

# KITARO'S SACRED JOURNEY

Kitaro uses the latest sonic technology to bring his ancient sounds — synths and otherwise — to the world.

by Mr. Bonzai

On September 11, 2001, Kitaro was en route to Japan from America when his plane was diverted to Honolulu. During his five-day delay, he was inspired to alter his career plans and embark on a musical mission of peace. "I felt I should do something positive and this project — Sacred Journey — came to me," he recalls. The first album in the series, *Sacred Journey of Ku-kai, Volume 1*, was released two days before the second anniversary of 9/11, and refers to the spiritual journey of the Buddhist saint Ku-kai. More than 1,100 years ago, Ku-kai embarked on a pilgrimage to the 88 temples on the Japanese island of Shikoku. It is also believed that Ku-kai (774-835 AD) created the modern Japanese way of writing (*hiragana* and *katakana* alphabets) and that he introduced the cultivation of tea plants to Japan. In honor of the "father of Japanese culture," more than 100,000 travelers retrace his steps each year.

For the first album, Kitaro visited the first 12 of the temples and recorded the unique sounds of the sacred temple bells. He then composed and recorded a rich musical tapestry inspired by each of the stops on the journey. His goal is to release the albums over the years and complete the musical recreation of the holy trek. What words might describe these new chapters in the music of Kitaro? Cinematic, translucent, revelatory, atmospheric, earthy, progressive, otherworldly, sublime, majestic, poignant, stirring, serene, passionate, emotional, spirited, hypnotic, bracing, vibrant, and peaceful. It's his exploration of music and imagination, anchored in the clarity of the bells on the journey.

The second volume in the series was released in '05, and in September '07, *Sacred Journey of Ku-kai, Volume 3* came out. The eight tracks on the new album include the bells of eight temples from the total of 88 that will eventually comprise the ten album series.

Kitaro describes the composition phase of the *Volume 3*. "In my studio in California I have just about everything I need," he says, "from synthesizers and acoustic instruments to large drums and tympani. I try to pick up each one as I am working on a song, to find the sounds and fit them to the music. By experimenting I find the sound that fits the composition idea and then I go deeper into the music. It could be any of these instruments I use while writing, but the main instruments for writing are the old analog synthesizers."

Joining Kitaro on the album are guest artists Paul Pesco on guitar; Alexander Adhami on cello, santoor, guitar, EBow, and flute; Masayuki Koga on shakuhachi flute; and Keiko Takahashi on keyboards. Ian Ulibarri was assistant engineer. The album was mixed at Ocean Way Recording in Hollywood, combining the location recordings of the Shikoku temple bells with traditional instruments and synthesizers recorded at his studio in California, utilizing 24-track analog machines and Pro Tools HD. Steven Miller and Ian Ulibarri recorded additional synth overdubs at Ocean Way and Miller mixed the album with Kitaro on the studio's Neve 88R console.

Two months after the album mix, we caught up with Kitaro and his touring band in rehearsals at L.A.'s Center Staging facility. Kitaro conducts the performances from his synthesizer cockpit, which features at his right hand an old Korg single-voice 700S from the mid-'70s and a double-voice Korg 800DV. "Although there are many companies making digital synthesizers that sound almost the same, these old synths have a warm feeling and more character in the individual sounds," he says. When the 800DV started making "strange noises" in rehearsals, Kitaro had a spare flown in from his studio. "No one knows how to fix them here, so I have to take them back to Korg in Japan where they still have a technician who can work with the old technology."

In addition to the aforementioned synths, on his left Kitaro uses a Casio FZ-1 Sampler as his MIDI controller and a Kurzweil K1200. "We sampled the old sounds of my analog machines because they sound so good. The older synths didn't have velocity and volume control so on the floor I have seven pedals for keyboards, MIDI, and other functions."

Concert mixer Luis Sanudo mans a DiGiCo D1 console which travels with the tour. For the taiko drum he uses a Shure Beta 52, for the gong an AKG



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Read more about Kitaro's recording process at [www.keyboardmag.com/1207112](http://www.keyboardmag.com/1207112).



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Kitaro onstage with Paul Pesco on guitar in the background. Yes, that taiko drum behind Kitaro is older than his synths — but not by much. See text for a description of Kitaro's rig.



Kitaro's band for the Love & Peace tour, clockwise from top left: violinist Kristen Autry, Kitaro's wife, keyboardist Keiko Takahashi, keyboardist Diana Dentino, guitarist Paul Pesco, Kitaro, percussionist Voyce McGinley III.



Kitaro (center) on location at a Japanese temple to record the sound of the bell for Sacred Journey 3.

451. For speaking, Kitaro's vocal mic is a Shure 58 and for his assortment of prayer bells resting on pillows center stage are two AKG 451s.

Kitaro explains, "For the beginning of the show, I like to meditate and ring these bells to connect with the audience. These smaller bells bring the same concept of the temple bells of the *Ku-kai* albums." He describes the performance of one song in particular, "Crystal Wind," from *Volume 3*. "It's interesting to experience the Indian santoor and my Native American flutes and analog synthesizers coming together for the creation of the song. It's a new combination for me."

