

# Songs of the 3.11 Triple Disaster in Japan's Tohoku Region

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*Abstract: The earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident that struck Northeast Japan on March 11, 2011 (3.11) prompted an array of local, national, and global musical responses. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines three songs that were newly composed in response to 3.11. I argue that these songs serve as means of optimistic attachments that simultaneously emphasize currently unachievable fantasies of the good life (Berlant 2011), and also foster the Japanese sociocultural aesthetic of gambaru (to persevere, to endure). I demonstrate how these songs serve as catalysts to inspire movements toward recovery and revival for 3.11 survivors.*

*Résumé : Le tremblement de terre, le tsunami et la catastrophe nucléaire qui ont frappé le nord-est du Japon le 11 mars 2011 ont suscité tout un ensemble de réactions musicales, aux niveaux local, national et mondial. À partir d'un travail de terrain ethnographique, cet article examine trois chansons qui ont été composées dans la foulée des événements du 11 Mars. J'avance que ces chansons servent de points d'ancrage à un optimisme qui, simultanément, souligne le fantasme actuellement inaccessible de la bonne vie (Berlant 2011) tout en alimentant l'esthétique socioculturelle japonaise du gambaru (persévérance, capacité d'endurer). Je montre de quelle façon ces chansons ont joué un rôle de catalyseurs pour inspirer des mouvements de rétablissement et de renouveau chez les survivants du 11 Mars.*

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At 2:46 pm on March 11, 2011, the most powerful earthquake in Japanese seismographic history, a 9.0 magnitude quake, occurred off the Pacific coast of Eastern Japan (Adams et al. 2011: 8). Footage of the catastrophic damage and the subsequent 30-foot tsunami waves that destroyed everything in their path flooded media outlets around the world. On the evening of March 10, 2011 (the afternoon of March 11 in Japan), I witnessed the disaster taking place live on television while I was waitressing at a Japanese restaurant in Encinitas, California. The chatter at the small but crowded restaurant

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suddenly fell silent as a breaking news headline came through announcing a major earthquake and tsunami hitting Japan. Amidst reports of continuous aftershocks in Tokyo, the footage shifted to a shot of cars swimming in a flood of water. Shortly thereafter, we were informed that the waves were flooding in about 100 km east of Sendai in the Tohoku region of northeast Japan.

While I was grateful that I didn't have family in Tohoku, I still felt a strong connection to this particular disaster because it was taking place in my ancestral country. Although I am fourth-generation Japanese American and had never lived in Japan prior to my dissertation fieldwork (though I had visited several times), I was raised to appreciate Japanese culture and to learn the language (Japanese was my first language). I had a shift at the restaurant the following morning, and by then the emergency at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant had been announced; the unfathomable extent of the earthquake and tsunami damage was starting to become clearer. I believe it was on this day at the restaurant, as I was wiping down tables, that I started to think about the potentially massive and diverse amount of musical responses to this series of disasters (hereafter referred to as 3.11). Three years later, I embarked on what would end up being two years (2014-2016) of ethnographic fieldwork in Sendai on this very topic.

This article explores three songs that were newly composed in response to 3.11 and considers how they reveal and assert tactics for culturally appropriate ways to express solidarity with, inspire recovery for, and provide comfort to 3.11 survivors. During my fieldwork, conversations with interlocutors about 3.11 songs served as an entry point into more personal perspectives and opinions about post-3.11 disaster relief and recovery. Here, I will analyze the impact that consuming and creating songs had for disaster survivors coping with recovery. Produced in March of 2012 by NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai), Japan's national public broadcasting organization, "Hana wa Saku" (Flowers Will Bloom) is a charity all-star song that virtually everyone I spoke to in Tohoku was familiar with due to the song's widespread dissemination by the media and its dominant presence at disaster-relief performances as an anthem of 3.11. "Ubukoe" (See the Light of Day) was released in April 2011 by Sendai-based hip-hop group Gagle and inspired the development of the Ubukoe Project, an organization that provides a range of support to disaster-affected musicians and communities. *Arabama Callings* is a 10-track album that Satō Nami,<sup>1</sup> a native of a coastal town in Sendai, put together as her undergraduate senior project and as a means of raising funds to support her disaster-affected community.

All three songs are intended to inspire perseverance and demonstrate solidarity while referencing longings for and attachments to a lost homeland (*furusato*) in different ways. While a countless abundance of songs were newly

composed in response to 3.11,<sup>2</sup> I have selected these three examples because they respectively illustrate national, local, and personal perspectives on how to provide comfort and encouragement to disaster survivors. Because I was not in Japan to experience the immediate aftermath of 3.11, my analyses of these songs are based on a combination of interviews and informal conversations I had with interlocutors in the field, as well as textual analysis.<sup>3</sup>

To help frame the context in which these songs emerged, I sonically trace the early aftermath of the disaster through accounts of music on the radio, as recalled by interlocutors I spoke to who experienced the disaster firsthand. I then investigate songs and sounds that were locally and nationally deemed culturally inappropriate during the transitional period from self-restrained silence to auditory normalcy. Finally, I present the three newly composed post-3.11 songs to provide a glimpse into how disaster experiences and observations as well as expressions of recovery and solidarity were musically interpreted and represented.

