

RAP AND THE PATHS OF CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION

HIP-HOP JAPAN



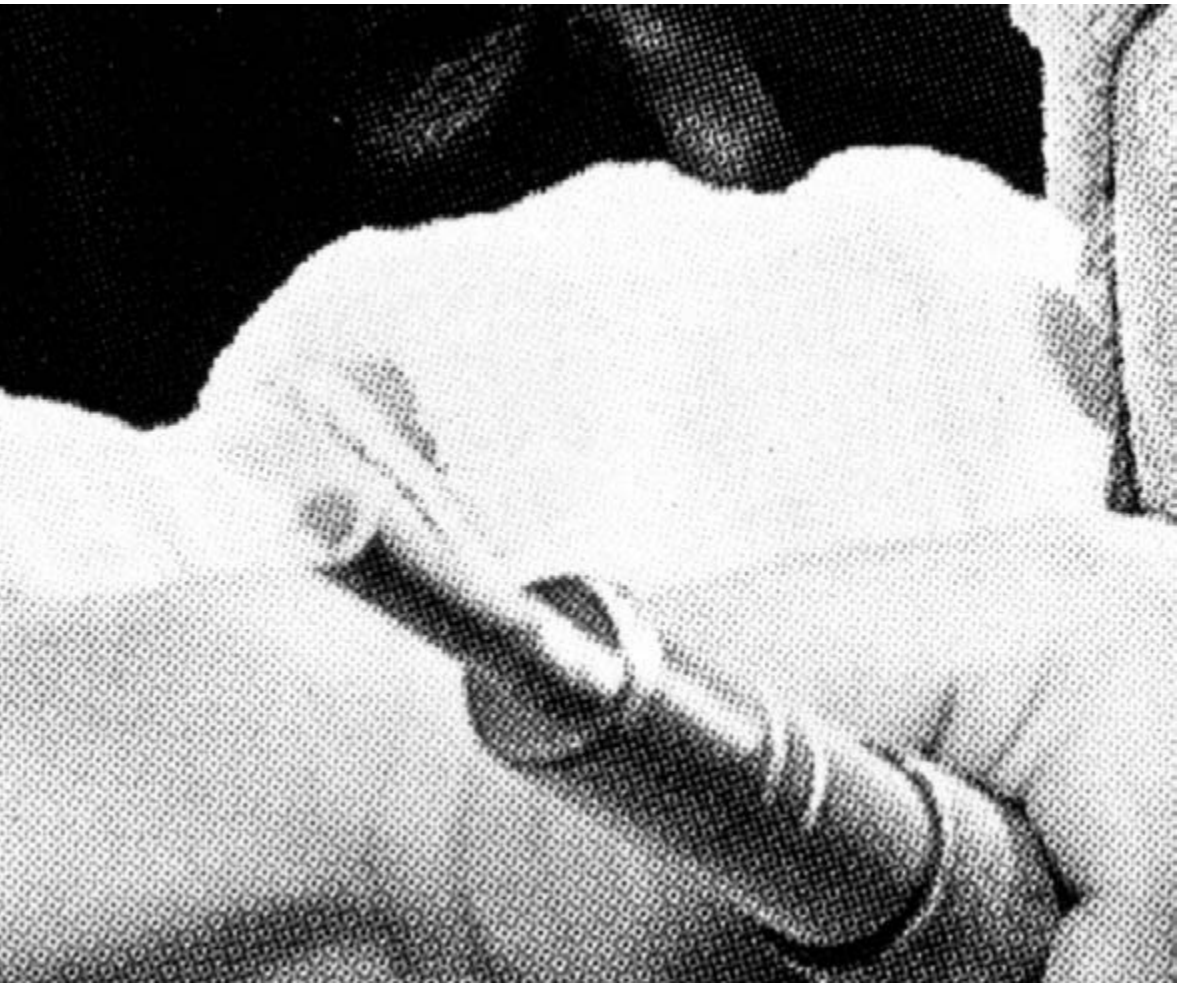
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JAPAN

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for Margot

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NOTE REGARDING TRANSLATIONS,
JAPANESE NAMES, AND WORDS

All translations are by the author. All interviews were conducted in Japanese by the author, unless otherwise noted. Japanese names are given in the Japanese order, that is, family name followed by given name (e.g., Sasaki Shirō), except in cases where a Japanese scholar publishes in English, in which case the Western form is followed (given name then family name). Song information is written in the form “Song title” *Album title*. Please be aware that Japanese words usually take the same form whether in singular or plural. Thus, the term *kimono* can refer to one or more pieces of clothing.

