

INTRODUCING...

Dodo Street Band

Nathaniel Handy speaks to genre crossing master fiddler Adam Summerhayes about his superb new instrumental quintet

Just what, you might ask, is a quintet of classically trained musicians doing playing a Gypsy-klezmer mash-up with classic old Celtic tunes? Shouldn't there be laws against this kind of thing? Wouldn't you expect more purism? Well, beware your prejudices. There's more to Dodo Street Band than meets the eye.

Fiddler Adam Summerhayes, who conceived the project, pulled together a fine cast. "The accordionist Murray [Grainger] said yes before I'd even finished explaining it," Summerhayes recalls. He then brought in Piers Adams ("I've never been next to such incredible virtuoso genius produced on a recorder – which is utterly ludicrous"), Malcolm Creese ("an extraordinary bass player and up for anything") and Irish percussion wizard Cormac Byrne.

"Cormac was a mate of Murray's," says Summerhayes. "Murray told me he

doubted he'd do it, because he's the best there is. But he said yes." The resulting quintet has Irish, Scottish and English traditional music coursing through its veins. But that's only half the story. In many ways, the godfather of Dodo Street Band is Summerhayes' grandfather – north-east fiddler Alex Whamond.

"His family were fishermen from the east coast of Scotland," Summerhayes says. "He grew up on Tyneside and with all the seafaring, there's a lot of different blood in the family; add to that, my granny was Jewish. He used to play a very mixed bag of tunes. That was my first introduction to what a violin was."

The Eastern European influence doesn't end with family lineage, mind you. Summerhayes started out playing folk airs with his grandfather – and in his bedroom when he should have been practicing his classical scales – but he was eventually sent to

study with Yfrah Neaman, the Israeli violinist. Whamond had himself trained with Adolph Brodsky at the Royal Manchester College of Music. Brodsky hailed from a Russian Jewish family and first played in Odessa – that beating heart of Ashkenazi Jewish culture. It doesn't get more steeped in klezmer than that. Brodsky would go on to perform the premiere of Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto in D major*.

Summerhayes' own early folk stirrings were roused again a decade ago, after a career performing classical concertos around the world. And it is freedom from dogma and structure that marks out his approach, which is manifested in Dodo Street Band's irreverent take on purist tradition.

"My grandfather was brought up playing folk tunes in a way that disappeared after the folk revival of the 1960s," says Summerhayes. "He never assumed to play a tune the same way twice. He hated what pub sessions became. The whole point was to play it and then set it free."

That anarchic strain is evident in Dodo Street's visceral live performances. Perhaps resurrecting the long extinct dodo is a metaphorical way of imagining different histories, ones that never happened, but which can still happen if we will them into being. "I've got these three disparate traditions in my head, which are absolutely alive for me," says Summerhayes. The band will be alive at a festival near you soon. ♦

- + **ALBUM** *Dodo Street Band's debut album, Natural Selection, is reviewed this issue, see p67*
- + **DATES** *The band are on tour in the UK through June and July, see dodostreetband.com for details*



Phil Richards

Minyo Crusaders

James Catchpole speaks to the band breathing new life into *min'yō*, an age-old Japanese folk tradition fallen to obscurity



Kubo Takahiro

The world music boom shows no signs of abating around the globe, yet amid the glut of African and Latin music groups and CD compilations the music of Japan has been woefully underrepresented. Major world music festivals rarely host Japanese performers, and cultural centres abroad tend to present a narrow vision of Japanese music and culture, focusing on the traditional repertoire of the *koto* or *shamisen* – if presenting any music at all. Sharing the earthy, lively and raunchy sounds of authentic Japanese life as expressed in *min'yō* (traditional Japanese folk songs) runs counter to the government's efforts to either promote 'Cool Japan' or the elite aesthetics of Japanese art.

Min'yō songs were originally sung at work, at play and during rituals, and are from so long ago that any known authorship is long forgotten. These tunes vary by region in Japan but have similar themes, often expressing the joys of life despite hard work and hard times. They are as integral to Japan

as blues is to the US, and yet in the modern world they are largely ignored.

As a result, the Tokyo-based Minyo Crusaders have hit the scene like a hurricane with their unexpected but seamless mix of min'yō with Latin, Caribbean and African rhythms. Formed in the western Tokyo suburb of Fussa in 2011, the ten-piece's debut, *Echoes From Japan*, has received widespread acclaim as their energetic live shows have seen them play to ecstatic crowds around the country.

The road to get here was not easy, as bandleader and guitarist Katsumi Tanaka explains: "Min'yō folk tunes are part of the Japanese identity from centuries ago, and yet today most people are relatively unfamiliar with the music. Most people have a vague knowledge of song titles and melodies and in the countryside people may have some appreciation for old, local tunes, but few people listen to min'yō outside of the context of local summer festivals. What we're aiming to do with the Minyo Crusaders is bring the

old min'yō songs back, but in a fresh, contemporary way incorporating different rhythms from outside Japan."

Tanaka goes on to explain that though the use of Latin and African percussion with min'yō songs may sound unusual, there is some history in Japan of this kind of mix. "In the 1950s and 60s, Japan's most famous singers, Hibari Misora and Chiemi Eri, sang some min'yō songs and *enka* (Japanese sentimental ballads) with updated arrangements that were swinging, funky and sometimes even rocking. Group lead vocalist Freddy Kumamoto and I went back and listened to all these records and were inspired to do something similar, but in a more contemporary way."

The band's concept of 'bringing back min'yō' developed rather quickly as the each new member was added, including veterans of the Tokyo world music scene like percussionist Mutsumi Kobayashi, conga player Irochi and DJ/vocalist Meg. The Minyo Crusaders' live shows immediately made an impression; having caught them the first time with no prior exposure, I was blown away by the deep funk and remarkable vocals of 'Akita Nikata Bushi'. The sound they produced was like being dropped into a Japanese farming festival with a bunch of Ethiopian jazz-funk musicians as the house band; everyone singing and dancing with wild abandon.

With an international release for their debut album, some new songs in the pipeline and possible overseas live dates, Minyo Crusaders are ready to show the world that there is more to new Japanese music than identikit J-Pop or stodgy old ballads. ♦

- + **ALBUM** *Echoes of Japan is a Top of the World in this issue, see p82*



We have three copies of *Echoes of Japan* to give away. To enter, answer: What is the name of Minyo Crusader's bandleader? See p21 for competition rules and deadline