

DJ Baku

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Kaikoo, an interview with DJ Baku

As part of our special Japan update (which also includes a new interview with DJ Kentaro and an article on the Japanese tablist scene) we've caught up by email with DJ Baku, one of the most interesting artists to come out of the Tokyo underground since the turn of the century. I discovered Baku originally through a friend who sent me a copy of an EP he'd released back in 2000, a remix project with fellow Tokyo producers Goth Trad, Saidrum and Bleeder. Following this, I came across a copy of a documentary DVD this summer, called Kaikoo, which Baku released earlier on this year and which focuses on various artists from the Tokyo underground hip hop and turntablist scene (including himself, Goth Trad, Kentaro, Tatsuki, Klock and others). The documentary is one of the most interesting I've seen in recent times, giving a great picture of the artists and music that doesn't get heard of outside of Tokyo or Japan. In it Baku discusses his own career and what it's like to be an artist in Tokyo today, one of the most vibrant, chaotic and hi tech cities in the world.

All this led me to hunt him down thanks to the guys at Studio RareKwai and Hiroki Sakaida, who directed the documentary and runs the label that helped release it. Baku's work is amongst the most interesting I've heard in recent times and I felt that it was only normal we try and expose him and his work to more people in the west. With the language barrier between Europe and Japan, finding out about such underground artists is always tricky. Fans in Japan consider Baku amongst the finest DJs to come out of the new generation that has followed in the footsteps of the Japanese pioneers such as DJ Krush. While comparisons are not always the answer, some of Baku's work is very reminiscent of Krush's experimental approach to turntablism and hip hop. And as you will see in the following interview, Baku himself has something to say about this comparison. So read on for the lowdown on who Baku is, where he came from, his music, his past projects and what it's like to be a turntablist and DJ in Tokyo's underground today. A refreshing and thoroughly entertaining read with one of Japan's finest, who you'll want to get to know better.

Let's start with a bit of history. Can you tell us how you discovered hip hop, decks and scratching/turntablism?

Baku: When I saw the film 'Juice', at the age of 14. I was surprised at how the DJ had the spotlight and was entertaining all these people, because I'd always thought the DJ was merely a support for the MC. I also liked the soundtrack and the topic on companionship in the movie. And I also identified with the film as I had friends around me at the time who were also heavily into DJing and no other music.

How and when did you start getting involved in the turntablist/hip hop scene in Japan?

B: I'm still not sure whether I'm included in the framework of the Japanese Hip Hop scene to be honest, but I've always felt from back in the day that the Japanese scene was already too big to simply accept my kind of style.

I admire people who have something original to offer but I thought these people wouldn't be able to slot into the mainstream and so I never felt the need to force myself into the mainstream either. I don't bite into something but I also don't distance myself from anything. I also believe that we have to build a scene with our own hands.

What was it that made you want to start using the turntables as an instrument? When did you start thinking that you could use scratching musically, in any way you want?

B: I was never good at playing musical instruments. But with scratching I found I could express simple melodies and even emotions by the touch of the hand. For example, touch the record violently to express anger or gently to express sadness. That is the area I started to emphasise and work more on, because I liked the fact that even a musically non-

educated person like me could create an atmosphere simply through the changing of a record on a turntable.

Who have been your influences DJ wise since you started?

B: I don't really get influenced much by other artists but I guess DJ Krush-san, Q-Bert, Mix Master Mike and DJ Shadow. Sounds made by tough people like these always stay fresh I believe.

How would you describe the scene, both hip hop and turntablist, in Japan to someone who's never been there? What do you think are the good and bad points of it?

B: The good point is that in Tokyo there are so many people and sounds that there is hope for all types of Hip Hop to co-exist. I think there already are a variety of original styles being born here. The bad point is that on the whole, the scene prioritises sales and too many people try to promote their CDs before they've even built their own style. This leads to more exposure towards artists with weak content. The desire for sales is going off on a tangent and means that the light isn't always shone on the most interesting artists.

I heard that you work with a rap group in Tokyo. Could you tell us some more about how you hooked up with them and what you do within the group (production, cuts etc...)?

B: To be honest, I hardly ever hang out with them and work on tracks but I chill with them, go for drinks etc... That's as far as it goes really. Maybe this is because I respect them and value the relationship of our souls more than anything else. We often go to this Indian curry house in Kabuki-cho, Shinjuku.

