

An interview with Makoto Kawabata of

Acid Mothers Temple

Since gaining his first international exposure as guitarist for Mainliner, Makoto Kawabata has proceeded to create quite a name for himself in the past five years, primarily through his work under the umbrella organization Acid Mothers Temple. This loose-knit collective is intended to bring together like-minded individuals, resulting in a number of groups containing many of the same floating members. The actual group Acid Mothers Temple & The Melting Paraiso U.F.O. is merely the best known of those bands due to their frequent touring and remarkable productivity recently. Their ability to encompass and successfully undertake everything that might be placed under the banner "trip music" is undeniable.

Other groups connected with the Acid Mothers Temple collective include the "shamanic trip folk group" Floating Flower (with Yuki and Kaneko Tetsuya); psychedelic duo Zoffy (with Atsushi Tsuyama); spiritual trio Tsurubami (with Emi Nobuko and Higashi Hiroshi); "virtual trip ambient unit" Uchu (with Higashi Hiroshi and Ayano); and the hard-rock combo Nishi-Nihon (led by bassist Atsushi Tsuyama, with drummer Yoshimitsu Ichiraku).

The various groups included within the Acid Mothers Temple Soul Collective are tied together by Kawabata's presence. While they certainly share a similar sensibility, the styles vary from pure droning ambience to trippy space music and otherworldly folk.

Kawabata is most recognized for his chaotic fuzz-wah guitar work with Acid Mothers Temple and Mainliner, but he plays everything from synthesizer to violin, and his first musical endeavors were made using homemade instruments and a borrowed synth. In 1978 he was part of a group called Ankoku Kakumei Kyodotai (Dark Revolution Collective), formed with a couple of friends, Tetsushi Kawagishi and Yasuo Iwaki, who both played handmade percussion instruments.

"We used to share records and information," Kawabata recalls. "Then one day we decided that if we really wanted to hear music that we wanted to listen to, we'd better make it ourselves. At the start, the music could have been described as 'really heavy rock with Stockhausen-esque electronic sound effects.'" Two long recordings of this group's intense trance-inducing sounds were released in early 2001 on a picture-disc LP by Qbico.

Kawabata took up the guitar in 1979 in his group Baroque Bordello. As with his earlier efforts, he simply thought up his own ways of playing; nobody ever taught him to play any instrument. However, he says "That meant it took me four years to work out how to tune my guitar properly!" Perhaps it was necessary for him to teach himself, as his playing evolved in response to his need to recreate what he hears inside himself:

"When I play any sort of instrument – not just guitar – I never think that it's me making the music, or of music as a means of self expression. In my head I constantly hear sounds from the cosmos (or God, or whatever you want to call it). I believe that these sounds are constantly there, all around us. I'm just like the receiver in a radio, picking up these sounds and transforming them with my hands into a form that everyone can hear. I'm constantly striving to become a better receiver – picking up sounds from ever higher dimensions, picking them up ever more precisely, reproducing them ever more exactly. That's my aim."

When asked if he sometimes feels limited in trying to reproduce these sounds using instruments like the guitar, Kawabata explains how the sounds determine the ways in which he approaches making music:

"There are basically two types of sounds that I hear in my head. The first is like absolutely pure tones from the universe. The aural hallucinations and ringing sounds that I've heard since I was a kid, and the heavenly orchestras I've heard in my dreams fall into this category. I try to realise these sounds in my solo work, or in other projects that are close to solo in their intent. The second type is something that I hear constantly, even in the midst of performing. My improvisations are just moment by moment recreations of this sound. I find that – especially when I'm playing with a other people and there are all sorts of sounds flying around – I hear something in my head that's like the universe guiding me towards the most correct music. Ultimately, I believe that this process will lead me to pure sound, or else to the power that will enable me to discover pure sound."

The sounds of his collaborators become a part of the larger whole:

"I honestly believe in the power of these sounds and I try as hard as I can to reproduce them moment by moment. Of course there are times when my collaborators take off in some direction totally different to the sounds I'm hearing. I'm always dazzled by the way my cosmic sounds kaleidoscopically change to keep pace with the changing situation around me.

"Perhaps an easy example is the way a satellite car navigation system immediately keeps suggesting multiple new routes every time you ignore the one currently being displayed. The only way I can communicate this to my collaborators is through sound, so the best thing for me to do is to become like a good radio receiver and clearly and faithfully transmit the sounds I hear. To tell you the truth, with my current levels of skill and perception, it's hard. Or maybe everyone is a good receiver and the point we're all heading for is the same. At times like that we create very high-grade music."

