

# Eastern Decknology

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Eastern decknology – a look at Japanese DJ culture and turntablism in the 21st century

## Prologue

This article has been a long time coming... for many reasons. The main one being that it has taken me nearly 2 years to find good, solid contacts in Japan and Europe, that could provide me with accurate information, and music, about the current and recent DJ and turntablist scene in the country. The other was that with the cultural and linguistic gap, it's always proved hard to be able to communicate with people over there. Still life threw me a bone, and this year through a succession of flukes (as is always the case) I've managed to finally find enough information to write this article, which looks at the new generation of Japanese turntablists, scratch DJs and DJ culture in Japan, albeit written from the western hemisphere.

Thanks must go to Studio RareKwai, Hiroki @ Pop Group, Kentaro and his brother Kotaro and Shoji @ BGPZ for helping with the source material for the article. Oh and also shout out to Sparky T for providing me with copies of Turntable Colossus and the All Star Beatdown Japan final.

Be sure to also check out the rest of our Japan special, includings interviews with Kentaro and DJ Baku.

## The chance encounter

Kaikoo is a Japanese word that roughly means 'coming across somebody or something and the chance born from that encounter'. And while this is the title of an interesting new DVD documentary about the Japanese underground tablist and hip hop scene it's also very fitting to how this article happened. Japan has for a long time exerted a sort of exotic appeal to westerners as a land of differences, where things are not quite the same, and I myself fell in love with certain aspects of Japan and its culture early on in life. Since the advent of hip hop culture over 20 years ago, Japan has also taken its place on the map as a country with a growing, and notable, local scene and fascination for this 'foreign' (and now worldwide) culture. After years of appropriation, changes and evolution, hip hop is now starting to come out of Japan in a way it never really had before. It's no longer about Japanese artists trying to imitate US or foreign counterparts (though this still happens), instead you can now witness and hear true Japanese hip hop (be it rap, b-boying, turntablism, graffiti etc...) and music thanks to the Internet and online shops which have made it easier to purchase and find Japanese artists' music (though it's still tricky at the best of times, unless you're fluent in Japanese).

The one name that will come to mind for many when speaking about Japanese DJs is DJ Krush. He was, and is still, a pioneer of the Japanese hip hop and turntablist scene and, along with others like Major Force, a godfather of sorts for Japanese DJs, whose music is known worldwide. His own style of experimental turntablism inspired a whole generation in and out of Japan and has earned him a reputation unlike many other.

However apart from Krush and Major Force, Japanese DJs or artists finding fame, or at least releasing music, outside of Japan have been very few and far between over the last 10 years. If we look at the scratch and DJ scene especially only a few more names pop up. London based DJ Go, part of the Mixologists crew, Shing-02 who has worked with US based label and collective Hip Hop Slam, and DJ Sushi (RIP) who was virtually unknown outside of Japan and the West Coast turntablist scene until Hip Hop Slam. released a posthumous EP collecting material from his short career a few years ago.

Yet I knew there had to be more to Japan's DJ culture in the 21st century, and with DJ Kentaro's win at the DMC world finals in 2002, a new door opened into the Japanese tablist world, a door I had to look through.

## No Walls Between the Music

DJ Kentaro's win at the DMC was the main catalyst that kick started his fame abroad and made him a household name on the DJ and tablist circuit over the last few years. While he had already garnered a solid reputation back home, this win (the highest ever judging score in a DMC event) sent things into further motion and he now regularly plays in Europe, does support slots for major US artists back home, and remixes and productions for big Japanese labels (Jazzy Sport, Undiluted, Endeavor). Most recently he has been taken in by Ninja Tune to release a Japanese only mix of their back catalogue (so successful it had to be re-released in Europe) and remix a track from Coldcut's new album, no mean feat for a DJ and tablist who no one had really heard of 4 years ago. In many ways, Ninja have done for Kentaro what they did for Kid Koala in the late 90s. Taken a talented, and virtually unknown, tablist and DJ out of his home country and brought him to the ears of a worldwide audience. Interestingly enough, when DJ Krush became widely popular in the 90s in Europe, through his releases on the then high riding Mo' Wax label, he was also invited by Ninja Tune to release a mix alongside Coldcut of the label's then back catalogue (entitled Cold Krush Cuts for those of you who've never heard it).

Kentaro attributed his 2002 win to his personal philosophy of 'no walls between the music', something he has detailed in the Kaikoo DVD and in the interview we did. Essentially this is his way of looking at music with a very open mind, without letting the constraints of certain scenes or genres limit what he can use in his sets or productions. 'You have to be free about what you want to do. Try different music, see what you like, that's what hip hop is all about really.'

