

culture

No room for wallflowers at Amapinight

African beats move the masses at Tokyo's most energetic party

Music

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Al it took was a single song — 2013's "Khona" by South African pop group Mafikizolo — to turn Yoko Itaya into a champion for African dance music in Japan.

Since her early 20s, the Tokyo native had been making annual trips to South Africa with her family, the first coming in 2008. As a result, she says she instantly fell in love with the people and their culture. During her travels, she naturally encountered musical genres like Afro-pop and Afro-soul, and upon returning to Tokyo she was eager to hear more.

"Back in Japan, I started to search for (the genres) on YouTube and a music video for a South African house tune, 'Khona,' came up," she recalls. "The tune was incredible, and from then on I started to listen to African dance music."

Itaya is now known among fans of African electronic dance music as the DJ Mitokon, one of the five members of Japan's first gqom party crew, TYO GQOM. Gqom (which is pronounced "gomm," but with a slight tongue click at the top) is a style of Afrobeat characterized by its signature polyrhythms and dark undertones, with artists like DJ Lag, Babes Wodumo and Citizen Boy exemplifying the sound.

Gqom has spawned various subgenres of its own, from Afrikaans gqom to sgbu, but one particular derivative, amapiano, caught the attention of Japanese dancers Rina Hagai, Sakura Hosokawa and Aoi Takase. While Itaya and the TYO GQOM crew were busy bolstering the popularity of the music, the trio of dancers launched a club night that would eventually bring both crews together to create one of Tokyo's most buzzed-about parties.

Amapinight takes place sporadically at various venues around the capital. Though time and location are never certain, two things you can be assured of when attending are that there will be dancing and a lot of amapiano. Amapiano itself is a genre that originated in the Soweto township in Johannesburg in the early 2010s. Grown out of

kwaito music, it is a mix of deep house, jazz and soul, characterized by a skittering log drum beat.

"We all got into amapiano around two years ago, and really wanted to hear it out in Japan," Hosokawa says. "I was close to Aoi, who was tight with (dance music DJ) Take-noko, who was also into it, and he let us borrow his gallery in Kansai to do an amapiano club event (in November 2022)."

Also joining them on that night two years ago was Saemu Nakamoto, a Kansai-based Senegalese Japanese DJ who spins under the moniker "Samo" and has since joined the Amapinight team as resident DJ and music booker. The first event, as all four attest, "went off," and the crew has continued to attract the attention of the international clubbing scene. Earlier this year, Samo was



the focus of a Boiler Room Osaka set that saw the crowd positively explode with energy. To date, the set has been viewed more than 50,000 times on YouTube.

The real magic of Amapinight, however, comes from its frenzied excitement — which reaches levels that are uncharacteristic of your usual night out at a Japanese club. Hagai, Hosokawa and Takase are enthusiastic hosts, and even when venues are small they'll be able to find some surface to dance on.

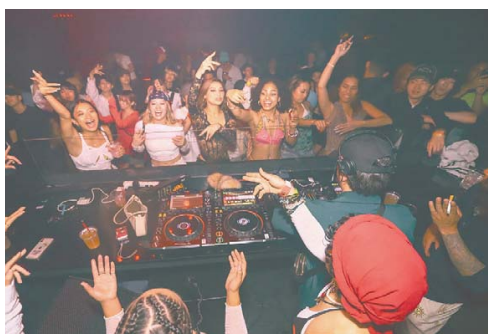
"I got really into (Jamaican) dancehall thanks to my mom," says Hosokawa, who has both Japanese and Tanzanian roots. "I love dancing, and have traveled around Japan performing at events."

Hagai, who is Ugandan Japanese, was also exposed to dance music at an early age: "I started dancing, mainly hip hop, in elementary school."

Both Hagai and Takase work as dancers for touring artists, but Takase also teaches dance and yoga. She got into Jamaican music after working at a reggae bar in Osaka for five years, a stint that eventually inspired her to travel to the country. "I linked with local dancers and got them to teach me the steps," she says. "Then, I mixed dancehall and hip hop, and started going to other clubs and venues in Japan, too."

