Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus (2025), **23**, e4, 1–4
doi:10.1017/apj.2025.8

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Note

Okinawan Jazz and the Reversion Movement

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Abstract

This paper explores the differences between the historical trajectory of jazz in mainland Japan and in Okinawa, where a stronger presence of American military bases monopolized employment for jazz musicians. In the turn of the 70s, while the leftist youth of mainland Japan embraced avant-garde free jazz for its anti-war messages, the economic dependency of Okinawan jazz musicians on American bases divorced the genre from involvement in protests for reversion. Through oral accounts and written records, this essay examines the politics of "Okinawan jazz" and the place of its musicians in the realm of reversion protests.

Keywords: Okinawa; American Occupation; Jazz History; US Bases; Reversion Movement

In July 1966, John Coltrane landed at Tokyo's Haneda airport to embark on a legendary tour playing jazz. The saxophone giant arrived at a moment of seemingly divine Japanese national economic growth that, thanks to a newly emboldened consumerist population, allowed for widespread enthusiasm for jazz music and culture.[1] Riding the then-2-year-old bullet train, Coltrane and his avant-garde quintet traveled to Shizuoka, Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, and, perhaps at his insistence, ventured as far south as Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[2]

The burgeoning free jazz movement, for which Coltrane was a prominent champion, was notorious for its jarring musicality and departure from traditional bebop form. It was also controversial for its anti-war associations. Coltrane's peace-loving philosophy is best evidenced by a famous photo of him praying before a wreath of flowers at a monument near ground zero in Nagasaki.[3] And though he was no violent radical, many passionate activists associated his wholesale opposition to war with their political aims. Indeed, with the escalating Vietnam War as the geopolitical zeitgeist of the era, Coltrane's appeals to peace reverberated even in performance; a recording of his free jazz elegy, "Peace on Earth," performed live in Shinjuku, remains available online.[4]

Notwithstanding mixed reception among jazz enthusiasts toward the new sub-genre, the "epochal" popularity of underground free jazz among New Left youth at the turn of the 70s leaves little doubt about Coltrane's influence on the cultural landscape of Japanese politics.[5]

But Coltrane's tour did not venture any farther south. At the time of his visit, the islands of Okinawa were still a half-decade away from reversion to Japan. They remained, instead, under the control of a fervently anti-communist United States military. The economic flourish that allowed for the democratization of jazz as a pastime in mainland Japan had not reached Okinawa in full. Neither had Coltrane's message of peace. In the three decades of the Vietnam War, the United States military constructed over 80 installations and employed 50,000 Okinawans, convincing many residents that the island itself had been transformed into a sort of military base.[6] Just as the history of Okinawa diverges from narratives of peace and prosperity popularly associated with the mainland of postwar Japan, the formation of jazz in both regions is, too, disparate. The anti-war philosophy associated with Coltrane and embraced by mainland New Lefters through free jazz was, in Okinawa, antagonistic to jazz and its musicians who relied on American occupation.

This past summer, I stayed in Naha, the capital of Okinawa Prefecture, to learn about Okinawan jazz. The phrase "Okinawan jazz" or, as some proponents emphasize in traditional speak, "*Uchina* jazz," refers to more than the history of jazz in Okinawa. It is a genre with explicitly racial and musicological connotations, not unlike "Black gospel," "K-pop," or "Japanese jazz." The association of geographical

[1] Atkins, E. Taylor. *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2001. p. 222.

[2] Whatley, Katherine. 2016. "Tracing a Giant Step: John Coltrane in Japan." *Point of Departure* 57.

[3] "映画『コルトレーンを追い&hiraka;けて』[Movie 'Chasing Coltrane']." 医薬経済オンライン [*Iyaku Keizai Online*], April 4, 2020. https://iyakukeizai.com/kikakubu-column/article/57.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAHtV0G7iCM.

[5] Satoh, Masahiko. 1977. "Japan." *Down Beat* 44(3), 18.

[6] Mitchell, Jon. 2015. "Vietnam: Okinawa's Forgotten War ヴェトナム、あるいは沖縄の忘れられた戦争." *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 13(16).

