

J-POPED: A brief introduction to Japanese POP culture

Music 音楽

Solo Artists ソロアーティスト

Koda Kumi (神田 来未子)

Is a 28-year-old singer songwriter from Kyoto. Her sound is often likened to R&B though a more appropriate term is Japanese urban. However, through out her career Kumi has experimented with various styles including: elector pop, rock and dance

She debuted in 2000 with the single “Take Bake” she has gone on to release over 8 studio albums, 48 singles, various greatest hit’s compilations and most currently a covers album. She writes some of her own lyrics

Kumi is known for her “sexy” and “provocative” image and is considered a fashion leader among young women. In 2005, her increasingly risqué image proved trend setting when she started a cleavage bearing craze that then evolved into a fashion style known as “ero-kakkoï” or ero-kawaii.”

Popular Singles: Anytime, Freaky, Alive/Physical Thing

YUI

In a landscape littered with moderately talented pretty faces that churn out over produced single after single, this young singer songwriter is somewhat of a rarity. Possessing more artistic integrity than all the 48 members of AKB combined, Yui sings, plays guitar (along with a bevy of other instruments) and writes all her own songs. YUI’s career started in early 2005 with the release of her single “Feel my soul.”

Popular singles: Feel my soul

Nishino Kana (西野カナ)

A relative new comer, Nishino Kana began her career as a J-pop singer after claiming the top spot amongst 40,000 participants in Sony’s “Miss Phoenix Audition.” After extensive vocal training Kana released her first single, “I” in 2008. She’s quite popular with a number of demographics, including adolescents, gyaru girls and evidently even has an audience with “50 year old aging hipsters.”

Popular Singles: I, Motto, If

Groups グループ

Johnny’s (ジャニーズ) A talent agency that trains and promotes groups of male idols. Current popular groups included but aren’t limited to:

SMAP

Not just a band, an institution and all around entertainment powerhouse. SMAP is J-pop's best selling group EVER. The name is an acronym for Sports Music Assemble People and was formed in 1991. As a group they have released over 40 singles and 20 albums. Half the singles and 1/3rd of the albums have reached the top of Japanese charts.

The current line up includes: Nakai Masahiro (leader), Kimura Takuya aka kimitaku (the heart throb), Katori Shingo (the baby), Kusanagi Tsuyoshi (the odd man out), Inagaki Goro (the refined member)

Despite a few scandals through out the span of their career (one involving hitting a police officer with a car; the other public nudity) SMAP have continued their reign as J-Pop kings.

All the members have branched out into other media avenues, frequently making appearances in TV dramas, variety shows and movies.

* **Kimutaki:** Aside from his success with SMAP, Kimutaku is in his own right a successful actor. He has starred in a number of award winning dramas as well as high grossing movies. He is highly recognized throughout Asia, particularly in Taiwan. He has also been voted Japan's sexiest man on multiple occasions

Arashi 嵐

A 5-member group that formed in 1999. Over their 10-year career they have continued to grow in popularity, both individually and as a group. Aside from music the members have successfully ventured into other avenues of media such as TV and musicals. The band began to break ground commercially after the release of their 18th single "love so sweet "

Members: Aiba Masaki, Matsumoto Jun, Ninomiya Kazunari, Ohno Satoshi and Sakurai Sho

Popular singles: Love so sweet, One Love, Truth/Kaze no Muko e"

Hey! Say! Jump!

Relative new comers to the J Pop scene, this ten member Japanese boy band debuted in 2007 and released their first album In July of this year. The name is a pun as all of the members were born in the Heisei period and Jump is an acronym for Johnny's Ultra Music Power. Their ultimate goal is "jumping high in the period of Heisei." They are younger than other groups that fall under the Johnny's umbrella and as such appeal to a younger demographic.

The group is subdivided further into 2 groups:

Hey! Say! BEST! (older members) BEST= Boy's Excellent Selection Team

and Hey! Say! 7

AKB48

The name of this 48 member theater/idol group is derived from a shortened Romanized version of Akihabara. They're distinguished from other run of the mill j-pop acts by the fact that they have their own theater in Akihabara, Tokyo, where they perform once

everyday and multiple times on the weekends. Tickets for men are 3000 円 and 2000 円 for women and children

The group is subdivided into teams A, K, and B. Currently there are 16 members in each group making for total of 48 members.

Minami Takahashi is the Team A captain and Yuki Kashiwagi is Team B captain.

