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[投稿論文：研究ノート]

# Guest Lectures in “Indie Rock ’88 to ’98” by Naoko Yamano of Shonen Knife

少年ナイフの山野直子さんによる

『インディーズロック ’88 ～ ’98』ゲスト講義

David Hoenigman

Visiting Lecturer, Faculty of Environment and Information Studies, Keio University

デイビッド・ヘニグマン

慶應義塾大学環境情報学部訪問講師

Correspondence to: david072@keio.jp

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to give a progress report about the “Indie Rock ’88 to ’98” course that I teach at Keio SFC. I explain the concept behind the course, and how it is constructed. I give the uninitiated an idea of what is meant by *indie rock*. I mention some of the albums that we focus on in the course, including Japanese band Shonen Knife’s 1992 album *Let’s Knife*. The article portrays some of the history of Shonen Knife, and explains their impact on the international indie rock world. The article recounts Shonen Knife leader Naoko Yamano’s online lectures in the “Indie Rock ’88 to ’98” class (6/10/2022 & 11/25/2022) via Zoom. Naoko Yamano has been active as the leader of Shonen Knife for over 40 years. During her virtual visits, among other topics, she told the students stories of her band touring with US grunge legends Nirvana in the early 1990s. This article includes an excerpt of her speech from her second visit, as well as selected material from the question and answer session.

本稿の目的は、私が慶應 SFC で担当している『インディーズ・ロック ’88 ～ ’98』講座の実践報告である。

まず、コースのコンセプトや構成について説明している。インディーズ・ロックとはどういうものなのか、初心者の方にもご理解いただけるだろう。日本のバンド、少年ナイフの1992年のアルバム『レッツ・ナイフ』など、このコースで取り上げるアルバムについて触れている。また、少年ナイフの歴史の一端を描き、海外のインディーズロック界に与えた影響についても解説している。バンドのリーダーである山野直子が、ゲストスピーカーとして2回（2022年6月10日・11月25日）Zoom訪問された授業を紹介。

2回目の訪問では、リーダーとして40年以上活動している彼女が、1990年代前半にアメリカのグランジレジェンドであるNirvana（ニルヴァーナ）と共にツアーを行った際のエピソードなどが語られた。本稿では、学生への講演の模様と、質疑応答を抜粋し掲載している。

Keywords: Shonen Knife, Japanese indie rock, Nirvana tours

少年ナイフ、日本のインディーロック、ニルヴァーナのツアー

## 1 The Unclear Meaning of the Term *Indie Rock*

In the first “Indie Rock ’88 to ’98” class of the semester, as a way to give students an immediate workable understanding of the imprecise criteria of the music to be discussed throughout the course, I invite them to simply think of *indie rock* as 1990s *rock music*. From that point, I hope that the dozens of artists, bands, and songs that we focus on throughout the term provide the students context to consider the inexact notion of what constitutes *indie rock*. My syllabus refers students to Novara and Henry’s (2009) description of the genre as “the careful balancing of pop accessibility with noise, playfulness in manipulating pop music formulae, sensitive lyrics masked by tonal abrasiveness and ironic posturing, a concern with ‘authenticity,’ and the cultivation of a ‘regular guy’ (or girl) image” (p. 817). To offer students further (perhaps more readily applicable) guidance from an undoubtedly familiar source, my syllabus also includes an excerpt from the *Wikipedia* page concerning *indie rock*:

Originally used to describe independent record labels, the term became associated with the music they [the labels] produced and was initially used interchangeably with alternative rock or “guitar pop rock.” ... During the 1990s, grunge and punk revival bands in the US and Britpop bands in the UK broke into the mainstream, and the term “alternative” lost its original counter-cultural meaning. The term “indie rock” became associated with the bands and genres that remained dedicated to their independent status.

As the rise and fall of both *grunge* and *Britpop*, including their cultural aftermath, are discussed at length in the course; this definition provides some of the footing on which to begin our analysis.