The newly composed post-3.11 songs I address in this article serve, in varying ways, as a means of optimistic attachment, defined by Lauren Berlant as:

The force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene. (2011: 1)

At the same time, the hope and promise attached to such songs also cruelly highlight their unachievability in the current state of political and socio-economic upheaval. The stripping away of assurances of stability is precisely what ignited the very desires to obtain it. It is because such ideas of “the good life” were stripped away by 3.11 that survivors strive to regain it through optimistic attachments to songs that evoke good-life fantasies. I want to make it clear here that I am not making the argument that these songs provide a cathartic escape from reality. Rather, the songs serve as tools to work toward adjustment when, as Berlant puts it, “the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to ‘have a life’ that adjustment seems like an accomplishment” (2011: 3).

The type of adjustment described by Berlant can be elucidated through the Japanese socio-cultural value of *gambaru*. *gambaru* is a multi-faceted concept that is not easily defined. It means to persevere, to endure, to do one’s best persistently, and to not give up. It suggests that accomplishments cannot

be obtained without tenacity, struggle, sacrifice, and hard work. It can also mean “take care” or “good luck” as a form of phatic discourse to ease social relations and show support for others (Cowie 2007: 250). The spirit of *gambaru* is encouraged from childhood through adulthood and engulfs every facet of Japanese society in work and leisure situations.<sup>4</sup> According to Benjamin Duke, the spirit of *gambaru* is “one of the major motivating spirits that ... buoyed [Japanese] society through adversity in its tenacious pursuit of postwar national regeneration” (1986: 122). Similarly, the spirit of *gambaru* continues to be an indispensable social attribute for post-3.11 recovery. Songs in response to the 3.11 disaster allow individuals and communities to develop strategies for survival (i.e., ways to continue to *gambaru*) and modes of adjustment to help them get by during periods when the ordinary is no longer easily sustainable.

### First Exposures to Music on the Radio

When the electricity went out on 3.11, connections to most media outlets were lost as well. In fact, many who experienced the earthquake in Tohoku had no idea about the tsunami and the nuclear fallout until days later.<sup>5</sup> *Kahoku Shimpō*, Sendai’s daily newspaper, did not miss a day of their morning deliveries, but the only source of auditory and real-time media readily available at the time was from the radio. Although the vast majority of radio broadcasts were news reports, many people I spoke to recalled that the first song they heard following 3.11 was not a song they themselves had chosen to listen to, but rather something that just happened to be on the radio. Hamada Naoki, coordinator of the *Ubukoe Project* (discussed later in this article), recalled:

The first music I heard was played on the radio, and not a song that I had personally selected. There isn’t any particular song that I remember, just that “Oh I haven’t heard the full version of this song for quite some time.” Radio stations generally play requested songs, or they’re limited to a set of monthly contracted songs, but at that time, songs were likely solely chosen by directors and radio DJs. I remember that most songs were gentle and comforting. (interview, June 14, 2016)<sup>6</sup>

Ethnomusicologist Oshio Satomi notes that songs featured on the radio in Sendai during this early period generally emphasized messages of perseverance and *gambaru* such as Yuzu’s “Hey Wa,”<sup>7</sup> originally released in January 2011, and “Nando Demo” (No Matter How Many Times) by Dreams Come True

(2013: 3). Originally released in 2005, “Nando Demo” was the most aired pop song on the radio for the week following 3.11 (3/14/2011–3/20/2011). It was downloadable as a free ringtone from March 28 to April 27, 2011 as a means of supporting and encouraging individuals affected by the disaster.

While the media emphasized messages of perseverance, many Japanese people voluntarily participated in a form of self-restraint known as *jishuku*.<sup>8</sup> Marié Abe defines *jishuku* as “a form of self-restraint from activities considered unessential or selfish” where “in the name of national mourning and energy-conservation efforts, many businesses and individuals observe [a] social convention of silence and frugality, leaving the streets dimmer, quieter, and emptier than usual” (2016: 244, 235).<sup>9</sup> From a Western perspective, *jishuku* may suggest mourning, but it is not so much a proclamation of sorrow as it is a movement that demonstrates compliance with cultural standards of individual sacrifice in solidarity with others who are suffering. For example, Oshio noted that while graduates traditionally wear bright, festive kimono at graduation ceremonies, most, if not all, students restrained themselves from wearing such outfits in 2011 because they felt it was culturally inappropriate to wear bright colors following such a tragic event. Initial musical responses to 3.11 also complied with cultural expectations of self-restraint as particular types of songs were avoided for very specific reasons.

### Self-censored Out of Respect

The rationale for why particular songs and sounds became taboo in tsunami-stricken areas post-3.11 is rather transparent and uncontroversial. While there may be disagreements about *how* to help and empathize with affected individuals in need, nobody opposed doing so.<sup>10</sup> Noriko Manabe notes how in Japan, “media personnel, producers, and individual entertainers censor themselves, making explicit censorship largely unnecessary” (2015: 8). The avoidance of certain songs following 3.11 was primarily a result of *jishuku* where artists, musicians, and radio/music industry personnel took it upon themselves to self-censor and avoid any repertoire that had even the slightest possibility of eliciting traumatic memories for listeners.

The most common and obvious reason to avoid a song was due to its lyrics. According to my interlocutors, any song that mentioned earthquakes, tsunami, waves, etc., such as Japanese rock band Southern All Stars’ “Tsunami” (2000), and songs about victims or the deceased were actively avoided by the media, by the artists themselves, and at disaster-relief concerts. Furthermore, affiliates of the Sendai Philharmonic Orchestra informed me that repertoires that musically elicit

ocean waves, such as Debussy's "La Mer," were actively avoided by symphony orchestras. Lastly, and perhaps least instinctively, taiko drums were also initially rejected, especially in enclosed spaces such as temporary housing units, because of their deep, rumbling sound. A *Japan Times* report noted:

Survivors of the massive tsunami that wiped out coastal communities and stole tens of thousands of lives recall hearing a low, grinding noise as they witnessed a huge, black wall of water sweeping over the land and swallowing everything in its way. (Adams et al. 2011: 6)

That low, grinding noise was apparently very similar in timbre to the sound of a taiko drum, so when Miyagi Prefecture-based taiko troupe Senrai (閃雷) attempted to give an encouraging performance at a temporary housing unit shortly after the disaster, they were immediately turned away and asked not to return until the residents were ready (Chiba Shū, interview, August 20, 2015).