The line up is a continuously rotating crop of school age girls. As such the members frequently dawn some variation of the Japanese schoolgirl uniform. As expected they are popular amongst young teenagers and men in their mid 30's.

Popular Singles: River, Pony tail to Shushu, Heavy Rotation

Ikimono No Gakari (いきものがかり)

Is a 3-member pop-rock/ j-pop band that debuted in 1998, though they didn't garner mainstream popularity until 2005. The band name refers to a group of students who are responsible for taking care of plants and animals at a shogako. The bands roots lie in indie lounge rock, though each subsequent album following their initial release has gotten increasingly more "popy." In other words they sold out.

Popular singles: Sakura, Joyful, Kimi Ga Iru

GReeeeN (グリーン)

Classified as J pop/rock/hip-hop/break-beat/ and everything else under the sun, Green is a vocal group comprised of four male members. The logo is a mouth full of teeth and the four e's represent each of the members: Hide, Navi, 92 and Soh.

Apparently all of the members are practicing dentists. In order to prevent interference with their careers as dentists they have never shown their faces in the public sphere, be it TV, performances, internet, etc....

GReeeeN have released 3 albums to date and their single Kiseki is the holds the record for "best selling download single."

Popular singles: "love song (Ai uta), Kiseki (キセキ)

EXILE (エグザイル)

Is a 14 member all-male band and dance posse. The group's sound is heavily influenced by R&B. Most of the members are performers with only 4 members taking on vocal duties. Hiro is the "leader" as well as founding member of the group; lead vocal duties however are shared by Atsushi and Takahiro.

Formed in 2001 the group began their rise to fame in 2003 after releasing the hit single "Cho Cho train," which preceded their 3rd studio album Exile entertainment. Exile entertainment went on to sell over 1 million copies.

Popular singles include: Cho Cho train, Tada Aitakute (ただ...逢いたくて), Moto tsyoku (street fighter 4 theme song)

AAA (トリプル エー)

Short for Attack All Around, AAA is a group of 5 males and 3 Women. They have gained minor success since their debut in 2005.

Popular Singles: Makenai Kokoro, Mirage

Japanese Rock or J-Rock

UVERworld

Considered to be one of the most influential rock bands in Japan to this day. Uverworld is a 5 member J-rock band hailing from Shiga, Japan. They have released 5 records to date. Their sound is a fusion of electronic elements along side traditional rock.

Their work is heavily tied to manga and anime culture with there debut single “D-technolife” serving as the second opening theme for the long running anime series Bleach and there most current single, “Qualia” being the ending theme for Mobile Suite Gundam 00.

Popular singles: D-Technolife, Qualia, Hakanaku mo Towa no Kanashi

Bump of Chicken (バンブ オブ チキン)

Not nearly as well selling as SMAP or other J-pop powerhouses, but very much an institution in there own right. Every release since there 3rd single “Tentai Kansoku” has charted in the top ten. The band formed in 1994 while all the members were in high school. Their music is frequently used in videogames and as theme songs for anime, movies and television shows. The 5 members of the group are self-proclaimed videogame and manga otaku.

Popular singles: Tentai Kansouku, Namida no Furusato, Hana no Na, and Mayday.

Radwimps

A 4-member group formed in 2001, the name is a combination of “Rad” and “wimp” and is intended to mean “excellent weakling” or “superlative coward”. The lead vocalist and guitarist lived in America for 4 years and as a result there is a prevalence of English lyrics in their songs

Popular singles: Oshakashama

Funky Monkey Babys (ファンキーモンキーベイビズ)

Is a 3 member Japanese hip-hop/rock/ pop group. The members include Funky Kato, Mon-kichi, and DJ Chemical. Since their debut in 2004 they have steadily gained popularity, in part due to their high-energy live performances.

Popular singles: Lovin Life, Chippoke na Yuki

Superfly

A Japanese rock act that debuted in 2007, initially a duo, the act now consists only of lyricist and vocalist Shiho Ochi. Former guitarist Koichi Tabo is credit as the group's composer.

The name does in fact stem from the Curtis Mayfield song "Superfly." Lead singer Oichi has stated that she has great admiration of singer Janis Joplin. To ddate Superfly has released 2 albums, "Superfly" and "Box Emotions."

Popular singles: I spy, I spy, wild flower Tamashi Revolution

Maximum the Hormone (マキシマムザホルモン)

As described on the bands web page:

"How does music composed of the essential factors from Loud Rock, Hard Core, and Heavy Metal sound? What does it sound like if growl, horribly fast rap and pop tune come together?"