To view the album list included in the syllabus, one would be right to surmise that for the purposes of this course I employ a deliberately broad scope. At times, I found it hard to resist adding certain albums that stretch the definition of *indie rock*,

but nonetheless incorporate the zeitgeist of the era and act as an entry point for students to gain a deeper understanding of the time period and its cultural output. Yes, my definition of *indie rock* is far-reaching in this course, but pointedly so; and I pause to stress this to students when I feel that certain songs we are analyzing in class threaten to belie what I have already taught them to consider *indie rock*. Some of the featured artists have evolved beyond the term, others' relationship to it had only ever been tangential. Though my definition of *indie rock* is rather expansive, I still prefer the term to *alternative rock* which I feel became overused in its day (especially by profit driven radio program directors), and included many artists who did not have a shred of abrasiveness, irony, or outsider sensibility.

## 2 The “Indie Rock ’88 to ’98” Course at Keio SFC

Included below is an excerpt from the “Indie Rock ’88 to ’98” syllabus:

### Course Summary

This class will explore *indie rock* from 1988 to 1998. It will be a firsthand account of album (cassettes/CDs) buying and concert going during that time period. We will discuss bands and solo artists within their cultural and historical contexts. We will analyze albums, song lyrics, music videos, and footage of live performances. We will have discussions based on these materials. Students are expected to participate enthusiastically. There will be weekly homework that relates to the in-class topics. There will be a midterm essay test and a final presentation.

### Objectives / Intended Learning Outcome

Students will

1. gain insight into *indie rock* and why it was/is significant,
  - be introduced to dozens of relevant artists
  - discuss the artists in relation to mainstream culture
2. improve listening skills through the use of authentic materials
  - be given *YouTube* playlists and corresponding homework
  - listen to weekly lectures concerning the playlists

3. analyze and discuss challenging artistic content,
  - join in classroom discussions
  - express their reactions to the music
4. gain an appreciation of subcultures and music scenes,
  - consider the subcultural origins of the artists
  - gain an understanding of subgenres within *indie rock*
5. choose an artist/album to focus on for the final presentation.
  - give a detailed analysis of an album or artist of their choice
  - consider why certain artists resonate with them

Pop culture is usually considered in terms of decades: the ‘60s, the ‘70s, etc. I was inspired by Simon Reynolds’ excellent book *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (2005) to not be inhibited by this conventional chronological framework. Though I wanted my course to highlight a decade of music, I felt that in my case the years 1988 to 1998 were the most formative in my feelings concerning the type of music I wanted to discuss. Jane’s Addiction’s *Nothing’s Shocking* (1988) and Neutral Milk Hotel’s *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* (1998) would operate as bookends. My firsthand accounts of discovering these artists and the profound effects these albums (and dozens in between) had on me would begin as a 16-year-old MTV-obsessed high school student and end as a 26-year-old *indie rock* devotee in my own “aeroplane over the sea” from my native Ohio en route to Japan. Beginning in week two of the course, each class focuses on a certain year (week two:1988, week three:1989, etc.). As much as possible, I try to include personal memories of my reactions to the music upon initial exposure to it. My lectures contain anecdotes of when and how I first discovered the artists, and ideally recollections of seeing the bands perform live at crucial points in their careers. I believe that a personalized account of the time period and its landmark creative achievements offers students a deeper cultural understanding of the topic.

It may be through multiple readings of *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (1996) by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain that I gained a special

love of rock history through storytelling: the artists and fans become humanized, songs from past generations become approachable and relatable, and the atmosphere of the time period takes shape in our minds. In class, I speak from the perspective of an enthusiast of the music and do not claim to have special insider knowledge of the artists other than how the music affected me and those surrounding me at the time of its release. In this capacity, I see myself as a curator compiling lists of works for students to interact with and consider. Though the more well-known artists on my syllabus may be somewhat familiar to them, I suspect that a good portion of the material will be entirely new to their ears. Ideally, students will come to gain an affinity for certain albums or artists. Homework consists of viewing *YouTube* playlists that I've constructed (1992 playlist, 1993 playlist, etc.) to correspond with the year that we are focusing on the following week.

### 3 Shonen Knife: Japanese *Indie Rock* Pioneers

As this is a course delivered in English, I have almost entirely focused on works by native English speakers written and sung in English (Björk from Iceland, and Stereolab's Lætitia Sadier from France are two exceptions). However, to add cultural insight and give students a sense of the role Japanese artists played in the international *indie rock* scene, I have included Japanese musicians when I thought it relevant. Shonen Knife's *Let's Knife* (1992), Blonde Redhead's *Blonde Redhead* (1995), Cibo Matto's *Viva! La Woman* (1996), and Boredoms' *Super æ* (1998) are discussed in class<sup>1)</sup>. Of these four bands, I give Shonen Knife a place of particular significance. I point out that in the pre-internet days, before American young people had ready access to Japanese manga or anime online; for a certain subset of my generation, Shonen Knife was our first meaningful connection to Japan.

