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David McNeill

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Interviewed by David McNeill

Japan's expat rebel with many causes blends music and a wider world view

Former Japanese pop heart-throb and musical pioneer Ryuichi Sakamoto talks to David McNeill about music, the state of the planet – and why he still reluctantly lives in New York City.

What a long, strange journey it has been for Ryuichi Sakamoto. A revolutionary firebrand in the 1960s, he morphed into a '70s techno-pop pioneer with the seminal band Yellow Magic Orchestra, which he co-founded with Hosono Haruomi and Takahashi Yukihiro. YMO became one of Japan's biggest-selling bands ever -- and even posted a late-'70s Top 20 hit in Britain with "Firecracker." The band was also a key influence on the techno and house movements that swept Western pop culture a decade later.



Multi-talented Ryuichi Sakamoto pictured during his recent interview in Tokyo.
Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert Photo

After a brief stint as a movie star in the early 1980s, including his role in Oshima Nagisa 's 1983 standout "Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence" -- for which he also wrote the soundtrack -- Sakamoto co-wrote (with Talking Heads' singer David Byrne and Cong Su) the 1987 Oscar-winning soundtrack for Bernardo Bertolucci's "The Last Emperor" -- still the best known of the many soundtracks he has written -- of which 2002's "Femme Fatale" is among his latest.

Film work, though, didn't derail Sakamoto from his music. Throughout, he has been collaborating with a wide range of creators, from rock's wild-man Iggy Pop to Brazilian pop muse Caetano Veloso.

Along the way, Sakamoto has rubbed shoulders with many of the West's rock and cultural glitterati, including David Bowie, with whom he shared a famous onscreen kiss in "Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence" He has also been a soundtrack composer for directors Brian De Palma and Oliver Stone as well as Bertolucci.

"The global view of cultures is part of my nature," says the former heart-throb. "I want to break down the walls between genres, categories or cultures."

Sakamoto now lives with his teenage son in New York (he and Japanese musician Akiko Yano were divorced in 2002), and is primarily occupied as an avant-garde composer of ambient music. At 54, Sakamoto is a long way from his pop-idol prime, and has wandered far from the mainstream spotlight. Currently, he is collaborating with cerebral German ambient musician Carsten Nicolai. On stage the two are a study in contrasts: The classically trained Sakamoto sways and bows in concentration over his acoustic piano, while Nicolai stands almost unmoving, like a member of fellow German pioneering electronic group Kraftwerk, coaxing blips and bleeps from his computers. Their six-year collaboration has yielded three albums, including 2003's acclaimed "Vrioon."



Working a 20,000-plus crowd with his samplers and synths on stage at Rock in Japan Fes. 2005 in Ibaraki Prefecture. David Hickey Photo

"I'm always looking out for interesting people," says Sakamoto, whose previous long-term musical foil was David Sylvian, formerly of pop group Japan. "Somehow I see music as a garden which has a lot of different styles: contemporary, classic, ethnic, Japanese, rock & roll and so on. I can enjoy them all and there is space for them all.

Oddly, despite his impressive musical resume, Sakamoto is probably better known among many in Japan today for his environmental and political work. A longtime activist who once hung out with the radical left, he is Greenpeace Japan's most famous supporter, a staunch antinuclear campaigner and one of the founders of Stop-Rokkasho.Org, a grass-roots project trying to close the controversial nuclear reprocessing plant at Rokkasho in Aomori Prefecture.

He has led several successful campaigns against the government, including a recent petition against a law that would have banned the sale of electrical goods made before 2001. Like many musicians, Sakamoto hated the law because he said it would have forced poor budding musicians to buy new instruments. Unlike most, he fought it -- and won.

After the United States and its allies invaded Iraq in 2003, he began what he calls a "chain-music project," enlisting more than 20 other artists to collaborate together to, as he puts it, "musically mark the passage of time that Iraq is in a state of war."

He adds: "Even though the 100,000-plus Iraqi civilian and the 3,000-plus U.S. military lives lost to date can't be brought back, I want to keep this project alive and open -- until peace comes to Iraq."

Few contemporary Japanese celebrities would stick their heads so visibly above the political parapet, and Sakamoto claims his domestic career has suffered. "Obviously, Japan has some major corporations, and they are major clients of the mass media, so of course they hate me. But I'm not worried because I know what I have to do. I feel my responsibility to speak out for my own children and future generations."

Sitting comfortably in a Tokyo hotel lounge of late, Sakamoto talked about all this and more -- beginning with where he now lives.

