



These pictures show Japanese techno DJ Ken Ishii performing at an art gallery in Tokyo. — AFP photos

From ninja to elder statesman: Japan techno king Ken Ishii

Japan's techno trail-blazer Ken Ishii rocks huge crowds the world over and leads a glamorous, jet-set life—but the superstar DJ insists he's a "bit of a nerd" at heart. Ishii, 45, burst onto the dance scene more than 20 years ago and has scooped up MTV awards, composed the theme song for the 1998 Winter Olympics and even appeared on the cover of Newsweek magazine. But new album "Leaps", released last week under his alter ego "Flare" and which draws heavily from 1980s influences Kraftwerk and Japan's Yellow Magic Orchestra, reveals a more introverted side to the Sapporo-born artist.

"Flare is more personal and experimental," Ishii told AFP in an interview. "It's like getting a new toy." But while he feels a sense of liberation, there is also a buzz of nostalgia that accompanies a return to "basics" Ishii experienced during his start in the industry as a producer. "My earliest music was experimental so it's like going back to my roots," he said. "I'm still like a kid when I'm in front of my computer. I guess you could say I'm a bit of a nerd when it comes to the creative process of making music."

Ishii's new 10-track record, which comes 23 years after he cut his first track, is a throwback to the 1980s and marks a subtle departure from his trademark techno voodoo. Industrial beats combine with squiggly synthesizers and video game bleeps to whisk the listener back in time: imagine Kraftwerk, Depeche Mode and an old Atari game console stuffed into a power blender. "When I was seven or eight, the first wave of video games like Space Invaders triggered my interest in electronic sounds," said Ishii, who fondly recalls pinching coins from his dad's pockets to spend at the video arcade after school.

"The album sort of harks back to what I used to listen to in the 80s," added Ishii, who became hooked on techno music after discovering Detroit overlorders such as Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson. "Electronic music was a big influence, particularly Yellow Magic Orchestra, Kraftwerk and German industrial, new wave stuff." But for me Detroit techno was like punk music in the late 70s in London—it was a movement."

'Sexy ninja'

Ishii quickly shot to fame after signing to Belgian techno label R&S Records while still at university, tearing up dance floors in Europe before Japan knew what techno music was. "They brought me to Europe for my first ever gig and it was in front of 30,000 people in Amsterdam," he recalled. "Nobody knew me, they were all wondering who this Asian kid was. 'I'd only had one warm-up gig before that, in front of about 30 people. They had me come out on stage dressed in all black with these models in sexy ninja costumes.'"

A No. 1 on the techno chart of British music magazine NME in 1993 was followed in 1996 by an MTV video award for the single "Extra"—both firsts for a Japanese artist. His seminal album "Jelly Tones" came out in 1995 as his stock soared. Then the Japanese Olympic committee called, followed by television commercial work, a movie soundtrack and even offers to act. But at that point, Ishii slammed on the brakes, terminating his record contract and forming his own label in 2002.

"People stopped seeing me as an underground artist

because of the commercial success," he said. "The record company was pushing me to release hit after hit, to use female singers—stuff that had nothing to do with techno. 'I didn't want to cross that line, to sell out. I wanted to go back to the underground. I'm an old-school guy.' Ishii has a philosophical attitude towards today's generation of celebrity DJs who fly in for shows by helicopter and plug in pre-programmed sets they often play for an entire festival season.

"People get into this game now to be pop stars," said Ishii, who still gets driven to gigs in his manager's battered Toyota. "People are buying tickets to watch a guy who's just standing on stage waving his hands. 'I'll have a drink with the promoters and fans after a gig, but maybe some DJs now think it's a waste of time—that more gigs means more money," he added. "I'm not bothered about flashy cars. I don't care how I look when I arrive. I'd still be doing this even if I didn't make any money." — AFP



This file photo taken on December 30, 1999 shows a multi-colored Hollywood sign during the celebration of the new millennium in Los Angeles. — AFP

China buys soft power with hard cash in Hollywood

With cash flowing faster than the Yangtze river, Hollywood is awash with ever-expanding volumes of Chinese funding, but analysts are warning the film industry there's no such thing as a free lunch. The Beijing-based Wanda Group's record-breaking deal in January to buy US film studio Legendary Pictures finally confirmed the long-heralded emergence of the world's second biggest box office as a major player in Tinseltown. The \$3.5 billion agreement is the largest-ever cultural takeover by China, with US studios keen to capitalize on its burgeoning cinema market at a time when Beijing is pushing entertainment as a source of "soft power."