I've made a few tracks for MSC in Shinjuku and I also do some cuts for them when they play live. I sometimes plan their live performances too so I guess I have the role of a producer of some kind for them.

How did the Kaikoo DVD happen? What made you want to release such a DVD exposing this talent in Tokyo to the rest of the world?

B: After Kaikoo was released I heard comments from people who felt "relieved" because I described Tokyo as chaos in the documentary. It seems hard even for people who live here to express the present Tokyo in words. I thought people wouldn't know how much dope talent were actually buried in this complex city.

They are immersed in too much information and don't realise the uncut diamonds amongst them. I think Tokyo is chaos in that sense. Chaos everywhere and I think everyone is confused because of that. I really hate loneliness and I couldn't bare the thought of no-one, not even abroad, knowing about these artists. As a DJ I also simply wanted to introduce good records and artists to people who might not know about them. So I think that I have fulfilled one of my roles as a DJ with this DVD.

You've never released a solo album yet, so will you be releasing something in the future?

B: Yeah but it's currently in production! I hope to release it next year sometime.

Having heard some of your work and seen the DVD, a lot of it reminds of DJ Krush, in the sense that it's a very

experimental approach to scratching and turntablism, but obviously with a new take on it. Do you feel as if you're continuing his work in a way or are you just doing what feels right to you?

B: I'm not trying to follow DJ Krush at all but in my mind Krush is my master. So I guess I've been heavily influenced by him, because of this way of thinking. But I wasn't exactly hanging around or chilling with him. I just went to his live shows and joined him in an interview for a magazine once and from that we ended up making a track together. When I was much younger I had this idea of what my ideal grown-up role-model would be and what I've realised now is that Krush-san was that kind of person. The fact that that very person happens to be a DJ just like me, means I have even more respect for him. Of course what I want to do now is my own style though. If I made a conscious decision to succeed DJ Krush, then I wouldn't really be repaying him for all he has taught me.

Could you tell us a bit more about the remix album you did with Goth Trad. How/why did it happen and how did you go about producing the remixes?

B: Back in '99, I thought no-one had released an instrumental album with a concept of beats with instruments scratched over it. It just so happened that talks of major distribution came in for what was originally an experimental album at the time and I took the opportunity to come in and work on it.

The whole album was built just with scratches. We kept over-dubbing it all onto the VS1680 hard disc recorder. Nowadays I mainly tend to use the MPC2000XL for making tracks and then put scratches over it. I'm not really good with computers and so for everything from sampling sounds to scratching I start from the turntable.

Are you aware of the things happening outside of Japan on the turntablist scene, like what D-Styles has been doing with the band Gunkhole, or the work of people like Ricci Rucker and Mike Boo, or even Birdy Nam Nam in Europe? The way people around the world are now using the turntable to create albums and songs entirely out of scratching or even using the turntable as just another production tool. Do you hear much about this in Tokyo?

B: I often play a 12" by Birdy Nam Nam and I really like the sound of Ricci Rucker's work too. But in my case I mostly do solo mixes so I'm not very aware on what's going on with them or around the world. I check record shops like Wenod and Power DJs over here for DVDs and records of that category.

Could you tell us some more about the Whakhakha project? (ed note: Whakhakha is a turntable band project Baku worked on in 2003, sponsored by Ortofon, and which is partly detailed in the Kaikoo documentary)

B: Myself, DJ Klock and DJ Tatsuki wanted to push Hip Hop to the next level. We just happened to be working towards the same idea at the time. DJ Tatsuki is a member of Danish band Blue Foundation so he was already supported by Ortofon. So one thing led to another and we ended up releasing the record we created and used during the shows, WhaKhaKha breaks, through Ortofon. We wanted to use our own records and effects to cross our DJ styles together and express a truly original soundscape, that was different from previous work like battle team routines. But to be honest my best project to date though was probably "ANAPHYLAXIN-SHOCK" with Goth-Trad.

What about the OIN showcase with BMX riders, could you tell us some more about that, why it started, who you do it with?

