

KANSAI Scene

Big in Japan

a music career over here

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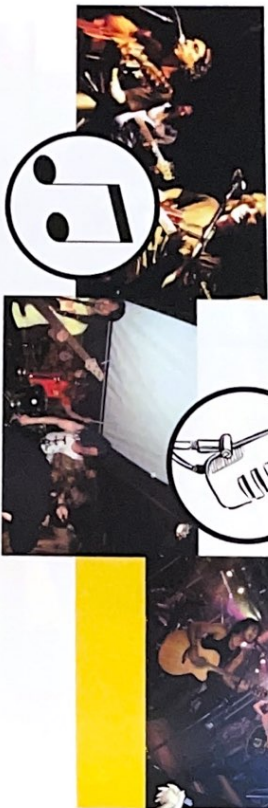
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Land of the rising star

Once upon a time, Japan was where Western rock bands came to die — it was a dinosaur's graveyard. These days, new acts are trying to break here, and their efforts are acknowledged by Sony's current audition season. Yet, this country is still a notoriously difficult nut to crack. KS meets the people who would be big in Japan.

Text & Photos: Ian Wainwright



Most foreigners coming to Japan have challenges: learning the language (Or if not, at least learning the language of "pointing and speaking with a Kansai accent"), figuring out how housing, utilities, and the all-important internet connection work, trying not to get lost constantly, figuring out the social scene, and a hundred other day-to-day problems — making it in every day life is hard enough to keep you busy for quite awhile. Yet some transplants are also trying to make it

in the other sense of the term, as music performers. Though some people have gotten a measure of success, it isn't easy. But as with aspiring musicians everywhere, those that are really committed aren't motivated by the promise of easy success.

For any band or performer trying to succeed in Japan, there are a few stages of development, though each is loosely defined, and exactly where a given group fits in might not be too clear.

AMATEUR

At the lowest level financially, there's a lot of opportunities for performers in Japan, particularly in Kansai. Guerrilla public shows, with bands setting up their own equipment on the streets and just playing, are far more tolerated here than in many Western countries, though runs with the police can happen. There are also many bars and other establishments that have live shows, and proprietors seem fairly open to new performers.

Unfortunately most of these are non-paying gigs, with no sound engineers and often no equipment, but it is a chance for performers just starting in this country to get experience playing here and get their name out in front of the public. If a lot of people come and buy drinks, performers will get asked back, ideally they establish a relationship with the owner and play gigs regularly. At this stage it's all about getting noticed, and being foreign can help. It's also about putting butts in seats, so networking is important, meaning at least one person in the band speaking Japanese fairly well is a plus. As music fans, finding good bands at this level can be very hit-or-miss. Word of mouth is the best bet, as people share good bands they've stumbled on at a bar or on the street.

Fortunately, recording a CD has been greatly democratized in the technological future-world we live in. If all you want is a CD of passable quality to sell at your gigs, most computers come with the requisite software installed, and a good mike isn't much less

common. But for albums that sound professional, the cost jumps up quickly, and can easily go into hundreds of thousands of yen.

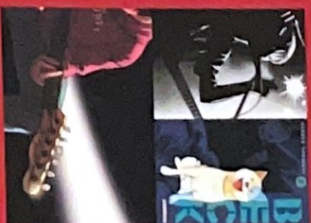
SEMI-PRO

At the next financial level of performing, there are semi-pro "live houses". These are venues where a number of bands get together on a given night, or just one band if it can pack enough fans in, and have a concert. The problem here is that the live houses are pay for play, meaning that the band must shell out money at the beginning, usually around ¥30,000 for half an hour, and tickets are sold to the public. If the number of tickets sold is under a certain cutoff, the performers make nothing. This is a great deal for the live house owners, and if a band has a very large following it can make sense, but in general this arrangement is more for opportunity than for profit. On the positive side, however, the added pressure to get people to buy tickets means much better advertising posters, announcements, and the ubiquitous flyers that tell you where the next big shows are, so once you get in the loop it's easy to stay current.

