

“Textuality as social action: reframing popular music in Shōwa era Japan”

University of Tartu

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Abstracts of the papers

Marié Abe, University of California, Berkeley

“From Gendered Labor to Dances for the Dead: Social Life of Tankō Bushi”

Bon-odori, popular folk dance that syncretizes indigenous ancestral worship and Buddhism, has become a backbone of summertime Japanese social life and yet remains relatively understudied. This paper tracks the social life of the most quintessential bon-odori song, Tankō Bushi, as it transposed from a popular urban song to a party tune at a geisha establishment, a women’s labor song, a regional ancestral ritual dance, and into a nationally beloved bon odori song during the first half of the 20th century—as it became entangled with histories of both the Japanese and US imperialisms. Further, by examining the circuitous route through which the tune further ensnares other modes of expressions to become a platform for the post 3-11 antinuclear movement, for an expression of Japanese Hawai’ian diasporic subjectivity, and for an imagined affective alliance between Japan and Latin America in 2020s, I call for an understanding of the ubiquitous bon-odori as embodied and dynamic assemblage of multiple histories, political aspirations, and transnational imaginaries. In tracing the social life of the song, I am interested in unpacking the tension between various registers of difference—regional, gendered, sexualized, classed—sedimented in the song on the one hand, and the homogenizing ethno-national subjectivity that is associated with the tune on the other—and their geographical implications. Secondly, I’m interested in the song, and bon odori at large, as a living practice that has emerged through unexpected articulation of multiple forms of musical and dance practices—as a way of challenging the epistemological limitations of thinking across categories of performing arts in English and Japanese (folk, popular, traditional, song, dance, performing arts, *minyō*, etc). Third, I’m interested in taking seriously the embodiment together with local ontologies that allow for not only commemoration of the dead, but also the production of imaginative and affective alliances.

Alexander Murphy, Clark University

“Assimilation, Movement, Errantry: Rephrasing Jazz in Japan’s Mid-Century”

This paper traces the movements of Betty Inada, Helen Sumida, and James Araki, three California-born Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) jazz performers who pursued careers in Japan from the early 1930s to the mid-1950s. In so doing, it aims to reconsider a prevailing historical narrative of jazz in Japan that tends to emphasize its postwar assimilation via the military bases of the Allied Occupation. In this account, the efflorescence of jazz in Japan is framed largely as a product of American tutelage, credited to the "schooling" of young Japanese musicians in the genre by U.S. servicemen and situated squarely within the dancehalls and "enlisted men's clubs" built to entertain Occupation forces. In contrast, this paper shifts its focus away from U.S. military and state actors to consider the vital yet under-researched role that the aforementioned Nisei performers played in the development of jazz in Japan across the transwar period, and how a fuller account (or "rephrasing") of their significance might help to foreground a longer transpacific history composed of migratory movements, errant gestures, and Afro-Asian encounters unfolding both within and beyond the carceral borders of empire and state power.

Michael Furmanovsky, Ryukoku University

“Anticipating the Asadora Effect: Kasagi Shizuko, NHK’s Boogie Woogie (2023) and the Fabrication of Japanese Popular Culture History” (online)

In October 2023, NHK will release “Boogie Woogie,” a new morning television drama (Asadora) based on the life of the pre-and post-war jazz singer and actress Kasagi Shizuko (1914-1985). This series has been an important vehicle for educating a general television audience on the lives of relatively unknown Meiji, Taisho and Shōwa-era female pioneers for over six decades. The fictionalized story of Kasagi’s life is expected to attract a domestic audience of close to twenty million as well as a significant number of non-Japanese viewers who are familiar with remakes of songs such as “Tokyo Boogie Woogie.” In anticipation of its release, an effort is made to provide a detailed narrative and analysis of the woman known for cheering up Japanese society in the immediate post-war years through her jazz-influenced “boogie-woogie” songs. The presentation will include around one hundred curated images of the singer collected over the course of a decade of research in the larger world of early and mid-Showa entertainment. It traces her traumatic and dramatic life as a woman negotiating a variety of gender-based barriers including single-motherhood and the death of her younger lover. Finally, too, it will explore and deconstruct her largely unknown role as the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of thousands of post-war sex-industry workers and her decision to retire from singing and focus on comedic acting following the rise of imitator Misora Hibari in the early 1950s.

