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From New York, Japan is 13 hours in the future. It seems only fitting if you think about it: the pace of the cities, the technology, the entire idea of the country seems feature film-scale futuristic to most Americans, as though it's something beyond modern. And, in 1992, Tokyo's buzzing industry quietly birthed Envy, a band whose decade-plus stint in the grassroots D.I.Y. community serves as a stark contrast to Japan's permutable incarnation. With the scope of their reach having touched several continents and thousands of people, the band has remained simple and true. Envy's acute perception of their own identity (both collective and individual) and tireless efforts in their trans-genre niche seem entirely separated from the indefatigable nature of the bright lights, big

city. That's not to say Envy isn't part of the ever-changing panorama, of course – the evidence is there in their far-spanning, multimedia catalog – but their endurance harkens back to the most traditional of notions: to thine own self be true.

Envy's history has been a seriously interesting one, especially considering the country's lens through which you examine it. Starting up next to contemporaries such as Corrupted, their current brand of post-hardcore with post-rock elements was straight, fast Japanese hardcore at inception. Influenced heavily by Born Against, releases prior to 2001 were branded by short, aggressive tracks. The band carved out a name for themselves in their first several years, working with small but strong Japanese

labels, including HG Fact and their own Sonzai Records, but didn't push their music west.

The release of 2003's *A Dead Sinking Story* was a turning point for the band. After meeting Scotland's Mogwai in the early 2000s, Envy's hardcore-based sound began travelling a different path. Turning towards more experimental elements and infusing a post-rock serenity into their material, *Sinking Story* stands as an epic, mature record that covers a lot of ground while being masterfully crafted. Released by the respected post-hardcore label Level Plane in the United States and Mogwai's Rock Action in Europe, the album received broader distribution than any of their previous, mostly Japan-only releases. But this pair of labels, while staples unto themselves, are a



Photos: Aaron Peralta



Adam Bizi



ENVY

Ever-Changing Scenery

BY MEREDITH TURITS

comparative blip on the independent music front, which is where Envy has – almost bafflingly – stayed. With little in the way of planned tours and a career whose length outlives most, they have friends but few contemporaries.

Moreover, with a fairly undocumented history that's a product of a D.I.Y. ethic and a language barrier, talking about Envy's level of recognition changes depending on the climate of the country from which you're judging. "We started the band when we were still going to school," vocalist/sequencer Tetsuya Fukagawa reflects, adding, "We were just kids with some time, never thought that it would last this long. Ten years went by quick." Fukagawa, along with guitarist Nobukata Kawai, guitarist Masahiro Tobita, bassist Manabu Nakagawa, and



drummer Dairoku Seki, seems wary to believe that they've had an impact and a presence with such fortitude. "I think that we've been recognized around the world because of the fact that we don't have any ambitions. There is nothing we want to do that is impossible," Fukagawa says. The conversation asking him to consider the band's history is placid, if even a little self-conscious. It's hard to resist the temptation of turning each question into a "retrospective," but Envy's forward motion is still very much in play. "Everything we are doing now is something that I never imagined I would be doing," he humbly responds. "We were just students with a lot of time on our hands."

More than 10 past releases aside, "everything [the band] is doing now" is astounding in shape and size; Envy is on the heels of two new split records and a DVD. After the early 2008 Temporary Residence Limited reissue of two major releases in their canon – *All the Footprints You've Left Behind and the Fear Expecting Ahead* and *Sinking Story* – alongside new EP *Abyssal* (Temporary Residence, 2008) and *Compiled Fragments 1997-2003*, an anthology of rare early material, Envy also saw the release of the *Transfovista* DVD (Temporary Residence, 2008). The documentary chronicles 15 years of the band's footsteps across tens of countries and hundreds of hours on stage. The title, a made-up word created by a friend, means "ever-changing scenery." It's ideal for Envy, whose own literal landscape has changed with travel but whose soundscapes have scaled mountains and burrowed into valleys with each separate endeavor. "We had a lot of footage since the beginning of Envy, and we decided to do this project since we wanted to convey our music in a different form of media," Fukagawa says of *Transfovista*. "We gave everything to a friend of ours who produces videos and he edited it all."

