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Aaron ThompsonYamagata Tweekster
Aaron Thompson

Photographer documents Daegu indie scene

'Sound and Fury' exhibition exposes best of city's grassroots music shows

By Hannah Stuart-Leach

DAEGU — Fans of independent music are not always well-catered to in Korea, in the midst of the ever-powerful K-pop industry. Seoul and Busan have, with the help of dedicated supporters and promoters, made great strides.

But somewhere between the two lies the lesser-known, more conservative city of Daegu, taking its own steps toward an eclectic music scene with a small but equally passionate band of followers.

The Korea Herald spoke with expat Aaron Thompson ahead of his photography exhibition "Sound and Fury" about his attempts to document it.

"There's kind of exciting stuff going on in regards to independent music," said Thompson, who plays bass and synthesizer in "dark noisy shoegaze group" Black Hanbok.

"With my photo show, I'm

hoping that people who aren't actually exposed to the indie scene will take a look at these images and go 'wow,' there's something really exciting and cool going on here."

The 26-year-old, who trained as a photojournalist, started photographing performers at Daegu's oldest nightclub, Club Heavy, back in June 2009. He met members of promoters Supercolorsuper and has been working with them ever since. The team help keep Daegu's alternative music scene afloat by getting musicians from around Korea and abroad to play.

Attracted by the similarities he saw with the indie scene in his native Las Vegas — principally the same struggle with getting people to show up to gigs — Thompson became fascinated by what he feels is a special time for the city, when people are trying to change things.

"A good photojournalist is

there to capture the moment that if it isn't captured, will be gone forever," he explained.

One of the centerpiece of his show is an image of the female lead guitarist in Dogstar, the only Daegu band featured.

"They're (Dogstar) probably one of the best unheard of bands in Korea. They just bleed music," Thompson, also a music writer, enthused.

Referring to the striking shot of Ryu Sun-mi as an example, he said, "I want to make images that when people look at them they can hear the music, they can imagine the style."

Other acts featured in the exhibit, include Sigborg, 10, Yamagata Tweekster, Hand-some Furs, On Sparrow Hills, Juiceboxxx, Denlal and King Kahn & BBQ show — from their last ever performance.

All of the shots were taken at Supercolorsuper-organized shows in Daegu. The four core members with the promotion/

booking organization there have put a lot of time into publicizing and extending the scene from its initial base at Club Heavy, into other venues with new acts, explained Thompson.

"They hit the ground running ... whenever a show's going they're out the weekend before putting up posters, hand-billing and you know, they're spending their own money," said Thompson, recognizing the hard work and challenges involved in trying to establish the underground scene there.

But, he said, people are starting to take notice and he hopes this show of his photography will contribute.

Thompson's meticulously selected images — it took two months for him to pick nine from his collection of around 4,000 — instantly catch the eye with their trademark vibrancy and kaleidoscopic waves of energy.

In order to keep editing to a

minimum, he said he swings the difficulties with lighting in murky clubs to his favor, using as little flash and as much ambient light as possible. "I tried to keep all the images as absolutely pristine and raw as possible," explained Thompson.

"I put everything into it and I'm just pretty crazy I guess. I'll do anything for an image."

In the past he has sustained injuries for his pictures and said once, as he was trying to get a shot of a band from above, he fell off a speaker onto his back.

His commitment and talent have not gone unnoticed; Thompson's images have been featured internationally in publications ranging from Rolling Stone magazine to British tabloid the Star.

But Thompson seems happy staying on what he calls "the ground floor," capturing music, and life, at its grassroots. Although his prints are available for purchase, he will charge

only twice the printing cost — the other half being reinvested into the local music scene and new projects.

He uses a Canon 40D which has been with him since he trained. "It's been through hell, you know, like a good camera should, but it keeps on kicking," he said, hoping he wouldn't jinx his good fortune by telling how it had broken and endured beer, dirt and even blood.

Next up for Thompson is another project that will take him to the fringes of Korean society: An in-depth pictorial of Daegu's migrant workers.

"Sound and Fury" will be at Doyo Gallery in Daegu from Feb. 1-28. Entrance is free and opening hours are midday to midnight. An opening reception will be held at the gallery on Feb. 5 from 7 p.m. with music by experimental band Not Jeremy Jones. For more information, call (053) 421-6233.