It was a revolution. Scratching
two records to make one music.

...

That energy came from the Bronx,
where hip-hop was first discovered,
from there across the ocean to Japan,
a spark flew and caught fire.

Yes, it is the beginning of the legend.

—ECD “Intro” on *Big Youth*

*Kakumei datta. Nimai no rekōdo o
hikkaite hitotsu no ongaku o tsukuridasu.*

...

*Sono kakki wa buronkusu, tsumari
hippu hoppu ga saisho ni hakken sareta basho,
soko kara umi o koe nihon ni mo
tobihi shita no de aru.*

Sō, densetsu no hajimari da.

INTRODUCTION

HIP-HOP, JAPAN, AND CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION

With these words, the Japanese rapper ECD uses the image of a spark to reflect on the ways hip-hop crosses borders and sets the world alight.¹ He gives credit to the New York City pioneers—Grandmaster Flash, Kool Herc, Rakim, KRS-One—and the energy of the Bronx that started the movement, but he also reminds us that while origins are important, hip-hop depends on the people who keep the fire going wherever they might be. *Hip-Hop Japan* analyzes the paths these sparks took as the music and culture spread from a small, underground scene in the eighties and early nineties, largely dismissed by Japan’s major media companies, to become a mainstream pop culture phenomenon today. Hip-hop was a revolution, as ECD says, because it provided a particular means for youth to express themselves through rhythm and rhyme, sampling and remixing, and battling with one’s skills. As the flames spread in the late nineties, Japanese hip-hop became more commercialized, but that commercialization developed alongside a widening and diversifying underground scene, encompassing artists and fans from a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds and from throughout Japan, from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south.

Hip-hop caught on because it spread through the smoky bowels of Tokyo’s underground club scene. There one can experience the ways Japanese hip-hop draws inspiration from American artists while at the same time inte-

grating the language and everyday understandings of Japanese youth. In this book, I focus on these sites of performance, what artists and fans call the *genba*, or actual site, of the Japanese hip-hop scene, referring to the all-night dance clubs where the combined efforts of artists, fans, and promoters fed the fire.² I use the concept of *genba* to draw attention to the ways hip-hop is constantly made and re-made in specific locations through local dialects and for particular audiences. These clubs were pivotal sites of performance, socializing and networking that form the dynamic links between the global and Japan.

The evolution of the Japanese hip-hop scene reveals a path of globalization that differs markedly from the spread of cultural styles driven by major corporations such as Disney, McDonald's, or Wal-Mart. Indeed, hip-hop in Japan is illuminating precisely because it was initially dismissed as a transient fad by major corporations and yet ultimately took root as a popular style nevertheless. This shows that globalization is not driven solely by powerful media companies, but travels through alternative paths as well. This ethnography aims to give an insider's view of what the music means to young Japanese, but I would argue that the lessons of this case study are more far-reaching, providing insight into how culture is changing worldwide today. In particular, the book offers two general conclusions. First, localization of cultural forms can, and at times does, proceed simultaneously with an increasing global sharedness, thus showing that the opposition between local and global can be a false dichotomy that hides more than it reveals. Second, I propose a method for understanding how the forces driving new cultural styles emerge from the interaction among diverse actors—media industries, artists, fans, writers, and so on—in a way that requires grasping the connections (rather than oppositions) between culture industries on one hand, and creative artists and active fans on the other. Attending to *genba* of cultural production provides immediate access to the intersecting power lines that produce transnational popular culture, while at the same time allowing us to consider the mutual construction of what are often viewed as dichotomous analytical categories (global/local, producer/consumer, complicit/resistant, etc.).