James (Jim) Dorsey, Dartmouth College

“Do-It-Yourself Social Activism Through Folk Music in 1960s Japan”

Due to censorship by both the recording and broadcast industries, the composition and singing of ideologically motivated folk songs in politically volatile 1960s Japan was primarily tasked to the fans of the music. There were, of course, gatherings at which the rising stars would sing: labor union meetings, anti-war protests, and student demonstrations. But distinguishing the movement were the smaller, less formal gatherings where attendees were mentored in the production of the music. “Folk camps” and “folk schools” appeared across the country; they included both political discussions and workshops focused on musical composition. As an aid to the less experienced, participants were encouraged to compose “kaeuta,” songs with original lyrics set to familiar melodies. This lowered the bar to participation. The gatherings also included sing-alongs, and photographs show more people on the stage than in the audience. Clearly, these were a “do-it-yourself” affairs. A second driving force of the folk song movement was the “publication” and distribution of a broadsheet titled “Kawaraban.” This modest pamphlet was primarily the brainchild of Katagiri Yuzuru, the theoretician of the movement. Produced with a mimeograph machine, it was a hodgepodge of songs (original and translated), cartoons, political diatribes, and letters from the readers. The songs were all presented with an eye to enabling the reader to sing for themselves. For example, the first issue, created in July 1967, included a Japanese language translation of Bob Dylan’s “The Ballad of Hollis Brown.” A footnote to the song encouraged readers to listen to the English original first, then try singing it in Japanese. A diagram illustrated the finger positioning for the Em chord, the only one needed for this simple song. Clearly this (and so much of the rest of this broadsheet) was intended as a sort of “do-it-yourself” manual for political folk singing.

Scott W. Aalgaard, Wesleyan University

“Virtual Book Talk: “Homesick Blues: Politics, Protest, and Musical Storytelling in Modern Japan””

The book “Homesick Blues: Politics, Protest, and Musical Storytelling in Modern Japan” (University of Hawai’i Press, 2023) explores how artists, fans, amateur practitioners, and others have used music to tell stories of everyday life in Japan from the late 1940s to 2018, a practice that the book calls “musical storytelling.” At its core, musical storytelling is a political practice, presenting potent-if ambiguous-world-producing potentials as social actors generate and share stories of themselves and others in ways that intersect with and inform social and political life. Sometimes, musical storytelling is used by powerful entities to reinforce dominant geopolitical, cultural, or economic visions. More often, it is deployed as a means of interfering in or redirecting those visions. In all cases, attending to musical storytelling helps reveal the complex, sometimes unexpected ways that everyday life has been imagined and critiqued across disparate moments in modern Japanese history. Homesick Blues is comprised of five chapters, each of which addresses specific instances of musical storytelling in the contexts of their own political, economic, and social histories. From postwar jazz to contemporary rock, from 1960s “anti-war folk” to Japanese pops (enka) and the “girls’ rock” of the 1980s, the book explores the political uses of music,

reassesses so-called "protest music," and grapples with the complex political-ness of artists themselves, many of whom have continued to interrogate conditions of everyday life in Japan well into the contemporary moment. Homesick Blues assembles a diverse ensemble of voices, some of whom are now appearing in English-language scholarship for the very first time, including industry stakeholders, rock stars, fans, newscasters, Kyoto-based folk singers, jazz singers, karaoke enthusiasts and even US military personnel.

