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WHAT DOES THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT
FEMALE ARTISTS MEAN FOR THE JAPANESE MUSIC
INDUSTRY?

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Abstract

The recent emergence of strongly independent female singers necessitated an analysis specifically into the treatment of women in music and the representation of these women to the public. Based on a review of current literature and a series of interviews with women living in the Tokyo area and working in various parts of the industry, this paper seeks to capture the real life experiences of women in the Japanese music industry in order to ascertain the reality of feminist issues in Japanese music. A wide variety of themes are addressed and explored, including the historical trends in Japanese music, the rise of independent labels, the issue of media influence and the consumer perspective to these issues. This multidisciplinary research summarises the experiences of women in a society that traditionally limits them according to the Confucian tradition and then looks into the future to discover further opportunities for equality. Finally, several barriers to freedom that female musicians still face are identified and discussed and this discussion forms the basis for the conclusions that present the industry with ideas for how to better deal with the issue.

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Foreword

This paper could not have been completed without the help of two people who I wish to show my gratitude to;

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Introduction

In pursuit of profit in a declining local market, the Japanese record industry is paying close attention to where its investments are placed. The boom of *kawaiko-chan* (cute & young female singers) during the 1990s is past its prime and left a market saturated with formulaic J-pop today, so while the biggest stars are mostly female, could the industry benefit by relaxing its tight control on their artistic freedom?

Unlike the modern music history of other western nations, Japan hasn't had any significant movement for female singer-songwriters and as such it is still unusual for J-pop stars to write original material by themselves. Such freedom seems to come only after significant success and still only with record-company approval. This tendency stems from a traditional and historical view that strong women are not accepted in a society where the woman's role is still rooted in marriage and childbearing. For all the empowerment of cute-culture, a rare phenomenon of a fashion and lifestyle dominated by women, it still led young girls to only act and dress as the most sweet and desirable object any man would want to marry. In an increasingly globalised world, with Japan's youth affected by western trends faster and stronger than ever before, the void of relevant female voices in Japanese music is ever-widening in a musical landscape that is dominated by seemingly submissive and meek female representatives.

Purpose: Japanese Popular Music: The Female Perspective

The purpose of this study is to look at how female musicians in the Japanese music industry have artistic freedom afforded to them, highlighting the various limits to access this entails. This will be examined by gaining views of women throughout industry, from musicians to journalists, from managers to record company employees, giving a voice to the women who are often unrepresented in the music industry in Japan. It aims to ascertain and define the current position of women within the industry and determine how the industry can move forward to support them.

The downturn in record sales in the early 2000s is largely being accounted for by internet piracy but another theory is that consumer apathy towards the large money-

making record labels and the repetitive products they release is a large factor. In order for the labels to address the issue of winning back consumer confidence, they must first look at their own practises so that artists that represent the consumers needs can flourish without facing the types of restrictions that today limit opportunities within the industry and hinder new artists from signing in the first place. The constant flow of pretty but talent-less female idols is the most startling issue that currently defines opinions about the music market in Japan today.

A basic assumption is that like most areas of Japanese society, the music industry suffers from a gender bias: in this case, women are tools to be manipulated in pursuit of profit. I intend to identify and analyse the barriers to artistic freedom that women face. Some barriers may be concrete, but it's those that are perceived by various participants that set the rules for inclusion and exclusion of females in the music industry. By establishing an analytical framework based on the inclusion & exclusion theory (Gamson 1997, Reimer 2004) I can detect the gender bias in the industry that discriminates against strong female voices. Once I have identified the barriers women face, I can analyse in further detail the effect this has on the industry, and on female artists' options to express themselves.

Questions: An Evolutionary Process

Understanding the current situation for women in the Japanese music industry first needs a thorough investigation into the past, in order to put it all into context. The most important question here is '*How* have things been changing?' Since female idols appeared in the 1970s, some 30 or so years have gone by and the notoriously fashion-conscious music business has changed irrevocably since then. But while in western music female artists have garnered greater success and more freedoms than ever before, it is debatable as to whether the attitudes of the Japanese music industry have really changed at all when it comes to local artists.

Having set the scene by looking at the historical perspective, this study will then move on to its largest section, that of establishing the opinions of women, musicians and others within the industry in order to evaluate the restrictions and possibilities that they

face. This will involve asking opinions about whether or not attitudes have or are changing towards female musicians' independency. Can women force changes themselves? Are the few artists who do write their own material considered lucky or are they viewed as barrier-breaking?

Ultimately this study is about establishing what barriers exist to artistic freedom for female musicians in Japan today and interpreting their experiences of facing them. Is it becoming easier for female musicians to get signed, be treated fairly and be given artistic license over their own products? Are the barriers eroding with time and if so, what is causing it and what else needs to be done? If art is the realisation of feelings, emotion and imagination in a perceptible form, then restrictions upon it deny its purpose and meaning. This study aims to distinguish the barriers that need to be removed in order for the artists to be able to realise their true aspirations.

Method: Uchi & Soto

My research is largely anthropological as I will conduct a series of interviews with female singers within the music culture, who are struggling and who have succeeded, and compare their experiences with interpretations of others within the industry. These interviews enable me to compare the insider and outsider views of the role of women in J-pop, comparing narratives and life-stories to examine the freedom that women have in expressing themselves. The choice of interviewees is crucial and should represent as great a variety of opinion as possible so that we can view the bigger picture. For this reason I have chosen to interview singers with varied backgrounds. Some participants have years of mainstream success with major labels, others with independent labels and some are singers who are just starting out their careers. All personal opinions are of course subjective, so no one opinion can be made into generalisations.

I felt it was crucial to talk to both men and women who work in other parts of the industry about this issue because it can too often be the case that those who are consumed within the process can have their judgement clouded. Also, many musicians are often lacking business knowledge and may not know the real reasons why they cannot get what

they want, so simply blame it on a gender bias. Talking to record company employees, promoters, managers and journalists will help clarify the reality from many perspectives.

Raymond Williams and R. Hoggart, the founders 'cultural studies', viewed culture as living on in everyday behaviour and expressions and this is the approach I shall employ. Discourse analysis from their perspective has its application of critical thought to social situations, thereby revealing hidden messages from the interviews or texts and thus allowing us to find the true motivations or politics involved in the cultural situation. However, Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000, p 202) commented that in discourse analysis, opinions given by people should not be taken too literally, since what they say may differ from what they really think. Slater & Glazer made this observation of the advertising industry that is particularly relevant for the music industry too: "It is a cliché in the industry that agencies promise their clients total and infallible power over the consumer's behaviour while telling the public that it has no power at all and merely reflects current trends or provides information" (1989, p 122). Composing an interview situation where I can receive information that can be easily interpreted will be my own biggest barrier to researching the truth. Reinharz (1992, p 46) discusses the political agenda of silence as well as words as needing interpretation. Especially in Japanese society where a refusal is normally denoted with an 'it's a little...[difficult]' rather than a straight 'no', the importance of silence as an answer rather than a lack of one is vital to consider. It often not only hides the truth, but exemplifies the restraint of the interviewee and attempts to show the desire to answer without actually doing so.

