

City Pop: A Brief Rewind of 70s' Music Culture

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The 1970s were crucial times for Japanese people. After stabilizing its economy in such a little time as 30 years following the mushroom cloud, Japan was under the effect of western-oriented cultures. Some completely adapted themselves to western influence, while others completely rejected it, stuck to their traditions. This very cultural clash was also occurring within the musical world. Amid this cultural clash and the economic boom within the country, a “new music” genre emerged as a western-oriented Japanese music genre that dragged millions of listeners along during the time. This term was later made into various shapes, one of which being ‘city pop’.

The definition of the term ‘city pop’ has always been subjective, differing from one artist to the other. Yutaka Kimura, an author of numerous books about city pop, defined it as “urban pop music for those with urban lifestyles”. Pitchfork’s Joshua Minsoom Kim called it “a vague descriptor for Japanese music that incorporated jazz and R&B”. An Electronic Beats writer characterized city pop as Japan's “answer to synth-pop and disco”. Put it simply, city pop can be defined as a music genre that is made for city people, by city people.

The origin of the city pop can be traced back to the early-mid 1970s. Some mark the band Happy End as the ‘ground zero’ for the genre, while others consider works of Haruomi Hosono and Tatsuro Yamashita in the mid-1970s as the initial steps. City pop peaked in popularity in the 1980s. Artists that managed to incorporate complex arrangements and songwriting techniques into their hits, plus the booming economy, were considered the most popular figures of the genre, such as Tatsuro Yamashita, who is generally referred to as the ‘king’ of city pop. However, the genre started losing its mainstream popularity after the 1980s.

Later in the 2010s, city pop became once again viral after gaining popularity of artists such as Mariya Takeuchi, plus the emergence of a brand new music genre named ‘vaporwave’. Vaporwave relied heavily on samples from the 1980s and 1990s, which contained various music genres. Although vaporwave considered being a “dead” genre ever since the mid-2010s, revival attempts of city pop have still been carried out up until today. Hundreds of thousands of people still create YouTube playlists, hours-long compilations for city pop.

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