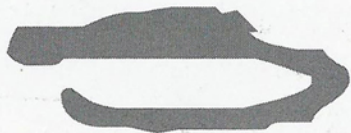


Sonic Youth in Manila: Guitar Terrorists Strike!

All photographs by CRISTINA CASTILLO



"O THIS IS MEGAMALL," says Lee Ranaldo. "The biggest fucking mall."

We are cruising along EDSA in a rental van, and I am sitting between Ranaldo, one of Sonic Youth's two guitarists and bassist Kim Gordon. I pinch myself and silently repeat a mantra: this is really happening . . . this is really happening . . .

Sonic Youth are, of course, alternative music godhead. Emerging from the New York avant garde art/rock scene in the early Eighties, guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo, bassist Kim Gordon and drummer Steve Shelley stretched the boundaries of post-punk rock to include massive slabs of raw guitar feedback and ringing harmonic overtones. Their uncompromising independent stance and fearless experimental bent helped usher in the era of modern "alternative" rock as we know it. It is extremely difficult to imagine bands like Nirvana and Pavement, now alternative music deities in their own right, happening without Sonic Youth having blazed the trail.

And here they were in Manila, as part of MTV Asia's "Alternative Nation" Tour, sharing the bill with the Foo Fighters

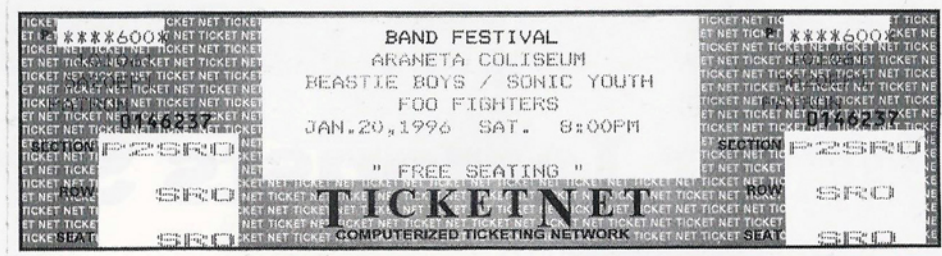
MANILA SETLIST	KIM	THURSTON	LEE
1. SCHIZ	BASS	DUO	LEO
2. TEENAGE RIOT	BASS	SEA	BLASTER
3. BULL IN THE HEATHER	PAGE	W.J.	L.P.
4. STARFIELD ROAD	BASS	W.J.	L.P.
5. WASHING MACHINE	GUITAR	W.J.	TIL.P.
6. NO QUEEN	GUITAR	W.J.	L.P.
7. SAUCER LIKE	GUITAR	BLUE	Y
8. 100%	BASS	BLUE	WOODY
9. BECUZ	GUITAR	BLUE	Y
10. ERIC	BASS	DRIFT	RUSTY
11. SKINK	BASS	R.J.	SUNNY
12. DIAMOND SEA	BASS	R.J.	SUNNY
13. WHITE / CATH ? MOTE			

Opposite

Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo bring on the noise.

Above

The Manila set list.



and the Beastie Boys. The Fighters and the Beasties are both great slamming bands, but Sonic Youth inhabit a universe of their own, filled with music of a strange and terrible beauty. So when BMG Philippines' Vic Valenciano called to say that Sonic Youth were having lunch with opening act the Eraserheads prior to the concert, I lost no time debasing myself and begging for an invite. And when they proposed a quick city tour of Manila after lunch, I completely lost all sense of shame and volunteered myself and photographer Cristina Castillo as tour guides.

"The Beatles played here in '66," I offer.

"Really?" says Kim.

"And Marcos had some thugs beat them up at the airport."

"Beat them up? Why would they do that?"

"The Marcoses wanted them to play in the palace, and as you know, the Beatles don't do impromptu gigs. So when they were about to leave for the airport . . . pow!"

"Are we going to get the same treatment here?" asks Lee.

"I seriously doubt it."

