Okinawa Revisited

Okinawan music has faded from the spotlight in recent times, but they’re making a concerted push at this year’s Womex. Paul Fisher gives us an update.

Gosh, is it really 23 years since Roots first published a feature on Okinawan music, an interview with the legendary Shoukichi Kina? Well, an update is probably well overdue.

Quick recap: I went to Japan in 1989 for a holiday, and before I left our editor alerted me to Kina. A Japanese subscriber visiting Sidmouth Festival in the early 1980s had left him a pair of albums by Shoukichi Kina, one of them his live debut and the other, featuring Ry Cooder, called Bloodline.

He was so enthused, he’d got more copies sent over and passed them on to Radio 1 DJs Alexis Korner and John Peel, resulting in the first UK radio play for Okinawan music. A year after I first arrived in Japan, and now living there having become transfixed by the music, I travelled by ship about 300 miles from Kagoshima, the southern tip of the Japanese mainland, to Okinawa, the sub-tropical islands in the East China Sea in search of the man.

It had been ten years since he had released Bloodline, and Kina, unbeknownst to me at the time, was just coming back from a period of relative musical inactivity (this is a cycle that has continued to this day, and Kina is back again this year with a new record: more about that later). He had just released a new album, and my visit at New Year coincided with a festival he had arranged and a live appearance on the national broadcaster NHK.

Kina turned out to be an interesting if somewhat challenging interviewee for my journalistic debut. My first rather innocent, break-the-ice, informal question about the festival produced a ten-minute answer along the lines of: he had been visited the night before by the spirits of both John Lennon and Bob Marley, who had said how important the festival was for world peace.

Over the following few years, Okinawa gained a reputation both in Japan and outside as one of the undiscovered jewels of world music. While the rest of Japan, so it seemed, shunned their own music in favour of generic western bubblegum pop, Okinawa stood firm, with everyone young and old, singing folk songs called shima uta (island songs) while playing their three-stringed banjo-like instrument, the sanshin. The truth of course, wasn’t quite as fanciful, but nevertheless through several visits I could see how local music still felt a natural part of daily life, unlike what I had observed elsewhere.

Ryukyu Chimdon Gakudan

We learned about other groups, all of whom got featured in the magazine, most notably Rinken Band and the female quartet Nenes, who ended up on the cover. Of just as much interest was to discover that this incredible con-coction of local and extraneous elements had been going on for years, some of the pioneers being the fathers of the main protagonists of the day: Shouei Kina, Rinshuke Teruya (father of Rinken) and Teihan China, father of Sado, the man behind Nenes.

Other media caught on, as did festivals such as Womad. Kina, Rinken Band and Nenes all toured in Europe and the US, with a growing list of well-known musicians spotted in attendance. That Bloodline album got released worldwide as part of a Kina compilation from David Byrne’s Luaka Bop label, while the UK’s GlobeStyle released Kina’s first album, and a record by Nenes.

By the mid-1990s, everything looked in place for Okinawa to join the ranks of other islands in the world that were making a big splash on the world music scene at the time, such as Cuba or Madagascar. So, what happened? Why in 2014 are we still talking about this as largely unknown music?
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W...hereas the driving forces in promoting Cuban or Malagasy music worldwide were mostly western record companies, in Okinawa the main market was Japan and the promotional drive was coming from Tokyo. The major Japanese record companies who had caught onto the tail end of the Okinawan music 'boom' by signing all the most popular artists were really only interested in their domestic market. Why go to all the trouble and expense of selling a few thousand more globally?

As with most 'booms' in Japan, saturation point was soon reached with versions of Okinawan jazz, reggae, and every other conceivable genre covered, and a bewildering array of compilationstrust upon a weary public. It became increasingly difficult to find a starting point for newcomers as the perception of a once vibrant, evolving Okinawan roots music gradually metamorphosed into a bland new age / healing potpourri mush.

Eventually the majors all but pulled out, leaving a few independents to pick up the pieces, some admirably, but without the majors' promotional clout. RRoots apparently fell off their radar.

Down in Okinawa, these events left musicians mostly non-plussed as the local market carried on in much the same way as before. The more famous artists, including Shoukichi Kina, Nenes and Rinken Band had opened larger 'live houses' or shima uta bars to accommodate the growing numbers of Japanese tourists frequenting them. The same artists continued to record, mostly for their own labels, with changes in personnel or, in the case of Nenes, a complete revamp as all four women vocalists were replaced.

Okinawan independent labels, established and newer companies, continued to support local artists, although these were largely tailored towards a local market with a penchant for lo-fi recordings and cheesy keyboards among the undoubteds. Some of those gems in the last 20 years, including those on Japanese labels, were from established artists Yasuakato Oshima and Tetsuhiro Daiku, previously featured in RRoots. Several older musicians including Misako Oshiro and Seijin Noborikawa (who died last year) found wider fame partially through appearances in the hit film Nabbage No Koi (Nabbage's Love). Many younger musicians have emerged too, such as the omnipresent Toru Yonaha and female Peruvian / Okinawan singer Lucy Nagamine.