All-female Osaka trio Shonen Knife struck a chord with western audiences for a number of reasons. The music was wonderful; it was catchy, quirky, and tight. The playful subject matter of the lyrics ("Twist Barbie," "Flying Jelly Attack," "Cycling Is Fun," etc.) was refreshing. As a necessary reaction to the good-time *hair metal* of the 80s, harder rock may have overcorrected with the heavy-handed earnestness of

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*industrial rock* and *grunge*. It had become too serious, too fast (for example, *Let's Knife* was released less than two weeks after Pearl Jam's hit single “Jeremy” that told the story of a 15-year-old boy who committed suicide by gun in front of his entire class). The feelings of social unrest that came to a boil in the Los Angeles riots of spring 1992 infused *gangsta rap* albums such as Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* (1992) and Ice Cube's *The Predator* (1992) that were released, and took the genre mainstream, later that year. Though the emotional weight of all this music was justified and inevitable, it did lead to a certain fatigue among young people who were eager to embrace a brand of detached apathy that Richard Linklater's 1990 film *Slacker* had crystallized and put in motion.

Kurt Cobain of Nirvana was somewhere in between weightiness and apathy. Though many were eager to attach coherent meaning to his cryptic Gen X call to arms “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” few succeeded in a discernable way. While the lyrics to the Nirvana singles that followed did not indicate anything mirthful or lighthearted; in interviews at the time, it seemed Cobain was trying to shrug off the responsibility of being the voice of a generation and wanted to simply revel in poppy escapism. In comments to the British magazine *Melody Maker* in 1991, Cobain stressed what attracted him to Shonen Knife onstage, repeating the word “pop” as if it were a kind of insecticide against a swarm of earnestness-carrying flies:

“We saw Shonen Knife and they were so cool. I turned into a nine-year old girl at a Beatles concert. I was crying and jumping up and down and tearing my hair out –it was amazing. I've never been so thrilled in my whole life.

They play pop music – pop, pop, pop music.” (Scanlon, 1991, p. 37)

Cobain had been a Shonen Knife fan for years at this point. He especially loved their 1983 album *Burning Farm*. From his comments here, we can see that when discussing the topic with journalists his enthusiasm for the band included a certain forcefulness and defensiveness. The idea of “pop” was scorned in some circles of the US at the time, still a few years away from when *Britpop* would breathe new life into the term.

In addition to the much-needed lightheartedness they brought to western fans,

Shonen Knife were a bizarre, yet charming echo of our own culture reflected back to us via a heart-shaped pocket mirror from a distant Asian underground music scene. As Edward K. Chan (2016) writes, “They rocked in a similar way as the Ramones, to whom they are inevitably compared, with infectious power pop chords and songs about ice cream, public baths, choco bars, and other elements of Japanese pop culture.” (p. 120) In their music, we could hear wonderfully distorted reverberations of the Beach Boys, the Ramones, and Buzzcocks. As Shonen Knife’s sound became more *hard rock* oriented at certain moments in their career, we would hear transfigurations of Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, and Kiss. The trio had a knack for retaining their own charismatic spirit and identity while putting western influences through a grinder.

Shonen Knife are a success story. With little reason to expect that they would break out of their local Osaka music scene in the 1980s, they were discovered by Calvin Johnson of US-based K Records who released their music in America, leading to the band’s first live shows in the US. The original lineup (’81–’99) consisted of Naoko Yamano on vocals and guitar, Michie Nakatani on bass, keyboards and vocals; and Atsuko Yamano (Naoko’s sister) on drums and backing vocals. They were invited by Kurt Cobain to tour with his band twice (a UK tour in 1991, a US tour in 1993) at the height of Nirvana’s popularity. Shonen Knife also toured the US as part of the 1994 Lollapalooza Festival. The trio performed at the All Tomorrow’s Parties Festival in England in 2010, and again in 2016. According to setlist.fm, they have performed in: the US 277 times, the UK 113 times, Australia 41 times, and in Canada 23 times, as well as multiple times in various countries throughout Europe<sup>2)</sup>. Though lineup changes began to occur in 1999, Naoko Yamano has been locked in as the frontman and primary songwriter of Shonen Knife for over 40 years. Since 1982, the trio has released 22 studio albums.

