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The Reception of American Jazz in Japan: An Outline of Issues

Abstract

The following article presents the history of Japanese jazz, from the first musical contacts to its contemporary successes and problems of the jazz music market. An important role in the development and evolution of jazz in Japan (even before the post-war US occupation of that country) was played by the presence of American military forces in the Philippines, which, as an American-dependent territory, maintained cultural contacts with the United States, where jazz had been born at the beginning of the 20th century and became one of the most popular forms of music. Apart from contact with Filipino musicians, who were the first source of jazz education for the Japanese, the rise of jazz cafés (*jazzu-kissa*) was also important for the development of jazz in the Land of the Cherry Blossom. The cafés played a huge role in generating interest in jazz and shaping musical tastes. The article also shows the influence of jazz on the formation of a modern, American-type lifestyle among the Japanese middle-class. In addition, the article discusses the complex issue of the authenticity of Japanese jazz in relation to American jazz and the role of world-famous

Japanese musicians, such as Toshiko Akiyoshi, in overcoming stereotypes. The aim of the article is to demonstrate the universality and at the same time the local character of contemporary Japanese jazz as well as the distinguishing features of jazz in Japan.

Keywords

jazz, Japanese jazz, *jazzu-kissa*, local jazz scene, Japanese culture, American culture, Americanisation, Toshiko Akiyoshi

Jazz and Its Local Varieties

What is jazz? A rich, lively and changeable phenomenon, hard to define once and for all, jazz can be analysed with the tools of many academic disciplines and research fields. It provides an interesting subject for study, particularly in the context of Japanese culture. Jazz can be viewed within a broader perspective as part of musical culture, and music is one of the few cultural phenomena which are universal to all humankind. We do not know of any human communities to which the practice of music would be alien. Its universal presence in culture has led many scholars to look for the sources of music in the so-called 'human nature', interpreted in philosophical or biological terms¹. The topic is also worth considering from the point of view of culture studies. Within every known human community, we can distinguish practices which researchers perceive and interpret as music. Still, the question of music and the phenomena encompassed by this term only makes sense in culture studies after we have defined what group of people we wish to study, whose consciousness and in what historical period is the subject of our research. From this perspective, in many musical communities associated with specific geographic regions or cities we can distinguish characteristics which are common to a given musical environment, be it the performance style, the shared history and tradition of the place, or the musicians' education, which likewise plays a major role. Many factors can probably be taken

¹ N.L. Wallin, B. Merker, S. Brown, eds, *The Origins of Music* (2000).

into account. These initial assumptions open up a field for scientific research.

Jazz first made its appearance in the early 20th-century in the southern United States. Of special significance on the musical map of this new musical genre was New Orleans, where jazz took the shortest time to crystallise, and where its most eminent representatives were then active. The music of the South first conquered the whole of the USA, and then began to spread worldwide, which coincided with the first symptoms of a global culture being born. Jazz as a musical novelty took strongest root and developed the most successfully in Western culture, as well as in places which modelled their image on US culture. In the various regions and countries to which jazz was transplanted, it underwent a process of acculturation, highly varied depending on place and time. The mechanisms of this process were determined by numerous historical and social factors, from favourable circumstances of intercultural contacts to the political or economic superiority of the US, to the role played by outstanding personalities propagating the genre². We should also remember why it was possible for jazz to develop. The reason may seem obvious nowadays, but it constituted a breakthrough in the 20th century. It was technological progress, the rise of the record industry, the radio, and talking pictures, that played a major role in the success of jazz. The genre also became an alternative to classical music. In Japan, the early forms of jazz were popularised in the first decades of the 20th century by US and Filipino jazz bands touring in the homeland of the samurai. Filipino bands constituted the vast majority, and the popularity of their concerts held on ocean liners contributed to the dissemination of US popular and jazz music in such Asiatic port cities as Shanghai, Manila, and Hong Kong³. Filipinos had become acquainted with American jazz in their own country owing to the presence of US occupying forces. The growth of Osaka as a hub of mass entertainment modelled on its US forms also contributed to the propagation of jazz in the region.