When the Acid Mothers Temple group are recording, songs come about in several different ways, depending on which

members are available and who is guiding the track. Sometimes several members simply improvise and record the basic song, to which overdubs are added later. Or Kawabata may compose the basic song and then the parts are overdubbed. Since so many people are involved, many of them busy with other projects, all of the members are never in the studio at the same time. Whoever turns up during the recording gets to do some overdubbing. At other times, each member sends his or her part on tape and Kawabata puts them together using chance operations, to see what might happen:

“I truly believe only in chance. I never try things out in advance. When I’m putting a track together, all I think about is picking parts that have the elements that come closest to the sounds in my head. Sudden inspiration becomes the most important part of my work. I believe that the resulting ensemble has already left my hands. It is assembled by the cosmos (or God). All you need to know is God. So I don’t search for good arrangements – all I do is give thanks for the presents that God sends to me.”

When the group plays live, each song’s main theme has been fixed, but everything else is improvised. The freedom of improvisation is extremely important to Kawabata. It is a key element of every group with which he works. As he says, “As far as I’m concerned, there’s absolutely nothing more meaningless than playing the same composition or arrangement over and over again.”

I was curious how he felt about people who enjoy the challenge of perfecting a composition:

“What is a perfect composition? For me, because the aim of my multi-tracked solo recordings is to faithfully recreate the sounds that I hear from the cosmos, I suppose it’s possible that a perfect composition could exist. But again, that’s only because multi-track recordings by their very nature involve stopping time – I’ve already departed from the concept of playing absolutely pure sounds, since they rely upon time and place. As a basic rule, ‘sound’ involves various elements, including place, time, atmosphere, and so on. That’s why, specially playing live, ignoring each different situation and trying to play the same as you did before is utterly meaningless. It’s like shutting up the music into a fixed frame or concept.”

Each group within the Acid Mothers Temple Soul Collective exists in order to create a different sound and each has a unique concept, but Kawabata looks at them as parts of one whole. As a parallel, he mentions Frank Zappa and The Mothers, although Kawabata is quick to point out that the relationships among his collective’s members are not controlled by monetary interests.

He doesn’t compose songs, then divide them between the units. Instead, a group is assembled based on a certain type of sound. The group’s goal is to try to reproduce that sound

as precisely as possible. But again, Kawabata stresses that “everyone fits together under the umbrella of the AMT Soul Collective, and I myself don’t really differentiate that much between the groups.”

Several of the groups, such as Father Moo & the Black Sheep, or Tsurubami, have only released one or two albums. Others, like Zoffy, have several. Kawabata explains that there’s no conscious effort made to record albums for any group. “If I hear a new sound in my head, then I’ll probably record a new album, but if I don’t hear anything, I’ll wait until I do.”

The idea that binds the collective bands together, as Kawabata sees it, is that all of the groups play “trip music” – by which he means something totally different from psychedelic rock. When I point out that many people think they’re the same, he describes his differentiation:

“As I see it, psychedelic rock is a type of rock music that evolved under the influence of the drug culture. Both musicians and audiences heard those sounds while under the effects of drugs – though sometimes those effects were faked. Because of that, there were some wonderful groups during that era who accidentally peered into the abyss of music. However, mostly they are happy simply to see the dimension that drugs gave access to. The music doesn’t attempt to reach the next stage. Drugs are only a means to an end; they’re only a first guide to the fundamental principles of the universe.

“The music that I refer to as trip music contains sounds that move towards that cosmic principle. Trip music always contains, even if only fractionally, some of those sounds of absolute purity that are related to the cosmic principle. Anyone who has glimpsed that next step on the path towards the cosmic principle, even once (and regardless of whether they realize it or not), will be aware of these sounds - even without the help of drugs. And the sounds themselves are a big clue towards finding the cosmic principle. Of course, there are many things that are both psychedelic rock and trip music at the same time. There are also many things that are just skillful imitations. You have to be careful to tell the difference.”

Kawabata’s solo material has thus far been divided into two distinct categories: his solo guitar work, simply released under his own name; and his trance-drone project Inui, which involves layered instruments including sarangi, violin, and synthesizer, as well as guitar. What Kawabata sees as the primary difference between the two has to do with his method and how far the results can take him:

“The advantage of the solo guitar stuff is that, because it’s always improvised, I can reproduce those cosmic sounds I hear in real time. However, for the same reason, I’m unable to pursue the sounds with any depth. Because Inui uses many instruments being overdubbed, I’m able to explore a

single sound in terms of its tonal color more deeply. The disadvantage is that it lacks the speed to allow me to pursue each new cosmic sound that I hear.”