The answer is the sound Maximum the Hormone bangs out"

Maximum the Hormone is a Japanese punk metal band. They've gained popular attention by contrasting heavy music with light pop.

Popular singles: Koi no Mega Lover

Manga 漫画 / Anime アニメ

Context

Shonen Manga 少年漫画: Refers to manga marketed to male audiences 10 and over. The Kanji literally means few years and the complete phrase means young persons comic.

Shonen Manga are characterized by high action contrasted with humor, the protagonist is almost always male. Further group camaraderie is emphasized. Another trademark of shonen manga are that female ccharacters often have exaggerated features.

Shojou Manga 少女漫画: Manga marketed to the target demographic of girls between ages 10 and 18. There is usually a strong emphasis on human and romantic relationships and emotions.

Shonen Jump: 少年ジャンプ: Shonen Jump is a weekly manga anthology that has been publication since 1968. The chapters are collected and later published into larger volumes, called Tankoban (単行本). Popular manga serialized in Shonen Jump include

One Piece (ワンピース)

(Written and illustrated by Eiichiro Oda):

Ongoing since 1997, there are currently 59 volumes. One piece follows the adventures of young boy, Monkey D. Luffy and his quest to become the pirate king. Along his journey he amasses a motley crew of pirates dubbed “the straw hats.” In order to become pirate king, Luffy and crew must find the whereabouts of the world’s ultimate treasure, One Piece. Of course the crew face various perils, face off against numerous villains and forge strong alliances as they sail the sea in search of One Piece.

Characters include:

Monkey D. Luffy (モンキー D ルフィ)

A young boy who ate one of the mythical “devil fruits” and gained special elastic abilities. He is captain of the straw hats and One Pieces primary protagonist.

Tony Tony Chopper (トニー トニー チョッパー)

A blue nosed reindeer that serves as the crew’s doctor, Chopper ate the human-human devil fruit and gained the ability to morph into 3 different forms. Because of his blue nose he never gained acceptance amongst his herd and has forever been ostracized by both reindeer and humanity. He finally finds a welcoming home and companionship amongst the straw-hat pirates.

Naruto (ナルト)

Written and Illustrated by Masashi Kishimoto

Naruto is the story of Naruto Uzumaki an adolescent ninja who aspires to be recognized as the Hokage, or strongest ninja of his village. Currently there are 51 volumes, with the series still ongoing. The story focus’ on Naruto and friends personal growth as they band together with other ninja clans to prevent Akatsuki, a rouge clan of ninja’s, from achieving their goal of controlling humanity.

Bleach (ブリーチ)

Written and Illustrated by Noriaki Kubo

Bleach follows clairvoyant high school student Ichigo Kurasaki as he protects humanity from evil sprits (hallows) and guides departed souls to the afterlife.

Currently Bleach chronicles the war between the soul reapers (those tasked with guiding souls to after life) and Aizen (a rouge soul reaper,) who intendeds to garner souls from Ichiro’s home town in order to open an portal to the location of the king of the Soul Society (roughly the equivalent of god.)

Reborn! or Katekyo Hitman Rebron (家庭教師ヒットマン REBORN!)

Katekyo is a portmanteau for Katei Kyoshi, which translates to home tutor. The farfetched plot of this manga revolves around the life of young boy Tsunayoshi Sawada. “Tsunayoshi” is inline to become the boss of a powerful Mafia organization called the Vongola Family. Accordingly he is assigned a home tutor to verse him in the ways of the Mafia. His tutor? Reborn, a gun-toting infant hit man from Italy.

Gintama (銀魂)

An episodic manga following Gintoki, a broke samurai living in an era when samurai are no longer needed. To add to his troubles, oppressive aliens called Amanto have moved into town. Gintoki lives with Kagura and Shinpachi, taking on odd jobs to make the world a better place... and to pay their rent.

Kimi ni Todoke (君に届け)

Sawako Kuronuma, called Sadako by her classmates for her resemblance to the character from *Ring*, has always been feared and misunderstood because of her appearance. Despite her appearances, she is a sweet and timid girl who longs to be able to make friends with everyone and be liked by everyone else. When her idol, popular boy Kazehaya, begins talking with her, everything changes. She finds herself in a new world. Slowly, but surely, a sweet love is blossoming between the two as they will overtake any circumstance or clear obstacles in their way.

Characters キャラクター

Hello Kitty (キティちゃん)

Representing all things kawaii, Kitty chan was originally introduced in Japan in 1975 and has since become an internationally recognized icon. She is a female white Japanese cat who wears a red bow.