The members of Senrai were in different parts of Miyagi on 3.11, and thus experienced the earthquake and subsequent blackout firsthand. According to their producer, Chiba Shū, within the first week following the disaster, members of Senrai went to a temporary housing unit in Miyagi with a taiko drum and offered to give a performance. Prior to 3.11, taiko typically had nostalgic associations, especially for the elderly, reminding them of matsuri festivals they had attended with their families. For children, it was an exciting, invigorating instrument to listen to. However, this time, Senrai was flat-out refused by the people at a temporary housing unit and told that the sound of the taiko would remind residents of the sounds and rumblings of the earthquake, and that the children would be frightened. According to the members of Senrai, it became strikingly clear to them at that moment that the very thing they had invested themselves in was worthless in a post-3.11 context, given that their music was denied, refused, and rejected, causing them to question whether they would be able to continue their careers as taiko musicians.<sup>11</sup>

Thereafter, members of Senrai went to temporary housing units to help not as musicians, but as volunteers, cleaning up debris, distributing donations they received from the taiko community, and chatting with the residents. One day, an older woman at a temporary housing unit saw an *ōdaiko* (large taiko drum) that they happened to have in the back of their car and told them that she would love to be able to dance *bon odori* to it someday.<sup>12</sup> She asked if she could write a message on the face of the taiko saying that she hopes to be able to hear its sound eventually. Others then quickly followed suit and started to write their thoughts, hopes, and words of appreciation on the taiko. From then

on, this *ōdaiko* came to be known as the “*kibō no tsuzumi*” (drum of hope), initially offering people in various housing units, and eventually people outside the affected areas, the opportunity to write messages of support as well (Chiba Shū, interview, August 20, 2015). Senrai continues to use that drum in their performances to remind audiences about 3.11 and as a symbol of gratitude that they were able to overcome their earlier rejection and necessary self-restraint.

Jishuku strongly influenced the body of songs that were avoided following 3.11. Because many artists and musicians took the responsibility to seriously self-censor their music-making, they were especially conscientious about their performance decisions in the days and weeks after 3.11. Individual sacrifice — in this case, refraining from performing certain songs and using certain instruments — was a way for musicians to show respect through restraint and to express their solidarity with others who were suffering.

While *jishuku* affected the body of pre-existing songs that were taboo to perform, air, and disseminate in the early aftermath of the disaster, it remained acceptable to write and release songs that were intended to support and share solidarity with disaster survivors. The UK and US have had a history of producing charity all-star song projects beginning with Band Aid (1984) and Live Aid (1985) for famine relief in Ethiopia, “We Are the World” (1985) for African famine relief, and Farm Aid (1985) to raise money for family farmers in the United States.<sup>13</sup> In Japan, the notion of charity all-star song projects is a fairly new phenomenon, though there were several in response to 3.11.<sup>14</sup> Noriko Manabe, for example, documents that Team Amuse’s “Let’s Try Again,” featuring 54 artists from the Amuse agency, was one of the bestselling new hits of 2011, raising nearly 500 million yen for charities in the year after its release (about \$6.4 million USD) (2015: 99). Another example is popular J-pop idol girl group AKB48’s “Dareka no Tame ni” (What Can I Do for Someone) disaster relief project. For this initiative, members of AKB48 began holding monthly volunteer concerts in disaster-stricken areas as early as May 2011.<sup>15</sup> The most notable and well-known post-3.11 all-star charity song, however, is “Hana wa Saku,” which was released a year after 3.11. This song has become the anthem of 3.11 and served as an entry point into conversations with my interlocutors as a song they all knew and had clear opinions about. I am therefore addressing it in detail first.

### “Hana wa Saku”

In March of 2012, NHK produced a song entitled “Hana wa Saku” (Flowers Will Bloom) to “build public support for the 3.11 disaster recovery efforts

and generate compassion for survivors from across the country and around the world” (NHK 2018). The song’s lyricist, film director Iwai Shunji, and the song’s composer, Kanno Yōko, best known for her anime soundtracks, are both originally from Miyagi Prefecture. Furthermore, the vocalists in the original music video, which features a wide range of celebrities including TV personalities, actors, athletes, and, of course, professional singers, all have personal ties to disaster-affected areas in Tohoku. The lyrics are written from the perspective of those who lost their lives and offer encouragement to the people they left behind. They nostalgically recount a lost homeland while optimistically assuring that flowers will bloom, providing hope in a time of despair.

Although NHK’s transparent objective with “Hana wa Saku” was to provide an uncontroversial means to allow people to express their solidarity and support by requesting, performing, and purchasing the song, and to create a united community through shared mourning, it also encourages what Sherene Razack calls “stealing the pain of others,” relying on the consumption of images and stories to “confirm our own humanitarian character” (2007: 375). The celebrities featured in the music video enact the victims, playing the role of spiritual medium between the deceased and their surviving loved ones for consumption by spectators.<sup>16</sup> Some capitalize on their professional acting skills, singing their line on the verge of tears, while others come across as naively innocent and ordinary, singing poorly, but still eagerly participating.