With these larger issues in mind, this book attempts to capture and make sense of the ways hip-hop is lived in late-twentieth-century, early-twenty-first-century Japan, at a time when youth face an increasingly uncertain economic future, and when the nation as a whole is struggling to adjust to its shifting position vis-à-vis Asia and the West. Among the rappers discussed in these pages are those who challenge government whitewashing of the World War II military atrocities, question racism in Japan, criticize the nation's sex

industry, rap about teenage bullying-victims-turned-schoolyard-murderers, and ask whether a job as a salaryman is anything but acquiescence to a life of quiet desperation. Far from being a straightforward example of Americanization, hip-hop in Japan includes rap songs that question the US government's reaction to 9/11 and the reasons for the Iraq war. Understanding the impact of this diversity of messages requires attention not only to the words, but also to the contexts in which they are performed and heard.

To understand these contexts, I have organized the book such that each successive chapter details hip-hop's development in Japan in terms of a central analytical theme: race, battling, performance, fans, language, gender and the market. Although break-dancers, deejays (DJs), and graffiti artists all figure importantly in the story of hip-hop in Japan, I concentrate on Japanese rappers and their lyrics, in part because rap has become the most commercially successful aspect of hip-hop, and because rap, more than dance, graffiti art, or deejaying, is most deeply intertwined with the Japanese language, and therefore provides particularly interesting insights into Japaneseness and its interaction with global flows.³ How is hip-hop changing as it gets relocated, re-interpreted, transformed and commodified in new settings? Are we witnessing the emergence of a what might be called a global hip-hop nation, or is hip-hop simply the latest foreign cultural style to be seamlessly integrated into Japanese culture? Does Japanese hip-hop resist entertainment-industry capitalism, or has it simply been gobbled up by the omnivorous J-Pop world? Does hip-hop promote deeper connections with African American culture or is it primarily a vehicle for superficial fashion encoded with offensive stereotypes? What drives the spread of these styles, and to what extent is it top-down or bottom-up? (Indeed, what is the top? America? Media conglomerates? The super-producer Dr. Dre?) To answer these questions, we must begin in the *genba*, where the huge sound, the intensely focused artists, the energized fans, the committed promoters, the critical writers, and the business-minded executives each bring particular energy, interests, and expertise to the movement.

Going to a Club

About a quarter mile from Tokyo's Shibuya station, the aptly named club Cave represented an important location for hip-hop in 1996. There I attended about a dozen rap performances and deejay scratch contests. To find out about an event at one of Tokyo's clubs, whether at Cave, Harlem, Family, Web, The Room or countless others, one could start by checking for flyers in Tokyo's

so-called record town (*reco mura*), an area in Shibuya that boasts what may be the world's most extensive collection of new and used vinyl record stores.⁴ Although the flyer may read "doors open at 10 p.m.," few people arrive before midnight, and the action picks up an hour or two after that. Arriving at a small office building's back door, you find no sign, but are likely to see a few clubbers in hip-hop gear outside talking on cell phones. Head down the narrow staircase, and at a ticket window you are charged about \$25 (¥3000) for the night's entrance fee, which many clubbers think inexpensive, given that a movie costs about \$15 (¥1800). Unlike most clubs in the mid-nineties, Cave would ask for ID to confirm that clubbers were at least twenty years old, the legal drinking age in Japan. A heavy door prevents seeing or hearing inside before paying. You receive two tickets each good for a beer or rail drink.

Inside the club, the air is warm and thick, humid with the breath and sweat of dancing bodies. Head left, and you will enter the cramped bar area with a graffiti-painted wall reading "Vortex," the record label associated with the club. Here, hip-hop artists meet before their shows to plan upcoming recording projects and live events, to pass on demo tapes from friends, and to gossip. Back through a narrow hallway, past filthy bathrooms covered with street promotion stickers, you arrive at the upper level dance floor. When Takagi Kan spins as a deejay, a group of disciples stand at the deejay booth, watching mix techniques and trying to read the artist and song names off the spinning vinyl. They never speak to him, nor does he acknowledge them. Standing on the dance floor, you feel the bone-thudding bass lines thump out of enormous speakers. There is the scritch-scratch of a deejay doing his turntable tricks, and the hum of friends talking, yelling really, over the sound of the music. The lighting is subdued, much of it coming from a mirrored ball slowly rotating on the ceiling. The smell of stale beer is mostly covered by the cigarette haze, but it is best not to look too closely at what is making the floor alternately slippery and sticky. At a couple of times throughout the night, a break-dance circle will open up, as the rest of us peer over shoulders to catch the good moves.

