

# Comeback queen of J-pop

Japanese pop stars rise high and fade quickly. But Namie Amuro's return broke the mould. **Leo Lewis** reports

JAPANESE POP music is mercilessly efficient. It makes nobodies into singers, it makes singers into *idoru* (idols), and it makes millions of fans spend billions of yen. Then, after a few years of hysteria, it makes the *idoru* into nobodies again. It does not make exceptions.

But the world of J-Pop never bargained for Namie Amuro, an obstinate beauty who has revealed that the music machine has a loophole. In the mid-1990s she was a classic idol: bigger in Japan than any Western star and creator of a teenage look that still dictates Tokyo fashions.

She was supposed to have fizzled

now it seems impossible to associate her with that "bubbly world".

She says: "I came back to do a live concert. Nobody had done that before and I know my managers were worried. I stopped caring what people thought. I just wanted to sing again."

Amuro asserts that what has happened is a jump from idol to artist: "I write songs now, I plan concerts. When I was younger, there was a huge gap between what I wanted to do and what I could do as an idol."

The murder of her mother, Emiko Taira, near her home on the sleepy island of Okinawa was a major news event. With her brother in the

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From idol to artist: Namie Amuro. Below, left: Amuro performs in the MTV Video Music Awards last year

but when she married seven years ago, stunning Japan by doing so when pregnant at the age of 21. When her mother was brutally killed by Amuro's uncle, it seemed unlikely that the starlet would surface again.

Instead, she has undertaken the biggest Asian tour by a Japanese singer and her latest album reached No 2 in the charts. She is even optimistic about a European tour. But Amuro's turnaround breaks Japanese social patterns that go beyond music. She is a single working mother. She has endured a messy divorce with her celebrity husband and a family tragedy. She has repeatedly defied her music company bosses. Disturbingly to the industry, her return to fame has been done without the media blitzing that J-Pop supremos have always assumed essential.

In her first interview with a non-Japanese paper, Amuro says: "Even my closest friend said I was finished, but I think I may be a little different from the others. My popularity plunged three years ago and I didn't try to court publicity. It was a real challenge forcing myself to be consistent in not playing up to my fans."

There is an atmosphere of melancholy about Amuro. When she had her first tattoo, it spawned a giant fad across Japan. Her latest piece of body art is a sombre memorial to her mother on her upper left arm. It all jars with the *idoru* tradition. Japanese starlets have always made their names by being irrepressibly *genki* — meaning energetic and vivacious. They are designed to be dumb, pretty and low-risk guests on TV shows. In the 1990s, Amuro played the role to perfection;

**'I hated singing. Every word reminded me of my mother and the grief almost broke me'**

Taira, at the wheel, Emiko was knocked down by a car while strolling with her husband near their home. Kenji then reversed over her three times, leapt out of the vehicle and swung at her repeatedly with an axe. Emiko's husband, Tatsunobu, tried to defend his wife against his brother and was himself injured severely in the frenzy. Kenji then leapt into his car, drove a few miles down the road and killed himself by drinking a bottle of insecticide.

Amuro collapsed on hearing the news, and now finds it nearly impossible to refer to the matter or even visit her home town.

The main TV networks speculated that Kenji's murderous rage arose from advice that Emiko and Tatsunobu had given him to end a three-year relationship. The more lurid tabloids hinted at a torrid affair between Emiko and Kenji, big cash loans between the two, arguments over Amuro's fortune and even mafia links to Emiko's old job as a bar hostess.



Just one year before the killing, Emiko had published a bestselling book of her own, describing repeated beatings by Amuro's natural father and the punishing series of jobs she had held down to put her children through school before remarrying.

This violent upheaval in Amuro's life gave her a chance to think, and that let her undermine the J-Pop regime. "I knew what I wanted to do. When I was snowed under with the work of an idol, I didn't have time to think. I never had the chance to consider what or how I wanted to be."

At the age of 12 Amuro was singing to shoppers for her local supermarket's promotional drive. A TV station later paid her to dress in a furry rabbit suit on a children's show. She was spotted by Masayuki Makino, a music promoter who would become her great mentor. He put Amuro in a teen group called Supermonkeys. While with this band she was noticed by Tetsuya Komuro — who made Avex Japan's most powerful idol factory and was supreme in the 1990s. He penned one hit for her in 1995, *Body Feels Exit*, and Amuro at 17 was suddenly bigger than Madonna in Japan. Her concerts sold out within ten minutes of tickets going on sale.

What followed defined the entire idol concept. Her tanned skin, common on Okinawa, suddenly became a must-have look for teenage girls across Japan and self-tanning lotion sales exploded. Every detail of her clothes, her make-up, and her acces-

**'There was no time to think. I had no choice in decisions. I was not doing what I wanted'**

sories were copied by hundreds of thousands of girls, who began calling themselves the "Amuraa".

"It was a shock to see teenage Amuraas. The phenomenon was out of my control. I don't think I did anything special to make myself charismatic for these girls. I think I was a mirror for what they wanted to look like and how they wanted to feel."

She is realistic about what was going on behind the scenes and, even in the boardroom of Avex's Tokyo offices, she describes the company as a "machine". "People around me called me an idol, so that's what I was," Amuro says, describing a two-year frenzy during which she appeared on a different TV show almost every night. "I enjoyed the opportunities, but there was no time to think. I had no choice in the decision to make myself available. I was not always doing things I wanted to do."

At the peak of her fame with more than 20 million album sales, she sang the theme tune to the Pokémon movies and starred in a corny high-school film about cheating in exams. It was her reaching that idol apex that made her marriage to Sam, a dancer from the boyband TRF, all the more shocking to the Japanese. Marriage is still widely viewed as a

woman's moment to bow out of whatever she's been doing.

More humiliatingly, while still under the control of her J-Pop bosses, Amuro and Sam, by now with a baby son, were induced to appear in a government TV campaign urging young Japanese to settle down and have children. She laughs when it is pointed out that the Japanese birthrate has fallen since her campaign.

Her divorce from Sam four years later has left Amuro again testing the limits of the Japanese system, this time as a single parent. Particularly outrageous, she says, was the criticism by Japanese papers that equated her comeback with the abandonment of her child. "During my grief, I realised there was nothing I could do for my mother, but I did have a child. I began to think more like a mother myself, and to become positive in my work again," she says. "I wish I could balance life as an artist and a mother, but sometimes when I am doing live concerts, I have to ask people to help me in my other role."

Despite her return to fame, Amuro lives quietly. She does not have a boyfriend, rarely goes out in the evenings and seldom meets her fans.

Amuro signalled her comeback by winning a huge singing show live on TV. In front of one of Japan's biggest TV audiences, she wept when she realised how much the public wanted her back. "You never know whether the fans will be waiting for you. All in all, I'm happy, but we're groping in the dark."

