

METRO in focus

The dark side to being a star in a pop brand

IT WAS a bloody intrusion into the world of bright and shiny pop that – in the eyes of Japanese teen fans – was akin to the stars of One Direction or Little Mix being put in the firing line. Two members of girl band AKB48 – Rina Kawaei, 19, and Anna Iriyama, 18 – were injured by an attacker wielding a saw during a meet and greet. They were treated for wounds to their head and hands and a 24-year-old was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder. But as the group's young followers got over their shock, millions of people in the West were left wondering – who on Earth are AKB48? The answer, it turns out, is a bizarre

A week ago, two members of Japanese pop group AKB48 were injured by an attacker armed with a saw at a meet and greet for fans. But what makes this girl band – which has 140 members – so successful and so controversial? **ROSS McGUINNESS** reports...

and creepy J-Pop phenomenon – so carefully contrived, it makes Simon Cowell's stable of manufactured pop acts look like free-wheeling rock 'n' rollers.

Let's start with the band's latest single – Labrador Retriever. In the video, the girls frolic on a beach in their bikinis, while a hungry dog eats their ice cream. The

AKB48 are a Japanese girl band with a revolving roster of **140** members across several teams

The band play a gig at their own **theatre** almost every day

The band has sold more than **30m** records

The group's first 23 singles all went to No.1 in the Japanese charts. **18** of them have sold more than 1m copies

Auditions to join AKB48 are held **twice** a year



AKB is short for Akihabara, the area of Tokyo where their theatre is based. The

48 refers to the original number of members



Source: Oricon



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In 2012, the AKB48 single **Manatsu no Sounds Good!** sold **1.6m** copies in its first week

The band has five main teams – Team A, Team K, Team B, Team 4 and Team 8. There are also a number of sister groups

The band's 36th single, **Labrador Retriever**, was released last month and sold more than **1.4m** copies on its first day



The group's members are **not** allowed to date men

accompanying music is bubble gum pop so bubbly that the bubble bursts – it's a relentless exercise in tweeness that makes One Direction's Best Song Ever sound like, well, the best song ever.

All the same, Labrador Retriever sold almost 1.5million copies... in the first 24 hours after it was released. If you multiplied Little Mix by 35, dressed them in even skimpier clothes and banned them from having husbands, you might end up with something like AKB48.

The group plays a gig almost every day in their own theatre in Akihabara – the Tokyo district which gave the group its name.

But that doesn't stop the band touring because there are 140 members – expanded from the original 48 – who travel around the country in teams. It gives fans the chance to interact with their idols – and followers get to have a lot more involvement than just collecting autographs.

One of the reasons why Labrador Retriever has been such a success – although AKB48 tracks regularly break through the million mark – is because it an 'election' single. These releases contain a ballot paper that allows fans to vote for which band members they want to feature in the video for the next song.

Another way of shaping the line-up is inspired by the playground. An annual competition sees the many members dress up in

costumes and take part in a rock-paper-scissors competition to decide on their pairings.

This may all sound a bit like a rather more entertaining version of The X Factor. But questions are being asked about an approach to music management that turns stars' entire lives into a game show.

'AKB48 is a triumph of marketing in a business that's designed to make money,' said Paul Browne, founder of British website J-Pop Go.

'When members of idol groups such as AKB48 are recruited, they have to sign a contract that excludes things that typically include dating, drinking and smoking.'

'The argument is that the premise of many idol outfits, which involves the perception of being pure, only works if the members are excluded from these activities.'

'There's an expectation in Japan that the idols fulfil a fantasy image of being pure, thus any sexual or romantic aspects to the members would tarnish that perception.'

WHILE there has been something of a 'So what?' attitude in Britain to footage appearing to show two members of One Direction smoking a joint, J-Pop stars are judged by different standards.

When Minami Minegishi, 21, was photographed leaving the flat of a Japanese boy band star at the beginning of last year, she was demoted from 'Team B' to the group's trainee programme. In an act of contrition, she shaved her head and apologised to fans

for what she called her 'thoughtless behaviour'. While banning members from relationships, the creator and producer of the group, Yasushi Akimoto, has simultaneously been criticised for sexualising his charges.

One of AKB48's best-known songs is 2010 hit Heavy Rotation. Its video, which depicts the group having a pillow fight in their underwear, kissing each other and taking a bath, has had 104million hits on YouTube.

Being in AKB48 brings fame and experienced members are eventually allowed to 'graduate' to a solo career – but it comes at a price, according to Random J, a London-based J-Pop blogger.

'AKB48 are marketed to such an extent, both collectively and individually, that you wonder how any of these girls could ever become a normal member of society again,' he said. 'It's extreme and invasive. The level of control over the group doesn't seem to put the girls' best interests at heart.'

'If this was the case, then their management would be more conscious of some of the outfits they perform in, the overtly sexual songs they sometimes sing and their gruelling schedules.'

Random J also said a large section of AKB48 fans are men who believe they could be in a relationship with their favourite band member. When Minegishi showed she may not be available, it broke an unspoken bond.

'These rules put a huge amount of pressure on these girls and the price they have to pay for their fame and the sacrifices they are made to make for that is too high,' he said. 'It's a dangerous line to tread.'



At one of the group's 'handshake events' last month, two members of the band were injured in an attack by a man armed with a saw



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