

Global Hip Hop Studies
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ABSTRACT

Many people assume that Japanese language and culture make the country an unlikely place for a robust hip hop scene, but in fact, Japanese emcees, DJs, breakers and visual artists have a long and varied history of contributing to global hip hop. From small nightclubs to giant arenas, Japan's hip hop artists run the gamut of underground to pop, with a wide range of approaches and styles.

Japan's hip hop scene continues to evolve and expand, developing in new and interesting directions some two and a half decades since I first encountered the music in 1994. At that time, Japanese rap musicians were experiencing what they called an 'ice age', facing a sceptical recording industry that had yet to witness a big hit. By the fall of 1995, three different singles hit the million-selling mark and 'J-Rap' entered mainstream consciousness. In the years since, Japanese artists have been making all variety of hip hop, with active local scenes from Okinawa in the south to Hokkaido in the north. The late-1990s club scene became the launch pad for underground artists, some of whom developed long and successful careers. In recent decades, styles have evolved, emerged and disappeared, as scenes become more internationally connected through the interwebs of online and in-person exchange.

Some features of hip hop in Japan will sound familiar to scholars, artists and producers of the music elsewhere. The seminal track 'Rapper's Delight' (1979) travelled the world and played in Tokyo discos too. Films like *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1983) and even *Flashdance* (1983) introduced young Japanese to breakdancing, who then brought it to Tokyo parks. The scratch DJ sounds of Grandmaster Flash and others inspired experimental approaches to

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**JAPANESE
PRODUCERS TO
KNOW**

- DJ Krush
- Nujabes
- Koenm
- Phew
- Zombie-Chang

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turntablism in the 1980s. In the 1980s, the overseas tours of groups like Public Enemy and Run-DMC made a big impact in Japan as well.

I arrived on the scene in Tokyo in the summer of 1994 as a graduate student in cultural anthropology, eager to explore my research questions surrounding cultural globalization (Condry 2006). Was the spread of cultural forms like hip hop in Japan best understood as a kind of cultural imperialism, imposing western styles and practices on the Japanese people? Or should we see the global spread of hip hop as local and distinctive transformations of the music and style that deserve to be recognized as original in their own right? At the time, there were also interesting questions about whether hip hop would ever take root in the country. Since Japanese people are known for being quiet and receding, would they really embrace the 'I represent me' ethos of rap music?

Another hurdle involved assertions that the Japanese language was incompatible with rap's emphasis on rhythm and rhyme. The language does not rely on stress accents, so Japanese emcees must add in accented pronunciation to make the language 'sound like English'. As my emcee friend Umedy told me during that first research trip, '[w]hen I first started rapping, my lyrics just sounded like *fuwa fuwa fuwa*' ('soft with little punch'). Moreover, in Japanese, the verb comes at the end of a sentence and there are only a few different verb endings. This makes it easy to rhyme, but difficult to make interesting rhymes. In addition, Japanese poetry relies more on counting syllables (*mora*, actually) than on rhyme, as in the 5-7-5 form of a haiku.

In 1994, when I spoke to people at the centre of the music industry – record company people, radio DJs and music magazine writers – I found that among these elites the consensus was that there was no future for hip hop in Japan. In addition to the cultural and linguistic challenges, I heard things like, '[t]he kids are just in it for fashion. They don't understand Black culture in America. They don't understand the history of civil rights'.. They argued hip hop was a fad that would quickly pass. Many people gently suggested that I should probably study something else. But they also had one bit of advice that turned out to be very helpful. They said, '[g]o to the nightclubs. You can see for yourself how lame Japanese hip hop is'.