My analytical approach will be largely similar to the *uchi/ soto*, (inclusion & exclusion) approach of Chalmers (2002) in her book *Emerging Lesbian Voices From Japan*, but with more emphasis on gender bias rather than social group exclusion. Like her, I will be conducting research in a community in which I can easily identify (the music industry) and where relationships are bound to be formed beyond the role of researcher and interviewee. Chalmers points to Lunsing's (1999, p 114) recognition that "researchers are not, nor should they position themselves as pseudo-benefactors or 'experts' from which it is assumed research participants are hoping to gain social benefits, assistance or advice". The life of women in the lesbian community can be compared directly with other types of feminist voices that are similarly suppressed or

living silent lives in Japan, in this case, singer-songwriters. Chalmers acknowledged that as a westerner in Japan, she would always be considered a western *gaijin* (lit. outside person) and not merely a *gaikokujin* (foreigner) (Creighton 1995, p 136-7: 152). Yet she transcended the boundaries of the *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) notion common in all Japanese societal relations by virtue of her shared marginalisation as a lesbian. In this way she felt both inclusion and exclusion from her field. Though my field is not related to sexuality, it is concerned with gender discrimination. As a student and researcher of music, I hope to gain similar experiences of *uchi* and *soto* so that I can better analyse and interpret responses from those in the society.

Selection: Contacting Informants

Since I am looking at gender issues and discrimination in the experiences of women in the record industry, my theory is based largely on liberal feminism (Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir). Skov & Moeran's theory that women are "hiding in the light" (1995, p 1-74), presents the idea that with so much attention on women in media, particularly their image, they respond unnaturally and hide their true voice. Coward meanwhile (1987, p 42-43) notes that the portrayal of women in media revolves around "the image is of a highly sexualized female whose sexuality is still one of response to the active sexuality of a man", echoing the research of Sharon Kinsella (1995) that cute culture has empowered women without giving them voices. I will utilise these theories based on various aspects of Japanese pop culture as I aim to examine the claim that the current music scene in Japan misrepresents women. I will do this from a female standpoint perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p 212), so that my interviewees will "interpret social realities on the basis of their experience", rather than interpreting their answers myself. Using this approach I hope to produce a level of equality between myself as the researcher, and the interviewees, so that true emotions are conveyed and my research is legitimised by tangible experiences.

All informants agreed to meet me voluntarily after I contacted them upon my arrival in Tokyo. The candidates' ability to speak English was not a major restricting

factor, as I used translators in interviews with several informants. Nevertheless I do feel that informants whose English ability is strong tend to answer more freely regardless of language due to their more international tendency to express criticism, something traditional Japanese usually refrain from. As such, the replies of candidates are treated with due respect and weighted accordingly throughout the research. Appendix 1 contains a typical list of questions, this one sent to a record label employee. All names have been changed to hide their identity.

Disposition

Research to date on gender theory in Japanese popular culture has thus far not branched out to the field of music, concentrating on *manga* (Kinsella 1995), magazines (Skov & Moeran 1995, Clammer 1995) and film (Iwamura 1994). While feminist theory is also documented heavily (Bunch 1996, Buckley 1997, Mackie 2003), my intention is to fill the gap of discussing the issue of gender and feminism in the mass-media medium of music. By discovering and documenting the processes of inclusion and exclusion of women in the music industry one can better understand the image and portrayal of women as a reflection of real life.

My paper begins in chapter one by delving into the background of the J-pop scene and women's changing roles within it. After an overview of the basic history of female artists and movements, I look at the causes of recent change within the industry. Chapter 2 furthers the historical aspect by discussing feminism in J-pop compared to overseas' movements and the influence of Seiko Matsuda. I continue by expanding the cute-ism theory of Kinsella (1995) in relation to pop singers. In 'The Recent Rise of Independent Female Artists' I look at the new movement of female singer-songwriters that inspired this investigation, to determine who are the artists breaking the rules, how are they doing it and what effect is it having on other artists and the industry. Over the next few chapters I examine different perspectives of the issues this creates, looking at barriers to artistic freedom according to the industry, the public and the singers themselves. Finally in Chapter 5, 'Towards Equality' goes on to ask my interviewees how they see future

opportunities for women and what else they believe needs to be done, leading to my final conclusions.

Chapter 1. A Changing Landscape

The Trends of J-pop and the Information Society

Japan's music industry has been subject to all sorts of changes in trends and fashions in the same way as any other. From *ereki* (electric) bands and the group-sounds era of the 60s through to the folk and 'new music' trend of the 70s, the *idoru* dominated 80s, and the dance-pop 90s (to which the term "J-pop" is most synonymous). Each of these trends has affected the status of women in music significantly, perhaps none more so than the new music movement which launched Yumi Matsutoya, Akiko Yano and Anri as the first female singers who would sing and perform their own material. This broad genre could be applied to any style of music where the artist wrote his or her own material and accounted for half of all music sales by 1980. The idol culture that followed stemmed the tide though and for the next two decades, outspoken female artists would be no more than fringe artists for the notoriously controlled Japanese music industry.

While Akina Nakamori and Seiko Matsuda dominated this period as supposedly squeaky-clean girl-next-door idols, Namie Amuro with her sultry dance moves and subtly provocative persona gave the 90s generation a new type of role-model, albeit with a male producer still pulling all the strings. That producer, Tetsuya Komuro was responsible for many of the 1990's most famous faces, such as Tomomi Kahala, Globe's Keiko Yamada and Ami Suzuki and made an astonishing 27 billion yen in his breakthrough year of 1995. The value of the Japanese music industry, second only to the US with \$4593.3 million total sales¹, nevertheless defied its lack of diversity right up until the late 1990s, when new media opened up new opportunities for musicians and consumers alike.

The biggest idol of the early 21st Century remains Ayumi Hamasaki, who has been seen as something of a new breed amongst supposed *talento* (talents, a term perversely given to singers who are deemed to have none). This reputed egocentric diva

¹ According to The Recording Industry in Japan (RIAJ) Yearbook 2004, section 41 (p25).

was encouraged to write her own material and did so with fervour, gaining a mass-market amongst the high-school market who appreciated her style and ambition. Purists however still tend to dismiss her influence out-of-hand due to the artificial sounding J-pop that fills up most of her repertoire, claiming she is merely a marketing phenomenon rather than a feminist role-model. Her power in the industry is undisputable though, in 2004 she staged a coup d'etat at Avex Records, installing her producer Masato Matsuura as president after threatening to leave the label.

Hamasaki has no doubt paved the way for others like her. Along with pop/r'n'b singer Hikaru Utada, who experienced life in New York before launching her massively successful J-pop career (her total sales for 2004 amounted to 866,010,000 Yen², the number one artist that year), the two have presented up-and-coming female singers with the idea that success needn't come with the traditional control and restrictions. The music scene in 2005 numbered many female artists who were seemingly doing it their way, from soulful Yuki Koyanagi to the alternative & eclectic Shiina Ringo and the avant-garde Ua. The question is, has freedom of expression for female artists really arrived and if so, how does it affect the industry as a whole? Are those artists really free to pursue their music or is it another marketing ploy? And are there really many female artists that have much to say anyway? These are the questions I discussed with musicians, journalists, producers and record company employees in order to establish the true state of affairs for female musicians in Japan's pop world today.

A Market Quickly Diversifying

Even when discussing the current situation of J-pop, there were immediate contrasting views. Established record producer Masataka Shirasaka, a former record company employee who chose to go it alone after making his name, believes that "a greater importance became attached to looks since the many talent [agencies] appeared", referring to the continued success of Johnny's Jimusho bands like SMAP and TOKIO as well as new projects such as the Morning Musume group and its spin-offs on Up Front! Works. These *geino* (artistic) production companies date back to the 1950's when private

² Oricon 2004 charts; *Oricon Style*. 1/3-10 2005 No.1-1276

broadcasting companies were created and the television was developed. While record companies co-ordinated lyricist, songwriter and singer, production companies were involved at every step, from contract negotiation with radio and TV to selecting and planning songs themselves. By the 1970s they controlled much of the industry and wield enormous power to this day.

While there is no doubt that the idol scene still thrives, Chihiro Maeda, a female employee in Marketing and Sales at a major Japanese label, believes that the market is diversifying at an electrifying rate. “The Japanese market can accept more varieties & styles of music than ever [with] completely different types of female artist[s] than we had ever seen before”, suggesting Misia’s western r’n’b style as being a crucial pioneer in Japan. She, like many singers, sees the trend moving slowly away from reliance purely on appearance as proposed by Masataka.

