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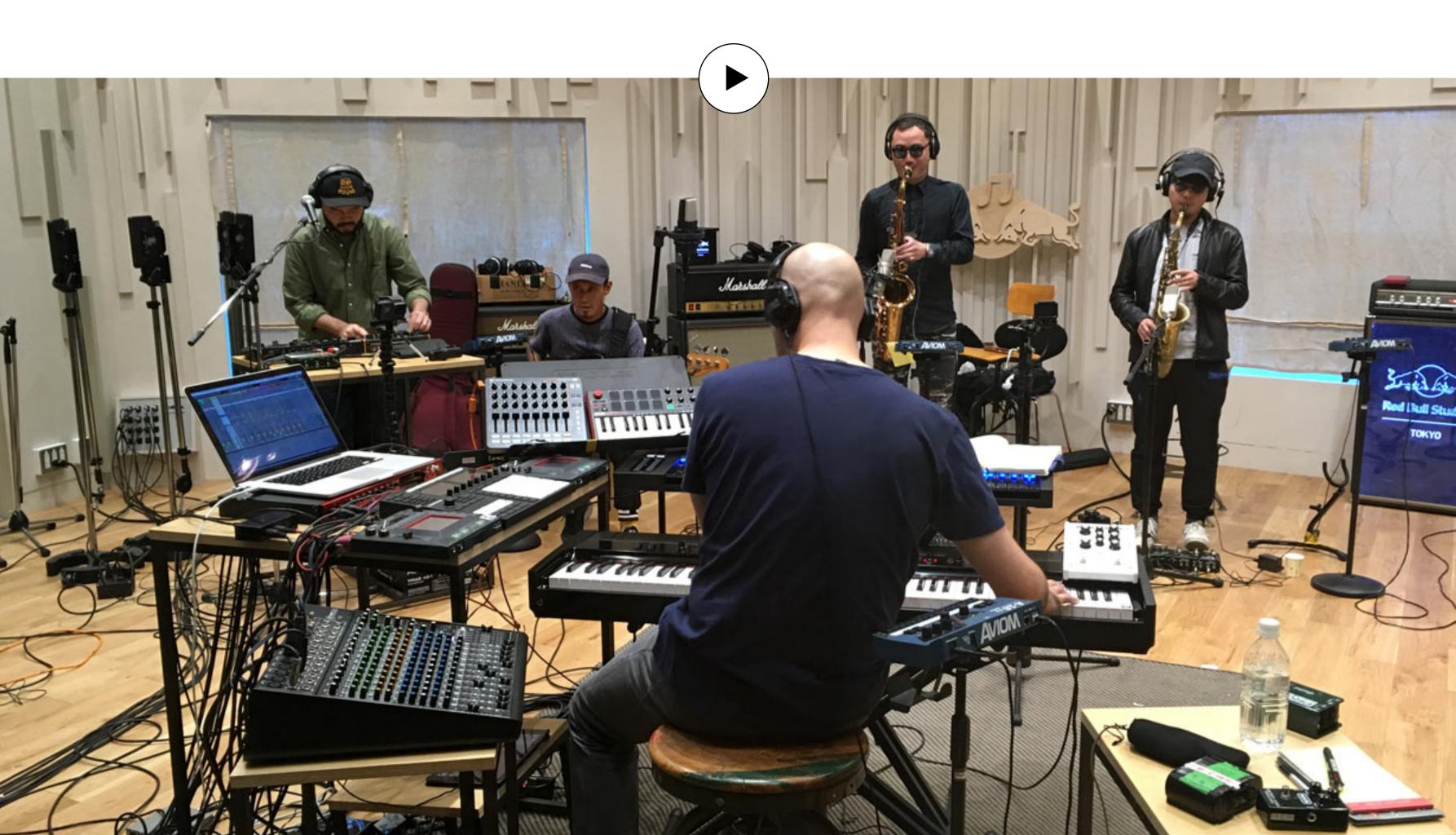


