

Hikaru Utada: The Complete *JQ* Interview

By Justin Tedaldi, Editor (Kobe-shi CIR, 2001-02)

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It was perfect timing. Back in January, Hikaru Utada, the New York-born recording phenomenon who before she was out of her teens notched three of Japan's top ten bestselling albums (including number one), was back in town working on a new album for the U.S., and JQ spent a full hour with Hikiki to talk of many things, including her new disc This is the One, which hit stores in May.

I know you want to talk about the new album and the single.

The song...

I heard it about two and half weeks ago, as I think I was already on the e-mail list from when your last English album came out.

Oh, right, right, right.

So we go way back. Ten years ago I found out about *First Love* when I studying Japanese as an

undergraduate...

Oh, wow.

It's amazing to be here now talking about it.

I'm humbled [*laughs*].

I really like the song, too...

Thank you.

And a lot of my other friends who live in other countries said, "Wow, this sounds so American, it sounds like it should be a big hit." Why have you chosen now to come back to do another English-language album?

Probably because I had a contract left [*laughs*]. I was contracted to do one more, and the record company, Island Def Jam, would say "when, when?," and I would do two Japanese albums and they would [*say*] "when are you doing an American one?" and I was like, "Uh, I'll get on it soon," and I then I finally began working on it about a year ago, and it's about almost done.

Do you have a title yet?

It's ninety-nine percent decided, but we haven't put out a press release yet officially. It'll be announced very soon, but not yet.

You recently had a birthday...

Yes, I did.

Did you do anything special?

Actually, the past couple of months have been a peak of busyness in terms of getting this American album done, and the video and all this...and I was working editing...I'm the chief editor for my Japanese official book as an artist in Japan...and editing that, and there was all this stuff that just got together and I was...quite caught up with everything that...I don't really care how I spend my birthday. I'm usually working every year on my birthday, anyway. But this year for the first time, I ended up spending it on the plane. I was flying from New York to Tokyo, and when I get on a plane I just pass out for 10 hours. So most of my birthday I was sleeping on a plane, and once I got home I just had dinner and just went to sleep [*laughs*].

You have to save the celebrations for after the album comes out.

[*Laughs*] Doesn't really matter when you do it, as long as you celebrate your birthday.

Agreed. So, I was really curious about another thing. Your name in the U.S., you've recorded under the name Utada.

Yes.

I was always wondering, was that a no-brainer for you to decide, or did you think about other names you might have chosen?

Well, I didn't even think about making a new artist name that's not my real name. I didn't do that for Japan, either, and I can't imagine thinking of a name like "The Ambiguous [*unintelligible*]." You know, I'm not a band, I'm just a person, I'm not going to think up a name like "Hank" or anything like that.

So there was never any confusion about how to pronounce your name, or maybe some of your fans here might have thought, "Oh, why doesn't she call herself Hikki here," maybe it sounds cuter...?

Well, the options to pick from where my full name, like Hikaru Utada, or Hikaru, or Utada...Hikki would have been so cute if not for the meaning of "kiss mark" here...that works in Japan as a nickname because no one knew what it meant, but I would never have thought of doing that "artist's name," and then since Hikaru is so hard to pronounce, I just thought, why don't we leave it as Utada, it's so much easier...more practical, why not?

So you're not worried about being thought of as a one-name artist like Prince or Madonna or any of those people?

But then, that's their real names, right? Hey, Sting, Madonna, Bjork...

You're in good company.

Yeah! I wouldn't mind those associations at all.

For the new English album, the first since *Exodus* almost five years ago, I was around when that came out and I watched all the hoopla that was surrounding it when it was released and listened to it when it first came out. I'm curious, what would you have done differently in hindsight with that album compared to the way you're going to promote and market the new one?

Well, it's not really a matter of me, it's the promotional staff, like the record company and what kind of PR we get...actually, there's a lot to learn from that. I mean, Island Def Jam was really...it on the edge of change and chaos. Nobody knew what they were doing and nobody really knew what was going on and I was just like, "what the hell is this? No support, come on, man, what's happening here?"

And you signed that deal...

