

LISTENING TO NOISE IN KANSAI

It was late, and we were wandering up a side alley away from the light and clamor of the main market road that leads away from the station. I was woozy after several drinks of strong Okinawan liquor that Tabata Mitsuru and I had been drinking at an *uchiage*, a collective gathering of musicians after a performance. “I’m going to miss the last train,” I complained, as we headed farther into the darkness, away from the rumble of the trains. “Don’t worry about it,” mumbled Tabata, pointing to a tall hedge that ran along the wall of a nearby house, “I’ve slept back there a couple times when I missed the train . . . besides, we’re almost there, and we can hang out and listen all night. Unless it’s closed . . .” We stopped before the door of what looked like an abandoned storefront, its large window completely pasted over with record album jackets, their images so faded that only blurs of blue ink remained. Some peeled off the wall in shreds, like remnants of old posters from some long-past political campaign. The door, too, shed bits of old magazine pages as we swung it open to step inside. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see that the interior walls and ceiling were the same, covered with faded images and torn posters behind shelves cluttered with junk and bottles of Jinro *shôchû*, a Korean rice whiskey, marked

with the names of the regulars by whom they were claimed. A shadowy figure stood behind the counter—really just a barrier formed by the piles of seven-inch records he was playing—as he bent down to replace the needle on the turntable. The dark, distorted “psych” rock music of 1970s *angura* (underground) Japan blasted out into the room and filled it for the next five hours as we waited for the night to pass. Two tables were occupied, and the third was stacked to the ceiling with records, but a couple of stools jammed into the counter were free. Tabata shouted my name to the master, his name to me, pointed to one of the stools, grinned, and nodded his acceptance of the unspoken offer of drinks. We sat and were absorbed in the music.

Listening to recordings is the crucible of modern musical creativity, and its practice is filled with as much interpretable meaning as the sonic objects themselves. This is as true in Japan as anywhere; but in Japan, there are music *kissa*. Throughout the twentieth century, music cafés, or *kissaten*—which, in their modern form, are something like the place I visited with Tabata—have been special places where urban Japanese come to develop musical knowledge. The subterranean environment of these hidden spots for listening to new forms of music, especially the famous postwar *jazu* (jazz) *kissa*, helped Japanese learn how to be modern through the rapid importation of foreign media and technology. *Jazu-kissa*, as popular music scholars have described, were strongly focused on stylistic canonization, which produced a formalized mode of hyperattentive listening (Atkins 2001; Derschmidt 1998; Hosokawa 2007). Experimental or “free” spaces for listening, in contrast, reorganized local media consumption to create new forms.

This chapter describes the emergence of Noise as a postwar history of Japanese media reception. I compare the distinctive modes of listening in postwar *jazu-kissa* with those of a “free space” called Drugstore, which was central to Noise’s development in Kyoto in the 1980s. The two contexts of listening are in many ways quite different. The *jazu-kissa* became a powerful space of nostalgic canonization and specialized knowledge of foreign media; in Drugstore, reception turned into performance and the local production of original Noise. Japanese popular music is often read through the hegemonic impact of Western media that produces an endless chain of copycats and subjugated fans of imported musical forms. But here I show how localized listening can produce new creative performances and sites of intercultural participation. The remediations of Noise did not re-

main isolated in local reception but created a new sound from foreign musical materials. Listeners created unique performances and eventually put their own Noise into circulation.

Drugstore's clientele included many of the early Japanese Noise practitioners, whose reception of underground music planted the seeds of Noise in Kansai. From within their collections of strange, "wrong," and impossible-to-classify recordings, they imagined a category called Noise and began to produce it for themselves. Drugstore listeners coalesced into performing groups, as well as the label Alchemy Records, which represented the Osaka Noise scene in the 1990s. In what follows, I detail these early days of Noise to show how Osaka became a center of Noise's cultural production through transnational circulation, despite its marginality within Japan. In Japan, Osaka has always been out of the mainstream, but in the 1990s it became the emblematic city of the Japanese underground for a worldwide audience. Alchemy and other local labels forged a distribution network that bypassed Japan to circulate Kansai Noise overseas, where North American listeners renamed it "Japanoise."

Listening is essential to the complicated construction of musical knowledge in contemporary Japan. On one hand, hyperattention to foreign recordings articulates the cultural marginality of Japanese participation in transnational media. On the other hand, listening could also divert the imbalanced flow of imported music into a new form of Noise. I focus on the invention and performance of Noise in Kyoto and Osaka in the 1980s, but I do not claim that Noise is the product of this singular place and time. On the contrary, the story of Drugstore shows us that Noise's creative origins cannot be excavated from "behind the music," where the true story of a local scene waits to be finally revealed. Its experimental modes of listening constantly turn musical history back on itself, transforming distant sounds into new forms of Noise.