PROFESSIONAL

Jumping to this level, where you are making music full time, is the real difficulty of course, just like any other country. It involves as a first step getting a label to sign your group, and it can be very difficult to get them to take a chance on you. Until recently, the main way of doing this was getting signed to a smaller record label and trying to use that as a

A BOY AND HIS GUITAR



An accurate picture of the journey to becoming a musician in Japan, from first discovering an interest in music, to picking up an instrument, through the years of practice, to some success, has recently been dramatized in the popular manga and anime *Rock*. Set in modern Tokyo, back then to be as realistic as possible (close to the old on the bottom) as it tells the story of *Rocky*, a typical Japanese high schooler who discovers a passion and talent for rock-and-roll. The story follows his progress, and the audience is introduced to the music scene in Tokyo through *Rocky*'s eyes. In the anime, the music for the fictional bands is played by very talented musicians, so many cannot read Japanese bands playing under pseudonyms. Back to *Rock* in Japan, and it is already popular with English-speaking audiences who downloaded copies with fan-written subtitles from the internet just to its eventual release in the West. Other international groups such as *RedFouls.com* have sprung up for fans to gather to talk about the show and discuss the many references to the modern music scene *Rock* makes. It's crawling on internet to rock for many people, as fans of the show are picking up guitars for the first time. One of the funniest discussions the show a post about "Did *Rock* influence your life somehow?" and received scores of responses.

"I influenced me enough to withdraw \$400 from my bank and buy a *Fender Stratocaster*" says one such response. "Then playing for about two hours a day and then taking it, I haven't enjoyed music this much in years. I think *Rock* is one of the best series ever." While the rock-and-roll lifestyle probably didn't need a Japanese cartoon to make it seem attractive, it's another example of the appeal in any country that keeps performers trying.

Feature

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY



You might think that to truly make it in Japan you would need to go to Tokyo. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere ... actually that might be a different city. But certainly with so many venues, and with so many labels calling Tokyo home, it seems the logical choice for aspiring musicians, and therefore those of us who want a vibrant music scene. Not so, say most of the performers interviewed, even some of those living in Kanto. While Kansai is a smaller scene, there are a lot of benefits to living here.

"There are so many bands and venues here that it's hard for anyone to make it" Says David Enemy, who performs in Kanto as the lead singer of the band Everybody's Enemy. This is especially damaging when it interacts with the pay-for-play system common in Japan. If there are twenty gigs on in a night, it's very difficult for anyone to make their money back on the expense of putting on the show.

Gordy Carlson, the drummer from Trouble Tribe Japan (<http://troubletribe.com>) agrees "Osaka's a small town in a way, in feeling, but strangely there are more top-class performers in Kansai." Much like the two cities themselves, the music scenes in Kansai and Kanto are quite different, and suited to different people. Kansai is smaller, but it allows you to get oriented and feel like you're really in a community, while Tokyo with its teeming throng offers variety that for many people is eventually unfulfilling.

springboard, since larger labels weren't interested in foreign acts. This situation may be changing, at least for some people. A major label is now opening to foreign groups trying to make it in Japan. Sony Music Entertainment (Japan) Inc Sound Development Group is holding open auditions for any foreigners living and performing in Japan or interested in doing so. It is true that there are precious few Western groups (read: none) on the top selling lists in Japan that aren't stars abroad first. But sales of domestic artists have been going down the last few years as well, to be replaced by big name Western artists, and increasingly groups from unexpected places like Korea. It is, in fact, in direct response to this that Sony Music Entertainment (Japan) Inc. is opening up the auditions to any foreigners, including Korean and Chinese, who want to sign to a major Japanese label.

Where does all this leave Westerners performing in Japan? While the odds for achieving some success and notoriety are probably higher than at home, the odds for making it big are just as bad or worse. If you are trying to become a superstar it's difficult to succeed. If you are trying to perform, to show your music, that's very easy and you're likely to "make it". You hear that same sentiment echoed again and again by performers happy with what they're doing. As Jayme Shores, an acoustic guitarist and musician working in Japan says, "I love singing and feel lucky that I have had the opportunity to share my own music with people from all over. I would like to continue performing live whether in Japan, the US or other parts of the world. I don't know if music will be my only career in the future, but it will definitely be a part of whatever I do."

THOSE SONY AUDITIONS

Sony is auditioning foreign musicians who are resident — or are prepared to move here. The hearings started in April and will run through May. Applicants should send a profile, pictures and if possible a demo of their music. More information at <http://www.sonymusic.co.jp/Audition/sdial/>



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