The main reason cited for the recent diversification is the sudden access to information about non-mainstream artists and obscure forms of music from the likes of the internet, cable & satellite TV and mp3 players. These days, artists can find audiences across Japan with advanced technology that bypasses the record industry altogether. Junko Yanase, an unsigned singer-songwriter trying to break into the industry suggested that the influence of TV is fading and that it means both the consumer tastes and the record labels artists rosters are diversifying as a result. “Before there was only TV, so there were no other opportunities to get information on artists. Now there is greater access and the introduction of Tower Records (the first large scale record store to sell non-standard genres of music and independent artists) affected things too.”

Chapter 2. Making a Stand

The Influence of Female Artists in J-pop

The landscape of female artists active today is a continuation of the influence of the musicians before them, and a reflection of the feminist movement itself. Both are important considerations determining the barriers still remaining for female musicians today. The music scene can often be an embodiment of the rights of women in society at

large, while at other times it seems to be driving the changes we see. There can be no doubt that in the early 21st century, Japanese women are experiencing a freedom and increasing equality unlike any they have had before. Natsuki Ono, an artist manager is quick to point out that “in general, not only in the music scene, women became to have more power and became more aware of what we want. Naturally we can see that change in the art/music scene”.

Rimiko Ueda, who works in licensing at a major label, explained that Japan has changed from a male-orientated country to one that gives more equal opportunities. Women continue to work after getting married nowadays even more commonly than quitting their jobs after marriage: “There are more opportunities for women to get more responsible jobs these days so they would like to keep their jobs [if they get] married or not. In this way, the same thing happened to the music industry”.

Most western societies, and the US in particular, experienced strong feminist movement during the 1960s and 70s, and this was reflected by artists who were similarly outspoken, from Joan Baez to Janis Joplin. Just as Japan never experienced any strong social movement, neither did it become accepted for female musicians to express strong opinions, or indeed, deep feelings. In her paper (1989, p 208), Fujie commented that the ‘New Music’ movement of the 1970s brought along with it “a growing feeling on the part of some musicians that the mass media and recording companies treated singers as commercial objects and neglected the close relationship between singer, song, and listening public”. But while those new female musicians broke ground in successfully proving that female singer-songwriters were fully capable of producing commercial products, it did little to change the status of women in music that has remained inferior until very recently. Keiko Ochiai, who worked on a feminist radio programme *Hold On, Monday (Chotto matte Mandai)*... explained in Sandra Buckley’s ‘Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism’ (1997, p 237-8): “We end up playing a lot of 1960s and 1970s American female vocalists. It’s not that we don’t want to play more recent music, but we have trouble finding newer material that has any serious political dimension...”

Certainly both the US and UK have experienced booms and lulls in movements for female artists. The mid-1990s saw the dawn of the Lilith Fair, an all-women travelling music festival that seemed to strike a chord with audiences who had previously only

witnessed male-dominated festivals. But by the early 2000s, the female role-models had changed from the introspection of Sarah McLachlan and Tori Amos to the idol-like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera (both 'graduating' from Disney TV in the same way as many Japanese idols did from the likes of Fuji Television's *Yūyake Nyan Nyan* [Sunset Kittens]) and Jessica Simpson. The UK too went from a mid-1990s social movement of Britpop, where female artists included the 'new Patti Smith' PJ Harvey and the outspoken Louise Wener of Sleeper, to today's melee of supposed talents via TV shows such as Pop-Idol. Wener herself commented in *The Observer* in February 2005: "Fast forward 10 years and there's barely a female rock voice left. Of the 23 categories contested at this year's NME³ awards, a British female artist is nominated in only one: World's Sexiest Women".

Japan then, can not be singled out for its untalented idol culture, but while the UK and US have had cyclical waves of pop-product (Glam, New Romantics, Eurobeat, Urban) and social motivated styles (Punk, Grunge, Rap), Japan's musical trends have seemingly remained stagnant. So was the era *never* right? Hitomi says that it's down to a lack of knowledge by the public at large: that what they were hearing was not exactly what they thought. "People used to expect female singers only to be young, pretty and cute, and are eased by the image so they are convinced that they are nice girls. This is because people did not have enough information to know that they are all controlled by the producers or record companies". Even so, it's hard to argue that the 1980s '*shojo*' (virginal) style of cute, passive singers wouldn't have been popular anyway; Indeed Hitomi admits that "such type of girls [were] popular to boys at that time". Whether through lack of knowledge or not, there will surely always be a place for idols, just as there is for formulated pop-product across the globe.

This issue of the public not knowing that many singers were controlled also fed into the singers who felt they couldn't question the authority of the labels. "The record companies had the absolute right. Many artists never doubted them and couldn't question their way of business" (Chihiro). Ultimately they had no choice, as Fujie (1989, p 205) explains: "The careers of singers were completely at the mercy of production companies, who decide to hard sell singers one year or ignore them the next". Even when the singer

³ New Musical Express.

agreed to sign to the label, she was invariably to sing songs written by men, which were inadequate in expressing female emotion. “I think that is why the fans for idols were mostly men. Those writers could catch their heart but may not understand exactly how women feel. The fans for popular female singer songwriters now are also female. I think this is because fans sympathise more to lyrics written by female artists” (Rimiko).

A succession of artists from the 70s and 80s disappeared, some at the height of their success, to become housewives, and it’s impossible to tell today how many were totally happy to end their career for homelife. This follows in the Japanese tradition explained by Hibino Yukata in his book *On the Way of the Subject in Japan (Nippon shindo ron)* from 1904 (in Beasley: 1990, p 83) “The vigorous and unimpeded advance of our culture, the constant increment of our wealth and power, our supremacy in the east, our equality with the other great powers, our imposing part upon the stage of human affairs, all depend on the establishment of a healthy home life, wherein husband determines and wife acquiesces.”

The expectancy that women in Japan should give up their jobs to become housewives once they marry has dwindled. The biggest idol of the 1970s, Momoe Yamaguchi, ‘retired’ in 1980 after her announcement of marriage, but went out in a blaze of glory singing about women standing on their own feet. She later stated in her biography that she didn’t enjoy working in contrast with her own wishes, sending a clear message that she was always controlled by strict record company policy. A string of other idols nevertheless followed suit by retiring after marriage, until the behaviour of Seiko Matsuda in the early 90s broke all the rules. While Seiko is rarely regarded as influential with regard to her music (she is in fact regarded as the epitome of idol culture with 24 consecutive number 1s in the 80s), my interviewees were reluctant but accepting of her enduring social influence. Despite marrying, Seiko vowed to keep singing, and even after having a daughter choose to launch a career stateside rather than stay and look after her family. A scandal in the early 90s that she should leave her family in Japan while she travelled, it surely laid a foundation for her millions of fans that ambition and drive were qualities to be admired. With numerous affairs attached to her name, famously including an extended dalliance with a ‘gaijin’, she managed to keep her integrity and her record sales intact despite furious media protest at her frivolous behaviour. What Madonna did

for western music is questionable, but what she did for female sexuality is indisputable. Seiko it seems, had done the same for women in Japan.

Cute-ism as Empowerment

Leading commentators, when evaluating feminism within the 'cute' phenomenon, have come to discover it may not be as simply discriminatory as we might first imagine. After all, western youth cultures are almost always led by male stereotypes, from punk, rap, electronica and new romantics to mods & rockers. With Japan's *shojo* culture came a phenomenon where women were far more than passive sidekicks, creating and dominating the whole culture for their own empowerment. Kinsella (1995, p 224) asserted too that Cute-ism was not a top-down multi-media imposed culture, whilst in a reversal of the aforementioned western subcultures that symbolised strong personas, "in cute culture, young people became popular according to their apparent weakness, dependence and inability, rather than because of their strengths and capabilities" (1995, p 237).