Savannah-Rivka Powell, University of Tartu

“Aynu puri as a Culture-Bound Compass: Guiding Autonomy in the Ainu Music Revival Movement”

For the Indigenous Ainu, traditions have been heavily impacted by pressure to assimilate into Japanese society. The continued crisis caused by colonization has greatly impeded the documentation and practice of traditional music. Ainu music revival has been central in maintaining a sense of belonging and bolstering community resilience. Archival recordings have aided in this effort, however, my interviews with singers have revealed limitations of available materials. When recordings are studied by Ainu performers to be shared, the Ainu subculture being represented is rarely conveyed to audience members. This has the effect of presenting a falsely homogenous image of Ainu communities that are richly diverse in regional variance. For under-represented Ainu identities this can have a devastating impact to broader efforts for recognition and inclusion. Interviews I conducted in Hokkaido in 2022 highlighted how Ainu singers are actively engaged in processes of deconstructing formulaic patterns of traditional performances to be applied to the (re)creation of old and new compositional formats. These endeavours are guided by the culturally grounded concept of Aynu puri, or desired conduct based on ancestral conventions. As individual interpretations of Aynu puri can be equally diverse as the greater Ainu community, I will propose the highly flexible and personally customizable framework of the Aynu puri Compass as a guiding framework in these endeavours. The case of the Ainu people is particularly relevant to discourses of performance heritage preservation in contemporary society given their remarkable perseverance and their uniquely flexible approach in the maintenance of their musical practices.

Lasse Lehtonen, University of Helsinki

“New Music, New Families? Popular music, youth, and ‘New Values’ in the Shōwa 50s”

"New Music" (*nyū myūjikkū*) and "New Family" (*nyū famirii*) are both vogue concepts that emerged in Japanese media around the mid-1970s. Contemporary discourse about popular music has typically defined New Music as a novel genre that upheld strong ideals of authorship and individuality, reflecting the changing values of Japanese youth. New Family, on the other hand, referred to young, urban couples who embodied more liberal (namely, less patriarchal and arguably more "Western") values compared to their parents' generation. While both concepts are thus related to a purported shift of

values among youth, they are also marked by semantic ambiguity. There is a debate surrounding whether New Music can be classified as a genre at all, and subsequent analyses have contended that New Family was predominantly a construct of the media rather than a tangible sociocultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, the influential nature of these "new" phenomena in contemporary media discussions cannot be denied. Therefore, it can be argued that they originated from a societal demand. This presentation explores the discursive links between New Music and New Families in modern Japan and asserts that the perceived "newness" in both, while subject to debate in hindsight, served as a representation of an idealized transformation during a decade marked by significant social changes. Consequently, both concepts contributed to the larger societal backdrop that witnessed, among other phenomena, the relatively brief media trend of liberal feminism. In this regard, they can also be seen as an implicit extension of the idealism prevalent in the 1960s, particularly within mainstream narratives.

Anita Drexler, Osaka University

“Nihonjinron through the lense of the furusato: Nyū myūjikkū-affiliated singer-songwriters and textualities of Japanese identity in the Shōwa era Japan”

Japan of the mid-to-late Shōwa era not only saw an influx of foreign influence that had accompanied a lost war and the successive transformations of society. Stakeholders in arts, politics and economics also sought ways to imagine a distinctive “Japanese” identity through all courses of life. When by the 1970s, a newly-accumulated wealth increased not only the possibilities within the country, but made it necessary to create a national identity that could withstand on a more global stage, the seeds for an ongoing public debate about the cultural and social uniqueness of Japan were sown through popular “nihonjinron” texts. Against this historical backdrop, in my presentation, I aim to illustrate how singer-songwriters of the then highly influential current nyū myūjikkū, through their approach towards the furusato or “hometown” trope, either constructed or rejected essentialist conceptions of “Japaneseness”. Based on Christine R. Yano’s notion of a “personal” and a “national” furusato, and an analysis of roughly 50 songs released between the early 1970s and early 1990s by nyū myūjikkū A-listers, I argue that nyū music artists not only displayed considerable innovation compared to how the topic was handled in popular music genres such as kayōkyoku or enka, but, by connecting their songs to then-ongoing nihonjinron debates, also stressed their authorship and their status as “artists” and “thinkers” rather than “mere” performers. As a further step, I argue that this also makes a case for reconsidering nyū myūjikkū as a socially conscious musical current of the Shōwa era, rather than an apolitical one.

