

Kobayashi Aika's first album "Gradation Collection" has been released.

Kobayashi has been involved in the school idol project "Love Live! Sunshine! She made her major debut as a solo artist with the single "NO LIFE CODE" in February 2020.

Tomokazu Tashiro (Q-MHz), who has been involved in the creation of music since her major label debut, produced the sound for "Gradation Collection," which she describes as her best work to date, and a diverse lineup of artists participated, including Saori Kodama, Yu Sudo (XIIX), Saeki youthK, and poet Yuumitsu Bunzuki. The album is titled "Gradation Collection. The title of the album, "Gradation Collection," was chosen by Kobayashi, who has been singing freely without being bound by anything under the themes of "gradation" and "borderless" since her debut. It was named after her.

To celebrate the release of their first album, Music Natalie interviewed Kobayashi and Tashiro. We talked to them about the production episodes of "Gradation Collection," how Tashiro got started producing Kobayashi, and the secrets behind Kobayashi's rich vocal expression.

Written and interviewed by Kyu Nakanishi Photographed by Reiji Yamazaki

I'm really grateful for your voice acting work.

Tomokazu Tashiro (Q-MHz): Initially, Toys Factory asked you, "What do you think of this singer?"

Tomokazu Tashiro (Q-MHz) At first, Toys Factory asked me, "We have a singer like this, how about you, Tashiro? How about you, Tashiro? Aikyan (Kobayashi) and I had briefly exchanged greetings before that, so I said, "Sure, I'll do it.

Aika Kobayashi: We met at the New Year's party, didn't we?

Tashiro: There was a big New Year's party for musicians and people in the industry. At that time, we just said, "Oh, hi" and that was it (laughs).

Tashiro: Did you have the idea from the beginning to produce artists in general?

Tashiro: I'm not sure how it went. Probably when I was working on "NO LIFE CODE," I didn't have all my plans set in stone, and then I joined Corona Damages, which made the future even more uncertain. So it's not like we've come this far with a plan, but rather we've been running along, making decisions as we go, wondering what we can do next.

Kobayashi I myself really liked the world view of Q-MHz's music, and I like the way their songs have a groove that makes your body start moving on its own, and the way you can hear the various instruments and feel the soul of each instrument as they sing with passion. I like the way each instrument seems to sing with passion and soul. I have an image that there are many

songs that I would like to hear live, and that would look great in a live setting. I'm very happy to be able to sing them as Aika Kobayashi.

Tashiro: What kind of vocalist did you find Kobayashi to be at first?

Tashiro: I had listened to some of your songs that you had released on an independent label before, so I had an image that you would be good at powerful rock music. But as I worked on it, I began to think, "I'd like to see more sides to it," so I tried something a little different with the coupling song "Yura Yura" for "NO LIFE CODE. That went well, so I decided to have them try different things for this album as well. Of course, I intentionally left out some things that I thought would probably not be suitable for this album.

Tashiro: By the way, what kind of things do you like?

Tashiro: Metal, I guess. If I had to choose whether I could do it or not, I think I could do it at all, but I don't think it's right for me to have the image of a "metal singer" at this point (laughs).

(laughs) Kobayashi Mmm-hmm.

Tashiro I'm conscious of keeping the colors of Aika Kobayashi coherent while showing variations. I'm always amazed at how she can do so many different things.

Kobayashi Originally, I thought that I could only sing cool songs, sad songs, and songs with blue emotions. However, after I started working as a voice actor, I realized that I could also sing cheerful songs. I felt as if I was learning more and more about myself that I didn't know before, and I came to like my voice and was able to sing songs that I had assumed I couldn't sing.

I was able to sing songs that I had assumed I couldn't. I realized that I had potential as a singer that I hadn't even seen before. Sunshine! (the self-proclaimed name of Yoshiko Tsushima, the character played by Kobayashi in "Love Live!

Kobayashi That's right (laughs). I'm really grateful to Yohane.

Aika Kobayashi is definitely a singer who can express herself in many different ways, but her sound image is centered around power pop. Who's decision was it to focus on this?

Tashiro I wonder who's decision it was (laughs).

(laughs) I think it became the axis when I noticed it.

Tashiro In the beginning, I didn't expect the world to become like this, so I set the goal of becoming an artist who sings a lot of songs in live performances. Maybe that's what influenced me. I tried to make songs that had a role to play in live performances, like call and response with the audience, or something that made people want to raise their arms.

I feel that you have an aptitude for all types of music, so much so that you could have any of them as your main focus. That's why, on the other hand, I thought that it would be difficult to decide on one line as the axis.