## A Beginner's Guide to Contemporary Jazz From Japan

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**SCENE REPORT** 

By David R. Adler · April 17, 2019



American jazz was forbidden in Japan during World War II, when the swing era and the stirrings of proto-bebop were afoot, but listeners embraced it in secret. As the music

**BUY** 

 $\Diamond$ 

**GO TO ALBUM** 

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**GO TO ALBUM** 

**GO TO ALBUM** 

Ronin Arkestra

continued its steady global expansion in the decades that followed, though, Japan's jazz obsession was anything but hidden. William Minor, in his 2004 book Jazz Journeys to Japan: The Heart Within, cites a comment from veteran producer Michael Cuscuna: "Japan almost single-handedly kept the jazz record business going during the late 1970s." And beyond consumers and fans, Minor elaborates, the country also produced its own wealth of jazz players: those who relocated abroad and flourished, those who remained and nurtured local scenes, and those who went back and forth, doing both. Aesthetically they've spanned a wide range—piano mastery and eclectic orchestral jazz from bandleader Toshiko Akiyoshi; fiery post-bop from trumpeters Terumasa Hino, Shunzo Ohno, and Tiger Okoshi; contemporary grooves and Brazilian tinge from

Satoko Fujii, who has led four different orchestras with players drawn from the talent pools in New York, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Kobe. This kaleidoscopic mix continues and evolves today, in the fusion/prog/funk of bohemianvoodoo, in the dance and pop synergy of Soil & "Pimp" Sessions, in the striking duo eccentricity of Audace. Others, like trumpeter Takuya Kuroda and keyboardist Mark de Clive-Lowe, have found traction in the States with their fertile hybrids of groove-jazz and hip-hop, embraced by the scene swirling around the live

music presenting agency Revive. Of Japanese and New Zealander heritage, de Clive-

Lowe also leads the Tokyo-based Rōnin Arkestra, broadening his global reach with

likeminded players on this year's debut EP, First Meeting.

something for every taste. Here are six albums to get you started.

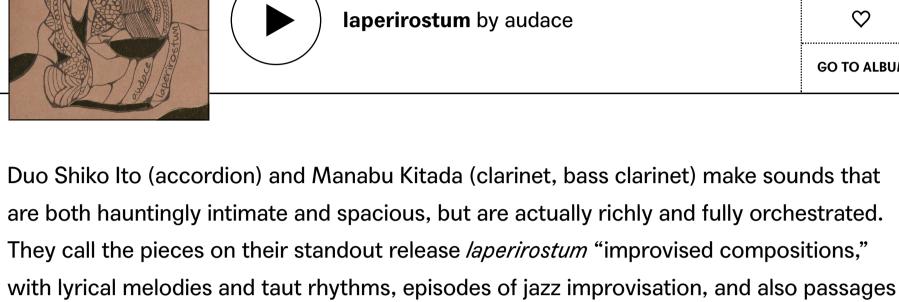
saxophonist Sadao Watanabe; sagacious piano musings by Yosuke Yamashita and

Masabumi Kikuchi; and explosive modern big band and abstract piano from the prolific

**Audace** laperirostum

With its rich and involved history—and propitious future—the Japanese jazz scene has





varied world traditions beyond Japan, from Europe to South America.



Merch for this release: Vinyl LP

Merch for this release:

**GO TO ALBUM** Borrowing "Arkestra" from the late, purportedly Saturn-born bandleader Sun Ra, keyboardist Mark de Clive-Lowe and Rōnin Arkestra blend futuristic beat-based music with echoes of '60s spiritual jazz and '70s fusion on their debut EP First Meeting. The Tokyo collective boast players at the forefront of Japan's jazz and electronic music

First Meeting by Ronin Arkestra

of spellbinding difficulty, requiring prodigious technique that the Tokyo-based pair is

always able to make sound effortless. With accordion and clarinet, they bring to mind

scenes, including guitarist Tsuyoshi Kosuga and beatmaker Sauce81, with robust horn and rhythm sections urging the music on. Building on his extensive experience in Los Angeles and the U.K., de Clive-Lowe (of mixed Japanese and New Zealander descent) is poised for similar impact in Japan. Their debut full-length is due out later this year.

