

MEMORY VAGUE: A HISTORY OF CITY POP

A Thesis Presented

By

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This thesis proposal is submitted to the Graduate School of the

University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2021

Japanese

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have received a great deal of support and assistance. I would first like to thank my advisor, Professor Amanda Seaman, whose expertise was invaluable in the composition and organization of my thesis. Our regular conversations also helped to boost my confidence in my writing and keep me focused throughout the process. I would like to acknowledge Professors Bruce Baird and Stephen Forrest for their early research advice and for educating me on proper research methods and the formulation of a coherent thesis. Thanks should also go to Professors Stephen Miller and Reiko Sono for their guidance in translating Japanese sources and Librarian Sharon Domier for helping me through the arduous process of procuring primary sources from Japan. I also appreciate the friendship and support of my fellow graduate students Benjamin Ashby, Joseph Erobha, Brett Kaufman, Elena Kirillova, Yurina Yoshikawa, and especially Clara Marino for her help in editing my final chapter and conclusion. In addition, I would like to thank my wife Michelle for her love, editing skills, and keeping me away from distraction. I would finally like to thank my dog Tibby for providing distraction when needed.

## ABSTRACT

MEMORY VAGUE: A HISTORY OF CITY POP

SEPTEMBER 2021

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This thesis gives a definition and chronology of city pop and places it within the context of Japanese history. City pop can be traced from the 1960s folk movement in Japan until its demise in the early 1990s, coinciding with the end of the bubble economy.<sup>1</sup> This thesis also examines the mid-2010s resurgence of interest in city pop among English-speaking internet users, beginning with a nostalgic rediscovery and curation of city pop around the turn of the century by DJs in Japan known as “crate diggers.” City pop was then transmitted to the West through sampling in hip-hop and especially within the internet-based genre of vaporwave. The character of vaporwave is one of dystopia and is highly contrasted with the breezy, optimistic sound of city pop. City pop was eventually discovered in the late-2010s by a wider international audience through YouTube, largely due to the suggestion algorithm and the sudden popularity of Takeuchi Mariya’s “Plastic Love.” This thesis will define nostalgia in relation to music and show in what ways it has been present as a factor throughout the history of city pop.

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<sup>1</sup> Known in Japanese as *baburu keiki* and also known as the asset price bubble.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every day, YouTube's two billion users watch over a billion hours of video. By the time you finish a five-minute music video over 2,500 hours of new footage have been uploaded to YouTube.<sup>2</sup> This amount of readily available content is unprecedented in human history. Consumers are experiencing a revolution of information exchange much larger in scale than the Printing Revolution started by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. But whereas the Printing Revolution happened over the course of centuries, YouTube has only been popular since 2005. The catalyst for YouTube's creation, Janet Jackson's X-rated "wardrobe malfunction" at the 2004 Super Bowl Halftime Show, could have set a salacious or otherwise frivolous tone for uploaded content. Instead, YouTube has developed into one of the chief resources for education and research available to the public. In seconds one can locate information that would otherwise require perusing the stacks of an academic library or find visual instruction that previously could come only from an in-person meeting with an expert. While this ability may be most often employed for simple household repairs and recipe suggestions, YouTube is filled with so much media from the past that one could potentially research the entire history of visual and aural culture using YouTube. That is exactly the manner in which YouTube began being utilized in the late 2010s, when by some odd twist of Internet mysticism, songs and albums of the 1980s genre of Japanese pop music now known as "city pop"<sup>3</sup> re-emerged on YouTube and increased dramatically in viewership among a mostly English-speaking listenership.<sup>4</sup> City pop artist

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<sup>2</sup> "YouTube for Press," *YouTube*, Accessed February 1, 2021, <https://blog.youtube/press>.

<sup>3</sup> Following the convention of other genres such as rock, pop, and jazz, I will not be capitalizing the term "city pop" for this thesis. Although some sources capitalize it as "City pop" or even "City Pop," Wikipedia chooses not to capitalize either word.

<sup>4</sup> YouTube DJ mixes of city pop have comments that are overwhelmingly written in English.

Takeuchi Mariya's song "[Plastic Love](#)" (1984), often seen as the symbol for this phenomenon, is approaching 100 million views as of June 2021.<sup>5</sup> A 2018 Vice article describes the song:

It's the kind of song that, when you first hear it... it seems like it's always been there, marinating somewhere in the cerebral cortex or as a memory from the womb... As one YouTube comment reads, 'this [song] gives me feels [sic] of something which never happened,' as though 'Plastic Love' is the lingering remnants of a diary entry from a past life.<sup>6</sup>

Many listeners claimed to have found something oddly nostalgic about city pop, even though they had never encountered it before nor lived in Japan. Most listeners from the English-speaking world where Japanese music was widely unavailable in the 1980s had no prior engagement with city pop but found its upbeat, disco rhythms intoxicating. Furthermore, the slew of comments responding to the video more or less stating, "How did I end up here?" imply that listeners found these videos by way of some quirk in YouTube's recommendation algorithm, rather than searching for the songs themselves.

So how did this music produced forty years ago on the other side of the planet come to be so widely known and appreciated by a non-Japanese audience? The story of city pop's rediscovery is long and complex, but in my view, there were essentially three phases. In the first phase, a small subculture of Japanese DJs in the early 2000s began sharing and playing domestic pop music from the 1970s and '80s for which they were nostalgic. These "crate diggers," as they came to be known, advanced a retro, pro-Japanese aesthetic at a time when Western music was

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<sup>5</sup> This figure arrived at by adding the two highest viewed videos of "Plastic Love;" Plastic Lover, "Mariya Takeuchi 竹内 まりや Plastic Love," YouTube Video, 7:56, Jul 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bNITQR4Uso>; Gun, "Mariya Takeuchi Plastic Love 竹内 まりや," YouTube Video, 7:56, Dec 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Gj47G2e1Jc>.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Bassil, "An 80s Japanese Track Is the Best Pop Song in the World," *Vice*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/435bgd/mariya-takeuchi-plastic-love-song-review>.



the norm in Japanese clubs. Next, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, American hip-hop producers began purchasing and sampling vintage city pop records and musicians working within the internet-based electronic genre of vaporwave began making references in their music to city pop and the imagery of Japan in the 1980s. Finally, following the popularity of vaporwave, and further catalyzed by the somewhat mysterious YouTube recommendation algorithm, city pop gained massive international listenership around 2017.

In the first chapter, this thesis will create a working definition of the genre of city pop, beginning with a brief history of post-war Japan and especially highlighting the atmosphere present in Japan during the 1980s. A thorough history of city pop in Japan will follow, starting with its nascent period in the early and mid 1970s, and finishing with the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, when city pop's popularity waned as new genres ascended. I will profile three artists that exemplify trends in the chronology of the genre: Happy End, Arai Yumi, and Yamashita Taturō. This history of city pop will also include a discussion of the lyrics and instrumentation that evoke the optimism of life in what was called the bubble economy. For the reader's convenience, I will provide a YouTube link for each song mentioned.

The second chapter will then trace and examine the three stages of the rediscovery of city pop by English-speaking internet users that I laid out previously, starting with city pop's nostalgic reappraisal among a small group of DJs in Japan in the early 2000s, its use as sampling material for hip-hop and the internet-based genre of vaporwave in the late 2000s, and ultimately, the transmission of city pop to an international listenership of millions of English speakers in the late 2010s.

In the third and final chapter, I will define nostalgia in relation to music and show in what ways it has been present as a factor throughout the history of city pop. City pop has always been a genre defined by nostalgia even in its infancy and this trend continued with its recontextualization as samples for vaporwave. Contrasting strongly with the optimistic breeziness of city pop, the sound of vaporwave is often described as dystopian; it invokes a pessimistic feeling for a “lost future.” Furthermore, many viewers claim to have experienced a nostalgia-like sensation while listening to city pop, despite having no experiential connection to the time and place in which these songs were released. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as hauntology by media theorists like Mark Fisher.<sup>7</sup> This chapter will finish by building a chronology of city pop’s transitions through various stages of nostalgia and hauntology.

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<sup>7</sup> Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts*, (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2016), 30.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE BIRTH OF CITY POP

In the early 1980s, the jazzy, disco pop songs that listeners now refer to as city pop regularly topped the charts in Japan. Some of the biggest artists now associated with this movement are Yamashita Taturō (b. 1953), his wife Takeuchi Mariya (b. 1955), his bandmate Ōnuki Taeko (b. 1953), as well as artists like Kadomatsu Toshiki (b. 1960), Arai Yumi (b. 1954), Ōtaki Eiichi (b. 1948), Anri (b. 1961), Kikuchi Momoko (b. 1968), Yoshida Minako (b. 1953), and Matsubara Miki (b. 1959). Yamashita Taturō's wildly popular album *Ride on Time* hitting #1 in 1981 seems a reasonable time to place the peak of the city pop boom.<sup>8</sup> City pop's period of popularity lasted from the mid-70s to the late '80s and coincided with soaring stock prices and an explosion in music-related technology available in Japan. As a genre, city pop takes inspiration from a wide range of American music traditions, such as jazz, R&B, soft rock, disco, funk, and soul. Within this fusion genre, different artists will lean towards one particular tradition more than others and as a consequence city pop is not recognizable by its instrumentation or production techniques.<sup>9</sup> Due to its diverse nature as a genre, city pop is more easily defined by its historical context.

#### 1.1 Definitions

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<sup>8</sup> *Raito merō wamono supesharu Light Mellow 和モノSpecial*, ed. KANEZAWA Toshikazu 金澤寿和 (Tokyo: Rutles 株式会社ラトルズ, 2013), 31; *Shiti poppu 1973-2019 シーティー・ポップ 1973-2019*, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修 (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019), 26.

<sup>9</sup> City pop artists often traveled to the United States to work with the producers who had created their favorite albums; HAGIWARA Kenta 萩原健太. *Hachinendai nihon no poppusu kuronikuru 80年代 日本のポップス クロニクル*, (Tokyo: P-Vine 株式会社 Pヴァイン, 2018), 114.

The upbeat and carefree attitude of city pop reflects a culture of economic prosperity and high optimism evident in Japanese society preceding the end of the bubble economy in the early 1990s. Later, it was further defined by the Western perception of that period, but city pop is inextricably tied with that very particular time and place. There are a few complications that arise when attempting to provide a definition of city pop. Firstly, this music was not generally referred to as city pop at the time of its creation in the 1970s and '80s. Much like the American genre of “yacht rock,” city pop only adopted its moniker many years later.<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s and '80s, city pop was simply referred to as *nyū myūjikkū*, a transliteration of the English “new music,” a genre also inclusive of folk and rock of the 1960s.”<sup>11</sup> However, the roots of the term “city pop” were already present. It was possibly inspired by the folk rock proto-city pop group Happy End’s 1973 best-of album *City* as well as their last concert on September 21, 1973 that was billed and recorded as “City-Last Time Around.”<sup>12</sup> A Japanese broadcasting almanac lists a radio show from 1988 called “Hiroshima My City” that played a rotation of city pop and targeted high school students and salarymen on the way home from work.<sup>13</sup> There are collections of “city pop” best-of albums that were released as early as the late 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary city pop musician Cunimondo Takiguchi reckons that at least as early as 2003, people were using the term “city pop” to refer to folk-rock bands of the '70s such as Happy End.<sup>15</sup> So, even though *nyū myūjikkū*

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<sup>10</sup> From the name of a 2000s parody film about the careers of artists like Michael McDonald, Kenny Loggins, Steely Dan, Christopher Cross, Hall & Oates, and Toto.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Bourdaghs, *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical History of J-Pop*, (Columbia University Press, 2012), 162; I will be using the romaji “*nyū myūjikkū*” instead of “new music” to avoid confusion with the concept of newly created music.

<sup>12</sup> Bourdaghs, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Japanese Commercial Broadcasting Almanac 1988, (Kouken Publishing コーケン出版, 1988), 363.

<sup>14</sup> *Shitte poppusu korekushon besuto 35 シティ ポップス コレクション ベスト 35*, Japan Crown 日本クラウン - CRCP28120, 1998, CD; At this time, Japanese sources tend to render city pop as some variation of シティポップ, sometimes adding a ス.

<sup>15</sup> FUJIKAWA Takahiro, “Cunimondo Takiguchi breaks down the era of City Music,” *Tokion*, December 20, 2020, <https://tokion.jp/en/2020/12/20/cunimondo-takiguchi-breaks-down-the-era-of-city-music-part1/>.

was the term typically used in the mainstream Japanese media of the time for the music now known as city pop, terms at least similar to “city pop” were in use in the music industry as early as the mid-80s. Contemporary interviews with Japanese music fans indicate a lack of familiarity with the term, even among a demographic well-acquainted with the artists typical of the genre.<sup>16</sup> However, as time has passed it has increased in usage as a retroactive descriptor for the subgenre of *nyū myūjikkū* of the late ‘70s and ‘80s that incorporated American music traditions such as disco and soft rock and evoked images of urban life. Exploring search term history through Google Trends tells us that, at least in English, the term “city pop” increased in usage in the mid-2010s, which coincides with its resurgence in popularity, and in all likelihood, with a new understanding of the boundaries between *nyū myūjikkū* and city pop.<sup>17</sup> However, some disagreement about terminology still remains. Cunimondo Takiguchi, for example, refers to it as “city music.”<sup>18</sup> Contemporary media scholar Furuhashi Yuriko calls it “bubble disco.”<sup>19</sup> To complicate the semantics further, “city pop” was also used to describe a genre of music in the early 2000s with a ‘70s retro vibe, which itself is often included in record collecting guides for ‘70s and ‘80s city pop, even though this music is separated from its influences by twenty years.<sup>20</sup> Revivalist movements are not uncommon in music history, though, and one could potentially reconcile this timeline by viewing the 1990s city pop-influenced genre of Shibuya-kei as a ten year detour for the genre before its revivalist period in the 2000s. As a final issue, as city pop

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<sup>16</sup> Cat Zhang, “The Endless Life Cycle of Japanese City Pop,” *Pitchfork*, February 24, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/the-endless-life-cycle-of-japanese-city-pop/>.

<sup>17</sup> “City pop,” Google Trends, Google, accessed February 1, 2021, [https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=%2Fg%2F1yh7\\_s0zs](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=%2Fg%2F1yh7_s0zs)

<sup>18</sup> FUJIKAWA Takahiro 藤川貴弘, “Cunimondo Takiguchi breaks down the era of City Music,” *Tokion*, December 20, 2020, <https://tokion.jp/en/2020/12/20/cunimondo-takiguchi-breaks-down-the-era-of-city-music-part1/>.

<sup>19</sup> FURUHATA Yuriko, “City Pop Breeze, Sonic Revivals and Mutant Afterlives of Bubble Disco,” filmed September 2019 at Never Apart, Montréal, Canada, video, 43:08. <https://vimeo.com/362702024>.

<sup>20</sup> AOKI Ryotaro, “City pop revival is literally a trend in name only,” *The Japan Times*, July 5, 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/07/05/music/city-pop-revival-literally-trend-name/#.XEZT8xNKjOQ>

was being rediscovered in the early 2000s and played by Japanese crate digger DJs, this emerging community of retro-enthusiasts referred to the music not as city pop but as J-Boogie, J-Rare Groove, or simply, *wamono*, although these terms were inclusive of more genre-pure Japanese funk and jazz in addition to city pop. Consequently, in order to smooth the sea of intertwining genre definitions, for the purposes of this thesis, city pop is Japanese pop music from the 1970s and '80s that was heavily influenced by soft rock, jazz, funk, and disco, and has achieved contemporary popularity among English-speaking YouTube viewers.

## 1.2 Post-War Life and the Bubble

City pop in Japan is inextricably linked with the free-spirited, breezy attitudes of young, upwardly mobile city dwellers. Japan's economy was soaring in the '70s and '80s at the beginning of the city pop era. It had been climbing already for many decades. Throughout the '50s and '60s real wages increased in Japan by 300%.<sup>21</sup> Whereas 1950s Japanese consumers sought to afford radios and sewing machines, starting in the late 1960s consumers were regularly purchasing cars, color TVs, and air conditioning.<sup>22</sup> Many emerging technologies produced in Japan in the following decade would help to make music production and consumption more convenient and pleasurable. In rough chronological order these technologies were cassette decks and FM stereos being made standard in vehicles, the Walkman portable tape player, and the first commercially successful digital synthesizers and electronic drum pads. The sale of many of these domestically-produced products aided Japan's post-war economic rise that continued mostly unabated until the early '90s.<sup>23</sup> From the immediate post-war era until the Oil Shock of 1973,

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth G. Henshall, *A History of Japan*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). 161.

<sup>22</sup> Radios and sewing machines were two of the original "Three Treasures," an ever-changing list of coveted consumer goods advertised as markers of success in Japanese society. The "Three Cs," (cars, color TVs, and cooler) were the 1960s version of the Three Treasures.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Blistein, "City Pop: Why Does the Soundtrack to Tokyo's Tech Boom Still Resonate?" *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/Japanese-city-pop-returns->

Japan's economy was growing at a rate of 10% per year, and continued to grow at a rapid rate thereafter.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the 1970s, Japan was a bonafide economic superpower and the number three economy in the world after the United States and the Soviet Union. As the decade advanced, Japan would become the world's largest producer of ships, radios, televisions, and cars, as well as the third largest producer of steel.<sup>25</sup> It was also a period of great economic security. The salaryman model, in which lifetime employment at a single large corporation was granted to male college graduates, had emerged after the war, and although exaggerated in its ubiquity, gave about one quarter of workers immense job security and a guaranteed high wage. Even though the other three quarters of the working population were not salarymen, it provided everyone with a life model to strive towards.<sup>26</sup> In the 1980s, the Japanese became the wealthiest people on the planet, at least on paper. They were the largest net overseas investor and controlled 4% of the American economy.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the decade, Japanese firms had controlling stakes in Columbia Film Studios, Columbia Records, and owned the famed Rockefeller Center in New York City.<sup>28</sup> Americans were frightened of Japanese economic power, even expressing it explicitly in racist "Japan bashing" films and novels and in the real-life murder of Vincent Chin in 1982.<sup>29</sup>

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[light-in-the-attic-compilation-pacific-breeze-822663/](http://light-in-the-attic-compilation-pacific-breeze-822663/)

<sup>24</sup> Henshall, 161.

<sup>25</sup> Henshall, 161.

<sup>26</sup> Henshall, 166.

<sup>27</sup> Henshall, 172.

