

THE ROUGH GUIDE to the music of

Japan

The days of Japanese music being perceived at both ends of the scale as the worst excesses of idol pop or inaccessible traditional music are hopefully over. In truth, Japanese musicians have for years been skillful at blending the traditional with the pop, absorbing foreign influences into their own music and inventing some of the world's craziest concoctions. A strict master-to-disciple learning system and cultural preservation has meant that traditions have been upheld and updated by younger musicians on the outer fringes.

Contemporary Japanese musicians have discovered a confidence in their identity, leading not just Asia but increasingly the world in creating exciting directions in electronica, dance, jazz, avant-garde, rock and other genres. This confidence in musicians as creators rather than

copyists has translated itself into Japanese roots music, too, with *shamisen* (lute) players becoming household names. Since the 1930s, and even earlier, Japanese traditional melodies were combined with mambo, samba, other Latin rhythms, Hawaiian music and jazz. American and Western pop and rock influences gradually took over, leading to largely Westernized music by the late 1960s, a trend which, apart from some notable exceptions, continued through the 1970s.

During the first 'world music' boom from the end of the 1980s, Japanese musicians began to consider what they could offer. They found that, although local folk music, *minyo*, had largely died out on the mainland, the unique local sound was still very much alive as a part of everyday life in the southern islands of Okinawa. Musicians started to incorporate Okinawan elements into

their music, creating a new roots music scene. In Okinawa, artists who had been playing for years suddenly found themselves leading this trend. The effect of this first boom in Okinawan roots music had positive effects throughout Japan. Many musicians began to realize that, in the recent past, good local music was produced in their own birth places too, and set about rediscovering the sounds that their parents might have grown up with. Copying Americans was no longer cool, whereas being yourself was.

The search for home-grown roots music deepened through the 1990s. Up in the north in Hokkaido, the Ainu (native Japanese) had been ignored for years, to the extent that many Ainu would rather hide their heritage. Today, contemporary Ainu music is one of Japan's most popular styles of 'world music'. In the deep

south, the tiny island of Amami Oshima, situated halfway between Japan and Okinawa, was considered as a backward place that hadn't kept pace with the rest of Japan, but this image changed as Amami Oshima became a hotbed of folk music. Even more than in Okinawa, music had survived and thrived, developing naturally among a growing band of young singers and *shamisen* players, learning from elder musicians.

This album encompasses all these various styles of music from ancient *gagaku* that sounds almost as it would have done 1,200 years ago to a recent *shamisen* bluegrass concoction. It introduces music from the current hotbeds of roots music from opposite ends of the islands Ainu and Amami, the most quintessential Japanese music of all, *enka*, post-war boogie-woogie that inspired a defeated nation, brilliant

World's craziest concoctions

Japan

sounds that defy
all categories



innovators of traditional instruments, Okinawan legends, music of the floating world inhabited by geishas a hundred years ago, culminating in a twenty-piece free-jazz orchestra inspired by the futuristic Sun Ra Arkestra (some of whom feature on the recording) and ancient *butoh* dance. An album that defies categories, challenges stereotypes and highlights some of the most potent musical forces of the East.

MICHIKO SUGA – Festivals take place across Japan throughout the year at temples and shrines of all sizes. Huge *taiko* drums beat to the rhythm of the *mikoshi* (portable shrine), or rows of kimono-clad ladies dance in sequence and sing in unison. Ushibuka Haiya Matsuri takes place every April on the coast in Amakusa in Kyushu. The song and dance originated during the Edo period (1603–1868), when women would perform

for the entertainment of the crews from the ships. These days, some three thousand women of all ages dance to this song down the street.

CHANCHIKI – Chanchiki embrace *minyō*, local folk music. *Minyō* formed an integral part of daily life, celebrating various festivities. Until the 1960s, *minyō* songs and melodies pervaded the popular music scene, while today people have mostly lost connection with them. The leader of Chanchiki, Tsutom Tanaka, wanted to inject a fresh energy to *minyō*, restoring the balance between tradition and creation by pursuing almost forgotten repertoire and adding Western instruments and elements of rock, Latin, African and other styles.

NAMI MAKIOKA – The island of Amami is the last drop of Kagoshima, Kyushu, the southern of the

four islands that comprise Japan. Amami lies geographically and musically between Japan and Okinawa, a unique hybrid of the two. As on Okinawa, the main instrument is the three-stringed snakeskin banjo, the *sanshin*. The music, however, is played in a minor scale, as in the rest of Japan. Amami has one of the most vibrant local roots music scenes, with a host of young musicians playing traditional music and updating it in ingenious ways. Born in 1983, Nami Makioka made her first record in 2002, with this track taken from her latest album from 2007.