Depending on where it was adopted, jazz took on specific, local shapes and types of sound, which, though differing from one another, were all based on one and the same permanent matrix. That base was

² R. Ciesielski, “Jazz w Polsce” czy “polski jazz”?, in R. Ciesielski, ed., *Jazz w kulturze polskiej*, 1 (2014), 39–54.

³ T. Atkins, *Blue Nippon* (2001), 59.

characterised, among others, by inserting the so-called 'blue notes', that is, notes which did not belong to the initial key and scale of the given piece, but were meant to add expressive force, create atmosphere, or introduce the 'call-and-response' sequence of two separate musical phrases played by different musicians, the second of which was a response and a kind of musical commentary on the first. This basic jazz form also entails the use of polyrhythms, i.e. the overlap of different rhythmic progressions performed by different musicians on different instruments or applied in different parts within a given piece, and of improvisation as the most typical element of standard jazz compositions.

Though the phenomenon of jazz essentially originated in the United States, it is now universal, though not uniform. Jazz performance styles differ from one place to another. Their emergence in time and space has made it possible not only to distinguish US jazz styles, their evolution and geographic dissemination in other countries, but also to account for the strong diversification of jazz in different cultures and regions, despite the presence of that unifying element which Rafał Ciesielski, one of the few and most prolific Polish jazz scholars, calls the common 'cultural idiom' of jazz. Here is how the author aptly explains the essence of local jazz idioms:

Developing in specific cultural (musical and extramusical) circumstances, jazz may absorb and become saturated with their qualities to such an extent that its character becomes distinct from other traditions (including US ones). This difference makes it possible to define its characteristic features, which through the process of extension and consolidation may lead with time to the emergence of a distinct formula, a separate 'edition' or form of the local jazz idiom. This process depends on many factors and does not always occur, nor is it predetermined for any given temporal perspective. Apart from other favourable circumstances, of key significance in this context is the artistic activity of outstanding, creative individualities, who additionally attract a circle of followers among other artists. The emergence of a more or less distinct local jazz idiom is therefore a certain possibility resulting from the potential of the local musical environment. It is a kind of test (or chance?) for that environment to demonstrate and emphasise its own image within the jazz universe⁴.

⁴ Ciesielski, "Jazz w Polsce"...', 43.

This paper aims to present both the universal and the local qualities of contemporary Japanese jazz and to define the unique characteristics of this genre in Japan. My text also deals with the influence of jazz on the emergence of a modern middle-class lifestyle in Japan, modelled on the US lifestyle. I discuss the complex concerning the authenticity of Japanese jazz in relation to US jazz, and the impact of world-famous musicians such as Toshiko Akiyoshi on overcoming this stereotype.

Jazz in Japan

Jazz is not universally associated with Japan. Nevertheless, the period between the two world wars (and specifically the 1920s) is considered, in retrospect, as the golden age of jazz in the Land of the Rising Sun. The increased openness to the West allowed the genre to penetrate into great cities, so that today Japan can boast the world's largest jazz community⁵. The early days of jazz in the 1920s Japan are associated with the growing number of luxury liners crossing the Pacific. Both Americans and the Japanese travelled on those liners between the US West Coast and Japan, as well as such cities as Shanghai and Manila. Along with the crew and passengers, these liners also carried music bands which provided entertainment during the voyage. Japanese musicians travelling to San Francisco and Seattle would disembark, buy contemporary US editions of sheet music and become acquainted with American popular repertoire, including jazz. A major role in the dissemination of jazz in Japan was also played by Filipino bands playing in hotels and on ocean liners in Osaka, Shanghai, Kobe, and other cities. The presence of US army troops in the Philippines (a US colony) supposedly gave Filipino musicians the chance and incentive to gain competence in jazz music. Some Japanese musicians claimed it was at concerts given by Filipino musicians that they had first heard improvisations, so characteristic of jazz music⁶. The exact moment of the appearance of jazz in Japan is difficult to establish. One of the

⁵ 'Jazz in Japan: A History of Tradition and Modernity', <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/international-jazz-day-2014/jazz-in-japan-a-history-of-tradition-and-modernity/#.XqcioikzblX>, accessed 7 March 2019.

