

# **STRATEGIES OF AUTHENTICATION IN JAPANESE EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC**

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## SAMMENDRAG

I denne oppgaven har jeg valgt å ta for meg på hvilken måte japanske eksperimentelle musikere forholder seg til krav om autensitet. Det finnes ingen klar definisjon på autensitet, og innholdet i ordet kan i stor grad variere utifra hvem som bruker det og i hvilken situasjon det brukes. Allikevel finnes det enkelte definisjoner som har hatt større gjennomslagskraft enn andre. Kort oppsummert blir det som av en eller annen grunn oppfattes som 'ekte' og 'ikke kopiert' også ansett som autentisk. I en musikkammenheng kan det brukes om ulike former for folkemusikk, fordi folkemusikk representerer den 'ekte' kulturen den oppsto i. Dette kalles ofte kulturell autensitet. Personlig autensitet oppnås i det en musiker eller gruppe musikere fremfører musikk med ett personlig budskap. Kommersiell pop-musikk oppfattes derfor av mange som lite autentisk fordi dens funksjon i stor grad er å generere penger til plateselskaper. Fordi dette er en av hovedprioriteringene i kommersiell musikk, krever det at musikken følger en rekke konvensjonelle regler og strukturer. På den annen side finnes eksperimentell musikk. Eksperimentell musikk oppfattes ofte som mer autentisk enn kommersiell musikk fordi den først og fremst krever individualisme, kreativitet og originalitet.

I Japan finnes det i dag et innflytelsesrikt eksperimentelt musikkmiljø, som i økende grad har fått oppmerksomhet fra tilsvarende miljøer i vesten. Mange japanske musikere har fått oppmerksomhet i vesten for sin utradisjonelle og kreative tilnærming musikk. Samtidig finnes det en rekke stereotyper og fordommer om japanere som i sin ytterste konsekvens ville tilsi at et slikt miljø ikke kan oppstå i det japanske samfunnet. Både i vesten og i Japan er det en utbredt oppfatning at japanere er gruppeorienterte i motsetning til individualistene i vesten. Japanere er teknisk flinke men har vanskelig for å uttrykke sin egen personlighet. En av de kanskje mest utbredte fordommene er at japanere kopierer vesten mens de selv er uoriginale og lite kreative. Flere av disse antatte karakteristikkene ville gjøre det umulig for japansk musikk å kunne oppfattes som autentisk.

I denne oppgaven vil jeg forsøke å vise hvilke strategier Japanske musikere har tatt i bruk for å imøtegå dette problemet.

## SUMMARY

In this paper I have chosen to write about authenticity and the way Japanese experimental musicians relate to this concept. There is no exact definition of authenticity and the meaning of them term may change depending on who is using it and in what context it is used. However, some definitions have had more operational power than others. In general, those things that are considered 'authentic' are 'real' and 'not copied' things. In music, various types of folk music are often considered authentic because they are thought to represent the cultures they emerged from in an uncontaminated way. This is what ethno-musicologists call 'cultural authenticity' while 'personal authenticity' is the kind of authenticity that a group or a solo artist achieves when performing music written by themselves and that has some sort of basis in personal opinions and/or convictions. Because pop music in some cases is produced with the expressed intent of generating money for major record labels, it is generally regarded as less authentic than music produced for the purpose of expressing some kind of message. Furthermore, mainstream pop music will quite often follow established rules and musical structures, and does not necessarily emphasize innovation and creativity. On the opposite side of the scale is experimental music. Experimental music is often considered to be more authentic than commercial music because it to a large degree focused on originality, creativity and individualized forms of expression.

In Japan there exists today a small but influential experimental music scene. This scene has had an increasing influence on similar scenes in Europe and America, and many Japanese musicians have been acknowledged for their unconventional and original approach to music. At the same time, certain assumed characteristics and stereotypes concerning Japanese people and Japanese society would suggest that they are culturally and ethnically handicapped in creating such a scene. One of the most prevalent stereotypes both in the west and in Japan, is that the Japanese are group-oriented, as opposed to the individualized people of the West. Japanese musicians are seen as technically skilled but unable to express their own personalities. They are seen as inclined to copy and emulate Western music, without contributing anything truly original. These stereotypes can be an obstacle for Japanese musicians wishing to achieve authenticity.

In this paper I will try to point out some of the challenges Japanese musicians have faced and what kind of strategies they have employed in order to authenticate their music.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

My interest in Japan was initially sparked by an interest in music. While working in a record-shop in Oslo that specialized in underground music, I started listening to Japanese experimental music and it appealed to me instantly. Years later when I came to Japan, I realized that the music I liked constituted only a marginal part of the Japanese music scene. Most people I met in Japan had never heard about the music I listened to. My somewhat romantic idea of Japan being a centre of strange and wonderful music was no more than a product of my own misconceptions, partly due to little available information and partly due to a quite common Western assumption: that the Japanese themselves are strange. The music I encountered when I came to Japan was a far cry from the creative madness I hoped it would be. I realized that in Japan, just as in any country, experimental music does not belong in the public sphere. It exists in small circles and scenes and has to be sought out. This was perhaps not so surprising. What did surprise me was that some of the Japanese people I met expressed certain stereotyped ideas about what Japanese people were like. They believed that Japanese people were ethnically and culturally handicapped in expressing themselves individualistically. One was not supposed to expect them to be either original or creative. This seemed to be completely at odds with my impression. As a fan of Japanese music I always thought that it was one of the most creative and interesting scenes in the world, yet here I met people claiming that the Japanese lack many of those features considered necessary in order to produce experimental music. Both the Japanese and people in the West seemed to believe that the Japanese have an inherent propensity to copy and mimic Western cultural expression, without offering any valuable contribution of their own.

In this paper I wish to shed some light on how Japanese experimental musicians relate to the question of authenticity. How can the Japanese make experimental music if it is true that they lack creativity, originality and don't have the potential for individual expression? And how can they be regarded authentic if what they do is simply copying the West? Last but not least, I want to investigate whether the authenticity issue is treated differently in the experimental music scene than in the jazz and hip hop scene, and if so, in what way-and why are the attitudes different?

## **1.1 OUTLINE OF THE PAPER**

Chapter 1 is a brief introduction of my personal motivation regarding the choice of subject. In chapter 2 I introduce definitions of some of the key terms and concepts that I will use throughout the paper. I have chosen to define some terms that can be used interchangeably in discussions about music, and explain why I have chosen to use ‘experimental’ rather than the related terms ‘avant-garde’, ‘underground’ and ‘independent’. In chapter 3 I explain the term *Nihonjinron* and the way it has affected debates about Japan and Japanese society. In chapter 4 I write about authenticity in general terms: how and why ideas about authenticity were shaped and how it has affected our aesthetic judgements of music. After this I move on to the more specific term ‘cultural authenticity’ and related terms such as ‘historical authenticity’ and ‘ethnic authenticity’. I have chosen to focus on cultural authenticity before moving on to personal authenticity. The reason for doing this is that cultural authenticity is easier to define and has had more operational power. As cultural authenticity to some extent makes claims about the nature of specific cultures, it has affected our ideas about other types of authenticity. For example, the notion that Japanese society is essentially group-oriented has led some people to think that the Japanese can-not express themselves individualistically something that would handicap them in attempting to achieve personal authenticity. In chapter 5 I write about how Western culture was introduced to Japan and how it has affected Japanese society. For comparison purposes, I have chosen to introduce briefly the Japanese jazz and hip hop scenes and their strategies of authentication. In chapter 6 I have tried to give a short introduction to Japanese experimental music, its history and in what ways it is different from similar scenes in the West. Chapter 7 deals with the way Japanese experimental musicians have tried to authenticate their music as ‘Japanese’ by pointing to certain cultural characteristics that have shaped their form of expression. Chapter 8 deals with technological progress: how it has influenced our perception of Japanese culture, the way it has changed the nature of music and challenged our notions of authenticity, and ultimately how some Japanese musicians have used it as a tool to geographically locate their music and thereby authenticate their music as ‘Japanese’. In chapter 9 I explain in what ways Japanese musicians confront the assumption that they cannot express themselves individualistically. In chapter 10 I write about Japan's official cultural policies and how these have shaped attitudes among experimental performers. Here I deal mostly with the assumed opposition between mainstream music and experimental music, and how they interact in Japanese cultural life. In chapter 11 I sum up my findings. Chapter 12 is a list of references.

## 1.2 SOURCES

The lack of information regarding this topic has been my inspiration for writing this paper, but it has also proven to be the biggest obstacle. Very few books exist about Japanese experimental music. For comparison purposes I have chosen two books that both address the authenticity issue in regards to Japanese music; *Blue Nippon* by E.Taylor Atkins and *Hip Hop Japan* by Ian Condry. These books deal respectively with Japanese jazz and Japanese hip-hop. In addition I have used the only book I could find that explicitly deals with Japanese experimental music, entitled *Japanese Independent Music*, which is a collaborative effort released by the French record label Sonore. This book features interviews with a wide array of the most influential Japanese experimental musicians today, and I have chosen to analyse some of the statements found in this book. Furthermore, I have conducted some interviews myself. In the summer of 2007 I spent two weeks in Japan working as a guide and translator for a Norwegian student radio station.<sup>1</sup> During this time I had the opportunity to interview and meet some Japanese musicians. I spent a weekend with Morimoto Ali in his house in Kobe and also had the chance to interview DJ Vinylman of the group Satanicpornocultshop. The following autumn I spent about five months as an intern at the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Tokyo. During this time I met and talked with Paul James, a Canadian musician living in Tokyo; Cato Canari, a Norwegian musician and DJ living in Tokyo, Yoshi, a young Japanese man that plays in the Tokyo-based Hardcore band Killie; Matsuura Ryo, a designer of record covers; and Franck Stofer, an executive of the French label Sonore based in Roppongi. My reasons for including some non-Japanese people was simply to get the perspectives of some outsiders. In addition I have had e-mail contact with Morimoto Ali and DJ Ugh, also from Satanicpornocultshop. Whereas the interviews in the book *Japanese Independent Music* feature some questions that explicitly ask about the connection between ‘japanese-ness’ and music, I have consciously chosen to avoid this in my interviews. The reason for this is that I feel that to suggest the connection would perhaps influence their answers. Many of those people I have interviewed will not be explicitly referred to in the following, but they have nevertheless offered me valuable insight through their comments and thoughts.

As information about Japanese experimental music is virtually non-existent in academic literature I have included a few interviews that I have found in internet blogs but I have to the best of my ability tried to keep this to a minimum.

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<sup>1</sup>Radio Nova

## **2 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

In the following I have chosen the term ‘experimental’ over related terms such as ‘avant-garde’, ‘underground’ and ‘independent’ These terms are often used interchangeably and to some extent cover the same ground, but for the sake of consistency I have chosen to use ‘experimental’ only. Furthermore, I feel that the term ‘avant-garde’ implies a close relation to a more classical music tradition, and that both ‘underground’ and ‘independent’ imply a position within the record-industry more than they explain the nature of the music itself. I will explain this briefly here.

### **2.1 AVANT-GARDE**

Avant-garde can be defined as: ‘the advance group in any field, esp. in the visual, literary or musical arts, whose works are characterized chiefly by unorthodox and experimental methods’<sup>2</sup> Avant-garde is most often regarded as an extreme position *within* a tradition, whereas experimental music is considered to exist *outside* a tradition. Since avant-garde may carry with it certain connotations of being linked to the classical music tradition, it would exclude many of the bands and artists I have chosen to write about.

### **2.2 UNDERGROUND**

Underground music, on the other hand, is typically made by and for a specific group of people and its overall success is not necessarily dependent on commercial success. However, I feel it defines a certain position in the market of popular culture more than it defines a specific type of music. An underground band can have a highly commercial sound and still be underground. Furthermore, underground can be used to describe everything from rock music to electronica and rap music.

### **2.3 INDEPENDENT**

Initially the term ‘independent’ was used to define those bands and artists that were not distributed by major record labels, thus being independent of both commercial restrictions and mainstream popularity. However, this term came to mean an expression of certain attitudes and ideologies, and

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<sup>2</sup>Webster’s Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. (New York: Gramercy books, 1989), 102.



does not necessarily say anything about the music itself. These days, the term ‘independent music’ (from now on I will use the abbreviation ‘indie’) is conspicuously used by major record companies to give quite conventional rock bands credibility.

## **2.4 EXPERIMENTAL**

The bands I discuss in this paper can all be defined as experimental in that they all, in different ways, have chosen to approach music in an unconventional manner. Their chosen form of expression may be highly varied, but they are signified by one common trait: they approach music from an experimental point of view and are less concerned with formal structures such as recognizable rhythms, catchy hooks, melodies and so on. Composer John Cage coined the term in 1955 and according to him music was experimental if it was the result of chance operations.<sup>3</sup> It was used about contemporary American composers like John Cage, Terry Riley and La Monte Young as opposed to the European Avant-garde represented by (among others) Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis. The difference between the European Avant-garde and the American experimentalists was that the American composers had not necessarily had any formal training. They were not even always musicians, and they drew inspiration from non-Western musical traditions and/or fields of science that had nothing to do with music. Some of the artists and bands discussed below have had no academic or formal training, and in that sense they can be considered amateurs. The most common feature among them is that they have started their careers in the DIY<sup>4</sup>-spirit that is usually associated with the emergence of punk, and later on lo-fi. However, they all work within the confines of a popular music tradition and are as influenced by conventional rock and pop as they are by jazz and art music. Therefore, John Cage's definition of experimental music as music that relies on chance operation of which the outcome is uncertain may not be applied to all of them. Instead, I use the term in a broader sense meaning ‘innovative movements in arts; usually associated with breaks with established traditions, styles and conventions’.<sup>5</sup>

I have chosen to include artists such as Oyamada Keigō, Melt Banana and Satanicpornocultshop, all of whom reveal the influence of popular culture in experimental music; Ōtomo Yoshihide and Keiji Haino who exhibit jazz and art music influences, and lastly more conventional composers such as Ichiyangi Toshi and Takemitsu Tōru. To exclude any of them would be to ignore the diverse sources that have contributed in forming Japanese experimental

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<sup>3</sup>Sitsky, Larry, ed. *Music of the twentieth-century avantgarde*. (London: Greenwood press, 2002), 92.