B: I've always wanted to do a showcase that would cross street sport with turntablism and I'd never seen anyone experiment with the timing of sound and movement before. When I first started to plan live shows I soon realised it would be hard to cross my sound with skateboards for example as they are airborne for such a short time. In the end I decided to work with the "flat-land" style of BMX because riders tend to do combinations of tricks for longer periods and that was

more suited to what I wanted to do, which was to jam to the riders movements.

First I play a beat that matches the rider's style. Then I sample live, adding to the beat, and watch carefully as the rider builds up to his next move and I cut the sound for a split second at the moment he goes for his trick. Then I kick the beat back in again when he lands the trick. Another technique is to start shortening the bars of the beat as the rider starts spinning. I've tried to develop the showcase so the sound and movement match each other. The two riders I jam with really understand music which is great. One of the riders, Kotaro Tanaka, has achieved great results in the world BMX championships and the other rider, Takashi Ito, runs a street-apparel brand called 430.

Can you tell us what equipment you use in your studio for productions?

I noticed you use a Kaoss Pad for some of your live performances, how useful is it for you?

B: It's actually not a Kaoss Pad but a Kaoss Mixer. I hear you don't see many on sale overseas. It's really useful as it comes with a Kaoss Pad built-in but you can't get it now in Japan either. You can use it to sample a beat live or hit the pad to make a kick sound and slow a beat down and mix with a slower beat, etc...

You can also put a flanger effect on one of the channels while you mix. It's great for creating chaos! I'm not sure when it will be out on sale but I did some work on a sales proposal for a Kaoss Mixer2 recently.

Can you tell us who's in the Dis-Defence Disc crew and how you all came together?

B: The official crew members are SKE, who is also our engineer, and Martin who does some scratching. I met them both when I was about 17 at clubs and events around Tokyo.

Is there a reason why you never entered DJ battles?

B: When I was in my teens I really wanted to enter and sent tapes a few times but I couldn't even enter the qualifiers! I think I was still very inexperienced. The presenter at the time said to us "we dropped all dirty scratches" - I still can't forget that line. I did think of entering a few times since but realised what I really wanted to do was what I do now, like an hour long set, and since then I've decided to express my world through mixtapes and longer sets rather than battles.

Do you think Japan benefits in a way from being separated from the rest of the world through language and culture? In a way you can do things without people elsewhere knowing about it or without knowing what other people are doing? Let me explain some more, I was very surprised because the work you did on the Goth Trad remixes is very similar to stuff that has been coming out of this scene around the world in the last few years, but you did that nearly 5 years ago!

And also do you find that this divide because of the language can sometimes be a problem?

B: That's very flattering and at the same time surprising. Maybe things are the way they are because we constantly strived to be original. I don't think the language barrier is a problem. The reason being that there are so many mutual values that all mankind share such as big, small, slow, fast, light, dark, odd and even. I try and pursue these universal denominators so I don't really have the need for language.

For you what's it like being a scratch DJ in Japan?

B: In Japan it's not a very commonly recognised thing. Being a scratch DJ in Japan is a bit like being an outsider.

Do you know many Japanese DJs who live outside of Japan, do you keep in contact with people in other countries?

B: I probably e-mail DJ Tatsuki, who lives in the UK, the most.

Do you have your own label? Are your previous releases available outside of Japan?

B: Dis-Defense Disc is my only label. All I do is drop mixtapes at record shops I know in Tokyo so it would be amazing to be able to distribute my material overseas.

Many thanks must go to Baku for his time and answers, Hiroki at Pop Group for helping to arrange this and all his help, and Ryo at SRK for translating it and helping conduct the interview. If you found this interview interesting then be sure to check the rest of our Japan special. For more information on Baku, Dis Defence Disc crew and his past releases, head over to the DDD site. While it's pretty much impossible to get a hold of his past releases outside of Japan, if you can read Japanese, or know someone who can, a few of them are available on Amazon Japan. You can see a trailer for the Kaikoo DVD, [here](#). The DVD is also currently only available in Japan, though we are at the moment trying to help arrange an official European release or licensing. In the meantime be sure to also check the work of SRK who are putting the finishing touches to the official European release of their own documentary about the Japanese hip hop and turntablist scene, 'Scratching the Surface: Japan'. Lastly you can check some tracks from Baku's remix EP with Goth Trad on past Turntable Radio and Rhythm-Incursions shows. Just check the archives and play lists.