With [then-Island Def Jam chief] Lyor Cohen...

Yes, years prior to that. I was living in Japan at the time when that happened [in 2002], and I thought, “Oh, it’s probably going to come out very soon,” and I think it was something like a two- or three-year wait...

And part of the reason was because of all that happening and..I guess I wasn’t mentally conscious and aware as an artist myself of how to promote myself that I’d never done that kind of stuff before. It’s not really the artist’s thing to worry about—it shouldn’t be, really. But now I’m more hands-on with it. I’m more involved in the promotional aspect of it, too. Because I learned from last time what kind of PR group you choose and have to work with you [on] what you don’t need, what you need, and how much to be in touch with the record company on this and who to be in touch with for what, and all those kinds of quirks with it. There’s a lot to work with it, and now I’m working with THE DOOR this time, we got a different company for that, and...everything’s quite efficient I think, much more efficient than last time, and I feel support, I feel some kind of face—I felt so insecure during the recording and promotion of *Exodus*, because it didn’t seem like anyone knew what I wanted to do, and I didn’t know how to get it across to these people. We were not on the same page at all, and now it seems we are.

I read a quote from you earlier where it said that for *Exodus* you were “trying too hard.” Can you explain what you mean by that?

Yeah, it was sort of like a...very experimental kind of thing, I guess. Trying too hard, I mean. Because when you’re experimental, and...my attitude towards it was like, “Everyone else is in a mess, I’m I just going to go ahead and do something weird, you know what I mean? [Laughs] I’m just going to go ahead and make something real weird and intense but interesting. I think the music is very very neat, but it’s going to be weird, but...I’m not gonna care. And, that’s why...in a sense I was trying hard, to show, to make interesting music. And I was doing all the arranging, and so they were saying, technical things I have to really worry about in the music-making, and I was all over the place, really. But I’m just, I was so happy and proud of myself for having done that, that one album. And when I heard Elton John in an interview saying, “There’s a girl called Utada, a Japanese girl who makes interesting pop music, blah, blah, blah,” I thought, wow, that makes everything worth it, man, thank you [laughs]. But it was that kind of album where you have to be really

into music or—it’s not easy to appreciate if you have no—if you have a certain, depending on your musical background or how deep into music you are. It’s wasn’t the kind of thing where you can listen to the radio and say, “That’s great!” and sing along to it, you know? And...I think I was trying to be more mature than I really was, I mean, what was I, like, nineteen or 20, and some of the stuff I was trying to be an adult, I was trying to say, I can do this. I’m grown-up, but I was a kid, kind of. And then, this time I feel like I’ve matured more, I’m more of a woman. If I sing something sexy, it’s more natural, it’s not forced, nothing feels strained, and everything seems to feel right. Like, it doesn’t make the listener feel any strain, either. I just feel really comfortable making it and promoting the album, too.



Would you say that this new album has the elements of a previous sound? “Come Back to Me,” for instance, I think some fans might listen to it and say, oh wow, it sounds like the first two albums, or an R&B style...

Yeah...

Is it consciously like that, or have you changed certain things that people will hear on the other new tracks?

Well, there's a lot of variety in the album, and the thing you can say for the entire album that the songs have variety musically, and the common theme is, I guess my lyrics, they can be very funny at times or they can be very bookish at times, very poetic or very blunt at times, but...they're that...the main theme, the ongoing theme throughout the album. And the reason there's a bit of that R&B feeling back in my music for this new album is not because I thought, R&B, yes, let's go that way, but, since I wanted to make something mainstream, at this point in American music, mainstream is just R&B.

The zeitgeist...

That's the only reason, I think. When I think R&B, I really think of the classic R&B singers back in the day kind of thing. The Sylistics, and, you know...

It's not a bad time to be with Def Jam, either.

Right. Well, the thing is, I'm only with Island, and it's really funny, like...Island and Def Jam have come together to be IDJ— Island Def Jam, right? But since the impact of the [name] Def Jam is so strong, most people, I think, especially in Japan, think I'm with Def Jam, so they think it's a hip-hop label, an R&B label, but...I'm with Island, which is U2, Bon Jovi, Sum 41...so that's a funny misconception that I find myself fixing quite often. Because sometimes [in magazines]...to make it short they just say “Def Jam,” but I'm like, no, no, no, no, that would actually be wrong [*laughs*].