Fun fact: Kitty chan is often drawn without a mouth, the reason being that without a mouth it's easier for the person looking at her to project their feelings onto the character. Thus the person can be happy or sad with Kitty chan.

Rilakkuma (リラックマ)

A portmanteau of the Japanese pronunciation of relax and the word for bear. True to his name rilakkuma enjoys relaxing. His favorite past times include soaking in onsen, watching tv, lying around, sleeping and listening to music.

He originally appeared in a series of picture books called Rilakkuma Siesatsu but has since gone on to be a marketable soft toy character. He is often seen with his mischievous companion Korilakkuma.

Gachapin and Mukku (ガチャピンとムック)

Gachapin is a green bucktoothed dinosaur who is usually accompanied by his friend Mukku, a red yeti.

Usavich (ウサビッチ)

A series of animated short films being created for MTV Japan. The story revolves around a couple of rabbits imprisoned in a soviet prison.

Season 1 follows absurd everyday occurrences of the two rabbits prison life; season 2 they escape from prison and subsequent life on the run; the current season, 3 follows the rabbits misadventures on the 13th floor of a shopping complex.

Kirenko: wears a uniform of red stripes with 04 on it. Originally a mafia boss, now sentenced to death, Kirenko is generally reserved but dangerous when provoked to berserker rage. He's typically apathetic regarding life with one exception, his love for sneakers.

Putin: wears the uniform of green stripes and has his ears are tied together. He's rather good-natured and enjoys fun, though this often leads him into trouble. He was an honest laborer, who missed a day of work due to a hang over and was then sentenced to prison as a capitalist agent.

Doraemon (ドラえもん)

Considered a Japanese cultural icon, Doraemon is a robotic cat who travels back in time to extend aid to a school boy named Nobita Nobi. His origins lie in manga, but his popularity amongst people of all ages has lead to a number of movies, TV shows, video games and even a musical. Most of Doraemon's episodes are comedic and focus on teaching moral lessons. The show often delves into environmental issues as well as miscellaneous educational topics. For this reasons it is particularly popular amongst younger children.

Doraemon has pocket from which he pulls various items from the future, dubbed the fourth dimensional pocket.

Anpanman (アンパンマン)

Another one of the more recognizable characters in Japan, Anpanman is a superhero that has dedicated himself to the cause of justice and aiding unfortunate souls. Anpanman's head is made of anpan, sweet bread filled with bean jam. In order to save people from starvation anpan man allows others to eat his head.

He is extremely popular amongst young children. Though considering he has been around since 1968 his is well known by both adolescents and adults. Further Anpanman has numerous friends who take the shape of various breads, amongst other things.

Totoro (トトロ)

A woodlands spirit from Hayao Miyazaki's brilliant anime, My Neighbor Totoro. My Neighbor Totoro is the story of two young girls and their interactions with woodlands spirits in post war Japan.

Television テレビ

Music Station (ミュージックステーション/Mステ)

A long running Japanese TV program, Mステ airs weekly from 8pm to 9pm on tv asahi. Currently hosted by Tamori and Yeshie Tekuchi, the program is similar to America's TRL (RIP) or Britain's Top of Pops. A number of successful groups and performers have made their debut on the show. The show also hosts international artists.

Variety shows バラエティ番組

As a general term in Japan, "variety show" can refer to "straight" variety shows with an appropriate myriad of topics, segments, and games. It is also used to refer to comedy-oriented shows that focus more on stand-up and skits, along with quiz/trivia type shows featuring comic elements. It is not to be expected that a variety show will always follow the same format, and guests from Japanese music and talent pools or frequent. Many shows are made up of what are called VTR's or video segments.

VS Arashi (VS 嵐)

An ongoing Japanese variety show featuring the members of Arashi, The show is broadcast on Fuji TV and airs on Thursday's during what is dubbed "golden time, from 7:00 to 7:57 p.m.

Quiz! Hexagon II (クイズ! ヘキサゴン II)

A popular quiz variety show on Fuji Television. The show airs on Wednesday at 7:00. Guests on the show often include, popular comedians and talents. During each episode, three teams compete for points in various quizzes.

Ametalk (雨上がり決死隊のトーク番組アメトーク!)

Yet another popular variety show, Ametalk is hosted by a famous owarai お笑い (broad word used to describe Japanese comedy) duo consisting of Hiroyuki Miyasoko (宮迫博之) and Toro Hotorhara (蛭原徹). The duo performs under the name Ameagari Kesshitai, which translates to post rain death squad.