## 4 Naoko Yamano’s Virtual Visits to Keio SFC

It was a great honor for us to welcome Naoko Yamano as a guest speaker (via Zoom) to the Indie Rock ’88 to ’98 class at Keio SFC on June 10th, 2022; and back

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again for an encore performance in the fall semester on November 25th, 2022. Below are excerpts of a transcript from the recording of her second virtual visit. Included here is a passage from her speech to the students, as well as selected material from the question and answer session.

#### **4.1 Naoko Yamano’s brief history (in English) of Shonen Knife:**

“We formed Shonen Knife very late in 1981. It was December 29th and we had our first rehearsal in Osaka, and since then we’ve been based in Osaka. Then we had the first show in Namba, Osaka. The first show was organized by our friend. After we had our first performance, people who watched our show invited us to perform at their show, and then after that we’ve never booked our shows by ourselves, we’ve always been invited by other bands or other people. One day when we played in Kyoto, a Japanese minor record label called Zero Records, the owner was Shin Hirakawa, asked us to release our album through his label. So, we recorded our first album *Burning Farm* and we released it in 1983, a very long time ago.”

“After we released our first album, an American guy from Olympia, Washington, USA came to Japan for his university graduate travel or something, his name was Calvin Johnson. He had his own record label, and he picked up our albums at an import record store in Tokyo. He took many Japanese underground albums back to the US. He had picked up Shonen Knife and he wanted to release our album as a cassette tape from his label called K Records. After people listened to our first cassette of *Burning Farm* from K Records, they invited us to release other records, so after that a record label called Gasatanka Records in Los Angeles invited us to play one show in Los Angeles in 1989.”

“At that time in Osaka we had a big audience, but usually Japanese audiences are very polite and very calm, just clapping hands after each song; but in America our audience was dancing and screaming, and so energetic. I was so surprised about that. Then in 1991 we were invited to the United States again, so we had four shows in America: L.A., San Francisco, New Jersey, and New York. Kurt Cobain from Nirvana came to our show in Los Angeles. After that, Kurt Cobain invited us as a support

band for his band's UK tour in December 1991. So, I didn't know the band Nirvana, but when I saw the photographs I was so scared to tour with them because they looked very wild, and it would be our first long overseas trip, so I was a bit scared. But our manager at that time said, "You should go," and we decided to go for a three week UK tour in December 1991 and once I met the members of Nirvana they were very kind to us, and very much were gentlemen, so we could have a very good time with them. Nirvana were just breaking out big in 1991 and they played at venues between 1,000 and 2,500 seats. We were invited to the shows as a support band again in 1993, it was for Nirvana's US tour. At that time, they played at very big arenas, so tens of thousands of people, very big places."

"We were playing music constantly and releasing our albums constantly, and in 1991 we released albums from a major label, first Crown Records and then Universal Records, and after that Warner Records. Since then we are touring constantly, and especially in these past 10 years we've toured overseas a lot; so in 2019, I was touring almost half the year: UK tour, European tour, US and Canada tour, and Australian tour. But after COVID-19 happened we had to stop touring overseas, but next year we will go to Scandinavian countries and the UK too."

#### 4.2 Excerpts from the Question and Answer Session: <sup>3)</sup>

**Student 1:** Yohitomo Nara's painting was used as the cover for the Shonen Knife album *Happy Hour* released in 1998. His work also appears in the music video for the song "Banana Chips" from that album. I was very surprised considering how well known he is today. I don't really connect the band with his artwork, how did that come about?

**Naoko Yamano:** The album was released by a record company called Universal Victor, and our contact there suggested that we ask Yoshitomo Nara, who is an amazing painter, to design the album cover. And we liked it, it was not famous yet, but very good. We were told if we liked his work, we could have him design our album cover.

So, we contacted Nara-san and he liked us and knew our work, and agreed to design the cover for us. At the time, he was living in Düsseldorf, Germany, and there was no internet yet, so I remember we communicated with him by fax. Just recently, our live performance was uploaded on Nara-san’s Instagram, so if you are interested, please have a look. By the way, I just met up with him last week.