We'll put that in bold type.

[Leans into the recorder] She's with Island! [*Laughs*]

There's this one song I read about on the new album called “Me Muero.” That's Spanish for “I die,” right?

Yeah, “I'm dying.”

How did this song come about, and why are you so fond of it?

Why is it my favorite one, yeah...If you listen to it, you'll see it has a bit of a Latin feeling to it, and then, there's one hook part where there's a melody, like [*hums melody*] that I came up with from the very beginning, and I had the image for some kind of Mexican or Spanish word or phrase down, but since I don't speak Mexican or Spanish, I didn't know how to go about looking for that phrase. I just got on the Internet and started looking at these Mexican and Spanish dictionaries to pick out random words which I hoped would exist, the kind of phonetics that I'm looking for, the phrase that has those, and then I said, okay, the coda is like this, I'm looking through all those words that would actually fit that melody line and actually make sense to be the hook of the song. And then I finally came to “me muero,” and [*sings the words*], okay, that's perfect for that melody line, okay. Now what does it mean? Okay, “I'm dying.” Well, I can write a song about, dying, okay! And that's how it came to be. And then I [sent e-mails to] my Spanish-speaking friends to make sure that it made sense grammatically, as it appears in the song: “Does it make sense if I say ‘me muero’ to mean this and that and so and so?,” and then I got the e-mails that came back, [which] said, “Yes, that's grammatically correct, but, um, you're not thinking about dying, are you?” [*Laughs*] And then I said, “No, no, it's only for a song!” And then they said, “You're not writing a will?,” and I said, “No, I'm not writing a will...in Spanish, it's OK.” It's a very playful song, and my vocal performance on it was so free, and I have a bit of a...that's around when I began listening to a lot to James Brown during that time, so there's a bit of a James Brown-sort of thing at the end, just singing, belting out at the end, and I just like the words that I was saying; it's my favorite.

I'll have to keep that in mind—I attended James Brown's last concert in New York...

Ohhh!

I waited years to see him, and I was always saying to myself, all right, I have to see James Brown the next time he comes to town, and it was at B.B. King... Yeah...

Which is a pretty small place, general admission. I was standing there, literally right on the stage, waiting for him to come out. And I was just looking up at him the entire time. And the energy, and the command that he had on the audience was phenomenal. Someone actually fainted in the crowd and they had to stop the show until that guy got back to life because he was just so excited.

Wow, that must have been amazing. Oh, I'm so jealous.



Well [laughs]... All right, what else do we have here...so I read this quote yesterday on RollingStone.com, and it was of a fan who posted something, and it was in response to a piece that RollingStone.com put up, talking about a song you did for [the video game] Kingdom Hearts II. Oh!

And he was basically praising it, and said, wow, it's too bad more Americans or other non-Japanese don't know more about Utada, so big up to him. But the comment I read

underneath it was great, and this is a direct quote. It said, "Utada is very talented. The fact that only nerds, like me and you, have seen her might be the saddest thing in this modern world, non-politically speaking."

[Laughs] That's very well put!

How are you going to get yourself out there more this time? I hear that you're thinking of going on some more mainstream talk shows like Conan O'Brien, or some other...

Umm, I think the promotion—the intent of the promotional plan so far...is to keep it flexible and keep the music driven. And I think it's the music—from the beginning of making this album, I wanted to make something that will connect with a wider audience for this time, and for me to be saying, "Hello! This is me, I'm introducing myself. Get to know me, listen to my music," that's the attitude, and I wanted to make something more mainstream, so—I think the music itself should do most of the job, basically."

Is it going to be tough to do extra promotion here, since you're probably also going to promote it in Japan? Because it comes out a couple of weeks earlier in Japan...