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Cite this article: Hisada R. Okinawan Jazz and the Reversion Movement. *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* https://doi.org/10.1017/apj.2025.8

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https://doi.org/10.1017/apj.2025.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press



"沖縄JAZZ協会記念誌" [Okinawa Jazz Association Commemorative Magazine]. 沖縄JAZZ協会 [Okinawa Jazz Association]. 2011. 古堅良雄＜ふるげん・よしお＞氏提供写真 [Photo provided by Mr. Furugen Yoshio]

distance with racial difference is important; the effort to distinguish "Tokyo jazz" from "Osaka jazz" has little drive despite their historical differences, in part because both are considered Japanese. As a former colony and American territory, the racial and cultural affiliations of Okinawans to the Japanese polity are not so unequivocal. Yet, defining the characteristics that distinguish Okinawan jazz from other cultural jazz is difficult, and it challenged every Okinawan jazz musician I interviewed. Some insisted on its similarities with early American swing-style jazz, and a few believed that Okinawan folk drumming lent itself to a more intuitive understanding of jazz rhythms. One elderly singer rejected the idea of jazz subgenres, claiming "Jazz is jazz."[7] Among a majority of musicians, though, there existed a broad if vague consensus that, somehow, Japanese and Okinawan jazz have differences—as if to imply that Okinawan culture remains distinct from Japan's.

The historical arcs of jazz in mainland Japan and in Okinawa have unmistakably different origins and characteristics. The introduction of jazz to mainland Japan predates the Second World War. In the 1920s and 1930s, jazz was a scandalous source of entertainment for the rebellious youth of the urban elite and often the subject of debates on Japan's cultural deterioration.[8] The commercial scope of jazz was limited; even in urban centers, the music was hardly in the mainstream. During the war years, the music became even more of an underground genre—sometimes literally—when the imperial government began censoring all "enemy music." The ban was lifted upon the arrival of Americans to Tokyo.

Jazz arrived in Okinawa, in contrast, with a postwar amphibious landing. The popularity of jazz with American soldiers attracted musical talents from mainland Japan and the Philippines—which, from decades of American imperialism, had become familiar with the music—until Okinawans began to learn the genre.

It seems improbable that an art form popular enough to have made headlines in prewar Japan never materialized en masse among an Okinawan population once famous for its domestic migrant workers. Still, with most local newspaper records burnt or destroyed during the War, it is difficult to find contemporary records contradicting that conventional wisdom. It is also true that today, every jazz café in Okinawa still in operation was established after the war.[9] Most musicians accept this chronology of jazz history partly because it fits squarely with familiar descriptions of prewar Okinawa—as poor, non-urban, and culturally distinct. It also ties the arrival of American bases to the mythology of Okinawan jazz.[10]

But the connection between Okinawa's jazz and military bases is not fiction. Until the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, live jazz performance remained a luxury effectively funded by American soldiers and officers. For nearly 30 years

[7] From interview with author conducted on June 15, 2024.

[8] Atkins, 12.

[9] Tashiro, Shunichiro. "沖縄ジャズロード." [Okinawa Jazz Road]. 書肆侃侃房 [Shoshikankanbō], November 2015.

[10] The universal belief in this nativity of jazz is itself historically valuable, but further research could examine cultural imports from Osaka during the mass labor migration of Okinawans for evidence of jazz. After the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, Osaka became the central hub of jazz activities. Since the presence of traditional Osakan art forms and artifacts in interwar Okinawa has been confirmed by previous scholarship, there is reason to believe that jazz may have been imported, too.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apj.2025.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of American occupation, to play jazz was to work for the American military—a necessarily controversial position before reversion and even today.

No such economic dependency on American bases existed in the jazz scenes across mainland Japan. In the 60s, a jazz enthusiast in Tokyo could have ridden a local train to his favorite jazz café. In the same decade, the typical jazz enthusiast in any city of Okinawa was often himself a musician, and he would have traveled nightly to a gig at a military club not by train (since the US military had not laid railroads) but by foot or carpool.