The focus on nostalgia and longing for one’s hometown (*furusato*), as well as a performative emphasis on tears in the music video, is very reminiscent of tropes in *enka*, Japanese sentimental ballads. Christine Yano claims that “enka’s tears become collective tears that define a racial, a cultural, and even a national community” (2002: 4). The tears in “Hana wa Saku” serve a similar purpose by representing a collective longing for the peaceful past and a lost hometown. Like *enka*, “Hana wa Saku” “suggests a forum for collective nostalgia, which actively appropriates and shapes the past, thereby binding the group together” (15). The tears for a hometown lost in the disaster are presented as the tears of a collective nation mourning together, which strengthens solidarity while also generalizing the unique hometowns lost in the disaster as a collective *furusato* that can be mourned for by all.

Interlocutors I spoke to, who ranged from university students, fellow taiko classmates, founders and organizers of music relief organizations, and authorities on Tohoku’s folk performing arts, had mixed feelings about “Hana wa Saku” and the drama of the music video. While some were comforted by “Hana wa Saku” and regarded it as a sincere expression of solidarity, others were infuriated by the song, claiming that the celebrities will never understand the suffering and sadness survivors have had to endure. People who were critical



of the song also expressed frustrations about the ignorantly optimistic and idealized message of the lyrics: that flowers will bloom and all will be fine. Similar to Pegley and Fast's description of the post-9/11 *America: A Tribute to Heroes* concert, it is "through the power of celebrity, music, and gesture" that the music video attempts to "forge a unified community" (2007: 29). The star power in "Hana wa Saku" combined with exaggerated gestures emphasize a staged and fabricated community that makes it difficult for some disaster survivors to accept the song's message as genuine and sincere. As the music video proceeds, the solo vocal lines gradually overlap into a full-fledged chorus, further emphasizing the message of shared solidarity and support that NHK wished to portray through this performance.

In some sense, "Hana wa Saku" is a song that fosters and encourages mourning as a means of moving forward. It shifted the public mood away from the messages of perseverance that initially dominated post-3.11 songs, which I will be referring to shortly, and provides a platform where performers and listeners are given a space to stop and take a moment to mourn. Judith Butler writes:

One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. (2004: 21; emphasis in original)

Celebrities are presented as vulnerable to validate a similar reaction in viewers as a legitimate means of mourning. "Hana wa Saku" provides comfort by granting permission to disaster survivors to be vulnerable and mourn openly. It suggests that emotion and mourning can play a part in the *gambaru* process, and that disaster survivors can deviate from perseverance to cope with their trauma. It offers a space to reflect on the past through longings for *furusato*, suggesting that reflection can contribute toward efforts to persevere and move forward. While "Hana wa Saku" serves as a generalized national-level musical response to 3.11, the following examples present more localized and personal musical perspectives.

### "Ubukoe" (See the Light of Day)

Local artists from the disaster-affected areas have never received much visibility on major media outlets such as NHK. I therefore wish to turn to examples of

songs written by musicians who experienced the disaster firsthand, and explore how their music conveys powerful messages of encouragement while presenting personal, yet relatable models for moving forward from the effects of the disaster. The song “Ubukoe” by Sendai-based hip-hop group Gagle, which was released in April 2011 to raise money for charity,<sup>17</sup> managed to captivate both young and old, hip-hop aficionados and novices alike, and served as a catalyst for the Ubukoe Project, an organization that provides a range of support to disaster-affected musicians and communities. According to Hamada Naoki, founder of the Ubukoe Project, “Ubukoe” is embraced by both young and elderly disaster survivors with no prior attachments to hip-hop culture because they are moved by the direct messages of encouragement that the song articulates (interview, June 14, 2016).

Founded in 1996, Gagle is a hip-hop trio consisting of MC Hunger, DJ Mitsu the Beats, and DJ Mu-R. Having released three major albums prior to 2011, Gagle already had a solid fan base and was well known within the Japanese hip-hop community at the time of the disaster.<sup>18</sup> Hamada recounted in an interview with me that on 3.11, members of Gagle were in Sendai and experienced the earthquake and subsequent blackout firsthand. Using what little battery power was left on their laptop, they put together a musical track and MC Hunger rapped over it, recounting his own disaster experiences and providing words of support and encouragement. The result was a track entitled “Ubukoe” (See the Light of Day)<sup>19</sup> (interview, June 14, 2016).

The lyrics of the song embody the *gambaru* spirit by recounting vivid moments of post-disaster hardships, such as bundling up in blankets amidst extremely cold temperatures due to lack of electricity, while encouraging listeners to move forward by supporting each other. The chorus of “Tohoku stand up! Quake Survivors! Tohoku ganba [short for *gambare* or *persevere*]! Everybody get up!” directs the encouragement toward disaster survivors, and makes the song specifically about recovering from the 3.11 earthquake and tsunami. The song ends by addressing each of the stricken prefectures individually, including Chiba and Ibaraki, which are peripheral to the Tohoku region and are often omitted in discussions of 3.11:

Miyagi stand up, Fukushima stand up  
Iwate stand up, Aomori stand up  
Chiba stand up, Ibaraki stand up  
Nippon ganba, Pray for one

When the lyrics of “Ubukoe” are compared alongside those of “Hana wa Saku,” it becomes even clearer that the focus of this song is not about soliciting

compassion, but rather about encouragement and standing strong together in the face of upheaval. Furthermore, the visuals in the music video are raw and seemingly unedited in contrast to those of “Hana wa Saku.”<sup>20</sup> The Ubukoe music video shows images of construction and rebuilding amid disaster debris, and of cardboard signs indicating that local businesses are working hard to remain open despite limited resources. Scenes of MC Hunger wearing a mask and gloves while helping with cleanup efforts on the ground signify progress and action toward the future, unlike images of celebrities standing idly by in front of a grey backdrop. The emphasis on debris in this music video is not to spectacularize the disaster as media photos do through aerial views of widespread destruction, but to demonstrate what the disaster sites look like from the ground through close-up and ground-level images.