Ah, no, but, um, the priority is the U.S., honestly, because I made it for the U.S. And Japanese promotion, I—in Japan, see, I don't do much promotion for myself, anyway. I'm infamous for not doing promotion. I rarely do TV, I hardly do any magazines, I just do, like, one big interview and then I have a writer write like 20 different articles for different magazines. I have a systematic way of doing things, because that system began when I was still—when I became famous in Japan and began working I was still in high school, and I was in 10th grade, and...to be going to school and be doing homework on the weekends and then studying for SATs and doing college apps and all this stuff, there was no way I could do a full promotion, like other music artists who are full-time musicians, basically. I couldn't do it, so we had to come up with me for a way to not do all that, and so I don't have to—there isn't much for me to do in Japan, promotion-wise.

But of course back here in the U.S., it's kind of a different story, since you really have to let people know you're out there, so if you could...

I guess we're going for more of that mainstream promotion this time, and that's the priority.

So if someone came up to you and said, would you like to do *Saturday Night Live*, or...

Ooh...

A late-night show, is that something you'd be interested in?

Well, I don't know...I'll think about it [*laughs*]. I would say...I think so, I think I'd be very excited.

Because I'd love to see *Rolling Stone* review the next album, and talk about it in some kind of capacity.

That's where we're trying to get to this time, and I'm doing all I can do to get there.

Well, we'll do our best.

Thank you [*laughs*].

Okay, so going back a little bit, the fact that *Exodus* was released in English also in Japan, was that a conscious decision? Was there ever any pressure either on your label over there, or from other people to say, "Well, if you do Japanese versions of these songs, they'll be so much more accessible, many more people will get to that?"

Uh-huh. Well, from the beginning, yeah...before doing that contract, I'd done a few songs where I had to translate, like for Kingdom Hearts, I had to make an English version of the song "Hikari," which became "Simple and Clean," and then also for Kingdom Hearts II, I had to make the Japanese version which was the song "Passion" and then the English version that was "Sanctuary," and that was *so* hard, it's just—and it felt strained—and as a result, I'm happy that I worked hard to do those, because those English versions are really good and "Simple and Clean," I think, is a really good song, and people...most of the people that know me here, they know me for that—but it's not ideal for me as a writer, to...because, actually, I changed the melodies for "Simple and Clean" and "Hikari," because when you change the language you're singing in, the same melodies don't work—and as a writer, it's just very frustrating to have, like...I wrote these melodies for Japanese words, and to have to write in English for that, it's just not right. And then, so, for this, uh, this contract with Island Def Jam, in the beginning I separated it to this English-language album, and I don't do Japanese translations. I just, my integrity as an artist just would not take that, could not take that.

Is there one that you prefer writing in? Because you're fluent in both; you grew up here. Do you feel that's sometimes restrictive to have to come up with a rhyme scheme for songs in English, or do you like the freedom of doing something different from the Japanese ones?

I don't have a favorite, I mean I like both because they're both equally challenging, and they're both beautiful languages...I think my level of how good I am in English and Japanese are both the same, so there is a difficulty in terms of technical stuff, I just have to...the different natures I get to play with are very fun...when I write Japanese songs for a long time I begin thinking, oh, I want to write an English song, because you know, an English song can be more playful, you can say some more, what do you call it, controversial things without having it be a huge deal—you can be more playful with everything, and at the end of the day it's music, your lyrics. You don't have to nitpick everything like, "Oh, did she say cigarette? 'Flavor of tobacco?' She's only 15!" That's what [happened] in Japan when I came up with this song...

I'll try not to ask about that [*laughs*].

Yeah, it was lyrics that said, "your last kiss had this flavor of tobacco," and then it became a huge deal there and I was like, come on, I'm not writing—I'm not Anne Frank, this is not a diary, I'm a songwriter, these are lyrics, this is a poem. You know, it's not that literal, man, it's not that easy, it's not a diary-writing kind of process...

That's what made that song jump out to me when I first heard it, because I thought, I've never heard a song that starts like this.

Yeah! [Laughs] So, it's fun in Japan to push that envelope a little bit, constantly, and to play with the beauty of the language, the subtleties and everything. But with English, it's easier to be more blunt, or...like really metaphoric, but that doesn't make much sense maybe, like in a Beatles sort of way, and that's the difference, I'd say, but I enjoy working in both languages.

