

AROUND TOWN

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PAGE 13

Pop music

not just for underachievers



Scottish band Camera Obscura plays in Taipei and Kaohsiung this weekend. The group's lead singer and songwriter Tracyanne Campbell spoke with the Taipei Times about the band's upcoming album, John Peel and songwriting

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



With Camera Obscura's introspective, bittersweet lyrics and dreamy, echo-drenched pop orchestration, it's tempting to call the band's music "indie-pop." But lead singer and songwriter Tracyanne Campbell will have none of it.

"I think that's its such an old-fashioned, pointless term ... we're more ambitious than that, you know?" she said on the telephone from Glasgow in an interview earlier this month.

"We want to aspire, we don't want to play out of time on a tune ... We're actually trying to be good, and I think we've suffered a bit from people thinking that we're sort of underachievers ... but that's not us."

Camera Obscura, which plays at The Wall (這牆) in Taipei tomorrow, has a few good reasons to aim higher. The Scottish sextet made a splash in the independent music scene with its 2003 release *Underachievers Please Try Harder*, while the group's latest album, *Let's Get Out of This Country*, has been praised as the band's best work and led to extensive tours of North America and Europe.

Through their Web site and MySpace page, the members of Camera Obscura realized they had a following in Asia,

which in part encouraged the group to make the trip. "We get a lot of e-mails from people in that part of the world ... it's amazing. We're like, [what's this] all about? It's really a nice feeling," said Campbell. The group will also play at ATT in Kaohsiung on Sunday before heading to Singapore next week.

This weekend, fans will likely hear Campbell's angelic soprano on several new songs from the band, which spent the first half of this year working on a fourth album, due out next year. She spoke enthusiastically about the new release: the band teamed up again with Swedish musician Jari Haapalainen, who produced *Let's Get Out of This Country*, and recorded at Atlantis Studios in Stockholm, which is where ABBA produced many of its memorable hits.

More importantly, the upcoming album is yet another step up for the band. "Camera Obscura's never going to make an album that's going to shock the world, but I think it's a bit more sophisticated than our previous attempts at making records ... I think fans of [our last two albums] will like it," she said.

The band originally attracted a following through its association with fellow Glaswegian band Belle and Sebastian, whose baroque, retro-pop sound rubbed off on Camera Obscura.



Above: Camera Obscura's Tracyanne Campbell. Don't ask her to describe the band's music.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMERA OBSCURA

The two groups even shared a drummer for a period of time.

But Camera Obscura also received an important boost from renowned British DJ and alternative music champion John Peel, whose program on BBC's Radio 1 helped the band gain wider recognition in the UK. The band played at the broadcaster's home on several occasions, including his birthday party shortly before he died in 2004.

Peel's support and sincerity gave the band confidence. "I think he could see something in us that other people didn't really have the patience to see ... he was really a lovely guy, and I know it sounds cliché, but he was really down-to-earth. There were no reservations

— he certainly never made us feel like he was doing us a favor ... he just liked the music, simple as that, really."

Campbell, who founded the band in 1996 with bassist Gavin Dunbar, hesitates to list definitive influences in their music "because you're influenced by different people from different artists on a weekly basis."

She acknowledges the Velvet Underground as a past inspiration, but says the band has moved on. "I guess when you're young and you're that age you want to be in a rock and roll band and you want things to be very cool, and have fantastic guitars and brilliant haircuts and things like that ... I mean, I am influenced by the Velvet Underground and I love the band, but there's so much more to being in a group than just trying to imitate another band."

The 34-year-old says nowadays she identifies more with music from her childhood, "people like my Gran used to listen to": American pop and country singers from the 1960s like Skeeter Davis, Connie Francis and Sandy Posey.

As with these singers, many of Campbell's songs revolve around heartbreak. In discussing her songwriting, she says the lyrics usually come first. "I tend to write things down ... if something's going on in my life, and I just want to write it down,

it helps. I guess it's a sort of therapeutic thing — those words, those lines and those paragraphs usually end up in a song ... I don't sit down with a melody and go 'let's come up with some words,' I just write about how I feel."

But for all the melancholy and self-deprecating musings in the music, Campbell is upbeat about the band's future, and hopeful its members can quit their day jobs.

"[People think] that we're probably loaded and don't need to work but we do, and we're hoping that this year will give us a chance for us to go full-time. You know we're nearly there and I hope that we'll get there this year, and I think we will."

So if not indie-pop, how does Campbell describe her music to a general audience? "I hate this question," she groaned. She's sick of answering it. OK, then how would she describe it her grandmother?

"I'd say that she would really like it because it's quite old-fashioned in a way, and it's not to be played too loud and it's not too noisy, and you can hear the words, hopefully — there's a clarity to it. It's tuneful, it's melodic ... um, yeah, something like that," she said in a confident tone.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Camera Obscura live in Taipei and Kaohsiung
WHERE AND WHEN: Tomorrow at The Wall (這牆), B1, 200 Roosevelt Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (北市羅斯福路四段200號B1). Call (02) 2930-0162 or visit www.the-wall.com.tw for more information; Sunday at ATT (ATT藝文展演空間), B1, 83 Jianguo 3rd Rd Sec 3, Kaohsiung City (高雄市建國三路83號B1). Tel: (07) 286-5380

TICKETS: NT\$1,100 at The Wall; NT\$900 at ATT
ADVANCE TICKETS: Available in Taipei through White Rabbit Records (same address as the Wall), call (02) 8935-1454; in Kaohsiung at Womb Bloc Arts (子宮藝文), 2F, 18 Linnan St, Lingya Dist, Kaohsiung City (高雄市苓雅區林南街18號2F), call 0912-712-602; online at tickets.books.com.tw
ON THE NET: www.camera-obscura.net