

Echoes of Change: Mariya Takeuchi and the 1980s Japanese Pop Music Scene

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This paper explores the music scene in 1980s Japan, focusing on the socio-economic and cultural factors that influenced the evolution of J-pop and city pop style. Through deep analysis on the music market, technological advancements, and the role of instruments, we examine how these elements shaped the distinctive sound of the era. The study is focused on the artist Mariya Takeuchi, with a particular emphasis on her iconic song *Plastic Love*. By analyzing the lyrics, musical composition, and the resurgence of in 21st century, we uncover its impact on contemporary artists and internet culture. The research highlights how historical contexts and music trends of the 1980s, not only influenced Mariya Takeuchi's music style and career but also left a lasting imprint on the music industry. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the *Plastic Love* and the 1980s Japanese music scene.

Introduction

Historical Context and Economic Influence on the Japanese Music Market

The development of City Pop cannot be understood without considering Japan's dramatic transformation in the Shōwa era. Recovering the economy from WWII, technology rebuilding, and westernizing led Japan to an economic explosion known as the "Japanese Economic Miracle", citizens were facing modernization and enjoying the bubble economy (Chang). As Japan rebuilt itself from the devastation of war, the government's focused investment in technology and infrastructure paved the way for unprecedented growth.

During this time, the Japanese public experienced a significant increase in disposable income and a shift towards consumerism, which directly impacted the

entertainment, automobile, and music industries. Influenced by Western culture, traditional Japanese companies have been introduced to new musical styles and technologies. Technology news and analysis website Engadget published an article by Marc, describing “From the '70s onward, synthesizers have been just as integral to pop music as electric guitars. Yamaha (along with a handful of other brands like Roland, Korg and Sequential) has served as an industry innovator, and in turn has helped shape the sonic characteristics of various genres.” Companies like Yamaha and Roland were at the forefront of these making the first step, revolutionizing music production with synthesizers, keyboards, and drum machines that would become staples in the emerging genres.

This era also brings massive of digital media to families all across Japan as the radio widely spreads the music into everyone’s ear. Economic prosperity allowed consumers to engage more with leisure activities, including purchasing music records and tapes, which in turn influenced the music industry’s direction towards more Westernized pop sounds (Herd). Those elements set the stage for the unique development environment of City Pop, reflecting a nation in transition and eager to project its newfound global identity.

The Growth and Distinctiveness of City Pop

City pop, merging prominently in the late 1970s, captured the essence of Japan’s vibrant urban culture during a period of significant economic prosperity. This genre was distinctly marked by its synthesis of traditional Japanese musical elements with heavy influences from Western music styles such as disco, funk, R&B, and jazz.

During this era, Japan's music market was significantly transformed by the influx of Western pop culture, while mixing video game music and taking advantage of recording technology. This was a period when Japanese companies like Yamaha began manufacturing electronic musical instruments, revolutionizing the soundscapes of modern music ("The Origin and History of the Yamaha Brand"). The use of synthesizers, drum machines, electric keyboards, and guitars became commonplace, marking a departure from traditional acoustic sounds to more 'virtual' and synthesized audio experiences.

City Pop stood out due to its ability to blend these new sounds with a visual and lyrical style that gives audiences the impression of an urban experience. Electric guitar and keyboard with distortion effect evoke imagery of nighttime cityscapes, neon lights, and high-speed cars on the Shuto Expressway.

However, City Pop was not merely an escapist fantasy, it also carried the information of the bubble economy as people wasting their time and money on things that did not belong to them. By incorporating both local and global influences, City Pop was not only shaped but was also shaped by the socio-economic conditions of Japan during the Shōwa era. It represents a period of cultural flux and creativity, capturing a distinctive moment in Japanese cultural and musical history.

Artist introduction

Mariya Takeuchi, born in 1955 in Taisha, Shimane, Japan, emerged as a pivotal figure in the city pop genre during the late 20th century. Growing up Japan's post-war economic boom, known as the "Japanese Economic Miracle", Mariya's formative years

were marked by a nation rapidly transforming under Western influence and technological advancement. Her social class afforded her significant educational opportunities, which were crucial in a society where economic status often dictated access to resources and cultural exposure (“Mariya Takeuchi Biography”).

In her adolescence, Mariya's musical journey took a pivotal turn when she attended Rock Falls Township High School in Illinois as an exchange student. This experience not only honed her English language skills but also let her close connected with the Western musical styles, which were instrumental in shaping her later work. The intersection of her Japanese identity and her exposure to American culture during this period amplifies the complex interplay of nationality and cultural exchange in her music, which could be demonstrated by the lyrics in her older composing period. Upon returning to Japan, Mariya chose to major in English Literature—a decision that reflected her continued engagement with Western culture. Her educational choices, particularly her focus on a subject dominated by Western narratives, underscore how gender and social class interacted to shape her path. In Japan's male-dominated music industry, Mariya's family background and education set her apart, supporting her to have the opportunity to study abroad and get a higher education.

