

A Cultural Metamorphosis: How Japanese Musicians Transformed Jazz into City Pop

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ABSTRACT

City Pop, a genre that emerged in Japan in the late 1970s and flourished through the 1980s, demonstrates that new styles of music rarely emerge in isolation. Shaped by post-war Japan's economic boom, urbanization, and the influx of Western cultures, City Pop is an amalgamation of jazz and Japanese musical styles. This paper examines the early reception of jazz in Japan and its gradual development into a unique musical form. In Japan, jazz was embraced as imported entertainment and reinterpreted to fit national narratives and modern aesthetics. This paper traces the evolution of City Pop through the globalization of jazz as musicians brought it back from the United States, sparking cultural exchange and challenging rigid ideas about authenticity. Drawing from three influential books, Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz* (2021), E. Taylor Atkins' *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (2024), and Bruce Johnson's *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation* (2019), this study traces jazz's evolution from its diasporic spread to its cultural and musical reinterpretation within Japan, showing how City Pop is in part a Japanese rearticulation of jazz aesthetics, transforming inherited harmonic, rhythmic, and stylistic practices into the soundscape of Japan's urban modernity.

INTRODUCTION

New styles of music rarely emerge in isolation. They are primarily the result of cultural blending and the stylistic evolution of an established genre. City Pop, a genre that grew in Japan in the late 1970s and flourished through the 1980s, is a prominent example of this phenomenon. Shaped by post-war Japan's economic boom, urbanization, and the influx of Western cultures, City Pop is an amalgamation of jazz and Japanese musical styles. The genre is known for its upbeat, nostalgic melodies that evoke a city at night. The foundations of City Pop resemble smooth and fusion jazz, as the songs incorporate instruments such as saxophones, trombones, trumpets, and electric guitars, which are primarily used for bass melodies in both genres.

This blend of jazz and pop within City Pop is not coincidental. As Ted Gioia (2021) explores in *The History of Jazz*, jazz is a genre defined by synthesis, emerging from African and European musical traditions, and constantly adapting to new contexts. In Japan, jazz was embraced not just as imported entertainment but as a form of cultural expression. City Pop occupies an unusual position in the history of

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popular music: a genre defined less by fixed sonic properties than by a constellation of cultural conditions that made its particular form of hybridization possible only in one time and place. Several dimensions of its distinctiveness merit examination.

This paper will first cover jazz's early reception in Japan and its gradual development as a major musical form. While Gioia's (2021) *The History of Jazz* is indispensable to understanding jazz's foundational qualities, it also reveals the limits of a predominantly US-based narrative. Next, the paper explores jazz beyond the US-centered perspective, showing how its journey across borders sparked cultural exchange and challenged rigid ideas about authenticity in music. Bruce Johnson (2019) presents jazz as a malleable form in *Jazz Diaspora*, continually reshaped by the local traditions and creative voices it encounters, offering a useful way to understand how the genre found new life and evolved in Japan. Finally, the paper examines how jazz developed in Japan. E. Taylor Atkins (2024) shows in *Blue Nippon* how Japanese musicians and listeners made jazz their own, honoring its African American roots while shaping it into a distinctly Japanese sound and identity. His ideas about authenticity, nationalism, and cultural blending show how City Pop grew not just as a style of music, but as a cultural expression, weaving jazz elements into Japan's postwar pop scene in ways that felt deeply local yet connected to a global tradition.

Jazz has undergone significant shifts since its conception, a product of stylistic and social commentary, carried across borders through globalization, and continually reimagined as countries adapt the genre to their own cultural identities. This review synthesizes three influential works—Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz* (2021), E. Taylor Atkins' *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (2024), and Bruce Johnson's *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation* (2019)—to provide an overview of the current debates and identify gaps in understanding how jazz operates as both a global and local phenomenon.

This paper argues that the evolution of City Pop can be understood through the globalization of jazz. By tracing jazz's evolution from its diasporic spread to its cultural and musical reinterpretation within Japan, this study shows how City Pop serves as a form of Japanese rearticulation of jazz aesthetics, transforming inherited harmonic, rhythmic, and stylistic practices into the soundscape of Japan's urban modernity.

