



Q&A: Luna Sea's Sugizo

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By Kirsty Evans

I have to admit that I was a little apprehensive about interviewing Sugizo, because big rock stars tend to have equally big egos and that can make them a little hard to deal with. In this case though, I was pleasantly surprised; in person the Luna Sea guitar legend is charming, polite and disconcertingly unassuming. It's rare to see anyone wear massive stardom so well – it tends to go to even the most level of heads after a while – but Sugizo manages to carry it gracefully. Watching him tidy up his own gear and patiently greet the people who gathered at the front of the stage after the show, I was more than a little impressed, and given how blasé I am about celebrities it's not often that happens. What a genuinely lovely man.

Brief history: Sugizo started out as the lead guitar player of Luna Sea, a massively successful band with a string of hit albums that had a huge impact on the Japanese music scene. The child of two professional musicians (both of his parents were in the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra), he was trained as a musician at the age of three, starting out as a violinist. A brilliant guitarist, he has legions of devoted fans, including many of the younger generation of Japanese rock bands. All of the former Luna Sea members have gone on to have successful music careers, but Sugizo's has been perhaps the most interesting and unexpected.

This interview took place backstage at The Independent on September 23rd a couple of hours before his show with Juno Reactor....

How did you end up getting involved with Juno Reactor, and how long have you been involved with them?

Almost two years ago. At first, of course, I was a very big fan of Juno Reactor from over ten years ago. And a few years ago, when I started to make my remix album, I asked for them.

Remix in terms of remixing old Luna Sea songs?

No, just Sugizo songs. Our first contact was for the Sugizo Remix Box, and it sounded great. Next we met in Japan, for a Japanese magazine interview, and I was a fan. And of course we got a very nice feeling. Then (laughs)...I just joined Juno Reactor. Ben needed a crazy guitarist. Before me they had Steve Stevens, who is a great guitar player of course.

Yeah, he used to work with Billy Idol.

I don't know much but I guess the communication between them was very complicated, and then Ben switched the guitarist position to me.

And you guys are getting along fine?

Mmm-hmm.

So you're planning to continue working together for a while?

Of course I want to. I mean, because trance is kind of my favorite style, of course I want to continue.

You guys were in Mexico a few days ago, right? Have you ever been to Mexico before?

Never. This was the first time.

Did you get to actually see anything or were you just sort of going from the hotel to the venue and then back to the hotel?

Exactly. This sort of schedule is quite hard. The first four days every night we had a show. And of course the first few days were in Mexico, at the Chihuahua Festival. It's a very big, wonderful festival. Almost twelve thousand people or something? It was a big honor.

Were there lots of different bands there?

Just us.

That's cool.

Yeah, it was cool. The power and energy of the audience was so wonderful. I got a very good experience from Mexico.

That's cool. A lot of bands actually skip Mexico.

I didn't know that. For me being there was a big pleasure.

It seems like the direction that Juno Reactor is going in, you've kind of been going that way for a while - more ambient and experimental, less rock.

Mmm-hmm.

What happened to make you suddenly change direction a few years ago? Do you think you're ever going to go back to rock?

I don't know why it was. It was a very natural thing.

Was it gradual or was it just all of a sudden?

In the 90s I got into more creative or ambient sounds because my roots are in Yellow Magic Orchestra which in Japan was the biggest techno band. I mean, the techno sound, ambient sound, trance sound is very natural for me. But I didn't know. I'm a Japanese artist; it's very interesting for me because the ambient style is very natural for me. I was in Luna Sea, but my image was very ambient and very psychedelic. I think that Luna Sea's guitar sound was very strange.

It really wasn't a standard blues based rock sound.

Exactly, not standard. Maybe it is my fault. My image is psychedelic, ambient, more directed to the cosmos. This way is very natural for me; Juno Reactor's sound is very natural.

You've also been spending some time in the UK, haven't you, where ambient is also huge?

Yes. But in Japan the scene is not huge. I'm a bridge for each style meeting, rock and roll, ambient. I believe we don't have borders between musical styles, but so many people believe it. They're too serious, too square, I don't like that.

Since Luna Sea you've done a lot of collaborations, a lot of work with other people, and I wanted to check in on the current status of some of them. What happened with SKIN?

Well of course we're going to continue.

Have you guys all just been too busy doing other things?

Yes, very busy, but all the members want to continue. I don't know when, maybe next year we can all join again.

Is Yoshiki OK to play again?

I think so. Of course his physical problem is not small but his mind is very positive.

About the recent Luna Sea reunion - it was a really big show, right?