<sup>4</sup>‘Do it yourself»

<sup>5</sup>Shuker. Roy. *Key concepts in popular music*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 21.

music as it exists today.

### 3 ON NIHONJINRON

Some scholars have compared *Nihonjinron* to a kind of secular religion because it makes claims that are grounded in unfounded assumptions that they feel no need to question. One of the most explicit and coherent formulations of this science is the belief in ‘*groupism*’, or collectivism, as a framework in which one can interpret Japanese society. The Japanese are portrayed as a people who lack a fully developed ego or an independent self, and the individual is only considered in his or her connection to the group. They are seen as having no need and/or ability to express their own personal opinions. According to some, this is related to the notion of *amae*, the inclination to seek emotional satisfaction by prevailing upon and depending on one’s superiors. Furthermore, *Nihonjinron* seeks to explain the Japanese psyche through one keyword or concept. First of all it is presumed that all Japanese share the attribute in question; secondly, that there are virtually no variations among the Japanese in the degree to which they share these attributes. The attribute in question is also believed to only exist marginally in other cultures than the Japanese, and moreover the trait is believed to have existed in Japan throughout its history, taking no consideration of historical circumstances. Sociologist Befu Harumi argues that when the Japanese lost the Second World War they were robbed of those things that normally define a nation. The flag and the national anthem were suddenly an expression and reminder of the negative direction the country had taken during the course of the war, and most people wanted to toss them aside. In this period the proliferation of *Nihonjinron* reached its peak and since the Second World War the search for Japanese ‘uniqueness’ has developed into a kind of collective national pastime. Although most Japanese do not agree with many of the claims stated by patrons of *Nihonjinron*, there have been few alternative strains of thoughts to cling to.

If we for the sake of argument were to compare Japan with a country that is closer both in geographical, ethnic and cultural terms, the uniqueness of Japan would seem less obvious and perhaps harder to claim. I feel that South Korea serves as the perfect example. The culture, the political system and certain characteristics such as the mimetic faculty are something they both share. Korea was, like Japan, a closed society that allowed little interference from other countries, in fact, it was referred to as the ‘hermit kingdom’ until the Japanese forced it open during their period of imperialism. Even before this time, however, there had been much cultural exchange between the two countries and some scholars even argue that the ancient rulers of Japan, the Yamato clan, hailed from Korea. Nevertheless, even though there has been close contact between the nations, the Koreans have harboured feelings of resentment, and no doubt increasingly so after

they became colonized by Japan. After the Second World War, Japan was forced to renounce its colonies and Korea became independent. However, just as the Americans in the post-war years occupied Japan, the Americans occupied South Korea in the Korean War. During the occupation years, South Koreans were introduced to Western culture in the form of the rock and jazz that the American soldiers brought with them. And just like the Japanese, a generation of South Korean youths started to listen to radio broadcasts that were initially intended for the ears of American troops. The introduction of a new culture quickly transformed the South Korean society and eventually it gave way to a new generation that grew up on largely Western values. These became known as *Shinsedae* (the new generation) and the term has its equivalent in the Japanese word *Shinjinrui* (the new species). Both terms are used to define young people that favour such assumed Western ideologies as individuality and personal freedom.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the heavy cultural influence from the west, South Koreans, much like the Japanese, soon started to interpret and emulate the new culture to which they had been exposed. Therefore, it is perhaps not so surprising that the music scene in South Korea is reminiscent of the Japanese music scene, most apparent in the use of the term K-pop. K-pop resembles J-pop in that it uses the first letter of its nation (the way it is written in English) to emphasize its origin. Simply put, it is pop of South Korean origin and just like J-pop it is a product of capitalism. This gave rise to the assumption that South Koreans were simply copying foreign culture, just like the Japanese have been accused of doing.<sup>7</sup>

*Nihonjinron* has given the Japanese people an instrument in which to redefine themselves in order to find a new position in the world. Since the West has been guilty of treating Japan and the Japanese as one uniform entity, the responses from Japan have often followed the same line of thought. They have in a sense adopted the Western view of Japan and re-conceptualized it as their own. In order to give the Japanese unique characteristics, it has been necessary to carefully choose countries of comparison. In earlier times this country was usually China, and in the past 150 years it has been Western countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States of America. If one compares Japan with South Korea, the differences seems smaller and perhaps less accentuated but this would not serve the Japanese project of making their own country stand out as unique. The Japanese authorities support the hegemonic ideology of *Nihonjinron* and they have chosen certain traits and features that they believe express the true Japanese mentality.<sup>8</sup> As Peter Dale points out, it is a paradox that while the Japanese are intent on claiming their uniqueness in the

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<sup>6</sup>Howard, Keith. *Korean pop music-riding the wave*. (London: Global oriental, 2006), 193.

<sup>7</sup>Howard, 70.

<sup>8</sup>Befu, Harumi. *Hegemony of homogeneity*. (Melbourne: Transpacific press, 2001), 9, 10, 81, 103.

world, they at the same time deny that this is a trait that can be found in the individual Japanese.<sup>9</sup> The Japanese themselves heavily support many of the stereotypes of Japanese people. When talking to different people I found, much to my surprise, that while the Westerners I talked to expressed some of these opinions, they showed more hesitation in making generalized statements about Japanese people than the the Japanese themselves, who were more certain of the truth of such statements as 'Japanese people can only copy' and 'we are not very original'. One of the most prevalent assumptions in *Nihonjinron* is that the Japanese are group-oriented with no need of demonstrating their unique personal or individual traits.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the characteristics that have been used to define the Japanese mentality, and by extension their society, may give the Japanese cultural authenticity. Emulation of western culture, the tendency to copy and lack of individual expression have been used to claim authority as representations of something that is authentically Japanese. However, there are a number of ways in which to be authentic and some of these are in opposition to one another. To achieve personal authenticity, it is absolutely vital that one reveals at least some sort of personal and individualized form of expression in one's work. Since traditional Japanese art presumably does not fully condone this, it would be hard to claim both personal and cultural authenticity. Before I move on to discuss the Japanese adaptation of western popular culture, I would like to give a brief introduction of authenticity in more general terms.

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<sup>9</sup>Dale, Peter N. *The myth of Japanese uniqueness*. (Australia: Croom Helm Ltd, 1986), 22.

<sup>10</sup>Befu, 20.

## 4 ON AUTHENTICITY

First of all it is necessary to point out that there is no exact definition of 'authenticity'. Authenticity is an abstract concept that can be interpreted in any number of ways. What is 'authentic' to someone may very well be considered 'inauthentic' to others.

The idea of authenticity, the perception that something is more real than other things, has its roots in the age of industrialization. As industrialization started to affect European nations, a feeling of losing particular cultures emerged. Up until this point, 'culture' meant basically the culture of the European courts and the culture of the uneducated masses was largely ignored. As the world entered the modern era, philosophers started to look back upon the 'unspoiled' culture of the masses. Suddenly, the 'ignorant' common people were considered the bearers of a nation's soul and culture. As they were uneducated, they were seen as unspoiled by modernity and as having managed to keep the 'real culture' intact.<sup>11</sup> The common people might have been closer to the so-called unspoiled culture than the European courts, but the interpreters of this folk culture were educated academics, many of whom had agendas that extended beyond simply representing the culture of the people. Issues such as the construction of nation states and other political topics have always largely affected the quest for cultural authenticity. Therefore, authenticity is not a fixed concept or a goal that can be achieved, but rather a dynamic concept that is continuously redefined. Calling music 'authentic' does not say anything about the quality of music or of the type of music in question. Whether something can be considered 'authentic' or not depends on a variety of factors, such as the political climate at a given time, one's own personal experiences, ethnic and cultural origin, ideologies etc. Therefore it is virtually impossible to apply the label 'authentic' to a certain artist, band or musical genre and expect everybody to agree. However, there are some conceptions of authenticity that to a larger degree than others have managed to become almost universally approved, and there is general agreement that the idea of authenticity was a 'peculiar modern response to the perceived erosion of a particularized heritage and identities in an era of globalization',<sup>12</sup>

One of the results of contemporary globalization is that humans interact more closely now than they have ever done before, and some people see this as a threat to cultural diversity. Fearing that specific cultures may become watered down or eroded, the idea of authenticity was introduced as a tool in which to separate the 'real' from the 'imitated' Therefore, for ethno-musicologists

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<sup>11</sup>Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the folk*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina press, 2000), 9.

<sup>12</sup>Atkins, E Taylor. *Blue Nippon; Authenticating Jazz in Japan*. (Durham and London: Duke university press, 2001), 23.

‘authenticity’ means representing unfamiliar music in its correct context. In other words, Japanese music played in Japan by Japanese musicians would be perceived as more ‘authentic’ than Western music played by Japanese musicians. Musicologist Peter Kivy suggests two conceptions of authenticity: historical authenticity and personal authenticity, and he claims that one kind of authenticity ‘entails the sacrifice of the other’<sup>13</sup> A Japanese musician playing rock songs could claim ‘personal authenticity’ if his or her songs are a sincere expression of his or her own individual emotions. However, since these emotions are expressed within the context of rock music, which historically is a Western form of expression, he/she cannot claim historical or cultural authenticity.

Even though the term ‘authentic’ may be interpreted in many different ways, the various definitions affect us in largely the same way. Authenticity demands that an artist or a work of art possess some specific qualities, and these specific qualities are defined by one (or many) authoritative voice(s). They must adhere to a certain standard and the level of authenticity is measured according to in what degree something exhibits these qualities.<sup>14</sup>

In the following, I will try to sum up the notions of authenticity that I feel are most relevant when discussing Japanese experimental music. I will start with the issue of cultural authenticity. Because the term ‘authenticity’ in itself is relatively vague, the terms ‘cultural authenticity’, ‘ethnic authenticity’ and ‘historical authenticity’ may be used to denote the same kind of authenticity. For example, one can claim ‘historical authenticity’ if one is a performer in a tradition that you are linked to historically through ethnic and cultural markers. In addition, I will discuss the importance of personal authenticity and in what way technological progress has affected the notion of authenticity.

## **4.1 CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY**

In many genres of music the ‘specific qualities’ that something must have in order to be considered ‘authentic’ follow racial boundaries. ‘Cultural authenticity’ has had more operational power than ‘personal authenticity’ because it may be easier to define objectively.<sup>15</sup> Since this interpretation of the term carries with it certain connotations of purity, ‘authentic’ is sometimes considered to be ‘that which is not contaminated.’ In order for a certain type of music to be considered authentic it must be ‘pure’, whether it is pure in terms of following established rules in a set framework for a certain type of music, or ethnically pure in that it is perceived to be uncontaminated by other

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<sup>13</sup> Atkins, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Atkins, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Atkins, 25.

cultures and traditions. Therefore, the struggle to achieve authenticity is particularly evident among those performers that operate within a musical tradition of which they are culturally and ethnically not a part. A black blues musician from Mississippi would have less incentive to prove his authenticity than a Japanese blues musician from Kyoto, simply because his very origin is more than enough to declare him 'real' Thus, the colour of your skin can represent both a limitation or give you more credibility, depending on whether the cultural expression of your choice is generally considered to 'belong' to you.

## **4.2 PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY**

Taken out of a musical context, the word 'authenticity' simply means the 'quality of being authentic'<sup>16</sup> and that which is authentic is 'not false or copied; genuine; real'.<sup>17</sup> According to the existential tradition of thought, one can achieve authenticity if one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite pressures from external forces. Authenticity in music means, among other things, to be true to oneself. This is what musicologist Peter Kivy calls personal authenticity.<sup>18</sup>

For most of human history, music has been an integral part of most societies and cultures, and was strongly connected to both speaking and dancing. Musicians were typically not separated from their audience.<sup>19</sup> Since there was less emphasis on the personality of the individual performer, there was never a demand that music should be authentic and express the performer's own personality and spirit. Music was an incorporated part of religious rituals and/or festivities, and it had virtually nothing to do with internal forces of the individual performer. It was rather a collective expression where everyone present was involved,<sup>20</sup> but as the world got more industrialized and secularized, music gradually took on the form of entertainment. Industrialization forced people into specialized professions, and although there certainly still are amateurs that play for the sake of their own enjoyment, a musician is typically a person whose profession is playing or singing music.<sup>21</sup> Among the first professional musicians there was no particular emphasis on their individual personalities. Most performers sang standard songs written by professional songwriters. It was not until the early nineteen sixties with the emergence of singer/songwriters that musicians started composing their own songs based on personal experiences. As the Western world became

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<sup>16</sup>Webster, 99.

<sup>17</sup>Webster, 99.

