

## 「J-music」

— The New Japanese Music Industry : The East Reinvents The West —

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### INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this research was to understand the very nature of modern Japanese popular music, its origins, as well as the evolutionary processes it went through during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another of its objectives was to understand the current structure of the music industry, alongside with the impact capitalism and consumerism had over music in Japan. Overall, we tried to answer the following questions :

- **Is there a real ‘Japanese sound’ that makes Japanese music different from other types of music ?**
- **How did J-pop came to sound the way it sounds today ?**
- **How is the music industry shaped today? What kind of relationship do record companies and artists share ?**
- **How do Japanese people consume music nowadays ? How is the digitalization of music affecting Japan and does it signifies the future death of the music industry ?**
- **Can J-pop generate fanbases outside Japan ?**

### METHODOLOGY

We attempted to answer the above questions in two parts. The first part explored the origins of Japanese traditional music before the arrival of Western music, as well as the evolution of Japanese popular music throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It eventually aimed at understanding what the term ‘J-pop’ defined from a musicological and sociological point of view. Though this part may be common knowledge for Japanese people, it aimed at giving Westerners an overall understanding of J-pop’s past. The second part analyzed the current structure of the Japanese music industry, how J-pop is being consumed by the Japanese nowadays, and how it is developing outside Japan.

## **ABSTRACTS OF EACH CHAPTER**

### **CHAPTER 1 -FROM JAPANESE TRADITIONAL MUSIC TO J-POP: EVOLUTION OF THE JAPANESE POPULAR GENRE THROUGHOUT THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND ON TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup>**

#### **(1) The Roots of Japanese Traditional Music**

We begin our research with a brief overview of the way modern Japanese music has evolved from its traditional to its modern forms from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. We look at the traditional Japanese emphasis on melody and singing (as opposed to harmony and rhythm in Western countries and Africa), partly due to the early lack of instruments, the oral tradition of passing on songs from one generation to another, and antiphonal singing in rural communities. The most widespread traditional instruments (Shamisen, Koto, etc.) and their tetrachord scale, as well as the syllabic segmentation of the Japanese language in song lyrics also played an important role in shaping the Japanese perception of melody, harmony and rhythm.

#### **(2) Evolution of Japanese Popular Music Across the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

We then venture into the different phases of the evolution of Japanese popular music across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Starting with the first foreign influence of American and Filipino jazz bands traveling to Japan in the 1920s, the first mix of Western and traditional music gave birth to new genres and words, such as Enka, Ryūkōka or Kayōkyoku. In the 1960s, these genres develop further into more modern forms of popular music such as folk and rock 'n' roll (following the Western musical evolution), further spreading with the development of radio and television broadcasting. In the 1970s, the technology boom influences popular music sounds through the increasing use of synthesizers, giving birth to the 'New Music' appellation. In the 1980s, music and technology merge further, along with the increased marketing of produced young idols and bands. In the 1990s, the term 'J-Pop' takes over the whole Japanese music industry, symbolizing the fact Japanese popular music is finally emancipating from its Western counterpart, even if the word was originally created to differentiate Japanese popular music from foreign music. Finally, in the 2000s, the globalization of music markets, widespread internet use and music digitalization changed the rules of the game for the Japanese music industry.

### **CHAPTER 2 – THE JAPANESE MUSIC INDUSTRY TODAY: CURRENT STRUCTURE, MUSIC CONSUMPTION AND GLOBALIZATION (AS OF 2010)**

In this second part, we attempt to analyze the overall structure of the Japanese music industry as it is today. We analyze the roles of the involved parties, the way music is composed, promoted and distributed, as well as the influence of globalization and

digitalization on the music market.

### (1) Current Structure of the Japanese Music Industry

First, we focus on the main record companies in Japan, and study the nature of their relationship with artists. As of 2010, the Japanese music industry is still dominated by the 'big four' major record companies (Universal music Japan, Sony BMG, EMI Music Japan and the Warner Music Group), by other powerful agencies such as the Avex Group or Johnny's Entertainment, as well as their associated 'jimusho' (artist promotion and management companies). Because of their expanded business network and exclusivity rights for air play on national television channels and radio stations, the big four control most of the music promotion network in the country, leaving very few room for independent labels to reach the audience. However, many independent labels are also included into the system, 'breeding' young talents before passing them on to major record companies.

