

Ryuichi Sakamoto

Ryuichi Sakamoto has made a career of crossing musical and technological boundaries. Sakamoto has experimented with, and excelled in many different musical styles, making a name for himself in popular, orchestral, and film music. Never one to be satisfied with the status quo, Sakamoto continues to push the limits of his artistry, fusing genres, styles, and technologies for the first time to create new and exciting directions in musical expression.

In 1963, at the age of eleven, Ryuichi Sakamoto, whose musical interests ranged from the Beatles to Beethoven, began studying music composition under Professor Matsumoto at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. Eight years later, he entered Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, earning a BA in composition, and then a Masters degree with a concentration in electronic and ethnic music. In 1977, Sakamoto began working as a composer, an arranger and a studio musician with Japan's most popular rock, jazz, and classical artists, and within a few years, he became a noted producer, arranger and keyboardist.

In 1978, Sakamoto released his first solo album and formed Yellow Magic Orchestra along with Haruomi Hosono and Yukihiro Takahashi. YMO was immediately recognized as an international sensation from Japan. Their second album sold well over a million copies, led to a world tour, and made them, along with Kraftwerk, the kings of technopop. Releasing eleven albums over the next five years, YMO developed a following that continues to the present day, and their influence on the rave, techno, and ambient movements is widely recognized.

Sakamoto's interest in different types of music - jazz, bossa nova, modern classical, dub and gamelan - was evident in his writing for YMO, his own solo albums, and starting in 1983 with Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence, a series of soundtracks. That year, Sakamoto left YMO to launch his career as a solo artist and to pursue his interest in "world music." He said at the time, "I have a kind of cultural map in my head, where I find similarities between different cultures. For example, domestic Japanese pop music sounds like Arabic music to me - the vocal intonation and vibrato, and in my mind Bali is next to New York.

Maybe everyone has these geographies in their heads; this is the way I've been working." This diversity has carried over in Sakamoto's collaborations with, among others, David Bowie, David Byrne, David Sylvian, Iggy Pop, Youssou N'dour, Robbie Robertson, Caetano Veloso, as well as writers William Burroughs and William Gibson.

Sakamoto's best-known work is probably the soundtrack to Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence, but in 1987, his score for Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* won him an Oscar, a Grammy, a Golden Globe, as well as the New York, Los Angeles and British Film Critics Association awards for best original soundtrack. Since then, he has worked with Bertolucci twice (*The Sheltering Sky*, *Little Buddha*), Oliver Stone (*Wild Palms*), Pedro Almodovar (*High Heels*), and Brian De Palma twice (*Snake Eyes*, *Femme Fatale*). Sakamoto's work as a composer for film was praised by *Billboard* magazine: "[his] pieces were composed mostly as aural accompaniment to visual events - but they exist on their own as pure music, evocative and compelling without any external program. *The Last Emperor*, *Little Buddha*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Forbidden Colours* (*Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*) are some of Sakamoto's most renowned themes, each proving as evidence that he is one of the more memorable melodists working today. And these compositions - along with the epic *El Mar Mediterrani* (written for the opening ceremonies of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games) and the rarely heard *Replica* (which originated on *Musical Encyclopedia*, one of Sakamoto's genre-defying solo albums) - are an ideal introduction to the art of a composer who revels in the polyglot *Zeitgeist* that marks the end of our century."

Sakamoto made his debut as a DJ in 1997 at Stephen Sprouse's spring '98 show, which also marked Sprouse's triumphant return to the fashion world. In 1999 Sakamoto's first opera, *LIFE*, premiered with seven sold-out performances in Tokyo and Osaka. This ambitious project featured contributions and performances by over one hundred performers, including: Jose Carreras, Salif Keita, Bernardo Bertolucci, Salman Rushdie, Pina Bausch, His Holiness Dalai Lama, and members of the Frankfurt Ballet. Sakamoto closed out 1999 with his first collaboration with Robert Wilson in *THE DAYS BEFORE: Death, Destruction & Detroit III*, and with the release of his first #1 single in Japan for the solo piano piece *Energy Flow*. Sakamoto's second #1 single would follow in 2001 for the collaborative piece *Zero Landmine*, which has helped raise millions of dollars to support ongoing landmine

removal efforts around the globe in conjunction with the HALO Trust.