<sup>18</sup>Atkins, 24.

<sup>19</sup>Levitin, Daniel. J. *This is your brain on music; the science of a human obsession*. (New York: Dutton, 2006), 6.

<sup>20</sup>Levitin, 6.

<sup>21</sup>Levitin, 7.



secularized, religion lost much of its power and the importance shifted from religion to self-realization.

Since then, musicians performing their own songs have always been regarded as more authentic than pop artists that sing generic songs about love written by professional songwriters.<sup>22</sup> Because intimacy and expressing personal feelings suddenly became an important marker of authenticity, the individual performers themselves became more and more important, and along with this a personality cult developed. As these performers became objects of admiration, they were expected to give something of themselves. Paradoxically, these demands sometimes required that the performers took on a different persona. In these circumstances it became more important to live up to people's expectations than to express one's own 'true' self. It did not really matter if one was really expressing oneself or not, as long as it seemed like that was exactly what you were doing.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the notion that music to some degree had to have a message in order to be perceived as relevant persisted. Of course, there exists a wide variety of bands and even genres that do not claim to have any particular message or ideology to which they belong, but these types of music are sometimes pejoratively referred to as 'entertainment' Music made for the sole purpose of entertainment may be just as good as any other type of music, but it is often regarded as less authentic than those types of music that have a strong foundation and roots in something that extends beyond the shallowness of pure entertainment.

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<sup>22</sup>Barker, Hugh and Yuval Taylor. *Faking it-the quest for authenticity in popular music*. (New York: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2007), 2.

<sup>23</sup>Barker/Taylor, 3.

## 5 WESTERN CULTURE IN JAPAN

Western styles of music arrived in Japan approximately 150 years ago, when Japan opened up to the rest of the world after more than 250 years of self-imposed isolation. Fearing that they were lagging behind the rest of the world, the Meiji revisionists quickly imported everything from technology and science to culture and arts. The Japanese proved to be quite adept at emulating Western culture and it was not long before they created their own response to both Western classical music and Western-style painting. New influences rejuvenated Japanese society, but the clash between old and new values generated a conflict for many Japanese people. Because the term ‘modern’ was tied up to the idea of ‘the West’ many people experienced an identity crisis. The Japanese had based most of their cultural identity on traditions that now were considered outdated. If they wanted to be considered modern, they would have to copy the foreign culture of the west, but since this culture was considered alien, they were afraid it might destroy Japanese culture. And could one be considered modern and progressive when all one did was to simply copy? These notions have affected our views on Japanese society ever since.<sup>24</sup>

### 5.1 JAPANESE JAZZ

Jazz first came to Japan in the years leading up to the Second World War. The term ‘jazz’ first appeared in magazines in the summer of 1920, and by 1929 it was an established term connoting a new age of carefree cosmopolitanism and playful subversion. Even though it was a quite marginal form of cultural expression, it became the heart of the entertainment industry in Japan, and as a commercial product it helped transform Japanese society into a consumer culture.<sup>25</sup> Although Jazz, along with other types of Western culture, was banned during the war it never stopped thriving. Interestingly, the rules were less strict in those areas of Asia that eventually fell under Japanese control such as China and Korea, and many musicians fled to these countries where they played for their own troops. Even before the war, a sojourn in Shanghai was seen by many jazz musicians as a highly credible way of gaining experience to play ‘real jazz’ and it quickly became a Mecca for aspiring musicians.<sup>26</sup> When the war ended and the American occupying forces (SCAP) took control

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<sup>24</sup>Pyle, Kenneth B. *The New Generation in Meiji Japan: Problems of Cultural Identity, 1885-1895* (United States of America: Stanford University Press, 1969), 4.

<sup>25</sup>Atkins, 46.

<sup>26</sup>Atkins, 12.

over Japan, there was a huge demand for orchestras that could entertain them.

The Americans tried to a large degree to change the Japanese culture and mindset through the use of American culture. Japan quickly became one of the largest markets in the world for jazz, and visiting musicians were treated as royalty wherever they went. The amount of respect they enjoyed coupled with better salaries than they could expect in America, did not remain unnoticed by American jazzmen, and after a while they arrived in huge numbers. Many Japanese musicians thrived in these years, trying to learn everything they could from their American visitors, many of whom were black. These were of course, by virtue of their race, considered more authentic when it came to playing jazz. The Japanese musicians struggled with an inferiority complex, and no matter how technically skilled they were, they did not feel that they could play ‘the real thing.’<sup>27</sup> Many people believed that while the Japanese musicians were highly skilled in terms of technical achievement, being Asian they could never really uncover and express the true soul of jazz (and blues). They had no way of incorporating the necessary ‘blue feeling’ because they had not suffered the injustice that African-Americans had. Their tendency to ignore and/or misunderstand the important historical circumstances from which jazz emerged, seemed to handicap them in expressing themselves authentically.<sup>28</sup>

## **5.2 AUTHENTICATING JAPANESE JAZZ**

In *Blue Nippon* E. Taylor Atkins describe some of the methods Japanese musicians chose in order to deal with these problems. There are two particular methods that stood out in their effort to ‘authenticate’ their music. One of these methods was to faithfully copy the ‘original’ jazzmen. In *Blue Nippon* there is a descriptive account on how this was played out when a Japanese musician asked a black American jazz musician how he can learn to play like him. The jazz musician replied (as a joke) that he had to eat collard greens and other types of soul food.<sup>29</sup> Many Japanese jazz musicians became interested in the civil rights movement, and created their own peculiar response to it. As citizens in a pre-war Japan, they argued that they too suffered from racial discrimination just like their black American peers. This gave them a better understanding of the situation of African-Americans and of their music.<sup>30</sup>

The other method was to create a particular brand of ‘Japanese jazz’. Acknowledging the

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<sup>27</sup> Atkins, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Atkins, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Atkins, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Atkins, 42.

impossibility of successfully copy the originals, many musicians tried to create a specifically Japanese type of jazz, and through this establish their own canon and approach, one that Westerners could never copy. In doing so, it was imperative that they incorporated elements that were perceived to be essentially Japanese. Some musicians started using traditional Japanese music, instruments and pentatonic scales in their music. Another way was to make jazz versions of traditional Japanese music.<sup>31</sup> This had actually already been done during the war, when Japanese musicians in an attempt to fool the government played Japanese standards in a jazz arrangement, or renamed jazz standards giving them new titles that had strong nationalistic overtones. Others turned to religion and incorporated the concept of *Ma* from Zen Buddhism, a sense of space believed to be a strictly Japanese sentiment that foreigners could never really grasp.<sup>32</sup> There were a number of ways by which to 'Japanize' jazz but some people such as Hayasaka Sachi, the bandleader of Stir Up! were critical of the attempts. He felt that it made no sense to focus on one's ethnic or cultural origin, because individual creativity was the only determining factor in jazz.<sup>33</sup>

### **5.3 JAPANESE HIP HOP**

In its original conception Japanese hip hop was nothing more than a blatant copy of Western party rap. Because rap grew out from the black urban areas of New York, one could assume that it was not easily applicable to the lives of Japanese adolescents. Urban African-Americans were faced with social problems such as crime and poverty. These issues had little relevance in Japan, and the reality of which they spoke bore little or no resemblance to the Japanese way of life. However, hip hop did not initially deal with these problems. The movement originally consisted of youth from quite diverse cultural backgrounds and their main interests were dancing and partying. Racial awareness and politics came later on and to some extent overshadowed the initial influences that ranged from everything from funk to the German band Kraftwerk. Nevertheless, few would see it as incorrect to label hip hop and rap music a typical black expression, and coming from an African-American background will certainly lend you an aura of authenticity that few Asians (or whites for that matter) performing this music could match. Interestingly, Eminem, one of very few white rappers to have achieved some sort of credibility among both white and black people thanks to his 'realness', owes much of his authenticity to the fact that he comes from a poor family and spent his teenage years living in a trailer park. On the opposite scale, the white rapper Vanilla Ice lost all of

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<sup>31</sup> Atkins, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Atkins, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Atkins, 41.

his credibility (if indeed he ever had any) when people found out that he came from a typical white, middle class background.

Japan certainly has their share of problems, but the fact remains that few Japanese will ever face racism in the same way that African-Americans can expect to. Few Japanese will probably even see a handgun, and they are more likely to earn their money working in a 7/11 than selling crack on a street corner. As one of the most important things to hip hop artists is 'keeping it real', many realized that they should sing about subjects that were relevant to themselves, and Japanese hip hop adopted the party aesthetics that were an integral part of early American hip hop.<sup>34</sup> Drinking, dancing and hooking up with girls were subjects that Japanese youths could easily identify with, and perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the first Japanese hip hop hits, 'DA.YO.NE'<sup>35</sup>, was a catchy tune about a young boy's futile attempt to hook up with a girl. Party rap with a pop sensibility has ever since been an important part of the Japanese hip hop scene, but some bands and artists also adopted a more political stance, criticizing those aspects of Japanese society they regarded as unfortunate and unhealthy.<sup>36</sup> With the advent of Gangsta Rap on the west coast of America, some artists even adopted the tough stance and confrontational attitude of bands like NWA, but the result was often met with ridicule among the Japanese audience. Talking about shooting people in Japan was far from 'keeping it real'.

#### **5.4 AUTHENTICATING JAPANESE HIP HOP**

Since gun slinging was not, nor had it ever been, a part of Japanese culture, many looked back to the age of the samurai. The samurai were perceived to represent the Japanese spirit and gave Japanese hip hoppers ample opportunity to come across as hardcore and still 'keep it real.' Their mannerisms and clothing started to look more like 'old school' samurai than American street hustlers.<sup>37</sup> Even though samurai's had not been around for over a hundred years, they were still in the minds of many Japanese and foreigners alike something that was utterly Japanese. In much the same way that Jazz musicians had incorporated Japanese instruments and scales, hip hop artists started using samples of Japanese origin. Artists such as DJ Krush used samples of shakuhachi and taiko drums. Kohei Japan plays with stereotyped perceptions of Japan using imagery of sushi and

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<sup>34</sup>Condry, Ian. *Hip Hop Japan*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006)70.

<sup>35</sup>Condry, 70.

<sup>36</sup>Condry, 158.

<sup>37</sup>Condry, 49.

ramen in his song 'Hungry strut'<sup>38</sup> Others started using a distinctly Japanese way of rapping, using old poetic styles of rhyming and even words and phrases that were unconventional and highly archaic, lending them credibility as Japanese and giving of an aura of cultural authenticity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Condry, 14.

<sup>39</sup>Condry, 159.

## 6 JAPANESE EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC

Whereas jazz and hip hop in many ways rely on quite dogmatic conventions, experimental music typically seeks to defy conventions about music. Even though performers of experimental music may be less concerned with external and superficial features such as the colour of the skin, there are other less visible features of their ethnicity that are considered to be to the disadvantage of Japanese musicians. One of the biggest obstacles Japanese musicians have had to face is the quite common accusation that Japanese are ethnically and culturally inclined to copy and mimic.<sup>40</sup>

To the casual observer of Japanese society, the music scene may indeed take on a uniform appearance, especially when considering the popularity of J-pop, the saccharine-sweet pop music of which seems to emulate the boy and girl groups found in Europe and America. While lyrics predominantly are sung in Japanese, save for the few random English words thrown in for the sake of perceived coolness, the music in itself takes on a shape that resembles Western pop music. However, there are a number of interesting and innovative Japanese bands and artists, who in recent years have gained a large following in the West, although remaining virtually unknown in Japan.<sup>41</sup> For people interested in experimental music, Japan has developed into an important source of inspiration. It is a paradox that while the stereotypical image of the Japanese portrays them as unoriginal copycats, the book *Japanese Independent Music* opens with the following lines: 'Japanese experimental music is today one of the most original and creative music around'<sup>42</sup> Below I will try to give a brief introduction to some of the key artists and historical circumstances that have contributed in the creation of the Japanese experimental scene.

### 6.1 EARLY INFLUENCES

When looking at Japanese music history, it becomes evident that Japan has fostered a number of interesting contemporary composers, such as Ichiyanagi Toshi and Takemitsu Tōru. In fact, Japan has since the early 1950s had a vital experimental music scene that has managed to inspire generations of both Japanese and Western musicians without merely copying the West.<sup>43</sup>

Established in 1951 by musicologist and critic Akiyama Kuniharu and composer Takemitsu

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<sup>40</sup> Atkins, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Cope, Julian. *Japrocksampler: How the post-war Japanese blew their minds on rock'n'roll*. (Great Britain: Bloomsbury publishing, 2007), 10.

<sup>42</sup> Stofer, Franck, ed. *Japanese independent music*. (Bordeaux: Sonoro, 2001), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Cope, 9.

Tōru (among others), the *Jikken-koubou* experimental workshop was a reaction to the westernization of Japanese culture. The founders were determined to retain some of their culture, which they feared would vanish, and they fused electronic experiments with *gagaku* percussion. *Gagaku* was a form of Buddhist ritual music that had been performed at the Imperial court for several centuries. Not only was this type of music considered to represent something essentially Japanese, but the Buddhist tradition of improvisation enabled the composers to think more freely in terms of musical exploration than their Western counterparts could.<sup>44</sup> The *Jikken-Koubou* experimental workshop encouraged a new generation of composers to experiment with electronic music, and the Otaku prize was awarded to composers that successfully managed to incorporate modern music with Buddhist elements.<sup>45</sup> Another important influence on the early Japanese experimental music was the European genre of *musique concrète* developed by the French recording engineer Pierre Schaeffer.<sup>46</sup> Performers in this genre utilized found sounds and objects for musical purposes. By locking a groove on a vinyl record, Schaeffer made the first ‘sample loop’ This technique eventually developed into digital sampling which is a common feature in many forms of popular music today.

