



With several pockets of scattered JROCK promotion companies across the U.S., none has been more successful behind the scenes than our good friend Ali Watson of JROCK REVOLUTION. Although very quiet in the past of her accomplishments, it has been a pleasant surprise to see Ali stepping out of the shadows and seizing the credit she has been long due. Most recently at a Naka Kon in Kansas City, KS where we got a chance to catch up.

Ali represents the dedication and professionalism that is lacking in many JPOP culture promotion companies. We sat down with Ali so she could spread some more light on her accomplishments with JROCK REVOLUTION as well as on her own personal contributions to the scene. Enjoy our first segment of “Behind The Scenes”.

Behind the Scenes:

ALI WATSON (JROCK Revolution) - Steps Out of The Shadows

Babel: You’ve been involved with the JROCK music scene for many years, and been responsible for many of the bands such as Dir en grey gaining a larger target market fan base. Although you’ve been very quiet about your accomplishments in the past, you lately have been more vocal and more in the forefront showcasing your work. Can you tell our readers, many of whom have no idea about the work you’ve done, some of the accomplishments you have achieved, including more information on your background in the industry?

Ali: Maybe the background will help set the stage. When I first got into JRock and Visual Kei, I was just a fan looking for more music. Occasionally lamenting over the cost of getting things shipped overseas. I was also a fan of Asian cinema and my collection of music and movies was modest but expensive. In 2007, after the JRock Revolution I festival, one of my friends made a deal to run the JRockRevolution.com website as a destination site for fans and made an open call to help out with that. It sounded interesting, so I volunteered.

When I first joined, I didn’t do much; a little research

and some interview questions. Another friend put me in charge of press and then the social network. Fans eager to do stuff, write or interview came and went. I eventually took over the webzine and then the owner entrusted me with the whole site.

I suppose if I could credit someone with doing more with the industry, it would have to be the former head of Harmonix. When Harmonix was interested in Japanese rock bands due to an amazing demand in their forums (see, fans, they do pay attention!), they asked if they could be put in contact with some of the artists in our top ten list. It wasn’t something the site was intended to be and so I took it upon myself to reach out through my, at the time, limited connections for interest.

There’s a lot I would love to say about that time. It took a lot of effort, close calls and downright failures before I could connect Dir en grey with the opportunity. And it’s in such a way that, to this day, I doubt the band knows of my involvement or how much effort it took to see every step through to their tracks being published. Despite the stress, I think that’s one of my favorite achievements.

Ali Cont.: From there, I've done some varied and memorable things. Earlier this year, I brought HIZUMI, ex-Dés-pairsRay vocalist, to Naka-Kon in Kansas City. I've been on good terms with Yoshiki's people and I've had some really cool opportunities to do some design work that has appeared on the Yoshiki Foundation website, as well as some official merch. In 2009, I was one of the first speakers at the South by Southwest (SXSW) music convention to speak about the Japanese music industry with Keith Cahoon of Hotwire Japan and Kawabata Makoto, founding member of Acid Mother's Temple. I was told that we were the first panel on that industry, which seemed pretty epic. A little surprising too, considering Japan is the second largest music industry in the world.

Babel: Why now have you decided to be more vocal or more in the front rather than strictly behind the scenes with panels, more active social media, etc?

Ali: There are a lot of things that I would like to see happen with the overseas industry. In Japan, they have things well in hand and there isn't a need for someone like me.

Overseas, especially in America, there are a lot of potential for opportunities that goes untapped year after year. When I first put together my website, it was more of a portfolio, but now I see it as a stepping stone to whatever the next level may be. I want people - fans, labels, managements and artists - to see amazing things that they could also be part of.

For bands looking to make an overseas presence, I want to point in directions that they might not realize are available. I want fans to see things that they can help accomplish for their favorite bands, or encourage them to go off the beaten path and in innovative directions. It doesn't have to be me that makes the next great thing happen, but it would be great to see that next great thing for Japanese artists happen overseas. I would even like to connect with other ambitious people and see if we can collectively make something happen. To accomplish any of this, I had to be more vocal about the things I've done and maybe a little of the things I'm trying to do.

Babel: How has JROCK or the Japanese music industry in general changed for you in the past 10 + years or so?

Ali: There has been a lot of ups and downs. For a short time, there was a bit of a boom with Japanese rock and Visual Kei artists coming overseas.