So, I went to the all-night Tokyo clubs, where artists perform between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m., the witching hours during which Tokyo's extensive public transit system shuts down for the night. Onstage, I heard testimonials from artists saying things like this, '[t]hey say there's no future for hip hop in Japan, but they're wrong! It's the greatest music out there, and we'll teach you'. They patiently explained rhyming, flow, scratch DJing, breakdance, graffiti and more. This was the puzzle at the time: who would prevail? The elite gatekeepers who controlled access to record companies and media or the young people performing in small nightclubs for their peers? Could the local artists' enthusiasm overcome the problems posed by the Japanese cultural tendencies and features of the language? These many years later, the answer is clear: the young people who built the scene in tiny clubs in front of small groups of fans, gradually building a network of like-minded artists and organizers, won the day over the old and powerful. Cultural and linguistic challenges proved no barrier either. It is a lesson that I think about a lot in the context of the many challenges we face in the world today, especially those where young people are leading the charge against a sometimes sceptical and often powerful older generation. The history of hip hop in Japan demonstrates that young people who organically build small communities of passionate friends and fellow travellers can overcome a powerful, cynical elite.

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An early moment for introducing hip hop to Japan was the screening of the film *Wild Style* in Tokyo in the fall of 1983. Directed by Charlie Ahearn, the narrative film follows the adventures of New York City graffiti artists, and also features clubs where emerging hip hop artists were showing their skills as DJs, emcees and dancers. The filmmaker and several musicians and other artists travelled to Japan for the screening, where they performed in department stores, which were art hangouts at the time. The scenes of breakers, scratch DJs and rappers on Japanese TV and in-person at Ikebukuro's Sunshine City shopping mall were an early inspiration for some in the audience, including for example DJ Krush.

But early efforts to create Japanese rap music faced strong headwinds. Ito Seiko and Tinnie Punx, President BPM, Takagi Kan and others generated cult followings, sometimes mixing punk and rap. Playful lyrics from a variety of early 1990s groups caught my attention with their wordplay and joking criticism of Japanese pop culture, such as Rhymester making fun of a penchant to judge personality by blood type ('A-B-AOB, I can't live within those categories') and Scha Dara Parr ('Protect him from what he wants', a sly take on consumerism). These artists found homes on record labels like File Records, Major Force and P-Vine, but through 1994, they had not achieved hits, hence, the scepticism I met on that first research trip.

In 1995, early breakthrough songs of Japanese hip hop came from intersections between rap groups and more established pop stars. Ozawa Kenji was a former guitarist with the band Flipper's Guitar before collaborating with the rap trio Scha Dara Parr on the smash hit 'Kon'ya wa boogie back' ('Boogie back tonight'). East End had produced a couple of underground albums before creating 2 million-selling singles with Yuri, a former pop idol with the megagroup Tokyo Performance Doll. East End X Yuri's songs 'Maicca' and 'Da.Yo.Ne.' took youthful slang mixed with catchy, sampled beats – shooting up the charts to become million-selling singles. Suddenly, Japanese rap was heard everywhere, associated with what became known as a 'party rap' vibe and drawing large, women-centred audiences.

Meanwhile, other underground artists pushed back against the idea that rap was primarily about youthful goofing around and instead cheered on their largely male audiences with slogans such as *chōshi wa dô dai, ikareta kyōdai?* ('how are you, my angry brothers?'). Microphone Pager, You the Rock, ECD, King Giddra and Buddha Brand, for example, released albums that focused more on social commentary and a *haa-kou* ('hard core') style. They argued for the importance of recognizing the protest and social commentary undercurrents of hip hop music. King Giddra drew its name from the three-headed space monster of Godzilla films, and also referenced US groups like Public Enemy, with a play on the lyric 'power from the sky' from the song 'Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos' translating into the Japanese *sora kara no chikara* (note the rhyme). In 1996, a pair of outdoor festivals highlighted this divide between party rap and hard core. The Big LB Matsuri featured a showcase of Little Bird Nation groups including Scha Dara Parr, Tokyo No.1 Soul Set and Kaseki Cider to a sunny, smiling largely female audience. A week later, the outdoor concert Thumpin' Camp featured a showcase of more underground artists including Rhymester, King Giddra, You the Rock and more, shouting in the rain to a largely male audience. The back and forth continued through the 1990s, culminating in the 1999 anthem by Rhymester called 'B-Boyism', which declared the ideology of hip hop was one of constantly improving oneself in the interest of perfecting the aesthetics of hip hop. Rhymester and their Funky

Grammar family of rap groups also charted a middle ground, drawing an even mix of male and female fans.