<sup>28</sup> Henshall, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Examples in film include *Gung Ho* (1986), in which Michael Keaton leads an initiative against a Japanese company who has acquired the Pennsylvania auto plant he works at, *Kinjite: Forbidden Subjects*, a Charles Bronson flick in which a Japanese businessman molests a teenage girl on a train, and *Black Rain* (1989), wherein Michael Douglas is a hard-boiled police officer who chases the brutal Yakuza from New York City to Tokyo. For literature, look to Michael Crichton's 1992 novel *Rising Sun* and its subsequent film adaptation, about a Japanese corporation in LA covering up the murder of a young woman. It was called racist even at the time of release. The author unconventionally ends his novel with a racially charged afterword in which he pleads with America to address the "problem" of Japanese business practices: "Japan is not a Western industrial state; it is organized quite differently. And the Japanese have invented a new kind of trade—adversarial trade, trade like war, trade intended to

However, Japan was not always so wealthy in economic or soft power. In the 1970s, Japan did not yet have an international reputation as a fashionable place. Before the 1980s, when the country transitioned to a consumption-based economy, Japanese popular culture was seen as “lacking in refinement and good taste and characterized by discomfort and shabbiness,” according to music critic Hagiwara Kenta.<sup>30</sup> Soon however, a new way of life began to emerge. The confidence of young people began to increase as a vague sense of style started to coalesce around this newfound wealth and the lifestyle that accompanied it. Japanese fashion magazines such as *Popeye* and *JJ* began embracing new fashion trends inspired by American college life. They went by names like “New Traditional,” “Yokohama Traditional,” and “Preppie,” and developed a small but loyal following that clad themselves according to the contents of these magazines.<sup>31</sup> In a 2014 interview, seminal city pop musician and producer Kadomatsu Toshiki describes the feeling at the time:

On the eve of the bubble, the Japanese people were becoming increasingly extravagant, and ordinary citizens were able to create lives of financial and spiritual freedom. In this environment, young people were building the kind of lifestyle where they could enjoy nightlife in the middle of the week and go surfing at Izu<sup>32</sup> or Shōnan<sup>33</sup> in the off-season. Many people were starting to become aware of a two-part lifestyle: the nighttime hustle and bustle of the city during the week, and the beach resort on the weekend. Everything felt full of energy and there was an atmosphere in which new things were always being made. City pop emerged in this stream, and the people who were listening were loving every minute.<sup>34</sup>

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wipe out the competition—which America has failed to understand for several decades;” Michael Crichton, *Rising Sun*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 265/269.

<sup>30</sup> Hagiwara, 111; My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Hagiwara, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Izu is a peninsula about three hours southeast of Tokyo by car or train.

<sup>33</sup> Shōnan is the coastline about one hour south of Tokyo by car or train that is also home to the famous beach town Kamakura.

<sup>34</sup> KADOMATSU Toshiki 角松敏生, “*Tokushu shiti poppu kadomatsu toshiki intabyu* 特集 シティポップ / 角松敏生インタビュー,” Interview in *Showa 40 toshi otoko* 昭和 40 年男, February 2014, 24-27. [https://www.crete.co.jp/s40otoko/vol\\_023/](https://www.crete.co.jp/s40otoko/vol_023/); My translation.



Along with changes in fashion, a new visual aesthetic of refinement was emerging as well. Hagiwara Kenta paints a vivid portrait of 1970s Japan:

Picture this: in a Japanese-style six tatami room sits a Lark<sup>35</sup> brand ashtray on a glass coffee table. On the wall hangs a bamboo mat, adorned with a Nagai Hiroshi illustration of a swimming pool [see figure 1]. Sitting cross-legged on your floor cushion, you listen to FM radio, taking drags from your Parliament<sup>36</sup> and sipping from a luminous can of Pokari Sweat.<sup>37</sup> Exquisitely produced American-style music plays... something that doesn't quite fit into the wider genre of soul. It's more of a hodgepodge: funky, mellow, poppy, and tropical... no more than a loose conglomeration of hip, urban sounds. This was still a time when nobody had air-conditioning in their apartments. In the summertime, it was a blessing that one only had to perk their ears to hear music with a cool, refreshing mood.<sup>38</sup>



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<sup>35</sup> Lark is an American brand of cigarettes popular in Japan.

<sup>36</sup> Parliament is another American cigarette brand popular in Japan.

<sup>37</sup> A Gatorade-like electrolyte beverage.

<sup>38</sup> Hagiwara, 111; My translation.

Figure 1. Nagai Hiroshi's artwork for the 1982 album *Niagara Sound Book*, a piece typical of his work at the time, which often featured swimming pools and other tropical scenes.<sup>39</sup>

Hagiwara free-associates a city pop scene steeped in references to corporate brand imagery. Lark and Parliament are American brands of cigarettes popular in Japan. Starting in the 1980s, [Japanese TV ads for Lark cigarettes](#) have employed three different actors that have portrayed James Bond: Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton and Pierce Brosnan, as well as American actors Mickey Rourke, James Coburn, and Tom Berenger to convey an image of sophistication and coolness.<sup>40</sup> [Parliament was heavily advertised in Japan](#) as well in the 1980s alongside images of New York City and featuring the actor Charlie Sheen.<sup>41</sup> Coincidentally, it is a brand also associated with James Bond and is referenced in Ian Fleming's novels many times. Parliament's TV ads heavily featured the music of Western artists such as Bobby Caldwell and Peter Cetera, musicians working in the AOR (adult oriented rock) genre that was roughly analogous to city pop. It is no coincidence that this American music is frequently mentioned in Yasuo Tanaka's seminal 1980 novel *Somehow, Crystal*, which among its other attributes can be seen as the quintessential piece of city pop literature. Tanaka, a college student at the time of publication, delivers an onslaught of brand names, song titles, 1980s youth slang, and city pop imagery to pull the reader into the restless world of young college students in 1980s Tokyo.<sup>42</sup> Among the musical name drops are yacht rock staples like Kenny Loggins, Boz Scaggs, Christopher Cross, Ambrosia, and Little River Band, as well as soul musicians like Teddy Pendergrass, The

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<sup>39</sup> Niagara Fall of Sound Orchestral, *Niagara Sound Book*, Niagara Records – 20AH1444, 1982, LP.

<sup>40</sup> 1980s Japanese Lark ads: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0\\_prW2uPw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0_prW2uPw).

<sup>41</sup> 1980s Japanese Parliament ads: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOJIBcrKszQ>.

<sup>42</sup> In addition to *Somehow, Crystal*, some other seminal representations of the city pop lifestyle in film and literature include Youichi Higashi's film *No More Easy Life* (1979), Claude Gagnon's film *Keiko* (1979), Ōmori Kazuki's adaptation of Murakami Haruki's novel *Hear the Wind Sing* (1981), Kataoka Yoshio's essay collection *Another Cup of Coffee* (1980), as well as film adaptations of his work such as Fujita Toshiya's *Play It, Boogie-Woogie* (1981), Obayashi Nobuhiko's *His Moterbike, Her Island* (1986), and Yoshimitsu Morita's *Main Theme* (1984); "Books and Movies" by KURIKI Itsuki 栗木 齊 in *Raito merō wamono supesharu Light Mellow 和モノ Special*, Edited by KANEZAWA Toshikazu 金澤寿和, (Tokyo: Rutles 株式会社ラトルズ, 2013), 72-73.

Dramatics, Kool & the Gang, and Ashford & Simpson.<sup>43</sup> It was among an audience of young students with eclectic taste in Western music and fashion that city pop would soon find fervent support.

### 1.3 Haruomi Hosono and Happy End

Like most genres of music, the date marking the beginning of city pop is a matter of debate. Two exhaustive contemporary record collecting guides to city pop, *City Pop 1973-2019* by Music Magazine and *Light Mellow Wamono Special* by Kanezawa Toshikazu, both agree that 1973 is when the seeds took root.<sup>44</sup> Yamashita Tatsurō's album *Ride on Time* hitting #1 in 1981 seems a reasonable time to place the beginning of a city pop plateau, with popularity waning in Japan as the decade changed and the bubble economy ended.

From the early 1960s, Japanese musicians were producing Western-style folk music. Much of this happened on college campuses, but there were also frequent “folk guerrillas” performing for impromptu audiences outside the West Entrance of Shinjuku Station in Tokyo, a practice that still exists today.<sup>45</sup> This music was controversial; police often showed up to disperse the gatherings.<sup>46</sup> While most of this controversy likely stemmed from the lyrical content of the music--politically dissident like its American counterparts--the sound must have also seemed alarming to those used to the mellowness and sentimentality of *enka* love ballads and 1950s

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<sup>43</sup> YASUO Tanaka, *Somehow, Crystal*, (Tokyo: Kurodahan Press, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> They however disagree on which album to first cite. Music Magazine pins it on Minami Yoshitaka's “*Matenrō no hiroin*” and Kanezawa cites Happy End's self-titled debut; *Raito merō wamono supesharu Light Mellow 和モノSpecial*, ed. KANEZAWA Toshikazu 金澤寿和 (Tokyo: Rutles 株式会社ラトルズ, 2013), 31; *Shiti poppu 1973-2019 シーティー・ポップ 1973-2019*, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修 (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019), 26.

<sup>45</sup> Bourdaghs, 160; Folk artists, as well as rappers, can also be seen at the northwest corner of Shibuya Crossing.

<sup>46</sup> Bourdaghs, 160.

*kayōkyoku* crooners like Sakamoto Kyū.<sup>47</sup> Michael Bourdaghs, a scholar of modern Japanese culture and music at the University of Chicago, describes Japanese folk in the 1960s as:

“Above all... oppositional: it aimed to negate the existing social, political, and cultural framework of Japan. Since politics frequently revolved around Japan’s relationship to the United States, folk music often invoked an antielitist, popular nationalism, one that resisted the policies of a conservative Japanese state that was seen as collaborating in American regional domination. ...its enjoyment implicitly invoked a certain geopolitical mapping of the world. Oppositional folk music called on indigenous culture as a source of resistance against the cultural imperialism of the United States. As such, it relied on a powerful ideology of authenticity, rejecting imitation and commercialism as fake.”<sup>48</sup>

This “geopolitical mapping” would figure greatly into the creation of city pop, and the transition referred to by Bourdaghs is best witnessed through the story of musician Hosono Haruomi’s (b. 1947) first band, Happy End, and the genre known as *nyū myūjikkū*.

Hosono is perhaps the most important figure in the historical development of modern Japanese music. His co-founding of three bands: Happy End, Tin Pan Alley, and Yellow Magic Orchestra, each in turn shifted the landscape of Japanese pop music and greatly influenced the development of city pop. Happy End was a rock band formed in the late 1960s by Hosono Haruomi, Matsumoto Takashi (b. 1949), and Suzuki Shigeru (b. 1951). They later added Ōtaki Eiichi (1948-2013) to the group.<sup>49</sup> At the time, rock music in Japan, often through the genre of Group Sounds, was highly oppositional to the folk scene.<sup>50</sup> To Japanese folk musicians, rock was commercialized, Americanized, and lacking in authenticity. At the end of the 1960s, the two scenes, rock and folk, essentially existed in two separate veins of society. However, in 1970, folk musician Okabayashi Nobuyasu (b. 1946) employed the band Happy End to be his backing band

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<sup>47</sup> Sakamoto Kyū was the famous singer of the only Japanese song to ever top the American charts: “*Ue o Muite Arukō*” (1961), known in English as “Sukiyaki.”

<sup>48</sup> Bourdaghs, 160.

<sup>49</sup> Bourdaghs, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Group Sounds was a genre of Westernized rock music that emerged in Japan following the performance of The Beatles at Budokan.

on his tour.<sup>51</sup> Okabayashi was a leader in the folk scene, often referred to as the Japanese Bob Dylan. He performed highly charged political songs such as “[San’ya Blues](#),”<sup>52</sup> about the struggles of day laborers in Tokyo’s poorest neighborhood, and his songs were often banned from broadcasting. He employed the rock band Happy End as the backing band again on his second album, 1970s *Miru mae ni tobe* (“Leap Before You Look”).<sup>53</sup> In doing so, Okabayashi helped to finally bridge the gap between folk and rock in Japan. This also lent clout to Hosono and Happy End.

From their experiences working in the folk scene with Okabayashi, Happy End had developed a distinct sound that blended folk and rock. Starting in the early 1970s, this sound was increasingly referred to by the Japanese music media as *nyū myūjikkū*. *Nyū myūjikkū* was a clear fusion between two previously opposed styles of music, both themselves highly derivative of Western forms. With every iteration of musical fusion, however, each subsequent genre became increasingly distinct from its relative influences. Thus, *nyū myūjikkū* began to form its own culture, and earned its reputation as a distinct genre: something more than folk-rock. *Nyū myūjikkū* took the sounds and innovations of Japanese folk, but largely separated them from any political motivations. As a genre, *nyū myūjikkū* did not position itself in political opposition to America or the Japanese government.<sup>54</sup> This attitude of openness to the foreign would be inherited by later musicians and allow for an incredible amount of cross-pollination between city pop musicians and American musicians. One could say that *nyū myūjikkū* was anti-contrarian in comparison to the antagonistic nature of folk, which fostered an evolution in the idea of

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<sup>51</sup> Bourdaghs, 161.

<sup>52</sup> Okabayashi Nobuyasu’s “San’ya Blues:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H37HfTqzawo>; OKABAYASHI Nobuyasu 岡林信康, “San’ya Blues 山谷ブルース,” Track 5 on *Watashi wo danzai seyo*, URC – URL-1007, 1969, LP.

<sup>53</sup> OKABAYASHI Nobuyasu 岡林信康, *Miru mae ni tobe*, URC – URG-4001, 1970, LP.

<sup>54</sup> Bourdaghs, 161.

“political music.” *Nyū myūjikkū* musicians and those of later genre iterations such as city pop and Shibuya-kei did not feel beholden to the idea of oppositionalism for its own sake. Rather, they felt open not only to commercialism as a goal but also to offering political commentary on the new issues of the 1970s, such as feminism and environmentalism.<sup>55</sup> Bourdaghs notes the change in tone of *nyū myūjikkū*:

...new music shifted the focus of lyrics and politics. Now, the frustrations of everyday life became prime targets. The seeming piling up of political slogans rejecting bourgeois everydayness that had characterized earlier protest folk began to feel hollow, and in its place new music turned precisely to everyday language and intensely personal modes of communication.<sup>56</sup>

Happy End spearheaded this lyrical sea change by crafting Japanese stories through their songs and became famous for being one of the first Japanese rock bands to sing exclusively in Japanese. The opening song on their titular first album, titled “*Haruyo koi*” (“Come, Spring!”), tells a story very evocative of everyday Japanese culture:

When it comes to New Year’s,  
it’s all about gathering around the *kotatsu*,  
Eating *ozōni*, while playing *karuta*.  
This year, I welcomed the year alone,  
But the ringing of the temple bell  
was so lonely I covered my ears.<sup>57</sup>

The references to *karuta*, traditional Japanese playing cards; *kotatsu*, a space heater that sits under low Japanese tables; *ozōni*, a soup of rice cake and vegetables eaten on New Year’s; and the Buddhist temple bells that are ritualistically rung 108 times on New Year’s, paint a vivid portrait of traditional Japanese culture. Up until 1966, just a few years before Happy End’s founding, foreign imports outsold Japanese native musicians in Japan, and in the immediate post-

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<sup>55</sup> Bourdaghs, 162.

<sup>56</sup> Bourdaghs, 161.

<sup>57</sup> Happy End はっぴいえんど, “*Haruyo koi* 春よ来い,” track 1 on *Happy End* はっぴいえんど, URC – URL-1015, 1978. LP.; My translation; Happy End’s *Haruyo koi*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYxBPAUifTU>.

war era, Western music had a full eighty percent market share.<sup>58</sup> Most Japanese rock bands sang in English, imitated trends and eschewed Japaneseness in their lyricism. Growing up after the post-war era when many of their elders idolized America and its culture, Happy End wanted to use rock and folk music to create something more reflective of their values and less deferential to Western musical forms.<sup>59</sup> They chose to sing in their native language, employing a conversational tone that notably utilized the polite *desu/masu* form of Japanese grammar.<sup>60</sup> After the release of their first album, a debate erupted in the Japanese press. The "Japanese-language Rock Controversy" (*Nihongo Rokku Ronsō*) was a cultural discussion over whether rock songs sung in native Japanese were commercially sustainable. The debate often took the form of televised discussions between members of Happy End and other music figures, such as music producer Uchida Yuya. Ultimately, Happy End won the debate through the relative success of their studio albums.<sup>61</sup>

Happy End also utilized a strange register; the vocalists altered their voices in various manners. They would extend syllables, warp their accents, and change pronunciations. The use of the Japanese language in a Westernized music format functioned not only to evoke traditional culture but also to create a sense of noise or alienation. On "*Haruyo koi*," "This singing style fits the narrative presented in the lyric: of a young person who has left home and family behind to gamble everything on a new life. The song rejects the nostalgic discourse of *furusato* (rural hometown) that was so central to post-war Japanese myths of national homogeneity."<sup>62</sup> By

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<sup>58</sup> Jason Makoto Chun, "The 'Pop Pacific:' Japanese-American Sojourners and the Development of Japanese Popular Culture," in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 150; <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uma/detail.action?docID=5211435>.

<sup>59</sup> Chun, 150.

<sup>60</sup> Bourdaghs, 173.

<sup>61</sup> "*Kike! Densetsu no Nihon Rokku 1969-79* 聴け! 伝説の日本ロック 1969-79," Takarajima Press 宝島社, 2004, 33.

<sup>62</sup> Bourdaghs, 174.

negating the rural mindset, but not necessarily embracing the Westernness of the genre influences themselves, Happy End carved out a niche: a new urban, Japanese sound.<sup>63</sup> Their songs wove tales of life in 1970s Tokyo tempered with a sense of ennui.<sup>64</sup> This sort of urban subject matter would figure heavily in lyrical content as *nyū myūjikkū* transitioned into a more stereotypically city pop sound.

Hosono Haruomi and the other members of the band were born between 1947 and 1951 and were thus part of the first generation of Japanese to grow up with no memory of the war. The frugal post-war period was likely also vague in their memory. They grew up as the first children to witness a new Japan, the trajectory for which little could be predicted. Happy End exposed the Japanese music world to a new feeling of novelty and urbanity that would persist into 1980s city pop.

Happy End also espoused the anti-commerciality of the Japanese folk movement from which they split off. Unlike the idols of the 1970s and '80s, the members of Happy End refused to appear on panel shows or otherwise participate in the televised entertainment that served as a powerful advertising machine for so many stars. They initially distributed their releases through independent, subscription-based means. Their lyrics even contained myriad ribbings of consumerist behaviors.<sup>65</sup>

“Happy End marked a moment of optimism, a moment of belief in the present as a beginning, a beginning in which one could bring into existence a new Japanese body through the performance of a new kind of music. This new body would be that of not only children who did not know war, but also children who had escaped the capitalist culture industry: the song “Happy End” contains direct swipes at those who define happiness in terms of material consumption.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Bourdaghs, 173.

<sup>64</sup> Happy End would be tapped to express this ennui again over three decades later with the inclusion of their song *Kaze wo atsumete* in the closing credits of Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003), a film about the alienation of Tokyo from a foreigner’s perspective. Happy End’s *Kaze wo atsumete*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0b6inZfiGrw>.

<sup>65</sup> Bourdaghs, 175.

<sup>66</sup> Bourdaghs, 175.