In 1996, groups that would later become staples on music television shows performed before small crowds between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. in a downstairs space that could hold only about a hundred people. It was a veritable firetrap with only a bare light bulb shining on the emcees rapping from the cramped deejay booth. I remember seeing Zeebra's head brush against the ceiling as he rapped to the underground crowd in his early days. During scratch solos, if you look at the hands of the assembled fans, you will see the would-be deejays doing "air mixer," wiggling their mixer fingers back-and-forth in time

to the scratches, a contemporary equivalent to a bygone era's air guitar. The darkness, low ceiling, black walls, and smoky murk create a space both intimate and claustrophobic. The loud sound and drunken revelry give clubs an atmosphere of excitement that culminates with the live show and often a free-style session afterwards. But an important part of clubbing is also the lull before and after the live show, when deejays work their crates, and everyone else circulates among the crowd, flirting, networking, gossiping, dancing, or simply checking out the scene. Clubs are spaces where the diffuse network of hip-hop fans, artists, organizers, producers, and entrepreneurs gather, and where work and pleasure mix. The nightclubs produce the hip-hop scene in a way that extends beyond the performances on stage. In this sense, *genba* are the crucibles where "hip-hop" and "Japan" merge to form the shape-shifting amalgam "hip-hop Japan."⁵

Fieldwork to Study Global Popular Culture

I came to this project as a graduate student in cultural anthropology interested in the intersection of global and local cultures (and also as a fan of American hip-hop). After listening to some albums by the Japanese groups Rhymester and Scha Dara Parr, I was struck by what unique perspectives they brought to their society. I decided that depicting what Japan looked like from the perspective of a Japanese rapper would add something I had yet to see in my years of studying Japanese culture. But when I began fieldwork in the fall of 1995, the number of potential sites was daunting. There were the places where the music was produced: record companies, recording studios, home studios, and in some cases on trains (some artists programmed beats using portable, handheld synthesizers). There were the places where the music was promoted: music magazines, fashion magazines, tv and radio shows, nightclubs, and record stores. There was also the interaction between musicians and fans to be observed at live shows or in mediated form on cassettes, CDs, and twelve-inch LPs. Besides, hip-hop includes not only rap music but also breakdancing, deejaying, and graffiti, and all of these aspects took their own shape in Japan. One of the tenets of anthropological fieldwork is that you cannot understand a people without being there, but in the case of hip-hop, where is "there"?

As I began interviewing rappers, magazine writers, and record company people, the term *genba* kept coming up. Even among those who were skeptical about hip-hop in Japan, everyone agreed that to understand Japanese rap music it was necessary to go to the *genba*, that is, nightclubs. The clubs

(also called *kurabu*) provided a space where the gamut of participants met, and provided an entry point for grasping the experiential pleasures within a variety of business practices. The idea of *genba* can be applied broadly to sites that become a focus of people's energies and where something is produced. Live shows are central for understanding the paths that Japanese hip-hop has taken, and they also constitute the events around which many musicians' lives revolve, at least, the musical parts of their lives.

At the same time, artists, magazines and, of course, record companies also measured productivity in terms of CD releases. After attending various events for several months, and as the artists became aware of my interests, some musicians invited me to observe recording sessions. Recording studios offered a different but also revealing *genba* of performance and networking. There, performance is turned into a material object and a commodity. Studios also prove important sites for teaching musicians what a company expects from a professional. In recording studios, the intense focus on the sound and the repetition involved in getting it right illustrates the on-going processes of pre-production, demos, rehearsal, writing, recording, mixing, and promoting that constitute other sides of hip-hop performance. Recordings also remain the best opportunity for widespread success, both in terms of getting paid and getting props. In these ways, recording studios serve as another central research *genba*, though they figure less prominently, compared to clubs, in the narrative that follows.