It petered out and picked up again a little bit. I think the era we're in now is a new separation of Japanese artists looking to be big in Japan and those who are also interested in making it big internationally. Festivals have become the new vehicles for Japanese bands making multiple overseas appearances; festivals aren't a new thing, but they have been a growing trend and one I applaud. I feel like the once glory days of bringing bands to conventions is dwindling, but I think the festival angle is more suited to engaging with new music fans.

I do think the Japanese music industry at large has lost interest in being part of the global music stage and has become more reclusive in that nature. Bands that used to tour overseas often don't, or haven't, in a while and it seems that they lack support to go overseas. Rather than many bands actively looking for ways to play outside Japan, only a handful are actively making it part of their goals and schedules. I'm hoping the near future brings more interest and activity from more bands in establishing an overseas presence rather than talking about it.

Babel: Although you have accomplished so much in regards to the JROCK scene, what are some of your future goals you have your mind set on?

Ali: When I first raised my ambitions to beyond working on JRockRevolution.com, I had four goals in mind. I've never said them all before, but I will now because maybe someone else can achieve what I haven't yet. I considered them lifetime milestones, so when I crossed two off my list in the first few years, no one could have been more ecstatic than me.

1. See a Japanese artist in a major motion picture soundtrack. When asked what band would be a good fit for a horror movie soundtrack, I said absolutely Dir en grey. A little connecting and patience and seeing them on the SAW 3D soundtrack was one dream come true. They even created a modified music video with movie clips. I wouldn't mind doing this again, though, with other artists.

2. See a Japanese artist in a major video game release. At the time I made this JRock bucket list, I thought more in terms of part of a soundtrack to a game or maybe a theme song. But Rock Band 3 was a major video game release, so I think it counts.

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3. See a Japanese artist's gear in the Hard Rock Cafe. When I extensively researched this, I discovered that there is not a single Japanese artist in any HRC in the world; including Tokyo. I came close to introducing an artist and their gear, but communication was not on our side and in the end, the band didn't even know what could have been anyway. I have a couple of artists in mind for this, but the project itself has been collecting dust on my shelf. Maybe if fans demanded Japanese artists from Japan in HRC, they'll listen, who knows.

4. See a Japanese artist on Saturday Night Live, or another late night program. Because SNL is a showcase for comedy as well as music, I thought it would only be right if an artist's or band's presence was strong enough to warrant inclusion on such a long running show. But it's also television and I know very little of television, but if someone else does, feel free.

As a bonus, I suppose a fifth goal might have been seeing at least one more Japanese guitarist on Guitar Center's Rock Walk of Fame. Currently, only B'z members Koshi and Tak Matsumoto are there.

Babel: What are some of the pros and cons that you currently see in the Japanese Rock scene in concerns to international promotion, and what can fans or industry do to help fix those cons?

Ali: Social media presence. The pro is that there are artists who understand the importance of a strong social media presence and have embraced it; and not exclusively in Japanese. MAN WITH A MISSION tweet in both Japanese and English. YOSHIKI tweets in both as does SUGIZO. Tomoyasu Hotei tweets often in English. So does Shonen Knife. All of the above do the same in Facebook. Of course, it won't always be the artists who tweet or post, but their social media presence keeps them on our radar. It's imperative that artists embrace that and stay connected with their fans, not just for music promotion, but themselves as artists. In this day and age, it's easier than ever to be connected.

The con is that too many artists don't even try, or do so sporadically enough that their follower numbers don't grow or interest wanes. Bands cannot rely on simply having good music anymore. Artists have to grow their fanbase and doing so means utilizing online opportunities readily available.

Maybe entrust a few interns to grow a social media presence, but do something to show you are as interested in your fans as they are about you. For me, that is probably my biggest pet peeve about artists, and by extension, their management. There are some artists who should already have big numbers in terms of a following and they're low because they don't make an effort to be connected. Some bands made apps and now they're collecting dust with no new updates or reasons to have them. You have free and internationally accessible platforms to educate about your band, promote your music, show off your merch and share your thoughts with fans. Use it!

For fans, I would encourage you to always try new music and if you have a band that you enjoy and maybe adore, buy their stuff. If you have to wait for a concert, buy their stuff. Wear it, use it, tweet it, Vine it, Instagram it - show your love! You, too, can help build a positive and visible presence for your bands by just showing it in your social media. Maybe we can utilize our own hashtags for that. #JrockLove #VKlove or something cool. I'm open to ideas.

Babel: What is one of your favorite moments while working in the JROCK industry?

Ali: When approval for something I'd been holding my breath on for months came through. I might have stood up, fist in the air and shouted an expletive followed by 'yeah'. Even when I knew stress would come after, nothing could beat that initial sense of accomplishment.

