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Translated by /u/uberbroke for /r/BABYMETAL

He's married and dotes on his children. Yet when possessed by the fox god, he becomes the diminutive white-faced God delivering sensational performances at metal festivals overseas. Mikio Fujioka is such a guitarist.

Although constantly sporting a disarming and soft countenance, Mikio Fujioka is undoubtedly a technical guitarist gifted with a stupendous amount of skills.

Having joined the ranks of the "Kami-Band" as the third guitarist and debuting his contributions at the Inazuma Rock Festival in September of 2013, Mikio eventually claimed his spot as a regular in the 2015 World Tour. Now he is also part of the founding members of the "Kari (temporary) Band", another band with transcendent qualities where he yet showcases unbelievable talent.

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Q: So how did you end up joining BABYMETAL?

Fujioka: The band started off with pre-recorded instrumentals, and it wasn't until May of 2013 that they started incorporating a live band in their performances. I was offered an audition for the gig, and having passed that, joined up starting with the Inazuma Rock Festival in September of 2013. During this time, a live band only got to play in full during festivals and only had partial contributions in other shows. The group started featuring full performances with a live band starting with the 2-day Budoukan lives in 2014. In previous festivals they've relied on back tracks.

Q: Do the band members get switched pretty often?

Fujioka: I've been playing consistently for the past one or two years. Until 2014 it was a rotation among the large, medium, and small sized god (me), depending on our schedules. We each had our own projects to attend to, so it was a matter of availability. In those days I felt I played different parts in each live. It became really confusing, and during some rehearsals when I was playing while waving my head around, we ended up playing the same part in unison instead of harmonizing, haha.

Q: When did you start playing abroad?

From July 2014. We had a few shows at live houses the size of ZEP for our independent tour, but the Sonisphere Festival in England was our first huge tour abroad.

Q: So Europe was the time you had a performance as a live band?

Fujioka: That's right. It seems like more people come to see us in Europe, like in UK and Germany. Especially in UK, we had independent shows at Wembley and O2.

Q: What other countries did you find yourself play in?

In terms of the number of countries we ended up in, we have Switzerland, Italy, France, The Netherlands... Too many to count, really. Germany is a big country so we did gigs in several locations.

Q: You appeared on an American TV show this spring.

Fujioka: I feel that American shows are similar to how Japanese shows were made in the past. The composition aspect especially. When we appeared on The Late Show, I saw that there was a live band, exclusively for the program. The jingles (the performances between segments) were all live and incredible. The Drifters had live bands back in the days, so they kind of reminded me of that. Anyways, the network staff members all started treating us well when we had our sound check.

Q: Would you elaborate on that?

Fujioka: We asked them to record the sound by line instead of with mics. At first they were like "Huh? Why?" When we got to the studio we saw mics set up. We asked if those mics were dummies, but they said they are used to record sound. Well the studio wasn't huge and the sound would mash up so we insisted using a line instead. Well, they had a lot of stuff done for us during the soundcheck, and that's when they started to treat us differently. We were all super pumped after the show too. The staff all told us we did a great job.

Q: Has things changed for you since you started performing in BABYMETAL?

Fujioka: There are people who come all the way overseas to see us. There are people who wait on us when entering / exiting the gig in every country. I also think they know which buses we ride on.

Q: They won't know who you are because of the make up, right?

Fujioka: Well, I'm just a tiny man when not possessed by the fox god, haha. But sometimes we take pictures and shake hands. They know all our faces now.

Q: You rank favorably in "Best Artist" and "Best Instrumentals" awards in Brazil. You're also rated highly by metal fans in general.

Fujioka: I feel that from how people wait for us to enter and exit gigs. Some people even camped out from the day prior for merch and good standing positions at Wembley arena.

Q: Speaking of which, what's with the white painted faces?

Fujioka: When we get close to live shows, we get possessed by the fox god and it just happens.

Q: The designs are always different. BOH's designs are especially crazy.

Fujioka: Yeah, the fox god does like to play around with us. You'll know when a live was performed by looking at BOH's head. Like during our first show of the year, his head read 「迎春」 or "Welcome Spring" (Happy New Year).