Happy End, and their jumbling of the values of Japanese folk, can now be seen as the edge of a precipice from which Japanese music would leap into the consumerist 1980s. Their urban sound persisted, but any anti-commercialist values would quickly evaporate as the music now called city pop emerged.<sup>67</sup> Most of Happy End's members would help to propagate this turn by staying involved in the music industry in one way or another. Drummer Matsumoto Takashi would write lyrics for many big stars, including Matsuda Seiko (b. 1962), who, while only city pop-adjacent herself, was perhaps the most successful and visible idol of the 1980s commercial culture in which city pop flourished.<sup>68</sup> Guitarist and vocalist Ōtaki Eiichi went on to win Best Album at the Japan Record Awards in 1981 with his album *A Long Vacation*, which is now seen as a high water mark in city pop history.<sup>69</sup> He also produced *Songs* (1975), the sole studio effort of early city pop group Sugar Babe, as well as subsequent releases by two of its members, Yamashita Tatsurō and Ōnuki Taeko, both massive city pop stars in their own right. Happy End's bassist Hosono Haruomi would eventually join Yellow Magic Orchestra, an influential synth pop trio. Most importantly, Two of Happy End's members, Hosono and guitarist Suzuki Shigeru, would join producer Matsutōya Masataka (b. 1951) and drummer Hayashi Tatsuyo (b. 1951) to form a studio band, Caramel Mama, eventually known as Tin Pan Alley, who would support rising pop star Arai Yumi on her studio efforts, including what would later be seen as one of the first true city pop records, *Cobalt Hour* (1975).<sup>70</sup>

#### **1.4 Arai Yumi and *Cobalt Hour***

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<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that some consider Happy End to also be city pop.

<sup>68</sup> In 1990, she even collaborated with Donnie Wahlberg on "[The Right Combination](#)" at the height of the popularity of his boy band, New Kids on the Block.

<sup>69</sup> Bourdaghs, 175.

<sup>70</sup> Bourdaghs, 177.

Happy End may have laid the theoretical groundwork from which city pop could arise, but they never scored any hits at the level of later city pop artists. Singer-songwriter Arai Yumi (b. 1954), also known as Yuming, was the first commercially successful artist critics might consider fitting in the category of city pop. Her 1975 album *Cobalt Hour* announced the arrival of city pop and set itself apart from the previous era of *nyū myūjikkū* defined by bands like Happy End.<sup>71</sup>

Arai Yumi fills an essential role in the story of city pop. Her singer-songwriter style, directly inherited from the *nyū myūjikkū* era of Happy End, allowed her to bring a more robust artistic flair to pop music, which she then applied to the hyper-commercial model developing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She took the lessons of studio wizardry and experimentation established by Happy End and filtered them through her natural abilities as a musician and pop star.<sup>72</sup> Bourdaghs describes her rise:

“...by the mid-1970s Yuming had become a dominant force on the hit singles and album charts in Japan. Moreover, she achieved this commercial success in large part without facing the charges of having sold out. She figured out, that is, how to transform new music into a massively successful commodity without sacrificing artistic ambition or pretension. Accordingly, the inherited negation that Yuming negated was that which opposed artistic integrity to commercial mass culture, and she did so by deconstructing the existing symbols that defined artistic resistance to market co-optation. In doing so, she paved the way for such later best-selling female singer-songwriters as Nakajima Miyuki, Utada Hikaru, and Shiina Ringo.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Shiti poppu 1973-2019*, 36.

<sup>72</sup> Bourdaghs, 178.

<sup>73</sup> Bourdaghs, 178.



Figure 2. Album cover of *Cobalt Hour* (1975).<sup>74</sup>

The album cover of her third effort, *Cobalt Hour*, was illustrated by Japanese artist Sato Pater, whose hazy airbrush illustrations would appear on four of city pop superstar Yamashita Tatsurō's later album covers. It features a prop plane bursting through a giant, red, cartoon heart. Standing below the plane is Arai Yumi, looking straight ahead at us with a wry smile. She appears to be dressed in the uniform of an airline stewardess, complete with blouse, scarf, and nametag. With her ponytail blowing in the wind, she welcomes us on a journey. A ring of blue, star-spangled sky hangs behind her, with a flash of yellow beneath it the color of beach sand. From this period onward, exotic travel would grow in significance as a symbol of city pop. The titular opening track "[Cobalt Hour](#)," creeps in with the rumbling engine of a prop plane gradually

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<sup>74</sup> ARAI Yumi 荒井由美. *Cobalt Hour*. Express ETP-72071. 1975. LP.

emerging from the silence.<sup>75</sup> The sound of the type of plane depicted on the album cover, commonly called a puddle jumper, would not be unfamiliar to tourists on islands in Hawaii and the South Pacific, many of which are only accessible by boat or small plane. A similar small plane is featured on the cover of *Niagara Triangle* (1976), an album from the following year by Ōtaki Eiichi, Ito Ginji (b. 1950), and Yamashita Tatsurō with tropical-sounding songs bearing titles such as “[Coconuts Holiday ‘76](#).”<sup>76</sup> *Cobalt Hour* is bookended with this sound, giving the listener the feeling of having been on a journey.

Compared with the mostly first-person perspective of Arai’s first two efforts, the more literary style of the lyrics on *Cobalt Hour* establishes Arai as a professional singer-songwriter. She takes a cosmopolitan European taste and overlays it with American pop sensibilities. This pop sense, heavily inspired by American music of the 1960s, would be perfected in the chorus effects utilized on tracks accompanied by vocals from other soon-to-be city pop artists.<sup>77</sup>

The lyrics of the titular opening track “Cobalt Hour” are also a fitting start to the era of city pop:

Flying across the *night city* [emphasis added],  
To the year 1960,  
I was absorbed in the rearview mirror,  
And inlaid in light.

The freeway continued to the harbor,  
Like the Milky Way flowing in the sky,  
The cold wind that smelled of the sea,  
Starts to wrap around my white *Belle G*.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> ARAI Yumi 荒井由美. “Cobalt Hour.” Track 1 on *Cobalt Hour*, Express ETP-72071. 1975. LP; The studio track is unfortunately unavailable on YouTube, but there is a live version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRG-9Kx00FM>.

<sup>76</sup> Niagara Triangle, *Niagara Triangle Vol. 1*, Niagara Records – LQ-7001-E, 1976, LP; “Coconuts Holiday ‘76: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E956HiuF1IQ>.

<sup>77</sup> Takahashi, 36.

<sup>78</sup> Arai Yumi 荒井由美, “Cobalt Hour.”; My translation.

Yumi's descriptor "night city" evokes one of the major themes of city pop. It recalls the image of an upwardly mobile salaryman or OL<sup>79</sup> racing along the streets of Tokyo in their sports car after leaving the office late at night.<sup>80</sup> Tokyo was bustling at the time and brimming with wealth.<sup>81</sup> It also gives the listener a feeling of escapism, another prevalent theme in city pop.

"Cobalt Hour" draws on nostalgia for its themes, a trend that has continued into the nostalgia expressed by the contemporary community of city pop listeners. In the song, Arai Yumi is travelling back to, or at least reminiscing about the year 1960. She zooms along in her "Bere G," a nickname for the Isuzu Bellett GT. The early 1960s saw a boom in the Japanese auto industry, with companies finally producing cars that could compete in domestic sales with foreign models. The sleek and futuristic Bellett GT sedan was introduced in 1964 (Arai has committed a slight anachronism in referencing 1960) and was known for the eccentric streamlined side mirrors affixed to the front fenders of the car. These are likely the mirrors Arai finds herself so absorbed in the lyrics. Cars, parties, and exotic travel all constantly figure into the themes of city pop lyrics and mark the optimism of the period. City pop often utilizes imagery of success at its zenith.

However, lyrical content is only one chapter in the story of city pop. It also represented a novel subculture within the Japanese music industry. The collaborative effort of early city pop records cannot be overstated. Future "king" of city pop Yamashita Tatsurō appears on *Cobalt Hour*, as a vocal arranger and one of the background vocalists, and two of the other vocalists, Ōnuki Taeko, Yamashita's band mate from the band Sugar Babe, as well as Yoshida Minako (b.

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<sup>79</sup> "Office Lady." Female office worker. In the 1980s, OLs made up approximately one third of the female workforce.

<sup>80</sup> The Milky Way-like freeway that crosses the harbor in "Cobalt Hour" might call to mind Tokyo's beautiful Rainbow Bridge, but as construction was not started until 1987, it must refer to one of the many other bridges in Tokyo that an office worker would cross on the trek back home out of the city.

<sup>81</sup> In Japan I have heard rumors of salarymen of this time regularly enjoying lavish steak and whiskey dinners and dolling out 10,000-yen tips to taxi drivers.

1953), would both enjoy enduring city pop careers. The first thundering bass notes that set a funky, driving tone for *Cobalt Hour* are delivered by Hosono Haruomi of *Happy End*.<sup>82</sup> Hosono would produce or play an instrument on many city pop records over the coming decade; If Yamashita is the king of city pop, Hosono is the godfather. Among the names listed in the liner notes of Arai's early albums, a city pop family tree is beginning to flourish. It is something not unlike the small community of session players on Nashville country records, with each city pop record featuring musicians from previous efforts. More specifically, a band called Tin Pan Alley, previously known as Caramel Mama, appeared as studio musicians on many city pop records. The band members are Hosono Haruomi and Suzuki Shigeru of Happy End on bass and guitar respectively, Matsutoya Masataka on piano, and Hayashi Tatsuyo on drums. They all appear on *Cobalt Hour*, although without any additional credit to Tin Pan Alley.<sup>83</sup> Tin Pan Alley would continue to help future city pop musicians create their albums, including Yoshida Minako, Ōnuki Taeko, and Yamashita Taturō, and some of the members would make city pop albums themselves. The pianist, Matsutoya Masatake, who would marry Arai Yumi the following year, became a pioneer for city pop production. He was among the first producers to champion the use of string and woodwind instruments, flutes, and harps in pop music arrangement.<sup>84</sup> The collaborative spirit of the city pop community contrasts the hierarchical and oppressive world of pop idols in which the lives of stars are dictated at every stage, and mirrors many of the new-wave or DIY philosophies of genres emerging in American and Britain in the late '70s and early '80s.

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<sup>82</sup> Arai Yumi 荒井由美, "Cobalt Hour," track 1 on *Cobalt Hour*, Express – ETP-72071, 1975, LP.

<sup>83</sup> Arai Yumi 荒井由美, *Cobalt Hour*, Express – ETP-72071, 1975, LP.

<sup>84</sup> "Masatake Matsutoya," Discogs. <https://www.discogs.com/artist/556508-Masataka-Matsutoya>.

## 1.5 Yamashita Tatsurō's Early Life and Commercial Work

The most iconic figure in the history of city pop is Yamashita Tatsurō (b. 1953), who arranged the vocals for *Cobalt Hour*. At a young age, Yamashita never fit into the rest of Japanese society. In the late 1960s, during his years in high school, he was barely passing each grade. After a bribery scandal at his high school, and amidst the backdrop of the 1970 Anpo Protests against the US-Japan Security Treaty, Yamashita joined in demonstrations that halted classes temporarily. After hardly attending school at all, Yamashita somehow squeaked out a diploma. Commenting on the trauma of the time, Yamashita said “I felt such a sense of hopelessness about being able to leave the world of high school that even today I have a recurring dream of being trapped there.”<sup>85</sup> After high school, Yamashita began attending Meiji Law School to study copyright law, but the distraction from his growing interest in music and the overall workload pushed him out after one semester of barely attending classes. Following that, music became his chief focus.

Years before releasing an album with his first band Sugar Babe, Yamashita was a leader in the crafting of city pop as a distinct sound. Much like his mentor and longtime producer, Happy End's Ōtaki Eiichi, Yamashita was quite successful in commercial work early in his career. Through the mid-70s, and long before his solo success of the 1980s, Yamashita created a slew of 30 second TV commercial jingles for popular brands. He worked at the apex of commercial jingle making, crafting songs for a diverse array of large, multinational corporations. Some of the biggest include Coca-Cola, Shiseido, Hitachi, Nissan, Kirin, JAL, Toyota, Toshiba, IBM, Honda, Sanyo, NTT, Suntory, and Mister Donut.<sup>86</sup> The audiovisual character of these

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<sup>85</sup> Myujiku magajin ミュージックマガジン, September 1998, 32-39.

<sup>86</sup> YAMASHITA Tatsurō 山下達郎, *Tatsurō Yamashita CM Collection Vol.1 (Second Edition)*,

commercials is something worth considering but the mere lack of cynicism with which Yamashita approached commercial work gives us an early glimpse at the soul of city pop and sets him apart from the anti-commercialist attitudes of his *nyū myūjikkū* predecessors. Yamashita created jingles for television commercials as early as 1974 and continues his commercial work to this day.<sup>87</sup> One of Yamashita's earliest efforts is [a 1976 jingle for an Ichijiku enema commercial](#):

When your body's tempo is out of order,  
When your body's rhythm has stopped,  
When it comes to enemas, it's Ichijiku.<sup>88</sup>

It is hard to imagine an American pop star making an enema commercial even early in their career. But in Yamashita's commercial work, there is not the sense of cynicism or the weighing of a corporate paycheck against lost coolness that a modern pop star may feel compelled to make. Yamashita even released two volumes of his commercial jingles and sold them to fans during his mid-1980s tours, proving that his commercial work was something he was genuinely proud of rather than an embarrassing bit of moonlighting from his past.<sup>89</sup> The visuals of the Ichijiku spot are nonsensical, although they could also be read as subliminally sexual: a woman accidentally squirts herself in the face opening a milk bottle, a Siamese cat runs away, and a shuttered window opens to reveal a cockerel weathervane on a nearby roof. The jingle itself is actually quite catchy and clever. There is a metronome sound effect incorporated into the jingle that fits with the musical terms “rhythm” and “tempo” present in the lyrics. It is not difficult to imagine Yamashita feeling genuinely inspired to write a tune about enemas. This attitude of

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Wild Honey – WCD-8002, 2001, CD.; Yamashita Taturō 山下達郎, *Taturō Yamashita CM Collection Vol.2*, Wild Honey – WCD-8003, 2001, CD.

<sup>87</sup> YAMASHITA, *CM Collection Vol. 1*.

<sup>88</sup> YAMASHITA Taturō 山下達郎, “Ichijiku Enema ‘75 いちじく浣腸 '75,” track 5 on *Taturō Yamashita CM Collection Vol.1 (Second Edition)*, Wild Honey – WCD-8002, 2001, CD.; My translation.; See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpnRkG-TCCQ&list=PLA5Z0m2JKyVJhG\\_dhvuxZo1OPtmM2BhWo&index](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpnRkG-TCCQ&list=PLA5Z0m2JKyVJhG_dhvuxZo1OPtmM2BhWo&index).

<sup>89</sup> YAMASHITA, *CM Collection Vol.1*; Yamashita, *CM Collection Vol.2*.



unwavering positivity persists throughout his career and informs the optimistic character of city pop.

His [1976 jingle for Mitsuya Cider](#), which was used in a large number of commercials, contains 1960s style vocals derivative of the Beach Boys' signature sound of stacked harmonies, although Yamashita recorded each vocal himself in a multitrack chorus.<sup>90</sup> The musical influence of the Beach Boys is prevalent throughout Yamashita's studio and commercial work; Yamashita has long been a huge Brian Wilson fan; the entire first side of his debut studio effort, [1972's \*Add Some Music to Your Day\*](#), is composed of impeccably recreated Beach Boys covers.<sup>91</sup>

Along with city pop's association with salarymen surfing on the weekends, the fact that Yamashita draws so heavily on early surf music for inspiration is one of the reasons that city pop is so associated with tropical imagery. Dozens of city pop album covers feature the ocean, sand, palm trees, or otherwise tropical themes. These elements are prevalent not only on Yamashita's first record, but also peppered throughout his career. For example, his 1978 album *Pacific*, made with Tin Pan Alley's Hosono Haruomi and Suzuki Shigeru, features a tropical island on the cover and songs with titles such as "Last Paradise," "Coral Reef," "[Nostalgia of Island](#)," "Walking on the Beach," "Passion Flower," and "Cosmic Surfing."<sup>92</sup> The album is made up of instrumental, loungey tunes that employ steel drums, exotic percussion, breathy flutes, and the twangy guitar of surf rock. It would not be out of place as background music in a 1950s tiki bar.

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<sup>90</sup> Yamashita, *CM Collection Vol.1*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuBWbB-m--.0>

<sup>91</sup> YAMASHITA Tatsurō. *Add Some Music to Your Day*. Believe In Magic Records – MAGIC-1. 1972. LP. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DD4rtΓ1dDg>.

<sup>92</sup> Hosono Haruomi, Suzuki Shigeru, & Yamashita Tatsurō 細野晴臣, 鈴木茂, & 山下達郎, *Pacific*, CBS/Sony – 25AH 426, 1978, LP. Translation mine. "Nostalgia of Island:" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52lXg9asnn8>.

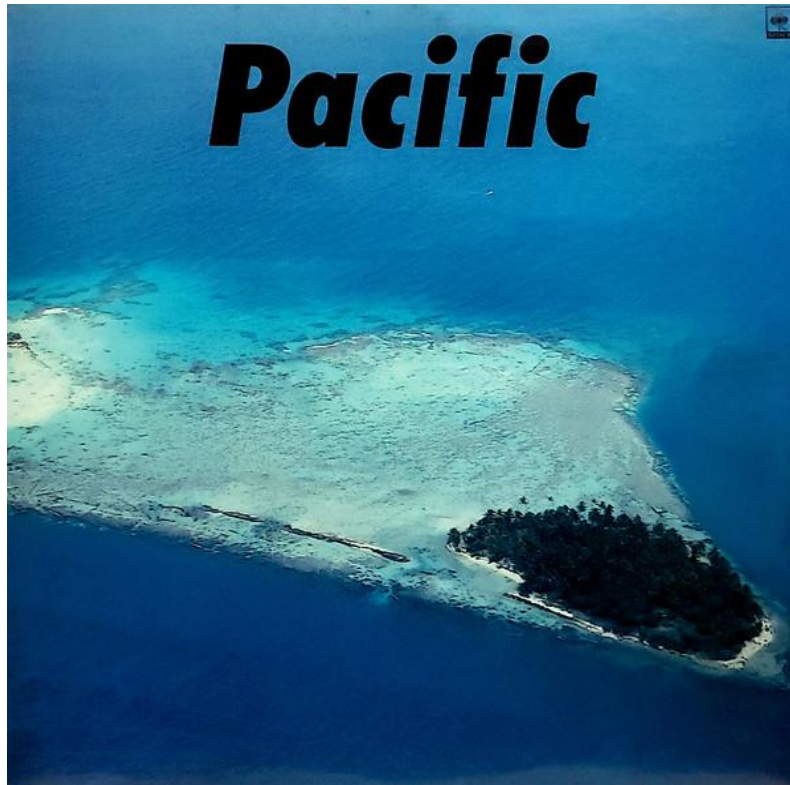


Figure 3. The album art for Hosono Haruomi, Suzuki Shigeru, & Yamashita Tatsurō's *Pacific*.<sup>94</sup>

Yamashita's mastery of tropical imagery was not lost on advertising executives. In 1979, the first single from Yamashita's album *Moonglow*, "Ai wo egaite – Let's Kiss the Sun" was condensed into [a jingle for Japan Airline's Okinawa TV campaign](#).<sup>95</sup> It was only Yamashita's second single as a solo artist.<sup>96</sup> It was however his first "tie-up," the Japanese term for a commercial collaboration between an artist and a corporation.<sup>97</sup> The song was released in its TV commercial version simultaneously with the release of the main single, although with the

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<sup>94</sup> HOSONO Haruomi, SUZUKI Shigeru, & YAMASHITA Tatsurō 細野晴臣, 鈴木茂, & 山下達郎, *Pacific*, CBS/Sony – 25AH 426, 1978, LP.

