

Michael Chaparro

English 21002

Sarah Perez

March 19, 2023

Music with An International Reach (Reflection)

For this field observation assignment, I wanted to direct my focus to a specific subculture that greatly captured my interest. As I am a major music enthusiast, I decided to focus on 1980s Japanese city pop, and the online community surrounding this niche genre. It's one of my all-time favorite musical styles, being that it's highly reminiscent of funk, soul, disco, and R&B, genres that I'm already a major fan of. Through observing the massive r/citypop subreddit, it was fascinating to see how people were drawn to the genre, and what they do as a community to demonstrate their love for it. Niche memes are a staple of any online subculture, but many in the community take it one step further and scour for original vinyl. They view it not only as a link to the thriving urban landscape of 1980s Japan, but also the most authentic way to experience the music. To many, there's few better feelings than being able to own a piece of music and history in their hands, especially when it's from an era that initially didn't gain much traction.

In this essay, I incorporated a major course learning objective concerning using the internet, in order to locate sources appropriate to my writing project. While the subreddit was a good representation of how the city pop community operated on a daily basis, I needed to locate a secondary source in order to fully understand how the genre became so prominent online. To gain more insight on the city pop community, I consulted a website hosted by prominent DJ Van Paugam. Knowing that he's partially responsible for the genre's popularity in the west, both through his DJ sets and his perseverance as a collector, I felt he might serve as a reliable source

in explaining why the genre had such an international reach. He not only articulated why the sounds of city pop found new fans through its familiar grooves, but also the manner in which vinyl collecting became such an integral part of being an enthusiast of the genre. Without a doubt, it was fascinating to uncover why the city pop community became the way it is today.

Michael Chaparro

English 21002

Sarah Perez

March 19, 2023

Music with an International Reach: The Online Spread of Japanese City Pop

When you step back and think about it, the internet is such a marvel to behold. For a little over two decades, it's cemented a rightful place as the world's largest and most exhaustive hub for information. With almost anything being a mere click away, the internet has allowed us to be more integrated, no matter how far we may be from each other. From world events, histories, the arts, to culture, no matter how niche it may be, we can pick and choose what to focus our attention on based on our liking, and it's allowed us to enjoy some incredible music we might otherwise never get the chance to hear.

One of these internet music phenomena revolves around an elusive style of Japanese popular music, known as city pop. City pop exploded in popularity during the 1980s, when Japan was in the midst of a major economic resurgence. With its eclectic and original mix of western funk, soul, jazz, R&B, and soft rock through a uniquely Japanese lens, the genre eventually gained its fair share of fans outside Japan, even to this day. This resulted in a sizeable, yet dedicated internet community being fostered across sites such as Discord and Reddit, the latter sporting the r/citypop subreddit, having close to 50,000 members as of this writing.

So how did the internet become invested in this niche genre of Japanese music? Seeing as how the western world was already into other Japanese cultural exports, such as anime and manga, the popularity of city pop should come as no surprise. Some got into it via future funk and vaporwave, which are two modern musical styles that rely heavily on chopped-and-screwed

samples of old Japanese hits. Their presence on platforms such as SoundCloud and Spotify eventually compelled listeners to seek the original source material, unearthing songs from a slew of artists including city pop architect Tatsuro Yamashita, Tomoko Aran, Toshiki Kadomatsu, and countless others. However, it's mainly thanks to the YouTube algorithm, since the site kept recommending Mariya Takeuchi's "Plastic Love", a mid-tempo offering from her 1984 album "Variety". Though exactly why the algorithm did this is still a mystery, the video managed to garner 24 million views before its initial deletion, drawing many with its slick, familiar grooves that easily resonate with fans of funk, R&B, and boogie. It struck that perfect middle ground between familiarity and novelty that continues to be a drive for city pop enthusiasts.