Thus, the era of the late 1990s was a time in which hip hop took root in Japan through the *genba* (pronounced with a hard 'g' as in 'Gary') or night-clubs, where hip hop was actualized. As I argue in my book *Hip-Hop Japan* (Condry 2006), hip hop became Japanese through these small, local performances that offered inspiration and networking opportunities for new generations of artists. In other places, terms like 'crew' or 'posse' might define collaborative groupings. In Japan, the word *famirii* ('family') was often used to characterize groups with similar artistic approaches who combined their efforts in producing events and recordings. Families of rap groups with different styles developed distinct followings and approaches, and it was the varieties of competition among these families, not some overarching approach to 'Japaneseness' that characterizes the scene's evolution. Contrary to the arguments of some social theorists, hip hop came to Japan not through abstract 'linking of localities' (Robertson 1995: 35) nor was it 'cultural imperialism' (Tomlinson 1991). It is better understood as '*genba* globalization' where small communities emerged around impactful performances that literally 'move the crowd'. This did not produce a global homogenization of culture. On the contrary, both hip hop culture and Japanese culture were expanded in new ways thanks to these musical and cultural intersections.

A nice example of this cultural mixing can be seen in the evolution of some of the lingo around hip hop recommendations in Japan. In the mid-1990s, free papers in Tokyo would review new albums positively by saying, 'Yo! Check it!'. Over time, this phrasing was transliterated into *katakana*, which is the syllabary (like an alphabet but each letter is a syllable) for foreign words in Japan, as 'Yo! チェッキ!' (*chekki*). Then, it became popular to change the first syllable to the kanji character 要 (*yō*), which means 'necessarily'. In the end, this produces the bilingual pun 'you must check it', which requires readers to know Japanese and hip hop. Indeed, it is a kind of visual gag that does not work with the roman alphabet.

The country has also a wide and varied history of graffiti and breaking. In the 1990s, a mile-long strip next to the Sakuragicho train station in Yokohama, a port city about a half hour from Tokyo, was home to an incredible array of street art. When I interviewed a police officer from the area, he noted his appreciation that the visuals were largely self-policed, saying that when offensive images appeared, they were quickly covered over. The breaking scene as well continues to develop and evolve. Crazy-A was one of the forerunners, breaking in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo in the early 1990s. He also, helped establish Rock Steady Crew Japan, a spinoff of Rock Steady Crew in New York City, which was featured in the film *Flashdance*, for example. Dance competitions across Japan highlight the incredible skills of local street dance teams. Talented street dance denizens in Japan are eagerly looking forward to breaking's debut as an Olympic sport in 2024 (which is the topic of *Global Hip Hop Studies's* next Special Issue).

Into the 2000s, the scene fragmented and evolved in fascinating ways. Musicians from around Japan brought new dialects and sensibilities to Japanese hip hop. A group called Tha Blue Herb from Sapporo in northern Japan developed an abstract and poetic style. Nujabes became worldwide phenomena with his cosmic, spiritual production of lo-fi beats, carried internationally in part through the anime series *Samurai Champloo*, which mixed hip hop themes with samurai movie tropes, freely re-imagining both. This connection to the popular television programme may help explain why, for

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many Americans, Japanese hip hop is associated with Nujabes, who is the producer Seba Jun – his artist name is his name spelled backwards. A burgeoning battle between Tokyo and the Kyoto areas of Japan came to symbolize the widening split among styles and approaches. The group Infumiai Kumiai (literally, ‘rhyme union’) from the Kansai region of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe were among those staking claim to a ‘west side’ style as distinct from Tokyo. More recently, hip hop from southern Japan includes groovy, meandering sample-based beats and rhymes by artists like Narisk and Freez. In Okinawa, mega-hit emcee Awich brings her own distinctive style of toughness, while underground producers like Harikuyamaku Dub and Churashima Navigator remake old folk song themes as contemporary reggae and hip hop.

