

### Versione italiana

*Once in a while you can get shown the light in the strangest of places...*[Robert Hunter, Scarlet Begonias]

It was around Christmas 2019 when my son recommended that I watch the well-known anime series Cowboy Bebop. I thought the show was fun, but I noticed that the music seemed remarkably good - in fact, it quickly became what I liked the most. Each episode ended with the growling A minor guitar chord at the beginning of the song The Real Folk Blues, and that became my favorite part of all.

Fast forward several months now to early summer 2020. Covid had struck and I was in my own version of "lockdown". By this time I had purchased all of the Cowboy Bebop soundtrack albums, the work of savant composer and producer Yoko Kanno. The music is phenomenal, and I had listened to all the discs over and over again with great delight. But something in my mind kept coming back to that dusky syncopated vocal that opens The Real Folk Blues. Who can sing with that dexterity? I knew the name of the singer - Mai Yamane - but that's all I knew.

One day in July that year I finally decided I had to know more, and I went online in search of Mai Yamane, and found more than I could ever have imagined in the work of this extraordinary artist. There are several musicians I can name that have deeply influenced me as a musician, but there are only two who I can say literally changed my life. The first is Antonio Vivaldi - he gave me Venice. The second is A-sha Mai Yamane. The way she changed my life is harder to express, but just like with Vivaldi, when I began to explore her music I felt something deep inside, a profound sense of recognition. Though I don't know Japanese, the songs touched my heart and soul and became part of discovering who I really am, or rather already was.

What follows is a personal appreciation of her work, filled with songs and videos. I want to introduce you to A-sha Mai Yamane, whose work is largely unknown outside Japan.

Mai Yamane left home at the age of 17 and went to Tokyo to pursue a career in music. At the age of 20 she won the Yamaha CockyPop Music Contest. Her prize was the opportunity to record a single with a famous producer.

Yamane then released her debut album working with same producer - the very successful Tasogare, released in 1980. Yamane became a star in Japan, signed to one of the biggest record labels there, for which she produced a succession of albums that ranged from pop to jazz-rock. Very skilled at singing in English, she often covered western music, most notably (to my ear at least) a stunning rendition of Danny Whitten's famous song I Don't Want To Talk About It:

Mai Yamane has cited Edith Piaf and Janis Joplin as her biggest influences as a singer. Joplin's

influence can certainly be heard in the final two albums she produced as a major label artist. In 1987 she released an album that was much more blues and rock oriented than her previous records, the cleverly titled *Woman Tone* (“woman tone” was the nickname Eric Clapton used for his early guitar sound).

Yamane clearly knew her way around rock music, as you can hear in this rave-up rendition of Bob Seger’s *All Your Love*:

By this time, Yamane’s sister Eiko, herself a singer and star in her own right with the band UGUISS, had become a working partner on Mai’s albums, writing lyrics and music and providing stellar backing vocals. This partnership came to the forefront with Yamane’s next release, *1958* (Side note: 1958 is the year Mai Yamane was born. The album was released in 1989, the year that Taylor Swift was born, who later released an album called *1989*).

With Yamane now also producing, the album features one band that performs the whole album (unlike the wildly differing arrangements of players other producers used on her previous albums), playing songs written almost entirely by Mai and Eiko. The results a tour de force. Filled with clever references to 60s, 70s and 80s rock music, *1958* also showcases Yamane’s extraordinary stylistic range as a singer. It ranks among my favorite albums of all time. Here are two tracks from the album, *Maybe Tomorrow* and *I Need You Here*; they sound so different it’s hard to believe the same person is singing on both:

*1958* marked the end of the first phase of Mai Yamane’s career. Tired of the constraints of working with a label, she cancelled her record contract and went out on her own. What followed in the early 1990s was a period of searching. Still a big star living in Tokyo, Yamane worked as a session singer, often with Eiko, and also toured as a backup singer for major Japanese rock group *Fence of Defence*. It was 1993 when she was first contacted by Yoko Kanno to do session work, several years before being recruited to contribute to the *Cowboy Bebop* soundtrack.

As great as the *Bebop* soundtrack is, Yamane actually only performs on four songs out of the 63 tracks Kanno recorded. However, in a 2001 interview Yamane said that the song *Blue* from that series was her favorite song, so it’s worth including here. Evidently, she liked it so much that she walked in the studio and recorded it in one take:

It was also in the 1990s that Yamane met and then married (in 1995) Takao Yamada (who passed away in 2002). Yamada was a mystic, philosophical/spiritual writer and meditation teacher. Mai Yamane soon became an assistant in her husband’s classes. She left Tokyo and moved with her husband to a home that sits across Lake Yamanaka from Mt. Fuji, and that location – and Mt. Fuji in particular – became a very strong part of her identity, and remains so to this day.