Comfort in “Ubukoe” is signified through progress rather than stasis. Furusato is presented not as a lost place of longing, but as a place that can be rebuilt and restored through teamwork and perseverance. “Ubukoe” also presents self-reliance as a valuable attribute enabling survivors to “stand up” and work together effectively with others toward recovery. Nobuhide Sawamura posits that “perseverance leads the Japanese to value self-reliance,” and that they have “a high regard for ‘self-’ and for the individual to work effectively in a team” (2004: 31). However, such a strong emphasis on the self-reliance rhetoric may also be easily valorized by neoliberal policies to leave the marginalized without institutional support. Therefore, “Ubukoe’s” emphasis on the self-reliance rhetoric risks deterring outside support by addressing the “quake survivors” as capable of and responsible for enacting progress on their own. When regarded in this light, “Ubukoe” presents contrasting issues to “Hana wa Saku.” While the latter makes mourning and longing for a lost hometown into generic sentiments that can be shared by all, the former’s emphasis on localized perseverance has a tendency to exclude the potential for more widespread collaborations to work toward recovery.

However, rather than exposing and dramatizing the vulnerability of those affected by the disaster as “Hana wa Saku” has a tendency to do, “Ubukoe” does exactly the opposite by encouraging listeners to turn suffering into strength to work toward revitalization. Anthropologist Liisa Malkki addresses how “the vision of helplessness is vitally linked to the constitution of speechlessness ... helpless victims need protection, need someone to speak for them” (1996: 388). Instead of presenting and addressing 3.11 survivors as helpless victims in need of representation, “Ubukoe” works to inspire them to take action and work actively toward revitalization. “Ubukoe” lends itself to giving a voice to the people by asserting that they are by no means helpless, enabling the song to present empowering messages that may be more difficult to convey through

other musical genres. The message of self-driven perseverance that “Ubukoe” emphasizes inspired the development of the Ubukoe Project, an organization that works to support disaster-affected musicians and communities.

## Ubukoe Project

Hamada Naoki (b. 1981) is a native of Sendai who was working as a manager for his parents’ convenience store (opened just three days prior to 3.11) at the time of the disaster. He developed a close relationship with Gagle in the early 2000s through his involvement in Sendai’s club music scene as an event coordinator and artist consultant. Hamada is a proactive and generous individual who, since pre-3.11, has been invested in promoting local musicians in Sendai and networking them with more established artists in Japan’s hip-hop community. Hamada believed that the strong reaction to “Ubukoe” was unique and special, and that it would be a shame if something more was not done with the song. Inspired by “Ubukoe,” Hamada, in consultation with MC Hunger, established the Ubukoe Project: an organization that provides disaster relief and raises awareness through the lens of music.

The Ubukoe Project serves as a network for the community in a variety of different ways. The Ubukoe Project Facebook Page primarily serves as a news source that shares stories about 3.11 music and disaster relief efforts in Japan. It also promotes posts by musicians in affected areas and publicizes their calls for support; for example, an artist in Ishinomaki is trying to collect funds to rebuild a club house that was destroyed in the disaster. Hamada and other advocates of the Ubukoe Project also provide advice to local, often small-scale organizations trying to put together music festivals and events such as the Hope For Project and the Shichigahama Seven Beach Festival. Furthermore, the Ubukoe Project owns audiovisual equipment, such as generators, mixers, and projectors that were purchased through donations and are lent to artists in disaster-affected areas free of charge. “I felt kind of uneasy about spending money on events,” Hamada stated,

since once the event finished, we were back to square one, needing to raise money for the next event without really having anything left to show for the previous event. People who donated might have been satisfied with us just saying we successfully held the event, but I felt Ubukoe Project needs to be involved in long-term engagements. (interview, June 14, 2016)

Rather than investing most of the funds in events, an equipment rental program provides a more sustainable means of support. Equipment rentals complement monetary donations for local reconstruction in that they support struggling musicians by providing them with the tools to revive and resume their music-making. The Ubukoe Project has not received any formal grants and has been operating solely on funds raised from the “Ubukoe” single and donation boxes placed at affiliated events.

While external support for the Ubukoe Project has been helpful in raising funds, it has also raised issues about whether one has to be directly from the severely disaster-affected areas to gain legitimacy in asking for support. For example, Hamada noted that he almost feels guilty that a club in Tokyo continues to dutifully display the Ubukoe donation box years after the event because he is certain that they feel they cannot put it away without the consent and approval of Ubukoe Project affiliates in Tohoku. Hamada said he feels obligated to tell the club in Tokyo that the people in Tohoku are alright now in order to give them the option to put the box away. He stated that engagement in social issues has been particularly difficult because it has to be approached very tactically. While outside supporters are willing to express their solidarity with and show support for disaster survivors, it can also be difficult for them to participate without burdening people from the affected areas with guilt and making them feel indebted to reciprocate (Hamada Naoki, interview, June 14, 2016).

