

THREE HAMS IN JAPAN

A NEW FILM BY DIRECTOR KENTA McGRATH, THREE HAMS IN A CAN, PUTS A TWIST ON THE FABLED DOCUMENTARY GENRE. ADAM TRAINER SPOKE TO THREE LOCAL MUSICIANS AND A FILMMAKER.



Going on tour is one of those rock'n'roll clichés populated by its own distinct and equally hackneyed imagery of TVs hurled from hotel windows, seas of writhing groupies and overdosing in the bath. But when Perth documentary filmmaker Kenta McGrath followed three local musicians on tour to Japan, the film he came away with – *Three Hams In A Can*, which screens at this year's Revelation Film Festival – broke the mould of your typical tour diary. The three musicians in question are Predrag Delibasic (or Pex to those who know him, bass player with Bamodi and Abe Sada and an established solo musician in his own right), Stina Thomas (much revered purveyor of melodic laptop electronica and sometimes member of Fall Electric) and Chris Cobilis (The Tigers' frontman and veteran local experimentalist).

The film is not a documentation of rock'n'roll excess but a gentle and absorbing meditation on the nature of friendship, travel and art, and the ways in which the three can intersect. Having grown up in Tokyo, McGrath accompanied the trio as a friend, part-time translator, and tour documentarian, although he maintains that the film came about very organically. "Although I made a lot of mental preparations beforehand I really had no idea what kind of film it was going to be until a few days in. It was scary and unpredictable, but that's also the fun and beauty of documentaries." However, his existing relationship with Tokyo was the key in allowing him to exert his own directorial sensibilities. "If I was filming in a huge, vibrant place like Tokyo and wasn't familiar with it, I'd simply be filming like a tourist, responding in a knee-jerk manner to everything I see and hear. Because I fell like I understand the character of the city, I could shoot in a more controlled and disciplined way. I knew what kind of images to look for and what to avoid."

For all three musicians, the tour wasn't necessarily all about the music. Pex's in-laws live in Yokohama, with one of the film's key sequences taking place at a barbecue at their house. "It was awesome going there this time with five of my friends, spending time together, doing the usual touristy things, buying records, eating, drinking and playing gigs," says Pex. Cobilis agrees that the trip held other important goals for him: "Junk food and shopping first, music second. Playing music overseas is really just an excuse to visit new places and meet new people" None of the trio placed particular importance on the supposed success of the tour from a financial or career perspective. Cobilis maintains this, "Basically all I do with my life is watch bands and talk to people in bands, and it's great if I get to do it overseas too. I measure success by the amount of 'good times' I have, which I had plenty of on this trip. Both musical and food related."

Very little of *Three Hams In A Can* even takes place in the venues within which the three plied their trade, instead focussing on sequences set in parks and on shopping expeditions and visits to temples. There's a sense of space to the film, with much of it devoted to the passive silences involved in waiting and travelling; in the limbo state of being in a foreign place. From a creative perspective, McGrath treasures this silence. "I always try to make films with as much silence as possible. Films for me are an opportunity to reflect and contemplate and I think silence has always been a very important – though much underused – element in film. I don't like the feeling of being manipulated and it's something I always try to avoid, or at least keep to a minimum, as a filmmaker. So I did make a conscious decision to keep my mouth shut, and keep it strictly observational for the most part."

McGrath's camera never interferes; we never feel its presence overtly on his subjects. In one particularly memorable sequence we follow the trio passively through the humid heat of a Japanese summer as cicadas hammer out their own distinctive sonic mayhem, and in another Pex conducts a roadside conversation in broken Japanese with a drunken train driver. The film's image are lyrical and subtly humorous – almost dreamlike, but with a distinct verite earthiness. Stina recalls another experience that didn't quite make it into recorded form, "Walking through Koenji, absolutely bucketing down with rain, seemingly flooded streets drenching all of us. I felt like I was at a swimming pool in summer. I know Kenta didn't film it because I was walking behind him watching him try to keep the camera dry, tripping over in his thongs and slipping on the occasional decorative tile on the road." What comes across from speaking with all four is the fondness they feel for the trip, not as an exercise in self-promotion or creative indulgence, but as a shared experience. If moments like this are what going on tour is about, who needs trashed hotel rooms?

As for the musical element of the trip, although all three conceded that communication did prove taxing at times, music does provide a huge point of connection that can override language barriers. Pex insists, "Where there's love there's no miscommunication! All the acts we played with were different and three of us played different music, so there was a lot to enjoy." Cobilis also shares a fond memory, "I had a conversation with a dude in a really wussy indie rock band about Slayer. I believe Slayer is the universal language of love."

Three Hams In A Can presents a version of the concert tour film that not only disrupts its dominant narratives, but also offers many subtle and insightful glimpses into the way in which both travellers, and hosts make connections with the constant risk of something being lost in translation. For McGrath, the barbecue at Pex's in-laws is representative of the film's driving theme. "For me it's the heart of the film and also offers a glimpse of Japan and Japanese people that you rarely see. The family can't speak any English, the musicians can't speak any Japanese but they communicate so beautifully. I think it's very universal."