

GO WITH THE FLOW



Able Noise's George Knegt (left) and Alex Andropoulos in The Hague, January 2025

Able Noise

The Scottish-Greek/Dutch duo's fluid post-rock is crafted from the precise placement and exchange of elements and gestures

By Abi Bliss

Photography by Sean Charlton White

"In documentary photography," George Knegtel remembers, "what we really had drilled into us when doing a project were the 'why' questions. Why are you the one photographing this project now? Why shouldn't your neighbour, or someone from a different culture do it? And why now? Making sure that nothing is accidental, that you always think through why you're placing something there."

It's easy to see how this approach translates into the notes that the Dutch guitarist places so thoughtfully when she and Scottish-Greek drummer Alex Andropoulos play together as Able Noise. The pair met when they were both students at The Hague's Royal Academy of Art. While they share the ability of Still House Plants to reimagine post-rock as a blank canvas for bold, unconfined structural strokes, their hushed vocals, delicate melodies and sense of intricate balance suggest a world sketched out on more intimate, yet still unpredictable lines. If her clean-toned style of baritone guitar is a gentle stream – darting through channels or whirling in small eddies, but mostly a measured flow – then Andropoulos's drumming is a riverbed in flux, with jutting rocks, shifting sands and tugging weeds as much shaped by the waters as containing them. Meanwhile, field recordings, tape manipulations and sudden ruptures add further layers of self-disruption.

According to Knegtel, continually asking why helped both develop as musicians: "I came from a more reserved way of playing and performing and Alex was much more explosive. So I'm toning him down drum-wise, but over time he has really made me boost things up and be aggressive."

When we talk over Zoom, both are at Knegtel's flat in The Hague, Andropoulos having travelled there from his home in Athens in preparation for an upcoming concert at the city's conservatoire. Having spent much of the previous three years working on their new album *High Tide*, there's an understandable air of both enthusiasm and trepidation. But it soon becomes clear that, beyond any first-night nerves, the pair approach every performance on a site-specific level, tailoring each set to the anticipated audience, room acoustics and general vibes. "When I have already built an image in my head of the mood of the space, the size, the smell, the colours or the light, and then if we get to the venue and it is completely different, that always kind of freaks me out," Knegtel says. "I feel as though I need to reprogram myself to this new environment."

"I put way, way too much pressure on us about doing something new," admits Andropoulos. "For example, we did a really nice gig in Madrid two years ago: new crowd, new city, everything new. And then two weeks before it we discovered that the other act on the bill were actually friends of ours from Rotterdam who have seen us about ten times. So it's like playing to a fresh crowd plus those two opinions in the corner."

"Like performing your magic trick to a new audience," nods Knegtel. "But two of them already knowing how it's done."

Such heightened attentiveness doesn't bely the quiet confidence Able Noise exhibit onstage. Early on in their existence, they discovered the classroom teacher's favourite tactic of drawing in distracted crowds by reducing the volume. Even with no real-time feedback from audiences, they hypnotise, tease then surprise. A video of the pair playing a Covid-era online set inside a former power station for The Hague's Rewind festival shows fierce concentration as Andropoulos captures Knegtel's

guitar line on a handheld recorder, then plays back a warped version, syncopating his beats around the stops and starts while she wrestles similarly disjointed sounds from the neck of her detuned guitar.

"Composition-wise, we have structured everything pretty much to the last detail," Knegtel notes. "But when it comes to performing it live, when we know the piece well, there is a sort of telepathic connection. We can let certain things go, or make things longer." Although Andropoulos describes his style as free rock rather than free jazz, he credits their attendance at a "literally life-changing" set by Peter Brötzmann and Han Bennink with igniting a rocket under his drum stool. "There was so much tension in the room, so much explosive energy. But no one knew how to deal with it," he remembers. Constraining this dynamism within Able Noise's music can be harder than letting loose. "There are one or two pieces where I play as fast and quietly as possible, at 150 percent of my physical capacity. George will have her eyes closed, in the zone, just strumming away and she'll keep going. We're constantly trying to balance those kinds of energies."

When the Covid pandemic interrupted plans to step up their live performances, the duo spliced together their final rehearsal with homemade recordings exchanged between them, an edit released as the cassette *Recordings* on Glasgow label GLARC. In contrast, the move to a studio for *High Tide* brought a vertiginous lack of restrictions. "Suddenly we felt the sky's the limit," Knegtel recalls. "We could make anything we want to and go as big and bold and intricate as we want to. Which..."

"...was horrible," Andropoulos interjects. "Just terrifying."

The change of context called for a shift in their songwriting. "Live, anticipation is a huge part of how we write, with build-ups and red herrings," Andropoulos explains. "But you can't really work with that in recordings because someone's going to listen to it several times. Instead, you can create tension." The musical palette was widened, with guests including saxophonist Sotiris Ziliaskopoulos, violinist Magdalena McLean and Shovel Dance Collective's Alex McKenzie and Oliver Hamilton on clarinet and violin; their contributions as likely to be processed and twisted as Andropoulos and Knegtel's own instruments. For "Providence", drums miked up to the point of feedback ran into the mixer, which Knegtel played like an organ. On "Tumbling", the guitar track was combined with its distorted, phase-inverted twin, cancelling out most of the harmonic content to leave a hollowed out rattle that echoes the song's theme of troubled mental states.

Although the pair are reluctant to over-explicate their lyrics – "A lot of it is trying to make sense of us being who we are in the catastrophe which is the world, and the state of the world, and it just being so impossible to talk about," Andropoulos says – titles such as "Boycott" and "Inertia" signal concepts to frame the music's sense of suppressed turmoil.

For Knegtel, making the album was a deeply introspective experience: "It didn't really feel like it was us from the inside looking out and expressing outwards, but just us being in our own little shelter, in our own bubble."

Now it is time to emerge: "Just travel around and play and play and play for as long as we can until we have to work on recorded music again," says Andropoulos. Faced with reworking the album's songs for live audiences, the challenges of recording have transformed into new possibilities: the chance to use their voices in different ways; a bouzouki Knegtel bought in Greece which she is keen to play with feedback. "I think we're going a little noisier, because there's quite a bit of that in the album," says Andropoulos, before adding dryly, "probably two percent noisier, which would feel huge to us." ● *Able Noise's High Tide is released by World Of Echo*