TAKASHI HIRAYASU – Born in Okinawa in 1952, a young Takashi Hirayasu played guitar with rock bands at bars catering for the American GIs during the Vietnam War. He soon became interested in Okinawan *shima uta* (island songs) and learned the *sanshin*. He joined

Shokichi Kina and Champloose as guitarist and took part in the classic *Bloodline* album that featured Ry Cooder in 1980. This track is taken from his first solo album (1998), and features ex-Nenes vocalist Misako Koja. Takashi went on to record two internationally acclaimed albums with Bob Brozman and has toured worldwide.

OKI DUB AINU BAND – This group has become one of Japan's most successful world music exports, which is ironic because Oki himself doesn't really see himself as Japanese but a proud Ainu, indigenous Japanese. Before Oki arrived plucking his *tonkori*, a brittle-stringed instrument, the music of the Ainu had been virtually forgotten, reduced to being heard in tourist villages in Hokkaido, home to most of the remaining Ainu living in Japan. Upon

Chanchiki



Nami Makioka



Oki Dub Ainu band



discovering his ancestry (he is half-Ainu, half-Japanese), Oki began his mission to bring the music of the Ainu into the modern age. He combines ancient Ainu sounds with dub, reggae and world sounds.

RYUKYU UNDERGROUND – Okinawa’s music scene encompasses *minyo* and *shima uta* (‘island songs’) with pop, indie rock and dance. Small, dark clubs reverberate to the latest beats, contrasting with the white sand beaches and natural beauty of the island. UK/US duo Ryukyu Underground emerged from this atmosphere and mix of cultures. Keith Gordon and Jon Taylor set out to combine the traditional sounds with electronic production and other influences. Their first two albums (2002 and 2003) became instant hits in Japan. Tracks from these albums were passed on to leading remixers and DJs for the two-CD set *Ryukyu Remixed* (2004), including this track, given a remix by Los Angeles producer-DJ Saru.

SEIJIN NOBORIKAWA – Born in 1930, Seijin Noborikawa is probably Okinawa’s most loved and respected elder musician, although he doesn’t fit easily into the ‘traditional’ musician category. He composes his own protest songs, developed a six-string *sanshin*, and is known as the ‘Okinawan Jimi Hendrix’ for his fast *sanshin* playing. He started recording from the 1950s, but it was after his starring role in the 1999 film *Nabbie No Koi* that his fame spread to the rest of Japan. ‘Asadoya Yunta’ is one of Okinawa’s most famous traditional songs.

SOUL FLOWER MONONOKE SUMMIT – This group is the acoustic version of Soul Flower Union. Formed in the wake of the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995, the group took to the streets to play for the victims. This track is taken from their album *Deracine Ching-Dong* and is their usual blend of Okinawan *sanshin*, the *chindon* drum plus accordion, *hayashi* backing vocals and the rasping vocals of Takashi Nakagawa. It was written in 1908 by Azenbo Soeda (1872–1944), a political street singer who was reduced to silence by the authorities after the 1920s.

HAJIME IKOMA – People have long enjoyed dancing at their summer *bon odori* festival in the Kawachi suburb of Osaka, when the souls of ancestors return from the dead. Kawachi Ondo developed unlike other *ondo* (dance music), the lyrics describing current events, the music embracing 1970s soul, reggae, electric guitar and string sections, and being performed in various venues throughout the year. The musicians perform on a raised stage, around which the audience dance in their kimonos. Various stars of Kawachi Ondo became known throughout the country and it became a source of pride for the working classes of Osaka. ‘Kawachi No Ryu’ is one of Hajime Ikoma’s best-known hits.

TADAO SAWAI – The thirteen-stringed zither, *koto*, is one of the most important traditional instruments. Tadao Sawai (1937–1997) excelled in updating *koto*, and his compositions are some of the most performed of the last fifty years. His influence on younger players is immense – his

thoroughly inventive approach changed the rules of *koto* composition. Sawai performed worldwide before his untimely death, but left behind a legacy of over seventy compositions. This track, played by Sawai, is based on one of Japan’s best-known melodies, ‘Sakura Sakura’.

KUNAICHO GAKUBU – Kunaichi Gakubu is the Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency, comprising about thirty members, who perform *gagaku* for official occasions at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo and elsewhere. *Gagaku* is an ancient form of Japanese classical music and has been performed at the Imperial Court for about 1,200 years. A *gagaku* ensemble uses a number of unique instruments, such as *hichiriki* (a small bamboo pipe), *sho* (a mouth organ with seventeen pipes), *kakko* (small barrel drum), *dadaiko* (large barrel drum) and *shoko* (brass gong).