⁶ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 59.

factors that facilitated this process were the increasingly more frequent journeys of Japanese citizens to the United States, which allowed them to become acquainted with the new stylistic mix in music derived from both Afro-American and US cultures. Many Japanese brought back jazz recordings to their homeland, and they began to be presented on a large scale in music cafés called *jazzu-kissa*. Some music groups recorded covers of US jazz pieces; this, however, was not mere imitation. Japanese musicians adapted the music to their own culture and language, also incorporating some elements of their national culture. Unlike in the poor districts of New Orleans, which had been the cradle of jazz, in Japan the average jazz consumer belonged to the urban middle or higher middle class and had access to the latest trends, including such technological novelties as the phonograph. Jazz fans frequented the cafés, bought records, listened to the radio, visited dance clubs and went to the cinema. Jazz was one of the modern pastimes whose users were highly aware of what was seen in the society as a global cultural movement⁷. Nevertheless, in that period jazz was still not only a tool of expression and a source of entertainment, but also a symptom of the growing American influences in Japan.

Culture is the main factor of a state's ability to exert influence on others, and it therefore constitutes an element of the given country's soft power⁸. Japan's postwar occupation by the US provided the Japanese with a brutal but direct experience of jazz music. Previously they had had access to American jazz records, but now they learned all the aspects of jazz while performing in US military clubs and bases. The spirit of cultural exchange between Japanese musicians sharing their musical ideas from the stage and US soldiers did not die with the end of the country's occupation. It remained a source of civic pride for the Japanese, and jazz itself became a dominant metaphor for the internationalisation and the cosmopolitan sentiments of the Japanese society in that period. From among the famous Japanese jazz musicians who

⁷ P. Jarenwattananon, 'How Japan Came to Love Jazz', <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2014/04/30/308275726/how-japan-came-to-love-jazz?t=1551953493572>, accessed 7 March 2019.

⁸ J.S. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). The author of the notion of 'soft power' explains: 'This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them'; cf. J.S. Nye, 'The Benefits of Soft Power', <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/the-benefits-of-soft-power>, accessed 14 Feb. 2021.

began their careers in US army bases, one should mention the saxophonist Hidehiko 'Sleepy' Matsumoto, the woman composer and jazz pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi, and the sax player Sadao Watanabe⁹. US military presence made possible the development and popularisation of jazz in such cities as Tokyo, Nagoya, Kobe, and Osaka. The latter city's entertainment district, Dōtonbori, became a jazz hub known for its numerous dance salons and nicknamed 'the Japanese jazz mecca'¹⁰. This provided an opportunity for such Japanese artists as the already mentioned pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi to develop an interest in the genre and win acclaim in the professional circles, both at home and abroad. The Japanese began to exclude from jazz everything that was typically American, adapting it for the needs of their own culture. They employed such traditional instruments as, among others, the *tsuzumi* (a Japanese hand drum). They incorporated Japanese courtly melodies and an aesthetic inspired by Zen Buddhism. This did not lead, however, to a fusion of traditional Japanese music with jazz, as was the case with, among others, Afro-Cuban, Caribbean, Latin American and Brazilian music, all of which had originated in African slave history. Japanese jazz was distinct both musically and culturally. It applied a musical scale borrowed from traditional folk music, made use of traditional Japanese instruments, and involved a unique relation between the society and the music, which established the worldwide position of Japanese jazz as an exceptional and original style.

