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Russian Avant-Garde Musicians AWOTT Bring 'Pure, Childish Fun'

By Timothy Misir

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Asian Women on the Telephone is known for its extravagant shows where band members are always masked.

One would be forgiven for assuming that Russian avant-garde music has faded away in recent years, but in dank basements out of the public eye, a diverse and thriving scene continues in Moscow.

One of its stalwarts is Asian Women on the Telephone (AWOTT), an impossible-to-pin-down group that plays a mix of krautrock, free improvisation and sound collage inspired by Russian futurism and dadaism that its members describe as "lo-fi music for a low-grade world."

Following "IVAN," released on Massachusetts-based Feeding Tube Records in 2013, AWOTT put out its new album, "You Have Reached Your Destination," independently last month. The group will play a pair of concerts in Moscow this weekend before beginning preparations for a European tour in spring.

Named after a track by American experimental rock band Sun City Girls, the now three-piece group formed in 2007, following the demise of three underground bands: Yarche-1000-Solnts, DimenticarmiNON! and Lisichkin Khleb.

"We started to get together at my place in a suburb district of Moscow. We drank tea, ate sweets. [Group member] Kapushoniha cooked soups, vegetables and sometimes mushrooms. We laughed a lot about different strange things, and this made us united," said band member Max , who refused to give his last name, about AWOTT's early days in an interview.

"Now we have our own dialect understood by dogs. In this fortress on the fifth floor of a dirty old building, we make decorations for our videos, we make our masks and costumes, we record music, we create album artwork," he said.

"We started to become friends with Russian artists. [The Moscow experimental music community] is a good audience because they are not snobs in music, and we are not snobs in art. ... We are inspired by faraway places, where we have never been and will maybe play someday. We absorbed dada and futurism like sponges when we were young, but now we don't think about it," Max said about the band's influences.

AWOTT's new album takes elements from free-jazz saxophonist James Chance, Captain Beefheart's psychedelic rock, German avant-garde band Can and Russian punk music over eight tracks that run for up to 20 minutes.

"The title is about when you drive along a windy and snowy road and the forest is everywhere and the ice is under your wheels and suddenly your GPS says, 'You have reached your destination.' The woman inside, her voice is so confident, and you absolutely sure she is right. I don't know why we are still here," he said.

The group is no stranger to controversy, having been banned from playing in a number of Moscow venues because of its alleged links to "a mystical ritualistic sect." Max declined to comment on the matter, saying, "It is a very old story. We don't even remember the circumstances but we look forward to new bans!"

AWOTT plays two mainstream venues this week — Flakon and 16 Tons — but they normally can be found in intimate venues, random apartments or more recently, an artist's studio.

The band regards its music as only secondary to its theatrical live performances, in which the group's members are always masked but not always fully clothed. Described as a "mix between a ritual and a play from an old Greek tragedy," they look like the plays of avant-garde theater director Robert Wilson on acid.

"We want to make everything special and this is the ritual. Our activity is like bees making honey. ... We eat different beautiful trees and flowers and then just make a concert," he said about the concerts, imploring those curious about Moscow's experimental music scene to check out their shows.

"We have pure, childish fun, with good noise and punk friends. We want to be closer, as close as possible. If you read this guys, come!"

AWOTT plays on Sunday at 6 p.m. at Flacon. 36 Bolshaya Novodmitrovskaya. Metro

Dmitrovskaya. Admission 300 rubles. And at the Mnogofotozvuka-3 party on Monday at 8 p.m. Shestnadtsat Tonn. 6 Presnensky Val. Metro Ulitsa 1905 Goda.

"You Have Reached Your Destination" is available on cassette and digital formats from asianwomenonthetelephone.bandcamp.com.

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