Eddie and Ming at a Sonic Youth show. Now *that* was a thought.

"WHAT'S 'Bawal Umihi Dito?'" asks Lee.

"It means 'Don't piss here'," says Cristina.

"Oh. Okay."

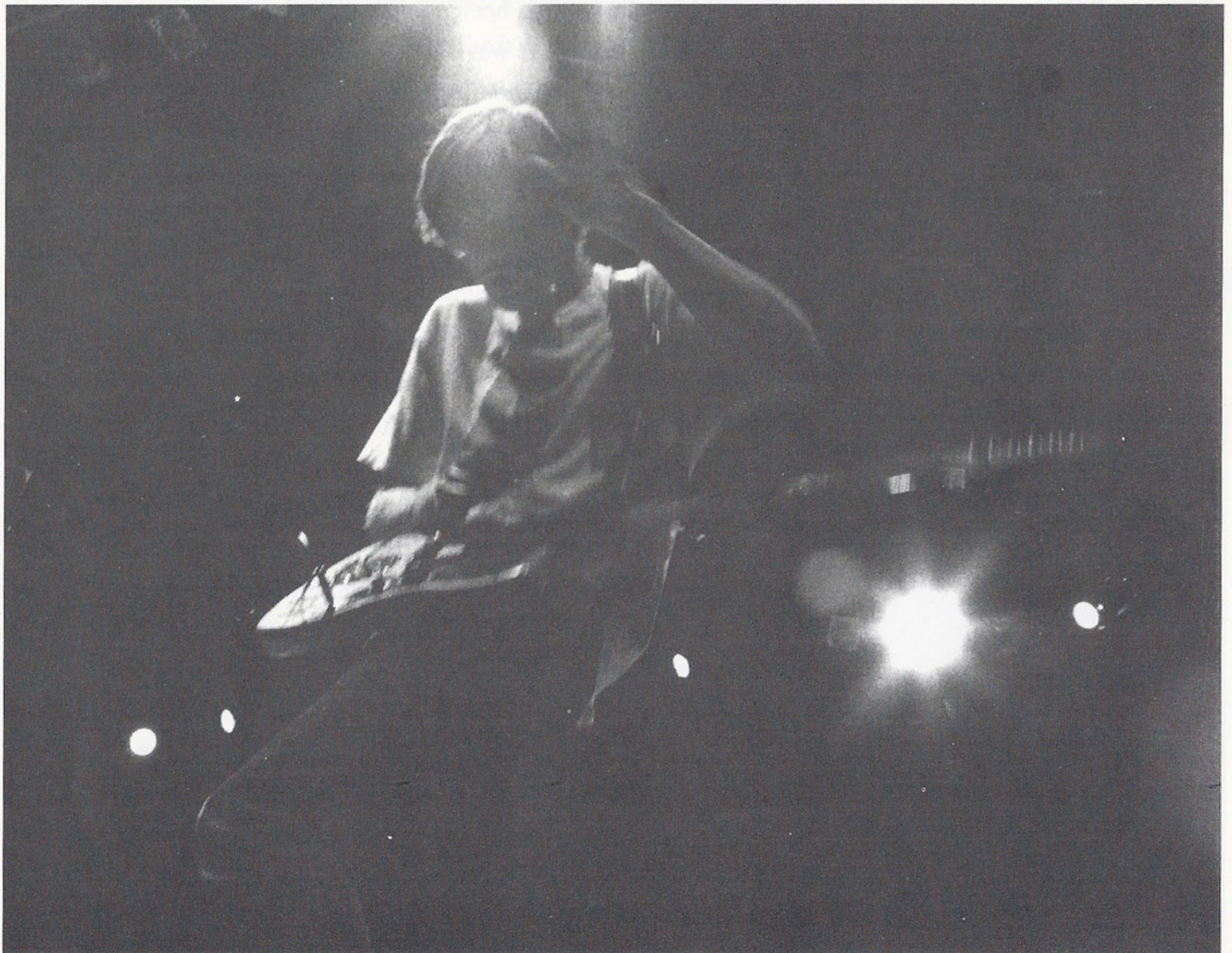
We are in Intramuros and Eleanor—Thurston Moore's mother and a very nice lady—is enthusiastically taking snapshots of jeepneys and *calesas*. Thurston had elected to stay at the hotel with drummer