The 1960s free-jazz revolution did not last long in Japan. The early 1970s saw the appearance in that country of another major stylistic trend, namely, fusion jazz, which combined jazz harmonies and improvisations with rock, funk, and rhythm-and-blues. Some of Miles Davis' best albums were recorded live in Japan, and many of the world's leading jazz fusion stars gave concerts for huge audiences in that country. This fashion led to the emergence of hundreds of local fusion bands, which dominated the Japanese stages until the end of the century. Some of them are still popular and continue to perform. At that time, from the 1970s onwards, Japan suddenly became the main consumer market for high-quality mainstream jazz. Many Western hard-bop and post-bop performers who had lost popularity in the United States or Europe gained recognition in the Japanese market. In the 1970s, 80s and

⁹ W. Minor, *Jazz Journeys to Japan. The Heart Within* (2004), 11.

¹⁰ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 58.

90s, numerous well-known jazz albums were recorded and released in Japan. One example is Herbie Hancock's *V.S.O.P.* of 1977. At present, Japanese jazz, liberated from under the US influence, constitutes a separate music genre. This has been made possible by numerous music schools established from the late 1960s onwards. The first of them, Yamaha Institute of Popular Music, was set up in 1965 by saxophonist Sadao Watanabe on his return from studies at Boston's Berklee School of Music. Ever since the late 1990s the Japanese jazz scene has produced a vast array of original young artists playing contemporary jazz, which incorporates elements of electronics, rock, and hip-hop.

The Phenomenon of the Japanese Jazzu-Kissa

In the period when jazz became popular worldwide, no other region of the globe generated a musical space for its development which was as unique as that of the Japanese *jazzu-kissa* or the jazz cafés. They were clubs in which one could order a cup of coffee and listen to jazz played back from vinyl records¹¹ for educational purposes. *Jazzu-kissa* replaced the dance clubs, which because of promoting jazz music and their American character worried the conservative part of the Japanese elites. In 1927 the municipal authorities in Osaka issued an order which forced dance clubs to close down. Ever since the first jazz café was opened (likewise in Osaka), *jazzu-kissa* became a popular alternative to dance, since they offered most recent jazz releases, and sometimes even live performances¹². The heyday of *jazzu-kissa* came after World War II, particularly in the 1950s. Frequenting jazz cafés was a symbol of modernisation, but also of Americanisation through a sudden influx of new technology¹³, coupled with the import of US music. Though coffeehouses had existed in Japan ever since the Meiji Restoration, in the 1920s venues serving coffee and tea after the Western fashion enjoyed considerable popularity. As a result, many of them began to

¹¹ S. Linhart, S. Frühstück, eds, *The Culture of Japan as Seen through Its Leisure* (1998), 303.

¹² D. Novak, '2.5×6 Metres of Space: Japanese Music Coffeehouses and Experimental Practices of Listening', *Popular Music* 1 (2008), 15–34.

¹³ J.D. Hankins, C.S. Stevens, eds, *Sound, Space and Sociality in Modern Japan* (2014), 111.

serve alcohol as well and came closer in character to night clubs or cafés. For this reason, venues which served exclusively non-alcoholic beverages were distinguished by a separate label, *kissaten*. *Ongaku kissaten* (‘music cafés’) emerged in the 1920s. Customers came there to listen to Western-style music in the company of hostesses¹⁴. The presence of waitresses-hostesses working in such cafés reflected the Japanese society’s emerging interest in models of Western metropolitan lifestyle¹⁵. Though women’s role as music listeners or as bargirls in such venues (especially in their early period) was increasing, the cafés were primarily created by men and for men. The first *jazzu-kissa*, ‘Chigusa’, opened in 1933 in Okinawa¹⁶. By the mid-1930s, with the dissemination of US jazz in Japan, there were forty thousand music cafés in that country. They served as meeting places for young people representing a new controversial social type inspired by the American jazz era, the *moga* (Japanese for ‘modern girl’) and *mobo* (‘modern boy’). The *kissaten* (later abbreviated to *kissa*) always functioned as places where the Japanese upper classes experienced a new mode of modernisation. It was thanks to *jazzu-kissa* that Western music became associated with social reform, and in particular – with the emerging Japanese democracy¹⁷. The expansion of foreign media, technology and music increased the tensions building up around Japanese social reforms in that period. What was probably most important about the Japanese jazz cafés, though, was the role they played in the musical education of several generations of jazz fans. Even in the postwar years, when jazz became more accessible thanks to radio broadcasts, *jazzu-kissa* remained the most important venue for the absorption of the musical language of jazz. Musicians spent whole days and sometimes also nights there, listening to the most recent releases by their American idols, whose albums were too expensive and too hard to obtain to have them in private collections. It was therefore frequently in *jazzu-kissa* that musicians learnt to improvise jazz by ear. The best-known and most busy jazz cafes of that time included Yokohama’s ‘Chigusa’, Tokyo’s ‘Combo’, and Nagoya’s ‘Combo’. The one in Tokyo, a paradise

