

AROUND TOWN

13

FRIDAY, JULY 30, 2010



Atari Teenage Riot pioneered the digital hardcore subgenre of electronica music in the 1990s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ATARI TEENAGE RIOT

Riot sounds return

Atari Teenage Riot has regrouped for a reunion tour and will perform in Taipei this Thursday. The 'Taipei Times' spoke with bandleader and founder Alec Empire about the group's politically motivated music

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

The techno crowd said they were no fun. The punks sneered at their drum machines. Yet Atari Teenage Riot's music was tied to both scenes when the band started out in the early 1990s.

Today the German group, which performs on Thursday at The Wall (這牆) in Taipei, is considered legendary for pioneering the experimental genre known as "digital hardcore," a mash-up of punk, noise and electronic dance music.

Imagine sampled metal guitar riffs played in a loop and MCs screaming at the top of their lungs while electronic drums spit out 200 beats per minute, and you have the typically untypical sound of Atari Teenage Riot.

The band was championed by the late BBC DJ John Peel and musicians like Bjork and Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. At its peak in the late 1990s, the group toured with Rage Against the Machine, Ministry, Beck and the Wu-Tang Clan and was signed to Grand Royal, the now-defunct label started by the Beastie Boys.

But the hype surrounding Atari Teenage Riot had more to do with the anti-fascist and anti-establishment stance that drove its music. The group formed in 1992 as a direct response to racial violence and political problems in post-unification Germany.

"At that time, we saw such an increase in racism," said 38-year-old bandleader and founder Alec Empire in a phone interview earlier this month. "The neo-Nazi scene was growing bigger. We really started the band to fight that."

Thus came Atari Teenage Riot's first single, *Hetzjagd Auf Nazis!* (Hunt Down and Kill the Nazis), a response to an incident in the northern German town of Rostock, where right-wing youths attacked and burned down an apartment complex that housed more than 100 foreign asylum seekers, many of them Vietnamese immigrants.

The specter of racism raised by this event hit home for Empire — his grandfather died in a Nazi concentration camp — and it made him reflect on the apolitical rave scene that was springing up with massive parties in abandoned warehouses in East Berlin.

"Because the techno scene is more about escapism, you know — let's go to a party, take drugs, have fun — we thought we can't really agree with that lifestyle anymore if in the real world, if you have all this stuff going on," he said.

For Empire, the euphoria surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall faded with the emerging economic problems of a newly unified Germany.

"[These] totally different countries clashed together and the reaction of a lot of people was they were looking for extremes, politically, because they saw that the system, the idea system of capitalism, didn't quite work out for the majority at that time," he said.

Empire remembers those days in Berlin as characterized by "extreme violence" on the streets, with fights "where there would be 200 skinheads on side and 200 punks on the other side."

As for the music, Empire wanted Atari Teenage Riot to reflect the turmoil he was seeing. "For us it was like, OK, we come from Berlin, in Germany, and we want this to sound exactly like that city, and like our generation," he said.

The noisy, aggressive style that characterizes much of Atari Teenage Riot's output was carefully constructed, says Empire. "People always think because it has that punk rock kind of energy to it — they think it 'just happened,' but that's not the way it was," he said. "I almost approached it like a film score or something, a lot of theory went into creating this kind of sound."

CHANGE MUST COME

Atari Teenage Riot's sound only grew harder and more distorted, and the band came to be associated with the saying "riot sounds produce riots," which became something of a mantra for the band.

The group saw this idea to fruition on May Day 1999 in Berlin, at a demonstration protesting Germany's involvement in NATO's bombing of Kosovo. The scene turned chaotic and violent when confrontations broke out between police and protesters.

Atari Teenage Riot took part in the protest, performing on top of a truck.

A YouTube video of the event (www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ab7Dksqfnw&feature=related) shows the group playing its signature songs *Start the Riot* and *Revolution Action*. At one point, Empire and his bandmates yell, "Fuck the police" and "Fight! Fight! Don't take it" as scuffles break out. They were arrested after the protest.

Empire says "the context" is important when evaluating the event. "For us it was a huge deal," he said. "It [Kosovo] was the first time after World War II where the Germans bombed another country. And for us, Germany should not be actively involved in attack wars, that's how we felt."

The video of the Berlin protest is the band's most watched clip on YouTube, and Empire sighs at some of the online comments he sees. "Sometimes you get these dumb people who think it's a great sensation that there's violence," he said.

But Empire holds no apologies for encouraging protesters to engage in "revolution action." As he saw it, the police had instigated the violence. "What a lot of people don't know is that the video was used in court later on to bring justice to these cops who just beat innocent demonstrators," he said.

BACK TOGETHER

In May, Atari Teenage Riot played in London's Electric Ballroom, the band's first show in more than 10 years. The group effectively disbanded in 2001 when a longtime member, rapper and MC Carl Crack, died of a drug overdose.

Originally the London concert was planned as a one-off event, but it went so well that the band decided to book more shows. "And now it's like, suddenly, we're coming to Taiwan," Empire laughed.

The audience at Atari Teenage Riot's show this Thursday will see and hear a mixture of the familiar and the new. Replacing Carl Crack will be Brooklyn-based MC and electronic musician CX KIDTRONiK, who has worked with Saul Williams and Kanye West. Empire says KIDTRONiK has re-written Crack's parts using his own lyrics, which include critical musings on US politics.