In 2016, when we had a live concert at Colchester Arts Centre, an old church turned into a live house in a suburb of London, Nara-san also had an exhibition at a gallery in Piccadilly Circus in London. So, he came to our concert, and we also went to see his exhibition. He also invited us to his 60th birthday event and we performed for him. We met through the *Happy Hour* cover, and have been in contact ever since.

**Student 2:** Which band member writes the songs?

**NY:** For the last 10 years or more, I have been doing it. In the beginning, Michie, the bassist, and I wrote the music together. After that, Atsuko, the drummer, wrote two or three songs. So, I can say that most of the songs are written by me.

**S2:** What do you think about when you compose?

**NY:** First of all, I think about the lyrics. I think of keywords that I feel in my daily life, such as “this is interesting,” “this is cute,” “this is delicious,” “this phenomenon is fun,” and so on. I write down the keywords in a notebook. Then, when it comes time to write a song, I remember those keywords and make a long lyric from them. Since we do a lot of overseas activities, the main lyrics have to be in English. In the beginning, there were many lyrics in Japanese, but there are still more songs with English lyrics. If I don’t start writing lyrics in English, translating Japanese lyrics into English changes the number of words and makes it difficult to match the sound. English is smooth like a wave when you add a melody. Japanese has one sound per character, such as “a-i-u-e-o” or “o-ha-yo-u-go-zai-ma-su.” Japanese is very digital, and English pronunciation is very analog. So, I make the lyrics in English first. And

then make them rhyme. This makes the song groovy. While looking at the lyrics, I play the guitar and add the melody that comes into my head. I add the A melody, B melody, chorus, bridge, and guitar solo. It is more difficult to write the lyrics than the melody.

**Student 3:** Do you play music or create music for your fans or for yourself? I think it's the difference between the designer and the artist, you know? I think there are both. Some people create music for their fans, and some people create music for themselves.

**NY:** Actually I don't have any consciousness about that. People who want to earn money through music might write songs for fans without the musician's taste in mind, but in my case, I would like to express my feelings, and the main purpose of my music is to make people happy through our music. So, if I write songs I write happy songs or fun songs people can be happy to. I usually pick up very positive things for my lyrics, sometimes cute animals or very tasty foods, and sometimes I write songs about Japanese food like sushi or something, because I would like to introduce very tasty Japanese food to everywhere all over the world.

**S3:** So, we can see musicians on our cell phones or on the internet, but in past eras, people had to go to a concert hall to listen to music. We could see the musicians and make more of a connection. The musicians and fans could more easily communicate. So, the opportunity to personally connect the artists and the fans has decreased. It's harder to make that connection now.

**NY:** Yeah, you are very right. Of course, listening to music through a smartphone or something, I can be happy if I listen to music that way. But the actual live performance is very different and we can share a music groove directly, and of course the sound is very loud. I can be motivated so I can be happier, and we can exchange our energy with our audience. So if people at the club get excited their energy comes

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to me, and I get excited more and I express my music. It’s like playing a game of catch with our feelings. After the show, people can be happy and get healthy, so it’s a very good opportunity to experience real live shows. Of course, I can say fun comments between songs. I’m from Osaka so I like joking. I’m happy if people are having fun or laughing or getting excited. So, experiencing the actual live shows is very important, especially for young people.

**Student 4:** Comparing Japanese to foreign audiences, how are they different? Which is easier to perform to?

**NY:** In the past, the reactions of foreign and Japanese audiences were different, but recently, for the past 20 years or so, they’re not so different. However, there are differences depending on the city. In some places, the audience listens quietly, while in others the audience makes a lot of noise. In Japan, Osaka and Tokyo are different. Osaka audiences are more responsive to jokes and the like. Tokyo audiences are more refined.

**Student 5:** The music scene has changed from when you were touring with Nirvana to now, but do you think you can successfully convey old music in a new form to the current era?