¹⁴ Y. Takahashi, ‘Why You Can’t Have Green Tea in a Japanese Coffee Shop’, in A. Ueda, *The Electric Geisha. Exploring Japan’s Popular Culture* (1994).

¹⁵ M. Silverberg, ‘Constructing a New Cultural History of Prewar Japan’, in M. Miyoshi, H.D. Harootunian, eds, *Japan in the World* (1993), 114–115.

¹⁶ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 5–74.

¹⁷ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 165–219.

for modern jazz lovers, was eternally crowded and could only hold ten musicians at a time, studying the recordings. 'Chigusa' was similarly a venue to learn bebop, and Nagoya's 'Combo' – a musicians' meeting place where Japanese-US jam sessions were held¹⁸. Virtually every major Japanese city had at least one *jazzu-kissa* in the 1950s, and every café aimed to develop its own separate and recognisable musical identity. Some specialised in New Orleans jazz, others in swing or in the various schools of modern jazz¹⁹. Professor Mike Molasky writes in his book *Post War Jazz Culture in Japan* that the cafés flourished between the 1950s and 70s also thanks to the imports of French new wave film music and to a series of live performances given in those venues by the US band Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers in 1961²⁰, which was hailed by many Japanese jazz historians as an epoch-making event²¹; it popularised funk music throughout Japan.

At the peak of their popularity, Japan had more than six hundred such jazz cafés, mainly in Tokyo and Kyoto. Nowadays, owing to the universal accessibility of music in digital formats and to the fact of Japan being an aging society, the number of *jazzu-kissa* in that country has gradually decreased, and music has moved to bars and venues which offer live performances and attract younger audiences. Today, the jazz cafés function more like museums or vinyl record collections than coffeehouses. The few that remain mainly cater for the needs of older customers. Nostalgia attracts these people to the places whose glory days coincided with the time of their youth. *Jazzu-kissa* no longer resemble the vibrant hubs once frequented by Japanese musicians. Nevertheless, the thousands of classic jazz LPs they possess function as repositories of rare recordings and treasure houses for vinyl lovers. There still exist, however, several original jazz cafés in which crowds of elderly jazz enthusiasts mix with young fans of this genre. For instance, Tokyo's 'The Pit Inn' invites the best Japanese and international jazz artists. Unlike other venues, where music is a mere background for conversations and social life, this club only attracts serious audiences, and each chair in that café faces the stage²².

¹⁸ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 200.

¹⁹ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 210.

²⁰ B. Cohen, 'Tokyo's Jazz Kissa Survive', <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20121203-tokyos-jazz-kissa-survive>, accessed 7 March 2019.

²¹ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 209.

²² Cohen, 'Tokyo's Jazz Kissa...'

The Authenticity Complex and Toshiko Akiyoshi

Japanese musicians became internationally recognisable in the 1950s and 60s. Making their mark in the US jazz scene and winning the acclaim of the American audience proved the greatest challenge. Some musicians from the Land of the Cherry Blossom attempted to overcome the authenticity complex²³, which placed US jazz in a privileged position. They therefore began to look for Japanese motifs and incorporate them into their own music. The long-standing illusion that Japan was 'a nation of imitators', mentally incapable of originality and socialised to the point of creativity having become devalued, is a stereotype that too many Japanese still accept as truth²⁴. It does not do justice to the output of such artists as Toshiko Akiyoshi. This stereotype only took shape and root in the 19th century along with the conviction that one must follow the Western example in order to gain equal treatment. The 'imitator' stereotype is still evident not only in jazz music but, most of all, in the US-Japanese competition for technological dominance.

