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KOKI NAKANO

ULULŌ

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*For his third studio album, the Japanese pianist channels all the desire and lust of a howl*

*"Gimme that harvest moon!  
cries the crying Child"*

*18th Century Haiku by Japanese poet Issa Kobayashi.  
Translation by David G. Lanoue*

*"I really wanted this album to be a very personal, straightforward expression of my feelings,"* says Koki Nakano of his third studio album, *Ululo*. Naturally, the pianist's previous work also reflected his inner world and sensibilities - his penchant for ambiguity and nuance captured in three acclaimed albums that tread the fine line between stirring, fleshed-out melodies and the subtle textures and minimalism of ambience music. But while there was something idealised and conceptual in Nakano's previous work, this album is far more raw. *Ululo*, which is Latin for "howl" or "cry", captures – above any concepts and ideas - human desire. Koki's desire, to be more specific. Here, the musician isn't just offering his musical observations on what is, or speculating on what could be, rather he's himself longing for what *can't* be. And although *Ululo*, the bellowing expression of this impotence, undoubtedly carries frustration, Koki's howl is also romantic, filled with beauty, humour and light.

Like most of us, Nakano's deepest desires were formed in his childhood. He remembers the tribulation of those first few years of life; the desperation of leaving his mother's arms, the feeling of being scared at being alone. *"My father used to take me to the terrace and I would cry at not being able to touch the moon which looked so big and near,"* he recalls. This early awareness of his diminutive scale in relation to the cosmos, and of the physical boundary that his own body inevitably imposed in the surrounding world, would leave a lasting impression on the pianist, one which would inform all his work to date. In 2019, Nakano collaborated with renowned visual artist Kohei Nawa, famous choreographer Damien Jalet and a group of dancers to seek the different points of fusion between the human body and the landscape. The project was then followed by Nakano's second album, *Pre-choreographed*, where he continued his collaboration with dancers to further explore this universe where dance pushes and pulls on the concepts of the internal and external world. On his last album, *"Oceanic Feeling"*, Nakano again used the human body as a starting point to contemplate ideas on separation and oneness with the world. *Ululo* continues to explore this theme, but this time around Nakano embarks on the journey, not from a speculative position. For the album, the pianist channels the passion of a howl to speak his heart. In doing so, a different bodily expression comes to the fore; rather than collaborating with dancers to explore movement, it is the human voice that gains prominence on *Ululo*.

*"Singing is the most direct way to touch the emotions, it's a huge weapon,"* says Nakano who invited singers Wayne Snow, Yael Naim and Jordy to fortify his own piano melodies on *Ululo*. The Nigerian singer Wayne Snow adds his soulful vocals to two of the album's tracks, infusing Nakano's already open sound with an extra sense of freedom. In **Vertical Pool**, Snow displays the lavish spectrum of his pitch, while Nakano manipulates his voice and the sounds around it to create a universe that's bright with possibilities. *"Vertical Pools is about a change in perspective, the freedom you gain by just looking at things differently,"* he says. Rather than aching with melancholy, the piece throbs with a passionate longing for



the world. Like **Valve**, the second track with Wayne Snow, the piece is both sensual and lustful even if harrowing at times. It's not the only time that Nakano chooses to portray desire through a positive, rather than a resigned spirit. As raw as *Ululo* is, it's also a deeply romanticised interpretation of life. *"I am not pessimistic nor sad, I'm personally more interested in finding a funnier kind of balance in things. I'm trying to crystalize this emotion, this howl, into something nice,"* says Nakano. **Prodigal Weep** goes as far as adding a touch of humour to the Sisyphean task, with a piano melody joyfully searching through a fantastical terrain that's filled with hurdles, emotion and adventure; the gaiety and naivety of the piano contrasting complex layers of electro.

The notion of romanticism is best captured in the piece **Seraphic June**, where Nakano clearly pays homage to the classical composers such as Chopin and XXX associated with the romantic period. In the solo piano piece, Nakano gives listeners a rare glimpse of his background as a classically trained pianist shining in skill and mastery over his instrument. *"It was a very quick recording where I was almost improvising or playing from memory as I recalled my years studying these pianists,"* says Nakano. Elsewhere in *Ululo*, it's the avant-garde composer that shines through. One who, even when tributing the romantic period, is also turning its ideals on its head. Although inspired by the heightened emotions expressed by composers of the time, *Ululo* moves beyond the need to extoll virtuosity that could plunge pieces into cathartic self-valorisation. Instead, Nakano always offers listeners a more nuanced view between what's purely personal and subjective and something larger. *Ululo*'s opening track **Tre**ve makes this aspiration clear already, while there's instinct to the track's melody there's a lot of pondered intellect to its elegant post-production. *"There's no shame in romantic music, we cannot live without this drama entirely, but I'm trying to find a new balance for it".*

In this search for balance, *Ululo* is consistent with Nakano's entire body of work. The composer isn't afraid of ambiguities and his music rarely gives itself to provocative contrasts and dichotomies. It's a position that can be explained by his nationality and upbringing in Japan, a country with a tradition in cultivating a moral middle ground. *"There's good and bad but also the middle point, which is neither,"* he explains. What makes *Howl* different from his previous work, however, is that Nakano approaches this more balanced stance from a place of lack, from a sentiment of desire; at times agonising at others lustful. It's this search for harmony that leaves the composer howling eternally at a moon that's both too close and too far to grasp.

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