

Interview with HATAKEYAMA Chihei Translation by MIZOGUCHI Akiko

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Preface

This interview is the first in a series I hope to continue on Japanese “underground” music. As the interviewee here notes, the term “underground” is difficult to define. What I intend by it is the subcultures of music that exist outside mainstream pop music. Thus, I don’t include classical music nor corporatized “indie” pop/rock. This project was inspired by two books: Peter Belsito’s *Notes from the Pop Underground* (1985, Last Gasp)—which features a series of interviews with underground artists such as Survival Research Laboratories, the Church of the Subgenius, Diamanda Galas, Jim Jarmusch, among others—and Julian Cope’s *Japrocksampler* (2007, Bloomsbury). Like both of those books—more the former than the latter—I am trying to capture aspects of popular culture that are not well known and to some degree ephemeral. My objective is to introduce readers to this somewhat esoteric music and capture a snapshot of some stories from the Japanese underground. The selection of interviewees is somewhat idiosyncratic based on my own tastes.

Chihei Hatakeyama is a Tokyo-based electronic musician born in 1978. He has released about 17 albums under his own name, in addition to a number of works in conjunction with others (including Asuna and Naph), as well as his collaboration with Tomoyoshi Date called “Opitope.”

I first became interested in his music with the album *Minima Moralia* (2006) in about 2008. His music fits into what we might call “ambient electronica.” It’s quite different than what we usually think of as electronica or club music, since it isn’t focused on dancing and rhythmic beats. Instead, his music often features washes of soundscapes that create moods or emotional states that are quiet or even melancholic. It is simultaneously eerie and beautiful, but not in a saccharine way, such as is often associated with “new age” music. As mentioned below, his music is like sound sculptures that create a sense of time and place. Although as he notes below, he had not been aware of the ambient industrial music (Zoviet France, Nocturnal Emissions, etc.) that came out of especially the U.K. in the 1980s, I tend to see his music in a similar vein. We can extend this lineage back to Brian Eno’s ambient music in the 1970s (someone he does acknowledge as an inspiration). If we push back even further, we inevitably must mention the avant-garde classical electronic music of John Cage, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and others.

This interview with Chihei Hatakeyama was conducted in Tokyo on 2013 August 6, with consecutive translation done by Akiko Mizoguchi. I have decided to write it in a third-person, sort of narrative form drawing on the comments made by Hatakeyama responding to my questions as translated by Mizoguchi to me.

1. Please describe how you developed into a musician.

Hatakeyama started playing guitar in a cover band while a high school student. At that time, he considered it a hobby. Then, in university (1997–1999) where he was studying political economy, he started collecting music CDs and LPs and educating himself about music, while also casually playing in bands. In particular, he was interested in techno/club music, as well as The Velvet Underground, My Bloody Valentine, Tortoise and other post-rock bands.

At this time, equipment for making electronic music was very difficult and costly to obtain. He formed a post-rock band with other students influenced by Krautrock and The Velvet Underground. At around this time, he quit university and went back home to Kanagawa. When the Macintosh PowerBook G4 was released in 2001, he became able to make music on a computer. He was inspired by artists on labels such as Mego and Raster-Noton (Germany) and others releasing post-rock and electronica. Many bands came from abroad to play live in Japan. There was also a record store called Onsa that specialized in post-rock and electronica. He made a big investment (¥700,000) to purchase a PowerBook G4 and software to make music.

Since he wasn’t interested in practicing guitar, he decided to work on computer

music. “Laptop music” is different from traditional, written music that is composed and written as a score by a composer and that needs to be performed by a plural number of musicians. “Laptop music” is more like a painting, which is conceived and executed all by one artist. It took about a year to learn how to make music with the laptop. Through the Internet, he was able to find others interested in making this kind of music, so he formed a band with them called Opitope.

After working at factories to pay back the loan for purchasing the musical equipment, he began working as an assistant director at a record label that specialized in blues and jazz music. In 2004, the American label Kranky released his album *Minima Moralia*. In 2007, the Japanese label Spekk released an album by Opitope called *Hau*.

2. Which musical artists do you find inspiring for your own work?

John Cage, Terry Riley, La Monte Young, free jazz, and progressive rock. Also Jim O'Rourke, Akio Suzuki (1960s), John Coltrane, Stephan Mathieu, William Basinski, Loren (MazzeCane) Connors, and Brian Eno. There are many more as well.

- a. Do you see any connection between your music and so-called “ambient industrial” music especially from the 1980s in England (Zoviet France, Nocturnal Emissions, Robert Haigh, etc.) or any other musicians in other countries?**

He wasn't aware of the ambient industrial music from the 1980s. In general, he wasn't aware of 1980s music, but recently has been listening to 1980s new wave.

3. In his interview with you, Tobias Fischer (2012) mentions that *The River* uses sound recordings you made in the U.S. Can you describe the types of sounds you used?

In San Francisco in 2008, he was very interested in the ambient sounds while he was taking a bus around the city. For example, the sound of rain, people's conversations, echoing effects of a city square, rock bands playing on the street.

- a. What were your impressions (in terms of sounds or culture) of the U.S.?**

He had visited New York City in 1998, but San Francisco was much different. The latter seemed similar to images he had seen on the TV show depicted in *Full House*. It's difficult to know if the differences in impression has to do with the different time periods, the differences between East Coast and West Coast,

or what.

