



Kaseo and his army of Pikachus: the dizzy heights of Japanese chiptune

game boyz

and smoldering circuits

welcome to the world of japanese chiptune

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The flyer says "22:00 Start", but I know better than to arrive late for a show at Café La Siesta. The Nullsleep event I attended last month had been wall-to-wall, and I'd been lucky to score a seat at all ...actually less of a seat, more of a *small stool* in front of an old *Street Fighter 2* machine pushed against the far wall. This time I'm more than three hours early and already the place is half-full. That's how it goes at Siesta, a small café in Kyoto's Kiyamachi district. Located directly below the *Lonely Planet*-plugged "A" Bar, it's famous among tourists for its casual vegetarian cuisine (including some mean veggie *gyoza*). Among locals, though, the place has a greater reputation as a hub for that most maligned of electronica subsets: chiptune.

At a time when electronic musicians have an almost unlimited palette of synths, samples and software to choose from, chiptuners pride themselves on being able to draw blood from a stone, limiting themselves to the nostalgic sounds of old 80s arcade games and Nintendo cartridges. Sequencing programs like *Little Sound DJ*, *Nanoloop* and *DS-10* can be bought or downloaded as ROMs, and then played through Game Boys, Famicoms and (most recently) the Nintendo DS. Once you've got a few loops going, record it on your laptop, dick around with it a bit in *Ableton Live*, *GarageBand* or *ACID*, and - voila! - you could be the next chiptune Prodigy. Assuming you've the patience to stare at blurry

LCD screens, navigate counterintuitive software and have a genius for 8-bit composition, of course.

DJ MasterKOHTA greets me at the door. He's the owner of Siesta, and the mastermind behind the 1H1D collective and the popular "Animetro" events down the street at Kyoto Metro. He's been running Siesta for eight years now, but it wasn't until four years ago when the venue started mutating into its current geeky incarnation. "I used to be into abstract hip-hop and the like, but then I saw this show that Kaz (aka Hige) did where he used this [Nintendo Power] Glove," he says. "And I got inspired from there." I take a seat at the circular table which acts as the centerpiece of Siesta, and order an Ebisu and the chicken tandoori dinner.

An absolutely innocuous gentleman walks in with Kohta, dragging a small bag and suitcase in tow. Kohta introduces him as **Kaseo**, one of the main acts of the evening. Kaseo's from Gifu. He looks about 40, and he's a father of two. I ask and he says he works for a company that makes agricultural combines. Apparently, he's also one of Japan's premier circuit-benders.

Circuit-bending, for those not in the know, is the art of taking primitive toy instruments and other similar devices and modifying them to make them more, well, *evil*. Before I can get the details of his performance, a guy in a funny hat comes up to Kaseo and starts showing him how he has just modified an old cassette re-

order to produce turntablist-esque scratching; amazingly, he pulls out said device and begins sliding the tape from right to left to demonstrate. My eyes open in wonder at the reasoning that such an operation should ever have been considered in the first place...

The VJ's setting up his laptop - an old Famicom and a Numark rig on top of an old *Space Invaders* tabletop - as the place begins to fill. I turn back to Kaseo and ask him what his wife thinks of his unusual hobby. "Absolutely no interest whatsoever," he laughs. "Probably for the best, I suppose." Nevertheless, despite his family's indifference, Kaseo's been enjoying some minor fame of late, mainly due to some YouTube appearances. Again I start wondering about what exactly he does.

The Fukuoka contingent arrive right on time. These are currently two of Japan's biggest 8-bit artists. I don't recognize either of them, but one looks at me and asks, "Haven't we met before?" The guy looks like a Japanese Horshack (ask your parents about "Welcome Back, Kotter" and watch the tears of nostalgia begin to well), and I shake my head. "Anyway, I'm **USK**."

The King of Fukuoka Chiptune Trashrave himself? I almost spit-take my Ebisu. "Wow, nice to meet you. I'm a big fan of both you and **Maru**."

"Ah, Maru's over there," he says, pointing to a slightly rotund nerd in a plaid sweatshirt playing *Tetris 2* with a random guy in the corner. Maru smiles and gives me a distracted salute, never missing a beat. Then both he and USK head to their bags and start playing Santa Claus. USK is giving out free copies of the newest Shanshui label compilation, and Maru's giving away BOTH of his semi-classic albums. "I already bought both of them!" I admit to Maru, and he smiles ear to ear.

