

Shugo Tokumaru

Shugo Tokumaru is the kind of artist you hear about from that friend of yours, the one who first took you to that out-of-the-way Peruvian restaurant, the one who made you that mix with the great Icelandic reggae band on it. This friend has a knack for sniffing out things that are special and unique. Extraordinary maybe. “Extraordinary” is a word that describes Shugo well. In fact, if there is any one adjective that can be applied to a young pop genius making miniature symphonies in his bedroom in Tokyo, “extraordinary” is it.

But let’s get the basic facts down. Shugo is 28 years old. He grew up in Tokyo, listening to Japanese pop and Beatles cassettes, starting to write songs at an early age. Shugo recently finished his third solo album, *Exit*. His first two albums, *Night Piece* and *L.S.T.*, were released on local labels in Tokyo. Passed from fan to fan, both found their way across several oceans and onto the iPods of an enthusiastic audience in the states and Europe. Critics were similarly enthralled, with both records receiving rave reviews, including a glowing 8.6/10 for *Night Piece* from Pitchfork Media.

More facts. Shugo records all of his music himself, in his apartment, using a Mac and a few microphones. He plays most of the instruments on *Exit* himself. There are over 50 instruments on *Exit*. The only instrument Shugo has taken lessons for is the piano. There is very little piano on *Exit*. He sings mainly in Japanese and bases his lyrics around a dream journal. Sometimes Shugo’s music sounds like a roomful of clockwork toys having a rave (listen to *Exit*’s opener, “Parachute,” and you’ll hear it). Other times, it is sweet, slow and mournful. There are cowboy guitar riffs rubbing shoulders with traditional Japanese instruments. Percussion sometimes means a drum kit and sometimes an ashtray, if not both. There are melodies as catchy as anything you’d hear on Top 40 radio, and moments as unique as anything you’d hear on college radio at 2 AM. It is the sound of a nuclear physicist playing with Legos: a precise mind having fun.

Because Shugo plays every instrument on his albums himself, his songs cannot be replicated exactly onstage; they are the musical equivalent of snowflakes, never to occur twice in nature. For some artists, this would be a burden, but Shugo treats each show as an opportunity to re-engineer the material into a surprising new form. That could mean a stripped down solo performance, a small combo, or his full “Magic Band” – a dazzling octet that brings a manic energy to the Swiss Watch arrangements and swirling arpeggios of *Exit*. It could, of course, be something else entirely, depending on the occasion. Right now Shugo’s fans in the states only have YouTube clips to satisfy their curiosity on that front. This may change soon.

One last round of facts. Did we mention that he’s shared a stage with Animal Collective, Jens Lekman, Iron & Wine, and M. Ward? Or that he enlisted a local kindergarten class to sing the chorus on *Exit* standout “Button”? Or that he spent two years in LA, eating nothing but McDonald’s and Mexican food?

Facts are good. But facts are ordinary. Shugo is extraordinary.