This outlook on music is apparent in a lot of Kentaro's work, be it his mixes (including the excellent 'My Favourite Tracks' series), live sets or recent productions. It's safe to say that Kentaro has become famous thanks to this philosophy of embracing music regardless and his ability to incorporate technical turntable skills in his work and make those skills a part of the music he plays, not the focus. Kentaro is as comfortable making tracks and compositions incorporating tablist techniques (see the intro to his recent Ninja Tune mix for a perfect example) that will wow the fans as he is rocking a club set for 500 people without the need to over-emphasise the skills that have earned him his title. Kentaro is the more friendly face of Japanese turntablism in the 21st century, pleasing the club crowds as much as the tablist aficionados. While Kentaro, like Krush in the past, has enjoyed growing coverage and popularity outside of his home others have not. Yet they continue to work in and out of their own scenes and country, propagating a distinct Japanese take on various aspects of DJ culture and music production. Be it making music solely from scratching, turntablist showcases, cuts on records or productions, Japanese DJs in the 21st century are as busy as everyone else. We just don't get to hear about it as much.

## Strictly Turntablized

One such other artist is DJ Baku, a little known Tokyo based turntablist and producer, whose work I first discovered on the Kaikoo DVD, a self produced documentary charting his work and that of people he's worked with or is friends with (which include Kentaro, Klock, Tatsuki, producer Goth Trad, DJ Ske, Miyajima, MSC and more). As part of the Dis-Defence Disc collective and on his own, Baku has become the next DJ Krush for many Japanese. While this comparison shouldn't be taken to mean Baku's work is a simple rehashing of Krush's music, he has taken inspiration from Krush's work and ethic (with whom he collaborated on the Japanese release of 'Prest', a Nike sponsored 12") for his own musical outlook.

As he puts it himself in our recent interview, '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.'

Baku's discography and work make for an amazing read and even more intriguing listen. Baku started DJing in 94, and after signing up with Dis-Defence Disc in 99, fast became a new favourite on the Japanese abstract scene and experimental turntablist front. Baku, like a few other scratch artists before and after him, has never battled instead making a name for himself through his musical works and projects.

Since the late 90s, he has released scratch mixtapes (which have become collector items in Japan), recorded cuts for, produced and performed with Japanese rap crews (including Rebel Familia and MSC with whom he works quite closely), done improvised mix and scratch sessions with classical Japanese musicians such as Noh percussionist Shonosuke

Okura, worked on a showcase with BMX riders called OIN (where Baku provides live music for the BMX riders to freestyle to), done remixes and productions for Japanese compilations and 12" and more. Two of Baku's most interesting projects to date though are a remix EP with producers Goth Trad, Saidrum and Bleeder and a live turntable band project with DJ Klock and Tatsuki called Whakhakha.

The EP with Goth Trad, Saidrum and Bleeder (entitled 'DJ Baku vs Goth Trad, Saidrum, Bleeder') is most interesting because Baku produced and composed his side of the release entirely on turntables (apart from portions of the original tracks). And this was back in 2000. The release includes 2 CDs, one that contains the original instrumental tracks from the producers and another that includes Baku's take on each track. Upon listen the EP comes across as a weird, 21st century fusion of experimental noise, downtempo and much harder electronic music. It's one of those releases that has to be heard to be fully grasped. And the fact that the release is already 5 years old, and yet at times sounds similar to a lot of western releases that have come out since, shows how big the gap is between the East and West when it comes to the export of Japanese music back to the West. Japan is very quick to absorb and take in Western music, in turn adopting it for its own purposes, yet the other way round isn't always true. While America does benefit from close links with Japan when it comes to music, Europe suffers from an even bigger geographical and cultural gap. Still in recent years many strides have been made to shrink this gap, as we'll see.

The Whakhakha project is also very interesting because again it shows similarities with the work of Western tablists and scratch DJs (especially Ned Hoddings, Birdy Nam Nam, D-Styles and the Bastrd Language Tour), and is something that has pretty much never been heard of by most tablist fans outside of Japan (and a few heads in Denmark). Simply put Whakhakha was a live turntable band project regrouping Baku, Klock and Tatsuki, that saw them solely use a record they produced and created specifically for the project to create music live on turntables. While the record was being made, Tatsuki who had a sponsorship deal with Ortofon through his work with Danish band Blue Foundation, managed to convince the company to help them fund the project by pressing and releasing a limited edition run of the record, entitled 'Whakhakha Breaks'. Where this project diverged slightly from its past and current Western counterparts was in the music the trio created. Put quite simply, the 15 minutes showcase (which was performed in 10 dates around Japan in 2003) was much closer to ambient music and experimental noise (with touches of harder electronic sounding work). I guess another way to put it would be that the showcase at time reminded me of the work of people like Sun Ra or Christian Marclay. So think along the lines of sound experiment installations and using the turntable as a sound module, but with a stronger turntablist ethic to it than the likes of Marclay, who are closer to sound artists than turntablists. The Whakhakha tour was a resounding success in Japan, with the limited edition commercial copy of the break record used selling out very quickly.