Legendary, the maker of "Jurassic World," "Godzilla" and the latest Batman trilogy, has grossed more than \$11 billion worldwide since it was founded in 2005, mostly with the kind of big-budget blockbusters popular with Chinese audiences. "It's a win-win situation... because the China market is really incredibly taking off and Hollywood has a real interest in that," Stanley Rosen, a political science professor at the University of Southern California, told AFP. It is an arrangement that benefits both sides financially, with movies becoming increasingly expensive to produce but the Chinese hungry for Western-made films.

But China, which has yet to make a global hit, is also buying expertise. "Hollywood has what China lacks, which is storytelling ability, marketing, distribution," Rosen told AFP. Wanda owner Wang Jianlin, who burst into the international spotlight in 2012 by buying US cinema chain AMC Entertainment for \$2.6 billion, says the Legendary deal makes his company the highest revenue-generating movie unit in the world. It also gives future Legendary films direct access to China's booming market, which has become crucial to foreign filmmakers, with North American ticket sales stagnant. PricewaterhouseCoopers has projected China's box office to rise from \$4.3 billion in 2014 to \$8.9 billion in 2019, meaning it would outstrip the US within two years.

Phenomenal growth

In 2014, 8,035 movie screens — 22 per day were installed in China and the screen count stood at 31,627 by the end of 2015, according to official sources. Underlining the shift in power, Chinese box office monitor EntGroup announced that cinemas took a record \$1.1 billion in February—a 70 percent year-on-year jump—overtaking the North American monthly revenue for the first time in history. The main driver of Chinese cinema's phenomenal growth is a steady emergence of a modern consumerist lifestyle among China's burgeoning middle class, expected to account for 75 percent of households within a decade.

Cumulative Chinese investment in the US since 2000 reached \$63 billion in 2015, with a \$4 billion going to the entertainment industry, according to research firm Rhodium Group. The trend looks set to accelerate, with Huayi Brothers

planning to produce at least 18 films with LA studio STX Entertainment, and Shanghai-based Fosun International taking a stake in US media company Studio 8. Both Wanda and tech firm Alibaba have been touted as possible minority investors in Paramount, while Hunan TV has signed a \$1.5 billion deal to fund Lionsgate movies and Perfect World Pictures is investing \$250 million in Universal's slate over five years. Beijing has pushed back against an invasion of "foreign culture," however, issuing an edict in 2011 discouraging movies featuring "fantasy" and "time travel" among other "bizarre plots."

President Xi Jinping has instructed artists to abandon "naive sensual amusement" and instead promote "true-to-life images to tell people what they should affirm and praise." Only 34 foreign films are given cinema releases in China each year under a quota set by Beijing, and all are subject to official censorship over content deemed politically sensitive or obscene.

Litmus test

Co-produced movies can bypass the quota as long as they contain significant Chinese elements, such as characters, plot devices or locations. But the strategy has backfired at times, most notably with "Transformers: Age of Extinction," which was derided for depicting characters drinking the Chinese version of Red Bull in Texas. Jonathan Landreth, managing editor of the New York-based online magazine China File, warned in a recent article that Wanda and Legendary were operating under Jinping's "looming encouragement" and said the deal could not have gone ahead without the approval of China's Communist Party.

"While Wanda invests in Hollywood to make money, the deal sees Legendary unwittingly becoming one of the most powerful channels for Beijing's worldview, a worldview that bars open discussion of the jailing of dissidents and the disappearing of book sellers," he wrote. The first co-production from the Wanda-owned Legendary will be the \$150 million sci-fi action movie "The Great Wall," starring Matt Damon, Willem Dafoe and Hong Kong Cantopop singer and actor Andy Lau. Directed by Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou and due for its China release in December, two months ahead of the US opening, the film will be entirely English-language.