THE ORIGINS OF JAZZ AND ITS CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz* is a foundational text for understanding jazz's development throughout history. Focusing on its prehistory in African and African American musical traditions, Gioia establishes jazz as a product of the successful synthesis between African and European musical values. His analysis foregrounds New Orleans, a confluence of cultural crosscurrents, where spaces like Congo Square enabled enslaved Africans to preserve musical practices that would later inform blues and ragtime (Gioia, 2021).

Bruce Johnson's *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation* extends this line of inquiry by looking at jazz through the lens of diaspora. Johnson challenges the traditional U.S.-focused view of jazz by showing how its global movements have created cultural blending and pushed back against narrow ideas of

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authenticity. He portrays jazz as a site of cultural negotiation, where musicians and audiences can shape the genre's trajectory and its ongoing evolution. By emphasizing jazz practices in Africa, Asia, and Europe as authentic to their respective regions rather than derivative, Johnson shows that the notion of America as the center of jazz no longer makes sense. Ultimately, he reimagines jazz as a diasporic form, molded by cultural exchanges and intricate power relations (Johnson, 2019).

JAZZ IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS: AUTHENTICITY AND HYBRIDITY

E. Taylor Atkins' *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* analyzes how jazz was interpreted and evolved under the influence of Japanese culture. Atkins explores Japanese musicians' and the public's effort to "authenticate" jazz within their culture, often addressing the tension between embracing jazz's African American roots and employing a uniquely Japanese interpretation of the genre. *Blue Nippon* challenges the notions of cultural purity and raises questions about what it means for jazz to remain "authentic" when performed outside its birthplace. Moreover, Atkins claims that jazz's global spread was not a process of cultural diffusion but one of active localization and hybridization. By examining Japanese jazz through the lenses of nationalism, modernity, and cultural identity, he challenges the idea of jazz as a singular, monolithic American export. Ultimately, his work underscores the need to examine jazz's global circulation as a dynamic, contested process rather than a linear dissemination of an original musical form (Atkins, 2024).

This framework is crucial for understanding City Pop's development, not only as a musical style but also as a cultural expression that incorporates jazz elements into Japan's postwar pop scene in uniquely local ways while remaining connected to a global tradition.

CITY POP: SOUND, SIGNIFICANCE, AND LEGACY:

Harmonically, City Pop is distinguished by its jazz-inflected complexity. The genre extensively employs extended chords, along with intricate chord substitutions borrowed from jazz fusion, creating sophisticated harmonic structures uncommon outside Western pop. Rhythmically, the genre foregrounds groove: influenced by funk and disco, City Pop tracks typically feature prominent, melodic basslines and syncopated drum patterns that prioritize feel over formal complexity (Satoh, 2022). Linguistically, the genre also registered Japan's intense cultural negotiation with the Anglophone West. One analysis of City Pop lyrics reveals that 1980s tracks contained significantly more English code-switching than their 1970s counterparts, with the functions of these switches proving varied and numerous and essentially a pattern that encodes the genre's aspirational cosmopolitanism at the level of language itself (Östlie, 2020).

City Pop is inseparable from the country's macroeconomic conditions. The genre formed during Japan's Bubble Economy of the 1980s, conveying an image of enchanting urban life and reflecting the era's consumerist aesthetics, often exported from the West (Zhou, 2024). Its catchy melodies, funky rhythms, and stylish aura captured the spirit of the Bubble Economy, becoming synonymous with the cosmopolitanism and sophistication of Japan's urban centers (Zhou, 2024). The genre's popularity

declined with the broader cultural deflation following Japan's economic contraction in the early 1990s. City Pop's demise coincided with the end of the bubble economy, and the genre's subsequent transmission to the West occurred through sampling in hip-hop and especially through vaporwave — an internet-based genre whose character is notably dystopian, standing in sharp contrast to the breezy optimism of the original music (Salazar, 2021).

Nonetheless, at the production level, City Pop's sonic opulence is inseparable from the new recording technologies and commercial studio infrastructure that Japan's prosperity made available. Case in point, the renewed popularity of city pop is apparent from the fact that City Pop has reached top 10 position in many countries in Apple Music's J-POP rankings (Uchiyama et al., 2024, pp. 586).