Skov & Moeran (1995, p 3-4) too questioned how much women in Japan's idol culture were truly in control: "Are they simply free-floating signifiers that circulate as media-invented phantoms without reference or relevance to the lives that Japanese women actually lead? Do the media really dress Japanese women in a straight-jacket despotically labelled 'the subject of consumption'? Or is it rather that women, excluded - as they tend to be - from politics and industry, compensate for their subordination by living it up on the consumer scene? Could it be indeed, that women are riding on the seething wave of media proliferation? Are they as dominated by the media as media images are dominated by them?" Only a few years after this interpretation of events was put forward, the diva behaviour and power wielded by supposed latter day *shojo* Ayumi Hamasaki seems to heavily support this view.

Furthermore, it has been argued that cute culture was unique in managing to reach an audience of women who may have perceived their inferiority as entirely limiting. The stardom achieved by girls presenting a non-conventional ideal of beauty and an obvious lack of real talent is "a lack that allows for an unprecedented identification between

audience and performer” (Treat, 1996/1, p 10). Seiko Matsuda herself is testament to this, not only did she break the rules of social conventions towards motherhood and femininity but also of longevity as her career continues to this day due to a fan-base that associates with Seiko the person as much as the performer and her songs. It could be argued too that the generation of young girls that were so influenced by the 80s idols and cute culture are those who in the mid-90s had grown up and demanded that they be heard as artists without fear of rejection or criticism that they might not match the ideal male interpretation of beauty.

However, even when viewing the seemingly facile idols in such a positive light, Kinsella (1995, p 241) was careful to point out that it also had its damaging effects on women in the long run. “By idolising their childhoods, young Japanese people implicitly damned their individual futures as adults in society”. Treat (1996/2, p 277) too, in referring to *shojo* novelist Banana Yoshimoto saw the empowerment of cute culture ending at the turn of adulthood, “Banana's literary longevity hinges on the assumption that, like the popularity of such pop singers as the earlier 1980s sensation Seiko Matsuda, her teenage narratives cannot survive her own teenage years, that there is nothing to her stories apart from the guise she herself assumes as a *shojo* novelist”. The flaws in woman’s new found sexuality was apparent even during the idol heyday: “The sexually immature body of the current ideal/.../ presents a body which is sexual - it 'exudes' sexuality in its vigorous and vibrant and firm good health - but it is not the body of a woman who has an adult and powerful control over that sexuality”, Coward (1987 p 42-43).

Women & The Media

Feminists began challenging media representations of women at an International Women’s Year Action Group meeting in 1975. But a 1988 case involving pop singer Agnes Chan, who had been bringing her pre-school son and nanny to professional engagements, highlighted sensitive issues. Mackie (2003, p 195) commented: “Much of the reporting, however, was sensationalist, with journalists concentrating on the conflict between Chan and other commentators on women’s issues, rather than on sober

discussion of the question of childcare. This case illustrates the point that feminist issues only appeared in the mass circulation dailies if they could be presented in the context of a sensational angle”. Seiko Matsuda faced an enormous amount of bad press herself, Schilling (1997, p 114) reported “As of August 1995, some 3,313 mostly negative stories had appeared about her in Japanese magazines, the highest total for any postwar public figure.”

Yayoi’s (1997, p 13) suggestion that the media enforces ideals upon the public at large goes some way to explain why the idol culture is so enduring. Young girls still grow up seeing them as role models. “Women do internalize elements delivered to them through the media. And this collage of media images works to reinforce the aestheticization and glorification of femininity. It is the process of internalizing this image of ‘what is it to be women’ that is most frightening. Something that starts out as ideology is gradually transformed into an aesthetic and, thus internalized, becomes ‘natural’”. Napier (1998, p 91) suggests that the media has been quite perverse and contradictory in its portrayal of women in popular, observing that “images of women in popular culture have served on the one hand to re-inscribe traditional roles into post-war Japanese society and, on the other, to offer visions of escape from them.” White’s (1995, p 261) identification that the media prefers to treat its audience as a homogenous entity further highlights the distance between image and reality. She demands that “the communication between media and youth must address the young person’s actual experience, identity and needs”.

The Recent Rise of Independent Female Artists

The idol culture of the 80s made way for the dance-pop of the 90s, but still the vast majority of female artists sang songs written for them rather than by them. By 2005 however, several of the top artists are writing for themselves (see Appendix 2: ‘From Chara to Yuki’). The issue of public interest in the current batch of female singer-songwriters emerged many times during my interviews, generally with pleasure that a larger section of the audience are choosing their favourite musicians less on appearance and more on what they have to say for themselves. This was widely recognised as being a

backlash against the industry control that had previously fooled a large section of the audience. “Now we have more information sources [to enable us to distinguish idols from original artists] that are easy to access even for the people living in rural areas” (Hitomi). And just as musicians are less likely to marry early and retire, so the audience wants to hear musicians who reflect their tendency to remain single and independent. Women want to buy music that they can associate with, so today they increasingly desire music that reflects their lifestyle changes.

The tendency for artists today to demand more control over their style from the start seems to have emerged from a few pioneers who began by following the rules, then broke them when success came. Certain artists were mentioned frequently as influences by all my interviewees, musicians and industry employees alike. With a greater ability to make music at home these days, it’s no surprise that artists don’t want to be told what to do. Junko told me of the influence of male rock duo B’z in the early 90s and more recently of Shiina Ringo. “B’z did what the record company wanted but after selling millions they changed their sound a lot. Ringo Shiina has said in public that she couldn’t do what she wanted on her first album. But then she was able to on the second”. In western music it is certainly very hard to be taken seriously as an artist if your first album is pure pop, something artists like Kylie Minogue have struggled to overcome. Both Alanis Morissette and Tori Amos were lucky that their early pop albums simply didn’t sell. But there is a sense that some Japanese artists are willing to sacrifice some integrity and earn big bucks in their early days, then happily trade it in later for a steady career doing what they truly desire. Seiko Matsuda is writing her own songs while Namie Amuro too, surely too young to be allowed a say in her early career path, has recently turned to r’n’b and incorporated it on her albums despite the niche market that it is likely to appeal to.

Junko explained that it’s not just established artists who have gained this new access; “before, artists couldn’t make music at home, so it was impossible to go it alone, but now artists can live working part-time”. Many artists though, are simply uninterested in the business side and just want to perform, but are naïve to the reality that music is a commercial product and record labels are ultimately looking to turn a profit. Despite her acknowledged lack of business sense, aspiring musician Yuka is still aware of the

potential to go along with the label's advice until the record sales are big enough to be able to demand more freedom: "Artists can use this to their advantage by getting their foot in the door".

Yuka's experience in Japan is the most telling indication that despite the good signs, the freedom that is sometimes shown by a few major artists simply isn't available to most women. Having been performing live and busking for many months in Tokyo, she was scouted by a major label. "They decided to wait once they knew I could write and encouraged me to do that. Then when the time came to launch me as a 'real' artist they insisted on a Country & Western style that was popular at the time". Yuka continued recording her own compositions in her distinct style despite the increasing pressure and meddling. Eventually, despite investing the money in making a full album demo that took a year to accomplish, everything collapsed. "I said no to what they wanted me to do.... but fortunately I got back all the demos".

