

ALBUMS

Candy Racer

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu

2021



7.2

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The J-pop icon and hyperpop predecessor returns with an album that looks forward even as it longs for an imagined past.

Try, if you can, to describe Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's earliest singles—like 2011's "PONPONPON" or 2012's "Tsukematsukeru"—without using the word "hyperpop." These songs predated PC Music yet presented a similar vision: pop songs so abrasively kinetic and uncannily saccharine that they begin to feel sinister. Kyary (aka Kiriko Takemura),

one of Japan's biggest pop stars, has rarely been placed in the largely Western hyperpop lineage. But her influence on the genre is hard to deny: When she first played London, Charli XCX was in attendance, and Kyary also worked with SOPHIE on a track that has yet to see the light of day. Having rewired J-pop's genre conventions and inspired many of hyperpop's foundational artists, Kyary has reinvention on her mind as she enters the second decade of her career.

Candy Racer, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's first album in three years, proposes two very different paths forward for the star. She continues to work with her longtime writer and producer Yasutaka Nakata (CAPSULE, Perfume), though there's a clear mandate to explore new sounds. In the album's first half, Kyary dials up the tempo until her slippery pop sound feels optimized for the dancefloor. The title track pairs manic marimba runs with a sped-up disco beat, while "Dondonpa" is nothing short of a galloping house track. If you encountered the latter song in a club, you might mistake Kyary's repeated chirps of "Dondonpa!" (an onomatopoeic portmanteau that evokes rapid-fire drums) for a sample—her vocals on the song are limited to that single line, plus some percussive scatting.

If the first half of *Candy Racer* decenters Kyary in her own songs, the second half recasts her image in a manner that feels even more radical. Tracks like "Perfect Oneisan" are built from the glossy synth presets and plastic horns common in vintage Japanese "city pop," and she does her best to approximate the yearning of a 1980s balladeer. Given the futuristic sheen that Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's music has always had, this might feel like a surprising pivot—though this is the same woman who named her beauty brand Nostalgia Syndrome. What's more curious is that the resurgence of city pop (and vaporwave, which often samples city pop) is a largely Western phenomenon, and Kyary is a massive star only in her home country. Both city pop and vaporwave satisfy a Western nostalgia for a past that feels slightly askew, having been filtered through pre-millennial Japanese sensibilities. Kyary is now selling that same aesthetic back to a domestic audience, alongside bottles of her signature shampoo.

If this all feels a bit meta, it's perfectly in keeping with the ethos of hyperpop, which walks a tightrope between skewering the language of commerce and outright embracing it. As with many things, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu seems to have gotten here first, by dint of working within Japan's more nakedly consumerist music industry; like many J-pop artists, she's no stranger to commercial tie-ins. But unlike most Japanese stars, she's been able to find a significant audience in the West through ambitious music videos (you could argue that she helped usher in pop's embrace of the grotesque) and her savvy use of platforms like YouTube. And so we get a song like "Natsuiro Flower," which sounds like it was pulled from the 2011 internet curio *Floral Shoppe* but was in fact recorded in 2021 by one of Japan's biggest stars, and which feels targeted at an audience of Western listeners hungry for Japanese retro-futurism. Not all of *Candy Racer* sounds like a break from the past: The album's midsection is littered with archetypical Kyary Pamyu Pamyu songs like "Kamaitachi," "Kimigaiinekuretara," and "Gum Gum Girl," which adorn bright melodies with unmistakably Japanese flourishes like shamisen. But even as it revels in new ideas, *Candy Racer* finds Kyary Pamyu Pamyu as we've always known her: just a bit more outre than her peers in the world of chart pop.

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