<sup>95</sup> HAGIWARA Kenta 萩原健太, *Hachinendai nihon no poppusu kuronikuru 80年代 日本のポップスクロニクル*, (Tokyo: P-Vine 株式会社 Pヴァイン, 2018), 109.

<sup>96</sup> "Yamashita Tatsurō no sakuin ichiran," Wikipedia, Accessed May 27, 2021, <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/山下達郎の作品一覧>.

<sup>97</sup> Referred to in English as a tie-in.

addition of a line referencing Okinawa.<sup>98</sup> The release of “*Ai wo egaitte – Let’s Kiss the Sun*” in 1979 fell within a period in which many musicians worked alongside corporations to connect their songs with products in the minds of consumers, a trend that would continue until the 1990s. Hagiwara calls this time a “tie-up bubble.”<sup>99</sup> Many tie-ups would start as TV jingles and later be crafted into full-length songs.” Commercial jingles such as Ogura Kei’s “*Yureru manazashi*” [1976], Ozaki Ami’s “*My Pure Lady*” [1977], Downtown Boogie Woogie Band’s “*Success*” [1977], Arai Mitsuru’s “*Wine Colored Days*” [1978], Yazawa Eikichi’s “*Time! Stop!*” [1978], Horiuchi Takao’s “*Your Eyes Are 10,000 Volts*” [1978], and Circus’s “*Mr. Summer Time*” [1978] jumped out of the TVs and onto the pop charts.<sup>100</sup>”

### 1.6 Yamashita’s Mainstream Success

It was well into this tie-up bubble that one of Yamashita’s jingles became a smash hit. His song “Ride on Time” was originally composed in 1980 as a full length song, but it was heavily utilized in [Maxell cassette tape commercials](#) early in the decade, and became an iconic song for the era.<sup>101</sup> Music critic Hagiwara Kenta describes the nostalgia for the early 1980s he felt upon reviewing the commercial today:

A man is standing in the ocean up to his knees, his back to the sun sinking into the horizon. He points at you with his fingers in the shape of a gun, his long hair fluttering in the wind. A carefree song plays in the background...This was the moment that I realized that the world of Japanese pop music had changed in a big way.<sup>102</sup>

It was Yamashita’s first hit single and his first real success outside of the world of commercial advertising. The titular album rose to number one, beginning a peak in Yamashita’s

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<sup>98</sup> YAMASHITA Tatsurō 山下達郎, *Tatsurō Yamashita CM Collection Vol.1 (Second Edition)*, Wild Honey – WCD-8002, 2001, CD.

<sup>99</sup> Hagiwara, 109.

<sup>100</sup> Hagiwara, 109.

<sup>101</sup> YAMASHITA Tatsurō 山下達郎, *Ride on Time*, Air Records – RAL-8501, 1980, LP;

Maxell commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXb00WMpjUQ>

<sup>102</sup> Hagiwara, 108.

career and in the popularity of city pop.<sup>103</sup> Staying true to the nature of city pop, he did not abandon his commercial roots. He immediately began work on the 1981 jingle “[Oh Love Land](#)”<sup>104</sup> for Suntory to advertise their new beer, “Suntory Genuine.” Much like his previous work, the commercial evoked an exotic party atmosphere, with a woman dancing through the streets of a tropical city. He then adapted the jingle into “[Loveland, Island](#)” for his next album *For You*.<sup>105</sup> The 1982 album was a huge hit and was especially popular among college students, becoming something of a “summer bible” for Japanese youth.<sup>106</sup> Illustrator Suzuki Ejin, who had previous experience working on covers for music magazine FM Station, provided the album art for *For You* (Figure 4). It was a beachside street scene, evoking the 1950s Americana from which Beach Boys-obsessive Yamashita drew so much inspiration. It gave young Japanese urbanites the power to transport themselves from their drab Tokyo apartments right onto the California coast.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> “*Yamashita Tatsurō no sakuin ichiran*,” Wikipedia, Accessed May 27, 2021, <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/山下達郎の作品一覧>.

<sup>104</sup> YAMASHITA Tatsurō 山下達郎. *For You*. Air Records – RAL-8801. 1982. LP; 1981 Suntory commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjIDEodCiEE>

<sup>105</sup> Hagiwara, 110; YAMASHITA Tatsurō 山下達郎. *For You*. Air Records – RAL-8801. 1982. LP; “Loveland, Island:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x4-brQDgA4>

<sup>106</sup> Hagiwara, 112.

<sup>107</sup> Hagiwara, 112.



Figure 4. Suzuki Ējin's artwork for *For You* (1982), evoking 1950s Americana and beachiness.<sup>108</sup>

A city pop movement had fully coalesced around Yamashita Tatsurō. Hagiwara describes it as something of a phenomenon:

*For You*, along with its breezy album art became the vividly realized soundtrack of the cutting-edge vibe that young people were striving for at the time. The album was a big hit and reached second place in the year-end charts.<sup>109</sup> ...Between spring and summer of 1982, one could hear the album turning up everywhere... pouring out of radios, TVs, car stereos, and store PA systems. Along with Ōtaki Ēichi's *A Long Vacation* and later, Seiko Matsuda's *Pineapple*, *For You* was considered an indispensable album among college students. One always had to have it on hand to pop into the car stereo.<sup>110</sup>

### 1.7 The Visual Vocabulary of City Pop

<sup>108</sup> YAMASHITA Tatsurō 山下達郎, *For You*, Air Records – RAL-8801, 1982, LP.

<sup>109</sup> Hagiwara, 112.

<sup>110</sup> Hagiwara, 119.

City pop was a very visual medium, and its lifestyle can perhaps best be understood through its album art. Much of this iconic art was created through the airbrush work of artists like Nagai Hiroshi and Suzuku Seijin. Some of the tropes of city pop album art include urbanism, blue skies, sunsets, palm trees and tropicality (or exotic travel in general), Americana (especially of California), and vehicles, often with design motifs that consisted of stark lines and a pastel palette of blues, pinks, and greens not dissimilar to the Art Deco hotels that line Miami Beach. These images reflect the nature of the “two-part lifestyle” cited by city pop artist Kadomatsu Toshiki. Many albums displayed through their album art the urban setting that the original Japanese lovers of city pop thrived in, as seen in figures 5 and 6 below.



Figure 5. Themes of urbanism in city pop album art. Clockwise from left, Kadomatsu Toshiki's *After 5 Clash* (1984), Omega Tribe's *River's Island* (1984), *Pacific Breeze 2: Japanese City Pop, AOR & Boogie 1972-1986* (2020), and Ohashi Junko's *Magical* (1984).<sup>111</sup>

<sup>111</sup> KADOMATSU Toshiki 角松敏生, *After 5 Clash*, Air Records – RAL-8812, 1984, LP; S. Kiyotaka & Omega Tribe, *River's Island*, Vap – 30136-28, 1984, LP; Various Artists, *Pacific Breeze 2 (Japanese City Pop, AOR & Boogie 1972-1986)*, Light In The Attic – LITA 179, 2020, CD; OHASHI Junko 大橋純子, *Magical*, Philips – 28PL-79, 1984, LP.

Many albums also referenced urbanism in their titles as well, such as Omega Tribe’s *Aqua City* (1983) and Kadomatsu Toshiki’s *On the City Shore* (1983). As seen in Figure 6 below, other albums contained art that highlighted the breezy lifestyle of the resort, with brilliant blue skies, poolside scenes, pink sunsets, sand, and palm trees.



Figure 6. Themes of tropicalism in city pop album art. *Top row from left*, Matsushita Makoto’s *First Light* (1981), Kikuchi Momoko’s *Adventure* (1986), and Piper’s *Sunshine Kiz* (1984). *Bottom row from left*, Anri’s *Timely!!* (1983), Seaside Lovers’ *Memories in Beach House* (1983), and Ohtaki Eiichi’s *A Long Vacation* (1981).<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> MATSUSHITA Makoto 松下誠, *First Light*, Moon Records – MOON-28001, 1982, LP; MOMOKO Kikuchi 桃子菊池, *Adventure*, Vap – 30183-28, 1986, LP; Piper, *Sunshine Kiz*, Yupiteru Records – YV27-1006, 1984, LP; Anri, *Timely!!*, For Life Records – 28K-63, 1983, LP; Seaside Lovers, *Memories in Beach House*, CBS/Sony – 28AH 1521, 1983, LP; OHTAKI Eiichi 大瀧栄一, *A Long Vacation*, Niagara Records – 27AH 1234, 1981, LP.



Other albums explicitly referenced exotic travel in their titles, such as Mamiya Takako's *Love Trip* (1982), Kadomatsu Toshiki's *Weekend Fly to the Sun* (1982), Piper's *Summer Breeze* (1983), and Noriko's *Dream Cruise* (1984). Some artwork contained the implement of escape: planes, as on Arai Yumi's *Cobalt Hour* (1975) and AB's *AB'S 3* (1985), as well as cars, as on Yamashita Taturō *Come Along II* (1984) and Katsumi Horii Project's *Ocean Drive* (1988). Many Japanese city dwellers in the 1980s saw the escape to tropical, exotic locations as integral to their dual lifestyle. This dual lifestyle allowed them to reap the benefits of both beach and city.

## 1.8 The Demise of City Pop

The breezy city pop era continued throughout the 1980s, with albums regularly reaching the top five in Japan. Even today, Yamashita Taturō and his wife Takeuchi Mariya continue to reach the top ten with their albums and singles, but if we look at the careers of other artists we can see a clear end of the city pop era in the late 1980s and early '90s.<sup>113</sup> Matsubara Miki's last album was in 1988 and Kikuchi Momoko released her final record in 1991. Kadomatsu Toshiki's last top five album was also in 1991, at least until 2019's *Tōkyō shōnen shōjo* (Tokyo Boys and Girls), a sign of city pop's resurgence.<sup>114</sup> Arai Yumi achieved the best-selling album of the year in Japan from 1989-1991, but never reached that level of sales thereafter.

It was a confluence of factors that dethroned city pop to make way for other musical forms. In some ways city pop segued into other genres such as J-Pop and Shibuya-kei. J-Pop groups like [Dreams Come True](#), whose brassy pop sound is somewhat derivative of city pop,

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<sup>113</sup> "Yamashita Taturō no sakuin ichiran," Wikipedia, Accessed May 27, 2021, <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/山下達郎の作品一覧>; "Takeuchi Mariya," Wikipedia, Accessed May 27, 2021, <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/竹内まりや/#/ディスコグラフィ>.

<sup>114</sup> "Kadomatsu Toshiki no sakuin ichiran," Wikipedia, Accessed May 27, 2021, <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/角松敏生の作品一覧>.

took the top album spot in 1994 and 1995. The breaking of the real estate bubble in 1991 that began the “Lost Decade” and a crashing of the Japanese stock market affected a number of foundational elements of city pop culture.<sup>115</sup> During the recession, a college degree was no longer a guarantee of a secure job, and many students no longer saw a salaryman position at a large corporation as a realistic goal. The free-spirited college students who had blared Yamashita Tatsurō’s *For You* from their car stereos suddenly had less to feel confident about.<sup>116</sup>

Newer music was starting to encroach on city pop’s hegemony as well. Pop stars known as *aidoru* (from the English “idol”), already popular since the 1960s, were becoming corporatized. In the early 1990s, Johnny Kitagawa, founder of *aidoru* management and training company Johnny & Associates, was cranking out male idol groups like SMAP and heavily promoting them through television appearances. Idols began to dominate culture, appearing in dramas,<sup>117</sup> commercials, variety shows, and talk shows. The influence of Johnny’s cannot be understated. It is now one of the most profitable talent agencies in the world. In 2013, Johnny’s artists held twenty of the top fifty highest selling singles of the year, and as a producer, Johnny Kitagawa has now produced more number-one hits than any person in history.<sup>118</sup>

The members of these groups were multi-talented personalities and far more salable than the stars of city pop, who were first and foremost musicians. During this recessionary period in the Japanese economy, the intertextuality of Japanese media increased; the various zones of interaction between artists and consumers: radio, variety shows, dramas, concerts, etc., all made constant reference to one another. Kitagawa rented out his stars in robust advertising campaigns

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<sup>115</sup> Henshall, 181.

<sup>116</sup> Chun, 153.

<sup>117</sup> Japanese soap operas.

<sup>118</sup> Chun, 148.

through these various modes of interaction, treating them more like spokesmodels than artists, marketing every aspect of their image. Many of his idols became something more akin to television personalities than musicians. Kitagawa also controlled the entirety of his pop stars' lives, including whom they could date and be seen in public with. He was a shrewd marketer; he was even known to leverage the popularity of his idols to coerce TV programs into disinviting rival performers.<sup>119</sup> As commercially minded as Yamashita Tatsurō was, he could never have dreamed of something so cutthroat. Yamashita has always maintained two separate musical lives: independent touring musician working for a record company and freelance commercial jingle artist. In contrast, the idols of Johnny & Associates work with the commercial world in a symbiotic relationship of perpetual cross-promotion. As music became more televised, image became of utmost importance, and a long recession began in Japan, the optimism and musicianship of city pop inevitably faded from relevance.

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<sup>119</sup> Chun, 152.

## CHAPTER 2

### REDISCOVERY

The events that make up the history of city pop's rediscovery and reappreciation are messy. While I have organized them as chronologically as possible, it is important to stay aware of the fact that, though there is a degree of intertextuality between the various components in the narrative that I will outline, it is probable that someone could trace a different path for the ascension of city pop back into pop culture. The various stages through which city pop moved all contain autonomous actors who were busy creating culture before and after their interaction with city pop. It is always prudent to remember that culture is not static and is constantly in flux.

#### **2.1 Crate Digging**

The term DJ, while originally referring to a person (lit. disk jockey) who transitions and introduces songs on the radio or at a party, has evolved to describe several overlapping musical careers. These include electronic musicians, who make original or sample-based dance music with synthesizers and computer software, “turntablists,” who manipulate a record player like an instrument by intentionally scratching the record needle, and also “crate diggers:” retro music enthusiasts who pride themselves on an ability to curate mixes of obscure, forgotten, or novel songs that they often spend hours searching for in used record shops.<sup>120</sup> The practice owes a great deal to Black artists of the 1970s, who sampled and remixed funk and R&B tracks to create the first inklings of the genre of hip-hop.

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<sup>120</sup> Night Tempo, interview by Ryōhei Matsunaga, in *Shiti poppu 1973-2019 シティ・ポップ 1973-2019*, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修, (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019). 14-19.

The start of a city pop revival came in the mid-2000s when Japanese crate diggers such as DJ Yoshizawa, DJ Chintam, and Mori-Ra started playing mixes of Japanese music of the '70s and '80s, usually with songs that included a disco or R&B beat.<sup>121</sup> Yoshizawa is a classic digger, while Chintam is a record buyer and the owner of Blow Up, a record shop in Shibuya that specializes in *wamono*, a term used by Japanese diggers to refer to older Japanese tracks that fit in a range of genres such as funk, jazz, and R&B. The two DJs together published a popular 2015 collector's guide of rare Japanese funk, jazz, and R&B albums called "*Wamono A to Z*"<sup>122</sup> that had been compiled through countless hours of digging. They continue to publish mixes of the music described in their guide. In a 2017 interview, Yoshizawa describes the crate digging process that led to the guide, in this case relating a story of finding an obscure funk record by the American band Rodan:

I first came across this record in the late '90s. At the time I was really into early '70s jazz rock and brass rock like Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chase, Chicago, Ides of March, etc. Searching for that sort of thing and fishing around on the prog and rock floor of Disk Union in Shinjuku,<sup>123</sup> I found a jacket<sup>124</sup> I wasn't used to seeing. It was ¥2800, which is considered pretty cheap by diggers, but ¥2800 is a lot of money for something you don't know the contents of, so I immediately gave it a trial listen.

At that time, even at Disk Union you weren't able to listen to discs yourself. So in that situation, I would look at the album credits, producers, musicians, instrumentation, song titles, and the depth of the grooves in the record ...in other words checking the state of the sound. After imagining what it sounded like, I would hand it over to the clerk to have a trial listen.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> ITO Daisuke, "*Nihon no kankeysha kara mita, wamono saihyouka no nami* 日本の関係者から見た、和モノ再評価の波," *Resident Advisor*, May 9, 2019, <https://jp.ra.co/features/2696>.

<sup>122</sup> ITO Daisuke, "*Nihon no kankeysha kara mita, wamono saihyouka no nami*."

<sup>123</sup> A large second-hand record shop located on the 8th floor of the Kinokuniya bookstore east of Shinjuku station. There are multiple franchises in Tokyo, each specializing in different genres.

<sup>124</sup> Album cover.

<sup>125</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite, "*Dynamite Hihousara gaido ni naranai otakara bainaru* Dynamite 秘宝盤 ~ガイドに載らないお宝ヴァイナル,~" *Donuts Magazine*, December 1, 2017. <https://donutsmagazine.com/column/yoshizawa003/>; My translation.

Yoshizawa and other crate diggers are essentially professional lovers and curators of music. They absorb entire genres as a personal project and feel a sense of pride in discovering something new or a record at the edges of a genre. They then mix those songs in live performances to other enthusiasts, in events such as the regularly held *Wamono* Groovy Summit, which Chintam DJs at on the fourth Friday of every other month.<sup>126</sup>

In June of 2003, DJ Yoshizawa made a “[novelty mix](#)” for a friend’s wedding reception. The bride and her guests requested lots of Western jazz and easy-listening tracks to match her Western-style wedding dress. In a cunning move, Yoshizawa was able to fulfill this request without playing any Western songs. The tracks were all in a “Western” style, meaning they were in genres that originated in America, but he used Japanese artists, with songs mostly sung in English. However, Yoshizawa extended his subversion even further by also including many tracks sung in Japanese. He mixed in some city pop tracks, including one song by Yamashita Taturō: “[Love Space](#),” as well as a few by other Japanese artists of the ‘70s and ‘80s such as Takanaka Masayoshi, Rajie, Kurano Haruko, An Ruisu, Shibata Hatsumi, and Ohno Eri. Most of these artists were obscure or long forgotten, but many would soon find themselves part of a resurgence of popularity in ‘70s and ‘80s Japanese music. The genres Yoshizawa chose from: disco, R&B, jazz, and funk, were all genres that were incorporated into the work of ‘70s and ‘80s city pop artists.