The main aim of the Kaikoo documentary is to showcase the people Baku has come across in his career (hence the title) and their work. These include Kentaro, Goth Trad, MSC, Whakhakha and others, with short appearances by the likes of D-Styles and Go as well. But Baku didn't limit himself to just being a central point of the documentary, as he also produced the music for it and worked as editorial supervisor, showing his talent for story telling.

Amazingly when you look at his work, Baku still hasn't released a solo album (though 2006 should see his first one drop). The majority of his work consists of collaborations or work with and for other artists. In terms of overseas exposure he hasn't been as fortunate as Kentaro, though he did play at the Batofar in Paris in 2001, and has played at major festivals in Japan and Korea. Goth Trad, the Tokyo based producer (whose third album is soon to be released on the Pop Group label set up by Kaikoo's director Hiroki Sakaida) has also played in France and Germany a few times since 2001. Again it's interesting to note that while Baku and Goth Trad do not use the same production tools or work in the same musical 'scenes', Goth Trad makes his music primarily on samplers, sound modules and self made instruments, they both share a similar musical vision and take on what music can be, as expressed in the documentary. Baku achieves his with the use of the turntable.

## Ichiban DJs

While we've looked closely at the work of both Baku and Kentaro, there is a multitude of other Japanese DJs who are also deserving of attention and who have in their own ways been pushing the artform. Again Kaikoo offers an insight into some of them, including other Dis-Defence Disc members such as DJ Ske. Since 2000 Ske has been incorporating the well-known turntable feedback process into productions and mixtapes, but where some western DJs like The Perverts and Allies have used feedback to create melodies in the past, Ske uses feedback and continuous tones to create much harsher sounds and melodies, closer to industrial techno. This method of his is best exemplified in his mixtape, 'Ske 1997-2000', where his singular noise scratching is laid over scratched beats. Other Dis-Defence Disc members include DJ Martin who does cuts and productions for the crew.

Outside of the Dis-Defence Disc crew, you can try and hunt down the Turntable Colossus video, released a couple of years ago, and which follows DJ Shun, the 2003 Japan All Star beatdown champion, DJ Gruff from Italian crew Alien Army during his Japanese visit, and the collective Urge, composed of Kouji, Hitoshi and Miyajima. In the early 2000s, Urge became quite popular in Japan with their turntable band approach, which again differed slightly from Western and Japanese counterparts. Musically though Urge's showcases were much closer to western styles with the use of saxophones, trumpets and other instruments to solo over beats and compositions. Urge were the main showcase at the 2003 All Star Beatdown Japan final (a DVD of which can be found on Japanese online shops).

Hifana are another band worth mentioning. They can be seen as the Japanese equivalent of a band like Fingathing, incorporating comic and visual elements into their work. Composed of two members, Hifana's music is most interesting and captivating live. On stage KEIZOMachine! and Juicy create music using turntables, samplers, sound modules, effects and percussion sets. Their music incorporates hip hop beats, scratches, electronic bleeps, voiceovers from TV and public transport and more pop culture throw-away sounds, giving a result that straddles genres and stays on its own, out of boxes yet firmly grounded in the well known Japanese sense of 'cool'. When B+'s project Keepintime was launched in Japan, Hifana played the opening party with the US artists, to great success and leaving quite a mark on B+.

DJ battles, which have helped spread the popularity of scratching, and thus turntablism, to the mass public since the late 80s, are also still quite popular in Japan, as they are in Europe and America. While it's true that their relevance to the artform and music as a whole is quite debatable today, they still serve a purpose and are quite possibly the most easily accessible insight into the Japanese scratch scene for Europeans. While DMC still has a good presence in Japan (no less thanks to Kentaro's win in 02), it's the Vestax sponsored Extravaganza competition that attracts most attention outside of Japan. Foreigners are invited every year to battle it out with the best Japanese talent, and last year Vestax invited Woody and the Ned Hoddings band to showcase, while this year they have introduced a new freestyle battle to the event. Unfortunately the finals are always held in Japan, and even getting hold of the DVD or videos of the event can prove to be tricky. Ultimately the battles' main purpose are still to offer a platform for turntablists to meet up with each other, link up and be seen by the rest of the world as well as providing the Japanese scene, in this case, with new blood.