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COME TOGETHER



- **Name of Club:** Geoje Foreign Residents Association
- **Location(s):** The white building adjacent to the Admiral Hotel in Okpo, on Geoje Island in South Gyeongsang Province. The club house is located on the second floor of the building, above Think Café.
- **Number of members:** Changes constantly due to the shipyard schedules, but normally around 600-700 members
- **Started:** During the 1980s in an upstairs room at what is now the Admiral Hotel. The club moved several times in the '80s, and broadened to include more family-friendly activities.

This is a series introducing associations and clubs for expats. This week, Expat Living spoke to Bryan Finan of Geoje Foreign Residents Association — Ed.

Who is it for? Foreigners and their families.

What goes on? Mainly we are here to provide somewhere for foreigners to come and relax, enjoy some food and have a chat in a relaxing atmosphere. Occasionally we have special events. Next month we will have a Scottish celebration in honor of Robbie Burns, which is usually one of the highlights of the year for the club.

Plans for the future? We're unable to expand the club in any way, but I think the club runs well the way it is at present. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

How to join? People can join by coming to the club and completing a membership form, which takes two minutes. It costs 40,000 won to join, 12,000 won of which is the first month's membership. Membership fees of 12,000 are payable every month after this and are deducted from the membership card. For more information on the club visit <http://gfra.net>.

BRIEFLY

Hongdae dance studio offers English classes

A new dance studio is to open in Seoul's Hongdae area.

All classes at the Dream Dance Studio are to be taught in English seven days a week, and will start Feb. 7.

Belly dancing will be the main feature of the new studio from professional belly dancer Eshe Yildiz, but special workshops will also be held with the goal of expanding the schedule in the future.

Hooping classes — limited to four people per class — will also be taught throughout February.

The studio is a four-minute walk from Mangwon Station (Line 6) Exit 1. E-mail eshedancer@hotmail.com to reserve a class or for more information.

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Seoul City to expand Sunday counseling

The Seoul Metropolitan Government said Friday it will make its Sunday counseling tour of foreign resident communities a year-round event from this year.

Since 2009, city officials have visited neighborhoods with high foreigner population every Sunday, except during winters, to offer legal and other counseling services especially to foreign workers, students and marriage immigrants who cannot spare time during weekdays to seek help at city-run administrative centers.

The range of counseling, currently limited to such subjects as labor affairs, law, mobile phone service and national pension, will also be expanded to include industrial disaster, wage default, immigration and injury, the local government said.

It is also considering ways to draw participation from Mongolian, Vietnamese and Filipino government offices in charge of social security and labor affairs to better help foreign residents, officials said.

The number of foreign residents in South Korea surpassed 1.2 million last year, according to government figures. A majority of them live in Seoul and its adjacent cities. (Yonhap News)

Start-up school helps expats open businesses

By Hamish Boland-Rudder

The idea of starting a small or medium-sized business in Korea for a foreigner can be daunting.

In addition to language difficulties, Korea is also the home of the "chaebol," powerful business conglomerates that dominate the market, so it's easy to think a business idea may become lost.

Acknowledging the relative lack of support for small and medium-sized enterprises, Seoul Global Center's business team developed its Business Start-Up School aimed specifically at foreign nationals.

"Other than the requirement to make an initial capital investment of at least 100 million won (\$90,000) at the very beginning, I would probably say that the language barrier is one of the biggest challenges for foreigners trying to start a business in Korea," said Seo Young-Ju from the Business Consulting Team at Seoul Global Center.

"Although Seoul has improved a lot to become a 'global city,' still foreign residents face difficulties on things such as document work for legal matters because there is no English service readily available. Especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, finding experts in each field of business who can provide English services is very challenging."

Going into its third year, the Business Start-Up School runs quarterly and is in high demand. The program involves 10, two-hour lessons spread over two weeks, and includes presentations from professionals in legal, accounting and business services, covering everything from visa requirements, business infrastructure, banking, tax, and business-relevant laws.

Applicants for the program must submit a full business plan, and demonstrate a readiness to start a small or medium-sized enterprise in Korea. Places are tight, with an average of two applications for every place.

Seo believes this is because in-



Aspiring expat entrepreneurs attend a class at the Seoul Global Center's Business Start-Up School.