In the beginning of 1969, big cities in Japan had experienced a growth in number of young people sporting long hair and unconventional clothing. These people were given the name *Futen* (mad people). Although some concern arose among the older generation, the government had recently implemented a new programme called ‘understanding among youth’, and instead of attempting to disperse the growing crowds, they opened up an unused army camp in Fukuzumi where the young people gathered and eventually started a commune. This caught the attention among other *Futen*, and several other communes were established. In order to prevent the same kind of campus riots that Europe and America had experienced, Japanese universities actually encouraged the students to speak their minds. Many bands and artists, such as J. A. Caesar, Murahachibu and Mustang had their roots in this scene. One of the bands was the notorious Hadaka no Rarizu whose band members were self-proclaimed revolutionaries that wanted to overthrow the established order. Wakabayashi Moriyasu, bass player in Hadaka no Rarizu and member of the Japanese Red Army Faction, was involved in the hijacking of an aeroplane at Tokyo's Haneda airport on 30 March 1970. The aeroplane was forced to land in Pyongyang, where the hijackers were received as heroes by the North Korean authorities.

There are those who may argue that these counter-cultures and their representatives were

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<sup>44</sup>Cope, 43.

<sup>45</sup>Cope, 42.

<sup>46</sup>Cope, 43.



nothing more than a Japanese response to what was going on in the West, but the *Futen* scene was in many ways different from the hippie scene in the West. The *Futen* label could be applied to people from many different subcultures, such as hippies and beatniks. Although they shared many of the same political convictions, there was a lower tolerance of illegal substance abuse in the Japanese radical youth movement.<sup>47</sup>

Further back in history, there are a number of examples of people that went against the grain. *Kabuki*, which is now an established form of traditional Japanese theatre, was once some sort of renegade avant-garde art movement. The *kabuki-mono* was known for their exaggerated manner of speaking, outlandish clothes and generally strange behaviour. The word *Kabuki* is derived from the verb *kabuku* meaning ‘to deviate from the norm’. The Kabuki were the punks of the seventeenth century; their leader Izumo-no-Okuni was a woman, and the majority of the audiences were urban commoners.<sup>48</sup> Miyanaga Kuniko, research fellow at the Institute for the study of Economic culture at Boston University, has argued that there have always existed people within Japanese society who have consciously chosen to follow their own individual path, whether this has been done because of religious or artistic convictions.

While I do not imply that all Japanese experimental music is original, (certainly they have their share of uninteresting bands and artists), chiefly, my aim is to contest the assumption that the Japanese in general are unoriginal copycats. Even though some of the Western-influenced genres in Japan, such as the *Eleki-boom* and the *Group Sound boom*<sup>49</sup> can, and have been, considered to be nothing more than a Japanese response to Western pop cultural expressions, we should not be tempted to write off everything that has been produced in Japan as mere copies.

Contrary to what we and indeed the Japanese themselves might think, Japan has proven to be a fertile breeding ground for everything from free improvisation to jazz and other experimental genres of music. To deny this means that we have to ignore legendary figures such as Haino Keiji, Masima Akita, J.A. Caesar, and Ōtomo Yoshihide and Ichianagi Toshi, all of whom contest the assumption that the Japanese cannot express themselves individualistically

There has been a tendency to exaggerate Western influences, while simultaneously underestimating the influence of Japanese culture in the Occident. Whereas Western free improvisational music had its roots in jazz, the Japanese free-improvisational music was inspired by technological experiments and *musique concrète*. Western free improvisational music was seldom

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<sup>47</sup>Cope, 14, 113, 123.

<sup>48</sup>Powers, Richard Gid, Kato Hidetoshi and Bruce Sitronach, ed. *Handbook of Japanese popular culture*. (London: Greenwood press, 1989), 305.

<sup>49</sup>*Eleki* is the Japanese word for instrumental-based music with a heavy emphasis on guitar-riffs that grew to popularity in the 60's. *Eleki* is an abbreviation of the two words “electric” and “guitar”. *Group Sounds* (commonly referred to as *GS*), is the equivalent to the genre of music that bands like The Beatles played.

more than a standard jazz tune interpreted by jazz musicians in a new and unconventional manner. Japanese free improvisational music however did not relate to any fixed standard. The Fluxus movement, an international network of artists, designers and musicians who blended different artistic disciplines, was inspired by Japanese contemporary art. The Japanese art ensemble Hi Red Centre was even invited to perform in New York. Both Karl Heinz Stockhausen and John Cage were overwhelmed by Japanese culture and tried to incorporate aspects of Zen Buddhism into their works. Both visited the famous Zen Buddhist Suzuki Daisetsu and showed considerable interest in such traditional practices as Noh theatre, tea ceremony and *gagaku*. Interest in Zen Buddhism increased in the 1960s among various celebrities and within the hippie movement. After visiting Suzuki, Stockhausen was inspired to make Telemusick, a ‘music of the whole world of all countries and races’<sup>50</sup> While much has been written about the cultural flow from the West to Japan, there seems to have been less focus on the cultural borrowing that has followed the opposite path.

## **6.2 DIVERGENCE FROM THE WEST**

Whereas Western musicians were often expected to stay within the established tradition of the musical genre they belonged to, the Japanese were encouraged and expected to transcend these boundaries.<sup>51</sup> Fewer restrictions were placed on them, which was something that allowed for more experimentation. As a result of this, many bands that were considered mainstream rock or pop acts could challenge conventions more freely than in the west. Many of the musicians I discuss in this paper are as inspired by Japanese contemporary music and Japanese free jazz as they are by Western popular culture and *musique concrète*. Additionally, one would expect them to have less of an incentive to prove themselves than a Japanese hip hop artist would, because their musical background is as rooted in their own culture as it is in Western culture. Whereas Japanese hip hop closely resembles American hip hop, Japanese experimental music has been considered something entirely apart from Western experimental music. This is especially true in the genre of noise,<sup>52</sup> the success of which may owe much to the notion that the genre expresses something uniquely Japanese. Many commentators give quite far-fetched reasons when explaining the difference between Japanese and Western experimental music. Even though authenticity is not necessarily linked to skin colour, it is nevertheless linked to Japanese ancestry. One thing that recurs not only in

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<sup>50</sup>Cope, 9, 61, 62.

<sup>51</sup>Cope, 14.

<sup>52</sup>Matsue, Jennifer Milioto. *Making music in Japan's underground-the Tokyo hardcore scene*. (New York/London: Routledge, 2009), 75.

discussion about music but in practically every discussion about Japan, is the reference to Japan as an island country and the implications this has had for Japanese society. Maruta of Club Lunatica Records elaborates:

From ancient times, because Japan is an insular country where various cultures drifted to, Japanese have taken bits of different cultures and mixed them to create their own. [They have] include[d] in their work what they think is good from other cultures without being aware of the context they came from. [They have been able to] choose without any kind of prejudice. This reproduction has started to be a source of pride for the excellence of Japanese culture.<sup>53</sup>

While researching this paper, I met with people who displayed some of the same stereotypes. One of them was Yoshi of the Tokyo-based hardcore band Killie. He explained to me that the thing he envied most in Western hardcore bands, was the fact that their drummers had such energy and displayed a kind of drive that the Japanese bands could never match. When inquiring why he believed they could not play like their American peers he suggested that it may have something to do with the Japanese inferior physique, saying that the '*Japanese are not strong enough*.'<sup>54</sup> He also told me that while Japanese people are skilled imitators, they rarely display originality themselves. Rather than voicing his subjective opinion he seemed to present this as fact: '*Japanese can copy but [can] not make things themselves*.'<sup>55</sup> Paul James, a Canadian musician who had been living in Tokyo for the last ten years, made similar claims. Although a bit more reluctant to make generalized statements about the Japanese, he seemed to share some of the same opinions as Yoshi:

At some point we tried out various Japanese drummers but they couldn't get it right. Although technically very skilled they all played like robots. They could not put their heart into it. Japanese cannot express themselves individualistically. They are not used to showing their own personality<sup>56</sup>

These comments reveal that certain stereotypes and notions continue to affect our idea about the Japanese, and indeed the Japanese people's idea about themselves. In its most extreme interpretation, one could assume that this would impose serious limitations on Japanese experimental musicians much in the same way it did on Japanese hip hoppers and jazz musicians. However, certain statements by the musicians themselves in the book *Japanese Independent Music*<sup>7</sup> suggest that while the same attitudes seem to prevail, the implications are not the same for

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<sup>53</sup>Stofer, 58.

<sup>54</sup>Personal communication, October 2007

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<sup>56</sup>Personal communication, November 2007

experimental musicians. Whereas the lack of understanding of Western culture posed problems for jazz and hip hop musicians, to the experimental musicians it has provided a sense of freedom from musical conventions.

## 7 AUTHENTICATING MISCOMPREHENSION

Ever since the introduction of Western culture and the construction of the nation state, the Japanese have been obsessively occupied with defining themselves, but many of the stereotypes that are assigned to Japanese people are constructions that they have inherited from the West.<sup>57</sup> Both Japan and the West have actively sought out those aspects of Japanese culture that supports their own ideas of what Japan essentially is. One of these was the ability to mimic, apparently noticeable in Japan's emulation of Western culture. However, since Japanese culture was always regarded as something completely different from Western culture, it is widely believed that parts of Western culture get very much lost in the transfer. When asked about the Japanese experimental artist's ability to mix various styles in a natural way, Kimijima Yui of the band Gaji responds: 'When listening to music, most Japanese don't know what tradition or history (or cultural necessity) lies behind it'<sup>58</sup>

Since many of the assumed characteristics of the Japanese society is at odds with features considered vital in order to classify something as authentic, it might seem impossible for a Japanese artist to claim authenticity, whether because of the mimicry of the West or because of the supposed difficulty in expressing individual personality. But when Japan emerged as a powerful economy in the early nineteen eighties, its cultural and technological commodities started to increase its cultural influence on Western societies<sup>59</sup> and in the experimental music scene, many artists started to view the Japanese propensity for copying the West as a good thing, with their inability to completely understand Western culture now being regarded as an essential part of their creativity. The book *Japanese Independent Music* features interviews with some of the main actors in the Japanese underground scene, many of whom such as Kawabata Makoto of Acid Mothers Temple and Hoppy Kamiyama from God Mountain Records, have experienced underground success in the West. Some of the statements in the book reveal a certain change of attitudes. No longer are Japanese misconceptions of the West viewed as something that handicaps them in creating something authentic. Rather, it is the very fact that they don't understand properly that allows them to experiment. This aspect gives their music authority as something uniquely Japanese and may lend them cultural authenticity. Kawabata Makoto of Acid Mothers Temple explains:

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<sup>57</sup> Atkins, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Stofer, 59

<sup>59</sup> Iwabuchi, Koichi. *Recentering globalization*. (Durham and London: Duke university press, 2002), 23

We don't have any consciousness of genres. The only distinction we make is between interesting music and uninteresting music[....]We experienced rock, jazz, blues, contemporary composition, ethnic music-in fact every variety of interesting music-as pure information and so we felt no need to learn about the history or social background behind these styles of music. All these styles of music were indiscriminately imported into Japan. So we were able to naturally internalise and blend these types of music[....]Japanese musicians have a deep interest in all sorts of music and we possess a vast amount of musical knowledge/data. We simply mix-up this information, and I believe this is one of the unique features of Japanese musicians. We have no historical background for rock, jazz etc, and we treated it all as imported goods. In terms of economic efficiency we felt the need to restructure and compress this knowledge'<sup>60</sup>

Kawabata seems to view the ability to mix various sources as a Japanese propensity and therefore a key characteristic of Japanese experimental music. Since they have no consciousness of genres, they can practically go anywhere musically without contradiction. One Japanese band that has taken this to the extreme is the Osaka-based group Satanicpornocultshop. In the summer of 2007, I had the chance to meet DJ Vinylman of this group. Satanicpornocultshop plays experimental hip hop, mixing sounds and samples from all over the world. They are just as likely to cover the Velvet Underground as Kylie Minogue. In their 2005 remix of Missy Elliot's *Get Ur Freak On* they have replaced Missy's vocals with a young Japanese girl singing the English lyrics, and they use everything from samples, electric guitars, shamisen and Gregorian chanting to dogs barking and vinyl-scratching.

DJ Vinylman explained that what they were doing was essentially mixing various sources without discrimination on the basis of the historical circumstances the sources had emerged from. However, he did not at any point relate this to the bands Japanese ancestry. To him, it was simply a matter of ecology: 'There are a lot of good music and a lot of bad music. Choosing one and one [sample] and making songs is a very ecological thing.'<sup>61</sup> DJ Ugh of the same group elaborated further in a personal correspondence conducted about a year later:

Hip hop for me is a collage art. Moreover, I think art formed from familiar material and not only special material is wonderful. For instance, I think that the person who makes culinary delights from the leftovers in the fridge is the best DJ! <sup>62</sup>

He too agreed with the ecological aspect of their songs that DJ Vinylman had emphasized:

Even though it is regrettable, famous music becomes an object of consumption. When the fashion goes out of fashion, it becomes garbage. That's why I think it's a good thing that one

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<sup>60</sup>Stofer, 48, 50, 59.