Moritz Sommet, University of Fribourg

“Ōtaki Eiichi and the cultural politics of history and language in Japanese popular music”

A prolific singer, musician, and producer, Ōtaki Eiichi 大瀧詠一 (1948-2013) first made his mark on the contemporary Japanese pop scene through his participation in the influential rock band Happy End. He later founded his own record label and became an iconic singer-songwriter with his solo album *A Long Vacation* (1981). A common thread running through his work, which is marked by pastiches of classic American pop music delivered in an idiosyncratic vocal style, is the relationship between language and culture. I show how the question of cultural identity surfaces in the language of some of Ōtaki's more famous songs and contextualize his position through an analysis of three key texts that seek to engage with this question by historicizing it: First, Ōtaki's contribution to the 'Japanese-language rock controversy' (Nihongo rokku ronsō 日本語ロック論争) of the early 1970s; then his diagrammatic conception of Japanese music history as a continuously evolving struggle for dominance between cultural 'denominators and numerators' (Bunbo bunshi ron 分母分子論, 1984); and finally, his vision of popular music as a spectrum of psychological 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' orientations (Poppusu “fudō setsu” ポップス“普動説”, 1991).

Ken Kato, Osaka University

“Beyond Nostalgia: Exploring City Pop's Revival and Its Impact on Japanese Cultural Identity”

This paper delves into City Pop, a musical genre that emerged during the mid-1970s, to investigate the shifting self-perceptions among Japanese music creators and audiences from the Showa to the Heisei and Reiwa eras. Despite experiencing a decline by the late 1980s, City Pop has reemerged as a significant musical heritage in Japan since the 2000s, with dedicated fan communities forming overseas through online platforms in the 2010s. Songs belonging to this genre generally exhibit common characteristics in terms of lyrical content, visuals, and sound, although the genre's boundaries have often been redefined by DJs and musicians. It is noteworthy that while City Pop songs are commonly perceived as optimistic, apolitical driving music, they are also highly regarded as authentic and valuable. Previous research has shed light on the genre's unique historical context, and ongoing studies are exploring its broader influential relationships. This paper concentrates on the recent surge in City Pop's recognition abroad and examines the diverse reactions, uplift, and conflicts experienced by Japanese audiences. Furthermore, it analyzes Japan's evolving position in the global music market and the intermittent transformations in Japanese social dynamics from the Showa era to the present. By delving into the resurgence of City Pop and its sociocultural impact, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the genre's significance within Japan and its reception overseas. Through an interdisciplinary approach encompassing musicology, cultural studies, and market analysis, it highlights the multifaceted nature of City Pop's revival and its implications for contemporary Japanese society.

Lauri Kitsnik, Hiroshima University/Ca' Foscari University of Venice

“Warp to Shōwa! Transtemporal Geopolitics of the Crazy Ken Band”

A collective known for its seamless amalgamation of a variety of musical styles ranging from rockabilly and blues to funk and soul, with elements of enka and rap, the Crazy Ken Band was founded in 1997. However, it could be argued that, above all, the band’s musically eclectic and lyrically nostalgic approach engages in a playful dialogue with a bygone and yet omnipresent era, commonly known in Japan as Shōwa (1926-89). This deliberate gesture of temporal displacement reveals a distinctive set of postcolonial anxieties, and possible pleasures, that are being played out against the backdrop of subsequent shifts in Japan’s geopolitical realities. While the Crazy Ken Band stays mostly within the musical idioms imported from the United States, the song lyrics, replete with imagery of locations far and close, make repeated forays into the East Asian region and beyond. This focus on locality is further condensed by an additional emphasis on Yokohama and its environs, the childhood home to the band’s charismatic lead singer and main songwriter Yokoyama Ken, as well as the seminal place for transcultural musical contacts in postwar Japan. In this paper, by exploring and delineating the outline of an idiosyncratic musical and mental map, I will attempt to delve beneath the seemingly unpretentious surface of the Crazy Ken Band to find traces of a more serious engagement with and reconsideration of the relationship of Japan to its geopolitical Others.