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Westernization and Its Effects on the Sound of Japan

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A major source of influence on Japanese musicians has historically been Western art, and the resulting music has also served to influence much of Western contemporary music. This paper forms a timeline containing some key moments in Japanese music history, including the pioneering of Japanese-language rock, synth-pop, and Shibuya-kei. This investigation into these important moments is supplemented by quotes from interviews of musicians, including Haruomi Hosono of Yellow Magic Orchestra and Happy End, Keigo Oyamada of Flipper's Guitar, and Yasuharu Konishi of Pizzicato Five. This paper finds that a country's art and culture, in this case Japanese music, can evolve through the importation and assimilation of foreign culture.

Keywords: music, Japan, westernization, Shibuya-kei, techno

Introduction

Prior to the Meiji period, the general Japanese population had little to no contact with the rest of the world, outside of what the government permitted to be traded into the country. The Japanese government practiced an extreme isolationist policy, only allowing limited trade with the Dutch. In 1868 however, Japan began an extraordinary societal shift when the Shogun was overthrown and the authority of the Emperor restored (Asia for Educators, n.d.). Under Emperor Meiji, international trade was welcome, including the use and adoption of foreign technologies. Japan transformed into a modern, industrialized society in the span of just 44 years, which has come to be known as the Meiji Restoration. A major component of this transformation was how receptive the people of Japan were to the cultures of the Western World. Over the years, Japanese society has continued to borrow and reinterpret these cultural values across various mediums. But how have these ever-present influences shaped the sound of modern-day Japan? In this article, I aim to examine the effects of westernization on the music of Japan, as well as the impact Japanese musicians have had globally.

The Meiji period brought about great cultural exchange between Japan and the West, and music was no exception. An article in The Columbia Encyclopedia notes the following:

> The Meiji restoration saw the importation of Western music to Japan, beginning with the brass band. In the 1880s, Western music was introduced into the schools, and in 1887 the Academy of Music was established in Tokyo. Later, symphony orchestras were formed, and Western music became an integral part of the cultural life of Japan.

The United States, for a long time now, has been a globally dominant force in the exportation of culture with regard to music in particular. When rock and roll was developed in the US throughout the 50s and 60s by the likes of Chuck Berry and Little Richard, Japan would soon follow suit.

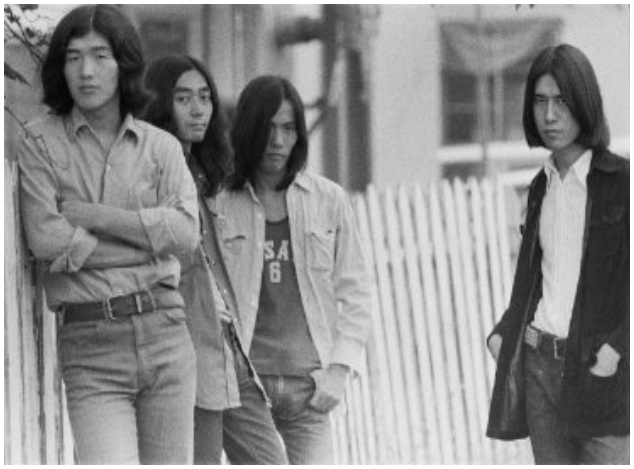

Figure 1: Happy End

In the late 1960s, the influential Japanese band Happy End caused great debate in their home country with their Bob Dylan-esque folk rock music. This debate, called the Nihongo Rokku Rons□ (Japanese-language rock controversy), asked if rock should be sung in English since it is originally American music. Leary (2021) writes, "Essentially the question was whether rock music was something totally foreign to Japan, something created primarily for American consumption, or if the genre could belong to the Japanese musicians creating it." The band settled this debate and cemented their legacy with their hugely popular 1971 album Kazemachi Roman, sung entirely in Japanese.

One of Happy End's band members, Haruomi Hosono, has since gone on to be perhaps the single most important voice in all of Japanese music, as well as a leading figure for electronic music globally. In an interview at the Red Bull Music Academy in Tokyo (2015), when asked about growing up with American music, Hosono answered:

> "I always listened to that music on FEN, the US military radio station. So almost all of the music I listened to was in English. Many of my favorite groups were from California. The psychedelic movement was happening there when I was a teenager. Groups like Moby Grape and Buffalo Springfield. A lot of legendary groups were there. I covered their songs in English. I felt their music was somehow profound." (00:07:49)

After the disbandment of Happy End and a successful solo career, Hosono began to question what kind of image Western audiences had of Asia when he was exposed to American-made exotica music. Leary (2021) explains, "Exotica was a cudgel used by Westerners to misinterpret the Asian character while truly Asian music, such as the music Hosono was making with Happy End, still had no place." Hosono, among other Japanese musicians, wanted to shed light on this misconception of his culture, as well as make something that is truly Japanese. This came to fruition with the formation of the forward-thinking and extremely influential Synthpop group Yellow Magic Orchestra.

The group (pictured below), commonly referred to by the abbreviation YMO, sought to challenge Asian stereotypes with their music. Hardy (2001) states, "The trio, with an image which parodied the stereotypical Japanese tourist, targeted Europe and America rather than Japan, and were hailed as the East's answer to

Kraftwerk." A strong example of this would be their song "Firecracker" (YMO, 1978), which is a cover of Martin Denny's 1959 exotica track of the same name.

