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HIP-HOP

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JAPAN

RAP AND THE PATHS OF CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION
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worthy—both to their fans and to the record companies seeking new talent. It is struggles between factions, and the ways these factional battles changed over time, that give the clearest sense of how abstract global ideals become enacted in Japan. Yet the history of hip-hop in Japan also shows that the sense of what ideals drive hip-hop also changes over time. The uncertainty about what hip-hop meant in the early days due to a lack of information and understanding has been transformed today into an uncertainty about what hip-hop means because there are so many examples to consider. In this way, widening battles, diversifying scenes, and far-flung regional developments point to processes that suggest a way of thinking beyond localization or domestication.

Part of the challenge of understanding cultural globalization involves recognizing that the global and the local are not so much matched pairs as they are symbolic crystallizations of more fluid, ongoing processes unfolding over time. Does the spread of such popular culture forms ultimately produce cultural homogenization or increasing diversity? Evidence can be amassed to support either claims of global convergence or of local diversity, yet I doubt that we can ever establish, once and for all, a scale of analysis that can legitimately give one interpretation priority over the other. What seems most likely is that we are witnessing both convergence and divergence, albeit in different dimensions and with contradictory effects. The idea of genba—actual sites of performance—helps us see how the global is refracted through particular actors and contexts, but what we can also see from the example of the samurai is that the local, too, is refracted through performance. Samurai do not stand for any single Japaneseess, and in this they accurately represent hip-hop and its battles.

Where is the real in hip-hop? Hippu-hoppu no doko ga riaru
In the clubs [genba] sore wa genba
in other words, right here tsunami koko ni aru
—Rhymester, "Kuchi kara demakase," on Egotopia

CHAPTER 3
GENBA GLOBALIZATION AND LOCATIONS OF POWER

In this chapter, I focus on the particulars of club events, and their location amid a larger music industry and a changing youth culture in Japan. The mirror balls that provide light in the dark of hip-hop clubs suggest a place to begin. Every nightclub has its mirror balls, turning slowly, painting the smoky haze with light. Mirror balls radiate a semiotics of clubland, illuminating no single star on stage, but rather spotlighting and then passing over all the participants—artists, fans, promoters, writers, industry executives, club owners, bartenders, the regulars, and the first-timers. The dynamic interaction among all these actors is what brings a club scene to life. Mirror balls evoke this multiplicity, splashing attention on each individual for a moment and then moving on, not unlike the furtive glances of desire between clubbers in this zone of intimate anonymity. We are drawn to the circulation of forces rather than to power emanating from a star, drawn to the liminal space between the stage and the audience, drawn to the relationships rather than the identities that animate Japan's hip-hop scene.

In this chapter I examine hip-hop nightclubs to ask: What do these locations of performance tell us about the music's place in Japan's youth culture? Do hip-hop club performances have the potential to influence the broader sections of Japanese society, business, and politics? Like the light radiating
from the mirror ball, the particulars of club performances lead outward to larger contexts: the youth's position in Japan's changing economy; the growing importance of so-called content industries—including music—for producing economic growth; and the government's interest in promoting the nation's cultural soft power. Hip-hop music in clubs illuminates certain aspects of Japanese youth culture by drawing attention to the performativity of media power. Put another way, the influence of mediated representations arises from a combination of location and performativity. Artists use club events to show their skill on stage and to convey their particular political and aesthetic perspectives, but their influence depends on whether they move the crowd, something that cannot be determined only in terms of what they say but also by how and where they say it. This is the essence of a genba perspective: performativity and location. I would argue that this requires a nuanced understanding of different locations in a music, from the megahit stars to the relative unknowns in the underground, which, taken together, we might conceive of as a pyramid of the music scene. The process of career development, from being one among the mass of amateurs to becoming one of the very few megahit stars, depends on navigating past the gatekeepers, developing connections, and improving one's skills. Of course, rising up in the industry is no guarantee that stardom will be anything but fleeting. An unfolding, historical perspective on key performative locations offers a way of moving beyond conceptions of culture industry power in dichotomous terms. For example, do record companies have more power than artists? Can fans control record companies? Such questions cannot be answered without recognizing the dispersed, networked, and performative character of hip-hop within a larger pop music world and in the midst of a changing Japan. We might call this analytical scheme "genba globalization." By viewing club events within the larger pyramid structure of a music scene, we can see more clearly the ways government and business interests focus primarily on the upper echelons of the music world.

