

Jennifer Milioto Matsue. 2009. *Making Music in Japan's Underground: The Tokyo Hardcore Scene*. New York and London: Routledge.

Reviewed by Kristen Sollee

Jennifer Milioto Matsue's ethnographic account of Tokyo hardcore in the late 1990s situates the scene both within the context of Japanese society and underground music scenes in urban centers around the world. The author characterizes this enclave of hardcore music making as both distinctively Japanese and simultaneously comparable to other music scenes outside Japan. Matsue's research spans from 1996 to 1999 and revolves around the band Jug and the club or "livehouse" they frequent, 20,000volt. Other bands and participants on the periphery of this particular group are discussed, although the ethnographer is most intimately involved with Jug, and eventually joins them during a few live performances as a guest vocalist. Crucial to Matsue's narrative is a concept of performance that includes both acts onstage and (inter)personal contributions within the scene.

Making Music in Japan's Underground: The Tokyo Hardcore Scene is divided into four chapters that progressively delve into the tightly-knit world of Tokyo hardcore. The first chapter gives context for the ethnography, providing an overview of Tokyo at the end of the century and establishing the dominant traits of American and Japanese hardcore music. While not attempting the dubious task of defining a genre, Matsue begins by outlining the basics of American hardcore, briefly touching on the genre's birth out of the punk rock movement, and its subsequent connection to both grunge and alternative rock in the 1990s. Taking punk tempos and speeding them up, hardcore is described by the *All Music Guide* (cited by Matsue) as incorporating guitars with a "monochrome" timbre and "half-shouted lyrics venting the most inflammatory sentiments the singers and songwriters could devise" (2009:36). Leftist politics are central to the early strain of hardcore in the United States and, as Matsue writes, citing Roy Shuker, the music created in the hardcore scene was "initially distinct from mainstream production systems" (37).

While Matsue fails to explain how and when hardcore made its way to Japan, her cursory overview of American hardcore allows her to compare and contrast the Japanese scene with its Western antecedent. Stylistically, the hardcore scene in Japan that she analyzes is "a range of musics loosely connected under the umbrella style of hardcore . . . [incorporating] a guitar rock or kitschy punk aesthetic, with quite a lot of screaming . . . or intensive

Current Musicology

mumbling” (1). Although independent modes of musical production remain important, radical politics are far less prevalent, and the performative aggression is more about momentary release than attempting to effect permanent political or social change. Matsue writes, “Performance in the scene allows participants a space to negotiate distinct individual and collective identities that can at times be further characterized by a sense of resistance, but this resistance is often temporary, even playful” (4). This description is in keeping with Matsue’s understanding of play. In her usage, play denotes a temporary leisure activity outside of work. Play also encompasses her definition of performance, which is specifically the creation of music onstage and the methods of production and distribution offstage (such as creating promotional flyers or starting independent record labels) that perpetuate the scene and facilitate live performances (44). Play can also include shifting aspects of one’s identity and persona that may result in resistance against conventional societal roles, although in a fashion that is not permanent (46).

The second chapter describes the infrastructure of the scene and the spaces in which the aforementioned play takes place. Matsue paints a vivid picture of the centrality of trains to Tokyo life. She contends that forms of behavior on these trains are broadly indicative of Japanese cultural norms such as measured control of the body and voice (50). The trains that the author describes constitute one distinct space that allows performers of the scene to be transported to other spaces for play, including livehouses, rehearsal and recording studios, and record shops.

Matsue explains: “The importance of all three spaces—livehouses, recording studios, and rehearsal studios—is located in the social intimacy fostered, supported, and even reinforced by the similar small size, run-down appearance, and stressful pressures experienced in all these locations” (69). The theme of illicitness fits neatly within this chapter, as the run-down spaces in which this underground music is cultivated are often literally underground, and thus appear to be physically separated from mainstream society.