On his blog, he refers to this mix as the “maiden work” of *wamono*.<sup>127</sup> In an email exchange I had with DJ Yoshizawa, he clarified some points about this era in city pop history:

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<sup>126</sup> Information on the event can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/GroovyWamonoSummit>.

<sup>127</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite, “*Wamono mikkusu CD hontou no shojosaku* 和モノ・ミックス CD 本当の処女作,” *DJ 吉沢 dynamite.jp* blog, January 12, 2017, <http://yoshizawa.dynamite-jp.com/?eid=1442109>.

“I don’t know who first mixed city pop, but DJs have been playing Yamashita Taturō and Takanaka Masayoshi, as well as western music, since the ‘90s. Until the beginning of the 2000s, there were almost no *wamono* DJ mixes that included city pop, so I think I was fairly early in doing that.”<sup>128</sup>

*Wamono* is generally genre pure. The artists may be Japanese, but they are playing funk or jazz in the American style. Yoshizawa seems to be saying that although there were DJs before him playing city pop, he was the first in the *wamono* scene of genre-pure music to mix in Japanese city pop, which is Japanese music that is merely influenced by American genres but ultimately uniquely Japanese.

In this early period of city pop revival however, there were not many venues available to enthusiasts. Another *wamono* DJ, Chintam, describes the difficult atmosphere at the time, when many club owners were opposed to hosting DJs who played city pop records:

"Until the mid-1990s, I wasn't really aware of *wamono*. ...at that time, it was like there was an unwritten rule that forbade playing records from Japanese artists. Of things that were more acceptable, rare grooves<sup>129</sup> were getting popular in the late '80s and early '90s. Music with a taste of American soul like Kimiko Kasai and Minako Yoshida was being added to British compilations and reimported."<sup>130</sup>

It seems that even Japanese music that was deemed acceptable to play by club owners had to first be informally approved of through its inclusion in foreign compilation label releases. Some of this music, like Minako Yoshida’s work, would go on to be part of the city pop boom.

In our exchange, DJ Yoshizawa reiterated this outlook and explains a shift in the anti-Japanese sentiment:

“...Japanese clubs weren’t playing much Japanese music and it felt like they didn’t like DJs playing it either. This is my personal opinion, but there was a record boom in Japan in the 2000s, and I think that the circumstances were that, alongside the trends of J-rap

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<sup>128</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite. Email exchange with artist. March 1-10, 2021; My translation.

<sup>129</sup> Rare groove is a UK-based genre of DJ music very similar to *wamono*. Chintam claims they are identical.

<sup>130</sup> ITO Daisuke, “*Nihon no kankeysha kara mita, wamono saihyouka no nami* 日本の関係者から見た、和モノ再評価の波,” *Resident Advisor*, May 9, 2019, <https://jp.ra.co/features/2696>; My translation.

and J-R&B, as DJs played Japanese language songs like city pop, business owners were able to complain less and less.”<sup>131</sup>

Yoshizawa’s view of recent Japanese music history seems to place multiple Japanese language genres, such as J-rap, J-R&B, and city pop, in a trend of increasing popularity. One could posit that this period, the mid-2000s resurgence of interest in Japanese language music, constitutes a nationalistic movement or a rejection of prior Western-cultural influence, not dissimilar to the rejection of American cultural hegemony by Happy End and the prior folk movement in the 1970s.

I put to Yoshizawa this question of the city pop resurgence as a nationalistic refutation of Western cultural obsession, but he rejected that theory in favor of something more mundane: “Yes, until around the year 2000, Japanese DJs that played records were mostly obsessed with Western culture, but to some extent, vinyl diggers had simply exhausted Western music. They next set their eyes on Japanese music and *wamono*.”<sup>132</sup>

Yoshizawa also remarked in our exchange on how cheap city pop records were in the mid-90s when DJs began digging for them, especially compared to how coveted they have become.<sup>133</sup> Yoshizawa believes that the *wamono* and city pop explosion was a natural progression; it was the result of a crate digging arms race. He also disagreed that the emergence of several Japanese language genres in the early 2000s was evident of a nationalistic shift in tastes: “J-rap, J-R&B and hip-hop were played along with city pop in ‘all mix’ clubs. They didn’t happen in a particular order.”<sup>134</sup> It seems hard to believe that multiple Japanese language genres

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<sup>131</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite. Email exchange with artist. March 1-10, 2021; My translation.

<sup>132</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite. Email exchange with artist. March 1-10, 2021; My translation.

<sup>133</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite. Email exchange with the artist. March 1-10, 2021; My translation.

<sup>134</sup> DJ Yoshizawa Dynamite. Email exchange with artist. March 1-10, 2021; My translation.



gaining popularity at the same time are not in some way related. The factors that may have led to a nationalistic shift are not readily apparent, however.

Other DJs further expanded the palette of *wamono*. Osaka based Mori-Ra started putting together “[Japanese Breeze](#)” sets in the mid-2010s that he refers to on his Soundcloud<sup>135</sup> as “a fantastic mix of rare Japanese cosmic synth funk, jazz, disco and J-grooves.”<sup>136</sup> While his mixes contain musicians such as Yamashita Tatsurō who would be heavily featured in later city pop mixes created by Westerners, he also featured instrumental music as well as synth-heavy jazz fusion of Japanese origin. It is fair to say that the early *wamono* DJs each curated Japanese music of the ‘70s and ‘80s in their own particular way. As I discussed earlier, when city pop was originally released, it was mostly referred to as *nyū myūjikkū*. Thus, city pop as a genre term was really synthesized from a retrospective of the ‘70s and ‘80s that occurred in the ‘90s and 2000s, and it would not commonly be used until knowledge of this music expanded outside of Japan. By the mid-2000s, multiple people were sharing mixes of bubble-era music. Some contained pop music, while others included instrumental jazz or funk. As media scholar Furuhashi Yuriko puts it: “Even though city pop as an archive is vast, different DJs are digging into this sonic archive and picking up different strands of this music.”<sup>137</sup>

There was an unacknowledged conversation going on about how the music of this era could be categorized; this was a conversation that would not really be completed until foreigners had a chance to weigh in. At any rate, with the stories of DJs like Yoshizawa and Mori-Ra, there is a clear beginning to the phenomenon of Japanese music of the ‘70s and ‘80s returning to

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<sup>135</sup> A website for electronic artists to stream their music to the public.

<sup>136</sup> Mori-Ra, “Japanese Breeze,” *Soundcloud*, <https://soundcloud.com/rotating-souls-records/mori-ra-japanese-breeze-mix?in=rotating-souls-records/sets/japanese-breeze>.

<sup>137</sup> FURUHATA Yuriko, “City Pop Breeze, Sonic Revivals and Mutant Afterlives of Bubble Disco,” filmed September 2019 at Never Apart, Montréal, Canada, video, 43:08. <https://vimeo.com/362702024>.

public awareness in Japan: at some point in the mid-90s, a small group of crate digging DJs began searching for and appreciating Japanese funk, soul, R&B, and jazz, as well as the fusion pop genre now known as city pop, and very slowly were allowed by venues to integrate this music into live sets. Subsequently, the early 2000s saw a boom of record collection and crate digging that led to a self-perpetuating movement of music discovery.

However, this movement of DJs sharing city pop records did not necessarily translate into large-scale popularity. That would not happen until city pop was discovered by international DJs and eventually by the wider international public. How this music crossed the Pacific Ocean, and eventually exploded in popularity on YouTube, is a complicated matter. DJ Chintam, coauthor with Yoshizawa of the *Wamono A to Z* record-collecting guide, shares his perspective on the shift:

It was around 2008 that I felt that Japanese records began to attract attention overseas. At that time, I was selling records at an online shop, and there was a person from abroad who sent me a record title list written in an honest attempt at kanji. He was a prominent figure, Dimitri from Paris,<sup>138</sup> and was searching for Boogie-type *wamono*.<sup>139</sup> There was also a request from DJ Spinna<sup>140</sup> for Japanese fusion records to use as samples. Musicians and DJs were the first to notice. It became known to a general class of foreigners when Japanese people began distributing records on Discogs.<sup>141</sup> Afterwards, I think well-known DJs started using *wamono* in their mixes a lot.<sup>142</sup>

South Korean city pop DJ and future funk<sup>143</sup> artist Night Tempo also noticed DJs getting into city pop outside of Japan: “...before people were talking about it [on YouTube], there were

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<sup>138</sup> A famous French DJ who plays disco and funk records.

<sup>139</sup> Boogie is a 1980s genre of dance music influenced by disco and funk. It is similar to nu-disco and future funk and has seen a revitalization since the 2000s.

<sup>140</sup> An underground American hip-hop producer.

<sup>141</sup> An online music database and used record marketplace.

<sup>142</sup> ITO Daisuke, “*Nihon no kankeysha kara mita, wamono saihyouka no nami* 日本の関係者から見た、和モノ再評価の波,” *Resident Advisor*, May 9, 2019, <https://jp.ra.co/features/2696>; My translation.

<sup>143</sup> A city pop sample-based offshoot of vaporwave

groups of my friends outside Japan who were sharing recommendations [of city pop].”<sup>144</sup> In the late 2000s and early 2010s, there was a nascent ecosystem of DJs digging and exchanging obscure Japanese music across the globe. In this period, much like how rappers of the 1980s and ‘90s had sampled American funk and R&B of the ‘60s and ‘70s, many of the most successful American hip hop producers and rappers began sampling city pop. Some of these artists include Nicole Ray, Lil B, Young Jeezy, Smoke DZA, Mac Miller, J. Cole, and Tyler, The Creator.<sup>145</sup>

However, while some DJs were sharing obscure music from the past, others were reappropriating it in interesting ways. By the late 2000s a new genre was emerging in the darker quarters of the Internet, and to fully understand the explosion of interest in city pop, there must next be an examination of the genre of electronic music known as “vaporwave.”

## 2.2 The Seeds of Vaporwave

In the first year of the 21st century, an 18-year-old student at Hampshire College named Daniel Lopatin received his first synthesizer: a Japanese-produced Roland Juno-60, as a birthday gift from his father.<sup>146</sup> The child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, both musicians, Daniel grew up sampling and experimenting with noise, collecting his father’s jazz fusion mixtapes and other early electronic music.<sup>147</sup> From these he would create his first pieces of music, loops of tracks

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<sup>144</sup> Night Tempo, interview by Ryōhei Matsunaga, in *Shiti poppu 1973-2019* シティ・ポップ 1973-2019, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修, (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019), 14-19; My translation.

<sup>145</sup> HASEGAWA Machizo 長谷川町蔵, “*Shiti poppu wa bei hippu hoppu no neta kara infuruensu gen e to shoukakushita?* シティポップは米ヒップホップのネタからインフルエンス源へと昇格した?” in *Shiti poppu 1973-2019* シティ・ポップ1973-2019, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修, (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019), 81.

<sup>146</sup> Sasha Frere-Jones, “Time Indefinite: Oneohtrix Point Never’s Transcendent Experiment,” *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2011. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/21/time-indefinite>.

<sup>147</sup> Patrick D. McDermott, “Going Home with Oneohtrix Point Never,” *Fader*, <https://www.thefader.com/2015/11/12/oneohtrix-point-never-garden-of-delete-daniel-lopatin>.

from the Chick Corea-led jazz fusion band Return to Forever processed through a synthesizer until the sound became grainy and unrecognizable.<sup>148</sup> He eventually found a fit for himself in the Brooklyn noise music scene, where he took on the moniker Oneohtrix Point Never.<sup>149</sup> The name was inspired by the Boston based radio station 106.7, whose adult contemporary block included the sort of 1970s and '80s yacht rock that was roughly the American equivalent of city pop, and from which OPN would soon mine many of his samples.<sup>150</sup> In the late 2000s and at the same time that city pop was being discovered by DJs and producers internationally, he began releasing audio-visual projects to fans by mail. They were offered in cassette tape form as well as posted to YouTube. The first of these projects, the ten track *Memory Vague* (2009), was composed mostly of ambient synthesizer tracks accompanied by visual backgrounds of digital animation.<sup>151</sup> However, *Memory Vague* contained two songs, "[Angel](#)" and "[Nobody Here](#)," that differed in their formulation. These two tracks combined heavily altered snippets of 70s and 80s pop songs with video clips of foreign television commercials from the same era.<sup>152</sup> In each track, a few seconds of a song were repeated over and over with a "glitching" or record-skipping effect. Lopatin also pitch-shifted the tracks downward, slowed them by about twenty beats per minute, and applied reverb and envelope filtering, giving the vocals a slurred effect. The new sound created a sense of unease, dissociation, and opiate intoxication not unlike the experience of

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<sup>148</sup> Sasha Frere-Jones, "Time Indefinite: Oneohtrix Point Never's Transcendent Experiment," *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2011. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/21/time-indefinite>.

<sup>149</sup> Hereafter abbreviated to "OPN."

<sup>150</sup> Ian Cohen, "ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER'S POST-MODERN MAKE-OUT MUSIC," *MTV*, November 16, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2694958/oneohtrix-point-never/>; Soft rock, which is synonymous with yacht rock and adult contemporary, is also the genre of American music most analogous with city pop.

<sup>151</sup> *Memory Vague* was released under OPN's pseudonym SunsetCorp.

<sup>152</sup> Daniel Lopatin, "Angel," track 2 on *Memory Vague*, Root Strata – RS43, 2009, DVD. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN0czUMRMU8>; Daniel Lopatin, "Nobody Here," track 11 on *Memory Vague*, Root Strata – RS43, 2009, DVD. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RFunvF0mDw>.

listening to a broken record or a worn-out cassette tape. He applied the same glitching and slow-motion effects to the background video as well, doubling the effect.

OPN drew from myriad sources to create the auditory elements of his art, but the media of Japan proved to be one of the most fruitful sources for visual material. Drawing from his experience as an MA student of Archival Science at the Pratt Institute, he scoured YouTube for visual ephemera from the 1980s.<sup>153</sup> Lopatin remarked:

I was tired of waiting for video artists to make me videos – it takes too long – so I started ripping YouTubes [sic] and editing them in Windows Movie Maker. I was primarily interested in Soviet-era TV programming as well as Japanese consumer electronics commercials, and I started organizing the footage by its body language and emotive aspects”<sup>154</sup>

OPN was now applying to video the crate digging techniques that earlier Japanese and international DJs had used for music. But instead of used record stores, YouTube was now the repository for discarded media of the 1980s. The commercials being sampled were not unlike those that originally employed the music of Yamashita Tatsurō in the 1980s: bubbly and optimistic. Although, with the addition of OPN’s glitching and slurring techniques, the commercials morphed into something more sinister sounding.

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<sup>153</sup> Sasha Geffen, “Oneohtrix Point Never’s Daniel Lopatin explains the secret to recording electronic music,” *Consequence*, September 30, 2013, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2013/09/oneohtrix-point-nevers-daniel-lopatin-explains-the-secret-to-recording-electronic-music/>

<sup>154</sup> Daniel Lopatin, “Oneohtrix Point Never: computer vision,” interview by Kiran Sande, *Fact Magazine*, June 22, 2010, <https://www.factmag.com/2010/06/22/oneohtrix-point-never-computer-vision/3>.



Figure 7. A collage of images of 1980s Japan from Oneohtrix Point Never's *Memory Vague*<sup>155</sup>

The second track on *Memory Vague*, “[Angel](#),” is created entirely out of an 11 second sample of the 1982 Fleetwood Mac song “[Only Over You](#).” The sampled section can be heard at the [48 second mark](#) of the original song.<sup>156</sup> The sampled lyrics are rendered as: “I miss you when you're gone; they say...Angel please don't go.”<sup>157</sup> OPN shuffled the lyrics around from their original order, changing the syntax and increasing the sense of ennui. The sample is replayed and glitched at various pitches and speeds for a minute and a half. The visual element of the track opens with footage of a 1980s Japanese TV commercial for a multicolored Sony tape deck (figure 7, top left). As the loop plays underneath, a disembodied hand opens and closes the deck over and over as the video sample repeats. Images of remotes and cables flash for milliseconds.

<sup>155</sup>Daniel Lopatin, *Memory Vague*, Root Strata – RS43, 2009, DVD

<sup>156</sup> Fleetwood Mac, “Only Over You,” Track 6 on *Mirage*, Warner Bros. Records – WB K 56952, 1984, LP.

<sup>157</sup> Daniel Lopatin, *Memory Vague*, Root Strata – RS43, 2009, DVD

The scene then transitions to other Japanese commercials, including a bikini-clad woman using a camcorder on a beach (figure 7, bottom right). It closes with a teenage girl slowly walking through a forest with a boombox. She turns her head to face the camera, which OPN edits to repeat many times. The girl smiles and waves at the viewer in slow motion as the song and image smash cut to silent blackness.<sup>158</sup> The mix of the loneliness of the lyrics with the images of technological opulence and the artificial smiles of TV commercials would become a common juxtaposition utilized in vaporwave art and music. As the lyrics, “I miss you when you’re gone” play over the final image of a girl waving, the commercial, intended to be alluring, instead becomes one in which the girl is waving goodbye to something. In slow motion, her innocent smile becomes something foreboding.



Figure 8. The final image of OPN’s “Angel.” The lyrics “I miss you when you’re gone” repeat as the image slows and cuts to black.<sup>159</sup>

With “Angel” and “Nobody Here,” OPN had created a prototype for a new genre: vaporwave, as it would come to be known in the following years.<sup>160</sup> Replicating the glitching techniques and the sampling of ‘70s and ‘80s pop snippets employed on these tracks, he released

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<sup>158</sup> Daniel Lopatin, “Angel,” track 2 on *Memory Vague*, Root Strata – RS43, 2009, DVD.

<sup>159</sup> “Angel,” track 2 on *Memory Vague*, Root Strata – RS43, 2009, DVD.

<sup>160</sup> The name comes from vaporware: software or hardware that has been advertised but is not yet available to buy, either because it is only a concept or because it is still being written or designed.

[Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1](#) the following year in 2010, an entire album of what he was now referring to as “eccoams.”<sup>161</sup>



Figure 9. The cover of Oneohtrix Point Never's Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. I<sup>162</sup>

With *Eccoams*, OPN had cemented a style of repurposing older music and was advancing a Japanese-inspired visual aesthetic as well. The album cover was a collage of images pulled from artwork for the 1992 video game Ecco the Dolphin. Although Ecco was actually created by a Hungarian company, it is closely associated with the video game consoles of the Sega Corporation. With the arrival and popularity of two other seminal vaporwave albums the following year in 2011, [James Ferraro's \*Far Side Virtual\*](#) and [Macintosh Plus' \*Floral Shoppe\*](#), a unified aesthetic emerged and the internet-based subculture of vaporwave began to gain steam.<sup>163</sup> Dozens of independent artists followed suit on sites like Bandcamp<sup>164</sup> and YouTube, and a vaporwave community was born.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Kjell Hansen, “Eccoams Vol. I was the Blueprint for Vaporwave,” *Talkhouse*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.talkhouse.com/eccoams-vol-1-was-the-blueprint-for-vaporwave/>.