Chapter 3. A Changing Industry

Home-made Production

The early 2000s has seen something of a revolution in the Japanese music industry. The rise of independent labels and self-made stars has shaken the establishment just as much as internet piracy. "Now it is easy to record and press CDs, even students can do it" (Chihiro). The rise of indie bands meant that Oricon (the chart compiler) had to add two indie charts to its information lists, while TV channels Mtv and Space Shower began devoting time to indie artists. Venues in Shibuya such as Deseo could expect 80 bands playing a month and Indies Issue Magazine, reacting to the phenomenon began putting out a sample CD every month of 15 new artists. With opportunities on the increase for all artists to at least get themselves known, what could all this mean for the industry's attitude to female artists? Yuka was unconvinced that it affected the record labels approach to dealing with women at all: "Major companies have been launching their own independent labels, perhaps to cash in on the phenomenon. They still don't have enough

confidence to relax control and I am pessimistic about them allowing female artists greater freedom... it's a manager-orientated business" (Yuka).

Having subsidiaries performing as 'independents' is not the only trick up the labels sleeves. Major label employee Chihiro related to me the story of a well known band where one of the musicians is not actually capable of playing the songs the band performs, so plays without being plugged in while an off-stage professional plays the real thing. "No-one can prove that it is true that the artists actually have control over themselves. I think that [the record companies] believe if the public thinks that [the] artist is a writer, then they must be perceived as talented".

The labels themselves have changed in recent years too, mostly as a result of the employees being from a generation that is more accustomed to being accommodating to musicians rather than telling them what's best for them. The days when working in a label was just another office job has faded, and many employees are actually passionate about music, so truly want to help the artists. "Record label people tend to be more creative or try to be, so it's cool to have artists who can be unique" (Natsuki). Indeed, many of the employees are ex-musicians: "In my company, some music producers and managers have experienced debt as struggling musicians. Some of them had trouble or bad experiences with the companies who tried to force them to do what the company wanted. So today they comprehend much better what the artists want to do themselves" (Chihiro).

While these changes spell good news for female artists, there is clearly still a bias, quite clearly seen by the lack of female artists representing the burgeoning indie scene. Artist manager Natsuki proposed that "for independent artists, [it's] only a matter of connections...do they know the right person in the field". But "record label people and promoters need to work on their strategies...", referring to distance she believes exists between what the labels try to sell and what the audiences really want to hear. And the inferior treatment of women is not just restricted to the labels and production companies. Referring to the male-dominated world of radio entertainment, Ochiai (1997, p237-8) commented, "There's a lot of resistance to our content from within the station, but that's all the more reason to go on with it. I think the most difficult thing for me is dealing with

the male colleagues in the studio. What comes across so strongly is how totally different our perception of the world we live in can be, and how different our priorities are.”

In an interview with the then president of TV channel ZTV (Painter: 1996, p 146), the president remarked about opportunities for women to climb the corporate ladder: “Basically, compared to men, women are less intelligent, they have less physical strength, even their bodily structures are different – that is the philosophy I hold to – but in order to show that the company president is *not* a male chauvinist, we are also hiring women. They are people too, after all. While they may have certain limitations, there must also be ‘territories’ where they can make use of their abilities too.”

Signing New Artists

Many musicians in Japan feel that the industry is just the same as all other industries in Japan, and as such does not accommodate for the fact that the product is people, and the personal performances by these people. The accusation is that the manufacturing culture that is so prominent has historically been applied to the arts fields too, such that record labels look for talent in the same way as other companies search for engineers or computer programmers. The wealth of music academies throughout the archipelago seems to support this theory, so I spoke to Tomoka Kikuchi, who runs an academy for aspiring ‘talents’ in Kyushu. She told me that many students have a strong desire to be famous even without their parents pushing them, and that an increasing number of girls are turning up with the ability and desire to write their own music and lyrics from their early teens.

The cyclical waves of musical trends, alternating from those emanating from social movements (bottom-up) and from record labels (top-down) have as previously mentioned, been indiscernible in Japan. A probable cause of this is the distribution system from the labels to shops that makes all products unreturnable. The charts are calculated by CDs sent to shops, not actual products sold to customers, and this favours large talent and idol agencies who can persuade the shops to take roughly equal amounts of the products continuously. Many small shops have then had to cut the price of the item in order to sell the stock, and some have gone out of business trying to cope with this. But

for the labels, the statistics show that idols have an appeal that rarely wavers and can expect high chart placings no matter how many of the CDs the shops actually sell. For female musicians this means that a new idol signed to a distinguished label can have her CD distributed widely (and get a high chart place as a result) while any artist who is seen as different or obscure, or who is not on a major label, will struggle unfairly.

“I do think there are more opportunities in the UK to be taken seriously as an artist because we don’t have the history of *idoru*. Any singer-songwriter here has to fight much harder, even if they have talent” relates Yuka, who grew up in the Midlands of England. Chihiro, with many years experience at a major label explained to me that right from the start, female artists can struggle just because of gender: “When a provisional contract is made with female artists, companies have more severe conditions regarding age and appearance than they do with male artists”.

However, there is a positive side to all this. Both Yuka and Junko, who are seeking new labels that will give them the freedom they demand, believed that the idol culture means women are more in demand than men, so getting noticed in the first place is much easier. The tendency for female artists to have shorter careers means that “there are more opportunities to get scouted or noticed here because the companies are always looking for the next act” (Yuka). “I feel I have more opportunities than male artists because I can join parties and meet the right people. In general, female singers are more in demand. Many people, music people, are looking for female artists because they have a bigger audience” (Junko). Despite claims that the record industry is shrinking due to internet piracy and falling CD sales, 2003 registered the most debut artists in Japan since 1996, at 281 compared to just 132 in 2001⁴ and while the bias is towards more female artists, “cute girls appeal to guys & girls, so opportunities [to get into the industry] for each sex are appropriate” (Yuka).

Here Comes The Flood?

The ability for artists in Japan to be able to create their own music at home has naturally led to more women becoming willing to make a go at singing as a career choice. Rimiko

⁴ The Recording Industry in Japan (RIAJ) Yearbook 2004, section 32 (p20).

suggested that for women, performing is the best way to express themselves and be heard: “The easiest way to show their feelings must be [by] writing lyrics and telling the public who she is”. Artist manager Natsuki has found through her associated independent label that new artists are in abundance: “Since independent labels’ information are everywhere and more artists have become independent as well, so naturally more artists wanna try to do themselves as least once...”. In fact, Yuka says that without the independent labels being around nowadays, her career would already be over: “It is definitely really encouraging for female artists; I myself would have given up if I thought I could only succeed if I did what the majors wanted me to do”.

Rimiko, defending the stance of the major labels counters that “yes, it is true that there are more independent labels in Japan than [there] used to be, but it does not give female artists more chances to do things which they may not be able to do in the major labels”. Her argument suggested that though there may be an increase in encouragement for artists, since it affects both male and female artists the overall effect does not necessarily give female musicians any greater freedom. Former Sony employee Hitomi went further to express the benefits of the majors that are enhanced due the independents’ lack of TV connections: “In order to be on TV, it was necessary for singers to belong to big management offices that have got strong connection to TV media and strong promotion power. These offices work closely with record companies to produce singers”.

The commercial tie-up, as mentioned in chapter 1, is still seen as essential in launching artists or increasing sales of new singles by established artists, but dates back many decades. Fujie (1989, p 204) discovered: “During [the] period 1920s-1930s, the influence of record companies grew to the point that they decided almost exclusively which singers and songs would become popular nationwide. With the growth of the record industry, a system developed whereby record companies and movie companies cooperated to simultaneously release the recording of a song and a movie that featured the song”.