City Pop composers also rely heavily on the ii–V–I progression, jazz's foundational cadential formula: a succession of chords whose roots descend in fifths from the supertonic to the dominant and finally to the tonic, was most systematically developed in jazz. In City Pop, these progressions appear not merely as cadences but as the structural backbone of entire verse and chorus sections, giving the music its characteristically sophisticated and harmonic motion (Levine, 1995). This fusion of jazz harmonic complexity with popular accessibility was not unique to Japan. Quincy Jones, who produced Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album, was a trained jazz arranger who worked with Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie (The Conversation, 2024), and prioritized imbuing Jackson's music with jazz language and sensibilities (Chow, 2024). City Pop shares that same harmonic richness dressed in polished pop production.

To completely understand how these influences of jazz manifested on City Pop, the following sections examine some of the most prominent City Pop artists: Anri, Miki Matsubara, and Mariya Takeuchi. These artists' works demonstrate how jazz was absorbed into Japan's music culture.

ANRI

Eiko Kawashima, better known by her stage name Anri, emerged during City Pop's rise in the late 1970s and became one of the genre's most recognizable voices in the 1980s. Debuting in 1978 and reaching popularity through major hits like "Cat's Eye" in 1983, she helped cement City Pop's urban nightlife atmosphere—music that sounded modern, internationally informed, and sonically luxurious within Japan's booming consumer culture (The Sankei Shimbun, 2018). Musically, Anri's significance lies in how she normalized a sleek, Western pop vocabulary with Album Oriented Rock (AOR)/funk textures, tight rhythm sections, and bright horn/keyboard colors that became central to City Pop's mainstream identity. Her relationship to jazz is evident both structurally and socially: her work frequently uses jazz-adjacent harmony and arrangements, such as extended chord color, fusion-style instrumentation, and instrumental breaks designed for solo sections. Her performances often featured saxophone phrasing that resembled jazz rhetoric, off-beat entrances, tied rhythms, and short motifs that repeated with variation. This connection became most explicit in her later career through direct collaboration with jazz-fusion musicians like guitarist/producer Lee Ritenour, illustrating that jazz in Anri's catalogue is not just a

"sound," but a professional network and musical language that City Pop could absorb and avoid being hyper commercialized (Winkie, 2019).



Fig. 1. Example of off-beats



Fig. 2. Example of jazz-like solos

The saxophone frequently enters on off-beats and uses tied rhythms that create the relaxed, behind-the-beat feel characteristic of jazz phrasing in the first few measures. The phrase structure is distinctly jazz-like: the solo unfolds in short phrases that are repeated and altered throughout the piece. Taken together, these showcase the influence of jazz on Anri's songs.

MIKI MATSUBARA

Miki Matsubara emerged during the rise of City Pop to mainstream popularity, much like Anri. Matsubara's music is best described as her execution of jazz-fusion and disco, with a glossy production that evokes the nightlife atmosphere of Japan in the late 1970s and early 80s. She broke through with the debut single "Mayonaka no Door (Stay with Me)," released in 1980, marking her entry into Japan's popular music industry (Barks, 2021). Though the single produced impressive numbers upon release, reaching No. 28 on the Oricon Singles Chart and selling over 100,000 copies, its influence and popularity skyrocketed in a later global resurgence (Nippon.com, 2022). Accelerated by streaming platforms and short-form video culture, this revival helped transform Matsubara into one of the most visible artists associated with City Pop's rediscovery in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Sommet & Kato, 2021).

"Stay with Me" exhibits strong jazz foundations, including chord progression and instrumental choices such as electric piano and brass. The song highlights her approach to jazz, including electric guitar and piano for harmony, a staple in jazz and fusion. The track also includes a solo preceding the chorus, similar to many City Pop songs. Instruments such as the saxophone and trumpet, prevalent in jazz ensembles, are

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also present in the chorus throughout the song. Matsubara's connection to jazz is reinforced by the broader context of her career and collaborators. Liner notes released by Pony Canyon for Matsubara's album *Blue Eyes* describe the project as explicitly jazz-oriented, framing its sound within Matsubara's early exposure to jazz through her family background, as her mother was a jazz singer (Matsubaru, M., 1979). The album also highlights collaborations with jazz musicians, produced by saxophonist Jiro Inagaki and featuring arrangements by Norio Maeda, placing Matsubara firmly within the jazz performance practice and arranging tradition (Pony Canyon, n.d.).