**NY:** Nowadays, with the use of PCs and machines, even people who cannot play instruments can create the music they want, and the range has expanded to include sounds that cannot be produced by human singing voices, sampling, and so on. In contrast, the old, indigenous, live music, such as folk music, for example, has a different quality from that of machines. It would be good if we could create individuality and uniqueness rather than imitation. In addition, with the recent spread of streaming subscriptions, some people listen to one song at a time or skip to the chorus. In the past, people used to listen to a single album, and it was not possible to skip to the middle of a song. The way of listening has also changed. Incidentally, old

LPs (vinyl records) are back in vogue these days, but I hear that CDs are going to be the next big thing, so those who have been listening to CDs may already have their eyes on them. I think that the impression and the way of hearing music also changes depending on the listener's state of mind at the time, so it is impossible to distinguish between now and then, or between analog and digital.

**Student 6:** Do you have any painful experiences of your activities in the US?

**NY:** I have not had any hard experiences with people in the US because people are friendly and fun. However, the country is large, so when we travel to multiple cities, we have to drive 8 hours one day to do a gig, and then travel another 7 or 8 hours the next day. That is hard for me because I am not a fan of long car rides. Then there is the fact that the food is almost always the same no matter where you go. Although recently, I can sometimes have a seafood bowl like *poke-don*. I like to eat a little bit of everything, but there is only one kind of food, like hamburgers. The amount of food is also large, so it pains me when I can't finish it and end up leaving some behind.

**Student 7:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work life?

**NY:** We haven't been able to perform overseas since our March 2020 event in Perth, Australia. Until 2019, I was busy going overseas half the year, so when the pandemic started, I thought, "This is my chance to take a break" and relaxed a bit, cycling around the neighborhood. In 2021, the band resumed a bit in Japan, performing live in western Japan, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka.

At the Okayama concert, face shields, which they had made themselves, were handed out to the audience. The audience wore shields like astronauts wear over their masks, and from the stage it looked like a row of Barbie dolls in boxes. This was a rare sight that I think I will never see again. These days, we are back to our old activities in Japan, and I look forward to seeing fans on tour in Europe and the UK next year.

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**Student 8:** I learned from the internet that Shonen Knife’s cover of The Carpenters’ “Top of the World” was used in the movie *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*. I was surprised, because I like this movie and have seen it many times.

**NY:** (smiles and nods)

**S8:** You have performed with Kurt Cobain several times, what was he like offstage?

**NY:** Kurt was rather quiet and very gentle. He was a nice, pure person with deep blue eyes. The first time I met him was on a live tour in the UK in November 1991. At one point, he asked me if he could play our song “Twist Barbie” at a secret concert. I taught him the guitar chords, and he learned them right away, and he really did play the song live. When Nirvana came to Japan in 1992, their manager and others did not take good care of them, so we took the band members and staff to dinner. The next day they played at the Osaka Kokusai Kouryuu Center and we went to see them; Shonen Knife were scheduled to play somewhere else in Osaka later that night. Then Dave Grohl, the drummer, said on stage, “We are going to see Shonen Knife live after this!” And a lot of people in the audience followed us to a smaller live music club, and the neighbors in the area got mad at us.

## 5 Conclusion

In addition to her firsthand knowledge of the time period and music that we discuss in this course, I believe there is something deeper that Naoko Yamano’s visit conveyed to my students. The Shonen Knife story is inspirational. From the early days of the band, there’s been a style and a purposefulness to their sound that transcends culture and language (the *Burning Farm* album that Cobain so loved, was sung mostly in Japanese). When the band was given the chance to shine on the international stage, they played their hearts out, and won over thousands of fans. From there, Yamano never looked back. Over the years, she has turned Shonen Knife

into an *indie rock* institution. Central to her success, was the creative spirit, self-belief, and determination that continues to infuse the band's recordings and performances. By having a chance to interact with Naoko Yamano, I hope that my students reflect on how far her creative vision has taken her, and how they can do likewise in their own careers.

## Endnotes

- 1) Cornelius' *Fantasma* (1997) was also originally included on the syllabus, but was cut when news of Keigo Oyamada's bullying controversy appeared in 2020.
- 2) *Search for setlists: shonen knife | setlist.fm*.(n.d.b). <https://www.setlist.fm/search?artist=6bd39a9a&query=shonen+knife>
- 3) Some of the material is translated from Japanese. Students are usually only allowed to speak English in class, but for Naoko Yamano's visit they were given the choice to speak English or Japanese.

## References

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