You've lived in New York for many years. Have you ever thought about leaving?

Obviously after 9/11, I and my partner talked about moving somewhere else. We were worried about a second terrorist attack, perhaps a nuclear bomb in a briefcase. More than that, though, we were really shocked that our friends in New York turned patriotic overnight. You know, they started putting out the flags and so on. So we were searching for a safer place, maybe Kenya or Brazil. (laughs) Japan is one of the United States' strongest allies next to Britain and Italy, so Japan is obviously not safe. The only reason why we're still staying in the U.S. is the school. Our son goes to a Quaker school, very pacifist. He'll graduate in three years, and we'll move somewhere safe. Japan is one of the options, but only one.

So presumably you don't like a lot of what is going on in the world right now?

Well, I'm very worried; politically and environmentally there are a lot of problems. That's why I started the Rokkasho project with a group of others. I'm very concerned about the danger of a nuclear leak and the proliferation of plutonium, which terrorists could steal. Japan has 43 tons of plutonium now. That's 5,000 Nagasaki nuclear bombs. The plant will produce another eight tons a year. What for?! Now we have North Korea's nuclear test, so the taboo in Japan is going away and people are talking about (developing) nuclear weapons.

The basic reason for this plant is the same as Japan's unnecessary dams. It is hugely profitable for the general contractors. They know nuclear power is unnecessary and dangerous, and that it will be dangerous for hundreds of future generations because of the radioactive waste. It is just for money, and it is absurd and stupid. I mean, we have to make money to live, I'm not against that, but why not choose something safer?

I don't hear anything explicitly political in your music. Do you prefer to keep the two separate?

It's not my way to express my political opinions. I'm an instrumentalist. I'm also concerned about the way that music has been used, especially by

the Nazis. I was involved in political movements in the 1960s here. Not with the Beiheiren (peaceful student demonstrators against the Vietnam War), they were softer than us. We were radicals. I used to think then a lot about propaganda and music. But at the beginning of the 1970s, when the movements failed, I shut my mouth for 20 years because I was against using music for propaganda. I didn't like the political folk singers of the time.

Is that why you drifted into electronic music?

No, I was playing the piano since I was 3 or 4 years old, so I missed my chance to buy my first guitar. (laughs) It is just the way things worked out. I eventually became really fed up with techno music [mimics the thump-thump sound of techno]. But within the techno movement, especially in Germany, there were some amazing talents, such as Oval [pioneering '90s experimental electronica outfit]. They were within the techno movement but they were very different, they were almost like a new pop version of Stockhausen. I was really surprised. Wow. Did they know where this music comes from?

You seem to shift easily from working with artists like Iggy Pop (who many people consider the epitome of rock & roll) into avant-garde collaborations. How do you manage such shifts?

I could work with Iggy Pop tomorrow if I have to. Somehow I see music as a garden which has a lot of different styles: contemporary, classic, ethnic, Japanese, rock & roll. I can enjoy them all and there is space for them all. I can listen to Bach and Iggy Pop, though not at the same time -- Iggy is too loud. They're not completely different things. I can listen to both.

Who would you like to work with again?

David Sylvian (lead singer with '80s hit band Japan) is like a brother -- and like all brothers, sometimes we are very close and sometimes very far apart. It depends on the time. David Bowie, I like his stuff. My favorite Bowie period is [1977's albums] "Low" and "Heroes." We both live in the same city, but he is so protected; he doesn't walk around the streets so much! I see Yoko Ono sometimes; we sometimes exchange aisatsu (greetings).



David Sylvian &
Ryuichi Sakamoto,
World Citizen

Do you worry about the state of things between Japan and China?

A little, but still the problems are much lighter than those in other countries, such as the conflict between India and Pakistan a few years ago. They were almost about to start a nuclear war. Compared to that, China and Japan is almost nothing. Neighbors fight each other all the time: Look at the British and the French. (laughs)

My biggest worry is the environment. That's much more serious than political conflict. China is building 18 new nuclear plants, and Japanese companies are helping them.

Connected to that, I'm worried about corporate earth. Water is not free any more. Our resources were free at one time, but now they are not. Everything is controlled by big corporations. I'm most worried about this. I've been thinking for a long time how to implement my feelings and political thought into my music, and I haven't succeeded. It is hard to find a way to do this. I don't know how to write protest songs. I don't want to sacrifice my art. My only tool to express my feelings is music.

David McNeill writes about Japan for the London Independent and other publications. He is a Japan Focus coordinator.

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