<sup>61</sup>Personal communication, July 2007

<sup>62</sup>Personal communication, April 2008

can make music through recycling that ‘garbage’<sup>63</sup>

These statements can be regarded as a comment on the rampant consumerism in Japan. By using those elements of popular culture that have been tossed aside and rearranging them, they implicitly criticize the habit of throwing away those things that are regarded outdated and irrelevant. At the same time they exhibit the eclecticism of Japanese experimental music. They question the distinction between high and low culture, because they give different genres equal treatment. By doing this they implicitly question authenticity, credibility, musical integrity and the importance of belonging to a certain ‘scene’.

## **7.1 A SUPER-FLAT MIX-CULTURE**

Japanese experimental musicians favour an eclectic mix of genres and have taken an ironic stance by mixing high and low forms of music. In the twentieth century, very few things are considered ‘pure’ if we use the established definition of the word. Everything is treated as commentaries, presentations and copies of reality and although referring to something authentic it is not part of reality itself. Whereas artists in the past created something inspired by an idea, a religion or an ideology, in the post-modern era one has lost the value of ‘depth’ and everything has become interpretations, comments, references, deconstruction and reconstructions of preceding works.<sup>64</sup> According to Kawabato Makoto of Acid Mothers Temple, the existing Japanese experimental scene is the product of an information pool that is continuing to expand:

It all comes from an illusion. At the beginning all we had was very limited amount of information and then we created, or daydreamed, an illusion from these materials. Our illusion has become larger and more all-encompassing than the original reality which inspired it.<sup>65</sup>

According to French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, in our modern world human experience is no longer real but a simulation of a reality that no longer exists.<sup>66</sup> In his book *Empire of Signs* French philosopher Roland Barthes argued that in Japan, unlike the West, a thing does not have to signify something transcendental but has value in itself. There is no great entity of which one can judge

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<sup>63</sup>Personal communication, April 2008

<sup>64</sup>Azuma, Hiroki. *Superflat Japanese Post modernity*. 05.27.2001, [http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat\\_en2.html](http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat_en2.html) (01.09.2008)

<sup>65</sup>Stofer, 52.

<sup>66</sup>Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. (The United States of America: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 2.

other things up against.<sup>67</sup> Some related ideas are summed up in pop artist Murakami Takeshi's concept of 'superflat'. On one level, it refers to various forms of flattened forms in Japanese graphic art, animation, pop culture and fine arts. Murakami sees a link between *Ukiyo-e*, woodblock prints that were popular among urban commoners in the Edo-period, and contemporary *manga*, which they resemble in many ways. They were often humorous, exaggerated and two-dimensional. Furthermore, because they were woodblock prints they were mass-produced and distributed among people who could not afford original paintings. On another level, *Ukiyo-e* were among the first representations of Japanese consumer culture and its perceived 'shallow emptiness'<sup>68</sup> Murakami sees Japanese culture as inherently superficial, a common perception among the musicians interviewed in Japanese independent music.

Whereas Japanese culture prevented the earliest jazz musicians from expressing themselves within the authentic idiom of jazz, the very same culture enables experimental musicians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to express themselves in ways that Western musicians cannot. The inability to fully understand Western culture has placed Japanese musicians in a unique position. Westerners cannot display the same kind of originality, because they are trapped within musical and historical conventions. When asked what it is about Japanese music that appeals to Westerners and makes it interesting, Sato Gak, musician and artistic director of TEMPO-SHERE<sup>69</sup>, replied: 'It's a mix culture. That's all'<sup>70</sup> His claim is supported by Yuko Nexus 6, an experimental Osaka-based musician: 'Japanese society is very schizophrenic. Cut ups and fragmentation are Japanese life'<sup>71</sup> This ability to mix various genres and styles without hesitation is seen as a Japanese propensity, related to the notion that the Japanese have no musical roots. Jazz guitarist Uchihashi Kazuhisa, explains:

It is because we have no traditional, strong musical roots. That's why we can go anywhere [...] We learned everything about music from the American and European music. Our musical roots are the music of other countries.<sup>72</sup>

In the early nineties, many Japanese experimental musicians experienced unprecedented success in Europe and America. Interviews and record reviews reveal to us that much of the fascination with these bands was precisely their ability to mix diverse types of music in a natural way. Cornelius, or

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<sup>67</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Empire of signs*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000)

<sup>68</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Superflat Japanese Post modernity*. 05.27.2001, [http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat\\_en2.html](http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat_en2.html) (01.09.2008)

<sup>69</sup> The contemporary music label of Right Tempo Records in Milan.

<sup>70</sup> Stofer, 53.

<sup>71</sup> Stofer, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Stofer, 51, 58.



Oyamada Keigō, was described in an interview like this: 'It's Oyamada's knack for seamlessly juxtaposing these disparate elements, as much as his mimetic abilities that makes his music breathtakingly cool.'<sup>73</sup> Oyamada himself agreed: 'You could compare it to a Transformer: You've got a car and a train, then you put them together and they become a robot. It's that kind of feel with my music, too: its different types of music put together in various ways, to make a whole new kind of music.'<sup>74</sup> However he downplays his originality by simply claiming that: 'We've already mixed all the music in the twentieth century and we're not doing anything new.'<sup>75</sup>

## 7.2 AUTHENTICATING THE COPY

Post-modern commentators have claimed that Japanese society makes no clear distinction between the real and the artificial, and through the act of copying the Japanese confirm their 'Japanese-ness'.<sup>76</sup> In *Recentring globalization* Iwabuchi claims that the:

Japanese capacity for cultural borrowing and appropriation does not simply articulate a process of hybridization in practice, but it is strategically represented as a key feature of Japanese national identity itself.<sup>77</sup>

One could perhaps argue that both Satanicpornocultshop and Oyamada Keigo exhibit many of those features that many regard to be characteristic of Japanese society. They seem to ignore most of the conventions that rule the various genres and make no clear distinction between them other than the difference between 'interesting' and 'uninteresting.' Through this act of indiscriminate appropriation they could be said to exhibit their 'japanese-ness', because the act of copying in itself confirms their cultural identity. However, since the various sources from which they draw their inspiration are culturally alien to them, the outcome of this process can never be an identical copy. Uchihashi Kazuhisha elaborates:

Japanese style is also based on imitation but it's not analytical, it's obscure. When they start to copy something, they will soon find themselves going in a different direction. It is not important for them to make a precise copy.'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Smith, Ethan. *The transformer*. net, December, 1998,  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1285/is\\_12\\_28/ai\\_53368760](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_12_28/ai_53368760) (09.01.2008)

<sup>74</sup>ibid

<sup>75</sup>ibid

<sup>76</sup>Cox, 9.

<sup>77</sup>Iwabuchi, 53.

<sup>78</sup>Stofer, 51.

Dj Ugh seems to agree:

When mixing different types of music you can give them a common feature. By doing that you can give them another shade of meaning than originally intended. Up and down, right and left change places.<sup>79</sup>

By their own admission, Satanicpornocultshop plays ‘bricolage hip hop’ inspired by the thoughts of French anthropologist Claude Lèvi Strauss. The word is derived from the French word bricoler, and is used to define a person who uses existing materials in new and interesting ways. The material itself is derived from existing sources, and this may resemble the assumed Japanese propensity to copy and emulate. However, the material may be used in a completely different context and in a different method than originally intended. The various qualities and features of these sources may impose certain limitations upon the bricoleur, and it may very well demand a higher level of creativity compared to people who start out with a blank slate.

Technology has provided musicians with new sounds and new ways in which to rearrange the past in ways that would seem inconceivable only a few decades ago. Whereas jazz-musicians had to rely on their own ability to copy the style of their American peers, musicians can now simply cut out pieces of the original recording themselves. These possibilities have given performers and audience alike new ways in which to interact and interpret their society, but at the same time technology has always been in opposition to nature and by extension that which is ‘real’ and ‘authentic’<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Personal communication, April 2008

<sup>80</sup>Cox, 9.

## 8 TECHNOLOGY

During the economic boom following the Second World War Japan started to become associated with technology and electronics. Japan's obligation to make payments for damage they had caused during the war was much less than Germany's; the American SCAP forces were more concerned with rebuilding the country in order to gain a stronghold in a part of the world where there was perceived to be an increasing threat from communism. Japan had to accept a new constitution, written by the Americans. One of the demands of the Americans was that Japan renounced belligerency. This meant Japan would no longer have to spend money on its armed forces, so the country now had the financial resources to concentrate on consumer-oriented commodities instead, and they quickly became one of the dominant exporters of new technologies.<sup>81</sup> Japan's adaptation of new technology may have contributed to strengthen the notion that there is something inherently fake about its society, and technological progress may have further widened the gap between 'the authentic' and 'the inauthentic'. New technology has given us the opportunity to faithfully copy, but it has also forced us to question the difference between what is perceived as 'real' and what is perceived as 'fake'

The notion that technology stands in the way of authenticity is not new. Technology such as the phonograph enabled musicians and performers to capture a moment in time and transcribe an external event. For the first time it was possible to manipulate music and create results that did not occur naturally. Editing and manipulating sounds in this way opened up infinite possibilities for the musicians but since it no longer captured a specific moment in time it was robbed of some its authenticity. Even in our time, the notion that a live performance is essentially more real than a record produced in a studio still persists.<sup>82</sup> In a live performance setting, a band or an artist may use technology such as electric guitars and amplifiers, and the band may play exactly the same songs in every performance, but a single performance is still a document of something that happened at a given time and that single performance will never take place again. A wrong chord or a missed note that would typically be edited out in a studio setting is preserved for all eternity, giving the recording a tinge of authenticity that a studio recording could never match. It is perhaps no coincidence that bands and artists often emphasize that their favourite part of playing music is in a live setting. Before the introduction of magnetic tape, every recording was done as a live performance and since studio time was expensive, small mistakes did not warrant a second or a third take. Therefore many of these recordings sound raw and crude to us and we feel that it is a real

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<sup>81</sup>Iwabuchi, 24

<sup>82</sup>Shuker, 218.

person playing the songs. These days many bands try to incorporate an aura of authenticity in their studio recordings by using first takes, avoid fixing mistakes and use second-rate equipment intentionally.<sup>83</sup>

Since the 1950s studio equipment has become both smaller and less expensive, and since the late eighties more people could afford cheap four tracks recording machines that allowed them to overdub their own songs. Aspiring musicians no longer had to spend huge amounts of money on studio time. Because they no longer had to be financially backed by major record companies they were free from commercial considerations. This gave birth to the idea that non-commercial music was more creative than commercially oriented music.<sup>84</sup> However, cheap four tracks could still not match a million dollar studio and the production quality was under par. Eventually, however, something that was largely a product of necessity became a part of the aesthetic, and the genre of lo-fi was born.<sup>85</sup> During the early nineties, many bands that had already achieved some commercial success continued to favour home recording. Unlike the slick production values of the commercial studios, it was quite obvious that real people played and produced the songs. They favoured music that sounded like anyone could do it. It was no longer purely technical skills that mattered but your ability to express yourself.<sup>86</sup> This opened up a process of democratization of the music business and these days practically anyone can afford music equipment. Compared to a four track, the equipment available today can almost match an expensive studio in terms of production qualities. However, it is not only technological progress that has threatened the aesthetics of home recording. The major companies realized that non-commercial techniques could lend them an aura of authenticity; in fact, in many genres such as lo-fi and black metal, poor recording quality is used conspicuously as an authenticating strategy because of its perceived opposition to mainstream music.<sup>87</sup>

Not only production techniques but also instruments themselves have benefited from the technological progress of the twentieth century. Keyboards and synthesizers became increasingly popular once they became affordable and today they are used in a wide array of genres. Owing much to early contemporary composers such as Steve Reich and Karl Heinz Stockhausen that experimented with tape loops, musicians today rely on keyboards for anything from sound effects to programmed beats. While some use keyboards purely as replacements for real instruments, other musicians exploit the technological features of the keyboard in order to create sounds that could not

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<sup>83</sup>Washburne, Christopher and Maiken Derno, ed. *Bad music-the music we love to hate*. (New York; Routledge, 2004), 277

<sup>84</sup>Negus, Keith. *Popular music theory-an introduction*. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996), 46.

<sup>85</sup>Azerrad, Michael. *Our band could be your life-Scenes from the American indie underground 1981-1991*. (New York: Little, Brown and company, 2001), 481.

<sup>86</sup>Azerrad, 6.

<sup>87</sup>Washburne, 239.

occur acoustically.

## **8.1 YELLOW MAGIC ORCHESTRA**

One of the leading pioneers of electro-pop or synth-pop is the Japanese band Yellow Magic Orchestra. Originally conceived as a one-off studio project, the band's mission was to fuse oriental exotica with modern electronics but they quickly became so popular that they decided to continue. The man initiating the project was Haruomi Hosono. He was one of the musicians during the nineteen sixties who wanted to mix Western music with Japanese elements, and his former band Happy End was the first to sing Japanese lyrics over more or less conventional 60s rock music. With Yellow Magic Orchestra he succeeded in mixing Western and Eastern elements and even the name of the band emphasized their ethnicity. YMO, along with German pioneers Kraftwerk, were among the first bands that experienced mainstream success by utilizing new technology such as synths, keyboards and sequencers. The technology itself was derived from the west but it was the Japanese who started using it to make products for the average consumer. The synth's, samplers and keyboards most commonly used by musicians around the globe are still largely the products of the Japanese electronics industry. Thus, YMO's music represented two aspects of Japanese culture: they played melodies that shared common features with traditional Japanese music, and they played it on electronic equipment from Japan. This may have been crucial to the popularity they experienced in the West. YMO was even invited to play at the American TV show 'Soul Train', a show that predominantly featured black musicians and whose main audience were urban African-Americans.