<sup>162</sup> Daniel Lopatin, *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. I*, The Curatorial Club – TCC011, 2010. Cassette.

<sup>163</sup> Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*, Beer On The Rug – BOTR009, 2011, MP3; James Ferraro, *Far Side Virtual*, Hippos In Tanks – HIT 013, 2011, LP.

<sup>164</sup> A site for artists to host their own music, similar to Soundcloud.

<sup>165</sup> “Vaporwave,” Google Trends, Google, Accessed May 29, 2021, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=vaporwave>.



At the time, vaporwave existed within an ecosystem of short-lived and much maligned internet-based microgenres such as seapunk, witch house, cloud rap, and many others, and was characterized in the media as something ephemeral and trendy.<sup>166</sup> However, vaporwave mixes on YouTube now garner millions of views, and its continued popularity speaks to a deeper resonance.<sup>167</sup> The fact that now twelve years after his initial underground releases OPN is appearing on the Tonight Show, directing the Weeknd’s Super Bowl HalfTime Show, and winning awards for film scores is a testament to vaporwave’s lasting influence.<sup>168</sup>

### 2.3 The Visual Vocabulary of Vaporwave

Although by sinisterly contorting the image of TV commercials OPN had arguably spawned an anti-capitalist music genre, it was future artists that advanced vaporwave more fully as a satire of 1980s commercialism. Early vaporwave artist James Ferraro revealed his intentions by instructing his listeners on how to approach his 2011 album *Far Side Virtual*,<sup>169</sup> constructed from MIDI samples and conceived of as a series of cellphone ringtones:

If you really want to understand *Far Side*, first off, listen to Debussy, and secondly, go into a frozen yogurt shop. Afterwards, go into an Apple store and just fool around, hang out in there. Afterwards, go to Starbucks and get a gift card. They have a book there on the history of Starbucks—buy this book and go home. If you do all these things, you’ll understand what *Far Side Virtual* is—because people kind of live in it already.<sup>170</sup>

The visual aesthetics of vaporwave albums also reflected a satirical view of the 1980s.

Vaporwave artists often employed elements from the artwork of city pop albums, sometimes

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<sup>166</sup> Zachary Lipez & Drew Millard, “The Definitive Guide to Hipster Music Genres,” *Vice*, December 14, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3bj4j8/hw-the-definitive-guide-to-hipster-music-genres-hipster-week>.

<sup>167</sup> See [Vaporwave / Chillwave - Ultimate Mix](#) and [★ Assorted Vaporwave Mix/Compilation #2 | 2+ Hours](#) ★ as well as 15 million views for [MACINTOSH PLUS - リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー \(reupload\)](#).

<sup>168</sup> OPN was nominated for various awards for his work on the film scores for Sophia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring* (2015) and the Safdie brothers’ *Good Time* (2017) and *Uncut Gems* (2019).

<sup>169</sup> James Ferraro, *Far Side Virtual*, Hippos In Tanks – HIT 013, 2011, LP.

<sup>170</sup> Aleix de Vargas-Machuca, “Vaporwave, the Millennial legacy of Daniel Lopatin,” *El Hype*, February 21, 2020, <https://elhype.com/vaporwave-the-millennial-legacy-of-daniel-lopatin/>.

intentionally, but perhaps also subconsciously, to evoke in a recontextualized manner the commercialism and zeitgeist of Japan in the 1980s. To make a direct contrast, it is prudent to again describe city pop's art style. The tropical, dreamy, and urban themes of the album art created by artists like Nagai Hiroshi and Suzuki Ējin are iconic and highly expressive of the overall mood of city pop and of Japan in the 1980s. They included stark images of blue skies, cityscapes, airplanes, cars, and tropicalia, all in a palette of pastel pinks, greens, and blues (refer to figures 5 and 6 on page 32 and 34). In figure 10 below, one can see how vaporwave album art co-opts city pop imagery. 2814's 新しい日の誕生 (2015), Macintosh Plus' *Floral Shoppe* (2011), and James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual* (2011; figure 10, clockwise from left) all include a city skyline, albeit with dystopian coloring or otherwise gloomy weather added to counter the brightness of city pop. *Floral Shoppe*'s city image is actually a single frame from a [1983 commercial for Fuji video cassettes](#) (coincidentally, a competitor product of Maxell tapes, for whom Yamashita Tatsurō made many commercials in the early '80s).<sup>171</sup> When the skies maintain their blue color in the album art, they are abstracted or have their depth distorted by being framed in an e-reader in the case of *Far Side Virtual*, being computer animated with '90s-era technology in ESPRIT 空想's *Virtua.zip* (2014; figure 10, bottom left), or mirrored in the case of 情報デスク VIRTUAL's 札幌コンテンポラリー (2012; bottom, second from right). Throughout vaporwave album art, buildings, cars, water, and skies are murky and uninviting. A theme of identity dissociation is represented through the loss or obscuring of the eyes, image doubling, reflection,

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<sup>171</sup> Fuji cassette commercial, 1983. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB6ss14MWDc&t=418s>; For an even further level of coincidence, consider that the commercial is scored by electronic musician Vangelis, who one year earlier had scored the cyberpunk sci-fi film *Blade Runner*, which vaporwave draws much inspiration from.

and a discomfoting asymmetry. All these elements serve to create an atmosphere of despair, also apparent in the music, to counter the capitalist utopia embodied by city pop.

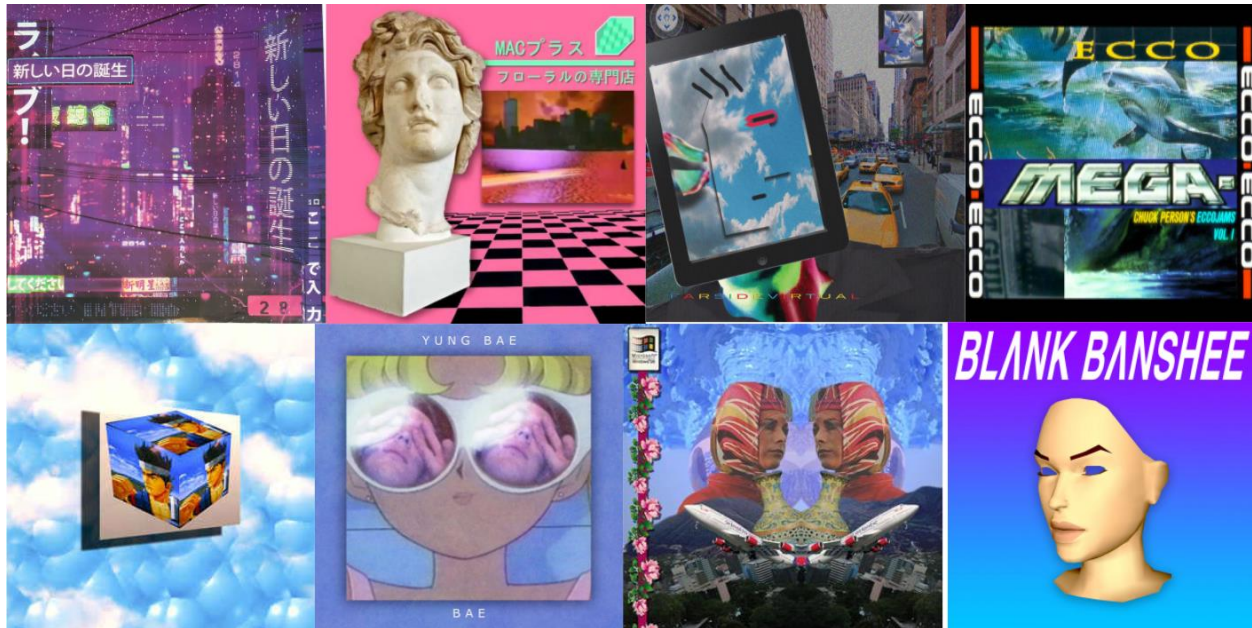


Figure 10. Vaporwave album covers. Clockwise from left: 2814's *新しい日の誕生* (2015), Macintosh Plus' *Floral Shoppe* (2011), James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual* (2011), Oneohtrix Point Never's *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. I* (2010), Blank Banshee's *Blank Banshee 0* (2012), 情報デスク VIRTUAL's *札幌コンテンポラリー* (2012), Yung Bae's *Bae* (2014), and ESPRIT 空想's *Virtua.zip* (2014).<sup>172</sup>

Even though very few vaporwave artists are Japanese, many of them use kanji in their names and song titles to evoke Japan. 情報デスク VIRTUAL's name translates to "information

<sup>172</sup> 2814, *新しい日の誕生*, Dream Catalogue – DREAMCD\_1, 2015, CDr; Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*, Beer On The Rug – BOTR009, 2011, MP3; James Ferraro, *Far Side Virtual*, Hippos In Tanks – HIT 013, 2011, LP; Daniel Lopatin, *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. I*, The Curatorial Club – TCC011, 2010. Cassette; Blank Banshee, *Blank Banshee 0*, Hologram Bay – none, 2012, MP3; 情報デスク VIRTUAL –, *札幌コンテンポラリー*, Beer On The Rug – BOTR013, 2012, FLAC; Yung Bae, *Bae*, Self-released, 2014, MP3; Esprit 空想, *Virtua.zip*, 100% Electronica – none, 2014, FLAC.

desk virtual,” a nonsense phrase of capitalistic jargon. 2814’s album *新しい日の誕生* is “birth of a new day,” but it is not necessarily the most eloquent rendering in Japanese of that phrase. It is much more likely that these artists simply entered a novel phrase into Google translate. One can also see this in some of *新しい日の誕生*’s song titles. Later releases include English track titles as well, revealing the phrases input into Google translate to obtain the Japanese, such as track 2: [遠く](#) [の愛好家](#)<sup>173</sup> (from “distant lovers” even though *遠い恋人* would be the better translation) and [真実の恋](#)<sup>174</sup> (from “true love”).<sup>175</sup> Perhaps the most iconic vaporwave track is Macintosh Plus’ [リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー](#)<sup>176</sup> from her album *Floral Shoppe* (2011),<sup>176</sup> which is a translation of “Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing,” and evokes a 1990s stationary brand, cannabis culture, and corporate jargon, respectively.

## 2.4 Future Funk

As the popularity of vaporwave began to spread, its aesthetic became common in memes and other forms of internet art. It also began dividing into further subgenres: there was the original eccoams, as well as mallsoft, vaportrap, lo-fi, and most importantly in the repopularization of city pop, future funk. Future funk is a more upbeat subgenre of vaporwave that exclusively utilizes city pop samples. One of the earliest events in the city pop boom among

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<sup>173</sup> 2814, “遠く of the hobbyist,” Track 2 on *新しい日の誕生*, Dream Catalogue – DREAMCD\_1, 2015, CDr, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43Gs17gZ6No>.

<sup>174</sup> 2814, “真実 of the love,” New Track 6 on *新しい日の誕生*, Dream Catalogue – DREAMCD\_1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GTVEh7FfC4>.

<sup>175</sup> 2814, *新しい日の誕生* = *Birth Of A New Day*, Dream Catalogue – DREAM\_86, 2019, LP.

<sup>176</sup> Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*, Beer On The Rug – BOTR009, 2011, MP3, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOkPcPqTq4M>.

Western listeners was a [2016 future funk remix](#) by South Korean DJ and city pop digger Night Tempo of [Takeuchi Mariya's "Plastic Love" \(1984\)](#).<sup>177</sup> Night Tempo describes his process of creating the remix:

I was playing [city pop] that had always been in Japan, but everyone felt like it was the first time they were hearing it. The sound of my edits was heavy. I added things like kick,<sup>178</sup> compression,<sup>179</sup> and ducking.<sup>180</sup> It was interesting that even young people saw it as something like EDM and accepted it as cool and fresh. I think adults would think [my edits] were crude. But to young people, I wonder if that crudeness was actually cool and easy to listen to.<sup>181</sup>

At the time of his remix's release in January of 2016, city pop had not yet exploded in popularity. Night Tempo remarks on the state of the scene in those early days:

When I edited "Plastic Love" it was still a really tiny scene. But, in that tiny scene everyone knew and loved that song. I think in that scene, including listeners and producers, there weren't even 1000 people. Before we knew it, we were discovered by outsiders and the scene grew. Even the original songs, somebody was uploading their music and we grew together. It's been interesting (laughs).<sup>182</sup>

The future funk community had been growing for a couple years now at this point, but it was still only a few thousand people.<sup>183</sup> Now, with the added popularity of city pop, it is perhaps the most persistent sub-genre of vaporwave.

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<sup>177</sup> Night Tempo, *Pure Baby Maker [Rewind]*, Neocity Records – NCR003, 2017, Cassette, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE4Q\\_ylGiwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE4Q_ylGiwM); TAKEUCHI Mariya 竹内まりや, *Variety*, Moon Records – MOON-28018, 1984, LP.

<sup>178</sup> Kick/bass drum

<sup>179</sup> Dynamic range compression, often referred to simply as compression, is a studio technique that reduces the volume of loud sounds or amplifies quiet sounds, thus reducing or compressing an audio signal's dynamic range.

<sup>180</sup> The original Japanese is "side chain" but likely referring to a specific type of side chain compression known as ducking that has become ubiquitous in future funk. Ducking occurs when one audio signal automatically reduces in volume with the presence of a second signal, creating an effect of a sound rapidly going up and down in volume, aka "pumping."

<sup>181</sup> Night Tempo, interview by Ryōhei Matsunaga, in *Shiti poppu 1973-2019 シティ・ポップ 1973-2019*, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修, (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019), 16. My translation.

<sup>182</sup> Night Tempo, 17. My translation.

<sup>183</sup> "Future Funk," *Subredditstats.com*, Accessed May 30, 2021, <https://subredditstats.com/r/futurefunk>.

According to Night Tempo, enthusiasts who had rediscovered city pop through future funk or record trading regularly traveled from all over the world to Japan to search used music shops for city pop tapes and records, often paying hundreds of dollars for rarer items, a massive increase from the days of DJ Yoshizawa and DJ Chintam’s crate-digging back in the ‘90s.<sup>184</sup> One of these crate diggers was even featured on the Japanese TV show *Why Did You Come to Japan?* (YOUは何をしに日本へ?) during his trip to Japan to find the Ōnuki Taeko record *Sunshower* (1977). It was so well received that the show invited him back for a second episode in which he meets Ōnuki.<sup>185</sup>

## 2.5 Popularity of City Pop on YouTube

Public awareness of city pop began spreading rapidly in 2016, beginning with Night Tempo’s remix of “Plastic Love” in January.<sup>186</sup> Later that year, various Reddit users made posts sharing the original track by Takeuchi Mariya and the city pop subreddit started increasing in membership.<sup>187</sup> The true watershed moment, however, was in a quirk of the YouTube recommendation algorithm. In 2017, YouTube users started being funneled through their suggested videos to the song. After listening, they would often be suggested other city pop albums or Japanese albums in the jazz or ambient genres. YouTube had effectively become a digital record store, filled with a much larger cache of obscure music than Spotify or Apple

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<sup>184</sup> Night Tempo, 14. My translation.

<sup>185</sup> “What are you doing in Japan? [A big search that leads from an Ōnuki Taeko record to a Japanese-American’s roots] Y O Uは何しに日本へ? [大貫妙子のレコードから日系移民のルーツまで大捜索], *Terebi Tokyo* テレビ東京, November 9, 2020, [https://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/broad\\_tvtokyo/program/detail/202011/22702\\_202011091825.html](https://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/broad_tvtokyo/program/detail/202011/22702_202011091825.html)

<sup>186</sup> Night Tempo, *Pure Baby Maker [Rewind]*, Neocity Records – NCR003, 2017, Cassette, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE4Q\\_ylGiwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE4Q_ylGiwM);

<sup>187</sup> See [https://www.reddit.com/r/listentothis/comments/6iaz2a/mariya\\_takeuchi\\_plastic\\_love\\_city\\_pop\\_1984/](https://www.reddit.com/r/listentothis/comments/6iaz2a/mariya_takeuchi_plastic_love_city_pop_1984/) and [https://www.reddit.com/r/listentothis/comments/6ilqsn/maria\\_takeuchi\\_%E7%AB%B9%E5%86%85\\_%E3%81%BE%E3%82%8A%E3%82%84\\_plastic\\_love\\_jfunk\\_1983/](https://www.reddit.com/r/listentothis/comments/6ilqsn/maria_takeuchi_%E7%AB%B9%E5%86%85_%E3%81%BE%E3%82%8A%E3%82%84_plastic_love_jfunk_1983/)

Music, and thus ripe for endless crate digging. The mechanics of how the algorithm was directing users towards obscure Japanese music are not fully understood, which is at least partially because Google keeps the mechanic a secret to avoid manipulation; however, there are elements of it that can be inferred. Andy Cush, a journalist who carried out an experiment in which he followed YouTube recommendations for an entire year, describes how he believes the process to work:

YouTube generates a pool of candidate videos based on data points including the videos you've watched in the past, the time you've spent watching them, whether you clicked like or dislike, the terms you've searched for, and whatever demographic information it has amassed about you. Eventually, it winnows that pool down into the set of videos it believes will keep you watching—and absorbing preroll clips from the advertisers that are its true customers—for the longest possible time.<sup>188</sup>

The YouTube algorithm is a mysterious driver of culture and has become something of a digital deity, pushing and pulling humanity's tastes at a whim. It has even been blamed for creating a pipeline driving users to alt-right conspiracy theory videos and other dangerous content. But why did "Plastic Love" get recommended in the first place? It sounds self-explanatory, but it may be impossible to place the exact moment a pop culture snowball reaches a critical mass. Perhaps it was the alluring smile of an energetic, youthful Takeuchi in the thumbnail for the [video](#), a photograph taken from the album art of a different album than the one "Plastic Love" was released on, and eerily similar to the aesthetic of the smiling girl in the final scene of Oneohtrix Point Never's "Angel."<sup>189</sup> It could also be that lyrics, a story of a woman trying to forget the ennui of urban life by dancing the night away, resonated with a Western

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<sup>188</sup> Andy Cush, "Uneasy Listening: My Year of Surrendering to the Strange, Soothing Power of the YouTube Algorithm," *Spin*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.spin.com/featured/youtube-algorithm-music-essay-ambient-hiroshi-yoshimura-midori-takada/>.

<sup>189</sup> Plastic Lover, "Mariya Takeuchi 竹内 まりや Plastic Love," Youtube Video, 7:56, July 5, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bNITQR4Uso>.

population of young people still feeling the effects of the late 2000s recession.