4. What do you think about the underground music scene in Japan?

It's difficult for him to define "underground music." The Internet allows people to go around the mainstream music industry, but they have to know how to market themselves. It's very chaotic. There are many people involved, and it used to be that they seemed to have an "alternative" orientation, but nowadays many people seem more mainstream-oriented. So some musicians may be independent, but not really alternative. Japanese independent music is not as global in reach (except perhaps Japanese noise music) as it is in the U.S. or U.K. because of the language barrier. After the March 2011 disaster, things in Japanese society generally and underground music in particular seem to have become more conservative—people seem more interested in things that are happy and easy, not requiring a lot of work on the listener's part. In general, it's difficult to find a niche for his own music in this chaos of the underground music scene in Japan.

5. How do you see your work fitting into Japanese "underground" music?

a. Is there a "tradition" of electronic music in Japan that you have been interested in?

i. I'm aware of Otomo Yoshihide, Merzbow, Aube, but are there others you would recommend?

Toshimaru Nakamura used to use a mixer to control feedback noise improvisationally. There's also Ryoji Ikeda, Yellow Magic Orchestra, Keiji Haino, Ken Ikeda (who put out music on the Touch label in the U.K.). However, there might not be a tradition of Japanese electronic music. Many of the aforementioned artists are really good at live performances, so he could learn a lot from them. He has definitely inherited a lot from them.

b. What about "underground" music around the world (since especially ambient/electronic music seems transnational)?

He has been able to find fans of his music around the world, even though he is not "famous." He has become interested in music from countries that are not advanced industrial societies, such as Turkey, Thailand, and Indonesia.

6. Do you think there is anything particularly “Japanese” about your music and aesthetic?

Yes, definitely. It comes from being born and brought up in Japan. For Americans, perhaps the best way to explain it is through Zen gardens and the meticulous and artificial manipulation of nature to create something natural. John Cage, La Monte Young, Terry Riley took inspiration from Zen philosophy and aesthetics and Eastern thought. Hatakeyama was also influenced by these Western composers and their interest in Eastern thought. Ryoji Ikeda has said in interviews that he was not directly influenced by Zen, but he may have been indirectly influenced by it through the work of Cage, Young, and Riley. Although we think of Zen as Japanese culture, it's not really the culture of the common people, so it's difficult to say that Zen represents Japanese culture because it was only adopted by a small number of people in the ruling class.

7. Do you think there is any particular “Japanese” aesthetic about sound and music that influences your music?

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8. What do you think about the influence of American culture in Japan, whether positive or negative?

The question is so broad that it's difficult to answer. There have been four major waves of foreign influence in Japan. First was the Chinese by way of Korea in 200 C.E. (Huang dynasty). Second was the European influence in the 16th Century during the “Warring States” period. Third was after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Fourth was the influence of America after World War II.

There is a lot of American culture (food, movies, music, sports) in Japan, but it seems to be superficially adopted in Japan, remaining on the surface.

9. It seems to me that your music is very “sculpted” and in fact you mention that your music is like sculpture in the Fischer interview. Do you think of your music in terms of architecture or “built space” at all? (I’m particularly interested in the relationship between music and the idea of “utopia” or music as “imaginary landscapes.”)

a. Do you imagine space or place as you develop your music?

Yes, but more in terms of built space or a kind of utopia than architecture. He wants listeners to be inside a kind of utopia or an imaginary space and time that he has built with his music.

For example, with *The River*, he was inspired by the film *Apocalypse Now*, not so much the story but more the different landscapes that we see as they travel along the river. It was a mixture of water, time, and changing scenery. He needed to find some external inspiration because he had already made a lot of music based on his own individual thoughts and ideas.

Also *Alone by the Sea* is interested in the passage of time, changing emotions, and the Buddhist practice of being alone in a boat searching for an imaginary heaven. Even though it is impossible and several people have died, they still did it.

So the idea of space is important in his music, but also the passage of time.

10. Are there any political or philosophical intentions in your music?

There aren’t any direct political statements in his music (such as saying “no” to nuclear power), but there is something remote or indirect. Especially in his last two works, he is interested in the roots of Japanese people outside the imperial system with the idea of the Emperor as the figurehead of the Japanese people. He was watching TV and they were talking about the crown prince and princess and her problems with mental illness. The prince was saying we need to support her, but people in the media were criticizing that, which was really strange. Hatakeyama thinks that Japanese people need to move beyond or outside the imperial system in order to mature politically. These things are best conveyed through writing, but he is trying to find a way to express this through music.

In terms of philosophy, this is an interesting question. This may sound a little over the top, but recently he has been interested in ideas of personal identity and integrity and he thinks that the individual values originally developed in European cultures

have gone too far. So, we tend to think about Shakespeare or someone as an individual genius who wrote all these masterpieces because he as an individual had a great talent, whereas the Greeks and Romans would have said he was inspired by muses or magical fairies that enabled him to produce the masterpieces.

Today, we tend to put too much emphasis on the individual; instead, we should spread the emphasis throughout society more. We need a different kind of value system. This is sort of an indirect philosophical intention in his music.

11. Are there other Japanese musicians/groups you think I should interview?

Asuna, Toshimaru Nakamura, Taguchi (owner of Emban in Koenji).

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