## **8.2 TECHNOLOGY VERSUS AUTHENTICITY**

As noted above, YMO successfully conquered Western audiences through their oriental music produced with Japanese technology, and this may have given them some credibility. Thus, being Japanese is not necessarily an obstacle in electronic music, and in fact it may very well be an advantage. After all, Japan is at the forefront of consumer electronics. However, technology may in some ways represent the unnatural, and can impose limitations on authenticity. Since computers and keyboards are mass-manufactured and because many of them are constructed to emulate the sounds of real instruments, they can be seen as less authentic than instruments like drums and guitar that offer a more organic sound. Therefore, while YMO may be having been considered culturally authentic thanks to their preoccupation with Japanese consumer electronics and oriental scales, the

very same technology may threaten their personal authenticity. Personal authenticity calls for an expression of real human emotion and many feel this cannot be expressed properly through the use of electronic devices. A common accusation directed at Japanese musicians is that they are too preoccupied with technique. They are technically and technologically skilled but they lack ‘heart’

Paul James described to me in an anecdote his frustration while trying to record his band's album in a Japanese recording studio: ‘We wanted it to be gritty, a dirty sound but they just couldn’t get it. It was too professional, too clean.’<sup>88</sup> He also claimed that their Japanese drummer; ‘played like a robot’<sup>89</sup>

In other words, the Japanese were so concerned with the technical aspects that they could not put their heart and soul into it. Even if technological advancements may be considered an essential part of Japanese society, it seems as if technology threatens human emotion, and music that lacks emotion and purpose outside itself may be regarded as less authentic. Humans have a tendency to perceive copies as something less real than the original. A copy is not considered real: it is simply a reference to something real. However, it would be wrong to assume that technology is solely responsible for the opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic. If we for example consider ‘folk’ music that by many is considered the most authentic music, this genre too has developed through the copying and blending of previous types of music. In fact, most genres of music are nothing more than the product of different variations of the same formal structures, and in that sense one can't make music without copying. However, new technology has given musicians the opportunity to cut out pieces directly from other sources, and the ‘theft’ has become more apparent. In earlier times, folk musicians often played the same standard songs, but their different techniques and interpretations would always change the songs slightly. Furthermore, since one could not afford to spend months in a studio, recordings were rarely a documentation of a perfect performance. When copying something using a computer, mistakes occur less frequently and if they do one can edit them out relatively easy. However, doing this makes it obvious that the recording is manipulated and to some people it would seem less authentic. Simply put, the imperfect is regarded as more real than the perfect. If it sounds like a human plays it, it is more likely to have intention, and in order to regard music as ‘personally authentic’ it must have some kind of meaning. Its existence must be justified in something that extends beyond itself. To some extent we expect ‘authentic music’ to have meaning, but this notion is rejected by some of Japan's experimental musicians. They feel this is a typically Western academic approach and does not support the idea that music must extend to something beyond itself.

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<sup>88</sup>Personal communication, November 2007

<sup>89</sup>Ibid

## 9 MUSIC BUILT ON NOTHING

To some extent, traditional Japanese art has been less occupied with originality as an aesthetic standard by which to evaluate works of art than their European peers have been. According to the tradition of *Iemoto-seidō* (the master-apprentice system) a skilled artist was a person that could imitate his master down to the most minute detail. Individual expression was never encouraged and students were in fact forbidden to expose their personal interpretation until they became authorized teachers.<sup>90</sup> Whereas the West valued individual expression in art, the Japanese focused on copying their masters. One of the most prevailing stereotypes of the Japanese is that they are ‘highly collectivistic or group-oriented, by the same token anti-individualistic’, especially in comparison with Western cultures.<sup>91</sup> This behaviour is perhaps best summed up in the proverb, ‘The nail that sticks out must be hammered down’, and is by many Japanese and Westerners alike considered to be uniquely Japanese<sup>92</sup> Even the Japanese word for ‘individualism’ (*kojin shugi*) carries with it negative connotations and may imply selfishness and egotism.<sup>93</sup> However, some scholars disagree. Research fellow Miyanaga Kuniko points out that individualism, although historically and culturally distinct from the Western interpretation, has always existed in Japan. Typical examples are monks and artists that chose to drop ‘out of established groups for the purpose of self-realization’<sup>94</sup> Befu Harumi says that the idea of Japanese ‘groupism’ has merely been derived from comparing Japanese behaviour with Western individualism.<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless, the prevailing assumption is that the Japanese are culturally handicapped in expressing themselves individualistically, and this may undermine any effort to come across as authentic. Personal authenticity concerns a person’s subjective relation to the world and cannot be achieved by repeating a set of actions or taking up a pre-established set of positions; it requires of an individual that he or she acts in accordance with his or her own morals and that the impetus to take action arises within the self.

Some of the musicians interviewed in the book *Japanese Independent Music* seem to share this perception. Oshima Dan, one of these musicians, explains: ‘To tell the truth, in Japan, we can’t be original. Everybody must be part of the boring mass’<sup>96</sup> If the Japanese cannot create anything new

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<sup>90</sup>Havens, Thomas R. *Artist and Patron in Post-war Japan*. (New Jersey: Princeton university press, 1982), 23.

<sup>91</sup>Miyanaga, Kuniko. *The creative edge; emerging individualism in Japan*. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), x.

<sup>92</sup>Miyanaga, x

<sup>93</sup>Befu, 21.

<sup>94</sup>Miyanaga, 4.

<sup>95</sup>Befu, 72.

<sup>96</sup>Stofer, 51.

but rather reinterpret and mix, it can be seen as both a restriction and a source of greater freedom. They treat Western music at hand simply as information, because it is not part of their own cultural roots. They don't need to consider historical circumstances or ideologies and this allows for more experimentation. Furthermore, because the expression of choice is not culturally linked to their ethnicity, they, in a sense, start with a blank slate. Oshima explains further: 'Japanese indie music is based on an absolutely absurd spirit. It is built on nothing. It contains no culture. In Europe music is based on a long history' <sup>97</sup>

The point of departure seems to be different for Western and Japanese experimental musicians. While European musicians seem to be carrying on a tradition, the Japanese seem to think that they are on the sideline merely commenting and reinterpreting this tradition. Many of the artists interviewed in the book *Japanese Independent Music* make a clear distinction between European music and Japanese music. European music may be original and innovative but it is always coming from within a certain tradition, regardless of whether it chooses to follow or reject the rules of this tradition. Japanese music on the other hand is built on nothing, <sup>98</sup> and in that sense does not necessarily have to mean anything. In an interview with the counter-culture magazine PlanB, Melt Banana, one of the most successful of Japanese experimental bands, recalls how they were faced with the western academic approach to music when playing in France:

In France we played this festival and they wanted members of each band to join this debate and discuss what they were trying to express,' says Agata. 'We told them we didn't want to do it, but they said in France people expect artists to explain and if we didn't do it then they might think we're fake. I thought that was strange' <sup>99</sup>

Composer and multi-instrumentalist Ōtomo Yoshihide, involved in a wide range of musical expressions from jazz, noise, and electronics to classical composition, takes a similar stance when asked about the intention behind his music:

I don't really understand the idea of a valid reason to make music. Why do you have to explain in words why you make music? It's the same as not being able to explain in words why you live.' <sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Stofer, 49.

<sup>98</sup>ibid

<sup>99</sup>MacNamee, David. *Melt Banana Interview*. Plan B Magazine, 05.2004, <http://www.planbmag.com/content/view/97/42/> (01.09.2008)

<sup>100</sup>McIntyre, Sally. *A conversation with Ōtomo Yoshihide*. Log Illustrated Archives, 2000, <http://www.physicsroom.org.nz/log/archive/10/otomo/> (01.09.2008)



The idea that music must have at least some kind of message is rejected in both of these statements, and Melt Banana, who use mostly English in their lyrics, claim that they base their lyrics on intonation only and that there is no meaning behind them. This may be equally true for many Western musicians as well, but some of the Japanese musicians interviewed claims that the ‘meaninglessness’ in their music is somehow related to their ethnicity. Japanese noise artist Merzbow has said that ‘Western noise is often too conceptual and academic. Japanese noise relishes the ecstasy of sound itself.’<sup>101</sup> When asked about the difference between American/European and Japanese styles, Jibiki Yuichi of Eater and Telegraph Factory replied: ‘Pure emotion. For example in case of noise music, European music is conceptual and logical, meanwhile Japanese noise is meaningless, coming from emotions within the soul.’<sup>102</sup>

The tendency to view European musical tradition as based on logic and concepts in contrast to Japanese music, which is mainly emotional, is an extension of thoughts found in *Nihonjinron*-literature. Japanese culture is believed to be emotional and asymmetrical. Furthermore, Japanese culture is regarded ‘spiritual’ in contrast to the ‘material’ West. There is not necessarily any expressed meaning or intention, and emotion is emphasized over logic.<sup>103</sup>

## 9.1 ONKYŌKEI; NON-MUSIC

In the late 1990s a new genre of music emerged from Japan. Based on free improvisation and owing a huge influence to free jazz, musicians placed an emphasis on texture rather than musical structure and the music was given the name ‘*Onkyōkei*’, a Japanese word meaning ‘reverberation of sound.’ Musicians like Ōtomo Yoshihide, Matsubara Sachiko and Nakamura Toshimaru rejected not only common assumptions about what music should be like, but went as far as saying that what they were doing was not music. *Onkyōkei* is silent and minimal soundscapes, and since there is neither a particular rhythm nor a melody, it is next to impossible to geographically locate it. Nevertheless, this type of music is associated with Japan, perhaps because of the perceived ‘emptiness’ of its expression. Matsubara Sachiko, one of the people involved in the scene, plays an empty sampler and uses only the sine waves generated within the sampler. Another artist that explores the possibilities of ‘empty’ instruments is Nakamura Toshimaru. Like Matsubara Sachiko he is

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<sup>101</sup>Hensley, Chad. *The beauty of noise: An interview with Masima Akita of Merzbow*. *EsoTerra* #8, 1999, <http://www.esoterra.org/merzbow.htm> (01.09.2008)

<sup>102</sup>Stofer, 49.

<sup>103</sup>Dale, 46.

reluctant to call himself a musician: 'I don't think I play, I produce my sound like a mirror'<sup>104</sup> He uses something he calls NIMB (no input mixing board), a board with the outputs connected to the inputs producing feedback. Like Sachiko's empty sampler, there are no external sound sources, and he lets the mixing board play itself. He does not seem to regard himself as a composer, and dismisses the common assumption that music should express the inner life of the composer. In contrast to those performers that view Japanese music as something emotional rather than conceptual and logical, he has reportedly stated that he wants to make music that does *not* express emotion:

The difference between my music and pop music is that pop music more consciously wants to be something, like sometimes pretending to be aggressive or pretending to be hostile. My music just happens naturally, unconsciously, so that is the difference'<sup>105</sup>

In other words there is no expressed meaning in his works, nor is there any emotion. His music simply exists.

Another major figure in Japanese experimental music scene is the previously introduced Ōtomo Yoshihide. He was one of the main characters involved with the *Onkyōkei* scene mentioned above. He also enjoys a good reputation in the free-jazz scene, which is closely related to the experimental scene, and has collaborated with many different musicians. As a Jazz-musician he has interpreted songs by the Beatles and has made an album where he covers famous *anime* theme songs. His involvement in the *Onkyōkei* scene is most apparent in his experimentations with turntables. While conventional Djs usually use two vinyl records, one producing a beat and the other a sample, Ōtomo uses no vinyl at all, using sounds that emerge from the turntable itself. However, these are just some of his unorthodox ways to create music. In 1998 he released the CD *Night before the death of the sampling virus*, a piece that not only questions legal issues such as copyright and fair use, but also his own role as a musician and performer. Whereas Satanicpornocultshop create something new through deconstructing and rearranging existing music, Ōtomo did not process his samples in any way. Most of the samples are simply small sound bites of Japanese TV advertisements lasting only a couple of seconds each. Each sound bite is a 'sample virus' and he encouraged musicians all over the world to include these samples in their own works so that they would spread like a virus through music.<sup>106</sup> In that way it can perhaps take on that 'new

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<sup>104</sup>Meyer, William. *Toshimaru Nakamura: Sound student*. Perfect Sound Forever, 07.2003, <http://www.furious.com/PERFECT/toshimarusnakamura.html> (09.01.2008)

<sup>105</sup>Meyer, William. *Toshimaru Nakamura: Sound student*. Perfect Sound Forever, 07.2003, <http://www.furious.com/PERFECT/toshimarusnakamura.html> (09.01.2008)

<sup>106</sup>Gross, Jason. *Ōtomo Yoshihide*. Furious, 05.1998, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/otomo.html> (09.01.2008)

shade of meaning' DJ Ugh talked about, but since the original only features unprocessed samples Ōtomo is reluctant to call it his work:

It's never my music because the sampling virus is sounds from TV [...] and since the original was made up mostly of sounds sampled without permission, it's debatable whether it can even be called my work. I was able to send out into the world this totally inconsistent, uncontrollable thing that I may not even be able to call a musical work, and in that sense I like it more than the projects I've had total control over.'<sup>107</sup>

However, Ōtomo is undeniably the man behind the work because it was he that collected these sounds. Indeed, it is his name on the cover of the CD, and although it is questionable whether one can call it music or not it still remains as a sort of conceptual piece of which he has the ownership and therefore the responsibility.