Has anyone ever said to you, "First Love' would be a huge hit for Mariah Carey," or anyone who's popular right now. Have you ever had to turn down someone who said, "well, if you sang a duet with this person and it's one of your songs, that will increase your exposure?" or "if you maybe tailored a certain song for someone else, they could be really big?" We've seen lots of examples of that happen many times in pop history.

Actually, I've just begun considering those options recently, because working with [producer] Stargate, they're like, "You're a really good songwriter...do you want to write for some other artists?" And now that we're really in touch and we know each other, we've actually spoken a bit about that and I've been thinking about, well to have someone cover my old song, and maybe I can write the English words to it for an American artist, or change it a bit, I mean, that's...a very timely question, I've just been thinking about that.



I've been thinking about it for years, so I'm glad I came up with that one.

Oh, okay! [Laughs]

For instance, for *Distance* you worked with [Grammy-winning American R&B producers] Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis...

Yeah.

Did they ever say, "hey, we work with a lot of artists, you might have some songs left over," or maybe "we really like this one that we'd like to..."?

Well, that—it didn't go that far, because I guess...working on one single—like, go in there and do it, and we're all happy—"bye, love you, and stay in touch" kind of, like, do iChat kind of thing, but they—they didn't show any business aspect, which was very interesting—they didn't [go] into any business-like kind of conversations...

Since you were worried about other things.

And I think...they were so big on musicians as artists, that...they...I don't know, it just wouldn't—I think it would seem out of character for them to come out and say, "How do you feel about writing for other artists?," things like that. It was just not—it felt off.

Who would you like to see, if you had a wish list of other artists, I guess an American or English-speaking artist, to cover your song or do a song that you wrote, are there any people in particular with whom you've always thought, it would be such an honor to see that person perform?

[At this point, Hikki's father/producer/manager Teruzane Utada and mother Junko Utada enter the room and take seats on the other side of the table]

The thing is, the people—the artists that I really really admire, most of them tend to be writers themselves, like singers and songwriters, so it's hard for me to imagine any of them covering my songs—just like I don't cover people's songs.

Speaking of which, that dovetails next into what I wanted to ask you—the song on *First Love*, “Amai Wana”...

Yeah.

Can you tell me the story about that, like why you chose that title, because I have a theory about that, but I'm curious to hear about it...that, and the tag of [the Rolling Stones'] “Paint It, Black” at the end, what the story was with that?

Well, that just kind of—well the ending, I don't remember how that really came up, it was just a fun thing to sing, I think, where we set up the ending...I think it just popped up from somewhere in the session, maybe it was because of my father, I don't...we just thought...someone just came up with it, and we were all, “Yeah, let's do it, let's do it!” But the title “Amai Wana” was...I thought it was funny, like a play on words. It sounds like “am I wanna,” like in English, it doesn't make sense in English live, but when I sing it [*sings those words*], it sounds like someone speaking English wrong—um, that was basically the only reason, I think. What was your grand theory? I'm interested.

You might know that that was the Japanese title of Cheap Trick's “I Want You to Want Me.”

Ohhh...

That's what it's called in Japan.

I didn't know that!

No way!

[*Laughs*]

Wow, that...that's a shocker.

I don't know any of the Japanese titles for these American songs, because I picked them up in America or I listened to them in English, or...U.S., UK version CDs, and—I never buy the Japanese version CDs, so I...don't have any idea of these Japanese titles. Oh, but that's—maybe it was a “meant to be” kind of coincidence.

It's amazing. Because I know, for me, I discovered it in a karaoke box, right? If you were looking at the songs from the...

Ohh, right, right, right.

So then, the song was already completed and then you just decided to add the...

Yeah, at the end.

Were there any headaches trying to get permission for that?

I think we had a fairly easy time with that.

Mr. Utada: I didn't. [*all laugh*]

Ah, so maybe *he* had a hard time with that. I didn't.

I just mean Mick Jagger maybe didn't mind, after he saw how successful...

[*Laughs*]

Mr. Utada: After they received the, uh, big royalty...

Right.

