

The Hook



October 26, 2018

George and Noriko

26 October, Spiegeltent, HBAF18
By Nafanua Kersel

Melbourne-based artists George Kamikawa and Noriko Tadano bring a fascinating edge to blues music by incorporating the ancient and traditional musical instruments of their shared Japanese heritage.

They cut a fine figure in the Spiegeltent: George, seated, holds a guitar and slide in his lap, kick drum and rhythm pedal at his feet and a harmonica, braced, locked and loaded. Noriko, silken in hair and kimono, stands, tsugaru shamisen and wide plectrum at the ready. Centre stage and full of percussion promise stands a taiko drum.

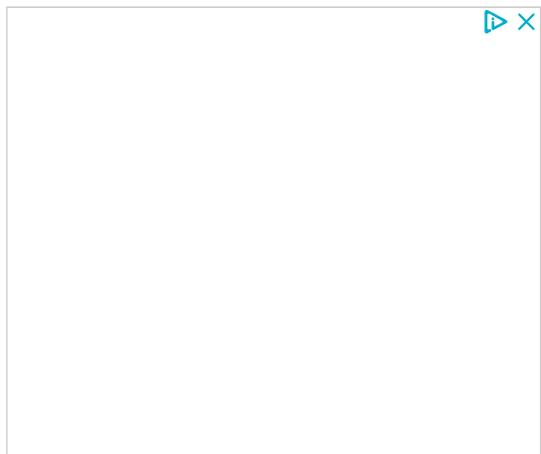
They're straight into the music, satisfying our curiosity and bringing even more wonder. I thought we'd have to take time to absorb and adjust to a surprising new sound. But the floorboards immediately reverberate the tapping of hundreds of feet. Once our eyes take in what might seem a surreal sight and combination of instruments, Kamikawa's voice comes out of nowhere, gravel rough but crystal clear, and obviously finely tuned to the blues. He also one-man-band's the beats, guitar and harmonica so easily that I have to double take when it becomes clear that he's blowing into the harmonica between song lines, whilst playing the drum and guitar. "No karaoke shit," he declares.

For all of its three strings, the shamisen produces a clear and naturally resonant sound. Sometimes it's far-away sounding and yet at other times, as if it's being played in the seat next to me. This ancient instrument is played so expertly by Tadano, who effortlessly rolls out riffs and distinctive hooks. She moves and shreds like a rock star – like the **Nancy Wilson** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR5-gUYwKi8>) of shamisen. Together the sound is crunchy, full and unshakably gratifying.

Their set is made up of covers, excellent original works and traditional Japanese songs. The duo are good humoured and genuine. Between songs they joke and banter with the crowd, and each other. He's friendly and buoyant, instructing us in a crowd-wide Japanese cheers – "Kampai!" we all yell with gusto as he praises our Kiwi beer. Tadano is dry, witty and pensive, though bright and smiling for the crowd. The crowd loves their personalities.

Clearly both are adroit as musicians. But they are also entertaining and encouraging. They have redefined blues music so precisely well that it's as if these instruments were always meant to be played in this way. A fantastic, foot-stomping show which helped me to shake off my end-of-week, end-of-Arts-Festival blues.

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