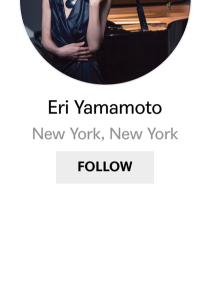
**Eri Yamamoto** 

eri yamamoto trio lif

Life

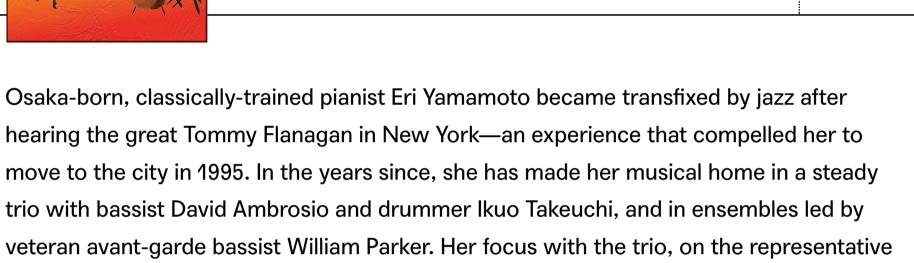
**Rōnin Arkestra** 

First Meeting



Ronin Arkestra Tokyo, Japan

**FOLLOW** 



2016 release Life, is original compositions (including one by Takeuchi): lyrical, darkly

hued, and modern-minded, and guided by a radiant calm and control, even in stormier

Life by Eri Yamamoto Trio

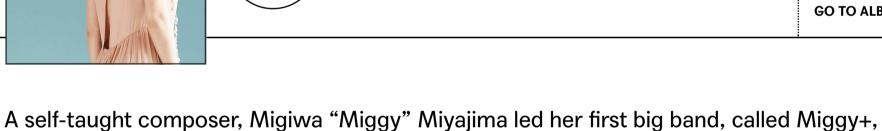
improvisational waters. Somewhere between the jazz mainstream and the avant-garde, Yamamoto has found a conceptual space of her own. Migiwa Miyajima Colorful BUY COLORFUL Miggy Augmented Orchestra Colorful by Migiwa Miyajima  $\Diamond$ 

in Japan from 1999 to 2010. Before relocating to New York in 2012, she began a unique

affiliation with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, producing the famed big band's Japanese

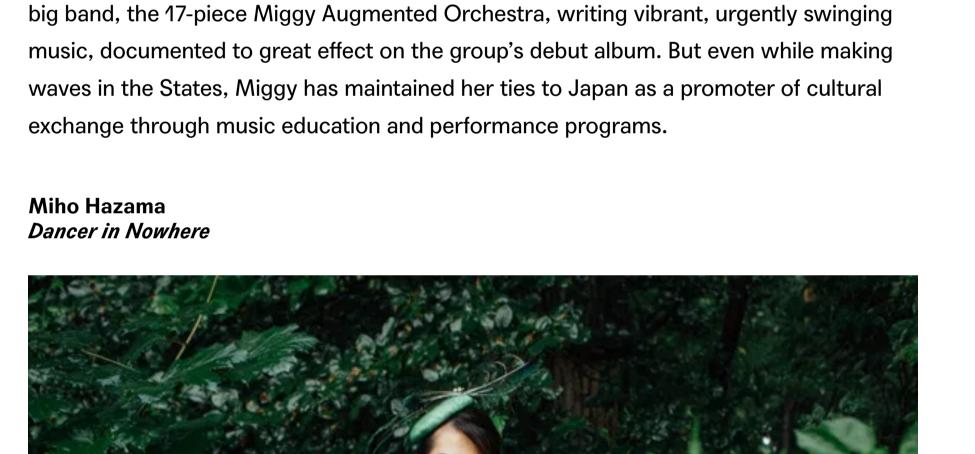
by veteran composers Jim McNeely and Mike Holober, she formed her own New York