Nishi-Nihon is another group tangentially related to the Acid Mothers Temple Soul Collective, but as Kawabata admits, it differs from the core mission. Firstly, the band is led by Atsushi Tsuyama, the bassist for AMT and Omoide Hatoba (a group led by Boredoms guitarist Seiichi Yamamoto). Kawabata plays guitar, and the drummer is Yoshimitsu Ichiraku, who has played with Yoshihide Otomo and Sachiko M in ISO, and is also very active in the Japanese free music scene with people like Kazuhisa Uchihashi (of Altered States).

The trio all loved hard rock when they were young, but this is their first chance to play that sort of music. Kawabata says that in a way, the band “is like a childhood dream come true for us.”

He’s also quick to point out that over the years hard rock has turned into heavy metal and become uninteresting, so Nishi-Nihon’s members are eager to preserve the style as it used to be. Kawabata goes so far as to say that it’s a kind of traditional music, “one that’s been produced in the 20th century. I believe that in the future, history books will make note of its importance.”

The Japanese title for Nishi-Nihon’s first album means “The new wave of art rock.” The title came about because when Cream and Led Zeppelin were first promoted in Japan, they were called art rock bands. “No one uses that term anymore, though. What we loved was art rock. The best thing about it was its sweatiness, its filth, its noise. In other words, all those things that are best summed up by an extended guitar solo at monstrous volume.”

Kawabata recalls the counter-cultural power of that music when it first started, before it became commercial music, big business. “Now there’s nothing like that left at all. I remember that when I first bought an electric guitar, my mother was convinced that I’d become a juvenile delinquent. Now that rock is accepted by the establishment, you never hear that kind of story.”

Some people might find it curious that Kawabata, Tsuyama, and Ichiraku are bent on rehashing old rock ideas, but, as Kawabata says, that’s the whole reason for the band; plus, they may have something to prove:

“Nishi-Nihon has zero intention of creating ‘new music.’ All we’re doing is recreating the great rock that used to exist. We’re happy to call what we do ‘yogaku.’ The people who listen to yogaku are totally different from those who listen to Japanese music.” (Yogaku, literally Western Music, has been the term used to clearly distinguish Western music from Japanese, from the time rock was first imported into Japan until the present day.)

“People often say that Japanese can’t rock, or that Japanese rock is nothing more than a pale imitation of Western music. I believe that anyone, irrespective of race or nationality, has the right to play great music. If this were not true, then surely Japanese must be unable to play Beethoven. No one ever suggests that, do they? I wonder why?”

There have been people who believed that they received inspiration from other sources: sometimes from God, or from space, or perhaps simply from a biological source within themselves. Asked for his own theory, Kawabata responds:

“If we assume for a minute that sounds are particles that flow through time, then – because they are particles – they must possess an energy. That energy flows from the remotest antiquity to the future. Doesn’t that mean that rituals or prayers (or in the 20th century, musical performance) are a way of recapturing the energy that existed at the beginning of the cosmos?”

“Rituals and prayer are a way of travelling against the current of providence that insists that all things are born, decay, and die. So aren’t rituals and prayers also a way of reawakening that which comes from the beginning of the universe, of opening the doors between different dimensions, and causing that energy to flood out? Doesn’t that also mean that by reaching for the true pure sounds that have existed since the beginning of time, we are able to touch (and become one with) the cosmic principle?”

When asked about the future of the Acid Mothers Temple Soul Collective, Kawabata seems happy to let things happen as they will. He also feels that there’s room for expanding the membership to include many other sympathetic souls, even if his view of musicians like himself is singularly curious:

“We only live in the present, the ‘now.’ I don’t know anything about the future. However, we would like to meet up with more people who share our views of a musical cosmos. We believe that people who make music are the dregs of humanity. Every person who was born into this world has some mission to fulfill. That’s why musicians – people who make something that has absolutely no relationship with living – are the dregs of humanity. Any musician who is capable of doing something else should do it. We really exist on the lowest rung of society, contributing nothing to it: we’re a commune of social dropouts. The only thing we can do is music. We were probably born that way.

“There are probably lots more people who are like us, and we’d like them to gather together around Acid Mothers Temple. Acid Mothers Temple is like a massive umbrella.”

Under this umbrella, then, Kawabata’s collective of dropouts have found an extended family devoted to

unearthing and channeling the sounds that only they can communicate perfectly. And as if tuning a hallucinatory radio, we're privileged to be able to listen in from time to time.

Kawabata interview: Mason Jones. Translation: Alan Cummings. © Ptolemaic Terrascope, 2001



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