

# Japanese Masterpiece Released on 9.5-Hour DVD

## DVD Review: 'The Human Condition'

By JOE BENDEL

The history of the 20th century was marked by the horrors of National Socialism and Fascism, followed by bitter disillusionment with the Soviet system. In a few short but epic years, one Japanese idealist experiences both firsthand as the anguished protagonist of Masaki Kobayashi's "The Human Condition," a closely linked cinematic trilogy now available on DVD from the Criterion Collection.

Kaji, a humanist intellectual of vaguely leftwing convictions, seems determined to martyr himself. As "No Greater Love" (Part I) opens, he tries in vain to reject his beautiful girlfriend Michiko, but their love is too strong. However, Kaji's fear that marrying her will only bring her painful tribulations proves all too prescient over the course of the roughly nine and a half hours that follow.

Given his pacifist inclinations, Kaji wants to avoid military service, but he is not one to do things the easy way. He accepts a promotion to manage an important provincial mine (and the military deferment that goes with it) in order to implement his enlightened theories of labor management. How-



ALONE: Tatsuya Nakadai in the "The Human Condition." THE CRITERION COLLECTION

ever, he soon finds himself undermined by openly insubordinate overseers and a thoroughly corrupt boss.

He is also surprised to discover the camp's contingent of "comfort women" also come under his management purview. Despite his coworkers' obstructions, Kaji makes some initial progress, only to see it collapse with the arrival of 600 Chinese

Complete rejection of the ideologies (of all stripes), which ravaged the last century.

POWs delivered by the Japanese military, precipitating the first of Kaji's many crises of conscience.

In "Road to Eternity" (part II), Kaji has lost his military deferment and must endure the brutal basic training regimen "under suspicion." Yet his hardheaded nature and physical strength make him decent soldier material. Unfortunately, the cruelty meted out on weaker conscripts only confirms his antipathy for the military. Kaji still does his duty as a soldier, but it comes as a futile display of honor as the Soviets quickly overwhelm his company.

Kaji had been preoccupied with the question of how to be humane in an inhuman system, but throughout "A Soldier's Prayer" (part III), his only concern is simple survival. As Japanese soldiers become lowly bandits (and worse), Kaji watches in horror. Still, his greatest disillusionment will come in a Soviet POW camp, where "good intentions are suppressed and evil is tolerated."

To some extent, a former fellow traveler,

enduring the same brutality from the Soviets that he had witnessed from the Imperial Japanese may well be the death knell of Kaji's idealism. He bitterly complains to a leftist comrade-in-arms: "They can send us to Siberia and work us to death. But take down the 'peace' and 'liberation' signs."

"Condition" is a true cinematic masterpiece—and that word is not used lightly. It is not merely an indictment of the Imperial Japanese war machine, though it most assuredly acts as such. In its totality, the film is a complete rejection of the ideologies (of all stripes), which ravaged the last century. Yet for all its clashing historical dialectics, "Condition" is fundamentally a "Zhuivago"-esque love story of a man and a woman cruelly separated by fate.

Tatsuya Nakadai gives a fully realized performance as Kaji, brilliantly evolving from an inflexible moralizer to a literal shell of a man. The luminous Michiyo Aratama is also quite remarkable, expressing the naïveté and surprising strength of the loyal

An angry but compassionate examination of what it was like to be human during some of the darkest hours.

Michiko. The cinematic marathon also boasts a host of accomplished actors in supporting roles, including Hideko Takamine (who appeared with Nakadai in "When a Woman Ascends the Stairs") as a desperate



LOVE STORY: Tatsuya Nakadai (R) as Kaji and Michiyo Aratama as Michiko in the cinematic marathon "The Human Condition" by director Masaki Kobayashi. THE CRITERION COLLECTION

refugee seeking Kaji's protection.

Though "Condition" played in its entirety on the big screen at New York's Film Forum (even making a brief return engagement), Kobayashi's monumental film cycle requires a time commitment most viewers can only muster for home viewing. Fortunately, Criterion beautifully renders Yoshio Miyajima's glorious black-and-white cinematography and Kobayashi's long tracking shots of sweeping vistas (that often reduces Kaji and his companions to tiny dehumanized figures along the expansive horizon) in their deluxe letterbox edition, making it a very cinematic DVD experience.

"Condition" is a truly great film (or film

trilogy if you prefer). It is an angry but compassionate examination of what it was like to be human during some of the darkest hours of the past century. Viewers should not be intimidated by the running time or the subtitles. It is a film about big picture themes everyone can relate to—love, war, and basic human decency—brilliantly crafted by a master filmmaker, finally available in a worthy DVD package.

Joe Bendel blogs on jazz and cultural issues at [jbspins.blogspot.com](http://jbspins.blogspot.com) and coordinated the Jazz Foundation of America's instrument donation campaign for musicians displaced by Hurricane Katrina.