INSIDE THE JAZU-KISSA

Jazu-kissa is generally rendered in English as "jazz coffeehouse" or "jazz café," but this translation is not quite right. They are not much like European cafés; they are more insular underground establishments that exist on the border of public and private space. They serve more whiskey than coffee, and the self-selected customers—circles of friends, really—come to consume music recordings as much as beverages. Jazu-kissa are first

and foremost places to listen. Although the tiny spaces occasionally feature live musical performances and are open to anyone, they often feel like a private living room or even a secret society. Like other tiny *nomiya* (drinking spots) sequestered in the back streets of urban Japan, they can be difficult to find. This is especially true of *jazu-kissa*, which exhibit a subterranean ambience that marks these places as special listening sites for a specific subculture of music fans. Even the earliest music listening cafés in urban Japan were associated with radical social changes of modernity and were symbolic of public discourses about foreign culture.

Though cafés have been popular in Japan since the Meiji Restoration, *on-gaku* (music) *kissaten* (later colloquially shortened to *kissa*) originated in the 1920s with *meikyoku* *kissaten*, within which customers listened to Western classical music accompanied by female hostesses (Takahashi 1994). Miriam Silverberg describes the growing public presence of the Japanese café waitress as a symbol of the nation's emerging relationship with Western models of modern metropolitan life.¹ This shift was musically marked with the introduction of American jazz, which became the default music for the niche of music *kissaten* I describe here. By the mid-1930s there were forty thousand cafés throughout the nation, packed with crowds of sophisticated youth whose new social ideals were exemplified by the controversial jazz age social figures of the *moga* (modern girl) and *mobo* (modern boy) (Silverberg 1993:125). As such, *kissaten* have long been sites for Japanese cosmopolitans to experience the nation's emergent modernity. *Jazu-kissa* took this reception a step further, to introduce new listening practices that linked the unfamiliarity of foreign culture to the integration of sound reproduction technologies into everyday musical knowledge. Ongoing connections between Western music and social reform culminated in the postwar association of jazz with an emergent Japanese democracy, which became a powerful undercurrent in the flood of foreign media and technology flowing into postwar Japanese cities with the U.S. occupation forces (Atkins 2001).

The music played in *jazu-kissa* became increasingly specialized in the subterranean environments of the postwar intelligentsia.² Although they shared with earlier music cafés a refined, salon-like atmosphere of intellectual connoisseurship, *jazu-kissa* soon became the centers of a growing countercultural imaginary, incubating in the cloistered, slightly hedonistic insularity of these dimly lit, contemplative spaces of listening. In the 1960s, the *jazu-kissa* became a symbolic meeting ground for student radi-

cals, much like Greenwich Village folkhouses where progressive politics and music tastes were interwoven. Jazu-kissa became centers of alternative media distribution, hosting film screenings, lectures, and meetings. On rare occasions, they transformed themselves into performance venues for live music, sometimes ranging beyond jazz to rock and blues. Although a few jazu-kissa provided space for local performers, the majority focused exclusively on playing records, and by the mid-1970s this range had narrowed to a very specific set of imported jazz recordings.

Today, the handful of remaining jazu-kissa in Japanese cities seem nostalgically unchanged from these formative postwar decades. The music is bebop and later “out” jazz, the atmosphere is darkly poetic, and the format is still vinyl LP (almost exclusively imported releases by artists like Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dave Brubeck, and also the “free jazz” of John Coltrane and Albert Ayler). A substantial surcharge on drinks ensures that the few seats in the tiny establishments are not occupied casually, but are for serious listening only. Silence is often mandatory, as listeners sit in rapt appreciation over their blend coffees and whiskeys; a new sound heard on each visit, a new piece of the giant puzzle of style. Jazu-kissa like Tokyo’s Shiramuren, a tiny shop crammed above a storefront in a run-down back alley in Shinjuku, still hold “concerts” each Sunday afternoon as listeners fill the seven stools along the bar, silently sipping whiskey as free jazz blasts from enormous monitor speakers a few feet above their heads.³ Such events epitomize the special kind of virtuosic listening that emerged alongside the industrial distribution of imported recordings in postwar Japan, aspects of which were later appropriated and altered in the experimental genre-breaking practices of Noise.

For Ôtomo Yoshihide, now an influential experimental guitarist and turntablist, the local jazu-kissa was at first an “ideal place to hang out and kill time while cutting class” in his hometown of Fukushima (Ôtomo 1995:4). It had been opened by a young Tokyoite, who moved north after burning out on the political and social quagmires of the city’s counter-cultural scene in the late 1960s. Meeting with this exile from the capital’s bohemian underground and listening to records together daily “opened a window into the cultural scene of Tokyo,” where Ôtomo has spent his adult life (Ôtomo 1995:4). His description of a typical 1970s jazu-kissa is particularly evocative of its cramped, media-filled environment: “2.5 by 6 meters of space. That and a pair of huge JBL or Altec speakers, a couple hundred jazz records and a bar counter were all that was necessary

to open your basic jazu-kissa. . . . Avant-garde jazz, manga [comic books], music and culture magazines, notebooks filled with the opinions of young leftists, concerts every one or two months, and 8 millimeter film shows” (Ôtomo 1995:4). The combination of carefully managed tastes and strictly maintained rules for listening made some jazu-kissa resemble counterculture *juku* (cram schools) for underground music, where social interaction was forbidden as records were played at incredible volumes. It was standard practice to play through an entire side of an LP at a time, so the course of an evening’s listening progressed in twenty-minute “lessons,” one following another, which introduced neophytes to narratives of style within the genre and sharpened the knowledge of experienced clients.