Her new life with Yamada also had a profound impact on her music. Yamane set up her own recording studio and record label, and in 1997 released a three-song CD with her sister Eiko and brother Satoru called New Archaic Smile. This disc features Futsu no Uta (Ordinary Song), a song that became one of her most beloved works in the new phase of her musical career.

This brings me to the first of Mai Yamane's songs I found online. The albums from her early major label career are not available outside Japan, and I did not hear them until later. The first songs I heard and saw were videos of live performances at the Naked Soul festivals Yamane produced from 2006 - 2009. I watched these videos and that was all it took for me to instantly become a fanatic about Mai Yamane. I had to hear everything she had ever done.

Here's one of those videos, a performance of Futsu no Uta:

As it happens, all the releases from this phase of her career are available for sale as downloads at [galacticnation](#). I bought all of them, and spent months marveling, in awe at the variety and depth of the arrangements and the writing and the singing... I was totally and utterly smitten.

From 2001 to 2007 Yamane released a series of CDs, some as Mai Yamane and others as New Archaic Smile. She produced two CDs of "awakening music", sound tapestries for meditation built around sounds produced by Takao Yamada's "consciousness technology" devices. All of these albums possess such musical, artistic, sonic and emotional depth that I can only offer a few tracks as samples and allow the music to do the talking.

First, Cosmic Wedding Song, from Kin no Himo:

Now, to the land of joy, with Haru ga Kita, from the New Archaic Smile release Yasashi Kimochi:

Finally, from the album Bird of Paradise, the unbelievably beautiful Sakura no ki no Shitade:

There is so much more, like her arrangement of Ravel's Bolero for voice, Eastern instruments, percussion and electric guitar. Her output is so varied and astonishing that it's very hard to try telling anyone about Mai Yamane or to describe her music without writing an essay... Each song is a world that exhibits one of her seemingly endless dimensions as a singer, writer and producer.

In 2012, Eiko passed away. That same year, Mai Yamane changed her name to A-sha, and around Christmas that year released recordings of her songs Plumeria and Step into the Light online. She continued to perform, sometimes solo, but increasingly often working with young DJs to round out her piano playing and singing. There are a scattering of videos online from this period.

This brings us back to 2020. That summer Yamane met a young DJ named Keigo Tanaka, who at the time was working with a trio called Crystal Nada.

Thanks to this association with Tanaka, I got to see A-sha perform live on Christmas Day 2020.

Crystal Nada livestreamed their annual "Christmas Nada" show and A-sha joined them as a guest.

I bought a ticket and got up at 4:30 AM (Japan is 13 hours ahead of EST) the day of the concert to watch the show. It was a totally unexpected gift - I could not have imagined I'd ever get to see her perform.

In February 2021 A-sha released a new recording of Plumeria, produced with Keigo Tanaka. It's available for download (for free) from the Galactic Nation site. Then in March 2021 A-sha announced she was staging a live concert which would also be livestreamed. Performing with Keigo Tanaka and guitarist Masanori Narikawa, the concert was dubbed Miracles, vol. 1.

This extraordinary and pretty much once in a lifetime show includes many of A-sha Mai Yamane's songs, of course, but it also contains gems like her version of Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen, an up-tempo version of the classic song Smile, her uncanny spoken word/scat singing and performances of both Plumeria and Step into the Light. In other words, pure joy, even at 5 AM EST. The stream was recorded and posted, so you can see it too. Note the lights swinging during the second song - this was the day of the 2021 earthquake in Japan, which started soon after she began singing: A-sha Mai Yamane continues to perform and teach meditation in Japan, but since the spring of 2021 has not shown many signs of releasing new recordings (or livestreaming concerts). The winter and spring of 2020-2021, it turns out, were a rare and special moment.

So here I am, writing about her on Christmas 2022. Ever since that fortunate summer of 2020 I have wanted to find a way to share A-sha Mai Yamane with others, as I hope I have done with you, dear reader. Her music is deep within me now, and I'm always filled with the strongest emotion and joy when I hear her music. Her work has touched me incredibly deeply, and it changed my life. I'm so grateful. All I have left to say here is *arigato* - thank you. *Arigato*, A-sha Mai Yamane, for helping me to feel the power of life and love through your music, and for the joy that brings me every day.

But there is one more thing to add. That amazing theme song that for me started it all. I can't think of a better way to end this appreciation than with The Real Folk Blues. *See you, space cowgirl....\**

*\*quote from Cowboy Bebop*