TENDAI SHOMYO, TATSUYA KOUMAZAKI & PANGEA – *Shomyo* is the Japanese version of Buddhist chants, the adding of melodic patterns to sacred Buddhist words in Sanskrit and other texts. Tendai Shomyo is one of the main Buddhist sects, founded in the ninth century at Enryakuji Temple on Mount Hiei. For 1,150 years it has been passed down from master to disciple. On this recording Tatsuya Koumazaki plays an acoustic guitar made from paulownia wood, as is the *koto*, the sound halfway between the two instruments, creating a rare combination of different Japanese traditions and instrumentation.

KOTSURU TADE – The twang of the *shamisen* has been heard in Japan at least since the beginning of the seventeenth century. The *shamisen* arrived in Japan via Okinawa, who first adapted the instrument from the Chinese *saxian* into the *sanshin*. This instrument has the greatest variety of uses in Japanese music; it is the backbone of kabuki music, folk music and the chosen instrument of geishas. This piece is an example of *kouta* (short song), performed by geisha in the pleasure quarters, with often playful lyrics about love.

TAKEHARU KUNIMOTO & THE LAST FRONTIER – Takeharu Kunimoto first heard American bluegrass on the radio when he was fourteen. The following year he saw Bill Monroe play live and shook hands with him after the concert which inspired him to take up the mandolin and form a Bill Monroe tribute band at school. By the time he was nineteen he started learning the *shamisen* and had become fascinated with *rokyoku* (traditional style storytelling). Over the years he developed his own wacky style of *rokyoku*, playing rock ‘n’ roll on the *shamisen* and telling amusing stories, dropping in the occasional bluegrass tune. In 2003, he went to East Tennessee State University to study bluegrass and formed his own band, The Last Frontier. ‘Appalachian Shamisen’ is the ultimate melding of his two musical passions.

SHIZUKO KASAGI – During World War II popular music was somewhat hijacked by the government for patriotic purposes. In post-war Japan, the

positive tone of the 1930s returned, as Japanese elements were mixed with American music and other styles in one of the most creative periods in popular music. The greatest songwriter during this period was Ryoichi Hattori (1907–1993) whose body of work laid the foundation for post-war *enka*. 'Tokyo Boogie Woogie' was one of Hattori's biggest hits, recorded in 1948 by Shizuko Kasagi, who was one of the most popular stars of the day – known as 'The Queen of Boogie'. This song, along with others, helped revive the spirit of the Japanese people and symbolized a new optimism.

HARUMI MIYAKO – *Enka* is in many ways the most quintessential of Japanese music, compared to French *chanson* or Italian *canzone*. *Enka* connects individuals with their dreams and heartaches. Hibari Misora (1937–1989) was Japan's greatest *enka* singer, but Harumi Miyako could perhaps

lay claim to the present crown. Born in 1948 in Kyoto, her mother taught her various singing techniques, including *unari*, singing an important phrase of a song with a growling voice. For two decades, since her first record in 1964, she was one of the most popular singers in Japan. In 1984, she decided to quit, citing exhaustion, however, she came out of retirement in 1990.

MORIO AGATA – Born in 1948, Morio Agata was one of the 'gentle generation' of singer-songwriters of the early 1970s, influenced by US folk/rock and hippy culture. Agata's music evoked the spirit of 1920 and 1930s Japanese popular music, mixing Japanese melodies with Western instrumentation. The producer Makoto Kubota was one of pioneers of Japan's burgeoning world music scene in the 1980s. 'Tokyo Bushi' was a

popular 1920s song with lyrics set to the tune of 'Marching Through Georgia'.

SHIBUSASHIRAZU – Shibusashirazu is a unique loose collective of around twenty musicians. Founded in 1989, the band comprises some of Japan's top free and improvised jazz musicians, combining experimental and avant-garde jazz with elements of rock, punk, Japanese pop and traditional music. In concert they feature *butoh* dancers, 'groove-dance' girls and props that turn the stage into a piece of art. They've forged a considerable live reputation in Japan and in Europe. This track features members of the Sun Ra Arkestra, probably their nearest counterparts in the West.

Paul Fisher is the founder of Far Side Music (www.farsidemusic.com) the leading specialist in music from East Asia. Aside to selling thousands of titles, booking Asian artists to perform around the world, releasing, compiling and producing numerous CDs, Paul is also a broadcaster, DJ, journalist and cameraman. Paul would like to thank Naoyuki Iwami, Kenichi Takahashi, Takeshi Inoue, Yuki Kishi and Makoto Kubota for their help with this album.

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Ryukyu Underground



Seijin Noborikawa



Soul Flower Mononoke Summit



Tatsuya Koumazaki



Takeharu Kunimoto



Shibusashirazu



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