With 17 songs from five albums, the DVD's content is pregnant with the band's furious live persona and traces of the places and ways in which Envy has left a mark. There's a striking contrast seeing the breadth of the footage, which frames Envy in small Mid-Atlantic U.S. spaces and then juxtaposes snapshots from performances during massive Asian festivals.

"We've been lucky to be able to tour all over," Fukagawa says. A cursory YouTube search of "Envy Japan" proves it. "We've been to China, Korea [and] Taiwan. We always start tours with the mentality of doing the best show, [but] there isn't any one show in particular that stands out to us," Fukagawa continues. "Having said that, we've had some crazy shows, like the first time we went to France. We played in a squatter house, totally different from Japan. We've played at so many venues, we've gotten used to all sorts. A Denny's style restaurant in China, someone's basement... I like playing at both small and large venues. I love festivals, since we get to see other bands perform."

Fukagawa also adds that the earliest footage on the collection appears by way of the *From Here to Eternity* (HG Fact, 1999) song "Carved Numbers," dating from roughly nine years ago. "Testimony to the Existence," from *Burning Out Memories* ten-inch (Moraire Industries, 1999), is the DVD's most recent performance, at about a year old. "It's good to know that this will last forever," he says about compiling Envy's years of video clips into a cohesive project. "We don't really do too many shows, so we've gotten a lot of good feedback from it. Glad to know that our fans are [enjoying] it." Besides adding a welcome visual element to Envy's visceral recorded soundtrack, *Transfovista* is the consummate reflection on the last decade of the band's work. "I like all the footage from the DVD," Fukagawa admits. "We took our time picking the songs and video." While Fukagawa asserts that there are not moments on the DVD that specifically speak to him over others, he has another type of reflection. "It's a bit sad to see how much older we've gotten," he remarks, though it's hard to tell if he says this in jest.

Not surprisingly, at least to anyone who has followed the band over the years, since *Transfovista*'s release Envy now has other projects in play. Both new works are split albums, which are testimony to the intercontinental relationships that Envy has been able to forge throughout their years. In tandem with the U.K.'s Justin Broadrick, Hydra Head/Daymare have just released an Envy and Jesu split CD. "We've always liked Jesu's music and his stance on performing," Fukagawa says about Broadrick, formerly of Godflesh. Interestingly,

there was little interaction back and forth between the bands during the writing process, and so Envy's tracks were created with little knowledge of what Jesu was busy composing. The result is a release that's twinkling from both sides of the split. Envy's tracks are still identifiable with familiar sonic profiles, but the three songs have a tangible visual component to them – almost like passing through countrysides on a slow train at night – which paces the record brilliantly. There's still Envy's explosive dynamism, which creates tempo and mood changes in a heartbeat, like in "A Winter Quest for Fantasy." And, almost creating a dialogue with Envy through each note, Jesu's traditionally heavier, driving tones turn down the volume without turning down the potency – it's an almost Envy-esque incarnation for Broadrick. "Justin seems like he [likes] Envy, and we respect his musical career and love his music," the Envy frontman states. "The songs he made for the split are great."

With a wildly different aural aesthetic, Temporary Residence Limited was at the helm of Envy's other project, a split with screamo purveyors Thursday. "Geoff [Rickly] from Thursday got in touch with us saying he would love to do a split with us," Fukagawa explains. "As for our side of the production, it was the same as how we always do it: We recorded it [in Japan], and sent it to the States. It's a convenient world we live in, where we can communicate with anyone around the world very easily." Fukagawa says that the most important element in creating both the Jesu and Thursday records was not musical, but rather mutual respect. "We weren't really conscious of the other bands' music when [we created] songs for these projects. Both bands have great ideas, and there are lots that we learn from it. That's what makes making splits worth it."

