

“Those he inspired will rise up, and like him, use their talents and their passions for good”—*Minamata* director Andrew Levitas marks the passing of composer Ryuichi Sakamoto

Richard Phillips, Andrew Levitas
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Japanese composer, musician, record producer and actor, Ryuichi Sakamoto, died on March 28, aged 71. His death from cancer was officially announced on April 2, following his funeral in Tokyo. Heartfelt condolences immediately began appearing on social media in Japan and from across the globe in appreciation of his work and from the many he collaborated over the decades.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will be writing on Sakamoto’s more than four-decade career, both as a solo artist and in many collaborative recordings with others from virtually every musical genre, as well as his numerous film soundtracks.

Sakamoto’s first film score was for director Nagisa Oshima’s *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, (1983) in which he also played the commandant of a Japanese prisoner of war camp, starring alongside David Bowie.

Numerous film and television scores—more than 30—followed, including for Bernardo Bertolucci, Brian de Palma, Pedro Almodovar, Alejandro G. Iñárritu and most recently, Andrew Levitas, the director of *Minamata*. Levitas’s film dramatises the determined fight by photographer W. Eugene Smith (Johnny Depp) in the early 1970s to expose the mercury poisoning of a Japanese village.

This week Levitas emailed us the following tribute to Sakamoto and his masterful film score for *Minamata* while explaining the composer’s passionate commitment to an honest and nuanced portrayal of the plight of the Minamata villagers and their ongoing struggle for justice.

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Ryuichi Sakamoto was a hero of mine for as long as I’ve been an artist. Not just because of the elegant brilliance of his creative work but because of how he chose to use his time and energy passionately supporting the people and ideals he most believed in.

As a social-impact artist, I am acutely aware that in a world where celebrities, politicians and social-media posting citizens virtue signal as a way of ticking boxes... only a very precious few—truly walk the walk. The Maestro was as authentic a citizen there has ever been, and he absolutely walked the walk with conviction.

Upon completing the first cut of the film *Minamata*, I arranged a screening for Ryuichi in New York City (where he was living with his equally brilliant and passionate partner Norika).

I had felt deeply since the project’s inception years earlier, that Mr. Sakamoto was the only composer who could deliver deep understanding as well as shoulder the responsibility of the nuance of the story, its inhabitants, the impact it could have locally and globally, and the policy it could shift.

We needed a composer who could authentically reach deep inside and touch people in such a way that it would honour the past (and current) patients/victims (and their families), as well as touch and inspire to action those who had no previous knowledge of the Minamata story.

Although we didn’t have the budget to pay for an artist of his stature, I held out filling the position until I had the footage to share in hopes that he would see a kindred spirit and the value of the work... So there I sat in a New York City coffee shop eagerly awaiting his

reaction.

As I stared out the window, his elegant figure crossed the street and entered. He walked right up to me, and without pretense or formality—he embraced me and quietly thanked me for making the film.

My eyes were immediately wet with relief, gratitude, and joy as I knew in that moment that I was gaining a partner, and that the quality and sensitivity of the work our cast and crew had collectively hoped to create was actualised. After all, no one understood the razor thin edge of what impactful art could deliver, as the Maestro did.

As I collected myself, Ryuichi explained that he heard the music as he was watching the film and thoughtfully hummed the first bars of what would eventually become the *Minamata* theme. It was one of the most remarkable moments of artistic connectivity and genius I have witnessed and what followed was a push/pull collaboration full of immeasurable generosity and consideration which I will hold deep in my heart for the rest of my days.

The loss of Ryuichi Sakamoto is one that is felt by the entire global artistic community as well as the millions around the world who he advocated for, but I believe that his most lasting and satisfying legacy will be that of the millions of people he touched and inspired who undoubtedly will rise up and like him, use their talents and their passions for good.

Andrew Levitas
Director *Minamata*



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