

## Ryuichi Sakamoto



If **Ryuichi Sakamoto** had been born in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy, we'd know what to call him: a Renaissance Man. But since he was born in Japan in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, we have to string together words like composer, musician, producer, actor, and environmental activist. It's a diverse resumé, but there are two things that match it: one is Sakamoto's music – pioneering electronic works, globally-inspired rock, classical scores (including a massive opera) and of course those familiar soundtracks. The other is the list of awards on his mantle – among them an Academy Award, two Golden Globes, a Grammy, the Order of the Cavaleiro Admissão from the government of Brazil, and, in July 2009, he was named an Officier of the coveted Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the government of France. Perhaps most prized of all, was the UN Environment Programme's Echo Award, for his innovative and groundbreaking work in eco-friendly touring and music distribution.

For millions of movie viewers around the world, Ryuichi Sakamoto is best known for the scores to the films *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, *The Last Emperor*, *The Sheltering Sky*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and dozens more. For many others, he is one of the founding fathers of electronic music; as part of the Yellow Magic Orchestra, formed in 1978, he is still a major influence in the worlds of techno and ambient music. Now, Sakamoto's legions of fans will have two new projects to savor. *Playing the Piano* is a series of "self-covers," as he refers to them – solo piano versions of his earlier works, including some of the famous film themes. And *out of noise* is nothing less than a summing up of Sakamoto's sonic interests, from medieval European instruments to hi-tech electronics to the sounds of the besieged glaciers of the Arctic Circle.

Though born in Tokyo, in 1952, Sakamoto has been a true citizen of the world. He has written music inspired by the traditions of Okinawa, Indonesia, and Brazil; has reinterpreted the songs of Brazil's late songwriter Antonio Carlos Jobim as a kind of world/chamber music; and has collaborated with David Bowie, David Sylvian, dramatist Robert Wilson, author William S Burroughs, the Three Tenors' Jose Carreras, and His Holiness The Dalai Lama, among many

others. He has written music for the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona and for the 400th anniversary of the city of Mannheim, Germany.

As a child Sakamoto fell under the spell of English rock (first record he ever bought: “Tell Me” by the Rolling Stones), and then French Impressionism. “Debussy was my hero,” he says, and acknowledges that echoes of his teenage idol can still be heard in his new piano disc. “Asian music heavily influenced Debussy, and Debussy heavily influenced me. So the music goes around the world and comes full circle.” *Playing the Piano* does indeed come full circle, offering a new, reflective take on some of Sakamoto’s “greatest hits.” His best-known film scores began life at the piano, so these versions are very close to the way Sakamoto himself first heard them. Songs like “Thousand Knives” and “Riot In Lagos,” on the other hand, are dramatically different from their original electronic selves.

*out of noise* is even more ambitious, wrestling with fundamental questions about what is music and what is noise. “As soon as you make a piano sound, it’s vanishing,” Sakamoto explains, “vanishing into noise. You can’t tell when it becomes noise, when it’s gone. That’s the area I’m interested in.” Sakamoto has for years explored that netherworld between music and noise, especially in his landmark works with Alva Noto, which blazed a trail for the style now known as glitch electronica. In *out of noise*, his exploration of music and noise extends even further – to the sounds of the environment. “We are surrounded by the sound of the environment,” he explains. “That’s music too, really.”

In making *out of noise*, Ryuichi Sakamoto went to Greenland with the Cape Farewell Project, as part of their cultural response to climate change. He recorded under the surface of the water of the Arctic Sea, and on the surface of the glacial ice. In the process, he may have gotten more than he bargained for. “The local Inuits told us their folklore,” he recalls. “According to legend the highest goddess lives under the deep sea. When I recorded the sound of the wind on the glacier, it was like I was hearing the voice of the goddess.” These sounds haunt the aural landscape of *out of noise* - a landscape peopled by, among others, England’s renowned early music group Fretwork, Austrian guitarist/laptop artist Christian Fennesz, and Icelandic multi-instrumentalist Skuli Sverrisson. Sakamoto found it a hard project to leave: “I felt a strong nostalgia, as if I left my soul on that glacier.”

Being a citizen of the world means more than just hopping from studio to studio working with an international cast of musicians. Sakamoto has devoted much of his time in recent years to environmental concerns – to turning Ego into Eco, as he puts it. “I felt really scared in the 90s thinking about our children’s future. I imagined my youngest son at my age, and wondered what the world would be like then. That was scary!” And so Sakamoto, who is somewhat reserved by nature, found a way to turn his fame into something useful. He began assembling various colleagues to work first on the Zero Landmines project; and then, faced with the enormity of the global threats to the environment, he hit upon a simple idea: moreTrees. Protecting existing forests and planting new ones could strike a natural way of balancing human carbon emissions. “A simple idea, but difficult to do!” he says ruefully. Still, within a year, his moreTrees foundation had a lease on two forests in Japan, and a third on the northern island of Hokkaido followed last year. Now, a fourth forest in the Philippines is being added. moreTrees leases the land for 50 or 60 years, planting seedlings and maintaining the forests, and offering carbon offset credits to corporations and individuals looking to reduce their carbon footprint.

Sakamoto’s tours put his eco-theory into practice. His award-winning “green” tours aim to reduce environmental pollution and CO2 emissions by asking for cooperation from both presenters and audience members. From the concert hall to the backstage, his staff aims to

use locally supplied materials wherever possible; and carbon offset credits are purchased for not just for the staff's unavoidable CO2 emissions, but for those of audience members driving to the venues.

moreTrees is clearly a long-term commitment, one that Ryuichi Sakamoto hopes to pass on to the next generation. And that is not all he's hoping to leave behind.

In 2006, at a time when the record business was hitting the steepest part of its current decline, he bucked the odds and launched an independent, eco-friendly record label called *commons* (the middle m, he says, stands for music) in collaboration with Avex Entertainment. Concerned that musicians were unable to make a living from recordings and that valuable work was being lost, Sakamoto began a two-pronged recording approach. First, he began looking for interesting artists, and found a funny thing happening. "As people get older, normally their ears close to new sounds. My ears get more open as I get older. There are always young talents – artists, bands, DJs – and I hear something surprising, an unexpected sound or noise, every day."

Among the artists Sakamoto has signed to *commons* are the veteran noise-rock band Boredoms, their all-female offshoot OOIOO, and the latest release from American "post-rock" pioneers Tortoise. An even bigger part of *commons*, though, is the project known as *Schola*. Sakamoto describes it as a 30-volume musical encyclopedia. Fifteen volumes will be devoted to Western music, from medieval to modern, and the other fifteen will be devoted to non-Western traditions. By licensing some of the finest existing recordings (some of them not currently in print), and producing each volume as a book with a CD, he hopes to offer a panoramic survey of the world's music. "Again, the main reason I started it is for the next generations. Music becomes information; it's on the internet, all flat, spread out on a huge plain. It's hard for them to pick out the good music. And I want to say, listen to *this* – it's worth it."

And what about the current generation? For us, there is a Ryuichi Sakamoto discography that is unparalleled in its diversity and quality. A discography with two notable new additions in *out of noise* and *Playing the Piano*. Listen to this – it's worth it.