



Mitsune – *Dotanba*

Sleeve Notes

Hold onto the sides. This is going to be some trip. Brace, brace, for a journey across epochs and tomorrows, flowing, changing lanes, looping the loop. Headbutting the fourth wall. Taking in birdsong and crickets, fireworks and Fibonacci, cross-cultural jostling and Japanese spiritual jazz. Arriving back — joyous, connected, incandescently free — where we began.

This, then, is *Dotanba*, the long-awaited concept album by Mitsune, that acclaimed Berlin-based quartet with DIY spirit and duelling shamisen at their core. Informed as much by ancient folk traditions and gather-round-the-fire storytelling as punk, prog rock and cinematic soundscapes, the seven movements of *Dotanba* unfurl with organic ease, featuring lyrics sung in Japanese or chanted, trance-like, to open channels further.

Think old school made nu-school. Be they loud and wild or chilled and ambient, the foundations are acoustic: recorded live, in conversation, in one room, amplifier-free. Effects and overdubs came later.

“*Dotanba* is nature spewed out onto an audio file,” says shamisen player and vocalist Youka Snell, an erstwhile classically trained violinist who grew up in Aotearoa and Australia, the daughter of a Japanese mother. “It is the coming together of four individuals from wildly disparate backgrounds with a combined desire to break down structures and tap into the roots of what unites us as humans.”

Need a visual? Mitsune’s onstage costumery involves flamboyant headpieces and vintage kimonos pimped with sequins, spikes, fur and shells, often handsewn by band members right before a show. Their leftfield art vibe was shaped by vocalist, flautist, shamisen player and free jazzier Shiomi Kawaguchi, who trained as a sculptor. More recently, Mitsune have begun working with designers Milligan Beaumont, a multidisciplinary artist from Stroud, UK, and the Berlin-based Don Aretino: “Don helps us make these crazy deconstructed outfits where you might still have the kimono sleeve, but then tits are out, for example,” says Snell.

Much of *Dotanba* is as improvised as the brief “*popo*” interludes Mitsune weave into every live performance. Jamming on grooves. Finding humour in skits, tropes, detail. Greek-born percussionist and vocalist Petros Tzekos, a merry prankster as well as a student of ritualistic Afro-diasporic rhythms, might build a tower from objects that tumble and fall. Double bassist and vocalist Daigo Nakai — raised in Japan, Australian-accented after years in Melbourne — may morph into his drag alter-ego Honolulu. Kawaguchi and Snell might venture into the crowd and trigger a mass laughing fit that becomes a paganistic scream-fest.

Consider each musician a friendly avatar, arriving through a portal.



"All of us have interpersonal chemistries," says Snell of the current incarnation of Mitsune, which was founded in 2018 as a shamisen trio. "We want to wake the inner child and spark wonder."

There's an inclusivity to this gang of outsider musicians, none of whom live in their home countries, all of whom are fed by mysticism and nature ("Our instruments are each made from natural materials") and consider storytelling and folklore a universal root. With the psychedelic energy of the original recording session further enhanced by post-production wizards, Pascal Karier and Adam Sait, *Dotanba* is a vibrant, anything-goes odyssey through shifting dimensions.

A note on the album's title: in Japanese, dotanba (土壇場) translates to English as "the last minute," "the eleventh hour" or "a critical moment." During Japan's Edo period, a dotanba was literally an earthen execution platform where criminals were beheaded. Over time, it has evolved metaphorically to mean a final, inescapable moment where your fate is decided.

"There is a question underneath this album that I have been carrying for a long time," says Shiomi Kawaguchi. "What is life and death? Having studied sculpture, the cycle of life, and the human body in its physical form, has always been part of how I think. Travelling west from Japan along the Silk Road, I also encountered many funeral traditions across Asia. I saw how differently people understand what it is that gives life meaning."

"When I play shamisen, I can still see the landscapes of Japan in my mind like mountains, sea, the sky. I see festivals. I see sad things," she continues. "For me, *Dotanba* is more like a conversation - between ourselves, with bandmates, and our memories. This recollection, and mixing with others and rebuilding, happened in many different ways with all the members throughout the album."

Album opener 'Dotanba: Is it a day before the day?' lights the spark. The shamisen is played rhythmically and percussively, twangingly and aggressively, as it has been for generations in Japan's Tsugaru province, a crucial element of the country's min'yō folk traditions. Bongos patter out Middle Eastern-inspired beats. A sharp, partly improvised shinobue bamboo flute solo conjures dragons descending from the sky. Bass rolls in. Percussion thunders. Words repeat, underlining the theme.

Long inhale. Longer exhale. We're into 'Nigōme no zassetsu', a largely freeform bass solo akin to determinedly climbing a mountain - or, if you like, ascending a rollercoaster's lift hill. Building tension, getting in the zone, passing spirits and monsters until, teetering, we're at 'Jinsei chōro no gotoshi' ('Life is Like Morning Dew'), simultaneously titled 'The Taniwha asked the butterfly, "what do you wanna wear in paradise?")'. It's a reminder of life's impermanence, a trance-filled interlude in which Snell's shamisen solo imagines hitching a ride on the tail of the Māori taniwha water spirit.

'Saitara Bushi (lovesong to our toil)' is a fisher's celebration song from Japan's Miyagi prefecture, traditionally sung - with an onomatopoeic kakegoe (heave-ho) chant - when hauling in a large catch.



What was originally a min'yō folk tune is now a paean to the hard work put into Mitsune by all four band members, each of whom was raised in proximity to the slow-breathing, ever-rhythmic sea.

"We've been touring and travelling a lot and seen so many new things, met so many people, eaten so much different food, touched so many different plants and swum in so many different bodies of water," says Snell. "We've been gathering the world to us."

'Mitsune Ondo' draws from the bouncy, lilting rhythms of Japan's summer matsuri community festivals, inviting dance, triggering fireworks, as Kawaguchi's lyrics champion the virtues of dancing, singing and looking at the sky, garnering perspective wherever you are in the world: *"When I look up at the moon, it's familiar from the past... Everything will be good/It's a loss if you don't dance at a time like this!"*

Then, as we dance, comes percussive thunder. An eruption of sound whose title, 'Kumonoko chirasu', translates as "a swarm of baby spiders." A chaotic, ecstatic, wildly abandoned mix of drums, grooves and tempos sourced from all over. Woodblocks, cymbals, giant gongs. Found objects that rattle and clash. Morocco's double-sided farad drum, as wielded in Sufi trance. China's traditional barrel-shaped tanggu drum, one large, one small, deployed together, a feature of Buddhist rituals and festivals.

All of it looms, then bursts forth, a sonic rockslide, crafting an intense percussive narrative before careening into the album's final movement, 'Setogiwa: death before life', where the notion of dotanba, the critical moment, takes form. Here, in the margins between binaries — success and failure, beginnings and endings, life and death — Mitsune figuratively teeters on the water's edge. Negotiating boundaries. Reintroducing musical themes.

Reaffirming the perfection of nature, the kakegoe chant is redelivered in phrasing based on a descending Fibonacci sequence — like a pinecone, or the arrangement of seeds in a sunflower's head. The inner child is here, eyes wide, as sound becomes an extraordinary adventure in pure imagination, uninhibited curiosity and serious musical chops.

The shamisen plays, as it did at the start, and the last note hangs in the air: *Dotanba*.

Words by Jane Cornwell