USK and Maru are flagship artists of the newly-formed Shanshui records, a Chinese label also currently home to IDM maestro Com.A and breakcore legend KID606. Though not as universally admired as Nullsleep's 8bitpeoples net-label (EVERYTHING is free to download

there - get along to **8bitpeoples.com**), Shanshui's releases are nicely packaged, cheap at ¥1,000, and showcase the ways in which Japanese (and Chinese) artists are taking things to the next level - in terms of composition and melody - in ways their geeky American brethren just aren't. I order another beer as USK and Maru get busy setting up.

A soft spoken young guy in glasses and a Pac-Man mandala T-shirt starts talking to me in English. "I'm Mao," he says. Ah! Aka **nnnnnnnnnn** (mysteriously pronounced "no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no"), Mao produces his own brand of lolico-core flavored chiptune, in which he juxtaposes disturbing lolicon manga imagery and pathetic "date simulator" audio tracks with evil, pounding Gabba. We talk about this and that (my favorite tidbit being that lolico-core legend ONOMATOPEEE has a rare medical condition where he hears explosions in his sleep - that explains a lot), and I find out that he's actually a fifth-year senior at the very university I teach at in Kyoto! So this is what my students are doing when they should be doing my homework...

Anyway, as the DJing progresses, I feel the need to get a *genki* drink from the *combin*i to keep my energy level up. On the way back in, I bump into John, the only other foreigner here, ex-NYC, now teaching English

in some *inaka* burg a bit south of Himeji. He looks frighteningly normal for such an event, actually, and we spend the rest of the night discussing 4chan culture and the finer points of the scenes here and there.

And then Kaseo appears. Wearing a full-on Don Quixote-bought Pikachu costume. Oh boy! There's murmured laughing in the crowd as he approaches a table covered by a mysterious red cloth. He then starts flipping switches and strange lights begin flashing ominously under the table. Off comes the cloth, and then what I can only describe in Lovecraftian terms as a twisted abomination, a corruption so horrific as to leave the mind stunned in horror (ineffable, but I'll try my best to "eff"). A dozen yellow Pikachu figurines ... strange bolts and dials soldered to their tiny forms ... wires connecting them all to a cryptic metal tablet which somehow controls them. "Pika-chu!" one volunteers, its eyes flashing red.

And then another speaks, and then another and another, a hellish *Pika-pika* polyphony. I giggle in horror and the audience cheers. After about five minutes, as the twisted pitch-bent cacophonous shrieks of the zombie Pikachu choir become almost unbearable, Kaseo reaches toward a dial attached to his homemade goggles - and then suddenly a Pika-beat! A good ten

minutes of Pika-techno later, and the crowd has gone utterly insane. There's overwhelming applause at the finale, and calls for an encore end up subjecting us to another five minutes of this missive from the bizarre universe. To top it off, Kaseo hands out DVDs of his recent performances free of charge, and those babies are snapped up faster than you can say "Koduck!"

Despite quality sets from nnnnnnnnnnn, USK and Maru, and awesome VJing filled with visuals from some of my favorite Atari 2600 games ("That's the guy from *Pitfall* dodging bullets from that *Berzerk* robot à la *The Matrix*!"), nothing could top Kaseo that night. And it solidified a thought I'd had recently about *otaku* culture in Japan: Sure, your typical mint-in-the-box Gundam collector or Akiba-kei lolicon porn-horder doesn't seem to contribute much to society - because they probably *don't*, at least not through their hobby. But take a curious, creative geek, give him/her an ancient Game Boy, and some hacked software, and suddenly you've got a punk aesthetic and an undeniably unique global indie scene. And with said scene (and video game music nostalgia in general) symptomatic of a longing for the bygone era when electronic music was less minimal and less dependent on one's consumption of illicit substances, it reflects a desire to put both fun and melody back into bleeps and blips.

the top 5

japanese chiptune albums



2. **Hamlin**, by KPLECRAFT
Chiptune with sax?! Not only that, but echoey psychedelic sax and long jams too! Unorthodox and trippy.



4. **Lo-Bit Animal Mutation**, by Maru
Actually a toss-up between this and his first album, but that baby's rather hard to get your hands on these days. Super melodies and intricate programming.



1. **Family Music**, by YMCK
Undoubtedly the way most people in Japan got into chiptune. A jazzy feel and cute female vocals set this Mario-esque offering above the rest.



3. **Rainbow Vision**, by Xinon
Hate to say it, but I think this album one-ups USK in the club-flavored chiptune department. Who knew Gunma could be so cool?



5. **The Final Computer**, by Bokusatsu Shoujo Koubou
Less noisy than a lot of BSK's other stuff (which flirts with lolli/breakcore) this hard-to-find gem has an indefinable SNES flavor I find irresistible.