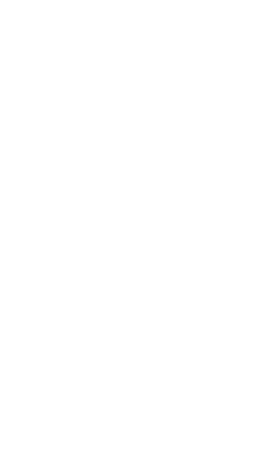
tours and co-producing two albums that ended up with Grammy nominations. Mentored





Migiwa Miyajima

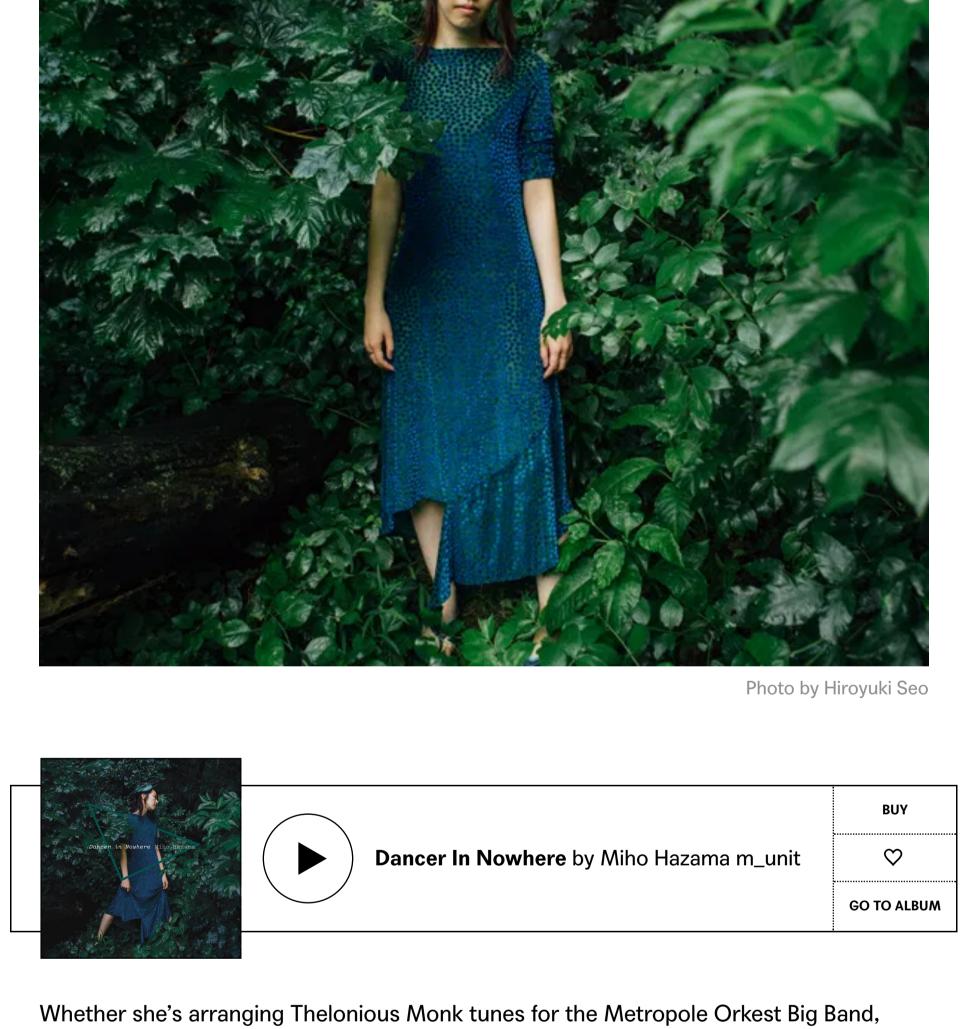




Merch for this release: Compact Disc (CD)

COLORFUL

Miggy<sup>Augmented</sup> Urchestra





Nautilus Japan

**FOLLOW** 

Miho Hazama

New York, New York

**FOLLOW** 

conducting the adventurous Terraza Big Band and Brian Krock's Big Heart Machine, or creating epic, far-reaching original pieces with her own 13-piece ensemble m\_unit on this year's release Dancer in Nowhere, Tokyo-born Miho Hazama is among a class of young composers bringing bold, imaginative frameworks to large-group jazz from her current base in New York. Her m\_unit music is rhythmically intriguing, harmonically advanced, and awash in tonal color—part big band, part chamber group—with French horn, strings, and vibraphone, leaving ample room for its members' top-tier performances.