Yes.

How long has it been since you've all played together?

Almost seven years. The feeling is...great, fantastic. In the 90s, at the end of Luna Sea's era, our communication was not good. It was very complicated, very difficult for each relationship. But, just some years, just time...

Do you think it's because you all got older and grew up a bit?

Exactly. We needed that time. Now ego is not the most important thing for us. Union, oneness and communication and energy, the relationships, that's what's most important now. But when we were in the 90s we didn't know.

Do you appreciate each other more now that you're not together all the time?

Exactly. I don't know what's happening with Luna Sea next, but we mustn't stop. We must continue. It's very important for the music scene I think.

It seems like a lot of the younger bands coming up now were very influenced by Luna Sea. Did a lot of them turn up to the reunion? I remember seeing on some band's blog that they wanted to go but couldn't because they had a show themselves.

Yeah (Laughs). It's just a big pleasure. (laughs again) I don't know how to say it.

Do you feel a sense of responsibility because so many of those young bands are inspired by you?

Just within the last year. Until the last year I didn't have any sense of responsibility. I didn't know the situation. I didn't realize that so many younger musicians respect us. I just walked my own way, I didn't know Japan's rock scene. But now that I know I feel a big responsibility for the music scene and the younger musicians and Japanese culture.

You played at the X Japan reunion too, right? I know there were plans to do shows in Europe and in America, will you be involved in that?

Yes. First, at the end of November we'll go to Paris, and then maybe at the end of this year we will play in Tokyo. Anyway...my English is good? No problems?

No, your English is fine!

Usually it's a very big problem for me but it's so important.

Are you finding it a problem when you're touring over here? You don't have a translator with you here, right?

No, no translator (laughs).

Is it stressful for you not having somebody around to translate for you?

Sometimes it's stressful but with the Juno Reactor members we have a beautiful relationship. It's the best. I think language is not the most important thing...but of course English is very important for me.

Both of your parents were classical musicians. At what point did you decided to get involved in something different? Was there ever a point at which you considered just doing classical music?

Of course I hated classical music as a child. I didn't want to play, but I had to play for my parents. They were serious classical musicians.

How old were you when you started playing?

Three. Of course I don't remember. I hated it, but when I was maybe 9 or 10 years old, maybe 11, YMO was a big shock. And some Japanese pop music interested me too.

What was the first Japanese band you remember really liking as a kid?

YMO, Yellow Magic Orchestra. You know?

No, I'm not familiar with them.

Also there was a lot of stuff from the UK. David Bowie was one of my favorites when I was in my early teens. And that made a very big change in my life.

Going back to collaborations, you worked with Ryuichi Sakamoto too, right? What was it that you worked on together?

The first time he played piano on my solo album. And then I composed some songs for his daughter, Maya Sakamoto. She's a big Luna Sea fan. I wrote a few songs for her and Ryuichi Sakamoto produced them. That was how it started maybe almost ten years ago. Until now he is still my biggest master.

You also seem to have been involved in environmental issues for a while now. How did you end up getting involved in that? Was it something you were always interested in or was it not till you were older?

Maybe ten years ago. My daughter...

I was going to ask, did becoming a father change the way you thought about things?

Exactly. Before I was such...a stupid guy, maybe. But no more. Selfish maybe. But when I had my daughter, my life changed. It was a very big change.

So now you have to think long term because...

Yeah. Just now my life is my daughter's. It's my responsibility. Of course now with ecological problems and war and global warming, so many problems, our earth is very sick. It is our generation's war. Just now the earth has a big problem, and it's our generation's big business. We must cure it.

Because we're getting to the point where it's too late and there's not much time.

Yes. We must get the earth fixed for our children's futures. Just now is a very big point. And of course for music, music must bear a big responsibility for this message and this spirituality.

And yet there seem to be less and less musicians who do talk about that stuff compared to say in the sixties or seventies.

Exactly.

Now it almost seems like musicians don't want to touch the serious issues any more.

I don't know why! I think music is very important for changing the world. Of course John Lennon was the best, also Bob Dylan, and there are so many black musicians who are important. I think music has a very big place in culture – that never stops. Just now the world has such big problems but I believe we need to continue...just now it seems like a lot of big famous musicians, they just take care of themselves, but that's not good for the next generation.

Speaking of the new generation, do you get to see your daughter very much? It seems like you're on the road a lot and always busy doing a lot of things.

It's a very big problem. But, I believe in my daughter. I think there's a new generation that's very different from our generation. They know that there are huge problems; they know the importance of spirituality. I believe in the new generation.

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