Concluding the chapter, the author interprets the floor layout of Tower Records in Tokyo as a microcosm of the Japanese music scene. The spatial arrangement of the store’s many floors and their topographical organization map the schematics and functioning of the music industry in greater Japan. Some of the higher level floors, like the Classical or Pop/Rock floors, include both Japanese artists and foreign artists, while others, specifically those closest to the ground floor, are dedicated solely to Japanese music on both independent and major labels. Tower Records’ infusion of its core local content with international products is analogous to Japanese hardcore in the sense that it “inhabits a sonic space located within Japan and the history

of Japanese music,” but at the same time “is part of a global movement of similar hardcore sounds and scenes . . . it is neither uniquely Japanese in its general sound nor entirely foreign” (79).

The third chapter analyzes the identities of performers, including band members, audience members, and those who control the means of music production. While these performers come from disparate backgrounds ranging from salarymen to college students living at home to the unemployed, all of them experiment with temporary identities that at times transgress the roles they play in Japanese society at large. Matsue explains: “Hierarchical social positioning remained in the scene, but one’s position had little to do with education or employment status outside of the scene.” She also devotes space here (and elsewhere) to a discussion of gender roles, suggesting that women in the scene have more potential for agency and equality than they do outside this safe enclave (106). This stands in stark contrast to prevailing stereotypes about male-dominated American hardcore. However, Matsue continually emphasizes the temporary aspect of transgression in Japanese hardcore, observing, for example, that Suzuki Miyuki, the drummer for the band Jug, is a mother and housewife when she is not onstage and in the scene. “Performers play with momentary imagined identities,” Matsue notes, which may make behaviors that would challenge or subvert conventional social roles in mainstream society seem far less threatening and therefore less contested when enacted within the safe space of the scene (84). Thus, when Suzuki leaves her child and household duties to thrash around onstage while beating drums and wearing only a sports bra and shorts, her actions are not nearly as radical as they would be if it was not understood that this change in deportment is only for the night, and that she will resume her role as caretaker shortly after the show ends.

The fourth chapter looks at the musical structures and sounds of songs by a few hardcore bands. Matsue’s investigation reveals vast sonic discrepancies amongst bands in the circle, leading her to conclude that “hardcore was not performed through the express production of music and lyrics onstage and the activity of leisurely listening in the audience alone.” It is the “extramusical tropes” that include “the behavior of musicians on stage and their style of clothing and postures when performing . . . [that] must be considered part of the local performance of hardcore that ultimately create a sense of this scene as ‘Japanese’” (131). This behavior includes Japanese-English hybridization in hardcore lyrics, as well as the transgression of the physical, vocal, and spatial norms of a Tokyo subway ride. Matsue’s roster of such transgressive behaviors includes musicians “screaming and thrashing about” and chain smoking with the aim of achieving a gritty vocal performance, as well as audience members standing in close proximity to blaring stage speakers

without ear plugs (128). But while American hardcore audiences commonly engage in moshing and stage diving, Matsue, in the previous chapter, notes that Japanese participants often sit on the floor or bob their heads in rhythm with the music without moving around too much (100). Like American hardcore, however, the communal rituals of creating flyers, stickers, and zines to promote bands and shows provides the social glue that unites the group of people involved in the Japanese scene (139).

Throughout her monograph, Matsue's attention to detail shows a great deal of care for the subject matter. However, there is an unnecessary amount of self-reflexive meditation on ethnography itself and her role as ethnographer, foreigner, and woman within the scene, which takes up the majority of the introduction. The author devotes too much initial analysis to herself, which is both misleading and off-topic given her thesis, and can be construed as purely pedantic. The narrative is clearer and more enticing when Matsue ceases analyzing her subjectivity and the practice of ethnography and moves on to a thick description of Japanese culture and the Tokyo hardcore scene.

In her conclusion, Matsue argues that the ultimate drive behind those playing in the band Jug and in the scene at large is twofold: the love of music and the chance to play with one's identity. Although hardcore has seemingly failed to have any documentable impact on mainstream Japanese society, it has radically affected the personal outlooks of those involved in the scene. In interviews Matsue conducted with Jug ten years after the original research, members of the band she speaks with still cherish the chance they had to "get a glimpse of a world [they] had never seen before" and believe the experience introduced them to people they would have never met otherwise (149). However, it is Matsue's love for Japan's hardcore music scene that ultimately gives weight to her endeavor to elucidate this little studied facet of the country's vibrant musical underground.