Noise and soundscape artist Nic Endo, a US-born German citizen who is half-Japanese, used to be only seen behind the sampling "machines" on stage when she joined the band in 1997. Nowadays she takes center stage, handling more of the vocal duties while Empire spends more time behind the decks.

One notable absence will be singer Hanin Elias, who was a visible force in the band and contributed riot girl vocals. She decided not to tour with the band out of fear of damaging her voice, according to Empire.

He says the band lineup has changed often over the years, and the latest configuration is "the way the band should have been back then, but the time wasn't right."

Today, Atari Teenage Riot's music finally feels "up-to-date" to Empire. "It's 10, 15 years later, and people exactly understand now what we were talking about back then," he said.

And so far Empire says he's been encouraged and surprised by the crowds' responses at recent shows.

"We were in a very dark mood [laughs] all the time," he said of the band during the 1990s. "We saw this world ending ... now it feels more like when we started the band. People are motivated, they want to be active — this is the reaction we get from the crowd. I wouldn't call it positive, but it's like, let's do something. Let's unite and you know, we need music for these ideas. I didn't see that coming at all."

PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Atari Teenage Riot on their Activate Tour
WHEN: Thursday from 8:20pm to 10:30pm
WHERE: The Wall (這牆), B1, 200, Roosevelt Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路四段200號B1). Tel: (02) 2930-0162. On the Net: www.thewall.com.tw
ON THE NET: www.atari-teenage-riot.com
ADMISSION: NT\$1,500 at the door, NT\$1,200 in advance, available at the venue or online via The Wall's Web site. Advance packages of three tickets for NT\$3,000 are on sale at The Wall, Kafka on the Shore (海邊的卡夫卡) and Underworld (地下社會)



Nico Endo and Alec Empire of groundbreaking German punk-electronica group Atari Teenage Riot.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ATARI TEENAGE RIOT

For us it was like, OK, we come from Berlin, in Germany, and we want this to sound exactly like that city, and like our generation.

— Alec Empire

[THEATER]



PHOTO COURTESY OF CREATIVE SOCIETY THEATRE COMPANY

Life wasn't simple back then, either

'He Is My Wife, He Is My Mother' is based on a banned Qing Dynasty novel that director Katherine Hui-ling Chou found at a university library in New York

BY ANDREW C.C. HUANG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The *Wedding Banquet* (喜宴) meets *Lan Yu* (藍宇) in Creative Society Theatre Company's (創作社劇團) *He Is My Wife, He Is My Mother* (少年金銀男孟母), a comedic costume drama that explores sexuality against the backdrop of the Republic of China's early years and the 1940s.

The gay-themed play about lust, romance, family and friendship spanning two generations premiered in May last year and was proclaimed by the *United Daily News* as one of 2009's top theatrical productions.

He Is My Wife, He Is My Mother was adapted from the sixth chapter of Qing Dynasty writer Li Yu's (李漁) novel *Silent Operas* (無聲戲). The book was banned because of its risqué subject matter, only to resurface during the second half of the 20th century.

Director and playwright Katherine Hui-ling Chou (周慧玲) discovered *Silent Operas* in a library at Columbia University while she was pursuing a PhD in drama at New York University.

"I was intrigued by how this writer obviously revels in his explicit description of homosexual love and sex but details them in a sardonic tone," said Chou during rehearsal on Wednesday. "He portrays homosexual love in the first half of the story and decides to finish it with a virtuous mother raising a son in the second half."

Though the novel is set in the early Qing Dynasty, Chou has adapted the story to a modern setting.

Her play tells the tale of a love triangle between three homosexual men.

Xu Jifang (許季芳) (played by Hsu Hua-chien, 徐華謙), a widowed father, falls in love with the youthful You Ruilang (尤瑞郎) (played by actress Hsu Yen-ling, 徐銀鈴). The two become lovers and move in together.

Chen Dalong (陳大龍) (played by Lee Yi-hsiu, 李易修), Xu's former lover, is so angered by his ex's betrayal that he orchestrates Xu's arrest, which, without giving too much away, leads to Xu's death.

The bereaved You moves to a distant city with his late lover's young son, where he impersonates the boy's mother in order to raise him.

"This story is about communication both ways," said Chou. "We usually think about children coming out of the closet to their parents, but parents sometimes need to come out to their children."

During rehearsal on Wednesday, Xu and You's first night of torrid sex was handled tastefully by the two actors with symbolic body gestures while Lee played *nanguan* (南管) music in the foreground.

The play neither sells itself as overblown comedic relief nor insults audiences' intelligence with jazzed up sex scenes.

"There have been too many gay plays that try to peddle political agendas or rely on steamy sex scenes," said Chou. "I just want to touch people's hearts."

PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Creative Society Theatre Company, *He Is My Wife, He Is My Mother* (少年金銀男孟母)

WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm, with a matinee performance tomorrow at 2:30pm

WHERE: Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段25號)

ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$2,000, available through NTCH ticketing at www.artsticket.com.tw

DETAILS: In Mandarin with English subtitles

ON THE NET: www.wretch.cc/blog/creative2009