



Fuji Kaze photo courtesy of Universal Music Group

↓ CASE STUDY

FUJII KAZE

By the time that Japanese singer-songwriter Fuji Kaze signed to Universal Music Japan in 2019, he had been uploading piano/vocal cover version videos to YouTube for a decade. And it was the buzz from these videos that led to a meeting that, in turn, led to his record deal.

Deputy Managing Director of Universal Sigma, Universal Music Japan, Mitsuhiro Higashikosono, explains how the A&R process then kicked in: “Kaze had a collection of original songs. They sounded wonderful. Then we started talking to him about how we could add value as a label by bringing in the best producers to take them to the next level.

“Of course, we could only do this by really understanding Kaze and the artist that he wanted to be. He is such a massive talent – we could already see his genius as an artist – so the first and most important part of our job was to understand his vision. It was only when we truly understood what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go that we could really help him achieve that. As our chairman Sir Lucian Grainge always says: ‘the artist must be at the centre of all we do.’”

After diving into Kaze’s music, style, and vision, Universal Music Japan worked to align Kaze’s goals with his overall artist strategy. Higashi continues:

“Kaze has been performing on YouTube since he was a kid – and we wanted to continue to value what’s important to him by continuing that journey and building it even further. Normally in Japan when you are first looking to build an artist’s audience, you would look to put them on TV and arrange media interviews, but we didn’t do any of those things.

“Instead, we chose to focus on what was Kaze’s key priority at that point in his career; that was YouTube, the tool he was most comfortable using to talk to his fans. So that’s where we put our focus – followed by other social media rather than the mass media.”

Kaze’s debut single, *Nan Nan*, came out in 2019. His first album, *Help Ever Hurt Never* followed in May 2020 and reached No. 2 in the Japanese charts.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, promotion for the album was limited largely to a drip feed of videos and live-streaming concerts. This potential disadvantage, however, turned out to be an advantage, as this was Kaze’s home turf. The move allowed Kaze and his team to begin building an organic audience outside Japan.

In 2021 he released a single called *Kirari*, which involved a commercial tie-in with Honda, facilitated by Universal. It became Kaze’s first Top 5 hit in Japan.

Last year saw the release of his sophomore album, *Love All Serve All*, which went one-better than its predecessor by topping the Japanese charts.

The real global gear-change came in July 2022 with the surge of *Shinunoga E-Wa on Tik Tok (or social media)*. The song, which translates to ‘I’d Rather Die,’ became the soundtrack to nearly half a million videos created on TikTok.



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The track started to blow up across Southeast Asia and eventually reached No. 4 in Spotify’s Viral 50 Chart in September 2022.

Higashi says: “It was a big buzz. And as soon as it started, Universal caught it – partly because of data reports and partly because they had offices and expertise ready in the territories where it was taking off.

The track went on to reach the Top 10 in the Global Viral Chart in 70 markets, demonstrating Kaze’s truly global appeal.

“Each country provided support and amplified what Kaze’s fantastic song had started on TikTok. We were then able to take that momentum and run with it around the world. Kaze and his team really appreciated that global reach and the teams on the ground around the world who were working to support Kaze’s vision. They really value that aspect of our partnership.

“It’s interesting, because Kaze sometimes sings in the dialect of his hometown of Okayama in Western Japan, he’s actually from what we would call the countryside of Japan; but his music speaks globally. I think this is what makes him such a uniquely exciting artist.”

At the time of writing, Kaze has more than 11 million monthly listeners on Spotify, the highest number for a Japanese artist, and he’s showing no signs of slowing down.