## 9.2 EMOTION VERSUS LOGIC

Some Japanese musicians seem to accept the notion that Japanese music is more emotional and cannot necessarily be explained in conceptual and logical terms. This theory has been supported by certain qualities of the Japanese language. The idea that language can expose the speaker's world-view is quite prevalent, and in the *Nihonjinron* discourse, the Japanese language is used to prove the uniqueness of Japan. Whatever is unique about the Japanese language is also unique about Japan. For example, the extended use of honorifics is thought to mirror the Japanese awareness of social hierarchies. In the same way, because the Japanese are so concerned with avoiding conflict, logic is sacrificed in order to maintain harmony. During the 40s and 50s *Nihonjinron* writers argued that Japanese was not a logical language, as supposed to French and English. Others such as Toyama Shigehiko, a professor of English literature, argue that while Western languages follows a 'line logic' Japanese follows a 'point logic'. In Japanese one does not have to verbalize everything. It suffices to subtly point out certain things and let your listeners draw his or her own conclusion. This he believes characterizes all of Japanese communication.<sup>108</sup>

If music has 'meaning' or some sort of message, it is likely that a majority of people will consider it more 'authentic' than music without any explicitly expressed meaning. Having a message indirectly implies that you want to express something that extends beyond playing music

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<sup>107</sup>Gross, Jason. *Ōtomo Yoshihide*. Furious, 05.1998, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/otomo.html> (09.01.2008)

<sup>108</sup>Befu, 38.

for the sake of playing music. However, in order to be perceived as 'authentic', the audience must feel that the message you deliver has some relevance to their own lives. When John Lennon sang *Imagine* his message of world peace seemed real and relevant to many people. When Britney Spears sings *I'm a slave 4 U*, her message, which according to her own interpretation is that she loves to dance, seems fake and superficial. It is not enough to have a message in order to be perceived as authentic, you must also have the right kind of message.

It seems like having a message is of less concern to these Japanese musicians. While having a message might strengthen a musician position as being 'real' or 'authentic', the very lack of message and meaning in Japanese music lends it authenticity as something uniquely Japanese. In the same manner as they authenticate Japanese music by emphasizing the Japanese ability to copy, they seek to authenticate their music by emphasizing the lack of meaning, which they assume is a unique feature of Japanese culture. Their music is in many ways devoid of purpose other than that of expressing some sort of emotional state of mind. On the other hand, Ōtomo Yoshihide's 'sampling virus' is more of a conceptual piece than an expression of emotions, and Nakamura claims that he wants to make music that does not express emotion. Unlike pop music, his music does not consciously want to be something. It just exists.

## 10 MAINSTREAM VERSUS EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC

The notion that ‘authentic’ music should have a message or meaning beyond itself is closely related to the idea that mainstream music is somehow less ‘real’ and less honest, than experimental music. Pop music seems contrived and artificial to many people because its success largely relies on following established conventions. That does not mean that pop music cannot be original, but its originality is somewhat limited by the very framework it operates within. Therefore, for some people, the level of authenticity is directly related to bands or artists positioning *Vis a Vis* the mainstream music business. Providing entertainment is the focus of the mainstream, and consequentially bands that belong in this sphere may in general be perceived as less authentic than experimental bands.

### 10.1 J-POP

Japan is a consumer-oriented society, and this is reflected in the type of music produced. Even though the Japanese experimental music scene receives quite a lot of attention in similar scenes in Europe, it is still largely an underground phenomenon. J-pop continues to dominate the charts as it has since the early eighties. It should be noted however, that J-pop is not an easily classifiable genre. It has undergone quite a few changes since its earliest inception, and because it is made with the expressed intent of making money it must always change according to changes in consumer tastes. Therefore, J-pop these days is closer to American R&B than it was in the eighties. However, since the importance of reflecting the changing taste of the consumer is a feature that is necessary for its survival, it is also one of the features that continue to threaten its authenticity. Music that is considered straightforward, cynical and commercial is often treated as inauthentic and insincere.<sup>109</sup>

Because J-pop has to take commercial considerations, it is regarded as manufactured music. Many labels use statistics and surveys in order to provide the public with exactly what they want. The labels choose the appearance of their artists, the constellation of the groups, what kind of songs they should sing and they favour the clean sound of professional recording studios. There are several aspects of J-pop, and indeed pop music in general, that go against the defining markers of what we would call authentic music. The debate about popular music versus experimental music has been largely influenced by the quite widespread notion that creativity is in

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<sup>109</sup>Washburne/Derno, 28.

opposition to commercialism. Even though 'popular music' is a term used about music that has achieved some success among the mainstream audience, and would include a variety of genres, there are a number of expectations that must be met in order to label something 'pop'. A distinct rhythm, catchy hooks, focus on melody, contrast between verse and chorus etc. Furthermore, it is vital for the record label to have their songs played on the radio, and this affects the length of most pop songs. Most pop songs follow a quite conventional and easily recognizable structure and usually last from three to five minutes. Because these external demands must be met, some people view it as a negative influence on the creative process. Therefore, there has traditionally been a tension between 'pop' which is connected to commerce, and 'rock' which is connected to creativity.<sup>110</sup> However, in later years many have rejected this notion and Simon Frith, sociologist and rock critic, has called this tension a 'clichéd opposition'. He argues that commerce and creativity is far more interwoven than some people might think.<sup>111</sup>

## **10.2 SELLING OUT**

Experimental musicians rarely take commercial considerations and the term is often applied to bands or artists that break with established traditions and conventions. Experimental music tends to value innovation for its own sake, and although commercially unsuccessful, may have a large cult following. Because experimental music is thought to value innovation and creativity over commerce, a sudden commercial success may lead to accusations of 'selling out' Using this term implies that an artist loses his or her authenticity and credibility when his or her music is suddenly appreciated by a larger audience.<sup>112</sup> It may not have anything to do with the music itself, but more by how it is perceived by others. Bob Dylan was the object of such criticism when he switched from acoustic guitar to an electric guitar. Although Bob Dylan's music is hardly experimental, it serves as a good example on how people react when an artist betrays his audience's expectations.

These notions seemed to be less important to the Japanese than to many Westerners. Most Japanese people I talked to were to a large degree ignorant of Japanese experimental music, but on the other hand people interested in experimental music did not necessarily reject commercial pop music. It seemed as if they did not feel constrained to one or the other but that they could enjoy both without any contradiction. Franck Stofer, the executive of Sonore records, told me that one of the artists on his label, Wono Satoru, was equally involved with experimental music as he was with

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<sup>110</sup>Shuker, 20

<sup>111</sup>Negus, 46.

<sup>112</sup>Negus, 45.

more commercial pop.<sup>113</sup> Wono Satoru, a DJ, music critic, author of books on the relation between music and technology, and assistant professor of Tama University, makes highly experimental music but has also worked as a producer for conventional pop groups. When DJ'ing he regularly plays bossanova pop. According to Sonore's web pages;

He has been able to develop in such directions that, to our occidental [my emphasis] eyes, may appear contradictory. His strength resides in his capacity to compose pieces of contemporary music, to be a renowned producer of pop, to work as a music promoter while attempting to preserve an atypical approach and the personal reflection that is necessary for musical experimentation.<sup>114</sup>

Most of the musicians I talked to seemed to agree that there was not really a market for their type of music. While living in Sapporo I went to a concert by Haino Keiji, and was surprised to find that in a city of approximately 1.8 million people, no more than about fifty people had shown up at the concert. A few years later, he drew a bigger crowd in Oslo, a town with a population of less than 600,000. The same happened when I went to see Melt Banana in Osaka. Of Osaka's approximately 2.6 million inhabitants, not more than 60 people were present, ten of whom were foreigners. When I saw them in Oslo a few years later, around 200 people were present. However, as Ali Morimoto and DJ Vinylman told me, the situation was not necessarily so bleak. Even though the market for their kind of music was small, the very size of the Japanese population still gave them some incentive to perform. There was always someone who was interested in their music.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, the assumed Japanese tendency to indiscriminately pick and choose on the basis of what was interesting rather than 'correct' seemed to allow a more pragmatic approach to the commercial music industry. Both Morimoto Ali and DJ Vinylman seemed less concerned with the notion of selling out than their western counterparts might have been. As Ali said:

I think the commercial scene in Japan is very flexible. For instance, Satanicpornocultshop recently made a commercial for female underwear. (They have a thirty-second version and a fifty second version.) I don't think that the major scene and the independent underground scene are in conflict. The major scene always wants to pick up interesting things. It's a good thing about Japan.'<sup>116</sup>

Contrary to my expectations, they saw Japanese commercial music industry as more flexible and more open for experimentation than its Western counterpart. If something was interesting, it did not

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<sup>113</sup>[http://www.sonore.com/satoru\\_wono/](http://www.sonore.com/satoru_wono/) (09.01.2008)

<sup>114</sup>[http://www.sonore.com/satoru\\_wono/](http://www.sonore.com/satoru_wono/) (09.01.2008)

<sup>115</sup>Personal communication, July 2007

<sup>116</sup>ibid

seem to matter whether it was commercial or not. It was the quality of the music that mattered. Moreover, since they could not rely on their music to generate any considerable income, selling a song to a company was never really the intention but rather a bonus. The music they made was therefore not influenced by commercial aspirations.<sup>117</sup> Paul James, the Canadian musician mentioned above, expressed quite a different attitude. He told me that his first meeting with Japanese music was through J-pop. Therefore his first impression of Japanese music was that it was made purely for the sake of entertainment, and that people treated it as a commodity more than anything else:

One thing that I thought of the music was that for them it seemed more like entertainment. We were in a car and a song was playing [on the radio]. All three were singing, they were going crazy. It was like a sort of shameless pop you know. For me it was kind of interesting to see that. Actually when I first came here I went to karaoke a lot, and I got to know some of those songs, but I never was particularly into that stuff. I never actually enjoyed that type of music.<sup>118</sup>

He admitted that he had played some gigs that would perhaps threaten their credibility in the West because the venue was too strongly connected to the commercialized branch of the music industry:

We played like a live show for a fashion show and if that was back home we'd probably hide that. Take the money and hide it, but over here it can't hurt you. They don't think it's bad. Even if I DJ too I'd never play songs that are in ads you know. If it's on TV it's like too big, but in Japan it's not like that. In Asia there's no shame about exchanging money. I don't think they have a shame about it somehow. If you're a banker you want to make money but if you're an artist in Europe you have to be dirt-poor to have credibility. Even in visual arts. With art in the west they have to be really careful with how commercial they get I guess. I don't know where it came from.<sup>119</sup>

It seems like there is less tension between the commercial music industry and the experimental scene in Japan than what one would expect from looking at similar scenes in Europe. One of the reasons may be that the Japanese, according to themselves, do not differentiate between various Western cultural expressions. I believe that one of the reasons for this lack of tension can be found in the nature of Japanese popular culture and Japan's official cultural policies.

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<sup>117</sup>Personal communication, July 2007

<sup>118</sup>Personal communication, November 2007

<sup>119</sup>ibid



### 10.3 CORPORATE PATRONAGE

The Japanese government has traditionally supported the ‘high arts’ such as Western classical music and ballet. The Ministry of Culture and Arts has one of the smallest budgets in the Japanese government, and for a long time their main priority was the construction of public halls. The idea was that these halls could be used for the promotion of any type of art, something they believed would be beneficial to the society at large. However, this was done at the expense of art itself. While building halls for the promotion of culture, the government did little to promote the creation of art that could fill these halls. This was a way for the Japanese government in which to avoid having to make aesthetic judgements, and the end result was that these halls became so multi-purpose that they were not suitable to exhibit any type of art. As a consequence, most of these halls were not used frequently. But while the Japanese government focused most of its attention on the building of the halls and promoting Western cultural traditions, the Japanese popular culture experienced an increasing growth in popularity.

Many corporations have contributed to artistic innovation by supporting new trends in contemporary music, visual arts and theatre. The Japanese popular culture industries have managed to successfully produce and export commodities to the rest of the world. The Meiji government made Western music the norm when they founded the Tokyo Academy of Music<sup>120</sup> (*Tōkyō Geijutsu Daigaku*) in 1879, but they did very little to encourage composers. However, a few rich music lovers acted as patrons and commissioned new works and sponsored concerts in the pre-war years. When the New Composers Federation (*Shinkō Sakkyoku Renmei*) was founded in 1930, it broke fresh ground for new music in Japan, but still most composers chose to write in the French or the central European tradition. In 1951 the ‘*Jikken-Koubou*’ experimental workshop opened up and laid the grounds for future sonic experiments. In the first decades after the war, private patronage of the arts evaporated as the nation faced economic difficulties. Since then many professional composers have had to rely on teaching as a means to gain some steady income. During the golden age of Japanese cinema, many composers relied on making film scores to survive.<sup>121</sup> Still, contemporary composer Ichiyanagi Toshi says, ‘the situation is quite favourable in Japan compared with other countries’. Although royalties are modest and few universities employ composers to teach general education courses, Ichiyanagi believes he and his colleagues are ‘freer artistically’ than composers in Europe, where ‘so many are indirectly employed by the state’<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>Tokyo Academy of Music merged with Tokyo Academy of Art in 1949 to form Tokyo University of Fine Arts.