Hamada also expressed dilemmas about anti-nuclear events; he is still very unsure about how the Ubukoe Project might consider getting involved in the anti-nuclear movement, and instead focuses on ways to support music events and artists in Fukushima. “I don’t think Ubukoe Project will ever scream about anti-nuclear sentiments,” he said, “because ‘Ubukoe’ as a song already exists, and we’re already involved in so many things, so it would be difficult to expand our project even further” (interview, June 14, 2016). My sense is that by saying “‘Ubukoe’ already exists,” Hamada means that the song was made to support and encourage disaster survivors, and that reconfiguring it as a protest song for the anti-nuclear movement would not only counter the reasons why the song became impactful in the first place, but would also be a daunting task. This reluctance to “take on” the nuclear issue is one that I observed repeatedly with individuals and organizations I spoke to, likely in part because the stakes are very high. As Noriko Manabe notes, to engage with the nuclear issue requires taking a political stance, which is very different from the comparatively uncontroversial use of music to help and support people in tsunami-stricken areas and discuss relief efforts (2015: 8). However, Manabe also names a handful of anti-nuclear musicians who have been active in fundraising and relief efforts in Tohoku including Soul Flower Union, Quruli, Asian Kung-Fu Generation,

Sakamoto Ryuichi, and Likkle Mai, among others (100). By comparison, the Ubukoe Project's musical activism is limited. However, "Ubukoe" as a post-3.11 song is notable for inspiring self-driven perseverance and direct support of local musicians in tsunami-afflicted areas. Members of the Ubukoe Project rely on their network of experience, connections, and knowledge to continue to develop ways to support local musicians and disseminate information, serving as a hub within and beyond post-3.11 hip-hop communities. Moving on from a localized approach to disaster relief, the following example illustrates how post-3.11 comfort, perseverance, recovery, and memories of a lost hometown are interpreted on an even more personal level.

### Arahama Callings

Satō Nami (b. 1990) was raised in Arahama, a small coastal town about 10 km from central Sendai, which had a population of 2,200 residents at the time of the disaster. Situated less than 1 km from the coast, the entire town was swept away by the tsunami, save for Arahama Elementary School (a four-story building which was nevertheless heavily damaged). On 3.11, Satō was in Yamagata, a neighbouring prefecture in the mountains where the earthquake was fairly strong (M5),<sup>21</sup> yet no catastrophic damage occurred. As a second-year undergraduate student at Tohoku University of Art and Design, Satō was studying film and was occasionally asked to compose music for her colleagues' projects. Yet, it was not until after the disaster that she felt a profound urge to turn to music composition, not only as an outlet for self-expression, but also as a way to contribute to disaster relief efforts. In an interview with me she stated:

I started composing *Arahama Callings* about one week after 3.11. My parents survived the disaster, and I was able to get in contact with them, but they told me not to come home to Arahama.<sup>22</sup> For one, there was the radiation issue and, at the time, people thought there was a possibility that Miyagi was dangerous. Additionally, our house was washed away and the food rations at evacuation centres were limited. I would be one more person to feed, so my parents discouraged me from coming home. I wasn't able to go back to Arahama until about ten days after 3.11. After thinking about ways that I might be able to directly help disaster victims, I thought money is the easiest way. I wanted to compose music that could turn into money to help disaster-affected towns. (interview, June 14, 2016)

Satō initially turned to composition because her music, which she used to raise money to donate, was the only thing she felt capable of contributing as a form of aid. Furthermore, it gave her purpose, and served as a way for her to cope with the unfathomable devastation that surrounded her. What started out as a means of helping disaster victims culminated in Satō's graduation project — a 10-track album titled *Arahama Callings*.<sup>23</sup> The album consists of tracks composed by Satō from one week post-3.11 to January 2013. When conceptualizing the album, Satō had two goals in mind:

1. To sonically present feelings of unease and tension through embedded found sounds of phones ringing and disconnecting, and to address these anxieties by metaphorically connecting listeners to things that were lost on 3.11.
2. To revive, through music, the landscapes and sceneries that were stripped away from Arahama on 3.11. The use of “callings” in the album title not only refers to the sounds of unanswered phone calls which depict the longing to reconnect with lost loved ones, but also addresses the yearning to regain all that was lost in the disaster — a calling for all that was part of Arahama before the town was ruptured in a single incident. (interview, June 14, 2016)

Tracks in *Arahama Callings* depict scenes and landscapes in Arahama that were no longer physically present after 3.11, but were still vivid in Satō's memories. These include blooming cherry blossom trees (Track 2), a cycling road (Tracks 3 and 4), a pond where swans used to swim (Track 5), and the sea (Track 6).<sup>24</sup> The album is a sonic representation of Satō's memories of her lost furusato. Satō described Track 7, “heaven's bottom,” as a requiem piece, while “cocoon” (Track 8) and “meguru” (Track 9) refer to a Japanese phrase, *inochi ga meguru*, which is about the transmigration of the soul and nature. The purpose of these tracks is to encourage listeners that 3.11 did not signify the end, that by being wrapped up in support (like a cocoon) it is possible to carry forward, and that things that seem to be gone forever are not gone for good as they continue to exist in memories and representations. Relying on her personal memories of Arahama, Satō's album aims to comfort disaster survivors, particularly those from her hometown who can listen to the tracks and visualize Sato's sonic representations. Satō's work emphasizes how, as Pierre Nora puts it, “memory attaches itself to sites” (1989: 22). It is through musical representations of sites in Arahama that Satō works to revive

not only her own memories, but also those of others which can be collectively shared with her own. Maurice Halbwachs notes that memory by nature is multiple yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual (1992 [1925]). Through representations of her personal memories of Arahama, Satō's work also emphasizes the multiplicity of memories that can be collectively shared through specific sites.