Into the 2010s, the Japanese hip hop scene has continued to diversify and expand. One hears more English now in Japanese rap songs, with bilingual rappers like Miyachi. Biracial hip hop artists are increasingly adding key notes to Japan’s musical history, including folks like OMSB, DJ Lil’Yukichi who raps as Cherry Brown and the mellifluous R&B singing of vocalist JC of *oon* (‘hoon’). Listeners are also increasingly hearing more English language in Japanese raps, with bilingual artists like Miyachi developing in new directions after pioneers like Shing02 and Verbal of M-Flo. Moment Joon, born in South Korea, is a recent emcee notable for speaking about the immigrant experience in his Japanese-language (with some Korean) raps. Other artists are bringing an electronic sensibility to hip hop as well, blurring the lines between genres, with women artists such as Zombie-Chang and Okinawa Electric Girl Saya.

In retrospect, despite the early scepticism of music industry elites, it would have been surprising if hip hop had not taken root, alongside virtually every other genre imaginable, from techno/house to salsa. Other key scholars explore various styles of Japanese music including jazz (Atkins 2001), reggae (Sterling 2010) and *chindon’ya* which is a style of perambulatory street music for advertising (Abe 2018). Noriko Manabe (2015) explores protest music in the aftermath of the ‘triple disaster’ of 3.11, namely, earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima of 2011. Hip hop artists appeared regularly in the anti-nuclear power protests in Tokyo in the wake of these tragedies.

Andrew Armstrong (2019) produced an in-depth study of the Kansai area music scene, focusing especially on what he calls a ‘ghetto gangsta’ style of the artist Anarchy, who comes from a poor area of Kyoto and has emerged as both a leading pop star and a tough guy from a rough background. The 2012 documentary film *Danchi no Yume* (roughly, ‘dreams from the projects’) portrays Anarchy and his crew onstage, in the studio, and in everyday life, as they welcome home a friend released from jail, and talk with Anarchy’s father who is a rock-and-roller and tattoo artist who seemed to spend more on his car than on raising his son. It is a portrayal of people of Japan with lower incomes, neglected politically and economically, but also their aspirations in finding a voice through hip hop. Shingo Nishinari takes his name from his socio-economically depressed neighbourhood near Kyoto as well, bringing a sympathetic and activist approach to his lyricism. Chuck Clenney (2018) provides a fascinating overview of female Japanese MCs who are ‘changing the world of hip hop’, including artists such as Akkogorilla, Rumi and DJ Misoshiru/MC Gohan.

Looking back on these decades of hip hop in Japan, it is now clear that the ‘*genba*’ or ‘actual site’ of Japanese hip hop culture has spread far beyond the small nightclubs where I did my fieldwork from the mid-1990s through

the early 2000s. The internet has made the music more available worldwide. Some Japanese rap artists are now overseas, as we watch 88rising keep rising, and London-based artists like Miso Extra and Kero Kero Bonito bringing new bilingual styles. In Japan in the 2010s, a late-night TV show called *Freestyle Dungeon* hosted by the emcee Zeebra spawned a movement in young Japanese people engaging in MC battles. Arguably, Japan has become the world centre for rap battles with high schoolers across the country competing for a spot on the national stage. There is also a long history of Japanese scratch DJs making their mark in world competitions. The DMC World DJ Championships, for example, have been won by Japanese DJs four times, including Kentaro (2002), DJ Izoh (2012), DJ Yuto (2016) and the youngest DJ ever to win, DJ Rena at age 12. Above all, what we see is that the 'Japaneseness' of Japanese hip hop can mean many things, and in fact, the local, so called 'native' aspects are always mixed with a transnational awareness. Since 2018, I have hosted a Japanese hip hop radio show *Near & Far* on WMBR 88.1 FM Cambridge in the United States (<https://wmbr.org/> with an archive at <https://www.mixcloud.com/iancondry/>), and I am continually struck by the incredible range of sounds and styles that keep emerging among artists such as Foodman, DJ Baku, Yayoi Daimon and many others. Hip hop has become a global phenomenon, thanks to the intrepid efforts of countless international artists, refining and transforming what hip hop can be and Japan is part of this global cipher. 'Yo! Check it!'

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