

The History of J-POP

by Toshinobu FUKUYA

Definition of J-POP

Yoshiaki Sato, Professor of Tokyo University, says in his book, *What is J-POP?* that the word of “J-POP” was born somewhere around 1988 in Japan. Before that time, Japanese popular music, “*Kayokyoku*”, was basically a kind of poor imitation of American popular music, of course several unusually great songs were made though. “*Kayokyoku*” is said to have evolved into J-POP which has its own distinct style.

J-POP includes Japanese folk, rock, reggae, R&B, Hip Hop, and pops. Today, the young Japanese generation is listening to J-POP with their i-pods. On the other hand, Japanese middle-aged and elderly people are singing “*Enka*” (Japanese traditional popular music) at *karaoke* bars. So we can say that J-POP is the music which is favored mainly by Japanese youth.

Early Days of Japanese Pops

After the Second World War, the American Occupation Force governed Japan temporarily. Day by day, American popular music poured into the American base camps in Japan. Japanese boys and girls encountered American pops at the parties there. In the meantime, some Japanese musicians started to play American pops in the 1950s.

And then they made the Japanese version of American pops; they added the Japanese lyrics to American songs. “*Kodomoja Naino*” sung by Mieko Hirota, the first big hit of Japanese pops, was based on “Don’t Treat Me Like A Child” written by J. F. Schroeder & M. E. Hawker.

Gradually, Japanese song writers came to write their own songs in their mother tongue. “*Ueo Muite Alukou*” sung by Kyu Samamoto topped the Billboard, the American hit chart. Americans loved that song calling it “*Sukiyaki*”.



Mieko Hirota



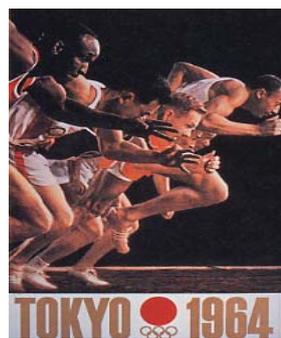
Kyu Sakamoto

Beatlemania in Japan

The high speed of the *Shinkansen* symbolized the rapid economic recovery of Japan. Its high speed gave the Japanese a feeling that their future was bright. The Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964 was an epoch-making event which showed the world that Japan was no longer a developing country but a developed country.



Hikari on a trial run



The poster of the Tokyo Olympic Games

The symbolic phenomena mentioned above allowed the Japanese teenagers to buy the Beatles' records. That is how Japan became the one and only country in Asia which could accept the Beatles without big delay after England.

In 1966, the Beatles came to Japan. Even though some schools prohibited students from going to the concerts, many students enjoyed the Beatles' show at the *Budokan*.



The Beatles at *Budokan*



The Tempters (GS)

The Beatles taught Japanese youth to have fun, to wear flashy clothes, to dance to wild rock 'n' roll music to be themselves, not copies of their parents. So Japanese boys began to form rock 'n' roll bands as soon as they could play two or three chords. As a result, many professional rock 'n' roll groups were born in Japan. They were called "Group Sounds" (GS).

The Influence of the Counterculture

The counterculture in the 1960s in America reached the universities' campuses in Japan in the early 1970s. The campuses were filled with T-shirts and blue jeans, the uniform

of hippies, and anti-war folk music. The folk music became the main stream of the Japanese music scene led by Takuro Yoshida and Shigeru Izumiya. College folk music with having fewer political messages also prospered,

The rock sound and the social message of folk music were put together by Happy End, Their sound was more sophisticated than that of GS. In addition, their lyrics were more artistic than that of Japanese folk music. The music in the 1970s was called “New Music”.



Takuro Yoshida

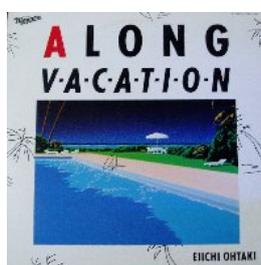


Happy End

High-quality Music

After breaking up, the members of Happy End made their way into various musical fields. Takashi, Matsumoto became a songwriter for Japanese pop idols. He drastically developed the lyrics of Japanese pops with his intelligence and sophistication. Eiichi Otaki started to pursue his solo activities. His first solo album, *A Long Vacation*, had a strong impact on the Japanese music scene. It was the cream of Japanese pops. Haruomi Hosono formed Yellow Magic Orchestra (YMO) with Ryuichi Sakamoto, a composer of the theme song for ‘Merry Christmas!, Mr. Laurence’ in which David Bowie starred. Shigeru Suzuki formed Tin Pan Alley with Masataka Matsutoya. Tin Pan Alley made their own albums, but at the same time, they played for other musicians like Yumi Arai(later called Yumin) and Tatsuro Yamashita.

Thanks to the Happy End family, the quality of Japanese pops got a lot better. Besides, Japanese pops came to possess internationality with its high-quality sounds in the 1980s.,



Album Jacket



YMO



Yumin

“Automatic” by Hikaru Utada

The word of J-POP became popular in the early 1990s with the repeated trial and error for its improvements since the 1950s. Putting the J into its general term for music showed

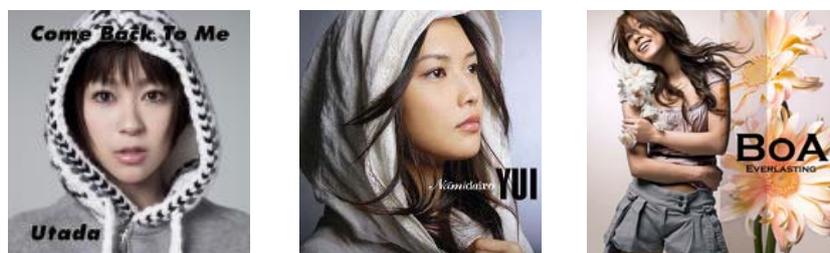
the confidence of the Japanese music world.

It was with the appearance of Hikaru Utada on the Japanese music scene in 1999 that the influence of black music on J-POP became distinct. She was born and grew up in New York. She was educated in English, but talked with her family in Japanese.

Her musical background is based on R&B, soul music and hip hop music. On the other hand, her sharp linguistic sense is a gift from her bilingual situation at home. The lyrics of “Automatic”, her big hit song, show her exceptional ability to express the time.

It was the first time in “Automatic” that a female singer called her boyfriend *kimi* instead of *anata*. Before “Automatic”, men used to call their girlfriends *kimi* whereas women call their boyfriends *anata*. The word *anata* had some connotation that women should be subordinate to men. Therefore, her calling her boyfriend *kimi* had some influence on changing the male-dominated relationship between lovers. After “Automatic”, Yui, BOA and other younger singers came to use *kimi* in their songs.

In “Automatic”, Hikaru Utada sings “I feel warm when I touch the twinkling computer screen”. The older generation never feels warm in their heart when they touch their digital electric appliances. They feel warm only when they touch living things. “Automatic” was a symbolic song that the time was changing to the digital era from the analog era.



J-POP in Other Countries

J-POP now has been enjoying its prosperity in Asia. Many Asian singers have been releasing cover versions of J-POP and many of them are catching on in their own countries. For example, Meas Sok Sophea, a Cambodian singer, released her new single, “Come Back to Me”. Of course, it is the Cambodian version of the song by Hikaru Utada. You can hear it on every street corner of Phnom Penh. LISA, a Swedish singer, made an album consisting of Keisuke Kuwata’s songs. J-POP is becoming global. So, the future of J-POP seems to be bright!!!