## Around the World

Outside of Japan, there are more Nippon artists who have emigrated to varying success and Japanese and non-Japanese people who work hard to try and bridge the cultural and linguistic divide between East and West. This article is just the latest to try and help raise some awareness of these people's work. While we've mentioned the Kaikoo documentary as a major source for this article and finding out about the artists in the Tokyo underground, there are others outside of Japan trying to achieve the same thing. Studio RareKwai, a London based studio collective of film makers and visual artists, and their 'Scratching the Surface: Japan' documentary are amongst these. While unfortunately due to monetary issues they have been unable to properly release the documentary outside of Japan yet, it is set to be a milestone for showcasing the Japanese DJ and hip hop culture to the West. 'Scratching the Surface' looks at hip hop culture in Japan, focusing on various elements, including tablism and DJing, and also looks on the work of people like Baku, Tatsuki and others. Hopefully the documentary will see a full UK and European release in 2006, and will help shine a light on the Japanese DJ culture in a way that 'Scratch: the movie' did for the turntablist artform as a whole. So far the documentary has been shown to great reception at various festivals around the world, including London's Raindance, and SRK also helped organise and arrange the Noroshi showcase at the 2005 edition of the Sonar festival in Spain, bringing over Tatsuki and Afra & The Incredible Beatbox band. Mixtapes by Tatsuki and Baku were also aired on the BBC Breezeblock radio show ahead of the festival. A short extract from the documentary can be seen on their site.

Tatsuki is another name we've mentioned in this article. Originally from Japan, he's now based in London and Denmark, where he works closely with the Blue Foundation band, doing productions and cuts for them. As a turntablist Tatsuki is acknowledged as one of Japan's finest, yet his name and work has also grown mainly under the radar of most westerners and tablist fans. His mixtapes are as legendary as Baku's back home, and his recent live set at Sonar 2005 left the audience in awe of his skills and work. Tatsuki uses a combination of turntables, drum machines and sound modules on stage to create music entirely live, and in the studio also combines the turntables alongside other tools to create his music. From straight forward tablist showcases using a loopstation, to more intricate live shows using a mix of the

aforementioned tools to productions for the Blue Foundation, DJ Klock and electronic outfit Bichi, Tatsuki keeps his work varied. More recently Tatsuki has been touring extensively with Blue Foundation, and collaborated with DJ Krush on the Jaku album. The Bichi album is the latest release he's involved with, put out through Danish label Hobby Industries and 2006 should see his self produced solo debut, 'Invent', being released. Update - we've got two tracks from Tatsuki's upcoming LP which you can download. Either head to the download section in top menu to your right or right click here for Haruka Phader and here for Ricochet Re-Edit. Both files are mp3s.

DJ Go is another name we've mentioned, and as part of the Mixologists crew he has made a name for himself as a world-class tablist and club DJ. Since their days of DMC battles in the early 00s (which saw them reach the world finals a couple of times), the Mixologists have moved onto increasing worldwide club appearances and work on productions both on their own and as part of the Spit Kingdom collective (headed by beatboxer Killa Kela). Go keeps strong links to the Japanese DJ and tablist scene, helping to bring Japanese artists over when possible.

Samurai FM are another collective of people who have in recent years helped shine a light on Japan's music while also exposing Western talent to the Japanese audience. Samurai are a web based radio station, based in London and Tokyo, who regularly broadcast, and archive, sets by a wide range of artists and musicians. While their musical remit is quite large, they have in the last year aired quite a lot of turntablist related material, both from Japan and Europe, and are now hosting the Rhythm-Incursions web shows as well (R-I is the show born out of Turntable Radio and presented by Mr Trick and Waxfactor). On the turntablist/scratch front, Samurai have hosted mixes by 2tall, Noisy Stylus, Tatsuki and others in the last year.

The end is only the beginning...

As we've seen Japan is as fertile a ground for new music and takes on tablist and DJ culture as other countries like France or America. While linguistic and cultural barriers have hindered a bigger flow and exchange of music between the consumers of each country, it remains that this does happen. Maybe not as much as some of us would like. Personally since seeing the Kaikoo DVD, meeting the guys at SRK and getting in touch with some of these artists, I feel that helping to shine a light on their work, past and present, is indispensable. Especially when it comes to DJ culture and tablist, an artform that is still growing and maturing and which can only benefit from more diversity and openness on what can be done when using a turntable in any setup and in any way possible.

As we move further into the 21st century, and the world continues to shrink thanks to the internet and other media advances, we can only hope that this expansion of media will help bring local music scenes closer and make it easier for artists to share their work with fans all over the world.

Sources for this article:

- Kaikoo DVD – 2005, Pop Group & Dis-Defence Disc – Disdefencedisc.com
- Kentaro interviews conducted by Laurent Fintoni in 2003 and 2005
- Discussions with the makers of 'Scratching the Surface: Japan' (SRK, 2004)

Find out more:

- Studio Rare Kwai
- Disdefencedisc.com
- DJ Krush
- Kentaro interviews: 2003 interview & 2005 interview

- DJ Baku interview
- Shun & Jifrock interview.
- Samurai FM - Check the archives
- Turntable Radio - Check the 2005 shows archives for tracks by Baku, Goth Trad, Kentaro and more.
- Hifana interview