PICKIN: Musician Steve Martin on stage for his debut concert at the Grand Ole Opry on May 30, 2009 in Nashville, Tennessee. RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES FOR GRAND OLE OPRY

## Steve Martin Hits Road With Banjos and Some Jokes

LOS ANGELES (Reuters)—Steve Martin may be one of the funniest guys on the planet. But when it comes to talking about the banjo, he is deadly serious. Eerily so.

Martin, 64, has been playing the banjo since he was a teenager, and is a respected practitioner in the bluegrass community. He has just begun his first concert tour to promote his critically acclaimed album "The Crow: New Songs for the Five-String Banjo," which features vocal assists from such A-listers as Dolly Parton and Vince Gill.

The album marked his first appearance on the U.S. charts since a comedy/banjo hybrid in 1981. It won two prizes—for graphic design and the inevitably funny liner notes—at the International Bluegrass Music Awards in Nashville last Thursday. Most of the tracks are instrumentals, and Martin wrote all but one of the 16 cuts, some of which date back to the 1960s.

"I can't imagine what my life would be without the banjo," Martin told Reuters.

The dry-witted comic might have been expected to follow the admission with a punchline and an imaginary drum rimshot. But there was none.

Instead, he explained what drew him to an instrument often asso-

ciated—for better or worse—with the theme song from the "Beverly Hillbillies" TV show and the inbred southerners in the movie "Deliverance."

"I just like the sound of the banjo. I can't explain why. It was the big bang for me. I really like what it can do. I like its range. I like that it's acoustic."

Which begs the questions: did he take the wrong career path? Would he have made a better banjo player who happened to be funny? Negative.

"I was always so interested in vaudeville that I don't think I ever would have taken it up as a profession," he said. "I was really interested in comedy and the banjo was this sidelight that I'm so fortunate I have."

Return To The Stage  
Martin quit the standup circuit 30 years ago to focus on films and writing. His tour provides a rare opportunity to see the comic in a different milieu, with plenty of one-liners thrown in. To wit:

"This is a song... Well, that pretty much says it all."

"I wrote this song when I was on vacation in St. Bart's, so I have about \$35,000 invested in it."

"This song is a sing-along but it has no lyrics, so good luck."

"This next song expresses sadness and melancholy, like the look on my agent's face when I told him I was doing a banjo tour."

Financial matters loom large in the album's liner notes with the observation that it is "the most expensive banjo album in the history of the universe." On stage, he tells the audience that if all goes according to plan, the tour should lose only about \$12,000.

There was a lot of flying, he explained in the interview, to Nashville several times, as well as a day trip to Dublin to record Irish singer Mary Black's vocals for "Calico Train." But

in reality, the cost was "not a significant number," he said.

Accordingly, he was not as anxious about the album's release as he is for a new movie.

"A failure in the record world, where I am, it's not a public thing. Whereas a film that fails is very public," he said. "This was just: Here's some songs, take it or leave it."

Gill and Parton share a duet on "Pretty Flowers." Martin sings on just one track, the novelty tune "Late for School." Multi-instrumentalist John McEuen, a founding member of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, produced the album.

## Punk Minimalism from North of the Border

### Album Review: The Sound Technicians

By ALISA CARRARO

Canadian four-piece The Sound Technicians are a refreshing, alternative band hitting the North American music scene and making quite the splash as they continue to impress young audiences throughout their Canadian soil and win new fans in the US with their new release entitled, "Reset."

Their music is a mix of punk minimalism with the heavily melodic chord structures of surf rock. In the case of "Looking at You," the band is reminiscent of The Pixies, without the harsh abrasive edge. Comparisons deliver the same off beat style, but not the dark, depressive subject matter that the Pixies' were best known for. "Looking at You" is more about flirting, and the bar scene. The song is catchy pop anthem, perfect for a sing along. "The Sun" is an energetic ode

to the potential dangers in letting success go to one's head, with the metaphor that if you look too closely or remain unprotected, you will get burned. There is a definite jump in parts of the song, where the leader singer uses his vocal prowess to speak about these potential dangers. The song is not directly similar to The Cars' "Let's Go," but lends an apparent similarity with breaks in the bridge and other leads that reactivate the old "new wave" vibe of the late 1970s.

All thumbs up for this zany Ottawa based band that play Los Angeles at The Whiskey A Go Go as they are nominated at the 2009 LA Music Awards for Best International Showcase of The Year. The band is well on their way as they offer a wonderfully energetic, fresh, open performance ready to entertain.

"Reset," the current single release is grabbing much attention and can



SINK OR SWIM: Canada based rock quartet, the Sound Technicians. COURTESY OF THE SOUND TECHNICIANS

be found at [www.soundorbit.com/](http://www.soundorbit.com/) [thesoundtechnicians](http://thesoundtechnicians)



Alisa Carraro is a Canada-based life

coach, speaker, and founder of Sound-Orbit.com, an independent multi-media music platform for independent artists.

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