Despite the name, the music policy at Amapinight isn't strictly focused on one genre. "It's not just amapiano," Samo says. "It's reggae, dancehall, U.K. funky. Simply put, it's the music of people of color, with an emphasis on the local cultures."

Representing those cultures are often the innovators themselves, with the crew bringing in headliners from overseas to play alongside the local talent. Previous headliners include British DJ/producer Scratchclart, Pacific Islander DJ Lady Shaka and gqom pioneer DJ Lag from South Africa.



And, of course, one frequent Amapinight DJ is Mitokon, along with her TYO GQOM crew: fellow DJs Cana Yang (who DJs under the name "K8"), "Bingo" Hiro Watanabe ("HW Bingo") and Akira Morohoshi ("Moro"). Rounding out the quintet is finger drummer Keito Suzuki.

"There was no party where you could hear a lot of gqom, so we figured that we'd do it ourselves," says Suzuki when asked how the crew came together. "The first lineup was me, Mitokon and K8, then HW Bingo and Moro joined for the second and third parties, and eventually we formed a crew."

With the exception of Mitokon, each of TYO GQOM's DJs are involved with other dance music scenes in Tokyo, having stumbled upon South African dance music along the way. "I got into gqom in 2016 after listening to the 'GQOM Oh! The Sound of Durban Vol. 1' compilation," says Suzuki, who's also active in the bass music scene.

Both the members of TYO GQOM and the team behind Amapinight have experienced parties in South Africa, Uganda and Jamaica, and, despite featuring the same style of

music, they all seem to agree that the events they hold in Japan have a different vibe to them.

"It's hard to explain, but rather than just 'grooving' to the music, people 'dance' to it," Itaya says. "There's also the singing aspect — in Japan, people tend to be more conscious of their surroundings and don't sing out loud so much, but in South Africa, it's normal for everyone to sing along, so it turns into a chorus."

The founders of Amapinight agree: "In Jamaica, it's seen as an obvious thing to dance at the club, regardless of gender, and the way people dance is different — they dance with their entire bodies," Hagai says. "There are a lot of specific moves from dancehall, and for South African music," Takase adds.

Amapinight does its best to translate this movement to its audience, going so far as to hire dancers knowledgeable in the styles specifically for its club nights. Those dancers will join the original trio onstage and take turns dancing with the crowd.

"We have a few regular dancers," Hosokawa says, while Takase notes this aspect of Amapinight "happened very naturally."

"At the first event, we noticed that a load of girls were going crazy around the booth, then it happened again at the second event," she continues. "Then we just started to book them."

If you're thinking of checking out Amapinight, make sure you're ready to deliver 100% on the dancefloor. Feel free to dress in bold styles and bright colors, be prepared to sweat and let loose.

"The vibes at Amapinight are so full of energy," Hagai says. "It feels like everyone is the star of the show."

For more information about Amapinight, check out @amapinight on Instagram.



Emerging Gen Z stars ME:I will perform on this year's "Kohaku Uta Gassen." © NHK

'Kohaku' still matters for J-pop bragging rights

Sound Off

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For nearly its entire existence, national broadcaster NHK's New Year's Eve spectacle "Kohaku Uta Gassen" has served as an overview of the preceding 12 months in J-pop. Since its inception in 1953, many households have gathered around the TV to catch up on the country's biggest hits before ringing in a new year.

The 2024 lineup, announced Tuesday from NHK's Broadcast Center in Tokyo, underlines how capturing a year of J-pop in one broadcast bonanza is impossible these days. The country's musical landscape has become so fragmented, there are myriad ways to discover new music and multiple platforms where a song can become a hit while being invisible elsewhere.

The national broadcaster deserves some credit for trying its best, though. This year's program is set to feature artists behind some of the biggest hits of the past 12 months, highlighted by the pop-rock trio Mrs. Green Apple and rap duo Creepy Nuts. In an effort to please every possible demographic that could tune in to "Kohaku," there's a healthy mix of long-running acts for the grandparents (Hiromi Go, Kaori Mizumori), 1990s throwbacks for the now solidly middle-aged (Glaxo, aiko) and emerging Gen Z stars (ME:I, tuki.).