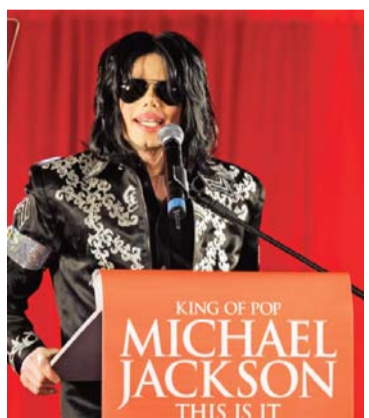
Christopher Spicer, a film financing expert and partner at international law firm Akin Gump, said the film, the most expensive ever shot in China, could serve as a litmus test of public appetite for Chinese-American joint projects. "I've been doing film and television for eight or nine years and at different times in history primary funding sources of film and, to a lesser extent, television have come from different countries all over the world," he told AFP. "But certainly for the time being I would expect the trend of Chinese financing to continue." — AFP

Sony buys late pop star Jackson's music venture stake

Sony said yesterday it will pay Michael Jackson's estate \$750 million for the late pop star's share of a music venture that owns the rights to songs by some of the biggest names in music history. The deal will see the Japanese firm pick up Jackson's 50 percent stake in Sony ATV Music Publishing, which owns several million titles including those written by the Beatles, Marvin Gaye and Bob Dylan. Sony will now control all of the company, whose catalogue also includes hits by pop star Taylor Swift, rapper Kanye West, Sam Smith and Lady Gaga.

Sony ATV Music Publishing was formed in 1995 by the Japanese electronics giant and the late "King of Pop", who transformed music with iconic hits including "Thriller" and "Beat it". Jackson died in 2009 at the age of 50. His estate said it will still own his master recordings and the publishing company that owns all the songs he penned. It will also keep its stake in EMI Music. The singer, a notoriously profligate spender, turned to music publishing rights at the height of his stardom as he looked for a place to invest his burgeoning fortune.

The proceeds from the catalogue offered vital revenue for the star later in his life as he struggled to pay his expenses and released little new



In this March 5, 2009 file photo, US singer Michael Jackson announces that he is set to play ten live concerts at the London O2 Arena in July, which he announced at a press conference at the London O2 Arena. — AP

material. Jackson said he first learned of the music publishing business from former Beatle Paul McCartney, who bought the copyright to songs by Buddy Holly and other classic artists. The Beatles did not show the same business acumen early in their career, however, losing control of their catalogue under the company Northern Songs—which eventually came under ATV.

'Smartest investment in music history'

Jackson bought ATV Music Publishing in 1985 for \$47.5 million, or about \$105 million at 2016 value, from the brash South African-born Australian tycoon Robert Holmes a Court. The deal "is considered one of the smartest investments in music history", Jackson's estate executors said yesterday. In the negotiations, the businessman insisted on excluding a song from the deal so he could give it as a present to his teenage daughter. Catherine Holmes a Court was given the copyright to the song "Penny Lane," which she continues to own today, one of the few Beatles' tracks not part of ATV. McCartney was friendly with Jackson, collaborating on the track "The Girl is Mine" off "Thriller," but was unsuccessful in bids to wrest control of the Beatles catalogue. Jackson sold half of the stake in ATV to Sony in 1991 for a reported \$100 million.

His will called for his mother Katherine and his three children—Prince, Paris and Blanket—to be supported, although not his father Joe Jackson, whom he had accused of abuse. Yesterday, Sony said the deal underscored a focus on its entertainment division, which includes a music label and Hollywood studio. The company has been leaning on movies, music and soaring sales of the PlayStation video game console in its bid to scrap years of eye-watering losses linked to the consumer electronics that built its global brand. "The entertainment businesses have long been a core part of Sony and are a key driver of our future growth," Sony chief executive Kazuo Hirai said.—AFP



File photo shows singer of US heavy metal band 'Down' Phil Anselmo performing during the Hellfest Heavy Metal Music Festival in Clisson, western France. — AFP

US metal singer in racism row pulls out of Europe tour

A US metal singer who gave a Nazi salute at a concert has pulled out of a European tour even after a French festival came under fire for standing by him. A regional government in western France had cut off subsidies to Hellfest due to the festival's refusal to scrap a performance by Down, a New Orleans-based metal band led by Phil Anselmo. The singer has apologized after giving a Nazi salute and shouting "White Power!" at a charity concert in Los Angeles in January that was packed with musical celebrities.