Figure 10. The Cover of Takeuchi Mariya’s *Sweetest Music*, which is used in the thumbnail for the popular video on YouTube for “Plastic Love.”<sup>190</sup>

Nevertheless, city pop had now found a wide audience on YouTube, reviving the careers of many city pop artists and creating huge demand for reissues and compilations.<sup>191</sup> Reissue label

<sup>190</sup> TAKEUCHI Mariya 竹内まりや, *Sweetest Music*, RCA – RHS-508(JPBO-0644), 1980, LP.

<sup>191</sup> “Plastic Love” (1984) is approaching 100 million views on YouTube as of June 2021. Jazz artist Fukui Ryo’s album *Scenery* (1976) is at 11 million. Many city pop and future funk mixes are in the 3-5 million view range



Light in the Attic has pressed two city pop compilations in their Pacific Breeze series (2019 and 2020), as well as *Kankyō Ongaku: Japanese Ambient, Environmental & New Age Music 1980-1990* (2019) and *Even A Tree Can Shed Tears: Japanese Folk & Rock 1969-1973* (2017). These compilations help to define and curate city pop as a genre through their song selections and their target demographic of Western music listeners. So, how can we understand the deep interest listeners have in this music of the past that they have never heard before? The concept of nostalgia, as well as hauntology, can help to explain it.

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with individual songs and albums in the 5-10 million range. Albums by ambient artists Kokubo Takashi and Yoshimura Hiroshi are in the millions as well.

## CHAPTER 3

### NOSTALGIA AND HAUNTOLOGY

In analyzing city pop and the phenomenon of its resurgence in popularity among a non-Japanese audience, there are of course many ways to frame the story. I have chosen nostalgia and hauntology, but there are other interesting considerations. The concept of Blackness for one, figures heavily in the narrative. The original city pop creators were fans of “Black music:” a common term in Japanese music criticism which includes jazz, soul, R&B, funk, and disco.<sup>192</sup> As city pop was rediscovered in the 1990s, Japanese DJs utilized crate-digging and mixing techniques pioneered by early hip-hop artists in the 70s. These techniques could also be seen in a parallel resurgence within American gangsta rap through the music of artists like Dr. Dre, Tupac, and The Notorious B.I.G. The Japanese fetishization of Blackness is an important topic, and it certainly figures heavily into the cycle of nostalgia surrounding the city pop narrative, but it is not a focus of this thesis, and I will leave it to other scholars to investigate further.

#### **3.1 Roots and Definitions of Nostalgia**

One of the chief mechanisms for understanding the contemporary consumption of city pop and other bygone media is nostalgia, often defined as a longing or affection for the past. There is a particular arresting feeling one gets upon listening to a song that sounds mysteriously familiar. You cannot pull your attention away. Whether you have actually heard it before or not, it seems like you are being momentarily blessed with a vivid vision of the past. How can one describe this feeling? The English word nostalgia seems at first too banal – perhaps tainted by its constant use in the advertising industry and by the culture industry bombarding consumers in the

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<sup>192</sup> While disco might not be immediately associated with Black musicians or listeners due its especially rapid adoption within White culture, it did originate among a private club subculture populated by gay Black, White, and Latino New Yorkers in the late 1960s. Many of the early disco DJs were black, such as Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles.

last decade with media that appeals to retro sensibilities. However, the term has been expounded upon by academics beyond its colloquial definition, and a more thorough explication will grant us valuable insight into how the 1970s and '80s Japanese genre of city pop came to be consumed by an English-speaking audience in the 2010s. So where does nostalgia come from, and what does it mean for city pop?

In a backwards gaze itself, the word nostalgia was coined in the modern era but contains Greek linguistic roots. A Swiss doctor in the late 1600s, Johannes Hofer, originated the term from the Greek *nostos*: to return home, and *algos*: pain. He used it to describe a condition plaguing soldiers at war, who often longed for the comforts of their childhood homes. It was at the time considered a chronic illness to feel nostalgia — a “disease of an afflicted imagination.”<sup>193</sup> The opinion of Renaissance doctors was that “longing for home exhausted the vital spirits, causing nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fevers, as well as marasmus,<sup>194</sup> and a propensity for suicide.”<sup>195</sup> It was deemed both unmasculine and unprogressive.

Svetlana Boym, the late Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literatures at Harvard University, outlines two modes of nostalgia in her seminal 2001 work, *The Future of Nostalgia*. In her view there is both a restorative and a reflective form of nostalgia. Neither definition attempts to explain the physiological aspects of nostalgia, i.e., what is happening chemically in the brain while one experiences nostalgia.<sup>196</sup> Boym’s dichotomy does, however, allow us to

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<sup>193</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 22/480.

<sup>194</sup> Severe undernourishment causing an infant's or child's weight to be significantly low for their age (e.g., below 60 percent of normal).

<sup>195</sup> Boym, 23/480.

<sup>196</sup> There is still debate among psychologists about whether nostalgia is an emotion.

begin to understand the habitual longing for the past that humans seem to be unable to escape from as well as what function nostalgia serves in our society.

Boym contrasts the two modes through their relationship to a metaphorical idea of “home.”<sup>197</sup> Restorative nostalgia seeks to recreate or return to the home.<sup>198</sup> Nostalgics in this category often do not see themselves as such. Their goal is one of restoring the truth or justice of the past rather than simple remembrance, so it is not surprising that restorative nostalgia is rampant in politics. One can see restorative nostalgia in action throughout the world, evident as fuel for nationalistic or reactionary political movements whose members often strive to reestablish their idea of a past utopia corrupted by modernity. There has been a wave of this restorative nostalgia in the 2010s. Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” recycled from past campaigns of Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater, was a reactionary pledge based in nostalgia for a vague mid-century conception of American prosperity to which many white baby boomers longed to return. A similar critique applies to the presidential campaign of Joe Biden, who in his speeches frequently referenced a more civil political landscape of the past and recalled stories of his youth, perhaps most famously in the saga of the swimming pool bully Corn Pop.<sup>199</sup>

Boym’s other mode of nostalgia, and the more common form, is reflective. Most nostalgics are not so much concerned with restoring the past as with relishing in the memory of

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<sup>197</sup> Boym, 64/480.

<sup>198</sup> Boym, 64/480.

<sup>199</sup> Robert Samuels, “There really was a ‘Corn Pop’ — but critics question Joe Biden’s oft-told story,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/there-really-was-a-corn-pop-but-critics-cast-doubt-on-joe-bidens-oft-told-story/2019/09/16/227115c8-d8ac-11e9-ac63-3016711543fe\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/there-really-was-a-corn-pop-but-critics-cast-doubt-on-joe-bidens-oft-told-story/2019/09/16/227115c8-d8ac-11e9-ac63-3016711543fe_story.html); We can also view Biden’s appeal as simply restorative nostalgia for the Obama era among liberal voters. There has even been a restorative nostalgic rehabilitation in the media of George W. Bush, considered by some to be a war criminal, through journalistic puff pieces about his friendliness with Michelle Obama at state functions and his taking up of painting as a hobby. Evident also in articles such as Francis Fukuyama’s “Donald Trump Makes George W. Bush Look Like a Paragon of Statesmanship,” this speaks to a restorative nostalgia among liberal media figures to return to an America when Republicans were “honorable men.” All of this points to a contemporary pervasive sense of restorative nostalgia in the American political discourse.

it. So, whereas restorative nostalgia is common in politics, reflective nostalgia is seen most often in art. Reflective nostalgics tend to linger on “ruins, the patina of time and history, [and] in the dreams of another place and another time.”<sup>200</sup> Enthusiasm for discovering long forgotten music such as city pop generally fits this mode, although this will soon be complicated.

### 3.2 The Inherent Nostalgia of City Pop

Reflective nostalgia has been an underlying factor in city pop since its inception. Around the time of Happy End, reflective nostalgia emerges more and more in song lyrics. The band made references to discrete elements of Japanese culture like the *kotatsu* and *ozouni* as an homage to their childhoods and to a time before the Americanization of Japanese culture. Later, Arai Yumi in “Cobalt Hour” constructs a story around her nostalgia for the 1960s and driving her Bellet GT. Scholar of Japanese music of the 1970s Michael Bourdaghs gives us some insight into this lyrical trend:

“This melancholic longing for a simpler time of youthful innocence, poverty, and a seemingly purer lifestyle characterized many new-music records... Ironically, new-music performers were producing successful song commodities that expressed an intense longing for a time when everyday life wasn’t dominated by commodity culture. The oil shock of 1973 and resulting economic recession in Japan produced a small blip in a decade that was otherwise dominated by accelerated economic growth, intensified consumerism, and the first sproutings of a sense that Japanese culture was now postmodern. At least in terms of popular music, this remarkable “success” ironically produced a nostalgic longing for simpler, pre-economic growth days.”<sup>201</sup>

This ennui can also be felt in Tanaka Yasuo’s novel *Somehow, Crystal*, in the lyrics of Takeuchi Mariya’s “Plastic Love,” and in many other city pop songs. There is a mild irony in contemporary city-pop loving audiences feeling nostalgia for songs that themselves express nostalgia for an even earlier time. In the case of “Cobalt Hour,” Arai is invoking the early 1960s,

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<sup>200</sup> Boym, 64/480.

<sup>201</sup> Bourdaghs, 181.

that period when Japan was moving into the top five GDPs on Earth.<sup>202</sup> Coupled with the soft power success of the 1964 Summer Olympics, it represented the beginning of Japan's period of economic bliss and world-famous cultural clout. In 1980, when *Cobalt Hour* was released, Japan was cresting its final plateau before entering the economic slowdown of the 1990s. Arai also had other nostalgic hits, such as 1975's "I Want to Return to That Day," (released the same year as *Cobalt Hour*) wherein she achingly wishes she could re-experience the lost love of her youth. The song and its sentiment resonated greatly with the Japanese public, as a 1975 poll following its release found her to be the most popular artist among female university students, who were perhaps pining for their own lost loves.

Many other Japanese songs of the mid-1970s exploit this nostalgia for simpler times, including Kaguyahime's songs "Kanda River" and "Paper Lanterns."<sup>203</sup> Interestingly, the band Bang Bang's number one hit "*Ichigo hakusho wo mō ichido* [The Strawberry Statement Again]," (1975) is a song that mythologizes the youth culture in America in the late 1960s and its impact on Japanese culture.<sup>204</sup> It offers a reflective nostalgia for American culture rather than Japanese. This reflective nostalgia for the never experienced should seem familiar to modern city pop fans, but it was prevalent in much city pop of the 1980s as well. *Somehow, Crystal* (1980) is filled with references to 1960's American soul music. Yamashita Tatsurō also embraced a reflective nostalgia for American culture, especially through his well-established love of the Beach Boys. His appreciation for 1950s and '60s Americana can also be seen in his album artwork, much of it done by Suzuki Ējin. In the 1980s, Yamashita, Arai, and other massive city pop artists like Ōtaki

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<sup>202</sup> "GDP growth (annual %) - Japan," The World Bank, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=JP>.

<sup>203</sup> Bourdaghs, 182.

<sup>204</sup> Bourdaghs, 182.

Ēichi were evoking the American 1960s by mimicking recording techniques of the era. Yamashita went so far as to travel to America to record with producers he had grown up listening to. Ōtaki Ēichi's album *A Long Vacation* (1981) even sounds like it could have been produced under famed American record producer Phil Spector and his Wall of Sound method.<sup>205</sup>

### 3.3 The Contemporary Trend of Nostalgia

As city pop entered a period of rediscovery in the late 1990s, Japanese DJs expressed through crate digging a reflective nostalgia for the music of their youth. Crate digging itself has always emerged from a place of nostalgia. In the '80s and '90s, Black hip-hop producers in America mined the '60s and '70s records played in their childhood by parental figures to create new beats to rap over. Media theorist Elodie A. Roy writes, "As they trailed second-hand shops and car boot sales – depositories of unwanted capitalist surplus – diggers were bound to encounter realms of mainstream, mass-produced LP records now fallen out of grace and fashion. They primarily used them as raw material, seeking to create beats out of them."<sup>206</sup> Even though she is talking about hip-hop producers, the same explanation fits Japanese crate diggers in the 2000s. It was only a matter of time until Japanese DJs like Yoshizawa and Chintam came across forgotten relics of 1980s mainstream music and presented them as a novelty to audiences unfamiliar with city pop.

When DJing for a wedding, DJ Yoshizawa subverted the bride's request for Western music by playing all Japanese artists. The question of why he chose to do this is an interesting one. It can at least partially be explained by the trendiness of this music within his social circle, but I believe there are deeper reasons as well. Yoshizawa was born in 1970 and was 21 when he

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<sup>205</sup> Hagiwara, 119; For Ōtaki's version of the Wall of Sound, see "*Kimi wa tennenshoku.*" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-hyY-1luHs>.

<sup>206</sup> Elodie A. Roy, *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove*, (London:Routledge, 2016), 118.

began DJing in 1991 just as the city pop era was ending. The music for him would have been the soundtrack of his childhood and adolescence, and the sound of the last time he can remember Japan at the height of her prosperity. There is a certain comfort in surrounding yourself in the culture of your childhood, especially in a nation as affected by American soft and hard power as Japan. Performing at a Western-style wedding where the bride requested all Western music, Yoshizawa's move to only include Japanese artists can be seen as a nostalgic act of rebellion against American cultural hegemony, not unlike the oppositionalism of Happy End and the folk movement thirty years prior. In this sense, it might be more apt to label his move restorative rather than reflective.

The explosion of interest in city pop among Western audiences around mid-2017 was part of a massive wave of reflective nostalgia-fueled media to emerge in the late 2010s. There seems to be a great deal of think pieces focused on the 1980s-set Netflix series *Stranger Things* (first aired July 2016), and its ability to “weaponize ‘80s nostalgia,” but the show is only one part of a larger trend.<sup>207</sup> There is also the “San Junipero” episode of the popular British sci-fi series *Black Mirror*, aired October of 2016, in which elderly people could reexperience the 1980s through a simulated reality. The plot of the 2018 Steven Spielberg film *Ready Player One*, based on a 2011 novel by Ernest Cline, is built around the concept of a virtual reality video game inhabited by characters and pop culture references of the 1970s and ‘80s. Starting in the late 2000s, there was a rebooting of many successful franchises of the 1980s. Some of these include *Batman Begins* (2005), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), and *Ghostbusters* (2016), as well as the TV series *Fuller House* (2016), *Roseanne* (2018), *Who’s the Boss?* (2021), and *Punky Brewster* (2021). More generally,

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<sup>207</sup> John Jurgensen, “How ‘Stranger Things’ Whipped Up ‘80s Fever,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-stranger-things-whipped-up-80s-fever-11561892400>.



there has been an expansion in popularity of superhero and animated films into an atypically older demographic, from which one can deduce that older audiences are nostalgic for the media of their youth. The Marvel superhero film series *Guardians of the Galaxy* is even built around a nostalgic conceit: the movies contain a diegetic soundtrack of 1970s soft rock hits recorded on a mixtape given to the main character by his late mother.<sup>208</sup>

One can look to all the new instruments of nostalgia that have emerged recently as further evidence of this trend. As of 2011, Facebook has become the largest online repository of photos in the world, with 350 million photos now uploaded by users every day.<sup>209</sup> With Facebook approaching its 20th anniversary soon, many college-aged users can trace their entire life history through photos uploaded onto their Facebook accounts, sometimes started by their parents during infancy. Nearly every popular television show, film, and album from the past is available for streaming, and there is an abundance of nostalgia-focused Instagram accounts, subreddits, YouTube channels, and Tumblr pages. This firmly places us in a newly formed world overflowing with immediately consumable reflective nostalgia. Consumers now have personalized instant gratification methods for scratching their nostalgic itches.

Comments by English-speakers on city pop YouTube mixes overwhelmingly reflect a nostalgia for a time few users could have experienced. Comments usually follow a flash fiction format, such as this one from user Chad Helgado: “I remember back in the day when I’d drive through the Tokyo streets at night with the window rolled down, neon lights on buildings,

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<sup>208</sup> For another interesting example of 1990s nostalgia, consider that if you were a young child when the Pixar film *Toy Story* came out in 1995, then you would be roughly the same age as the main character Andy in *Toy Story 3* (2010) when he grappled with abandoning his toys before heading off to college.

<sup>209</sup> Salman Aslam, “Facebook by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts,” *Omnicores Agency*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/facebook-statistics/>.

everyone having a good time, the 80s were great. Wait a minute, I'm 18 and live in America.”<sup>210</sup> The highest rated comment on “Plastic Love” is reflecting on a memory of falling in love with a girl in a bookstore in the 1980s while city pop played in the background. The truth of this tale is unprovable.<sup>211</sup> There also seems to be many comments reflecting on fantasized memories of driving at night through Tokyo listening to city pop, a clear reflection of themes established in the lyrics of city pop artists like Arai Yumi and Yamashita Tatsurō. Again, from the native-level English of the comments and the Western names of the users one can infer that most of these are not Japanese natives.

The longing for a 1980s Japan by 2010s English-speakers on the other side of the world seems strange and would imply that these listeners are prone to fantasies about the past contrary to reality. At least part of the Western love of city pop can be explained by the fact that city pop itself contains many elements of Western musical forms such as jazz, funk, and disco, that users could have heard in their childhoods. However, the love seems deeper after reading through the YouTube comments fetishizing Japan as a land of wonder. The comments speaking of a perfect Japan form an interesting counterpart to the fetishization of Blackness and Americana that the

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<sup>210</sup> Cribblingdepression, “warm nights in tokyo [ city pop/ シティポップ ],” YouTube Video, 45:17, May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOVpLtJUIg&t=3s>.

<sup>211</sup> From user JK: “I remember growing up in Japan when I was 10. I had just stepped out of a book store [sic], and a pretty girl the same age shyly held out her hand to me and asked me if I wanted to walk around with her. This song was playing on the radio where we stopped to have ramen together. She never gave me her name, but told me a day to always meet her to hold hands and walk or picnic. I finally got her name a few months later - Mitsuki. We became close friends, but my parents took a job to [sic] America when we were 13, so I had to leave her, both of us in tears and snot. I would send her letters, and she would send letters back. At 22, she suddenly stopped mailing me. I thought she was gone. 5 months later, she was at my door in America, with her hand out to me when I opened the door. We're married in our 40's now, and we've taken walks through multiple cities together across the world and we always stop someplace [sic] that has noodles and play this song on our phone. Thank you Mariya. Your love may be plastic, but mine is beautiful thanks to this song. If you see a middle-aged couple with or without their kids with them, holding hands and acting like teenagers or even young kids in Tokyo browsing the shops, its us;” Plastic Lover, “Mariya Takeuchi 竹内 まりや Plastic Love,” Youtube Video, 7:56, Jul 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bNITQR4Uso>.

original city pop listeners expressed in Japan in the late 1970s and '80s. There is embedded in the story of a city pop a cycle of nostalgia and cultural fetishization.