Tashiro No, it's really true. For example, we always put a stylish song in the coupling of our singles, and it's totally possible to make that the main focus. However, I think it would be a shame if I became too much of a "fashionable singer". I don't want to give off an air of pretentiousness, and since I'm a person who lives like the wind and is very aloof, I don't want to give off an air of pretentiousness.

Kobayashi (laughs).

Tashiro: I wanted to preserve that feeling. I wanted to keep that feeling. The energetic songs with a lot of energy are on the surface, but I wanted to be able to say, "You're going to switch to that in the second song? I wanted the core of the album to have a sense of aloofness that could appear anywhere. I hope it will be centered on an aloofness that allows me to show up anywhere. I think that casualness is like Aikyan.

I think the casualness of the album is very Aikyan. The album has power pop as a mainstay in key places, with various ingredients in between. So that was the theme of the album?

Tashiro That's right. That's what I was trying to do. (to Kobayashi) Are you okay?

Kobayashi I'm glad to know so much about you (laughs).
I've decided to take responsibility for what I say.

Let's talk about your album "Gradation Collection. You wrote the lyrics for "Tatanbarin Rizumu".

Kobayashi Mr. Tashiro once asked me, "Aikyan, do you know any instruments? I light-heartedly replied, "I might be able to play the tambourine," which was picked up (laughs). (laughs) He said, "Then I'll write a song about tambourines.

Tashiro The song is based on the premise of having the artist play the tambourine.

Kobayashi I decided to take responsibility for what I said (laughs). (laughs) From there, we decided that if we were going to release an album, it would be nice to have a song that I wrote the lyrics for, so we decided on this one.

Kobayashi: The lyrics are about the excitement of love, using the rhythm of the tambourine as a heartbeat.

Kobayashi I thought that if the lyrics didn't connect with the tambourine, there would be no point in having the tambourine playing. So I started thinking about how to connect it with the

tambourine. I thought I could write a song about love by comparing the sound of the tambourine to the sound of the heart or the feeling of wanting to stamp your feet in a lively way. I decided on my own story and wrote it as I became the main character in the story.

Kobayashi: Did you find it easy to write?

Kobayashi When I had completed a certain amount of work, I submitted it to Mr. Tashiro, but each time it came back to me in red. Every time I submit it, it comes back in red, and he carefully corrects it.

Tashiro In the first version, I think the ending was already in the second line, right?

Kobayashi That's right. So he said, "Let's make it a stage where you haven't realized you're in love yet.

So, the lyrics might have worked, but when you look at the flow of the song, it's like, "This isn't something that should be sung here yet.

Tashiro: That's right. The conclusion had already been reached before the interlude, so there had to be another twist at the end to make the story longer.

Kobayashi I learned a lot from you.

Kobayashi: Is there anything you pay attention to when you choose your words?

Kobayashi I wanted to express the cute feeling of love, so I used a lot of hiragana, and I consciously included repeated words like "yada yada" and "doki doki". I'm a person who is very particular about the characters.

Tashiro: I like the stretching sticks in "Oh, my God" and the small "a" in "something".

T—I see. Personally, I have the impression that you are a lyricist who pays a lot of attention to the sound of sounds when you sing. Even the song "Lorem Ipsum" (a coupling song for the single "Tough Heart" released in January 2021), which was co-written with Tashiro-san, seems to have lyrics that focus on the sound.

Kobayashi While I'm singing, I'm thinking, "Does this fit? I guess it's because I'm thinking about it as I sing. It's a sound that makes my mouth move properly. For "Lorem Ipsum," I sent in a lot of key words, and Mr. Tashiro put them together, but I realized that all the words I was going to send in ended in "ru. I realized that all the words I was going to send ended in "ru," so I thought, "Let's unify them all with "ru.

So I decided to unify all the words.

Kobayashi I wonder if that's true. Maybe I am (laughs). (laughs) Indeed, the album title "Gradation Collection," which I gave myself, rhymes perfectly. I thought it was a good idea, including the letters.

— Among the participating creators, the poet Yukimitsu Mizuki, who wrote the lyrics for "Night Camp," is a very unique choice.

Tashiro: Bungetsu-san is a poet who, unusually for a poet, does public appearances, and is making various efforts to spread poetry, and I thought he was doing interesting things. I had an idea that I wanted to write a country/western song about campfires, and I thought it would be interesting to borrow the sensibility of a poet, so I asked him to do it, and he agreed.

Kobayashi In this song, the various instruments sound as if they are singing one after another, and I have a strong image of it coming in like a chorus. I felt like it was a chorus (laughs). (laughs) The song has a warm impression, as if everyone is singing in a circle around a campfire. But what I'm singing is quite deep, and it's a song that makes you feel positive, "Even if I grow up, even if I turn to ashes, I'll keep that flame burning. I really enjoyed singing it.