Coinciding with the album release, Kitaro is launching his Love & Peace worldwide tour this fall. Joining him on tour is his wife, Keiko Takahashi, playing keyboards and bass, using a Korg O1/W and a Roland XV-5080. Keyboardist Diana Dentino uses the Korg O1/W Pro X and Korg Kontrol49 MIDI controller for the sound of acoustic piano, harp, strings, and sound effects.

Recreating the sound of the albums in rehearsals for the world tour, Kitaro confides, "Sometimes it's tough to keep the gear working, but still I like to keep my signature sounds. I try to retain the analog synth sounds, but I am also using the new digital technology as well."

Kitaro, a Grammy and Golden Globe winning composer and musician, has been an influential figure in world music for nearly three decades. His debut album, 1978's *Astral Voyage*, created a sizeable following in Japan, but it was his soundtrack for the acclaimed NHK documentary, *Silk Road*, that garnered international fame. Kitaro's distinctive weave of Eastern and Western musical influences, combined with his now classic synthesizer touch, was seminal in the era of New Age music. As the new millennium progresses, darkened by the events of 9/11, Kitaro is making music with a restorative power. "The wars of the world don't come from outer space," he says in the liner notes. "People create them, people who have a war within themselves. I want to create music that eases the war within."

Kitaro's life began in the Toyohashi Prefecture of central Japan. He was raised in a Buddhist/Shinto culture with special reverence for the importance of nature. "My parents were farmers and I lived in a regular farmhouse," he told me at our first meeting in 1986, shortly after the release of *Tenku*, his Geffen Records U.S. debut. "I lived with nature every day. My parents watched after me gently, but I can't point to one particular gift." Was he encouraged to pursue music? "Not at all. When I was a child, I liked sports — I never thought about making music. The first music I heard was folk music, traditional music. When I began to hear popular music, I became interested in the guitar and wanted to learn how to play. I thought the Beatles were great, and R&B — my favorite was Otis Redding. It had a warm feeling — very spiritual."

At the time, New Age was a common label, but I had heard a puzzling reference to Kitaro's music translated as "new science." When I asked the meaning, he replied, "New science? It really means *shizen* — nature. There is big energy and we move in it. This is the principle that I try to understand and use in my work. It

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## A SELECTED KITARO DISCOGRAPHY



*Sacred Journey of Ku-kai, Volume 3* (Domo)



*Silk Road Suite* (Gramavision)

*Astral Voyage* (Geffen)

*Thinking of You* (Domo)

*Heaven & Earth* (Uni)

*The Light of the Spirit* (Geffen)



*Dream* (Geffen)



*Tenku* (Geffen)

means more than science, though; it means spirit — a return to the spirit. It is science, it is spirit, it is religion — everything. Finally, these concepts become one. There is old energy that comes from somewhere, and passes through us. Creating music is using this energy to communicate with an audience. Like being a messenger.”

Further exploring the themes of nature, life, and death, 1987’s Grammy-nominated *The Light of the Spirit*, was a collaboration with Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart. The album sold more than two million copies in the U.S. alone and coincided with Kitaro’s first American tour. 1992’s *Dream* was another collaborative effort, this time with Jon Anderson of Yes, and was another big hit. The next year he composed music for Oliver Stone’s *Heaven & Earth*, which earned a Golden Globe for Best Original Score. Numerous nominations followed, with 2000’s *Thinking of You* winning the Grammy for Best New Age album.

For the new *Kukai* albums, the location recording of the temple bells in Japan was an arduous task. “It was tough work,” Kitaro explains. “Many of the temples are in the city, so we must record late at night.” Much of the recording was done during cold winter nights free of insect and animal sounds. To provide the authentic sound of each bell, Kitaro explains, “We use eight microphones. Inside the bell we have two, plus four microphones positioned at four corners, and then two ambient mics. I once had an experience in Nara with one bell that was the size of a room. I

stepped inside the bell when it was struck and it sounded so good that we are using that internal sound mixed with the external. Inside the sounds of the bell is a sonic texture that is good for meditation and I am using that sound with my music to create an experience that I hope is new and worthwhile.”

As of 2007, Kitaro has recorded the bells of 58 temples, leaving 30 more to go. After *Volume 2*, he began recording in the field using his Pro Tools HD rig.

Other than his film work, the *Kukai* project was Kitaro’s first venture into surround sound. “It was fun, and it’s a new experience for me,” he says. “There are only a few places in Los Angeles where I could mix, and I chose Ocean Way with their new room and the Neve 88R console.” *Volume 2* was mixed by Joe Chicarelli at Chalice in L.A., and *Volume 3* was mixed by Steven Miller back at Ocean Way.

Kitaro explains his understanding of Ku-kai’s pilgrimage. “There are many different sects within Buddhism,” he says, “but this monk was beyond the individual sects. He was a leader of early Buddhism in Japan and wanted religion for the people so that the land would become more peaceful. His travels were intended to unify. We worked closely with the monks at the temples and learned much about the history. Ku-kai had studied Buddhism in China and was responsible for bringing real Buddhism to Japan. I am focusing on what he accomplished in bringing something that was very good for the people. I hope that I am continuing his work.” 