Anselmo, best known as the former singer of the band Pantera, profusely thanked Hellfest's director Ben Barbaud in an open letter but said it was not the right time to tour. "My AWFUL mistake has taken a toll on my reputation, and justly so!" he wrote, crediting Barbaud with "know(ing) me better than this drunken incident could ever describe." "I BEG YOU, give me this time to get my brain clear, and to come back (if you will have me back) next year, my brother, I implore you!" he wrote. Anselmo said he was also suffering from a recurring knee injury and needed rehabilitation.

A member of Down's management on Monday confirmed the letter's authenticity and said the band would not tour Europe, but declined further comment. Besides Hellfest, the band

was scheduled to play at the Download festival's editions in both England and the Paris region, as well as metal events in Belgium and Italy. The only upcoming date remaining on the band's schedule is in Las Vegas. Barbaud had criticized Anselmo's actions at the Los Angeles show but said the singer had performed seven times at Hellfest without incident.

"I know him and he has a provocative personality which has nothing at all to do with anti-Semitism," Barbaud told AFP at the time. The government of the Pays de la Loire region cut funding to Hellfest over Down's inclusion, although it had contributed only 20,000 euros (\$22,000) to the annual festival's 16-million-euro (\$17.8 million) budget. "It is out of the question for the regional council uncritically to accept that incitement to racial or religious hatred take place on the stages it finances," said Laurence Garnier, head of the region's cultural commission. Anselmo has long faced allegations of racism and Pantera has incorporated the Confederate flag into band artwork. He had initially played down his "White Power" remark, saying he had been making an inside joke about band members drinking white beverage. — AFP

Review

'Midnight Special' is an electrifying mystery

"Midnight Special" is one of those rare, stimulating creations that grabs you and penetrates your bloodstream from start to finish. This unique tale about a kid with special powers skillfully melds mood and story, giving the entire experience the feel of a thrilling getaway chase — one that you're part of, too. Director Jeff Nichols dares you to get in, shut up and come along for the late night drive down some desolate Southern roads where the headlights are optional and the mission is life or death. As with his riveting 2011 breakout "Take Shelter," Nichols doesn't reveal details carelessly. It forces you to pay attention and give yourself to his vision.

Take the first scene. We hear about a child's abduction on a television broadcast. Then we discover that we're with two men (Michael Shannon as Roy and Joel Edgerton as Lucas) in a motel room. They're paranoid about something. Then we see a white bedsheet draped over the outline of what appears to be a child, and you realize you're with the abductors. It's an

unsettling milieu. But then Roy removes the bedsheet to reveal a child (Jaeden Lieberher) who is neither scared nor upset. He's calm. He's wearing noise cancelling headphones and pool goggles and there's even ordinariness about it. You realize that Roy isn't evil at all — there's an undeniable tenderness in his empathetic, haunted eyes, and it just makes you want to know more.

The boy's name is Alton and he is, to put it too simply, exceptional. He has powers that no one understands, but that inspire obsession, devotion and fear from those around him. Roy is his father. He's taken his son away from a religious cult led by Sam Shepard's Calvin Meyer, whose service that night is interrupted by federal investigators who have also become interested in the kid. A skeptical, curious NSA agent (Adam Driver) shows up too. The cult has been using Alton as their prophet. He goes into a trance and speaks in tongues and they take it for scripture. What is most compelling to the government, the leaders, and even his father, though, is a date and location that keeps

coming up. Friday, March 6. No one knows what will happen then, not even Alton, but they've seen enough to know that it's not worth questioning. But the kooks, the simpletons, the bureaucrats, the scientists, the law, and the devoted parents alike all know that they must go.



This image released by Warner Bros. Entertainment shows Jaeden Lieberher in a scene from 'Midnight Special'. — AP