Nevertheless, while there's something signature that brands Envy's sound regardless of the release, the tracks on the Thursday split evoke something tranquil and atmospheric that speaks to a new facet of Envy's sound. The opener, "An Umbrella Fallen into Fiction," weaves a gentle humming pitter-pat of percussion that anchors the composition. Still, like the record's subsequent tracks, it swells

into a bastion of forward propulsion while also cradling the listener with its resonance. Envy's base, which lies in heaving oceans of sound, much of which is instrumental, slips surprisingly cozily into Thursday's pieces. There's still an urgency and fire about Thursday's half, but the hum of their vocal-less songs fuse tightly the communication between the two halves of the split. "We were a bit surprised that Thursday recorded two instrumental tracks, [but] they're great songs," Fukagawa says. "Musically, I don't think they complement us at all. I think this is more of a project where we both made songs that complement ourselves. We could have done a split with anyone, it was just that they seemed very passionate about doing one with us, and it's an honor for us."

Even if Fukagawa is entirely right and the halves exist wholly autonomously in the sonic realm, the intensity of both Envy's and Thursday's tracks speak to each other in nearly irrefutable ways. "I like the fact that they have been playing music without forgetting about the importance of passion," he says of the New Jersey rockers. "I've always liked them. I wouldn't really call myself a fan, more of a friend... I think it's a split between bands that both respect each other's music and performance. I think it's a good opportunity for both our bands to be exposed to each other's fans, as well."

The idea of exposure has been a strange thing for Envy. While there's clearly a sizable, worldwide audience for the five-piece group – the band's reach wouldn't be what it is without it – their level of notoriety has managed to stay rather nebulous. Outside of their core fan base, Envy remain largely unknown in North America and Europe, especially when compared with Japanese post-hardcore and experimental rock acts of similar stature, like Melt-Banana, Mono, and Boredoms. "We're not interested at all in becoming famous. It's not the reason why we play. I guess it's different for everyone, but it's not important to us," Fukagawa declares. "We've never tried to make a living off of music. We don't sell ourselves to anyone. We just like to make music as naturally, as it comes to us." With their career spanning so long, it's been a continuous grassroots pull that allows Envy to play and continue to record. But Fukagawa says that it was never intentional to use an underground network for promotion, nor ever a goal to pave an international stage on which to play. "It's not something that we try to do, [but] I think it just comes naturally to us. I think that it's never a good thing to go above and beyond our capacity as a band – it won't lead us in the direction that we want to go," he says. Regardless, Fukagawa seems to understand that there's a buzz in play for Envy. "It's great that our music is spreading, no matter how slowly."

The fan web has both opened up new territory while simultaneously simply not having offered other opportunities to the band, who seem

concerned about working with only what's in front of them. While Envy has played all over the world, as evidenced in *Transfovista*, they have only toured the U.S. twice. "We were just never invited to go over," Fukagawa says. "We don't usually ask to tour so... we'll go anywhere if we get an invitation. As long as it's safe." They're hoping to hit American soil again in the upcoming year, during which they'll also spend a significant amount of time writing and recording for a new Temporary Residence release due mid-2010.

With all of the changes that Envy has endured – their bare-bones approach and fortuitous moments in accord – their future work will be heavily influenced by the ground that they've already tread. "Our unity as a band has gotten a lot stronger than before, our recording methods [have] progressed from analog to digital, touring has gotten a lot easier than when we first started, and our live performance has gotten much closer to our ideal," Fukagawa expresses. "I think the most important part is to understand each other, and to be able to communicate with each other without holding anything back." They understand to take nothing for granted. "We've been lucky to be together for so long and have the opportunity to make and play music for people everywhere. It's an honor to be able to affect people."

Fukagawa is careful to accept a compliment about how the band has transcended genres and pushed boundaries, but he does concede in his own way. "We are always pursuing originality," he says. "Writing music is a difficult process for us, and there have been many songs that we have thrown away in the process because we didn't feel like it was complete. Our albums express our full limits of our creativity at that time."

New limits of creativity are all systems go. Envy perseveres with zeal, continuing to connect with fans, who identify the band's career as significant. As for Envy themselves, with a formula that's both meaningful and effective, Fukagawa is at a good place about the project that's defined so much of his life. "Envy seems to always be changing. I think that [change] all affects us positively, but the foundation of our music hasn't changed much. I guess if you fear change, it's difficult to move forward. We see everything as a challenge."

SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

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Insomniac Doze (CD/2LP, Temporary Residence, 2006)

All the Footprints You've Ever Left and the Fear Expecting Ahead (CD, Dim Mak, 2003; CD/LP, Temporary Residence, 2008)

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