The artists who didn't make the lineup, however, are just as telling. For the second straight year, "Kohaku" will feature no groups from Starto Entertainment, an offshoot of the former Johnny & Associates talent agency that was split in two following a sexual abuse scandal involving its founder. The agency boasts some of the country's biggest male pop outfits, such as Snow Man and Aespa. Group, and reports from earlier in the year indicated NHK would start using talent from that company once again, seemingly opening up a path for them to appear on the broadcaster's biggest music show — yet none are on the roster.

Instead, NHK has tried to shine a light on a new era of male-fronted pop. Notable newcomers to "Kohaku" include the buzzed-about trio Number.i, all of whom used to be a part of Starto's King & Prince, and long-running group Da-iCE. K-pop is represented by Tomorrow X Together, as well as Japanese acts influenced by the genre J1 and BeFirst.

NHK is using a similar approach to showcase a wider range of J-pop. Last year's program was defined by the presence of Yoasobi, Ado and Atarashii Gakko! — acts that used anime and the internet to not only break out at home but become global successes. However, none of them are expected to appear on this year's show despite remaining in the limelight and touring internationally. Rather, the inclusion of Creepy Nuts ("Bling-Bang-Bang-Born") and Kocchi no Kento ("Hai Yorokonde") stand in as this year's representatives of the industry's global ambitions.

Plenty of other artists and songs could have been represented, and it's not that NHK overlooked them — it's more that J-pop has become too diverse to encompass in a single program. This fact reflects how the fragmented cultural landscape has changed "Kohaku," too. Despite its reputation as once must-see TV when spending the holidays at home, the show is no longer the only TV option for bored families stuck inside on New Year's Eve. There's also no shortage of streaming services, and TikTok and YouTube are just a click away.

"Kohaku" still matters, however, thanks to its legacy and general status as the biggest televised music show of the year. For artists, being featured on it is still seen as a major accomplishment — and the show's lineup continues to inspire fierce debate online, especially from fans who think their favorite group has been snubbed.

Much like a solo show at Budokan, or the No. 1 spot on Oricon, bragging rights are still a big deal in Japan.



People visit the "Dragon Ball Daimatsuri" event, to mark the 40th anniversary of Akira Toriyama's Dragon Ball franchise, at the Tokyo Big Sight convention center in Tokyo. AFP-JJJI

Japan's manga powerhouse 'Dragon Ball' turns 40

Culture

AFP-JJJI

'Dragon Ball' fans on Wednesday celebrated 40 years of the globally beloved Japanese manga, anime and video game franchise, just months after creator Akira Toriyama's unexpected death.

The original "Dragon Ball" manga was first serialized on Nov. 20, 1984, featuring a boy named Son Goku who collects magical balls containing dragons to help protect the Earth. The comic books have since sold more than 260 million copies in Japan and worldwide, according to publisher Shueisha.

Toriyama died aged 68 in March because

of a blood clot on his brain, sparking an outpouring of grief from fans, including tributes from world leaders.

The first part of the manga series was turned into an anime for TV, also called "Dragon Ball," from 1986. Dubbed in different languages, the show captured children's hearts with its madcap battles.

"Dragon Ball Z," an adaptation of the later part of the manga, took the series' popularity to even greater heights. Films, video games and other spin-offs followed as the franchise grew into a global phenomenon.

"Happy birthday to Goku and all his friends. And eternal farewell to Akira Toriyama," anime fan account Catsuka said on its X page, which boasts more than 230,000 followers.

The franchise is particularly popular in Latin America, and several tributes

appeared in Spanish on Instagram, including from a Mexican newspaper.

"It's a seminal work that celebrates victory gained through friendship and hard work. I think the simplicity of the story has been an important factor in the series' success," says 19-year-old student Tsutomu Tanaka in Tokyo.

The latest anime series in the franchise, "Dragon Ball Daima," began airing last month, and Saudi Arabia has announced it will build the world's first "Dragon Ball" theme park.

"The commercial machine is already there" for "Dragon Ball," says journalist and anime expert Tadashi Sudo. But while the popularity of the franchise is secure in the short-term, "the challenge remains whether it can maintain its creativity without Toriyama."