Analyzing the relationship between record companies and artists, we see that the types of contracts and services they have been engaging in has roughly been similar to those of their foreign counterparts, although specifics vary from one company to another (especially concerning the ownership of copyrights and royalties). However, one main difference may be that while artists usually retain the intellectual property of songs in Europe or America, record companies generally own both the executive and intellectual rights on the artists' recordings in Japan. Due to these terms, many artists in the major industry remain in debt or bound to their record company over long periods of time.

Regarding the impact of technology on record companies' activity, we see that three main trends have been emerging in the last decades: the decrease of the average amount of necessary funds both for music recording and CD manufacturing, as well as a radical shift in the main profit source in musical activity (from CD sales to merchandizing and concert tickets sales). These three aspects brought great changes in the J-Pop industry over the 2000s. Overall, in comparison to the 80s or 90s, we see record companies taking much less risk in signing independent artists today, focusing on long-time best-sellers and produced artists such as young idols and boys bands. Concerts and performances increasingly become a show aimed at promoting the artist's image, and music is pushed into the background.

### (2) Music Consumption in Japan Today

We then observe how Japanese people consume music nowadays, and the way it affects the industry. With the quick evolution of technology leading to widespread internet use and increased music piracy in the 2000s, the digitalization of music has taken over the country like the rest of the world. An increased number of Japanese people claim to listen to music on portable devices while on the move (on their way to school/work), and on their computer rather than CD players while at home. However, national

polls and surveys show that Japanese people remain much more prone to buy CDs today than their Western counterparts. We found that this is partly due to the strong development of the artist's image marketing and 'package business' in Japan. Spending money for one's favorite artists by buying related goods seems to be especially important for fans, giving them the impression they are 'breeding' their favorite artist, and buying him/her as a whole along with every piece of merchandizing. The 'package business' is especially developed with young boys bands and idols.

### (3) J-pop, Digitalization and Globalization

Finally, we look at the impact of globalization over Japanese music, as well as the influence of J-Pop overseas. We analyze the influence of English over Japanese popular music lyrics and how it carved new values and ways of perceiving foreign countries. We then look at the influence of J-Pop over Asia, and especially its influence on K-Pop and C-pop, early imitators of the genre in Korea and China who are now taking their turn in emancipating. We then examine the first impacts of J-Pop outside Asia, how it is perceived in the West and the birth of its first Western fanbases. We then reflect upon how Japanese popular music has been shaping social bonds and values over the last decades, and in that sense, how it can be perceived as a new form of culture.

## CONCLUSION

What appears clearly by looking at the evolution of the Japanese music industry is that its extreme vertical structure brought a high level of control in the hands of major record companies over the promotion network early in history, and bipolarization between major and independent labels therefore developed much quicker than in the West.

Like in any other country, music appeared in Japan centuries before the 'industry'. Among the many influences brought by the West during the 20th century, the one that changed traditional Japanese music the most were probably capitalism and consumerism, but they were emphasized by vertical social structures in Japan. Music was turned into a product, was put a price on and started to be consumed for its social significance rather than for its real value early in Japanese history. Idolization and the star system turned music into a 'package' where music became a support, not the core focus. What is consumed in music nowadays is rather the image of the artist him/herself. It is especially obvious in Japan with 'artists' such as idols&boys bands from Johnny's management, whose popularity persists while the phase is long gone in the West. Consuming a chosen artist is a way to express, define, individualize and associate oneself with a reference group. This is especially important in large urban societies like the one in Tokyo, where accelerated consumerism is disintegrating people's identity, cultural

references and social bonds. With music now going digital and CD sales dropping, the industry's empire crumbles, and record companies hold on to their 'products', kicking musicians off the sinking boat.

As we see it, the crisis of the industry marks the end of the 'music as record consumption' era, but not the end of music. The industry is crumbling down, unable to make enough money out of records any more, and forced to turn its attention on other sources of revenues. On the other hand, digitalization takes us back to a point where music is exchanged and shared freely again, and where musicians can make a living out of gifts and donations during performances, just as it was before the birth of the industry.

Though music will definitely survive, it is hard to make clear assumptions about the future of the industry. What we can predict is that digitalization may put an end to the oligarchical network established by major record companies as we know it. But what kind of system will replace it is anybody's guess. In Japan, the major industry's network is so firmly established that it is hard to imagine a rise to power from independent music and labels, like it is now the case in the U.S., but why not? Does the end of music consumption marks the beginning of a new era for society as a whole, or did the consumption cycle for music simply ended too fast compared to other industries? In the latter case, what will happen to music and musicians, freed from the industry's claw but still living in a society that abide by the rhythm of the consumption clock?

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