Mariya's career, therefore, can be seen as a dialogue between her Japanese roots and her Western influences, challenging traditional gender norms and expectations within the Japanese music scene. Her songs often incorporate themes of love and self-reflection, a blend of East and West, which appeals to diverse demographics. This balance of influences not only helped her navigate the complexities of the music industry as a

woman but also positioned her as a cultural ambassador, bridging diverse musical and cultural worlds.

Music Analysis

Plastic Love by Mariya Takeuchi is a classic example of the Japanese City Pop music genre, which became extremely popular in the late 1970s and 1980s. The song was originally released in 1984, written by Tatsuro Yamashita who is Mariya's husband. The song got an uptick in the 21st century again as social media widely spread the chilling mood.

Apple Music: <https://music.apple.com/us/album/plastic-love/1591437245?i=1591437487>

Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/track/7rU6Iebxzlvqy5t857bKFq>

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_1C2O1oIew

Instrumentation

The arrangement of *Plastic Love* features drums, piano, a prominent bass line, funky guitar riffs, and soft, sweeping synth pads. The use of a distorted electric guitar for the solo sections enhances its funky and sultry atmosphere, which is a staple in many City Pop tracks, evoking a feeling similar to lo-fi music.

Music Production

The song *Plastic Love* is set to a tempo of 102 BPM in a 4/4 beat and is in D minor. This tempo was common in Japanese music of that era. The D minor chord lends

an energetic atmosphere, while the bass guitar provides a deep backdrop that evokes the mood of fog and neon lights.

In the main theme, the songwriter uses the D minor scale, starting with a G minor 9 chord at 00:01:25. This transitions into an E-flat scale descending to D minor and G7 by 00:01:29. Uniquely, instead of using an A7 chord, the songwriter opts for an E-flat 7, creating a more dynamic and funky feeling as we listen.

In the next section, the songwriter transitions from D to G minor (00:01:35 – 00:01:38), then introduces the keys A, D-flat, and E, before returning to D minor. Although D minor is being as the base of the music, still there's a lot of use of Dorian mode, rather than the traditional D minor scale, which adds an element of surprise and keeps the audience engaged.

Lyrics Analysis

The theme of the music explores the perspective of a woman who doubts the existence of true love, viewing the relationships are plastic and fragile. Instead, she thinks they are disposable items and treats love as games. In the lyrics analysis, verse and chorus would be mainly discussed.

Verse:

突然のキスや熱いまなざしで
恋のプログラムを狂わせないでね
出逢いと別れ上手に打ち込んで
時間がくれば終わる don't hurry!

愛に傷ついたあの日からずっと
 昼と夜が逆の暮らしを続けて
 はやりの disco で踊り明かすうちに
 おぼえた魔術なのよ I'm sorry!

The opening lines introduce a speaker who is cautious about letting romantic gestures disrupt her controlled approach to relationships. She sees love as a program, something that can be managed and timed, emphasizing a calculated detachment.

After that, the girl begins to reflect on how past heartbreak led her to a nocturnal lifestyle, seeking for the night could bring her energy. This could connect to the city aglow with red lights and green wine, the economy flourishing, a scene of a city that never sleeps. Simultaneously, this nocturnal pursuit reflects her use of nightlife and social drinking as a means to alleviate the loneliness in her heart.

Chorus:

私のことを決して本気で愛さないで
 恋なんてただのゲーム
 楽しめばそれでいいの
 閉ざした心を飾る
 派手なドレスも靴も 孤独な友だち

The chorus speaks directly, asking not to be loved seriously, as if to protect herself from further emotional pain. : “私のことを決して本気で愛さないで 恋なんてただのゲーム 楽しめばそれでいいの”, refers to “Never love me seriously, love is just

a game, enjoying it is enough”. “派手なドレスも靴も 孤独な友だち”, which can translate as: with flashy dresses and shoes, my lonely friends. The metaphor of dressing up as a closed heart with flashy attire suggests superficiality and loneliness amidst apparent glamour.

Musical-Lyrical Integration

Plastic Love uses its musical composition to reflect the song's themes, particularly the interplay between 1980s urban lifestyle and personal narratives. Funky bass lines and sweeping synth pads evoke the superficial glamour of Japan's economic bubble era. At the same time, the choice of D minor, associated with melancholy, subtly underscores themes of disillusionment amidst vibrant city life. This era was marked by economic prosperity paired with personal and social disconnections, a contrast that the song's upbeat tempo and danceable rhythm highlight, presenting an outwardly prosperous yet internally fragmented society.

The strategic use of musical elements in *Plastic Love* not only illustrates the complex emotional states within the lyrics but also paints a vivid picture of the cultural and economic atmosphere of the time. By weaving detailed production techniques with historical context, the song acts as a reflective commentary on the era's shifting attitudes toward love and relationships, encapsulating the contradictions of the period with a rich, danceable sound.

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