Track 1, "yūnagi"<sup>25</sup> (evening calm), and the final track, "iekaze"<sup>26</sup> (family tradition), are linked through the theme of disconnected phone lines. In "yūnagi," the sound of a phone being dialed breaks into an ambient track embellished by wind chime sounds, followed by the sound of a phone continuously ringing. This leads to an automated answering machine message stating that the number dialed, 022-287-4069 (the number for Satō's former home in Arahama), is not available; then the line gets cut off. The feeling of unease presented by this sequence of sounds is put into suspension as Satō guides us through tracks that illustrate Arahama sonically and aim to bring comfort to listeners, before readdressing the tension presented in Track 1 in the final song. "Iekaze" begins with the sound of a phone ringing accompanied by wind chimes, reintroducing the sonic themes presented in "yūnagi," which gradually transition into an arpeggiated melodic line repeated on a piano. The repeated phrase reaches a climax at 3:05 and is punctuated by a rhythmic pattern that incorporates what sounds like a blend of phone, wind chime, and bicycle bell sounds. A choral line is then incorporated into the mix before the mass of sound reverts back to the initial arpeggiated piano line and wind chime sounds. Amidst this serene soundscape, the sound of the ringing phone returns, and when the arpeggiated piano line finally cadences on a high note, a chorus of *moshi moshi* ("hello" in Japanese when answering a phone) finally responds to the incessant ringing. Satō sampled the *moshi moshi* voices from a range of people of utmost importance to her, including her parents.

*Arahama Callings* not only reflects Satō's personal interpretation of Arahama and her post-3.11 anxieties, but also serves as a vessel for others to reflect upon their own memories and to find the strength to move forward after the disaster. In this respect, *Arahama Callings* can be regarded as a "memory space," which is how American composer John Adams described his work in memory of 9/11, *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002). Adams describes his piece as

a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions. The link to a particular historical event — in this case to 9/11 — is there if you want to contemplate it. But I hope that the piece will summon human experience that goes beyond this



particular event. “Transmigration” means “the movement from one place to another” or “the transition from one state of being to another” ... in this case I mean it to imply the movement of the soul from one state to another. And I don’t just mean the transition from living to dead, but also the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind, of those who suffer pain and loss and then themselves come away from that experience transformed. (2002)

Similarly, in Satō’s work, the memory space is populated by personally meaningful sounds and voices that can be interpreted and customized into a familiar soundscape by listeners. Both *Arahama Callings* and *Transmigration* are not so much memorial pieces for the deceased or works in tribute to victims as they are works for survivors to reflect upon as they negotiate their personal feelings about each respective crisis.

*Arahama Callings* functions as a sort of sonic palimpsest where Satō’s reconstructed memories of her hometown are sonically remapped onto the landscape of post-3.11 Arahama. Although most everything in Arahama was effaced, Satō highlights and sonically revives traces of memories amongst the destruction that remain to be uncovered. Satō stated to me that 3.11 really made her realize that the ordinary can suddenly be cut off, and that *Arahama Callings* served as a way for her to uncover and leave traces of pre-3.11 Arahama behind (interview, June 14, 2016). Through a sonic representation of her personal journey toward post-3.11 recovery, *Arahama Callings* not only brings solace to listeners, but also serves as a means of optimistic attachment for Satō and others, assisting with post-3.11 adjustment. While this album may not be as widely influential as “Hana wa Saku” and “Ubukoe,” it is unique among the post-3.11 songs I encountered because it is so deeply personal. Similar to “Hana wa Saku,” Satō’s album suggests that reflection can contribute toward efforts to persevere and move forward. Additionally, her desire to directly address, support, and engage with people from the affected areas is reminiscent of “Ubukoe” and the Ubukoe Project. Had it not been for 3.11, Satō may not have pursued music composition so fervently. While her album may not explicitly express the gambaru spirit, Satō herself is a representation of it. Although she started out as a burgeoning musician still fairly new to composition in the wake of 3.11, Satō continues to persevere toward becoming an established musician in her own right and has not stopped composing since.

## Conclusion: Songs as a Way to Navigate Toward Recovery

In the early aftermath of 3.11, the body of songs addressed in this article served as tools for affected individuals and communities during the transitional stages from shock, uncertainty, and restraint, to working toward recovery through perseverance and the emotional acceptance of mourning. While different in musical style and presentation, each of the songs discussed in this article is directed toward disaster survivors and expresses solidarity, support, and encouragement. They brought music-making back into the post-3.11 soundscape and served as alternatives to *jishuku* (self-restraint) by using music to provide comfort. They suggest social and psychological methods to work toward recovery whether that be through collaborations with outside supporters, working on the ground toward revitalization, or reflection and introspection through attachments to a lost homeland. “Hana wa Saku” takes a traditionally Western approach to disaster relief through solidarity and mourning expressed with star power; “Ubukoe” relies on the genre of hip-hop as a means of encouraging community resilience; and *Arahama Callings* presents personalized memories to foster collective memory-building as a coping mechanism. Kimberly Theidon argues that “claiming trauma is in part a demand for services. Talking trauma is one way of constructing the intervenable subject — individually and collectively” (2013: 35). Music in response to a crisis is expected to carry powerful messages, and the songs discussed in this article also work to selectively revive fragments of what existed before the rupture. More importantly, these post-3.11 songs were composed to spark progress, whether by encouraging listeners to move forward toward recovery, evoking memories of the past as a means of negotiating continuity amidst rupture, or prompting the development of relief efforts. At the same time, such songs also inevitably highlight the cruel reality that assurances of stability have been stripped away, and that the ordinary must be reconstructed. In a society such as Japan where talking openly about trauma and emotional struggles is not commonplace and is instead often replaced by encouragements to *gambaru*, the songs were a way for creators, participants, and listeners to work toward social and emotional recovery. While the reality may be that “pre-disaster normality is gone forever” (Gill, Steger, and Slater 2015: xvii), post-3.11 songs not only provided messages of encouragement and support, but also presented strategies for sustenance and survival, as well as models for envisioning and working toward rebuilding renewed communities. 🌸