In 2004, the number one single by a female artist (‘Jupiter’, 675,807 copies sold) was by Ayaka Hirahara, with a classical crossover style. Her appeal has been built by tying her songs to commercials (Car manufacturer Toyota & telephone company NTT Docomo), TV (NHK), the musical ‘The Ten Commandments’ and a TV drama. Kou

Shibasaki had the second biggest selling single (591,897⁵), and Ai Otsuka the 3rd (405,600) by tying their songs to TV programmes. Hikaru Utada, who ranked 4th (14th by artists overall), had her song used in animated film *Kyashaan* (キャシャーン), while Ayumi Hamasaki, (5th, 6th & 7th) had two of her singles used for TV commercials to push sales. While mass exposure may seem ideal for reaching the widest audience, it tends to only enhance the idea that women have to be cute and sexually appealing in order to sell music. Television is the most popular form of media to access new music, and Fujie (1989, p 212) points out that a result of the “close tie between popular song and television is that visual expression of the song – that is, the singer’s facial expression and gestures, as well as the set and costumes – becomes closely tied to the communication of the emotional content of the song. In other words, the aural and the visual elements have become inseparable in the perception of much of popular music in Japan today”. Understandably, for emerging singer-songwriters, music and not image is the focus, so with such reliance on TV and tie-ups, this is a barrier that is hard to breach.

Chapter 4. Remaining Barriers

Fear of Speaking Out

“The role of women in business is still looks and acting cute over skill and this is still based on inter-office marriages” says Yuka. “I think sexism still exists and expectations, especially as entertainers, are still based on chauvinism. It is slowly changing but still very difficult”. The industry seems to be very slow in catching up with society at large. While the public are increasingly showing their interest in artists that can express themselves freely and to which they can associate, and the artists continue to strive to supply them while backed by supportive indie labels, the majors still seem to look at appearance and age first. A recent talent search by Victor Records took place through the web and asked the public to pick who they would like to see signed purely from the

⁵ Nenkan Hittochaato Book/ Oricon 2004 Year-End Charts in *Oricon Style*, 1/3-10 2005 No.1-1276 p3.

photos of the candidates. The most popular would then be whittled down by the company to create their new idol. Such procedures disgusted several of my interviewees who swore against ever signing for a label that had such a policy, even if it did have separate ways of attracting non-idol types.

But it would be unfair to suggest that only the record companies create an atmosphere of intimidation towards female artists. Chihiro asserted that “in Japan, production companies are stronger than record companies. They take the majority of copyrights, usually 70% or more. So record companies make affiliated management companies to fight against it and try to keep their profits”. In order to counteract the sway of the production companies, many labels are now operating this service in-house. My contact with one manager was the most significant example of the fear of many women to speak out, risking the sack or other consequences. The female manager of one the first wholly independent female singer-songwriters in Japan felt that her artist answering questions of her determination to succeed against the tide of idols during the early 1990s might lead to uncomfortable questions, and consequently pulled out at the last minute. The opportunity to assert her position as a role-model was lost despite the entirely complimentary set of questions, due only to fear of the artist being required to express in words the same thing that has been expressed in her songs. Further conversations confirmed this fear (that she was even afraid to admit) and the situation was a startling example of the still strict expectations on women in Japan to not speak up.

Similarly, despite several interviews with a former idol with a string of hit albums under her belt, she avoided any questions regarding the industry, despite their harmless nature, due to her continued reliance on it. The only clear information was that during her early days her image was not her own creation, and while she increasingly began to write her own material, she eventually finished her association as an artist with the major labels and currently dreams of making just one album with total freedom.

Media Troubles

It struck me however, that the media in Japan are perhaps the worst culprits when it comes to opening up the domestic market to greater freedom for all artists, let alone

women. So reliant on the labels to give them artists to interview so that they can achieve high sales, they agree to send all articles to the labels for 'checking' before printing. What this means is that virtually no criticism exists in the music media and all articles are nothing more than adverts for every single and album scheduled. My interview with a leading female journalist, who is used to interviewing all the major J-pop stars, revealed that she can expect any of her own personal comments to be removed from any of her reports. She is also instructed to ask about fashion, live performances or new songs, avoiding any personal or slightly controversial questions. The public then are essentially deceived since they are given no gauge to judge what is good or not, who is a puppet and who is for real. Furthermore, the reliance on big artists to sell magazines means that few indie artists get any coverage: the indie labels simply don't have the 'association' to persuade the magazines to cover their artists, and they can hardly afford to advertise in the way major production companies or labels can. If the media is itself intimidated by the record labels, then it's no surprise that many artists who want to reach a wide audience are left with little choice but to present their music and discuss little else.

A case in point is the 'disappearance' of Ami Suzuki. A hugely successful idol (10 million units through Sony in 1999), her production company president was involved in a scandal regarding tax-evasion charges in 2000, so her family quickly moved to get her contract annulled to protect her image from being tarnished. However, after suing the production company in order to gain her freedom from commitments relating to them (AG Communication), Ami Suzuki suddenly found herself dropped from sponsorship deals, black-listed and unwanted by just about any other production company, even her producer (the renowned Tetsuya Komura) distanced himself. She may have won her case but it tarnished her career within the industry and highlighted the practise of verbal contracts taking precedent over law. As a result of the case, artists such as those I spoke too are fearful of making any comments about their employers, and pitifully even the media barely covered the story for fear of upsetting interested parties.

Liddle & Nakajima (2000, p115) discussed the historical trend of the media in Japan and found "a construction of the media portrayed as militantly autonomous, economically independent, sexually promiscuous, above all, apolitical (Silverberg 1991, p 240-43)". They advanced that "this portrayal as apolitical was a means of distancing

her from any kind of feminist analysis or critique of male power”. In truth, the media itself has been as male-dominated as any other industry and the same prejudices are present. Skov & Moeran (1995, p 46) discovered that “feminism has come to be a part of the ambivalent cluster of consumption, independence and sexualization which acts as a backdrop to reinforce women's responsibility for family and housework. In this complex interplay of ideas and associations, feminist terminology has been co-opted as the means to utterly commercial ends, redressed as a way for advertisers to 'help' women. Given the relative isolation of feminists in Japan, this has been as easy game for media.”

Control: Restricting or Nurturing?

“The Japanese music market is not mature yet. Companies see their main customer as 15-30. So companies want to sign young artists” explains Chihiro. Those young artists however, are easily manipulated. Often signing in the early teens, sometimes younger, they are usually too young to understand contract details. Idols at production companies are indeed treated like normal employees, paid a set monthly fee (Ami Suzuki was revealed in court to earn just \$1500 a month at the start of her career, and a miniscule 0.4% royalty rate on CDs, raised to \$9780 and 0.55% in 1999 despite eight-figure record sales that year). Starting so young means that few artists at this age have an idea about what they really want, or how to achieve it. “Giving them more freedom does not mean they can write good music or it would become better” explains Rimiko, “we need to think about our sales as much as we would like to give artists some freedom”. Chihiro revealed that the record labels are feeling the pinch with recent indie developments. But she also suggests this may not be all good news for the consumer: “Increased competition to deal with newcomers, management or record companies makes the contract with artists easier than before. And as a result many untrained artists debut or release their CDs, despite the resulting lower standards”.

Manager Natsuki related that 20 years ago the lack of competition meant it was much easier for record labels to sell CDs, largely because artists didn't demand much freedom and thus all singers could be easily marketed with one system style. And while artists today may have more demands, they will still need the record labels to take care of

them. “They do *need* some control, some artists don’t have the ability to succeed without guidance” (Junko). Some artists are able to listen to their music in third person, enabling them to control marketing themselves, Mongol 800 being a good example, “but people without skills need a team and control. We have to accept that some people in record companies know the audience better than we do”. Yuka too stated that “I leave the business side to someone else, I am not in touch with it”. Being in her mid-twenties, Junko feels that she can’t be deceived so easily. “There are bad companies, but I can tell them apart. If I respect them, if they are trustworthy, then I can accept some restrictions”.