In some respects, this book is an experiment aimed at exploring what sites of cultural production can teach us about the intersecting forces that produce global hip-hop. My fieldwork assumes an ethnographic approach that is performative rather than place-based. I did not focus on a single club, but attended a variety of different clubs to establish a comparison. I spent five weeks in Tokyo during the summer of 1994 to begin research for this project. My intensive fieldwork was conducted between September 1995 and February 1997. I have made brief return trips almost every year since then, most recently in July 2005. In all, I have attended more than 120 club events, mostly in Tokyo, but also some in outlying suburbs. I have also witnessed over fifty recording sessions in venues ranging from small home studios to multimillion-dollar studios.⁶ *Genba* research in clubs and recording studios offered opportunities for interviews with musicians, fans, event organizers, record company executives and club owners. Eventually, I visited the homes of several musicians and met with some of their parents as well. I supplemented this fieldwork with interviews with record company representatives, record store owners, and music magazine writers.⁷ I continue to follow the

scene by reading magazines and Web sites, through contacts by e-mail, and, during my return trips, by meeting with friends, artists, and writers to go to clubs and to record stores.

Of course club performances do not generate a singular or even converging approach to combining Japan and hip-hop, but rather constitute a complex and evolving scene has arisen out of a range of competing approaches. To get a small sense of this variety, we need to step out of clubs to visit an event at which a wider range of artists battled for attention at one of Japan's cornerstone hip-hop events.

B-Boy Park 2001

In August 2001, I attended a four-day festival in Tokyo called B-Boy Park that provided an overall snapshot of Japanese hip-hop as it entered the new millennium. Organized by Japanese hip-hop pioneer Crazy-A, the festival began on Thursday and Friday with competitions in freestyle rapping, breakdancing and battle deejaying, events that were the culmination of regional competitions held throughout Japan. The finals of the freestyle competition drew upwards of a thousand fans to watch the emcees compete on a boxing-ring-style stage at On Air East, a big box live space in Shibuya. The six expert judges—writers, rappers, producers—voted after each head-to-head round, but they relied on the screaming fans to decide all ties. In the end, Kreva (of Kick the Can Crew), battled to victory, winning his third straight title with his pointed dis raps and clever rhymes. The break-dance and deejay competitions drew audiences in the hundreds as well.

On Saturday and Sunday, the performances took place at the outdoor stage in Yoyogi Park. Nestled between the youth shopping districts of Shibuya and Harajuku and adjacent to the Meiji Shrine with its giant wooden torii gates and nationally famous iris gardens, the park constitutes a space between traditional Japan and the youth consumer culture that symbolizes the present day. Since the 1980s, the park has been a gathering point for street musicians on Sundays. It was here in 1984 that the first Japanese break-dancers started practicing. Crazy-A and his brother Naoya were among the people who first performed there, and later DJ Krush, the group B-Fresh, and others joined in the fray. In the 1980s, when hip-hop was just beginning in Japan, small-scale gatherings nurtured the first generation of artists as groups of friends shared what little information was available about hip-hop while experimenting with the new style.

In 2001, B-Boy Park illustrated the long way hip-hop in Japan had come.

The variety of groups and activities at B-Boy Park also embodied a movement caught between pressures of commercial media, diverse aesthetic approaches, and an array of political messaging. In the early afternoon on Saturday, a panel discussion featuring rappers, writers, and radio personalities, took questions from the audience and discussed the state of Japanese hip-hop, with particular attention to the dangers associated with rap's on-going commercialization in mainstream media. On Saturday afternoon, several independent record labels sponsored a "new talent" showcase, featuring two dozen up-and-coming groups, including then new-face teams Gagle and Torikabuto. B-Boy Park culminated in an all-day free concert on Sunday, featuring over forty of the leading Japanese rap groups and break-dance teams, including Crazy-A's outfit Rock Steady Crew Japan. The capstone event drew an audience of upwards of eight thousand people, and constituted the largest hip-hop show up until that time.

Wandering around Yoyogi Park during the final day's performances, you could see all manner of Japan's hip-hop fans. Some of the men were dressed in the latest thug fashion, with bandanas, do-rags, and platinum chains. Some of the fans had tanned skin, dread hair, or even beauty-salon-styled Afros to go with their NBA jerseys or FUBU wear, but overall the darkened-skin fans were few and far between. More common were simply baggy pants, baseball caps, Kangol hats, and Nike sneakers along with a variety of more normal, everyday Tokyo youth fashion (i.e., jeans and a T-shirt that none of your friends have). The audience was weighted 60-40 toward men, with most listeners in their teens and early twenties. The musicians tended to be a little older, in their early- to late-twenties.

