



'Crossing' Over

Trading breakups and pain for songs about breakups and pain, the poets of Crossing Togo tilt toward triumph | By Dan Oko | Photography by Debora Smail |

Crossing Togo—whose energetic 10-song debut album *Of Love, Scorn and Insecurity* just dropped, proffering soft-rock '70s sounds with hints of grunge and Middle Eastern melodies—has a meet-cute story worthy of Nora “Sleepless in Seattle” Ephron.

Two years ago, Japanese-born Ko Nakamura—just “Ko” when he performs—was kicked out of the Houston band he’d been fronting. “I got the it’s-not-you-it’s-me speech,” recalls the soft-spoken lyricist and singer, 29, who fronted cover bands in college while studying engineering and creative writing. “They were, like, ‘We consider ourselves beer and nuts, and you’re champagne and caviar.’” So, Ko decided to form a new group.

At the same time, just-divorced Corpus Christi native Scott Spencer, 46, was looking for a songwriter with the vocal chops to match his fluid guitar compositions. A wise-cracking, multi-instrumental talent, Spencer spotted Ko’s web posting. “Yeah, we met on Craigslist,” Spencer says, shaking his head, embarrassed.

Kicking back at Ko’s Heights-area townhouse, the duo shares a bottle of red with their producer, Eric Jarvis. An industry vet who’s worked with Ray Wiley Hubbard and other Texas legends, Jarvis was instrumental in helping Togo achieve lift-off. A hookah or a few groupies might have completed the living-room scene, but these casually dressed musicians are not everyday rockers. Indeed, producer Jarvis is the only full-time musician in attendance.

The relatively straight-laced Ko has a day job at a law office, while Spencer runs an investment firm. Their personalities are as distinct as their hairdos; Ko has close-cropped black hair, while blue-eyed Spencer boasts a hearty nimbus of sandy curls. But the differences in style coalesce in the music.

Spencer and Ko jumped at the chance to join Jarvis in the studio. The producer in turn sent Togo’s arrangements out to his far-flung colleagues, such as drummer Matt Johnson—who backed the late Jeff Buckley, a singer Ko’s voice recalls at times.

Of Love’s songs focus on heartbreak. Hand-picked backing players—who’ve worked with the likes of Shakira and Rufus Wainwright—provide a backdrop that borrows from Eastern music and veers into hard rock. Tracks include an ode to Spencer’s father, who succumbed to Alzheimer’s, and “Like Water,” which channels Spencer’s surfing hobby into a meditation on the waves.

Togo hopes good feedback at Austin’s South-by-Southwest fest in March will bring broad recognition. “I look at Steely Dan,” says dreamer Spencer. “There were only two guys in that band. That may be a little ambitious, but they made amazing music.”

By contrast, Ko is content to focus on his poetry and law career while enjoying the success the band has attained so far. “I’m happy with the way the songs turned out,” he says. “I’m not even thinking about playing before a thousand people.” ■

SAD SONGS SAY SO MUCH Crossing Togo, photographed at SugarHill studios as they perform for a female fan, just dropped their moving debut disc.