2004 saw the rise of two new idols, Ai Otsuka and Aya Ueto. These two singers seem to hark back to the idol heyday when similar young girls had multiple careers on TV, in film, modelling, promoting products and singing. They are also incredibly hard working, Ai Otsuka released two albums and a string of singles in just 12 months, perhaps highlighting the pressure to sell as much as possible while the artists is hot. Karin Iwamura, a leading journalist in the music field who has interviewed both on numerous occasions, told me how tired they usually are, their days and weeks crammed with commitments. Producer Masataka explained that idols careers take an immense amount of planning and doesn’t come easy: “It is important for an investor (the production company) to make an investment for the next generation and to [encourage] the talent. An artist does not come out without money and talent”. It is a common ploy to ‘launch artists’ stateside to huge investment, knowing that even if they don’t succeed the artists can be publicised in Japan as having broken the American market. This expensive investment technique has worked for Mai Kuraki, Hikaru Utada and Kumi Koda, the latter reaching number 18 on the extraneous Billboard Hot Dance Music/Maxi-Singles though billed back in Japan as if having achieved the feat on the Hot 100. Even Ayumi Hamasaki answered in a 2002 interview, “I lack even basic knowledge about writing music”, showing that even those at the very top still need the labels support. “Record companies never complain as long as it sells well” commented Chihiro.

Chapter 5. Where is it all Heading?

An Industry Slow to Wake Up

The main threat to the Japanese music industry today is that if the majors don't keep up with what is going on at ground level with the actual music and continues to see the art form as mere product, then the whole industry and consumers alike will suffer. Japan has seen a huge growth of indie labels because a large proportion of the audience was not being catered for, and now the major labels are trying to play catch-up.

“[The industry] has to be more creative because of competition” explains Natsuki. She firmly believes once the independent artists have more chart success, outselling the formulised output of majors, they will create a trend: “Everyone will follow this trend here in Japan”. Yuka's experience highlights the waste that labels often make due to indecision and not enough planning. Despite one year's investment in recording a full album, she was never actually signed to the label and was let go with all her material. Junko believes the waste goes beyond that: “There is too much money being spent to sell CDs. For indies, artists can get 50%, but for majors it can be 5% due to unnecessary costs. There are simply too many people involved in making just one CD”.

All my interviews with record company employees involved mentioning the fear of the challenge of indie labels. Avex, which only began in the early 90s, became Japan's most successful label just a few years ago and despite struggling in the last couple of year, remains Japan's biggest indie. In 2004 Avex ranked number one amongst the labels with 3,282,310,000円⁶ sales, giving it 11.9% of the total market compared to 11.1% of second placed Toshiba EMI. In fact, a full 56.8% of retail sales were by non-major labels in 2004 (though many of the independents are in fact major label subsidiaries). Accordingly the major labels (Victor Entertainment, Toshiba-EMI, Universal, Warner, Sony, BMG Funhouse) need no reminding of the potential of these up-starts, even if they are not responding to them appropriately.

Towards Equality

Yuka, when asked about the future prospects for female artists, saw the Japanese market as ultimately following the western pattern: “I see eventually the demise of *idoru* as these

⁶ Statistics from *Original Confidence*, 10th Jan 2005 Vol.39 No. 1970, p76.

independent artists appear more and more. People will recognize talent for what it really is. Major labels are getting more shaky, so they will need to change. I can imagine them taking more risks". Junko disagrees however: "*Otaku* (fanatic) fans still support musicians well, buying three copies of every CD, one to keep, one to play and one spare, as well as attending every concert". She suggests that this market will never completely fade, no more than the potential for boy-bands is likely to disappear in the western markets.

Music is concerned with marketing acts to the largest portion of consumers, so using cute singers appeals across the gender divide, but as we have seen, this restricts opportunities for expressive female artists. Rimiko doesn't see the barriers of the first contract changing, relying heavily on looks: "It may reduce as there are more female artist who do not walk the way which record labels or management expect but they are considered as one of the important matters to make a deal at the very first stage." Treat (1996:281) discussed the image of women in popular culture as being "relegated to pure play as pure sign". When applied to Clammer's (1995: 214-5) argument that the appeal of image over content as being deeply entrenched in Japanese culture, we can conclude that for the foreseeable future, image will remain a limiting factor on new artists: "The consumption of the sign (image) rather than of the thing itself has behavioural and psychological ramifications. It may be that the 'concrete' nature of Japanese culture (Hasegawa 1982) has protected itself: or, rather, that the visual qualities of the culture permit consumption of the sign to have mostly positive or even cathartic effects. The overall result is an expanding display of the body in the media, /.../ but with very little individuality in its actual expression. A tendency towards normalization prevails, despite the growing opportunities."

Producer Masataka, as if responding to many artists' suggestions that labels will have to take risks, suggested that for the production companies, investment even at a risk is necessary to nurture truly talented artists into the industry and then the mainstream consumer consciousness. Yuka meanwhile, suggested that upcoming female musicians should simply ignore this system as many rock bands already have done, and do things on their own terms. "If I had lots of money I would make lots of indie labels and publicise

them. Hold competitions like for popstars for talented artists. People who previously thought ‘fuck the majors’ will get publicity and come out of the woodwork.”

Changes from within are nevertheless already taking place, just as labels are increasingly becoming filled with music fans, so producers are becoming younger and are more-clued up about the current scene. Junko is dubious: “but there are still many there who don’t know the audience at all. People who work in positions selling artists should be 20s-30s otherwise they cannot be good advisors.” This age-trend is likely to change the hierarchy in labels in the long term, also allowing women to rise to higher positions even if they do decide to marry. The increasing average age to marry is now past thirty, when career-minded employees may already reach middle management levels. Indications are that it will have to be the industry changing first from the inside, by these employees, before more female artists are allowed the freedom they desire. While Seiko Matsuda was successful and popular enough to shock the music industry by quitting her management company and setting up her own, most artists do not have access to that privilege. Significantly in 2005, the blacklisted idol Ami Suzuki stands as a torchbearer for women going it alone. Despite her indictment for successfully suing her management company, Ami refused to quit, set up her own independent label ‘Amity’ and reached no. 1 on Oricon’s independent album chart with ‘Forever Love’ in late 2004. She has recently signed for Avex, whose president Masato Matsuura has taken her under his wing, though even with such strong backing, the question of how the industry will respond to her career relaunch will be a severe test for the media and industry alike.

Conclusion

Optimism in 2005 at the state of music in Japan seems already significantly higher than during my first visit just 4 years previous, when the growth of independent labels was in its infancy. The opportunities and threats that they present are an exciting development that used well can be the launchpad of many artists that the public want to hear, but which the major labels are not promoting extensively. Out on the live circuit there is now a clearly visible wealth of female singer-songwriters, sometimes backed by male bands, sometimes performing alone, but all performing their own material. Amongst these

performers lie strengths in song-writing skills that is lacking in the all-male rock bands that often perform on the same bill, and who use energy and enthusiasm in place of clear talent to get their message across. The unique bond between singer and audience that is lacking in idol culture, where songs come across as insincere generalisations about life, is gradually being earned by women who are interpreting lived experiences to a growing fanbase. These women are rarely extravagant and unlike those who wish to be *talento*, rarely seek success actively, merely allowing the music to take them where it goes. In this way, the biggest barrier I see is the lack of support they are given and the lack of knowledge they have about how to forward their careers.