<sup>121</sup>Havens, 183,185.

<sup>122</sup>Havens, 185.

In Europe, where the governments have supported the creation and promotion of new types of art, there seems to be a common assumption that works commissioned and paid for by the government are somehow less constrained by external considerations than the ones supported by corporate interests. This notion is perhaps not as common in Japan where the government rarely supports new types of art. However, the government may very well impose restrictions upon artists and perhaps even more so than a corporation would. While a corporation would typically have to take some commercial considerations, a government will more often have to consider other aspects that can be equally restraining. After all, the government spends taxpayers' money and would have to consider public opinion regarding its aesthetic judgements. A corporation would also have to make similar decisions but since they spend their own money they are less likely to be the object of criticism if they were to make a bad decision.

#### **10.4 A POP-CULTURE SHARED BY EVERYONE**

Although the Japanese governments official cultural policies favour 'high art' and traditional arts and crafts, the proliferation of pop culture is quite extraordinary. Not only does Japan exhibit an extreme variation of pop cultural expressions and commodities, but also even the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture is less accentuated than in the West. The Japanese seem to express less intellectual snobbery when consuming cultural products and one thing does not necessarily come into conflict with another. Although there are small elites engaged in the so-called high arts, even these people are very knowledgeable about the popular culture of the masses. Not only are the people belonging to the higher ranks of society quite knowledgeable about lower culture, but also the lower classes are also quite knowledgeable about the various intellectuals that are shaping the Japanese elite cultures. Generally, among acclaimed intellectuals in the West there has been a tendency to consider engagement with the low culture to be 'below them' and consequentially they are relatively unknown among commoners. In Japan however, intellectuals regularly appear on any number of variety shows and popular science has a stronger impact on the general population than in the West. The notion that lower class culture is too vulgar to take part of is not as widespread. The Japanese popular culture is a culture shared by all and has a function of social cement that closes the gap between the upper and lower classes.<sup>123</sup> This flexibility can also be seen in the entertainment scene. Kitano Takeshi is one of Japan's most celebrated authorities in the

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<sup>123</sup>Powers, Richard Gid, Kato Hidetoshi and Bruce Sitronach, ed. *Handbook of Japanese popular culture*. (London: Greenwood press, 1989), 315.

field of film and his reputation has gained him many fans among Western audiences. However, while he is celebrated as a serious director and actor in the West, in Japan he is equally known as an artist, author and comedian regularly appearing in slapstick sketches. In much the same way, celebrated crooners such as Fuse Akira and Kayama Yūzō would occasionally collaborate with more underground musicians releasing highly experimental music.<sup>124</sup>

Morimoto Ali from Kumacoop Recordings told me that he considered the Japanese to be ‘not so serious.’<sup>125</sup> He had been responsible for releasing a compilation called ‘Billboard Headsoup’. This CD features many Japanese experimental musicians, among them Satanicpornocultshop, covering Billboard hits. He was quick to emphasize that there was nothing ironic about the release. He said that they did it with respect for the originals and that they reinterpreted these songs simply because they liked them. According to him, the Japanese seemed to be more flexible than their Western counterparts because they did not have to choose between mainstream and experimental music but could in fact enjoy both without contradiction.

Japanese musicians and celebrities have in fact been encouraged to utilize their talents in diverse fields. In the West, the attitude has traditionally been quite the opposite: you should stick to what you know. This may very well have to do with the common assumption expressed by various musicians throughout this paper, namely that the Japanese are less concerned with the historical and cultural background of cultural expression treating it all like pure information. However, there might be other factors that are equally important. Morimoto Ali told me that the Japanese government did little to support experimental music: ‘In Europe they have subsidies. We in Japan don’t have that system.’<sup>126</sup> Dj Ugh backed his statement:

The Japanese Government is quite inconsiderate in the support to the art. Japanese pension system and Medicare system have failed now. And also educational expenses and funding sources for road will be reduced in the future. The subsidy system to the big enterprise is top priority in Japan.<sup>127</sup>

This might lead one to believe that it would be more important for Japanese musicians to adopt a commercial outlook in order to earn some money, but this was not necessarily the case. In fact, precisely because a band could never rely on support from the government they all had day jobs in order to earn an income. Thus, financial considerations had nothing to do with their music and Morimoto Ali said that they did not think in terms of profit when they made music and that they

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<sup>124</sup>Cope, 134.

<sup>125</sup>Personal communication, July 2007

<sup>126</sup>ibid

<sup>127</sup>ibid

made music to ‘enjoy life’<sup>128</sup>This, in a sense, allowed them to think more freely in terms of musical innovation. They seemed to think that the Japanese commercial industry in some sense was more flexible than in Europe. They related this to the sheer amount of people living in Japan, something that created a scene for virtually any kind of music:

Japan is very small but full of information. The information passes very fast. So in the major scene or the independent and underground scene there is a huge audience. Many people are interested, so the information passes fast.<sup>129</sup>

In the West it seems that as a band you have to choose between underground credibility and financial gain. The second you enter the sphere of commercialized music there is no turning back and you will forever be labelled a ‘sell-out’ In Japan however, they seem to be less strict on these types of things, perhaps because musicians cannot rely on the government to support them.

The lack of distinction between the mainstream and subcultures in Japan may be the result of the nature of Japanese cultural appropriation and the official cultural policies of the Japanese government. As mentioned above, the Japanese have imported various cultural expressions and treated them all as pure information. There is less emphasis on the various historical backgrounds and/or ideologies that have shaped these expressions, and the only distinction that matters is that between the interesting and uninteresting. It may be the case that a Japanese musician operates within a looser framework and with fewer restrictions imposed on him or her than his or her Western counterpart. There are not so many conventions that one consciously or unconsciously would have to consider, and this may result in interesting outcomes. However, the issue of authenticity is always present whether one dismisses its power or acknowledges it.

Perhaps neither experimental musician Morimoto Ali nor hardcore guitarist Yoshi can be considered representative of an overall attitude in the Japanese experimental scene. While Ali felt that the Japanese were flexible in their relation to the commercial music industry, Yoshi seemed even less flexible than his Western counterparts. He had adopted an anti-authoritarian and confrontational attitude typical of hardcore and punk musicians. Yoshi had in fact lived in Canada for an extended amount of time, and was very aware of the political aspects of the scene he was involved with. To him, selling out to corporate interests, or even dealing with the commercial music industry, was unthinkable.<sup>130</sup> Neither Ali, DJ Vinylman nor DJ Ugh made similar comments. They did not seem to feel that politics was a necessary part of their music. When I asked DJ Ugh if he

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<sup>128</sup>Personal communication, July 2007

<sup>129</sup>ibid

<sup>130</sup>Personal communication, October 2007

considered music to be art or entertainment, he simply answered that music could be any of the above depending on the usage. It could be used to transmit various ideas but as long as it did not ‘damage peoples mind[s]’ he felt that it was good.<sup>131</sup> There is nothing particularly Japanese in any of these statements. Some genres of music are simply more related to political issues than others.

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<sup>131</sup>Personal communication, April 2008

## 11 CONCLUSION

The Japanese have been quite successful in redefining themselves in the post-war era, but they have done so by comparing themselves with nations and cultures from which they are far removed. In their quest to position themselves in the world, America and Europe have in modern times been their focal point of comparison. This is perhaps due to the major influence the West and its culture has had, but it may very well be because America and Europe represents something essentially different from Japanese culture. That way it has been easier for Japan to claim uniqueness.

Japan's adaptation of Western technology contributed to formulate the notion that Japan was a nation of copiers.<sup>132</sup> Although proving themselves to be skilled imitators, it was assumed they rarely ever contributed with something truly original.<sup>133</sup> This generalization is a notion that has had significant impact on how we view Japanese culture. This may be of less concern to the mainstream record labels, but it poses serious problems for experimental musicians who work in a tradition where individuality and creativity are considered important elements.

Carolyn S. Stevens argues in her book *Japanese popular music: Culture, Authenticity and Power*, that Japanese musicians have created their own musical culture and even though derived from the West, they have successfully managed to incorporate it into their own culture.<sup>134</sup>

To view this as a result of simply copying is to devalue their efforts while simultaneously overestimate the originality of Western musicians. When I asked DJ Ugh what he thought about statements such as 'Japanese people cannot be original', he replied that he considered that it was nothing more than a 'fixed phrase that the Japanese use when criticizing themselves'. He did not believe it to be true and said that it was quite obvious that some Japanese people can be truly original. It had more to do with personality than ethnicity.<sup>135</sup> To be fair, some of the musicians interviewed in *Japanese Independent Music* seemed to agree with DJ Ugh. While many acknowledged the tendency to misunderstand Western culture as a point of departure for musical creativity, and others such as Miyamoto Shigetoshi even suggested that Shintoism may have been an indirect influence,<sup>136</sup> some musicians seemed to reject these notions. When asked in what way a different cultural background may affect originality, Mason Jones, head of Charnel Music label, responded:

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<sup>132</sup>Cox, 2

<sup>133</sup>Atkins, 28.

<sup>134</sup>Stevens, 7.

<sup>135</sup>Personal communication, April 2008

<sup>136</sup>Stofer, 54.

Most Japanese bands that I know personally don't think that there's much connection at all between their music and traditional Japanese culture. So I'd probably venture to say that it's the difference of background, but not the specific Japanese culture, that leads to some originality.<sup>137</sup>

While he acknowledges the idea that different cultural background may lead to a different approach to music, he rejects the notion that Japanese culture in particular has any direct influence on their music. While jazz, and to some extent hip hop, tried to implement Japanese folk music in order to authenticate their music, it seems like experimental musicians have been less concerned with traditional Japanese culture. There are of course exceptions to this rule. Some of the contemporary composers in Japan such as Takemitsu Tōru fused Japanese traditional music with European art music,<sup>138</sup> but this tendency is less accentuated among the new generation of experimental musicians. This may perhaps be because experimental music is not directly connected to notions of ethnicity. First of all, most of the experimental musicians mentioned rarely use any lyrics, and in that way they do not make a connection to their culture through the use of Japanese. Secondly, since experimental music is outside of tradition it can be practically anything.

However, features such as creativity, individuality and originality are essential in experimental music. All are features that the Japanese do not exhibit, in many people's opinion. Since so many aspects of Japanese society and Japanese behaviour are considered to be inherently fake, it has posed some problems for Japanese musicians. Not only do the Japanese musicians work in a tradition they feel they can't fully understand, but because they are Japanese they must face stereotypes that not only claim that they are not creative but also that they can not express themselves individualistically. While the experimental musicians may have overcome superficial issues such as skin colour and supposedly inferior physique, they still have their roots in a culture that presumably does not condone nor fully appreciate individualized forms of expression.<sup>139</sup> Their sense of cultural identity is not as related to external features as they are to characterizations of the Japanese psyche, and these assumed features may prevent them from realizing that they may in fact have more in common with their Western peers than they might think. Instead of acknowledging their similarities with experimental Western musicians, they have emphasized those aspects they feel are different. Their claim to authenticity is often based on stereotyped perceptions of what the essence of Japan is.

Yellow Magic Orchestra displayed many of these stereotypes in their music, most notably through the use of consumer electronics, which is one of Japan's major exports. Furthermore they

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<sup>137</sup>Stofer, 52.

<sup>138</sup>Cope, 43.

<sup>139</sup>Befu, 5.

fused this with traditional eastern pentatonic scales. Other artists such as Ōtomo Yoshihide, Matsubara Sachiko and Nakamura Toshimaru explores emptiness, an important concept in Eastern philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism, in their works. Some performers claim that their music is meaningless, based on nothing and containing no culture. In contrast, Western music was considered conceptual and rational.<sup>140</sup> Another stereotype that has affected Japanese musicians is the common accusation that the Japanese only copy Western forms of expressions. Some of the performers seem to agree with this notion but it is no longer considered an obstacle. While a copy may be regarded as inauthentic, *the act of copying* lends these performers cultural authenticity because it confirms their Japanese-ness.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, because their chosen form of expression is not part of their cultural roots they have been able to approach it with less restriction than their Western counterparts.<sup>142</sup> For Japanese hip hop and jazz musicians the inability to properly understand Western culture was considered an obstacle, but for experimental musicians it has offered them more freedom to experiment.<sup>143</sup>

The point of departure for some Japanese experimental musicians is perhaps not the West, but the West they have imagined.<sup>144</sup> The ‘real West’ if such a thing exists, does not matter to them. What they relate to is simply their own idea of the West, and they continue to interpret their own and other cultures within this context.

Perhaps it makes no sense for experimental musicians to aspire for ‘authenticity’ in the same way it does for jazz musicians and hip hoppers, simply because they have no fixed standards to which they are obliged to adhere. Instead, they have constructed a reality that extends beyond the boundaries of what is real. Even though this may render their music fake in a sense, it is authentically Japanese because it reflects the Japanese society that they claim is superficial and two-dimensional. In the end, the inauthentic aspect of their music lends it authority as authentically Japanese.

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<sup>140</sup>Stofer, 49.

<sup>141</sup>Cox, 9.

<sup>142</sup>Stofer, 58.

<sup>143</sup>Stofer, 53.

<sup>144</sup>ibid



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