Sakamoto joined frequent collaborators Jaques and Paula Morelenbaum at the home of Antonio Carlos Jobim in Rio to record *Casa*, a collection of hidden treasures and some previously unrecorded material written by Jobim himself. The recording of their first release under the group name Morelenbaum2/Sakamoto was a magical experience for Sakamoto. “The whole experience was spiritual, as if Tom’s spirit came into me through the fingerprints on the keys of his piano. During one of the recordings at his house a bird suddenly sang in the middle of the song. We all thought that was Tom,” he says. This magical atmosphere was certainly captured in the recordings, as evidenced by the reaction of Jobim collaborator Vinicius de Moraes’ daughter Luciana, “Sakamoto’s musicality felt so close to that of the maestro, and this fact deeply impressed me. I might say that I had never heard such a close translation of the maestro’s melodies, and I had the privilege of listening to Tom playing many times at my grandma’s place when I was a child. What I liked most about this CD, besides the harmonic perfection, the repertoire and the interpretation was that familiar atmosphere that takes us back to one of those evenings at Tom’s house, when we talked about love, music and poetry, while in the background the most perfect Brazilian songs filled the night air. As my father wisely said in one of his lyrics, celebrating Brazilian composers, ‘we are one family, an island made of love,’ welcome to it, maestro Sakamoto.” On July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004 the group won the equivalent of a Brazilian Grammy with their TIM Award for best MPB (Música Popular Brasileira) Group. The Brazilian government further honored Sakamoto’s contribution to Brazilian music and culture by bestowing him with the Order of the Cavaleiro Admissão.

In 2005, Sakamoto managed to simultaneously return to his electropop roots and maintain his classical influences with a fusion of many musical styles on his 15<sup>th</sup> solo release, *Chasm*. In 2006, Sakamoto continued his collaboration with alva noto with two European tours and his first Asian tour in support of their releases *vrioon*, *insen*, and *repev*. In 2007 we saw Sakamoto revisit his partnership with Christian Fennesz with the release of their debut full-length album, *Cendre*, as well as the first release from Sakamoto’s collaboration with Christopher Willits, *Ocean Fire*, under the group name Willits + Sakamoto. On November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Sakamoto premiered *utp\_*, a new collaboration with Carsten Nicolai, commissioned by the city of Mannheim, Germany for the celebration of their 400<sup>th</sup>

anniversary. All the while Sakamoto remained active in film with the release of the minimalist piano score for Tony Takitani, and the orchestral scores for Shining Boy and Little Randy and Silk.

In 2007 Sakamoto premiered LIFE - fluid, invisible, inaudible..., a collaboration with Shiro Takatani, a core member of the Kyoto-based internationally active art group, dumb type, with installations at YCAM in Yamaguchi Japan and the NTT InterCommunication Center in Tokyo. While the genesis of this piece is in Sakamoto's opera LIFE (first performed in 1999, and for which Takatani created the video aspects), as is evident in the title's "fluid, invisible, inaudible ...," it revisits the resources of sound and vision in LIFE now, several years later, in this new millennium, for an entirely new deconstruction and evolution of the work.

Sakamoto recently reunited with Yellow Magic Orchestra for one performance at Al Gore's Live Earth festival on 7/7/07 in Kyoto, a performance which Rolling Stone magazine called the best reunion of the global festival. The group got back together for a performance at the Massive Attack-curated Meltdown on June 15, 2008.

Sakamoto is back in 2009 with his first new solo recording in five years, out of noise, and his first solo tour since his 2000 BTTB tour. out of noise is yet another musical achievement that manages to capture the essence of Sakamoto at this particular point in time. Perhaps as curator Diego Cortez suggests, Sakamoto has mastered the art "deconstructing the past, and the present, in order to lead us into the future with a greater scope."

A six-week tour of Japan will be captured live for sale in the iTunes Music Store within 24 hours of each performance, the first time in the world this service has been offered by iTunes. Sakamoto will be on the road in the EU performing pieces that span his career with two pianos this autumn in support of out of noise.

Sakamoto remains socially active, raising awareness about issues including the environment and anti-war efforts through projects including: LIFE, Zero Landmine, which raised millions of dollars for landmine removal, and stop-rokkasho, an evolving music

and art project aimed at bringing attention to the dangers of a nuclear reprocessing plant that opened in Japan. The Sakamoto-founded more trees organization maintains two forests, which allows the group to offer carbon offset credits to environmentally aware corporations.

With Ryuichi Sakamoto the only constant is change. The sheer breadth of musical styles he explores - even within one album - is central to his being as an artist. He feels no need to exist within musical boundaries, and he celebrates tearing them down. "This global view to the different cultures is just part of my nature. I want to break down the walls between genres, categories, or cultures. Instead of building walls or borders, I always try to combine different things. To me, it's challenging and exciting."

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