The performances on stage paid homage to hip-hop's four elements (*yon yōso*) featuring break-dancers, deejays, and rappers, while several graffiti artists produced pieces on both sides of the half-dome stage. The woman graffiti artist Belx2, for example, made a manga-inspired piece, namely, a big eyed, bare breasted woman giving the finger (see figure 1) while another artist next to her depicted rappers with their microphones and iconic images of aerosol artists with face masks and spray cans.

Like other graffiti writers in Japan such as Kazz Rock and Tomi-E, Belx2 does work-for-hire like this, and also bombs outdoor pieces. For example, a wall along the train tracks near Sakuragi-cho station in Yokohama features a mile-long stretch covered with pieces from many of the Kantō area crews (see figure 2).

The rapping, deejaying, breakdancing, and graffiti at B-Boy Park would be instantly recognizable to hip-hop fans worldwide. In a way, it could have been



1. Belx2 working at B-Boy Park 2001. Photo by the author.

a hip-hop event anywhere—until one looked a little more closely at the details. The street vendors, for example, were selling *yakisoba* (fried noodles), *takoyaki* (octopus dumplings), *okonomiyaki* (an omelet-like snack), along with corn dogs, dried squid, and cans of Kirin beer. An undercurrent of eco-friendly activities was noteworthy as well, as some environmental groups had tables set up with information about atomic energy (bad) and beer made with hemp (good). Several times between acts, announcements were made to encourage the tobacco smokers in the crowd to use non-flammable plastic snap-pockets as portable ashtrays to prevent dirtying the park with cigarette butts (and people were actually using them). At the back of the viewing area were garbage cans that required you to separate your trash into six categories for recycling.

But above all it was the Japanese lyrics that marked the event as Japanese. Not only did the day's emcees transform what is often thought of as the subtle and refined language of haiku into a rhythmically pounding flow of rap, but they all rapped about topics that carried a distinctly Japanese flavor. Among the event's peak moments, performances by Rhymester and Zebra stood out. When one of Rhymester's emcees Utamaru performed a song criticizing the Japanese government, thousands of fans joined him for the chorus, screaming, cheering, taunting, calling on the government to "open the zipper" and lay bare the sordid backroom dealings that were corrupting Japan's



2. Kazz Rock graf piece in Sakuragi-cho, 1999. Photo by the author.

political system. Hip-hop and global politics also intertwined in Zeebra's performance of a song inspired by the Kitano Takeshi film *Brother* (2000). The film portrays an exiled yakuza tough, played by Kitano, taking over the Los Angeles drug trade with the help of his brother and an African American friend. In the song, Zeebra riffs on the idea of Japanese beating Americans at their own game, yet he positions himself not as "representing Japan," but as fighting for himself, "Zeebra the ill skill."

it's true we lost the war	<i>Tashika ni maketa ze, sensō jya</i>
but don't dis us now	<i>da kedo DISrarenee, kon no genjō wa</i>
we're tough, hard internationalists	<i>orera tafu de, haado na kokusaiha</i>
the top fighters who made it through	<i>masa ni erabinukareta toppu faitaa</i>

—Zeebra feat. Aktion (2001) "Neva Enuf" single (Future Shock, PSCR-5936)

Zeebra's song illustrates how hip-hop, even as a Western form, can be used to challenge Western cultural hegemony. Later in the song, fellow emcee Aktion even brags, "I can't even understand your English—ha ha!" with the implication that knowing English hardly proves necessary to be number one. Uta-maru, criticizing the Japanese government, and Zeebra, questioning American dominance, offer two examples of the ways in which hip-hop cannot be seen as straightforward Japanization of a global style, nor as simply Americanization. B-Boy Park 2001 demonstrated that there exists no singular Japanese approach to hip-hop, but rather a wide range of artists competing to promote diverse visions of what hip-hop in a Japanese setting might be.