Q: Do you get acquainted with other musicians overseas?

Fujioka: We got to meet with members of Anthrax. Also Billy Sheehan. BOH is a fan of Billy Sheehan so he was super excited about that. He even uses the same effect pedals as Billy, so I think Billy is an idol to him. We got to meet Kiko Loureiro a decade ago and we were thrilled about seeing him again, but unfortunately we were in different tents. We didn't have the guts to enter Megadeath's tent, so we were kind of bummed about not meeting them this time. I hope we'll get a chance to play something with them someday.

Q: Who is your guitar hero?

Fujioka: My idol is Paul Gilbert. It was because of him that I entered MI (Musicians Institute). We even had a chance to play together at events. I like Jeff Beck too. I actually also like Yngwie Malmsteen. I go to his live concerts like the one at Loud Park. I still have a Yngwie model guitar at home. I haven't been influenced much by people in the technical fusion genre.

Q: So you're quite a metalhead.

Fujioka: I can't compete with the originals after all. So I try to learn from each and develop my original sense. I started off loving J-Pop, but got into Paul Gilbert and started listening to hard rock. I then started listening to Young Guitarists like Yngwie, Steve Vai, and Dream Theater. I also like Scott Henderson as a fusion too. He has some crazy brilliant musical sense.

Q: In that sense, you can say you've returned to your roots with BABYMETAL?

Fujioka: Yeah. I don't feel awkward playing here at all.

Q: Do you bring all your stage equipment with you from Japan?

Fujioka: We both use Kempers for guitars. It's a rack type, and you can punch in data directly off of a USB. We can pretty much do anything with this so we just bring our USB and rent out 4 kempers including 2 subs. We just bring two guitars. Other than that, we just bring original pedals, tuners / volume pedals, so it's not like we have to carry around a truck load of stuff with us. In the beginning though we used live amps and swapped guitars based on tuning.

Q: What about the other members?

Fujioka: BOH likes to procure on location amps like the ones he usually uses. But sometimes we receive totally different stuff from ones he requested, haha. But he ends up using it because it's not like you're not going to play because of it.

Q: What were some big issues you've faced?

I support Aimer and BABYMETAL simultaneously, and at Japanese festivals they often have double headers. Kemper features a data bank, so it's easy to swap profiles, but it would be a calamity if I accidentally use the fox god's sounds during an Aimer gig.

Q: (lol)

Fujioka: When we rented out a Kemper in Europe the other day, the previous renter (who is part of a super huge band who will also remain anonymous) forgot to wipe their data, so of course I gave it a try, haha. Our current engineer supported Motorhead until last year, so we note the differences and even developed new sounds in the meantime.

Q: So you discuss Motorhead with him?

Fujioka: We talk about how Motorhead records off the mic and balances the sound. How they have good balance between the snare and the kick and what they do on stage with a lot of stuff going on.

Q: There doesn't seem to be any big issues in the tour so far.

Fujioka: Kemper is a German amp so there isn't an issue in Europe. However, at times we only get to rent out 3 of them, so we end up bringing one from Japan. Rain is an issue though. We've had a volume pedal short out during a festival in the rain, but it wasn't an issue for the band. We often have problems with the bus though, like the belt popping off, haha.

Q: What's the bus like inside?

Fujioka: The band bus has 2 decks, and both decks are equipped with living rooms, simple kitchens, and bathrooms. One bus has beds for 16 people, but they're so small that you'd hit your head getting out of it. I'd only spend up to 2 weeks in it. We move around a lot, and we visit

local instrument stores on free days. People there have asked us “Hey, aren’t you a member of the foxes?” before.

Q: So you’re enjoying your time overseas?

Fujioka: Well, we’re only free for a day or two, and those days usually start with laundry at the hotel. I often find discarded underwear at festival shower rooms. I’m sure someone famous wore the underwear, but I think they wear them as disposables. That’s how difficult it is to get your stuff laundered out there.

Q: How do you like the food during the tour?