Mr. Utada: Sting, too.

Yeah.

Oh, which one did...?

Well, after that, I sampled “Shape of My Heart.” [*sings riff, which sounds like the intro to her song “Never Let Go”*]

Mr. Utada: Just the guitar.

That was on my first album as well and, I think in the beginning there was some clearance issue...and then so at the last minute we couldn't put it in the credits, because of that—like it wouldn't make it for printing, to the factory kind of thing, so then there was a weird little scandal like, “oh, she didn't give credit for it, and she just put it out,” but that was false and then we had to explain, like, “well, we got clearance, we got the permission, it's all official, it's okay, it just didn't make it into the credits of the booklet because it was so late...”



Wow, I didn't know about that.

Yeah. I'm sure they're both very happy with the result [*all laugh*].

I want to ask you about the new producers you're using for the album, Tricky and Stargate. How were they chosen? Did you change your style, or did you kind of change their ways of doing things in any way...

Oh, I see...

Were you allowed to have input, were they allowed to have more input compared to your previous experiences, and how do you feel about the final results?

When I began talking with Island Def Jam about making a new record, of course one of the big things was, what producer do you want, like, “we'll get anyone for you,” and “who do you want to work with?” kind of thing, and I didn't want a producer that was a “producer's producer,” you know, with his own set of writers, and his own color comes out so strongly and that kind of thing...I

wanted it to be “me,” but not as “me” as *Exodus*, because I did all the tracks, like most of the track making on that, and I was so sick of that track making process...by the end of *Exodus* I was just going, “ahh, can someone else do this for me but not be a loser, like...not be Timbaland, but do this for me, like I want to work with a track maker,” that's what I told IDJ...so I had them promote a list of track makers, like producers that could make a track and all that, that I could work with, to collaborate on the tracks as well, and then let me do all the melody writing and the lyrics writing and the singing, and then just to collaborate sort of, with the structure and things like that. So it's me writing music the way I usually do—music, melodies and lyrics, but working on the track, collaborating with Stargate and with Tricky. So, I think that was a bit irregular for them. I had to go in and...the first time we met, we sat down with both teams, I had to explain, “I'm gonna write all the songs, so I'd like to take out some demo tracks you guys have and take them home with me, and then play around with it, change the tracks, change the chords in some parts maybe as I song write, I need the complete control over the melody and the lyrics-writing, that kind of thing.

Do you have any plans to tour here or do any additional live or concert appearances?

Yeah, actually there are some appearances that are not set yet, not even soon, but we're thinking about—some are ongoing, underway. And a tour, we're not planning yet, but I do think I should [*laughs*].

Let me know, we'll be there in the front row.

[Laughs] As long as there's a demand, uh yeah, I think we will.

Well, when we send this out I'm sure there there'll be a lot of people who would like to know more.

More feedback, more demand!

The "one in a million" line on "Come Back to Me," is that sort of a dedication to Aaliyah, and what's your favorite Aaliyah song?

My favorite Aaliyah song? You know, I do love, like the big first hits like...okay... "Age Ain't Nothin' But a Number" is one of my all-time favorites, but what I listen to now, what's in my favorite playlist that I listen to a lot now still is that cover song she did, "At Your Best (You Are Love)" [originally a hit for the Isley Brothers in 1976—ed.] [sings a few lines]. That was done so beautifully, and it's a mature song I guess, the original...I'm so ashamed for not being able to say who the original singer is for that song, but I know that it was done by a much more mature...was it a black male singer? I'm not sure, but probably much older than her, or maybe female, I'm not sure. But she made it sound like there was some kind of magic when she sang it that age...it's from a viewpoint of someone who knows relationships well, you know, who's in a mature relationship, but Aaliyah...sort of matched that in a funny way, I guess because she was mature, I mean, mentally and emotionally. That's my favorite.

So is there any of that in the line?

Yeah, a little bit, yeah [laughs].

What's your favorite ice cream flavor?

Ice cream flavor...I have, I think... As I've grown, I have come to like, how do you say it in English? [To her father] "Choco minto."

Mr. Utada: The mint, chocolate mint...

