

## DJ Klock - Non Circular Music

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Non circular music – a look at the work of DJ Klock

If there's one thing about Japan, and the many facets of its culture, that never ceases to amaze me it is its ability to constantly surprise. Musically this translates to regular discoveries of new producers and artists who from a Western perspective always bring something fresh and surprise. DJ Klock is one of them – I first discovered his work after meeting Tatsuki last year while I was researching and working on the Japanese music article I wrote and special podcast I presented for Turntable Radio. Klock had worked with Tatsuki and Baku as part of the live band Whakhakha (Japan's first live 'turntable band') and when Tatsuki gave me a copy of Klock's first album, 'Human Essence', I was taken aback by his approach to composition – seemingly unhindered by rhythmic constraints or established structures, and full of sounds that from a European point of view seem genuinely Japanese and unique - like those used by DJ Krush and other Japanese producers like O N O. Rather than pillage the myriad of sounds, samples and instruments everyone else has, these guys use instruments, sounds and samples that are closer to them culturally and which in turn gives their music a unique aspect and an overall sound that can be surprising at first. They never sound like they're trying to imitate somebody else, instead they come across as genuine.

The music on that album just seemed to flow freely, sometimes without any rhythmic structures. There would just be sounds, notes, melodies flying around in my ears. It was harsh and soft, fast and slow – sometimes it didn't work and sometimes it really did. The music sounded very electronic (not surprising in hindsight as the label the album was signed to is a Japanese techno stronghold) but still contained elements that seemed to run deeper than just electronica or hip hop – it built on electronica and hip hop and achieved something that was more than the sum of its parts. It left me thinking. The way I viewed Klock's music, in a weird parallel universe of its own, was then further cemented by a chat I had with Tatsuki where he explained to me that the album, and the majority of Klock's work, is done literally out of the bounds of what might be considered modern production – that is he sometimes works (as he did on that album) with absolutely no grids when using production software. He doesn't restrain himself with bars, measures and other established structures and in turn his music reflects this freeform aspect – halfway between chaos and organised confusion he found a place where harmony could exist. And anyone who's a fan of music, past or present, will know that some of the most powerful and engaging music ever made was made by breaking the structures (purposefully or not) and having no regards for the established boundaries.

After my original encounter with DJ Klock I hadn't really heard much more of his work, what with the availability of Japanese music being pretty thin in Europe, until an email from his brother, who runs his Clockwise Records label, asking me if I'd be interested in checking out his recent and upcoming releases. A few days later a package landed on my doorstep full of Klock's recent releases including his new album, 'San', his first mixtape 'Klock's Mix Café' (re-released on CD) and his 'Rainbow Trilogy', a work in three parts released on cassette, CD and vinyl. Here was an occasion to delve a bit deeper into his work and what follows is a look at these releases – not really a review, not really an article. A bit of both I guess, an invitation to discover the work of an artist that treads the boundaries between 'genres' and styles, finding himself in places others won't go. Before that though is a small introduction of Klock's career to date.

DJ Klock first came up on the Japanese music scene at the turn of the century, part of the new wave of DJs, turntablists and producers that are for many the direct descendants of DJ Krush's work and influence. Ironically Klock collaborated with Krush on the Nike sponsored 12" 'Cage b/w 2001 Cage Odyssey', which featured another collaboration between Krush and Baku, who Klock has also worked with. While Baku and Klock can be seen as descendants of the production ethic and work of Krush, they are both unique artists with their own style and sense of production, as shown in their varied work.

Klock set up his own label, Clockwise Recs, in 2000 to release his first EP. He was then signed to Sublime, a leading Japanese techno label, for which he released the 'Human Essence' album. He then released his second album, 'Sensation', on Revirth before going back to his own label to release the Rainbow Trilogy and his forthcoming new solo album 'San'. In between all this Klock also released and worked on a multitude of mixtapes, live shows and other releases. These include 2 EPs and one album with the band Cacoy, a Japanese formation put together by Klock and

regrouping 2 members of Japanese pop group Tenniscoats, Maher Shalal and Klock. The band has been referred to since then as a true Japanese all-star formation with their album, 'Human is Music', receiving praise worldwide. Actually it proved so popular with Danish band Efterklang that they licensed the album for release on the German label Rumraket this year, 3 years after its original Japanese release. The album features a mix of hip hop, electronica, pop and folk music built on the turntable and sampler compositions of Klock over which are laid sax, guitar and organ melodies as well as the voice of Saya from the Tenniscoats. As with many of Klock's other works the work of Cacoy manages to bring together many styles and sounds into something new, never quite what you expect. He has now formed a new band, called Trilo, who feature on his new album and who are currently working on some new material.