Babel: What is one of your worst nightmare moments?

Ali: Someone that I greatly respected said disparaging things about me in a communication to another party. After laying down some truth, the other party and I were fine and maintained a professional relationship. But that once respected person was never apologetic about what they'd tried to do. I don't know why they did what they did, but those kind of severances are the worst.

Babel: What current artist do you have your eye on and why?

Ali: VAMPS is a duo that have made great strides in taking on the international stage fully with the intent on being heard. I love their attitude and ambition and I hope to see them become an international sensation. Plus, I love their music. MAN WITH A MISSION; are they wolves? Are they men? I was introduced to their music when they first started and didn't expect them to gain the popularity that they did in such a short time. I've been getting more of their music and they seem intent on being heard far and wide, too, so I hope to see more of them around the world.

There are other artists, such as ONE OK ROCK and coldrain, who are making a name for themselves overseas. While I'm interested in their progression, I haven't had a chance to obtain their music, but I hear good things. MIYAVI is evolving into an international presence and I hope he does pursue acting as a career. YOSHIKI, of course. He's been involved in such a wide range of projects in addition to music that it's difficult not to admire the man for the accomplishments he's made. Now he's getting into fashion on top of everything else.

Babel: Have you ever been star-stricken by any artist you met or worked with?

Ali: There are plenty of times that I'm nervous before an interview, but it's more 'am I early/late?' or 'do I have enough questions?'. I want to do my job well in those times and other than an introduction, there is no real chance to interact with artists during interviews. The few times that I met or worked with artists outside of an interview, our focus was on the project at hand so there again, there wasn't an opportunity to be anything but professional.

Babel: In many of our long talks in regards to the industry, we have always talked about how important the fans are. What are some things you feel that fans can do to help keep JROCK strong internationally and help it grow?

Ali: Keep showing your love and appreciation. Connect with other fans. Post in groups and official channels where allowed. Buy official merch and music through official channels; like it or not, our support can often best be felt by how much we're investing in their music and merchandise, but remind them where you're from so they're aware, too. Say loudly where you want them to go if asked. Fans post pictures of themselves and signs '[country] loves you' or 'come here' and sometimes artists see it and repost it. Embrace the #JrockLove and #VKlove hashtags!

You are not just one voice, you are one volume level of a larger one. Let's turn up that volume.

Babel: I believe it was last year you flew to Japan for the first time to do a report for JROCK Revolution. How was your experience?

Ali: I didn't get to do much except go from the hotel to the National Olympic Stadium for the Japan Night festival. Overall, the experience was positive and definitely made me interested in spending more time in Japan, both for business and pleasure. I would very much like to experience the cuisine and see some sights as well as learn more culturally.

Babel: Can you give some advice to those that either want to work in the industry, or currently work in the industry?

Ali: If you're not already in the industry, lay out some goals, grow a thick skin, ambition and a lot of patience. Don't be afraid of new ideas. If you need to establish connections, find a good mentor whose goals you can help as much as they can to introduce you to new avenues. The downside is that if you're too associated with something, that might be what you're recognized for the most. For example, it's extremely difficult for me to shake being labeled as "Ali with JRockRevolution.com" as apposed to "Ali who is working on opportunities". An alternative is to make a go of your own. Host panels in conventions that you're already attending. Be active in social media, blog, report on shows or write reviews of music. Carve out a name for yourself and show why you're an expert to be trusted or followed with your ideas.

If you're already in the industry or think that you are, be aware of your goals and ideas and that they have the potential to affect artists as well as fans. Someone asked me once how to manage an artist that they'd convinced to let them and didn't actually have a clue on what to do. Yet they were also posting in many places online 'managing xyz artist', which is troubling. I've seen that declaration from other people or websites and I often wonder if the person knows what they're doing. It's not good to overextend beyond your knowledge by so much, especially when it could mean negatively altering an artist's future opportunities. Take things slow, know what you're doing and always learn more.

Babel: If you could train your cat to do anything, what would it be, and why?

Ali: Fly. If he was a flying kitty, his world would be so much more exciting. If you mean something real, maybe folding laundry. That would be super helpful.

Babel: What are you currently working on now that fans can look forward to?

Ali: I seem to always have a few projects going on. I'll know in the next few weeks which one or ones that I can really start to discuss openly. Until then, tell me what you, the fans, want to see for your favorite bands. I listen too! Who knows what we can make happen together.

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