Figure 2 (left to right): Ryuichi Sakamoto, Yukihiro Takahashi, and Haruomi Hosono

With this cover track, the band took the older Martin Denny song, whose wind chimes and xylophones created a generalized and fictional sound of the orient, and reinterpreted it into something that was truly and uniquely Japanese. The Yellow Magic Orchestra cover version, as with the rest of their music, was futuristic and cutting edge. YMO, along with Germany's Kraftwerk, were early pioneers of electronic music. They heavily incorporated newly developed musical hardware, such as synthesizers and drum machines, to the extent that almost everything heard in their music was being generated by some kind of electronic gadget. The early work of YMO predicted the direction Western music would head, as well as served as inspiration for many Western artists. In Detroit during the 1980s, Yellow Magic Orchestra and Kraftwerk would get radio play alongside the likes of funk groups such as Parliament-Funkadelic. Inspired by the sonic futurism coming out of Japan and Germany, a whole generation of young, black Detroiters reinterpreted this technologically advanced sound back to America, and created what we know today as techno (Sims).

There are a few other Japanese music scenes worth mentioning because of their connection to Western genres. City pop was popular throughout the 80s and could be described as a Japanese interpretation of disco, not entirely unlike the Italo-disco music of Italy. Noise music (often called "Japanoise" when referring to Japanese musicians) has its roots in Japan, with artists pushing the envelope on what Western musicians were doing in the 70s and 80s with industrial music. But there is one scene that is a melting pot of many different genres, and is truly the culmination of all the back-and-forth of Japanese and Western musicians interpreting each other's musical ideas. This music scene is known as Shibuya-kei.

The English musician Momus, who produced for many Shibuya-kei artists throughout the 90s, wrote a lengthy page on his website about his experiences with the scene. In the article, Momus introduces the genre with the following:

> The epicenter of global retro culture is Shibuya, the trendy shopping district of West Tokyo which gave Shibuya-kei (literally 'Shibuya

style') its name. Here the record shops are the best stocked in the world. Fashions change every five minutes, and the moment a style is invented it's also revived and parodied.

Figure 3. Pictured left: Pizzicato Five. Pictured right: Flipper's Guitar

The originators of the Shibuya-kei sound are the bands Pizzicato Five and Flipper's Guitar, both based in Shibuya, Tokyo. The bands wore their influences on their sleeves, taking wildly and fervently from several radically different sources. Pizzicato Five favored the American and French Lounge pop of the 50s and 60s, and frequently sampled the lush, orchestral instrumentation that was typical of Western music at the time. Another source of inspiration for nearly all Shibuya-kei musicians is The Beach Boys' founding member and chief songwriter Brian Wilson, whose compositional techniques and use of vocal harmonies serve as the groundwork for much of the movement's music. Shibuya-kei musicians would often combine these influences with elements of modern electronic music, such as house, techno, and drum and bass, resulting in an innovative dichotomy between old and new musical ideas. Flipper's Guitar preferred jangle pop and the baggy/madchester music coming out of Manchester, England, which resulted in a much more guitar-driven, psychedelic sound. Keigo Oyamada, former member of Flipper's Guitar, was asked about his exposure to music growing up. Oyamada (2021) answered as follows:

> "I love all kinds of music and am influenced by all kinds of music as well. I think most of those sounds just naturally come out," he says. "It's not as if I like rock or only listen to classical — I have a great love for all kinds of music. My father is a musician, and I used to look through his record collection. It's all because my father's got some great records."

It was this crate-digging mentality that drove these artists to create such an inspired sound, but the inspiration for these groups didn't end with music. Foreign films and fashion were also integral to the development of Shibuya-kei's sound and image. Pizzicato Five would often blatantly reference film in their music. Their 1985 song "The Audrey Hepburn Complex" uses the late golden-age Hollywood actress as a namesake for their song, and their music videos often contain dedications to film directors of old. The fashion of Shibuya-kei is reminiscent of the films of the French New Wave, with a lot of pastel cardigans and turtleneck sweaters, in addition to beige trench coats and brightly colored dresses. Yasuharu Konishi, founding member of Pizzicato Five, was interviewed in 1999 about the influence French film has had on his music. Konishi stated:

> "I saw the film 'une femme est une femme' by Godard. I don't remember where. Japanese-French center?, there was no subtitle [sic], but the images were very beautiful. One of the scenes was Anna Karina and Belmondo's dancing. At that moment, I thought 'this is what I want to do!'. I didn't exactly know what I wanted to make, music?, film?, but I wanted to make something."

It only seems natural that Western musicians have played such a big role in the shaping of Japanese

contemporary music and vice versa, seeing as how the United States and Japan, respectively, have the two largest music industries in the world. As societies grow and engage with each other, I believe it's important to give and take aspects of different cultures to develop one's culture even further. America can be an incredibly diverse and multicultural place, especially within its cities. Japan, on the other hand, is an island nation with little immigration, so the greater majority of its population is Japanese. The importation of Western music and film has proven to be invaluable to the development of Japanese culture. The artists examined here were given a refined image of the West through imported art, and were able to take from it and make something that is distinctly Japanese.

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