Mint chocolate!

Mr. Utada: ...Chocolate chip.

Mint chocolate has become my favorite.

That's a good one. It's good by itself because it doesn't mix with others, but it tastes nice for what it is.

I'm not very big on really sweet, like, chunky chocolate kind of stuff.

So what did you like before?

Before that I used to like regular chocolate ice cream, and what do they call those, the cookie and...

Oh, cookie dough.

No, the cookies and...

Cookies & cream?

Yeah, like Häagen-Dazs' kind of thing.

About Kuma Chang...

[Laughs]

...What's the fascination, and is there anything else that you always like to have with you all the time?

All I need is Kuma. It's funny, I guess...he and I would make a very good team of therapists. When I actually talk with him, and through this dialogue I often discover things about myself that I [have] tucked away in my subconscious, and I can become more honest about, and discover what I feel deep down—it comes out, by talking with this big teddy bear, that—I do his talking, too, but there's a funny therapeutic aspect to it.

A security blanket, like Linus in *Peanuts*.

Yeah, great for conversation [*laughs*].

What's your favorite thing about New York?

About New York? Oh, New York is just New York. I love...I guess this is from when I was really small, we grew up in New York. I walked a lot, so the fact that you can just walk anywhere. It's a great city to walk in, like when I'm in L.A., I don't even have a driving license, I'm like, "Bummer, I can't go anywhere without a car, I can't drive, what am I supposed to do?," but New York, of course you can cab it if it's a long-distance drive, but...I just love to walk forever and ever and ever, and they have a huge park right next to the biggest shopping areas, so it's a great mixture and you get the best of both worlds with [the] city and the park, and just the fact that I can walk around everywhere and have a great time wherever I walk.

A friend of mine once said it was the center of the universe. Not the center of America, not the center of the world, the center of the universe.

I've only recently begun to appreciate how unique and *cool* this city is. Because I was born here, there's been a lot I took for granted, I guess. And the past few times I came back to New York from Tokyo I was like, wow, this city is so cool, man—I can't imagine living anywhere else anymore.

Are you going to be involved in the soundtrack for *Kingdom Hearts III*?

I don't think so, I don't know. Probably not.

Mr. Utada: We said no to Disney.
Ohh...

You turned down Disney?

Mr. Utada: Yeah. Because they don't pay.

Because they don't pay, yeah. My parents work for Disney World, so I'm sure they'd be in agreement with you on that.

They can have a drink over that [*all laugh*].



The next time you guys are in Orlando. So at 15, you recorded what ended up being the biggest-selling album in Japan, the most successful one, whatever the hype is for that. At that age, to have so much success and you handle it so well—you're really easy to talk to, you don't have an ego trip like a lot of artists who might be in the same position.

[*Laughs*]

And I mean that, it's really genuine. I feel like it's a nice, comfortable conversation.

Thank you.

The people who read this will probably feel like they know you so much more by getting to read an English-language interview with someone who...

Yeah.

Mr. Utada: Yeah!

They might—yeah, they might only know through just CDs, or just listening over the Internet, or through Japanese friends, and that's what we're here for, because we represent people who have worked overseas in Japan, and have come back to New

York. And before we were just a newsletter for our organization, but now we're branching out to be more of a magazine, and it's interviews like this and talks we can have with people who can really promote that message and get more Americans who maybe aren't planning on living in Japan or aren't planning on studying the language to just pick it up and read these kinds of things, so thank you again for that.

Oh. It's great that you—I feel rewarded to have that, to see that you appreciate that, I feel very happy.

Thanks. What I'd like to know, though, is, because of all that success, do you ever feel that, having achieved it at such a young age previously, do you feel that you're always trying to top yourself, or have people saying, "you should do this or you should do that," it might be impossible to top because it feels like there's things you should do or be required to do for the good of your fan base or as a Japanese artist in the 21st century?

Should do? Like what do you mean, to keep on making stuff?

What would an example be...it's like, if you become so successful at one thing, some people might say, oh, well you should put out a CD that's in this style and see if you can become just as successful at that, or you should do movies, or do something completely different.