Japan has produced many excellent jazz musicians. Among them, pride of place must be given to Toshiko Akiyoshi, the first lady of Japanese jazz, because of the scale of her success and the pioneering character of what she achieved in the field despite her gender. She is a pianist, composer, arranger and leader of jazz bands that she set up herself. In spite of the limitations that women instrumentalists encountered in those times, she founded The Cosy Quartet (1952), of which she became a professional and uncompromising leader. The status and recognition she won among her colleagues were unprecedented in the male-dominated world of jazz. Discovered in 1953 in a Tokyo jazz café by the famous US jazz pianist Oscar Peterson, she embarked on an international career and became the first Japanese musician to study at Boston's prestigious Berklee College of Music²⁵. One of Akiyoshi's protégés was the renowned Japanese sax player, Sadao Watanabe. Akiyoshi's music stands out, among others, for its conspicuous use of elements taken from Japanese culture. Following the death of Duke Ellington in 1974, whose music was claimed to have reflected his African roots, Akiyoshi began to compose pieces inspired by Japanese themes. She wanted her

²³ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 19.

²⁴ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 32–33.

²⁵ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 207.

own music to reflect her cultural heritage as well. She thus began to use Japanese historical costumes, musical scales, and harmonies. She employed traditional Japanese instruments such as the *tsuzumi* hand drum and the *kakko* double-headed drum. She also derived inspiration from traditional *nōgaku* Japanese theatre and from *tsugaru-shamisen*, a music genre that had originated in the Japanese Tsugaru Peninsula. Her music nevertheless remained strongly rooted in jazz, reflecting such influences as, among others, Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, and Bud Powell.

1980 saw a breakthrough in Toshiko Akiyoshi's career, which also proved a major landmark in the history of Japanese jazz. In that year, she won the first place in the prestigious *Down Beat* magazine's poll, in the categories of best big band, composer, and arranger. It was a time when Japan had already gained recognition as a highly developed economy and a technological giant producing consumer electronics and cars of a comparable or even better quality than those made in the USA. However, Akiyoshi's triple victory seemed to justify the claim that Japan could also outperform the United States in the field of jazz. Her triumph became such an important event in Japan that it was even celebrated in the national media, and all the Japanese, whether jazz fans or not, were proud of their compatriot's achievements. Being named as the best composer was both her personal triumph and a national success, which marked the end of the long decades when Japanese musicians strove to 'catch up' with the standards of US jazz and its authenticity²⁶.

Conclusions

Jazz is frequently perceived as a typically American genre. Much as its Afro-American roots ought to be remembered, it needs to be emphasised that nowadays jazz has become a universal phenomenon, co-created by excellent musicians worldwide. The history and evolution of jazz in Japan demonstrates the great potential of Japanese musicians, who have created original jazz compositions, given performances in many countries, and gained international recognition. It also proves

²⁶ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 222.

that Japanese society, especially in the early days of jazz, was open to musical innovations and to the Western lifestyle associated with them. Today's Japan boasts, apart from the legacy of such jazz giants as Fumio Nanri, Toshiko Akiyoshi, and Yosuke Yamashita, also a young generation of jazz musicians who have breathed a new life into the country's jazz and its institution. The international careers of such Japanese jazz artists as Takuya Kuroda and Hiromi Uehara prove that Japan has long overcome the authenticity complex with regard to the United States. Rather than copying, or being inspired by, their US counterparts, present-day Japanese musicians have won acclaim with their own original repertoire. Japan also boasts one of the largest jazz communities worldwide and the world's second music market after the USA²⁷.

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²⁷ K. Ackerman, 'Big in Japan: A History of Jazz in The Land of the Rising Sun, Part 1', <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/big-in-japan-a-history-of-jazz-in-the-land-of-the-rising-sun-part-1-by-karl-ackermann.php?page=1>, accessed 7 March 2019.

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