Steve Shelley. The rest of the Sonics are getting a pretty quick, if somewhat bent, idea of Pinoy pop culture. So far we have covered jeepneys, cockfights, "TF" movies, hotel lounge bands, dog-eating, traffic, the odd-even scheme, and the global ubiquity of fastfood chains.

"The Dunkin' Donuts people really have their shit together here," notes Peter Vandervelde, Sonic Youth's red-haired Dutch tour manager.

"Did you know that in the States they had to legally change

Blinded by the light.



**A Sonic Youth
concert blasts
you out of
yourself,
drenching
you in a sonic
bath, until there
is no you.**



the name 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' to 'KFC'?" asks Lee. "That's because technically, it wasn't really chicken they were serving. It was a genetically-mutated thing with six legs. They got more drumsticks that way."

"Wow."

"We were art students, slackers, heavy dopers," says Lee, telling the Sonic Youth story as we head back to the hotel so the band could chill before playing.

New York had always been a fertile breeding ground for bands that were, well, different. There was of course the Velvet Underground in the late Sixties, singing about shooting heroin and sadomasochism while the Beatles sang "All you need is love." Then in the late Seventies, punk crawled out of the Bowery with bands like the Patti Smith Group, the Ramones and Television, bands which later inspired a musical revolution across the Atlantic with the Sex Pistols and the Clash. And in the Eighties emerged Sonic Youth.

"The band's four members combined hepster knowledge culled from four separate corners of the bohemian globe," writes Byron Coley. "Bassist/guitarist Kim Gordon brought intense avant-art credentials, strange pop sensibilities, and a uniquely cracked reading of the California Girl mythos. Guitarist Lee Ranaldo brought unassailable technique, and a gift for tongues osmotically received through submersions in the works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Dylan, Mitchell, Young, et. al. Guitarist Thurston Moore brought idiotic loads of cultural fandom and mania, a heavy sense of punk justice, and riff-savvy as straight and dirty as his bangs. Shelley (who became a permanent member in 1985) brought bonafide midwestern hard-core experience, fresh-scrubbed rhythm presence, and art-rock width potential. These four disparate tastes combined to produce a crazy cultural stew that was nearly impossible to resist as it was to codify."

"It's as difficult as it ever was to make music that's uncommercial and

unknown," says Lee. "There's always been some underground culture, even to react against. It's gotten easier for us because we've been around a long time and we're on a good label now. We've always been able to do things exactly the way we want to do them. It's a very lucky situation, being a band that doesn't write hits."

I wonder aloud how they feel touring Asia as part of a package tour, not that much unlike the Beatles or Freddie and the Dreamers back in '66.

"Alternative music to us means mainstream," says Kim. "In America what's called 'alternative music' has become the status quo. It's like commercial radio format, like Bush and Oasis. We know what it is, but we don't really relate to it that much."

I ask about the currently overused shibboleth in the music scene which is "punk," with bands claiming to be the true inheritors of punk's scabrous legacy, and slagging each other for not being "punk" enough. I also ask them what they think of the current punk revival, with bands like Green Day and Rancid resurrecting the massive buzzsaw guitar sound and melodic vocals of early British punk.

"They remind me of Sha-na-na," says Lee, referring to a now-largely-forgotten Woodstock-era Fifties revival band.