During the 1950s and early '60s, foreign jazz records were not widely available in Japan outside of U.S. Army bases, and the typical way to acquire them was to import directly via international post, which was prohibitively expensive for individual fans.⁴ Listening collectively at a jazu-kissa was the only affordable way to become a knowledgeable fan of the latest music. Competition in seeking out new and different records became a matter of survival for the jazu-kissa in Japanese cities, because whichever one acquired the first copies of a recent release would draw the cutting-edge audience who needed to hear the newest sounds as soon as possible. Acquiring a functional knowledge of the jazz genre meant constantly keeping abreast of new releases, which could be a formidable task when important recordings were released on small and independent labels. Jazu-kissa owners began to search out private sources for supply, and some began to write to dealers in the United States, arranging for new releases to be shipped directly via airmail. Such arrangements helped build translocal U.S.–Japan chains of mail order and collection, developing early independent distribution routes and interpersonal relationships based on international exchange of recordings.

Listening attentively to recordings in jazu-kissa represented the best means for aspiring Japanese musicians to connect to the outer world of American jazz. Musicians would go to hear new and rare records, and sometimes they attempted to transcribe the solos as they listened for hours on end. The mandatory cup of coffee (or glass of whiskey), however, could be extremely expensive, so listeners would stay for as long as possible, making the most out of their opportunity to audition a rare LP, which might well be their only chance to do so. The atmosphere of some popular jazu-kissa could resemble a performerless concert hall, and in



3.1. Display of LP covers in jazu-kissa. Photo by the author.

the most hard-core jazu-kissa, listening in complete silence was standard practice. The careful, serious listenership of the jazu-kissa created a model for tightly focused, attentive Japanese audiences. But in the relatively small world of jazz fans in postwar Japan, the cultivation of live music performance, whether by local or foreign performers, did not follow directly from the appreciation of recordings. Rather, they curated a mediated knowledge of jazz by listening deeply into an exclusive repertoire of recordings that managed the music's local meanings and values.

A single jazu-kissa could exert a great amount of influence over the reception of a particular recording, and the opinion of its “master” (*masutā*) might make or break the local reputation of a foreign artist. The master usually owns and manages the kissa, and is often the only employee, serving drinks, small snacks, and most important, controlling the selection of music and talking with the clientele. Jazu-kissa masters are widely regarded as the pinnacle of expertise in the styles of music featured in their establishments, and they are often called on by critics and reviewers to cor-

roborate data. The authoritative character of the master is somewhat analogous to the position held by a teacher in Japanese society, and the behavior of the clientele is like that of students, who develop loyal and exclusive relationships with a single jazu-kissa and its master.⁵ The kind of silent, attentive listening practiced in the most conservative jazu-kissa carries the aura of an orally transmitted music lesson, in which a student learns a repertoire by hearing the teacher play and discuss each piece in hierarchical order.⁶ Jazu-kissa, then, were less often places to socialize than places to be “socialized, evangelized, and indoctrinated into the mental discipline of jazz appreciation, and to a deeper understanding of the music’s message and spirit” (Atkins 2001:4).

The social space of the jazu-kissa was also undoubtedly one of male privilege and prestige, which concentrates expertise in the figure of the master: as the gendered term implies, masters are almost always male.⁷ Gender divisions are common to consumer identifications with sound reproduction technology in Japan, and the discipline of listening takes place within a masculine social hierarchy.⁸ The master’s evaluations of specific recordings and opinions of a particular stylistic era or group of artists are widely reproduced among his clientele. The master is considered to be in total command of his record collection; requests are rarely made, except by extremely long-term customers. His carefully presented taste and knowledge place him in a fetishized, practically magical relationship with his records. The elevated aura of the master is well captured by Bill Minor’s remembrance of Hashimoto Tsuneo of Nagoya kissa Jazz Aster, “standing directly in front of a rack of LPs encased in transparent plastic covers, the room’s light—reflected on them—producing the effect of some sort of flickering, glistening halo surrounding his head” (Minor 2004:239). The underground authority of the jazu-kissa, then, is coded in this special mastery of a foreign musical genre through a unique local interpretation. The terrain of jazz is presented here as an “out” music that also reproduces very “inside” hierarchies of social control.

The master is also a host, and the art of creatively producing and shifting the mood with records is considered a consummate skill. Fukushima Tetsuo, owner of the famous Shibuya jazu-kissa Mary Jane, on learning that I had been a student of the composer Anthony Braxton, played Braxton records all night, dramatically and proudly relating the story of how he had put the famous saxophonist at ease during his stay in Japan in the early 1970s: