

From mxd.dk: Japanese Fan Culture and Tips for Working the Japanese Market [An Overview]



Interview with Toni-Matti Karjalainen by Linus Lassus, MXD

In order to investigate how Danish music industry could benefit from the experience of the Finnish industry ventures in Japan, Music Export Denmark met with [Toni-Matti Karjalainen](#) to discuss Japanese fan culture and Japanese music consumption.

Toni-Matti is the editor of [The Playing Finn](#) - a book including his own article on Finnish metal music export to Japan. You can find a more extensive discussion on the article here: [What You Should Know About The Japanese Music Market](#). The article provides much background information on topics discussed in this interview.

Below are some of Toni-Matti's main conclusions and further reflections on the topic.

Japanese Fan Culture

Just as Finland can combine metal and Moomins and make them appeal to Japanese fans, so could the Scandinavian countries combine e.g. design and music, or food and nature.

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Anything that can contribute to the bigger picture and narrative is a plus. This work involves several parties and not just the music industry.

"I've never experienced a clear-cut genrefication in Japan," says Toni-Matti. "Different aspects of national culture - like music, design and nature - don't exclude each other, but come together in a bigger picture."

A key word when appealing to fans in Japan is storytelling - an important ingredient for the Japanese way of experiencing culture and cultural phenomena. That's why the more you can integrate your story into the already existing image of the culture, country etc. that you represent, the better. It's important to be visual as well:

"Visuality is very important. When you go to Tokyo, you're overwhelmed with visual messages, billboards, lights etc. etc. It's an essential part of the Japanese way of communicating," says Karjalainen.

Karjalainen agrees that, due to the very different way that people experience culture in Japan, traditional demographic segmentation might be hard. However, he also points out that there's also a lot of "generic" fans. At the same time, on-off fandom is a fact. It's not really unusual for people to trade their suits for face-paint and back again when going to a show.

"I rarely see any metalheads or other people expressing their personal taste on the streets in Japan," says Karjalainen, "but that's just because all of that happens during the shows or other fan events."

Yogaku and Hogaku

As described in the article, over-seas music has a special position as "yogaku" in Japan. The division between yogaku and hogaku - domestic and Korean music - happens more or less automatically, but in order to successfully fit the image of a yogaku band it's good to get distinguished from the masses. To use the word "gimmick" is maybe too much, but emphasizing the characteristics of an artist is a good way of telling an interesting story and being part of a narrative.

Can language be that characteristic then? Karjalainen has a pretty simple answer to that question.

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“The Japanese usually have very limited skills in English, so unless you make music in Japanese they probably won’t understand the lyrics immediately anyway. That doesn’t mean they’re not interested – you should give them the possibility to understand through translating the lyrics.”

Karjalainen emphasizes the importance of making the music and story sound interesting instead, and language may provide a way of doing that.

Tips for Penetrating the Market

It takes a lot to enter the Japanese market, and there are a few things Karjalainen thinks are important to remember:

Find Your Gatekeeper

“I’ve only been studying the metal niche, but I imagine it’s the same for all kinds of *yogaku* music: in the article I talk about *Onta* a lot, the guy from **Creativeman** who Music Finland collaborates with. The music industry in Japan includes a lot of gatekeeping, so you need to find and establish a relationship to the gatekeepers of your genre. That’s the most straightforward and realistic way to do things if you want to succeed.”

Mind the Language

Karjalainen emphasizes the importance of being aware of the language. It’s impossible to avoid contact with it and it might be an issue that needs to be dealt with. Also, learning a few phrases may break big ice blocks during conversations.

Focus on Tokyo

For someone playing in Japan for the first time, Tokyo is probably the only realistic city to play. Playing outside the capital is expensive and having an audience in Tokyo does not guarantee fans elsewhere in the country. It takes a long time to build up that kind of audience in Japan.

Engage on Social Media

Social media is almost the only way of engaging with Japanese fans as a relatively unknown artist. Twitter and **Facebook** are good channels to start out with, especially **Twitter**. But

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you shouldn't forget the local social media, like **Nico Nico**, **Line** and **Mixi**. YouTube, Instagram, Last.fm and Spotify are also widely used.

"Press, radio and TV are very important, also for music, but getting featured is extremely hard. In reality, you don't get featured on TV unless you're a national star, even though Japan is a TV nation. Take the language into consideration, translate and serve special content to Japanese users," says Karjalainen.

Stay Focused

Excerpt from the article:

"...Regardless of the genre, it is very difficult to build any business in Japan without close cooperation with the local professionals. Language barriers, cultural barriers, and many practical challenges are too high to cross. Generally speaking, in Japan it is of paramount importance to find the right people to advance the local presence. Confidential relationships are at the core of getting things done in Japan. And it is necessary to reserve time towards building confidence. Numerous business card exchanging rituals and cups of tea are often required before effective co-operation is built. Only when confidence between the partners is at a good level, the cooperation starts to solidify. When trust is created, personal opinions and tips are valued. Furthermore, encounters are characterized by typical Japanese politeness."

Adds Tony: "When going to Japan, you have to collaborate with different people and show your serious intentions. But the effort still needs to be focused. I've seen many projects grow until they come unmanageable. It doesn't have to be big to be effective, but focused."