Merch for this release: Compact Disc (CD), Vinyl LP

Merch for this release: Compact Disc (CD)

BUY NAUTILOID QUEST Nautiloid Quest by Nautilus  $\Diamond$ **GO TO ALBUM** Drummer Toshiyuki Sasaki, bassist Shigeki Umezawa, and keyboardist Daisuke Takeuchi have the rare-groove aesthetic in their bloodstream. Even their band name, Nautilus, is

an homage to the crate-digging sound: it's derived from a 1974 Bob James track that

artists. Across their 2017 release Nautiloid Quest, they exhibit an unerring feel for the

Heron, Donald Fagen, and Suzanne Vega. The vibe is electric and funky, with guest

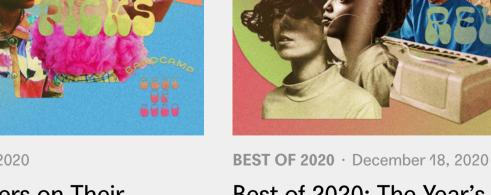
vocalists, engaging rhythmic sleights of hand, and Takeuchi's occasional switches to

went on to be sampled by Eric B. & Rakim, A Tribe Called Quest, and many other hip-hop

beat, playing their titular Bob James track, along with originals and classics by Gil Scott-







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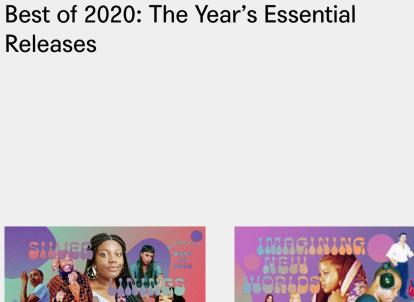
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on Their Favorite Albums

**Nautilus** 

Nautiloid Quest

acoustic piano.



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Best of 2020: Silver

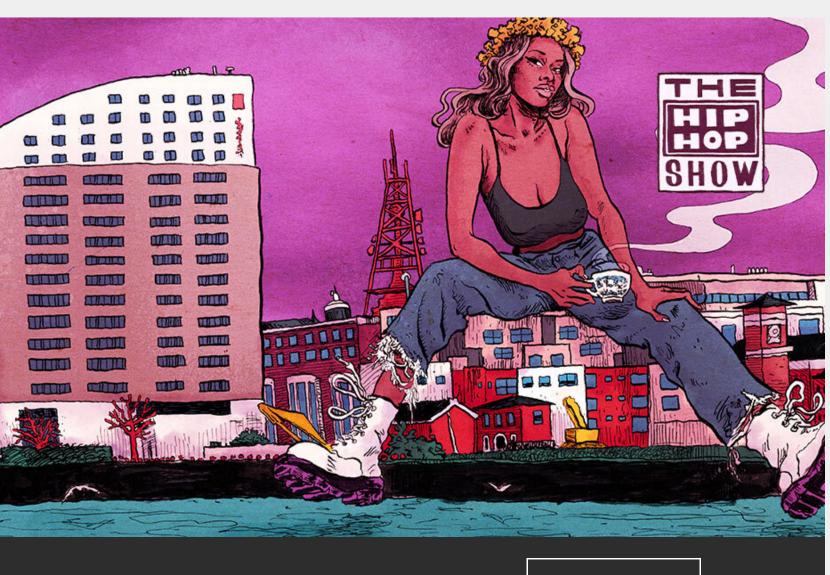
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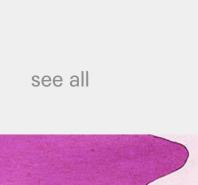
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Best of 2020: It Got Heavy

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