Seoul Global Center

creasing numbers of expats are seeing Korea as a viable location to open up a variety of businesses, from small-scale import and export enterprises, to restaurants, retail, and even language and consultancy services.

"Considering all the future potential coming from rapid economic growth in China and other Southeast Asian countries, Korea can be a perfect place for any business to establish itself," said Seo.

"There is excellent infrastructure here, such as all the advanced technology and development in IT field. You can be at the center of current, IT-advanced technology development and at the same time capitalize on the amazing potential within the entire Asian market."

Of the 115 graduates from last year's program, 10 have gone on to open their own business.

"Considering the initial capital investment they had to make, and the difficulties faced by smaller businesses in getting

government support, I would say it is not a small number at all," said Seo.

New Zealand mountain hiker Roger Shepherd, who completed the course in November last year, was trying to establish himself in Korea after being appointed honorary tourism and goodwill ambassador when his guide book "Baekdu Daegan Trail: Hiking Korea's Mountain Spine" was published in July.

Shepherd began a love-affair with mountaineering in Korea in 2006, and after returning multiple times for subsequent hikes, decided to make a career out of his passion for the Korean highlands.

Quitting his position with the New Zealand police force, Shepherd moved to Seoul in March 2010 and began investigating possible business ideas around hiking and mountain-promotion.

"I had no clue in the world what would be required of me to get a business visa. In fact,

I thought it would probably wouldn't be possible, because I was thinking that you'd need to be a multi-million dollar investor here," he said.

Initially trying to garner support through diplomatic channels, Shepherd found that embassy staff were more accustomed to dealing with large-scale trade agreements rather than assisting a small business start-up. He was pointed in the direction of the Seoul Global Center where he found the business school.

"Doing the business course was imperative," he said. "With all the information I learned from the course I was able to visualize what needed to be done for me to have a business here in Korea. And I was surprised at the amount of support there was for business ideas in this country."

Shepherd is now deep in the development stage of his Hike Korea business, which will focus on the promotion of Korean

mountain culture through tourism-based services such as guided hiking tours, and through sponsored hikes publicized in the media.

"The Koreans love my concept because they very much love the mountains. So the idea of a foreigner being in this country promoting mountains and promoting mountain culture appealed to them," he said.

The business course also introduced Shepherd to a variety of services and people that he admits would have been difficult to find on his own, and allowed him the opportunity to apply for six months of rent-free office space at the Seoul Global Business Support Centre in COEX.

"If you are a foreigner by yourself with no language skills, you need to do these courses. You'd be banging your head against the wall trying to find out the information by yourself.

"In Korea and Seoul, networking is very important. People tend to want to do business with people they know. And if they like you, and they think your idea is good, they'll back you. ... You need to work with the system, not against it. It's very important."

According to recent figures released by Seoul Global Center, there are now more than 250,000 expats living in Seoul. Since the center opened in 2008, they have received more than 336,000 visits from foreigners seeking assistance with living and working in Korea.

Of the 26,000 counseling sessions conducted by the Seoul Global Center in 2010, more than 9,000 were related to work, and another 645 were about finance.

About 4,000 focused on administrative issues, while other main counseling topics were immigration, health, telecommunications and tourism.

This year the expat support center hopes to continue developing and promoting business courses, while also strengthening online counseling services through a revamped website and new smartphone applications for "mobile" counseling. (hamish.bolandrudder@gmail.com)

ATEK appoints new PR officer

Rachel Bailey, 24, has been appointed as the National Communications Officer for the Association for Teachers of English in Korea.

Bailey has been teaching in Busan since July and is a graduate of the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communications. In her new role, she will be responsible for the organization's contacts with the media as well as with expats.

Via e-mail, she said that she joined the organization because she feels it serves as a liaison between the foreign and Korean communities, offers resources to foreign teachers and builds a sense of community among expats.

She replaces Rob Ouwehand, who had held the position since early 2010. Ouwehand will enter graduate school in March and is no longer a teacher, making him ineligible for the office.

"I saw that, given my degree in journalism and my experience working in various kinds of media catering to a wide variety of audiences, I had something to contribute to a community of which I am a part," she said.

Ouwehand was confident in Bailey's qualifications for the positions and said he'll remain an associate member of the organization.

"I've been in touch with Rachel about the job and what projects and messages are important for ATEK communications, and I'm very impressed with her attitude and her qualifications," he said.

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