An explosion of divergent styles in the first years of the twenty-first century shows how different groups of artists, each with somewhat distinct fan bases, use their expressions to draw selectively among competing aspects of hip-hop. The proponents of these different styles—party rap, underground hip-hop, hard core (*haa ko*), conscious rap (*konshasu*), spoken-word rap, free-jazz rap, and rock rap, to name a few—all emphasize different linkages of aesthetics and politics. These choices help us grasp why different club events (*genba* performances) draw different audiences and promote divergent visions of what Japanese hip-hop can be. While some Japanese emcees portray themselves as self-styled thugs cruising Yokohama streets in Southern-California-style lowrider cars, others are featured in music videos fighting ninja with *katana* (samurai swords).⁸ The annual event B-Boy Park, which began in 1998, is unusual in the sense that the different groups, each with an individual approach to Japanese hip-hop, tend to segregate themselves through separate late-night events. But the competitive interaction between the groups at the huge festival acts as a metaphor for the competitive dynamic that generated the widening diversity within the overall scene. By the time of B-Boy Park 2001, it was clear that neither the term *localization* (becoming more Japanese) nor the phrase *global homogenization* (becoming more like everywhere else) could characterize that range of stylistic approaches within the scene. It was also a scene that many people had doubted would ever develop at all.

Hip-Hop Endures Despite Doubts

When I began this study of hip-hop during a preliminary research trip to Tokyo in 1994, few would have predicted that an event like B-Boy Park could draw thousands of fans, much less support four days' worth of performances. Up until the mid-nineties, people who worked in the entertainment world

pointed to hip-hop's rootedness in African American communities as a reason to doubt its possible takeoff in Japan, where different understandings of race, language, and social class prevail. At the time, when I interviewed Japanese music magazine writers, musicians, and record company representatives, many were skeptical: "Japanese rap is all imitation"; "Japanese youth don't understand where hip-hop is coming from"; "It'll soon disappear"; "Japanese B-Boys are only interested in hip-hop as a fashion statement"; and "The Japanese language just doesn't work with rap." Except for File Records, a small, independent label in Tokyo, few record companies were showing any interest in producing Japanese rap music. The early 1990s constituted a winter for Japanese rap and it was not clear whether warmer times would ever arrive.

Japanese hip-hop reached a tipping point, however, later in 1994 and 1995, when several rap singles sold around a million copies each. In contrast to the United States where Run-DMC's 1986 crossover hit "Walk This Way" hinged on a combination of rock and rap, Japan's mid-nineties crossover moments arrived with songs that combined the *kawaii* (cute) orientation of pop music with rap vocals and deejay textures. Of particular importance were two singles by East End X Yuri (the "X" is read "plus") and a single by the group Scha Dara Parr that featured singer-songwriter Ozawa Kenji. The huge sales drew the attention of major record companies who viewed teenage girls as the linchpin for expanding the genre. Those corporate attitudes angered the more underground rappers, who sought to establish their own legitimacy, their own "street cred," despite selling fewer records. When I returned to Tokyo in September 1995 to begin a year and a half of intensive fieldwork, cute-oriented so-called J-Rap was being covered in music/fashion magazines, while underground artists, still ignored in the mainstream press, stoked the fire in late-night clubs. Years later, some of these underground groups found their way to mainstream recognition.

What was once expected to be an ephemeral, fashion-oriented, transient fad now figures prominently in Japan's popular culture, appearing on television, radio, in magazines, and influencing many areas of Japan's pop music world. In what ways does the view from live performance spaces help us understand hip-hop's longevity, vibrancy, and diversity in Japan? In contrast to symbols of cultural globalization, such as Coca-Cola, Disney, Nike, and McDonald's, which take their cues from huge multinational corporations, hip-hop in Japan draws attention to an improvisatory working out of a cultural movement in the language and among peer-groups of a particular generation of youth.

