

The Wire, The West Australian: June 24 2009

THE WIRE

The West  
Australian



## Turning Japanese

By Matt Giles

When emerging WA filmmaker Kenta McGrath was asked by local label Heartless Robot Records to film a mere tour diary of the Japanese of tour of three of its artists – Stina Thomas, Chris Cobilis and Predrag Delibasich – he immediately said yes. Then he thought about it for a while and said no. Instead, he wanted to film a complete tour documentary. That documentary, *Three Hams in a Can*, will screen as part of the 2009 Revelation Film Festival next month.

“I think the idea was to shoot some concert and behind-the-scenes footage which they could later use to promote the label and the musicians,” McGrath says. “I thought of Tokyo and imagined the kind of places the musicians might visit, the interactions that might take place, and I started to see the possibilities of a more universal film that simply observed them as foreign holiday-goers rather than touring musicians.”

In fact, *Three Hams in a Can* features only snippets of performances by its subjects. Most of its content is an artful, unromanticised treatment of both the travel and band documentary genres. Instead of the glamorous grit of Sonic Youth’s *The Year Punk Broke* or the drama of Wilco’s *I am Trying to Break Your Heart*, *Three Hams in a Can* presents travel and performing music as mundane acts much like shopping or renting a mobile telephone.

This approach charges unimportant moments with over-determined meaning. The emotional peak of the film takes place during a visit to Delibasich’s Japanese in-laws, without his wife. McGrath was born and raised in Japan and through his camera and translations we are able to see the language barrier that distances the musicians from a family of strangers who have nonetheless graciously welcomed them into their home.

But after such “real-life” moments, the film inevitably returns to music. It offers peeks of the avant-garde practices of Thomas, Cobilis and Delibasich, as well as a brief window into Japan’s experimental music scene. Plus, as unromanticised a travel doco as it is, it still manages to give an alluring, humanising whiff of Japan through its heat, buskers, temples and the constant chirping of cicadas.

“It doesn’t have a plot or driving narrative; for the most part, it simply meanders and quietly observes the trio and other parts of the city,” McGrath says.