## Notes

1. In this article, I provide most Japanese names with the family name first, corresponding with actual usage in the Japanese context. Japanese names leading with the first name correspond to people who have established professional names using the English order, and/or whose cited scholarship is published in English.

2. See Oshio (2013) for a database of post-3.11 musical activities including performances, cancellations, and CD/song releases presented in Kahoku Shimpō newspaper articles from March 12 to December 9, 2011.

3. I conducted formal interviews with roughly 20 individuals ranging from musicians, founders of 3.11 disaster relief organizations, 3.11 festival coordinators, and scholars of Tohoku's folk performing arts.

4. According to W.O. Lee, “gambaru is also a major component in building a strong sense of competition, especially group competition. As competition means competing for success, gambaru also implies the necessity to make sacrificial efforts until success is attained” (1991: 20). Furthermore, Samimy, Liu, and Matsuta present a triangular relationship between gambaru, *amae* (dependence), and *giri* (obligation) and suggest that these three elements influence one another and are closely embedded in the Japanese psyche (1994: 267-268).

5. Circumstances and accessibility to news updates varied greatly depending on where people were situated. According to my interlocutors, people living in Tokyo who experienced the earthquake, for example, saw the tsunami coming in real time on television, while others without electricity in Tohoku relied on mobile radio receivers and could only hear updates read solemnly to them by newscasters during the first few days following the disaster.

6. All interviews were conducted in Japanese and translated to English by the author.

7. Phonetically, the song means peace (平和), but it is written out as Hey (和).

8. The kanji characters for jishuku (自肅) mean 自 (*ji*, self), and 肅 (*shuku*, reverence).

9. According to Abe,

Matsudaira Tokujin, legal scholar, has shown that the word was created during WWII in the context of a regulated economy modeled after the Nazi Germany policy of total war, which demanded individual responsibility for the continuation of the collective, even when that meant contributing your own life. Jishuku was a militaristic and government discourse that became a social custom through imperial ideology and social conformity. (2016: 245)

10. Obviously, the nuclear fallout is a highly contentious political issue that needs to be treated as a separate study in this case. See Manabe (2015) for the ways that music played a central role in expressing anti-nuclear sentiments and mobilizing political resistance in post-3.11 Japan. See Novak (2017) for how post-3.11 festivals

have become integrated in social activism and serve as expedient ways to enable broad critiques of technocultural capitalism and its silencing of marginal populations.

11. I only sat down for a formal interview with Chiba Shū, but I did speak informally several times with all the Senrai members.

12. Bon odori is communal dancing at summer *matsuri* festivals to honor the spirit of the ancestors.

13. See Berger (1987) and Garofalo (1992) for more detailed discussions of these projects.

14. One example of an earlier charity all-star song project is “Smile Again,” written by Japanese folk-pop singer-songwriter Sada Masashi in 1992. “Smile Again” was a response to a fatal volcanic eruption at Mount Fugen in Nagasaki in 1991.

15. From March 2011 to March 2013, the project raised a total of roughly 1.3 billion yen (\$11.4 million USD) from funds donated to both the project bank account and donation boxes at AKB48 concerts and events. AKB48 released a disaster support song in March 2013 called “Tenohira ga Kataru Koto” (The Things Palms Can Say) to serve as an anthem for the project. The song is available for free digital download on their website.

16. The music video with English subtitles can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuMIBNCTTFA> (accessed March 28, 2019).

17. According to Hamada Naoki, the song couldn't be released earlier due to electricity outages.

18. For ethnographies about Japan's vibrant — though not necessarily mainstream — hip-hop scene and the ways that Japanese DJs define a nationally Japanese style see Condry (2006) and Manabe (2013).

19. Although the song has an English title, it is not a direct translation of Ubukoe. Ubukoe (産声) refers to the first cry of a newborn baby.

20. The “Ubukoe” music video can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3xSwXN7WbE> (accessed March 28, 2019).

21. An M5 or magnitude 5 earthquake is considered moderate in strength on the Richter Magnitude Scale, and only causes minor damage. The Richter scale calculates an earthquake's magnitude (size) from the amplitude of the earthquake's largest seismic wave recorded by a seismograph.

22. Satō, however, did lose her grandfather, classmates, relatives, and pet dog who were all in Arahama on 3.11.

23. The album can be previewed and purchased here: <https://satonami.bandcamp.com/album/arahama-callings>.

24. Prior to 3.11, local residents and visitors used to go swimming in the sea off the Arahama coast in the summertime, but, for safety reasons, the sea was closed off by barricades and swimming is still strictly prohibited.

25. Yūnagi (夕風) is a period of evening calm in coastal areas as the wind blows offshore.

26. Iekaze (家風), more commonly read as kafū, means “family tradition” and is written using the *kanji* characters for house and wind.

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