### Rainbow Trilogy – Direction of Rainbow, View of Rainbow & Rainbow EP

The Rainbow Trilogy is a work in three parts produced by Klock alongside Barnstormers member Kenji Hitara. The Barnstormers are a famous graffiti collective, and Kenji and Klock collaborated over a period of roughly 3 years for this series of releases, moving back and forth between NY and Tokyo. Klock created, produced and performed the music while Kenji drew, painted and created art for it. The results are a cassette, a CD and a 12" vinyl showcasing a variety of styles, music and ideas spread over time and across formats. Kenji delivered the artwork for all 3 releases – artworks that are linked, and have also become part of Klock's new album for which Kenji once more did the artwork and produced a video animation for the first single, 'Theme' (which you can check below).

The first part of the trilogy, 'Direction of Rainbow', is a cassette recording of a mix Klock did at bpm in Brooklyn, on his first US tour back in 04. The set received such a warm reception, Klock and Kenji decided to release it. The mix itself is an interesting snapshot in time – eclectic and challenging, it's not your average live DJ mix. From thumping electronic drums laid with effected scratches to downtempo, dubby soundscapes and snippets of classic hip hop beats and breaks, it's an interesting ride that breaks away from the accepted 'smooth and seamless' live mix of most DJs. There are parts where the mix just doesn't seem to ride perfectly, but it soon smoothes over and the ride continues. Klock wasn't trying to sound perfect and the mix captures that without suffering from it. What's more the choice to release the mix on an actual cassette is really quite dope – when was the last time you dusted off your tape deck and gave it a whirl?

'View of Rainbow' followed, a CD release under Klock's Turntabrush name. The name was fitting for a project that was entirely produced on turntables; however this isn't your usual 'turntable music' or 'turntablism'. Rather than follow or fit into what's already been done by others worldwide, Klock lives up to the name Turntabrush by using sounds, noises and other sonic artefacts created on the turntable to paint a sonic landscape. Rhythms and structures are largely absent – a lot of the tracks are short improvisations that don't follow a pattern or create anything you can really latch onto as a listener. Instead what you get is much more of a sonic experiment, as if Klock was just trying things out, pressing record and keeping it after one take without any thought of arranging or cleaning anything up. At times a 'track' might appear that seems to follow more of a traditional structure but even then the rhythms and patterns are stretched or distorted as much as possible, the sounds are discordant, they seem to clash at first and then your ears accustom themselves to what they're hearing. I found myself listening to the CD a few times trying to find something I could recognise, a beat I could ride to get into the music but I couldn't. Instead I found myself listening to these sonic arrangements and only being able to let them wash over me and make sense of themselves. I guess it's a process similar to watching visual art and taking it in – it might not make sense at first, it might take a while but then something will appear that helps you understand what the artist may have been trying to say and you might 'get' it. The feeling is deeply personal, it's no doubt different for every one but the realisation will still happen.

In the case of 'View of Rainbow' this process is what makes the album a really interesting offering. It'd be easy to dismiss it as too 'arty' or just crap, but if you give it some time there is actually more to it than what you first see, or in this case hear. The audio paintings make sense after a few listens and some time contemplating. Whether or not this appeals to most is probably not important. What does that matter is the uniqueness of the release – especially considering the music that has been made following the explosion of the turntablist movement in the early 00s. Klock went back to his turntablist roots with this project and came out with something that no one else has really done, or would probably want to do. A weird hybrid of what turntablism and the music was, is and can be. It shows there are really no boundaries to how someone can use the turntable to create music or in this case art. It's ironic that this part of the trilogy is the only one released on a digital format, which is prone to skips and deterioration that aren't far removed from some of what is actually on the CD – life imitating art imitating life?

The 'Rainbow EP' concludes the trilogy and goes back to the analogue format with a 12" vinyl. On there you find 7 tracks taken from Klock's new LP, including 'Los Voladores' performed by the Tiemporachas, a trio composed of Klock, Kenji Hitara and vocalist Palabrito. 'Los Voladores' is a glitchy, skippy rhythm laced with stuttering piano hits and Spanish and Japanese vocals. The Tiemporachas were created during Klock's second visit to the US in 2005, completing the duality formed by Klock's sounds and Kenji's visuals by adding vocals and thus creating a triangle of sounds, visuals and words. The remaining tracks featured on the EP all showcase yet more of Klock's wide production styles, constantly hopping and never firmly staying in one spot. Chopped up electronica and glitchy hip hop ride alongside trumpets, xylophones, MPC, voices and more to create a mesmerising whole that gets better with every listen.

A big part of this trilogy of work is the art of Kenji Hitara that links the releases together through its colourful and bright shapes and designs. The paintings add another dimension to the music that is too often looked over or rushed by so many musicians, artists and labels today. The pleasure of looking at artwork while listening to the music, and taking in what this also represents alongside the sounds is something we don't get to do enough today. It's true that after the decline of vinyl in the 80s and years of people ignoring the importance of the art that accompanies every single music release, such as the cover, there seems to be a resurgence of small labels who understand and value the importance of visual art as much as that of the aural art included in the releases. And with the Rainbow Trilogy, Klock and Kenji Hitara seem to have found the perfect balance between vision and sound.

