel. Over the last decade, the band's emotional transmissions have moved from a deep sense of frustration and anger on early albums to what Goto has described as feelings of solace and redemption.

"Personally, I feel we people need some sort of bursting positive energy now. [So] we want to make a strong album which has the power of a blessing, an album that listeners can get good energy from every time they listen to it and be inspired," he said. I want to express people's joy and sorrow with my music at the level of

Japanese post-rock band Mono returns to Taiwan for Formoz 2008.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRA MUSIC

Beethoven and Ennio Morricone."

Mono's vehicle for these grandly humanistic ambitions — lengthy songs composed in building and receding movements — very loosely echoes the narrative structures used by Beethoven and other Romantic composers. But as with much other post-rock, Goto claims his stories are inspired by the much more modern medium of cinema.

"When I make an album, I write a story like the plot of a film, and I write music at the same time. Just like chapters of a movie, I construct scenes for the story, title them and write music for them," he said.

The music that results, he hopes, is intended as a sort of antidote for the paucity of modern emotional life.

"There are always problems or issues we have to deal with in our lives," he said. "We all have to face it. Our life is like a long tunnel. Each one of us has to walk toward the light coming from the end of the tunnel. I believe music, like films and books, is able to encourage us and provide us clues and direction when we are walking toward the light."

Mono performs tonight at 10:40pm on the Mountain Stage (山大王).

Bands of Note

Today

► **Inoran** 8:10pm to 9pm, Wind Stage (風舞台)

Solo performance from guitarist and founder of now-defunct Japanese rock band Luna Sea, who pioneered the "visual rock" movement in Japan with elaborate costumes and stage spectacles.

► **Sugar Plum Ferry** 9:30pm to 10:10pm, Mountain Stage (山大王)

A favorite in Taiwan's post-rock scene; the three-piece released its popular second album, *Thank You for Reminding Me*, at the end of 2007.

► **LTK** (濁水溪公社) 10:40pm to 11:30pm, Wind Stage (風舞台)

Legends in Taiwan's underground scene that combine punk, nakashi and Taiwanese folk music with crazy stage antics.

Tomorrow

► **White Eyes** (白目) 5:30pm to 6:10pm, Wind Stage (風舞台)

Garage-punk band that won the battle of the bands at this year's Ho-Hai-Yan Rock Festival.

► **Fire Ex** (滅火器) 6:40pm to 7:20pm, Wind Stage (風舞台)

Taiwanese pop-punk band from Kaohsiung, one of the longest-running bands in southern Taiwan's punk scene. Fire Ex is releasing a new EP at Formoz.

► **Chthonic** (閃靈) 8:40pm to 9:30pm, Rock Stage (石敢當)

Led by Formoz organizer Freddy Lim, Chthonic has started to make waves in the international metal scene. The band will be debuting two songs from its next album, due at the end of the year.

► **Caribou** 9:10pm to 10pm, Mountain Stage (山大王)

This Canadian group's wild, loud and elegant electronica compositions are written by drummer and mathematician Daniel Snaith. The group played Formoz in 2005.

Sunday

► **4 Bonjour's Parties** 8pm to 8:50pm, Mountain Stage (山大王)

Seven-piece Japanese indie-pop band that blends electronic sounds, horns and standard rock instruments.

► **LM.C** 6:40pm to 7:30pm, Wind Stage (風舞台)

Japanese electro-rock duo renowned for their wild costumes and high energy shows.

► **Sodagreen** (蘇打綠) 10:30pm to 11:30pm, Wind Stage (風舞台)

A current favorite in Taiwan's alternative-pop scene and winner of the Golden Melody Awards' Best Band award for two years in a row.

► **Her Space Holiday** 10:40pm to 11:30pm, Mountain Stage (山大王)

The band of California-based indie rocker Marc Bianchi is one of the headliners for Formoz's closing show.