On the r/citypop subreddit, most content seems to be driven by either memes, fans who take pride in showing off their vinyl collection, excerpts of interviews with original artists, and rare concert footage. Many of these memes are centered around more well-known songs in the genre such as the aforementioned "Plastic Love", or around current events in the city pop sphere. For a particularly wordy example, one of the most upvoted memes by user PhaBaZa reads, "the city pop community witnessing virtually all of Tatsuro Yamashita's most iconic songs that's been existing for years on YouTube with dozens of millions of views be copyright striked and deleted off the platform in a span of a few days", with a picture of Woody from Toy Story staring blankly (*R/Citypop - What the Hell Happened.*, 2022). This meme makes a reference to the general lack of accessibility of city pop for non-western listeners, with some like Yamashita preventing his albums from being streamed on services such as Spotify, as they're mainly concerned with their domestic market. One should consider that because of the geographic proximity of city pop, much of it is physically out of reach, so vinyl and CDs are extremely hard to come by in places like the US. For many wishing to support the artists, YouTube remains their only option, as

pretty much any song can be found there with a little bit of digging, and some Japanese labels like AIR or Moon Records don't have their full roster of artists available on Spotify, Deezer, or other streaming services. As city pop artists grow aware of their popularity abroad, this trend has slowly started to change with many making their discographies officially available for international audiences. However, a lot of progress still has to be done, and some fans still resort to piracy because of the lack of legal mediums for older Japanese pop.

With great attention paid to such a niche genre, vinyl digging and collecting are crucial driving forces of the city pop community. As interest in city pop grew from the late 2010s onwards, many fans often scavenged and scoured online marketplaces such as Discogs to purchase rare LPs and singles, an ode to the collector spirit that regularly inhabits fans of Japanese pop culture (Paugam, 2022). Van Paugam, a prominent DJ that contributed to the genre's overseas popularity, outlines this phenomenon in his article, *Why We Like Collecting City Pop Vinyl in 2022*. Stemming from the recent renewal of interest in vinyl, many eagerly paid massive prices for original Japanese pressings, fueled by resellers who took advantage of both the popularity and scarcity of city pop records. For example, "a listing for Junko Ohashi's fabled compilation 'Magical' once sold for over a thousand dollars", proving that no price barrier would stop the most die-hard fans of the genre (Paugam, 2022). Progressively, this trend got to the point where Japanese labels took notice, with many eventually repressing city pop LPs and singles at a more affordable price. Such high price tags are often indicative of the desire to acquire an authentic product, and given how LPs and 7-inch singles were the main format through which many listened to music in 1980s Japan, owning an original vinyl is as close to a living snapshot of the city pop era one will get. Even artists from the era, such as famed singer Taeko Onuki, took notice of this to the point where she was invited to meet an overseas fan and collector on a

TV show (*R/Citypop - This Is a Great Photo of Me and Taeko Onuki! I Was Record Digging in Japan and Ending up on Why Did You Come to Japan? (YOUは何しに日本へ)! I Found Her Record on TV and They Invited Me Back to Meet Her the Following Year! It Was a Blast!*, 2019).

It's truly a marvel to witness the online reach of city pop. With the internet allowing us to access and explore different cultures, the eclectic sounds of the genre were able to reach the ears of many, even transcending the language barrier. As its popularity skyrocketed, city pop spawned a niche culture of its own, paving way to a slew of internet memes and a strong vinyl culture still prominent today. If the overseas reach of the genre proved one thing, it's that music truly is a universal language, and it will eventually reach the right audience.

References

1. *Japanese City Pop: 1980s urban driving music*. (n.d.). Reddit.
<https://www.reddit.com/r/citypop/>
2. *r/citypop - What the hell happened*. (2022, September 15). Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/citypop/comments/xfgo6x/what_the_hell_happened/
3. Paugam, V. (2023, February 16). *Why We Like Collecting Japanese City Pop Vinyl in 2022* — Van Paugam. Van Paugam.
<https://www.vanpaugam.com/blog/why-we-like-collecting-city-pop-vinyl-in-2022>
4. *r/citypop - This is a great photo of me and Taeko Onuki! I was record digging in Japan and ending up on Why Did You Come To Japan? (YOUは何しに日本へ)! I found her record on TV and they invited me back to meet her the following year! It was a blast!* (2019, July 16). Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/citypop/comments/ce7opu/this_is_a_great_photo_of_me_and_taekeo_onuki_i_was/