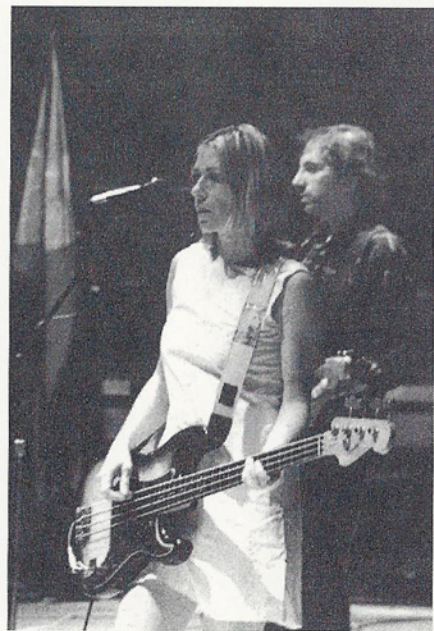
"We've never been into retro music of any kind. It's like playing dress-up, and not working very hard at it."

"What's punk in 1995? I think there's like three or four different kinds of punk," says Kim. "There's power-pop punk like Green Day and Offspring, which is similar to what South Bay/LA punk was like in the Eighties. And then there's radical punk which is groups like Bikini Kill and the grl power groups which is much more radical. And then there's the sort of techno punk like Nine Inch Nails."

And then there's Sonic Youth. Where exactly does the band fit into this schemata?

"We're post-punk, from the original punk," she says without batting an eyelash.

Bassist Kim Gordon (with Lee Ranaldo): "We're post-punk, from the original punk."



SECURITY is unusually tight backstage at the Araneta Coliseum. We run into a couple of dazed Eraserheads, who bravely faced down an impatient crowd earlier in the evening. With them is Keltscross bassist Jeng Tan, still floating in cloudland after finally meeting her idol Kim Gordon and basking in the Sonic's reflected aura of total coolness.

The Foo Fighters do a good job of churning the mosh pit into a frenzy with their brand of three-chord power pop punk. There is an air of keen anticipation by the time Sonic Youth takes the stage. First onstage is 18-month-old Coco, Kim and Thurston's daughter, already wearing her hearing protectors. Good idea there, Coco. With her is Eleanor, who in spite of having been knocked down and injured in an Auckland show by an overenthusiastic member of the audience, is as expectant as any fan.

"Have you always been into your son's music?" I ask.

"Oh yes," she says. In fact, Eleanor was at some of the 1995 Lollapalooza shows when Sonic Youth played.

The guitar tech is frenziedly checking and re-checking the band's arsenal of some 35 guitars and basses, most of which are in out-of-this-world alternative tunings—GGBDGA, EEBBEF#—and most of which bear the scars and marks of hundreds of gigs.

Finally, Sonic Youth walks onstage.

"Good evening my Filipino friends. We're Sonic Youth from New York City. This song is called 'Schizophrenia'."

At the first unearthly howls of wailing feedback and monstrous chords, the crowd explodes.

"Noise rock" has been the term of convenience critics apply to Sonic Youth. The band does make use of feedback, dissonance, percussive effects, drones, harmonics, distortion and sheer volume in deconstructing pop conventions. In lesser hands this approach soon grates, but Sonic Youth manage to create eerie soundscapes that are strangely fascinating, even beautiful.

In the best tradition of trance music, a Sonic Youth concert blasts you out of yourself, drenching you in a sonic bath, until there is no you.

The band runs through "Teenage Riot," "Bull in the Heather," "Eric's Trip," "Skink," "100%" and several songs from the new album *Washing Machine*. By the time they reach their final song, the shimmering, 20-minute symphony called "Diamond Sea," the crowd is rapt in sheer sonic bliss.

BACKSTAGE after the set, I run into the Eraserheads again, now looking more dazed than ever.

Died and gone to heaven is how Jeng Tan looks.

"I feel like a baby," says Eraserhead Buddy Zabala.

The Beastie Boys are on. Great as they are, somehow I don't feel like sullyng the purity of the Sonic Youth experience. My ears are ringing, but I feel strangely cleansed.

We wave good-bye to Sonic Youth as they head for the van.

They are going bowling.

11 February 1996

Sunday Inquirer Magazine