The swarm of independent labels has not yet matured, with success being achieved only by those going against the idol grain in the last 3 years. This means that many young artists can be easily led into indie labels that are unprofessional or unskilled, while the majors have yet to change their ways to fill the void. Hanging around on shelves in second-hand stores and given away at tiny live-houses are poorly produced CD recordings of talented singers that are often much better songwriters than those who write for many an idol. There seems too a lack of a community where these singers team-up with musicians to fill-out their sound and give these artists' songs the resonance that is hidden under the surface. In this way, many female musicians seem afraid to be as outspoken through their music as much as their lyrics, seemingly caused by a fear of upsetting audiences rather than connecting with them. This subtle form of expression in live performance denies themselves of their own goals by still in part yielding to the submissive female role prevalent in all Japanese society.

Skov & Moeran's (1995, p 74) 'hiding in the light' theory is testament to this, suggesting that women have yet to escape their social and Confucian roles in Japan. The singers who were afraid to answer my questions for fear of upsetting their employers were not the only shy ones, younger musicians too were afraid to express themselves simply because of fear of seeming 'troublesome'. The answers to many of my interviews then were not so much concealing the truth, but were perhaps always only a taste of the reality that most of interviewees felt women are still considerably discriminated against. My presence as a *gaijin* seemed in the most to advantage me, as being an outsider I could

be granted freedoms in questioning and receiving answers that many women would have felt uncomfortable sharing with someone in their own realm of context.

Sharon Chalmers (2002) investigation into lesbianism in Japan sought to gain real-life experiences to interpret the reality of the situation, a style I have followed when looking at feminism in music. Two important points brought up by her book struck me as being strongly applicable to any woman in Japan who differs from the norm. She asserted that lesbians are neither complimentary nor dependent on men, leaving them as worthless outcasts in Confucian tradition and that women's roles as 'cute girl', then wife, then mother, are all abandoned by lesbians, thereby leaving them without function in society. When singers present themselves as fully capable of writing, singing and producing music, previously only privileged freedoms at the discretion of men in the industry, they similarly suggest that they are not seeking male attention by their actions and are treated as outcasts. Their desire to perform with their own styles, outside the sphere of 'cute-ism' or any other sexually motivated style, suggests their rejection of these same women's roles according to male's ideal.

This rejection, albeit implied rather than active recalls Gamson's (1997, p 179) theory that "social movements depend on the ongoing construction of collective identity, and that deciding who *we* are requires deciding who we are not. All social movements, and identity movements in particular, are thus in the business, at least sometimes, of exclusion". Female musicians in Japan today have far from celebrated their new-found ability to express themselves, and have instead shied away from presenting it as a rejection of roles. This strikes of Chalmers (2002, p 35) assertion that many lesbians remain in heterosexual marriages to appease the status quo, so too women in music express themselves openly in live houses in evenings or weekends but return to 'normal' life on weekdays.

The subjugation of women in music that has led to the quiet revolution in the live-houses may seem to suggest that these are voices that don't truly wish to be heard, or that they simply have little to say. Ueno (1997, p 278-9) points out that in any East Asian culture, the power of women is held differently than in the west, and it's rooted in family life and the household. "I think that we need a far greater sensitivity to cultural differences. It is possible for Asian women to develop a feminism that is the product of

their own cultural context and meaningful to them. To impose the goals of other feminisms onto those women or use foreign goals as a measure of the quality of the lives of Asian women is problematic.” While many women may wish to share their lives through expression in music, they also don’t want to risk losing their position as women in society. “The domestic role is highly valued, some would even say overvalued, in Japanese society. This is something Japanese women do not want to give up”. This investigation however has shown that there is a strong community of women who are prepared to defy this theory and seek a more visible position of strength in society.

While this paper has sought to highlight barriers to artistic freedom that women face in Japan, it leaves room for more comprehensive comparisons between the ‘product’ nature of music in Japan compared to other societies such as the US and UK. Is the notoriously controlled Japanese music industry actually any more money-orientated and discriminating than any other, or is it just that the image of the singers that it churns out makes it more apparent than in other countries, a result purely of local preferences towards cute and submissive women rather than strong sexual identities? No matter what the reason, the lack of socially relevant women in mainstream music is a loss to society at large. As Louise Wener (2005) puts it: “We need their voice and deserve their vitality; we should be desperately craving their difference. When [Courtney] Love was asked how it felt to be a woman in rock she once famously replied ‘I’m not a woman in rock, I’m a force of nature’”.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions

What does the development of independent female voices mean for the Japanese Music Industry?

1. What do you believe are the biggest differences in the opportunities available to female singer-songwriters in Japan today compared to 10/ 20 years ago.
2. How and why do you believe these changes have occurred?
3. In the past, record labels had almost total control over singers, why do you think there was no feminist movement to change this?
4. Today, many female Japanese artists have control over their image and songs, often writing the lyrics or music or both. Why do you believe such artists are becoming prominent and popular?
5. Has the Japanese music industry woken up yet to this recent phenomenon and can they relax their control even more to allow the artists greater freedom of expression?
6. Do you believe the buying public is aware of the issue?
7. Has the market for foreign artists, where most write their own material, affected the attitude of record labels/ promoters etc?
8. The growth of independent labels is significant, has this increased encouragement for female artists to pursue a career that previously they would not have attempted?
9. What barriers or challenges do you believe still exist for emerging female singer-songwriters (and are any of them gender-related or applicable to both sexes)?
10. How does this compare to the barriers artists faced 10/20 years ago?
11. What do the recent developments mean for the music industry of Japan, how should they proceed due to an apparently strong market for more independent artists?

APPENDIX 2: **From Chara to Yuki**

It was early 90s phenomenon Chara who really got the ball rolling for the new generation singer-songwriters. Chara played guitar, piano, drums and much more, seeing herself first and foremost as a musician and adding a depth to her songs that had been totally absent in J-pop at the time. Furthermore, getting married and having children seemed to only strengthen her music. While her sense of pure love for making music on her own terms certainly affected the scene, it was Bonnie Pink who emerged as the first of a new breed of singer-songwriters who harked back to the Joni Mitchell's and Suzanne Vega's of the western music scene. With help from Swedish producer Tore Johansson, Bonnie grew her sound from her 1995 debut and developed immensely as a songwriter that walked her own path regardless of artists around her. Meanwhile, Osaka-born Ua (Swahili for 'flower') debuted in 1996 and with her exotic looks and earthy style was seen as an example of how "Japanese pop had matured and grown" (McClure 2005). Her unpredictably and strong persona was shared by the eccentric Okinawan Cocco, who has been putting her confessional lyrics to hard rock songs since 1997, but perversely rose to fame when she decided to retire in 2001 and spend two years cleaning up the beaches on her island by hand. Her soulful folk musings about the human condition, often distorted into wailing hard rock and always performed with genuine intensity, truly expanded the boundaries for female musicians in Japan.

While these artists appealed to distinct niches and those seeking alternatives to mainstream music, by the turn of the century a cluster of female singers in the J-pop world were following their lead. Pop-ballad songstress Aiko released her first introspective album in 1999 and proved the viability of the market for such singers. Perhaps the most critically acclaimed female talent, Shiina Ringo debuted in 1998, proving herself inventive, creative and able to transcend any genre boundaries, not least in her ability to sing in English, French, German and Portuguese. Minmi has blended r'n'b, hip-hop and reggae, uniquely acting as her own producer while pop singer Chihiro Onitsuka has made it a point of accentuating her lyrics before surrounding them with music. 'Heart-rock' act Hitomi Yaida has insisted in interviews that her songs are the embodiment of deep feelings, openly admitting that this may reveal darker sides to her

personality. Her single-collection was highly publicised in 2004 and sold more than 400,000 copies⁷. Finally, former Judy & Mary vocalist Yuki is now going it alone, developing a unique image akin to Bjork's unconventionality, utilising homemade clothes and stark images, and even manages to drum for all-girl unit Mean Machine.

⁷ Statistics from *Original Confidence*, 10th Jan 2005 Vol.39 No. 1970, p46.