Tashiro: Personally, when I heard Ms. Kobayashi's voice, I got the image of a girl in a tribe who doesn't talk much but has strong eyes.

Tashiro I think that's a very good interpretation.

Kobayashi I had never thought of such a Native American image (laughs).

Tashiro: Do you ever sing in such a way as to create a character?

Kobayashi Not really. If it's a character song, I do. Well, I think of my song as "Aika Kobayashi's character song" (laughs). (laughs) However, this song is simple and has only a few notes, so I sang it more carefully. Maybe that's why it sounded that way.

Tashiro: As a result, I think this song shows Aikyan's honest and natural atmosphere, like "I just sang this. I like it because of its simplicity.

— Personally, the song that I felt that natural feeling the most was "Easy Fizzy".

Tashiro That's true, too (laughs).

Kobayashi That was the same (laughs).

(laughs) Tashiro: In the case of Aikyan, there are probably three types of "plain" voices. Rather than adding flavor to her original voice, I think she has three different voices, and I just adjust them to suit the song.

— "Secret Feeling" was written by Saori Kodama. I don't have any doubts about the choice of Ms. Kodama (laughs), but could you tell me how it came about?

Tashiro: As a lyricist, Kodama-san is very good at writing songs that accompany anime stories, but this time I wanted to see something different. I wanted to see what would happen if I asked him to write lyrics that were purely for the artist's expression. I deliberately tried to give him a song with an adult taste, as an experiment.

Kobayashi When I listen to it myself, I think, "This is really good" (laughs). I think I'm singing in a way that I've never done before. It's got a glamour to it, and Tashiro-san and Kodama-san have brought out a "mature coolness" that is different from sexy. However, although I call it mature, I wonder if it's actually appropriate for her age. (laughs).

— Also, I'd like to talk about Mr. Saeki YouthK on "Moonlight Balcony." In all of Aika Kobayashi's songs, including this one, he always participates as a "lyricist/arranger. I've never seen him credited as "songwriter" or "songwriter/arranger," but as "songwriter/arranger.

Tashiro: That's very unusual. To start with the idea, Yashikin once asked me to compose the music, and I wrote the lyrics. At that time, I realized, "This kind of pattern is possible? That's when I realized that this kind of pattern was possible. So, when I wrote "NO LIFE CODE", I wanted to use Saeki-kun's specialty of funk and soul in the coupling, and when I wrote "Yura Yura", it worked well. Not only did I get a taste of that (laughs), but I also made the next song "Sunset Bicycle" (a coupling song for the single "Tough Heart" released in January 2021) with the exact same group, including not only the songwriters and composers but also the musicians. And this time, "Moonlight Balcony" is in the same vein.

T.K.: I see. I see. So you made the song with that lineup in mind. It's a kind of guesswork.

TASHIRO Yes, yes (laughs). (laughs) For "Moonlight Balcony," I composed it from the beginning with the intention of throwing it completely to Saeki.

Kobayashi For his songs, Mr. Saeki always does a temporary song for me, and it's really cool! I always sing it, hoping that I can express its quality in my own way. There are a lot of "cool! (laughs), and it's really fun to sing.

Precise voice control cultivated through voice acting

Was there any song that was difficult to record?

Kobayashi How about (laughs)?

Tashiro: That's the thing, Aikyan doesn't have much trouble. Once I've decided, "This is the direction I want to go with this song," the rest seems to just fall into place. So the only part that takes a lot of time is the initial decision of direction.

So the only part that takes time is the initial direction.

Kobayashi No, not at all. In the first place, she didn't advise me that I should sing in this way.

Tashiro That's right. In fact, when I was having trouble, Aikyan would say, "I'll try it in a different way. I never get stuck.

Tashiro: In other words, do you enjoy being able to try out different ways of expression?

Kobayashi Yes, I do. It's fun, too, when Mr. Tashiro says (in a low voice), "A little more brightness, 20% more," or something like that.

Tashiro Is that an imitation? (laughs)

Kobayashi (In a low voice) "That was a little too bright, so take 5% off" or "Oh, there's a girl who sings well, so please turn her down" (laughs). (laughs) Thanks to her, I think I am able to consistently sing as Aika Kobayashi in the song.

What percentage of the song can you control?

Kobayashi It's a matter of feeling (laughs).

Tashiro No, I really think I can. I think you can really do it.

It's amazing. It's like a precision machine.

Kobayashi Hahaha (laughs).

Tashiro: Sometimes I go overboard (laughs).

