Yoshida Tatsua is a busy guy, and 2011 has been an extremely busy year – even by his standards – with four new albums having been released. While not exactly a household name (partly due to his normal aversion to doing interviews), Tatsua's name is a familiar one for those who've followed the amazing blossoming of avant garde music coming out of Japan in the 1990s and 2000s. When I corresponded with him, Tatsua was on tour in Japan, playing solo as Ruins Alone (a version of his main project, Ruins). He was touring in support of his first Ruins Alone album, a new Ruins album (the first in nearly 10 years), a new Ruins retrospective and a new release from one of his other projects, Korekyojinn. Multiple encores were most likely a necessity.

As the founder and sole constant member of Ruins, Tatsua pioneered a bass-and-drums sonic attack that presaged bands like Hella and Lightening Bolt. Ruins' sound is aggressive and spastic, with hardcore punk slamming full body into prog time signatures and complexity, along with jazzy improvisation. Songs can range from less than a minute to almost ten, and everything is constantly shifting. Ruins records are entirely restless things, with songs moving from section to section almost as soon as they've arrived: imagine a world where D. Boon and Mike Watt had gotten really into Yes. "I started to play drums at clubs in the early '80s," Tatsua explains. "After a few years, I wanted to try to make my own band and started Ruins. My basic idea was to combine the complexity of progressive rock and the energy of hardcore and punk rock."

A prominent feature of Ruins' sound are screeching, yodeling vocals that might sometimes keep the faint-hearted at arms length – it's not exactly a commercial sound, something that Tatsua is willing to admit. "My music is always underground in Japan," he explains. "It's not easier than before. CD sales have become worse and people want to stay at home instead of coming to concerts."

While some might attribute these unfortunate realities to Ruins' somewhat quiet last decade of existence, it has more to do with Tatsua's other engagements – one influential band might be enough for most people, but not for him. Tatsua plays drums for Acid Mothers Temple, the heavy metal band Zeni Geva, the avant prog group Koenjihyakkei and finds the time to lead the supergroup (at least by Japanese avant rock standards) Korekyojinn, along with guitarist Kido Natsuki from Bondage Fruit and bassist Nasuno Mitsuru from Altered States. Korekyojinn's latest album, *Tundra*, which came out last January, is like a more playful version of Ruins: while Ruins has vocals and a distorted, punishing tone, Korekyojinn is instrumental and much more melodic. The core is still there, however, with stop-on-a-dime rhythms and a light-footed prog sensibility very much in evidence. The music feels no less heavy, but is more likely to stretch out for an unexpected guitar solo, acoustic passage or world music interlude.

"The band name is inspired by This Heat and Gentle Giant," Tatsua explains of "Korekyojinn," which roughly translates into English as "This Giant." That's a pretty apt description of what they sound like as well, bringing together the shifting post punk experimentation of This Heat with Gentle Giant's tendency to move from lyrical passages to heavy prog workouts from one moment to the next – all turbo charged and delivered at the speed of light, of course.

"Korekyojinn is not a studio-based project, but we don't perform very often," Tatsua says. "Once every two or three months, because guitarist Kido is too busy." While that's the case, Tatsua is also the major songwriter for Korekyojinn (as he is with Ruins). "I compose all of Korekyokinn's songs," he says, "but I get some inspiration from the guitarist and bassist, and of course there is room for improvisation."

"We record a new album when we have enough songs for an album," he explains. "I'm not working only for Korekyojinn and have lot of projects, so sometimes it takes a long time."

One interesting aspect of the Korekyojinn project that carries over from Ruins is their album covers: each depicts large, ancient statues from different eras, such as the Egyptian Sphinx, Easter Island Moai and a Buddha head. The imagery is deliberately chosen by Tatsua. "After I started Ruins, I have been interested in stones, ruins and ancient monuments. I have been traveling around the world, taking a lot of pictures and then used these pictures for my album covers. From my collection, I selected Megalithic statues for Korekyojinn albums, because 'kyojinn' means giants."

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Photo: Peter Gannushkin / downtownmusic.net