Fujioka: We often get hamburgers and pizzas catered. I really miss having a rice cooker, haha. I found that food catering in France isn’t that good. Food in Germany was always good. English food wasn’t as bad as it’s reputed to be. But sometimes we get some crazy weird food. Some catering services were nice enough to get us miso soup, but it was actually consommé disguised as miso soup, haha. It was really nice when a Japanese bento shop made us some awesome Japanese food in Paris. Touring is arduous so having the right food is crucial.

Q: How are the foreign audience reactions different from that in Japan?

Fujioka: I felt a sense of “How do I react to this...?” at American festivals. People get into it in the end, though. At Sonisphere, there was definitely a feeling of people just observing us at first too.

Q: How long is a set, usually?

Fujioka: We’re doing longer and longer sets now, around an hour these days. Even short ones are about 40 minutes. We don’t have breaks between songs so the audience really livens up in the momentum. Although official rules say that lives would be cancelled when people start doing wall of deaths, we still see them every time.

Q: You guys are a metal band in earnest, then.

Fujioka: We are. People aren’t supposed to come up on stage, so we don’t see that happening though. We are getting more popular in Japan, but I feel the scale is different in the rest of the world. The majority of fans are male in Japan and abroad, but the number of female fans in Japan is gradually increasing. I still prefer touring in Japan though. The food’s great and we don’t have to worry about so many things.

Q: Do you feel on edge when touring abroad?

Fujioka: One time when we were touring in Germany and we rendezvoused with the other staff members for a drink, we stood up to offer up cheers. At that very moment, someone stole the cameraman's gear bag. It was only for a brief second, but these kinds of things happen almost every time. We sometimes have issues with the PA system, lighting, and mixers too. Sometimes we get stuff delivered that's totally different from what we ordered. Sometimes the equipment is old, in tatters, or just plain broken. The first day of the tour is usually spent building up the set and making sure everything works as it should.

Q: By the way, you are also actively involved in the "Kari (temp) Band" with BOH. How did that happen?

Fujioka: I first met BOH on location for the fox god, and we found out that three of us play jazz and fusion type pieces in sessions and the like. Mr. Maeta has always played as the drummer in BLUEMAN, and he would sometimes play for BABYMETAL. So we decided to go ahead and do something together.

Q: So it's right to assume that "Kami-Band" = "Kari Band"?

Fujioka: Yup. The members of the Kari Band are Mikio Fujioka (G) 、BOH (B) 、Yuya Maeta (Dr) .

Q: So how did it occur that the members who play metal music were to also play jazz fusion music together? You guys also cover King Crimson, Jeff Beck, and Herbie Hancock.

Fujioka: Well, it was actually Maeta that asked me if we wanted to do something a little off-beat outside of what we were doing. It turns out that 3 of us like this genre so we decided to get BOH in on it too. It's been about a year since that. We didn't feel like making original songs at first, so we just covered songs we like. We did about 3 live sessions, and we liked it so much that we decided to take it a step further. We got to the point where we've decided on featuring our own piece, so we plan to get it recorded and released by the end of the year. We might show it off in a tour at the beginning of next year.

Q: What kind of music is it?

Fujioka: They're fundamentally complex technical pieces, and their features change depending on the guest musician. Kind of like from Jazz to Fusion to Djent. I think we'll end up with a mix of various musical tastes. Composition usually starts with my chords accompanying BOH's phrases. We have 3 songs made so far.

Q: We can't wait for the album.

Fujioka: We want to make an album that makes people go "What the heck is this?" The concept is basically playing what we want to play on top of complex technical groundwork. 2 of the songs are so complex you won't be able to make out the meter or the beat. Maybe a pop ballad

and a few songs that feature individual players. Kari band is a technical instrumental band, and the genre at live sessions will depend on the guest. Well, I suppose the genre is more in the realm of fusion jazz.

Q: There seems to be a huge difference between the Kami band and Kari Band. Will Kari Band be expanding its activities overseas in the foreseeable future?

Fujioka: Maeta seems to want to, so definitely, when given the chance!