Disparity between the mainland notwithstanding, Okinawan jazz musicians were some of the highest-earning citizens on the islands. Gigs in military clubs paid extraordinarily well, even in the earliest years of occupation; in one account, the pay was double the salary of a civil servant, at 30 US Dollars a month; in another, it was nearly triple, at 40.[11] Military wages were not their only source of income, either. An elderly drummer described to me the challenge of squeezing all the cash thrown at him into his drum shell.[12]

As American occupation expanded, so did the number of base clubs, and Okinawan musicians honed their skills for better-paying gigs. It was not uncommon for novice instrumentalists, often high schoolers with free afternoons, to join local big bands, then climb the ranks over the years: first, fake-playing at the Enlisted Men's Club; then squealing at the Non-Commissioned Officers Club; and at last, performing at the highest level at the best-paying Officers or Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Clubs.[13] And while Okinawan jazz musicians were not, on the whole, particularly wealthy—a dollar taxi ride home remained an unaffordable luxury for most—they lived comparatively lavish lives that non-musicians would have been envious of and that anti-war activists despised.

In 2022, the Uchina Jazz All Stars released an album celebrating the history of Okinawan jazz. The group earned its name; the newly-formed big band features musicians of local legend, some then as old as 92, in a collaboration between the icons of a bygone era and the rising stars of the post-reversion generations. Their album, entitled *Uchina Jazz Goes On*, is a rare fusion of Okinawan folk tunes arranged in the classic big band style—an expression, perhaps, of a veritably "Okinawan" jazz. The liner notes, available online, double down on a familiar narrative—that the history of Okinawan jazz began concurrently with the end of the Second World War, and that with a burgeoning American presence came a commensurate Okinawan jazz "golden age."[14] The album's publication on June 22nd, the final day of the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, is no coincidence. The notes describe jazz as a genre widely loved by both Americans and Okinawans and conclude by honoring the young musicians who have stewarded the "inextinguishable" legacy of *Uchina* jazz.

This narrative of Okinawan jazz as a cultural product of American occupation is frequently reproduced by local newspapers and television. It strikes a feel-good balance between evoking nostalgia for the American Century and obliquely reminding the audience of Okinawa's unique political landscape. But beyond the hint of modern American occupation, these narratives steer clear of politics. Based largely on oral accounts of elderly musicians, they merge musical history with personal history in a way that reframes major political events as of secondary importance to its social climate. Where the Vietnam War is mentioned, it serves as context to illustrate tough times of the past but not to frame the backdrop of violent reversion protest and indeed the *raison d'être* of American bases on the islands.

Elderly musicians seem to share a collective aversion to encountering politics, insisting on a separation between *their* history and its contemporary political context. One singer manifested this spirit of aversion when asked whether she had any misgivings about having subsisted off occupation forces. She told me she had been "fortunate enough to not have thought about that."[15]

Still, the conditions that made jazz music available were fundamentally political. The proliferation of military bases corresponded to an increase in base clubs—at one point, as many as 36.[16] The increase in the number of clubs was a response to a growing demand for entertainment from a rising number of troops stationed for deployment across the coastal nations of continental Asia.

By some estimates, the number of troops in Okinawa at the height of the Vietnam War surpassed 50,000, or around 5% of the islands' total population.[17] After Okinawa's reversion to Japan, the subsequent reduction in troop numbers forced many musicians to seek alternative employment. A shortage of funds for entertainment and a change in musical tastes among young American servicemen who increasingly preferred rock also forced many jazz musicians to either abandon their profession or fund their passion by working additional hours.