Another significant record featuring Makoto Kubota, a Japanese musician and producer who had helped spawn the first wave of interest in Shoukichi Kina by covering his hit Hasai Ojisan and participating on the Bloodline album. After many years of championing music from outside Japan, he became fascinated by the 80-something-year-old singers and ancient prayer music from the outlying Miyako island resulting in an album by his Blue Asia project called Sketches Of Miyahik. There's been a subsequent film and several spin-off projects such as re-releases of long-deleted traditional albums, and the Kubota-produced Miyako funk band, Tako and Kiba.

Another Miyako island singer, Isamu Shimooji, together with Yukito Ara from hibgaki island formed a duo called Sakishima Meeting, Sakishima being the name of the archipelago that includes both islands. In the 1990s Yukito Ara had already fronted the group Parsha Club, at the time one of the younger bands inspired by Shoukichi Kina or Rinken Band.

Isamu Shimooji is one of several musicians, along with others such as hibgaki island trio Begin, or female singer Rina Nakayaka, who have combined elements of their tradition into a singer / songwriter folk framework that has been extremely popular on the mainland. Shimooji sometimes sings in the local dialect, rendering his lyrics unintelligible not only to Japanese but to most Okinawans too. Sakishima Meeting are due to perform at an Okinawa reception at the world music trade fair, Womex, this month.

A previous Womex showcase artist and former guitarist with Shoukichi Kina, Takashi Matsu, had probably the biggest selling Okinawan albums overseas with the late Bob Brozman, partly due to extensive touring and the added promotion that brings.

Shoukichi Kina meanwhile withdrew almost entirely from music to concentrate on politics, eventually becoming elected to the upper house in the Japanese parliament, House of Councillors, in 2004. He did release sporadic albums, but this year he has seen his most significant release for many years as a double single and mini CD collaboration with Dutch electronic musician Pascal Plantinga (you can hear a track on this issue's RRoots 51 compilation). Plantinga, in his clever arrangements and soundscapes, has managed to capture the passion and charisma of Kina that had been lacking recently, but set him apart from his contemporaries back in the 1970s.
he changing political situation in Okinawa, especially opposition to the American bases, has also had repercussions on the music scene. The bases take up about a fifth of the main Okinawan island, meaning 75 percent of the US bases are crammed onto about one percent of the total land area of Japan. Currently about 27,000 US troops are stationed there. The opposition has been exacerbated by a series of events such as the rape of a local schoolgirl and the crash of a US helicopter into a university. An ongoing issue is the relocation of the Futenma marine base from a densely populated area to an unspoiled location near the city of Nago in the northeast.

This has resulted in musicians aside from Kina finding a political voice, such as Tatsumi Chibana, whose music encompasses hip-hop and reggae with elements of the tradition intertwined. Some of his lyrics in the Okinawan language Uchinaguchi add to a sense of detachment from mainland Japan, and some would say growing support for political independence, although this is generally regarded as still a remote possibility.

So, where is Okinawan music in 2014? Well, in August the cultural department of the local government advertised for Okinawan musicians to apply to be included on a compilation of music to be distributed at this year’s Womex. This is significant in itself, as Japanese and Okinawan institutions have often eschewed such opportunities, while artists and companies have been reluctant to work together for the greater good, and instead tend to view each other suspiciously as rivals.

I was lucky enough to be asked to be one of the judges, so what better way to test the musical pulse of the islands? The standard was remarkably high. Musicians from an array of genres ended up applying, with roughly one third of them playing something that would be of interest to readers of this magazine and indeed Womex delegates. Not bad. These include Tatsumi Chibana, various excellent female singers, some performers who have been around for a few years such as Chihiro Kamiya, Kanako Horiuchi and Hirara, and some rather wonderful and exciting new mixtures and sounds from groups such as Maltese Rock, Ryukyu Chimdon Gakudan and Nee Nee.

All in all quite an affirming experience. It’s easy to think of 23 years ago as the middle of a golden period in Okinawan music that hasn’t been matched since. Perhaps today is simply different as the music scene has grown up and the musicians have an inner confidence. Those coming from a traditional background have not been totally eclipsed by the success on the Japanese mainland of their pop and rock contemporaries.

A core of young musicians remains acutely aware of what makes Okinawan music and culture special, connecting to the history of their island which has always embraced outside influences. Crucially, the young still participate in local festivals and traditions and music remains a natural part of daily life. The real local music continues to develop and mutate in new ways. Just as it has always done.

Not a lot of Okinawa-related web pages are in English, but try:
musicfromokinawa.com
Rinken Band: http://rinken.gr.jp/English/index.html
Yasukatsu Oshima: oshimayasukatsu.com/english/index.html
Makoto Kubota: www.kubotamakoto.com
Editor’s note: author Paul Fisher’s own Far Side Music web site farsidemusic.com is the best UK source for Okinawan CDs.

Shoukichi Kina (right) and Pascal Plantinga