I ignore all of them [*laughs*]. It doesn't interest me at all.

It's probably the healthiest thing, right? Because you can succeed on your own terms.

I'm not closing my ears to all that. I do like to keep open, and I don't want to become like in this small little world of la la land, this unreal world where like a lot of artists are kind of led into, in a sense, it's not their fault that they're in there, I feel like it's the environment's fault, the staff makes them—they just put them on a throne, and...they just lose touch with reality, you know, you see it happening and it's kind of sad. And...I don't think I could become like that, because that's the way I am, my character, personality, but I am open to whatever offers I get, like I do get a lot of offers, which surprises me as, like, movies, or like, scripts, or, "do you want to do this about this business or do you want to start a clothing brand," or like, "how about this movie, it's like...," are you serious? Nooo, I'm just not interested, and I don't even know why they offer it to me [*laughs*], but, to them it's just a business op, and I don't do just business.

Right. But at the same time, [annual Japanese New Year's Eve program] *Kohaku Uta Gassen* is pretty much dedicated to music, and you've never done it.

Yeah.

Is there any one reason why you wouldn't want to, or is it something you might do in the future at some point?

It's...I do choose my jobs very carefully and consciously. And *Kohaku*, it just doesn't... [*Long pause*] I don't feel like I belong there.

Why?

I don't know, I just feel so alien from that culture. It's a different culture all of its own. It's like a heritage—a Japanese heritage, and I have had no part of it in my own life, and I just don't relate to it. [*Pause*] Bottom line, I just don't want to be in it, I would hate to see myself in it; I just don't think I could take it.

The big dresses and all that, it's not for you.

The chaos and the partying all night...

Where does this kind of reserve come from within you? How did you know you'd be able to deal with these things for all this time you've been a recording artist?

I guess, growing up, my mother was a very famous singer. I saw her picking jobs, or [having] to take jobs she didn't want to do, just because of the record company making her do it, or...it just looked sad. It didn't seem like the ideal environment for an artist, and I could see how frustrated she was and the bad effect it had on her. And then, my father was managing her in her later years as a singer, and he—as my manager—to begin with for my career as well, my father took extra care to make sure that I would have the control over what I want to do and what I don't want to do, what I think I want to do and what I don't need to do. And...we've had a very good relationship with the record companies and as management on the artist's side, really. So I think that protection [and] freedom that came from—in the beginning, when I was too young to be aware of that kind of thing, and that's when artists get caught up with all that, like they sign something that they don't know what they're signing, and they have to do all this stuff they didn't know they had to do, and then they have all these problems with the record company later on because of their first contract and...they keep on changing management companies because they don't get along well, and all this, but...it was sort of the same feeling and ideas about what the artist wants to do, and fortunately I've never had that problem, because my father has been the manager from the beginning.

What goals do you have in music, in life, anything else, in the future, and how do you want to be remembered?

Goals and...I really don't have goals [*laughs*]. I never have goals or plans for the future.

It's not a huge thing, basically, for this album to become the greatest thing that's ever happened to the U.S.?

Well, that would be great if it happened, but it's not something...I'll do what I can on my part to try to make this happen for this project but...I think it's silly to plan ahead—if you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, then that might change everything, so what's the point of planning? I just don't have any life planning in me, because everything happened so unexpectedly, and things never happen the way you expect them to, and to me it's better that way; I love that about life. But I do, eventually, want to take a long break and have kids and play with them for a while, that kind of thing, some time, but I don't have any specific idea of when or where I want to live, or career-wise, what I want to do in the future...I have no idea.

And being remembered, is it the same?

Remembered...I'd like being remembered more as an artist than a celebrity, and an intelligent artist with integrity. Honesty; an honest artist.

Any other messages for our readers and members of the JET Programme and JETAA New York?

Umm, New York is the best city after everything, isn't it? [*All laugh*] I guess I might bump into these people walking around New York.

Or at the concert.

Yeah, or at a concert [*laughs*].



Special thanks to Caroline Bubnis at THE DOOR for media assistance. Photos by Yasunari Kikuma. For more on Utada and This is the One, visit her homepage at www.utada.com.