The on-going experimentation with what works for a Japanese audience (from fans, to writers, to record company execs) is what distinguishes the *genba* of a hip-hop nightclub from something like Wal-Mart, Disney or McDonald's. It may be a matter of degree, but I would argue the distinction is worth making. Several scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of cultural globalization by showing how Disney and McDonald's in Asia take on particular local features, and therefore do not constitute a straightforward "Westernization" (Watson 1997; Brannen 1992; Raz 1999). Nevertheless, I would argue that the kind of circular interaction among the participants in a club, especially between artists and fans, offers a more fluid space for producing a collaborative movement. Wal-Mart, McDonald's, Disneyland have a more formalized range of experiences that generate feedback loops primarily through consumption. One could argue that each of these is a *genba*, but I would say they are less influential as *genba* because the performative and social networking features are less pronounced and because the character of the experience is more rigidly defined by the producer. Personally, I'm less interested in defining what is and is not a *genba*; rather, I suggest that *genba* offer a window on some cultural processes better than others. In performative and media contexts, I believe *genba* is very useful for broadening our understanding of the mutual construction of cultural forms (like hip-hop) beyond "producers vs. consumers" to include other actors (artists, record companies, media, fans, etc.) in dynamic feedback loops.

Another aspect of hip-hop's movement from underground niche pursuit to mainstream presence deserves clarification. Although the appearance of two million-selling Japanese rap groups in the mid-nineties prompted articles in music magazines declaring J-Rap's "citizenship" (*shiminken*), criticisms of the music's inappropriateness to Japan did not cease. Rather, the skepticism was transposed from the formerly dominant discourse of hip-hop's association with African-Americans and the English language (in contrast to Japan's ethnic and linguistic setting) to a new discourse challenging Japanese hip-hop's authenticity on the grounds that it was "simply commercialized (*koma-sharu*) pop music." But as I discuss in more detail in chapter 3, it is important to understand the fluidity between "commercial" and "underground."⁹ Many commercial pop artists spent years honing their styles in underground clubs, and underground artists often aim for wider recognition and more lucrative contracts. I picture the link between commercial and underground in terms of a pyramid structure, with the amateur artists, underground performers and independent label musicians working in the base. The fewer but more visible artists working for major record labels, and the rare mega-hit stars

taper off in numbers toward the top. The artists in the upper echelons receive far more attention, and often come to stand for hip-hop today even though they represent a small fraction of the overall number of artists, fans and promoters in the overall scene. The point of clarification, then, is that hip-hop did not go from an underground era to a commercial era, but that the pyramid expanded with those at the top breaking into mainstream media coverage, while the base of the pyramid expanded as well, though largely unnoticed by people removed from the scene. Moreover, this aspect of hip-hop suggests ways of pushing forward several intellectual debates about the relationship between Japaneseness and global popular culture.

Toward a More Complex “Japaneseness” Amid the Global Popular

An emcee who calls himself Kohei Japan illustrates how rappers not only playfully rework hip-hop but also play with notions of what Japan means as well. In one song, he remixes food, rap, and Japaneseness in a particularly interesting way. Kohei lived with his parents in Yokohama into his twenties, and while pursuing a music career with a rap group named Mellow Yellow, he has been working as a chef. As his stage name suggests, he does not shy away from imagery of traditional Japan. On the cover of his debut solo CD (see figure 3), he is portrayed as if he were a kabuki character in a woodblock print.

This image of a kimono-clad emcee could be taken as representing Japan, but a closer look reveals a more contradictory message. His fingers make the gesture of the so-called funk sign (a reference to one of the songs on the album), and the funk sign appears on his kimono as well. The Kangol hat also appears unusual for a kabuki actor. A look at the lyrics of one of the songs on the album shows that while Kohei highlights his Japaneseness, he does not expect to be taken seriously.

[I'm] always all-natural, completely Yoga	<i>tsune ni shizentai maru de yoga</i>
not bread, but rice; not ramen, but soba	<i>pan yori raisu ramen yori soba</i>
not meat, but fish; not cooked, but raw	<i>niku yori sakana yaku yori nama</i>
not flowers, but dumplings; my cap is	<i>hana yori dango, kyappu yori</i>
Kangol	<i>Kangol</i>
wearing a hunting cap, it's my time	<i>hanchin kaburya ore no jikan</i>
K-O-H-E-I, the Japonica	<i>K-O-H-E-I za japonika</i>

— Kohei Japan (2000) “Hungry Strut” *The Adventures of Kohei Japan* (Next Level/File Records, NLCD-037)