## San

Klock's 3rd album, titled 'San' which means 3 in Japanese, is a departure from what I had experienced with 'Human Essence'. Where that album seemed out of boundaries and free sounding this one seems to fit much more within rhythmical structures though it still contains the same freedom and disrespect for established styles as the first one did. The album sounds very electronic, even though a lot of instruments are involved – the arrangements, beats and overall composition can sound cold and robotic but they are brightened by the warmth of the instruments and voices. When I say cold and robotic, I don't mean that these are devoid of any life, as they are most definitely not – they still have a human element to them that gives them an appeal simple, calculated music can't bring.

However easy it might be for me to tag the music on 'San' as electronica it's not so straight forward – the backbone of a lot of the music is electronic but the results are wide and varied. You have tracks like 'Los Voladores' and 'Return of the MPC Freak' that reference hip hop but glitch it and build on it. You have 'Incomplete Housen' with its 4/4 House beat but none of the cheesiness or ecstasy that most mass produced House offers today – instead flutes, organs and bits of breaks create a weird feeling that is removed from the House backbone of the track but which combines with it to deliver something quite enjoyable, even if you're not really into House. 'Sun to Sea', performed by Klock's new band Trilo, is a slurry, disjointed jazz composition that keeps building but never delivers, yet still contains head nodding hooks you'll hum long after its finished. 'San to Si' then follows with each band member using toy versions of their instruments and trying to recreate a snippet of the previous track.

Every track on this album brings with it something new and different, without really breaking the flow or making the album sound like a badly collated series of tracks that shouldn't be together. The addition of musicians (on trumpets, guitar, sax, flute, tambourine and more) and vocalists adds an important organic dimension to the electronic backgrounds laid by Klock. Acting as the only common point between all the tracks, he fuses often syncopated and discordant digital sounds and rhythms with warm, bright and simplistic melodies, imbuing the coldness of the electronic sounds with a human element that is unpredictable and highly enjoyable. After a few listens you find yourself drawn in to his world and unable to resist a smile here or a headnod there. Some of the nicest things in life come from trying something different and with 'San' Klock shows that this is most definitely true in music too.

You can download a track from 'San' right here (as well as in the downloads section). Right click and save as on the link (8mb, mp3 format). The track is called 'Rounds' and is performed by Klock and Trilo.

You can view the animated video by Kenji Hitara for the track 'Theme' from the 'San' album below or right here on our youtube.com page.

## Klock's mix café & Timing Incorrect

Before we finish this feature, I thought I'd mention quickly the two mixes I've got of Klock as mixes seem to be a big part of Klock's work alongside production and live shows. As with other Japanese DJs Klock seems to value mixes a lot as a way to showcase music he enjoys – and he also seems to enjoy delivering those mixes in a more traditional format but with his own twists. This is something I've heard a lot of Japanese DJs do, including the pioneer DJ Krush. 'Klock's Mix Café' was his first mixtape and the second release on the Clockwise label. Just over an hour long it's a chilled ride with music from the likes of Boards of Canada, Mass Influence, Cage, DJ Krush, Harry Love, Anti Pop, Dose One and Klock himself peppered with cuts, drumming and subtle juggles. There isn't a lot you can say really about mixes other than some are really enjoyable and well put together and this one definitely fits that category.

'Timing Incorrect' was Klock's second official mix, released on the Sublime label and with a distinctive electronic slant. Here the bulk of the music comes from Klock himself and other electronica artists such as Dabrye, Krush, Solenoid, Numb, Minautor Shock and Christian Kleine. Again the mix is smooth and quite relaxed, with the odd hip hop accapella and back beat thrown in. Cuts and edits are also thrown in throughout, keeping the mix going seamlessly and allowing Klock to improvise on and remix some of the tracks.

If you're a fan of good mixes that are all about the music and use skills to complement it rather than act as window dressing and distraction than I can only recommend you hunt down some of Klock's mixes as you most definitely won't be disappointed.

A lot of Klock's music sounds and feels genuinely unique as I've said. If I were to think of some comparisons, the likes of Dabrye, Krush and Ko-Wreck Technique spring to mind, though as with all music comparisons only go a certain way to describing someone's music. You have to hear it for yourself to really decide and make your own mind up. Hopefully this article will encourage you to go and check out some of his work – I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Huge thanks go out to Yuki and Ryo for getting in touch with us and making it possible for this article to happen by sending all this music down and letting us showcase it. You can find out more info on Klock at [www.clockwise-rec.com](http://www.clockwise-rec.com), including full discography, tour dates and more. Klock will be in Germany this summer with Kenji Hitara for some shows in September and hopefully a few appearances in the UK as well. We'll announce details as soon as we know them.

'San' is being distributed through Ropeadope records in the US this fall and in Europe soon. Cacoy's album is distributed in Europe by Rumraket Records and is available now. If you've enjoyed this feature and want to find out more about Japanese DJs, tablists and producers than be sure to check our Japanese special feature as well as the interviews with DJ Baku and Kentaro in our interviews archive (link on the right hand side menu). Also check the downloads section (again right hand side menu) for music from Tatsuki.