Jazz musicians understood what Okinawa's reversion to Japan would entail for their livelihoods. They were apprehensive about that future. "If I had to say what I thought," one drummer told me, "I guess I was opposed to it."[18] Okinawan jazz musicians silently opposed the reversion of Okinawa to Japan and the reduction of American bases—a twist of fate for a musical genre often associated with racial liberation. Indeed, in the most heated weeks of anti-occupation protests, violence could stray from occupation forces to musicians. If they parked near a base club for the night's gig, they returned to punctured tires. When the protests prevented them from driving to gigs, they were

[11] Kishi, Masahiko. 2022. "沖縄ジャズの生活史." [The Living Histories of Okinawa Jazz]. *文學界 [Bungakukai]* 126: 154.

[12] From interview with author conducted on June 5, 2024.

[13] Kishi, 131.

[14] "ウチナー・ジャズ・オール・スターズ「ウチナー・ジャズ・ゴーズ・オン」[Uchina Jazz All Stars "Uchina Jazz Goes on]." リスペクトレコード [Respect Record]. https://www.respect-record.co.jp/discs/res339.html.

[15] From interview with author conducted on June 15, 2024.

[16] See リスペクトレコード [Repect Record].

[17] Sandars, C. T. 2011. "From Conquest to Containment: Asia". In *America's Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire* (Oxford, 2000; online ed., Oxford Academic); "国勢調査/昭和45年国勢調査/沖縄編," [Showa 45 (1970) Census, Okinawa Edition]. 1970.

[18] From interview with author conducted on June 5, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apj.2025.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

escorted in military trucks, through the thick masses of protesters gathered around the barbed gates.

On some weekends, protest movements remained so fervent that military bases, including their base clubs, went on effective lockdown, meaning neither American soldiers nor Okinawan musicians could escape the enclosures. For those nights, the musicians mopped floors and cleaned dishes in exchange for food and extended shelter. Under these conditions, interactions between musicians and protesters were rare but not impossible. Another drummer told me about a night a protester yelled in his face that, for entertaining the Americans, he was not truly Okinawan. "But I am Okinawan," he said to me, "I am Okinawan, and I needed to feed my family."[19] To frame musicians as complicit actors in emboldening American occupation suggests an autonomy too great for musicians who were themselves subjects of occupation and desperate for economic stability.

Yet, it would be erroneous to describe them as fortunate victims who, by a stroke of luck, found themselves in the highest stratum among an occupied population. Many musicians forged complex relationships with American soldiers. Whether for friendship or exclusive jazz paraphernalia, musicians exchanged goods and conversations with servicemen. In forming cordial relationships, they shared stories about family and fear of combat. One musician recalled three servicemen he had befriended, one of whom, named "Bobu," he reconnected with decades later during Bob's vacation to Okinawa.

While performing at an Enlisted Men's Club, musicians could surmise whether there had been news of deployment from the number of sobbing men. One of these teary-eyed soldiers, conscious of his mortality, promised a musician the payout of his life insurance upon death.[20] Such anecdotes illustrate instances of solidarity between soldiers and Okinawan musicians. The two were different subjects of the same occupation force.

Coltrane was not the only American jazz giant to visit Japan during its era of economic prosperity. Big names toured East Asian nations and territories on the State Department's payroll in the soft power struggle against Soviet influence. Among these "jazz ambassadors" were Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Lionel Hampton—all made stops at Okinawa to perform for American officers and servicemen.

Yet Coltrane's absence from occupied Okinawa is telling in part because he remained influential in mainland Japan. While both the rioters in Okinawa and the New Left youth of Tokyo protested American war efforts, only the Tokyoites enjoyed free jazz. And because free jazz did not enjoy a market in Okinawa's US bases, and because the sub-genre was implicated with anti-war sentiment, there was no underground free jazz for the Okinawans—the musicians were not allowed to play freely. To secure employment as a jazz musician, they accepted the prohibition laid down by American officials against participating in dissent of any kind. Nor did they want to. Their love for jazz, whether for its art or its financial stability, was not worth risking by taking part in the anti-occupation movement. That uncompromising passion was one attribute of Okinawan jazz.

Financial support. Research funded by the Robert Lyons Danly 1969 Memorial Fellowship.

Competing interests. There are no competing interests.

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[19] From interview with author conducted on July 3, 2024.

[20] Kishi, 155.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apj.2025.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press