(laughs) - Is that a skill you acquired through your voice acting career?

Kobayashi I think it's all connected. The skill of adjusting the brightness of the voice itself, and the boldness to do it without embarrassment were all cultivated through voice acting.

I'd like to ask you about the artwork. What kind of connections do you have with her?

Kobayashi I'm completely a fan of her work. When the label staff asked me what I wanted for the artwork, I said, "I'd really like Rei Katoh to draw it. I had an image of her as an illustrator with a sense of transparency and beautiful blue colors, but even with different colors, she was able to create something that was both unique to Katou-san and me. I feel that you are working together with me and my work. That's exactly what happened with "NO LIFE CODE," when I asked you to fill the illustrations with my favorite things.

Tashiro Oh, by the way, at that meeting I said, "Put some ramen inside the flower," didn't I?

— Ramen inside a flower:?

Kobayashi (laughs). (laughs) There's a ramen in the middle of a sunflower, but people don't find it very often.

Why did you want to put ramen in the flower in the first place?

Tashiro: When we first decided on the image of the artist as "a kind of living witness to the theme of diverse values in the future," we started talking about how there are scissors for left-handed people, for example. It was a visual concept of "a variety of things coming together. That's why there are ramen noodles among the flowers, because I thought it would be nice to have such a combination, and it's not unexpected.

T.K.: I see. What do you think of the illustrations this time?

Kobayashi: The theme for this issue is "floating". In the booklet, there are illustrations of people on top of me that I don't understand, and there are illustrations that defy gravity, like "Is that the top? I don't know if that's the top or not, but it defies gravity. The booklet also has a gravity defying part that makes you wonder, "Is that up there?" Since the booklet incorporates this sense of mystery, I feel like you could really buy the jacket. I'm really happy to welcome Rei Katou to the Aikyan team.

Kobayashi: Even though the standard edition has a photo-based design, I think it takes a lot of courage to release a work with a jacket that doesn't use your own photo.

Kobayashi In fact, I think it would give me a better chance to reach a wider range of people.

Tashiro You are very humble.

Kobayashi No, no, no, no. It makes me want to pick it up!
From left to right: Aika Kobayashi and Tomokazu Tashiro (Q-MHz).

It's too good to be true!

How do you feel about the album now that it's finished?

Kobayashi Everything is so great, I don't know what to do.

Tashiro We've done such a great job with our first album. We're very satisfied with it.

Kobayashi Some of the songs sound different depending on the emotions you feel when listening to them, so it's interesting to hear the gradation of everything. I'm sure my songs are

also gradations, and I'm sure everyone else's will be too. It doesn't matter how you feel when you listen to it, I think it's all correct. It's the kind of work that doesn't deny anything, but affirms everything.

Tashiro: The fact that we were able to include songs that are unique to the album, such as "Night Camp," is quite significant. We didn't just want to show that we could do this kind of thing, but it turned out to be really good in the end. It's not the end, but it's an album that makes me think, "I can't wait to see what I can do next."

Who do you want this album to reach? I think it will definitely reach my fans, so please tell me what you think would make people who don't know Aika Kobayashi happy if they listen to it.

Kobayashi Of course I want everyone to listen to this song, but I'm not the type of person who pushes you, I sing with the feeling that I want to walk with you. So I hope that when you listen to the song, you'll feel that you're not alone. I think the beauty of Aika Kobayashi's music is that it can make you feel a little cheerful and end on a positive note. So, rather than me giving happiness, I want everyone to be happy together.

Tashiro I also want people outside the anime and voice acting industry to know about it. I don't want them to be prejudiced in some way, or think, "This is what it's like anyway," but rather, "If you give it a try, you might be surprised. I think that's what I'm trying to do."

— It's true that there are a certain number of music fans who won't even listen to a song just because it's sung by a voice actor. It's not as bad as it used to be.

Tashiro Yes, I think that's a shame.

— The structure of professional singers singing songs written by professional artists is disappearing from the modern J-POP scene, but that culture is actually being taken over by the voice actor scene. I sometimes think that people who want to enjoy "singing by professional singers" should come to the voice acting scene.

Tashiro: That's exactly right. I've been doing a lot of work over the years, and I've come to realize that voice actors have two great weapons: their expressive power and their smooth tongue. They have a great understanding of words, including intonation. I want music fans to know that there are artists like them. I think it's a shame that people don't listen to them and pass them by.

Kobayashi Because everyone, including the artists and performers, is a specialist in their own field, I can sing with peace of mind. I'm not the type of person who thinks too much about responsibility (laughs), but I want to be a professional and continue to pursue better things.