Stay With Me

Miki Matsubara

♩ = 108 Gm9 C7b9 Am7 Dm7 Gm9 Csus

7 F F Gm7

12 F Gm7

41 Dm Dm/C# Dm/C Dm/B Gm7 C7sus

Fig. 3. Example of a D → G → C pattern



Fig. 4. Example of an A → D → G pattern

The bass transcription of "Stay with Me" reveals multiple literal ii–V–I progressions, a basic chord pattern in jazz in which three chords are used consecutively. In measures 1–7, the bass outlines the movement G → C → F, which is the ii – V – I cycle in F major. Later sections repeat this functional pattern through progressions such as D → G → C and A → D → G, all of which are transposed versions of the same jazz harmonic device. Although the song does not remain in a single key, the bass consistently moves by perfect fourths into the next chord root, a direct inspiration and influence from jazz harmonies.

MARIYA TAKEUCHI

Mariya Takeuchi is often treated as a central figure in City Pop because her career captures both the genre's original emphasis on urban, Western-facing modernity and its later global revival. A formative biographical detail is her year abroad as an exchange student in Rock Falls, Illinois, which expanded her contact with American popular styles that later informed her songwriting and studio aesthetics (St. Michel, 2018). After debuting in 1978, she became a major singer-songwriter in Japanese pop music. Her 1984 album *Variety*, produced by Tatsuro Yamashita, who is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of the City Pop sound, demonstrated Takeuchi's ability to combine accessible pop melodies with polished, studio-driven production, establishing her as a leading figure within the City Pop movement. In the 2010s, her song "Plastic Love" garnered international recognition by resurfacing on the internet through streaming platforms and social media, becoming one of the emblematic tracks of City Pop's internet-era resurgence (Balfe, 2023).

Mariya Takeuchi's sound draws on the broader jazz-adjacent toolkit circulating in 1980s studio pop: extended harmonic color, groove-first rhythm-section writing, and arrangement textures like electric keys, clean guitar layers, and horn/lead lines that echo jazz-fusion and funk's production language (Paugam, 2025). "Plastic Love," arranged and produced in Yamashita's sophisticated studio idiom, becomes a strong site for analysis because its jazz connection can be argued through rhythmic and harmonic behavior

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anticipations, chord color, and bass-driven functional motion while still operating as impeccably crafted pop.

竹内まりや - Plastic Love (Bass Score)

Transcribed by 李祐彬



Fig. 5. Bass score from "Plastic Love"

Although the harmonic progression of "Plastic Love" already demonstrates the influence of jazz on the song, the bass line tells us that its linkage with jazz extends beyond harmony. The transcription reveals a consistent use of rhythmic anticipations, a common practice in jazz.

CONCLUSION

From its origins as a synthesis of African and European musical traditions to its evolution into a unique sound and emergence as a global cultural form, jazz has demonstrated its capacity for adaptation and reinvention. Its movement across the globe reveals a broader truth about music itself: that sound is never static, and in order for a genre to sustain itself, its cultural identity is continually reshaped through listening, imitation, and reinterpretation.

City Pop rose from this globalization of music. City Pop's distinct take on American R&B and jazz fusion shows the power of influence and imitation in music: the inspiration is undeniable and formidable, yet the outcome manages to be still undeniably Japanese. As it was born out of Japan's postwar modernization and economic growth, it fused jazz chord progressions and instrumentation with catchy melodies and electronic production of pop music. The genre's shimmering textures and urban feel reveal how Japanese artists transformed inherited musical languages into expressions uniquely their own. City Pop's fusion of Eastern and Western musical influences are noticeable as artists drew inspiration from Western genres like funk, disco, and jazz, infusing them with Japanese lyrics, melodies, reflecting Japanese musicians' code switching, be it language, culture, or musicality (Östlie, 2020). Ultimately, the relationship between jazz and City Pop demonstrates the broader dynamics of globalization in music: translation, adaptation, and

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renewal. Jazz's improvisational style and malleability enabled it to transcend its origins and inspire new movements around the world. In the neon-lit soundscapes of Tokyo in the 1980s, the legacy of jazz found a new form—not an imitation, but a transformation.

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