But why do so many English speakers seem to imagine this perfect Japan of the 1980s? This is certainly not a new phenomenon, as Japanophiles have held Orientalist ideas of Japan at least since Impressionist painters of the 19th century began taking inspiration from Japanese woodblock art. City pop and vaporwave are situated at the nexus of the most recent trend of the longing, eastward gaze, but perhaps the listeners had actually heard city pop before in a way. The trend of idealization of Japan by Westerners through city pop might be explained by nostalgia for Japanese media of the 1980s and '90s that was popular in the West. Many anime series and films popular in the West had theme songs with a city pop feel. Some of these include the opening theme to *Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam*, "[\*Mizu no Hoshi e Ai wo Komete\*](#)" by Moriguchi Hiroko (1985); the closing theme for *Ranma ½*, "[Positive](#)" by Morikawa Miho (1991), the opening theme of *Yu Yu Hakusho*, "[Smile Bomb](#)" by Mawatari Matsuko (1992); the opening theme of the aptly titled *City Hunter*, "[Ai yo kienaide](#)" by Kohiruimaki Kahoru; and most interestingly, the theme for *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), Arai Yumi's song "[Rūju no Dengon](#)," from her 1975 album *Cobalt Hour*, that sparked the city pop era.

Current city pop enthusiasts might also be nostalgic for the music of Japanese video games they played in their youth. Kondo Koji, Nintendo's composer for such iconic games as *Super Mario Brothers* (1986) and *Zelda* (1986), was heavily influenced by city pop jazz fusion bands like Casiopea and Piper.<sup>212</sup> Likewise, Meguro Shoji, the composer for the *Persona* series (1996) was influenced by the fusion group T-Square, whose guitarist Andoh Masahiro even

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<sup>212</sup> Steve Lord, "The Incredible Story Of Future Funk, Vaporwave, and The Japanese Music You Loved But Never Heard" *Tales From the Dork Web*, May 21, 2020, <https://thedorkweb.substack.com/p/the-japanese-musical-genres-youve>.

composed the music for the racing game *Gran Turismo* (1997).<sup>213</sup> In fact, much of Japanese video game composers' output of the '80s and '90s sounds very similar to city pop. Furthermore, two popular game series, *Shenmue* (1999-2019) and *Yakuza* (2005-2021), are contemporary but set in the city pop era of 1980s Tokyo, likely engendering nostalgia in the player. So, even though current city pop enthusiasts had likely never purchased a city pop album or heard a city pop song on the radio before 2017, many were at least subconsciously familiar with the overall aesthetic character of the music.

### 3.4 Hauntology

Although there is likely a reason for many contemporary city pop listeners to feel some nostalgia for the time in which the music originated, reflective nostalgia cannot fully explain the fervency with which many city pop enthusiasts listen to this music. Especially in understanding the recontextualization of city pop and 1980s Japanese imagery by vaporwave, a further theoretical framework is useful: media theorist Mark Fisher's conception of "hauntology." Hauntology is originally a term introduced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx* to describe the persistence of ideas from the past, especially in discussions of Marxism's effect on current political discourse.<sup>214</sup> It was coined to challenge political scientist Francis Fukuyama's claim that the fall of the Berlin Wall had brought an end to the ideological struggle between communism and capitalism and thus, the end of history. However, later scholars have advanced the term to include the persistence of art forms in addition to ideology. In a widening of the term by more recent scholars, including the late media

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<sup>213</sup> Rob Arcand and Sam Goldner, "The Guide to Getting Into City Pop, Tokyo's Lush 80s Nightlife Soundtrack," *Vice*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbzabv/city-pop-guide-history-interview>.

<sup>214</sup> Andrew Gallix, "Hauntology: A not-so-new critical manifestation," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical>.

theorist and critic Mark Fisher, hauntology describes a feeling of lost future, that is, a longing for a time in the past at which there was optimism for improvement. In fact, Mark Fisher's description of hauntology almost directly describes the glitchy, decayed sound of vaporwave: "Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions."<sup>215</sup>

Hauntology can be placed on a spectrum with reflective and restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia simply gazes and marvels at the past. Restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct elements of that past in our present. But hauntology takes nostalgia one step further by assessing our failure to live up to that past hopefulness. It is too late; the hope that once existed in the past is now unfathomable. Using the example of city pop and vaporwave: to replay and appreciate the hyper-capitalist music of the 1980s and '90s, like the Japanese crate diggers of the '90s did, is to engage in reflective nostalgia. To listen to city pop on YouTube and write a comment expressing your desire to live in the time and place in which it reigned is to engage in restorative nostalgia. To decay that music using vaporwave production techniques, thereby transforming upbeat, commercial music into eerie satire is hauntological. In the latter iteration, the music has become the sound of a lost future.

Mark Fisher finds within the history of popular music a slow erosion of hope. Writing in 2013, he stated:

It was through the mutations of popular music that many of those of us who grew up in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s learned to measure the passage of cultural time. But faced with 21st-century music, it is the very sense of future shock which has disappeared. ...Imagine any record released in the past couple of years being beamed back in time to, say, 1995 and played on the radio. It's hard to think that it will produce any jolt in the listeners. On the contrary, what would be likely to shock our 1995 audience would be the very

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<sup>215</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, (Winchester, UK : Zero Books, 2019), 39/81.

recognisability of the sounds: would music really have changed so little in the next 17 years? Contrast that with the rapid turnover of styles between the 1960s and the 90s[.]<sup>216</sup>

In Fisher's view, this erosion of the future created a vacuum of novel art that enabled the industry of nostalgia that emerged in the 2000s. As the producers of pop culture became increasingly focused on nostalgia and recyclability, our anticipation of cultural progression was even further depleted. Because of this, consumers of media inevitably begin to look back even more, losing our hope in the future and becoming haunted by a hopeful past. Although Fisher believes this process has been a long time coming, it is likely no coincidence that vaporwave, the contemporary poster child of hauntological music, emerged in 2009 in the immediate aftermath of the subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent global recession. As young people in America had already had their future prospects pummeled by 9/11 fallout, two protracted wars, and a thirty-year neoliberal dismantling of the middle-class, the recession added even more fuel to the hauntological fire.

Degraded and warped iterations of the sounds of 1980s hyper-capitalist utopianism, vaporwave songs are often also described as the kind of music that might play in an abandoned mall. Shopping malls were once a symbol of a standardized opulence and utopianism created for the middle class. In a 1982 CBS special on malls, a young female patron is interviewed at Oak Park Mall in Kansas City, Missouri, stating that in malls she coolly marvels without irony that:

Everything's always the same. ...you have the same temperature, and the air smells the same all the time and the scenery is the same. They even try to bring in trees, but that's false, that's not real. If you come here in the winter those leaves are still gonna be green and outside the trees are gonna be bare. It's always the same.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Hauntology, Depression and Lost Futures*, (Winchester, UK : Zero Books, 2014), 7.

<sup>217</sup> Charles Kuralt, "The Mall," *CBS News*, 1982, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RkxhXQnVSsw>.

As America has started to de-suburbanize, those malls have lost their tenants and are now something akin to our cultural conception of the haunted house, those dilapidated Victorian mansions and Depression-era symbols of the collapse of Gilded Age wealth. The interviewee's acknowledgement of the artificial nature of malls, even as she praises them, is an eerie predictor of the cold and impersonal character of vaporwave as it satirizes the hopefulness of the unapologetically commercial music of the 1980s.

Vaporwave and the resurgence of city pop in the West thus form a dichotomy in their expression of nostalgia and hauntology. Vaporwave offers a more pessimistic and cautionary view of the future. If there is a thesis to vaporwave it is that if humanity does not address the problems of alienation under capitalism, then this is what the world will soon sound like. The subsequent popularity of city pop in the West however can be seen as a transition into optimism, or at least the creation of an alternative position; one could call the popularity of city pop an expression of a desire to recreate the perceived utopia of 1980s Japan, immediately evident in the hopeful comments of YouTubers wishing to "return" to that world. A restorative nostalgia is at least more hopeful than a hauntological one.

However, the use of Japan for the formation of palliative fantasies in the face of lost future is problematic. Both vaporwave and the city pop resurgence likely draw from the same sort of Orientalism that has shaped Western opinions of Japan for centuries. Music blog Neonmusic addresses this, stating that "the fascination with Japan amounts to more than just a deliberately awkward amalgamation of visual tropes for shock/confusion factor. It has its roots in centuries of Orientalism, of the West viewing the East as a source of cultural curiosity, artistic inspiration and exotic fantasy."<sup>218</sup> Within vaporwave, the Japanese iconography is illegible or

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<sup>218</sup> "THE TOMORROW THAT NEVER WAS: JAPANESE ICONOGRAPHY IN VAPORWAVE," *Neonmusic*, October 15, 2017, <https://neonmusic.co.uk/japanese-iconography>.

clumsily utilized and often exists amidst a grab-bag of aesthetic touchstones such as renaissance sculpture, late '90s and early 2000s web design, glitch art, cyberpunk, and a 1980s pastel color palette.<sup>219</sup> Vaporwave's casual application of Japanese imagery betrays a lack of serious understanding among its producers of Japan's history and cultural context. The past of the Japanese 1980s, before the period that hauntologists see as a collapse of hope, is haphazardly appropriated and not accurately represented in vaporwave. It was not a perfect time, evident at least in the urban ennui expressed in *Somehow, Crystal* and "Plastic Love," but also in the rampant nostalgia throughout city pop lyrics for an even earlier time in Japanese history. But this has not stopped listeners from finding resonance in the music. Neonmusic states:

While vaporwave does use Japanese iconography to convey ambiguity and disorientation, its nostalgic references to a now-defunct vision of Japanese society evoke a pathos, a sense of yearning for something unattainable, which strikes at the emotional core of the genre's identity. ...In the case of vaporwave, a genre preoccupied with escapism, memory, and nostalgia, modern Japan perfectly embodies that tension between strangeness and familiarity, old and new, reality and artificiality that vaporwave artists strive to create.<sup>220</sup>

This dissociated formation of Japan by Western audiences is again nothing new. Much like how 19th century Impressionists viewed Japan through a prism of *ukiyo-e* art, a young contemporary Western audience interprets Japan through a fantastic kaleidoscope of anime, J-pop, manga, modern architecture, haute cuisine, consumer electronics, and now, the optimistic breeziness of city pop.<sup>221</sup> Whether the hopefulness of this Eastward gaze (or lack of hope in the case of vaporwave) proves to be politically productive remains to be seen.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.



## CONCLUSION

This thesis had several aims: to situate city pop within Japanese pop music history, to chart its comeback, and to explicate the reasons why it became repopularized at this particular moment. In order to do this, I first created a working definition of city pop, highlighting the conditions in Japan that fostered its birth. It is a genre more defined by a time and place than by a particular sound or set of production techniques. City pop is a genre of bouncy pop songs of the late '70s and '80s whose lyrics and feel evoked the lifestyle of young, upwardly mobile college students, salarymen, and OLs in Tokyo. According to Kitazawa Yousuke of Light in the Attic Records, "This was music made by city people, for city people."<sup>222</sup>

This thesis has outlined a multi-decade timeline of the evolution of city pop. Following the ascension of the Japanese economy in the post-war era, prosperity in the country began to create cultural shifts. Starting in the early 1970s there was a countercultural reaction to American cultural hegemony in Japan, seen through the works of the folk-rock band Happy End. Using their native Japanese language amidst a musical landscape of Western-genre copy-cats singing in English, as well as through nostalgic nods to discrete elements of Japanese culture from a time before the influence of American occupation, Happy End created *nyū myūjikkū* and began a trajectory that would lead directly to city pop. Soon, pop stars like Arai Yumi would achieve success through building on Happy End's nostalgic themes, often with aid on the production side from past members of Happy End as well as up-and-coming stars like Yamashita Tatsurō. Through what may be termed a refutation of the values of Happy End, artists like Arai and Yamashita returned their gaze back across the ocean and expressed a nostalgia for their

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<sup>222</sup> Jon Blistein, "City Pop: Why Does the Soundtrack to Tokyo's Tech Boom Still Resonate?" *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/Japanese-city-pop-returns-light-in-the-attic-compilation-pacific-breeze-822663/>.

influences: American music of the '50s and '60s. Through television commercial work and a general attitude of acceptance towards commercialism they also contrasted themselves with Happy End by creating a sleek, hyper-capitalist sound and aura. The artists adapted their music to the free-wheeling and jet-set lifestyle of their listeners through a new visual vocabulary of tropical and urban imagery, which were representations of the dual city and beach lifestyle of young Japanese urbanites of the 1980s. This lifestyle and its city pop soundtrack were eventually dethroned by several changes in Japan. These included the recession following the bubble economy as well as shifts in the music industry towards highly marketable idol groups, especially those led by the shrewd talent manager Johnny Kitagawa.

After a stagnant period in the 1990s, whispers of city pop began to emerge again around the turn of the century. DJs in Japan began "crate digging:" the tedious combing of used record stores for gems from the past. A tiny subculture of city pop nostalgics, for whom this music was only familiar to from their childhoods, began circulating songs among each other and attempting to share them with the wider public. After a period of hesitancy during yet another period of Western musical hegemony in Japan, Japanese clubs began allowing these DJs to play city pop records. The club owners were partially mollified by the emergence of a general trend of Japanese language music, such as J-rap and J-R&B, into which city pop fit comfortably. Slowly, the popularity of city pop expanded to include a community of international DJ adherents, with many famous hip hop producers utilizing the music for samples and beats. Around the same time, the new internet-based genre of vaporwave was in its infancy and often co-opted the imagery of Japan in the 1980s including that of city pop. Musicians like Oneohtrix Point Never pioneered a new YouTube-based form of crate-digging and through his excavation aided city pop along its path towards fuller awareness in the Western public. Vaporwave music satirized

the hyper-capitalist sounds of 1980s musical refuse by applying a decayed and glitched sound to samples of music from the era, creating an intoxicating effect that drew many listeners.

Musicians working in the vaporwave subgenre known as future funk more explicitly played around with city pop samples, and it was only a matter of time before listeners sought out the source material. In the late 2010s, city pop songs began to garner millions of views on YouTube and a genuine movement of Western city pop fans was born.

Many of these fans claimed to feel feelings of nostalgia or longing while engaging with city pop and vaporwave. To explain this, I have outlined a spectrum of nostalgic modes: reflective, restorative, and hauntological, and explicated how they apply to each stage of city pop's development. There have been threads of nostalgia evident since the opening of the city pop era. Early city pop exercises a reflective nostalgia for simpler times in Japan. Mark Fisher, who applied hauntology towards an understanding of pop music history, believes that pop music evolution has slowed, leading to an increasingly backwards gaze and an emergent industry of nostalgia which would include vaporwave and the city pop resurgence.

Overall, I am not convinced about Fisher's claim that the future is cancelled, at least as far as it pertains to music. One could argue that in general, musical trends are progressing steadily into new terrain at the same rate as they always have. Skeptics of his theory could look to the explosion of experimental music or bedroom-produced indie pop in the 2010s, the increasing political relevance and continuing evolution of hip hop through musicians like Kendrick Lamar, or the novel and noisy sounds of pop musicians like Billie Eilish and the late Sophie. Listeners could argue that the 2000s simply represent a temporary slump in creativity resulting from a full saturation of digital technology within music production. Furthermore, hopeless hauntologists should consider whether "novelty" in music has ever been a constant. It is

unclear how much novelty was being produced by musicians in earlier societies. Were there not times in the past when repetition of traditional art forms was the norm? I would contend that the early work of Yamashita Tatsurō in the 1970s was simply a repetition of the previously established style of the Beach Boys and other American artists of the 1950s and '60s. One might even argue that the entire idea behind novelty being the main impetus of cultural progression is part of an effort by pro-capitalist individualists to establish a narrative of the “genius” as opposed to the view that culture is advanced through slow, steady communitarian effort. As it pertains directly to this thesis, I posit that, instead of a cancellation of the future, the resurgent popularity of city pop in the 2010s can be viewed as the creation of an optimistic alternative and a refutation of the pessimistic hauntology of vaporwave, or at least a downgrading back to the level of a more optimistic restorative nostalgia.

The history of city pop is now almost fifty years in the making and it may still have a long life ahead. In 2021 city pop again saw a boost in popularity, this time on the social media platform Tik Tok. Young Japanese Americans began to surprise their parents with clips of city pop songs and record their reactions. Seeing the joy on the parents' faces as they felt compelled to dance to a song they had not heard in four decades is yet another testament to the enduring charm of city pop. City pop has also brought back a revival not only of the careers of city pop artists, but of their American influences as well. Yacht rock staple artists like Michael Macdonald and Kenny Loggins, both huge influences on Japanese city pop artists of the '70s and '80s, have seen a reappraisal of their work among contemporary critics and artists. In an interesting display of the cultural ouroboros we now live in, they have been featured as

musicians on recent records by the same sort of hip hop artists who originally mined city pop for samples.<sup>223</sup>

City pop continues to remain ripe for analysis. This thesis is but an opening salvo in a longer work on the massive story of Japanese city pop, and there is especially more room for study on these more recent developments and their relationship to nostalgia and our continually evolving cultural memory. There are also other pieces of this story that deserve more exploration. For example, city pop musicians were a relatively small group of collaborators and exhibited a degree of autonomy in production and touring that set them apart from the notoriously exploitative idol system. Considering that a disproportionate number of these songwriters was female, city pop should be analyzed as a feminist counterculture within the general culture of conformity in Japan. Other areas of study might be the relationship of city pop with technology, the reasons behind the anti-Western shifts in the 1970s and 2000s,<sup>224</sup> and the small subculture of Japanese vaporwave artists and what that means in terms of nostalgia and hauntology. Finally, city pop's relation to Blackness could be a rich area of interrogation.

The resurgence of city pop is certainly not the first time that one human culture has sought escape through the media of a foreign culture. City pop itself was originally based in ideas of escape for Japanese people. The hauntological reimagining of our own decaying world through a fantasy of a foreign culture's past is particularly disturbing. It is as if the American pop cultural past is so lacking in an opportunity to place a moment at which there was still hope that listeners are forced to seek out fantasies from across the ocean. Again, perhaps we should take

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<sup>223</sup> WATANABE Tooru 渡辺亨, "Beikoku shiin no nagare wo doujidaiteki ni toriireta kuuruna nihon no ongaku 米国シーン流れを時代的に取り入れたクールな日本の音楽" in *Shiti poppu 1973-2019 シティ・ポップ 1973-2019*, ed. TAKAHASHI Osami 高橋修, (Tokyo: Music Magazine 株式会社ミュージック・マガジン, 2019), 88-92.

<sup>224</sup> Although, DJ Yoshizawa does not believe the 2000s resurgence constituted a nationalistic shift.

some solace in the temporal relationship between vaporwave and the resurgence of city pop; the optimism of city pop may now have fully supplanted the pessimism of vaporwave. Either way, the fun danceable music of city pop, even with the community's sometimes tenuous interpretation of a blissfully optimistic 1980s Japan, allows listeners something valuable: a temporary escape from our own world and an ability to form a new memory of the past on which to build an alternative future.

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