I argue that focusing too much on megahit stars leads to a distorted picture of what promotes thriving media economies and a nation's soft power. Japanese hip-hop unfolds amid contradictory discourses surrounding youth culture in Japan. On the one hand, young people are seen as dragging down the economy as freeter (temp workers) who value their leisure habits more than commitment to workplaces. On the other hand, content industries depend on youth as discriminating consumers who become, in effect, a national resource through their sensitivity to what is "cool." A look at some of the differences between major-label artists and underground rappers leads to a discussion of power within the recording industry. Instead of the binary oppositions of artist versus fan, artist versus record company, I suggest a more dynamic and interactive model of differential power in the cultural production of music. This perspective sets the stage for the further exploration of other dimensions of Japanese hip-hop's cultural interventions in terms of fans, language, gender, and markets.

Defining Genba

The word genba is written with the characters for "to appear" (现 gen) and "place" (場 ba). The word evokes a "place where something actually happens, appears, or is made." Genba sometimes refers to a place where something bad happens, such as a traffic accident or the scene of a crime. The term is also used for places where something is produced: anime studios, film locations, a construction site, a recording studio. The use of the term genba to refer to nightclubs where hip-hop is performed draws attention to "the making of the scene" (シーン). Whether as recording studios or as nightclubs, genba focus musicians' energies and provide a particular measure of their skill and success. Rather than asking how accurately Japanese hip-hop represents a kind of Japanese-ness or a legitimate respect for black culture, we can focus instead on how both Japanese-ness and blackness are performed by different groups (underground, pop, etc.) in different locations (in small clubs, in giant stadiums, etc.).

When rappers emphasize the importance of clubs as genba, they stake a claim to authority based on their onstage performance in front of generally receptive fans. Clubs can be viewed as a kind of home turf in contrast to other contexts for determining value. In the mediated world of the market (市场), value is defined by sales. In the entertainment world (エンターテイメント), value derives from celebrity renown. In the industry (産業), record company executives make decisions regarding production and promotion budgets by gambling on what may become valuable based on their understandings of marketability. In the media, value depends on attracting audiences important to advertisers. Each context draws attention to different schemas for evaluating performance broadly understood. Regardless of the interpretive context, no single person or group is fully in control of the outcomes.

I use this idea of the genba to explore what can be learned through fieldwork in performative locations. Rather than a place-based analysis, I work from sites where particular kinds of performative roles emerge through ongoing negotiation, networking, and debate. I view this as part of broader trends in
anthropology to rethink participant-observation fieldwork (Inda and Rosaldo 2002a; Marcus 1995). An important trend involves the focus on locations viewed not as geographic locales, but rather as sites constructed in fields of unequal relations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). This reorients our attention away from cultural flows from place to place toward questions of how global culture gains its force from the ways performances energize people in particular locations. Thus *genba*, I argue, are key paths of cultural globalization because they actualize (*genjitsu suru*) the global and the local simultaneously. Instead of cosmopolitanism, I use the term *genba globalization* to highlight the actualization or performativity, rather than subjectivity, of intersections of foreign and indigenous ideas. Unlike aspects of globalization spread by major multinational corporations and powerful governments, hip-hop in Japan is particularly instructive because it represents a kind of globalization that depends on *genba* for its force. A freestyle session in one of the late-night Tokyo clubs, described below, illustrates this dynamic.

**Freestyle as a Metaphor of Genba Globalization**

In what ways can a focus on nightclubs as *genba* help us unravel the question of what drives the globalization of hip-hop? Can we also determine whether hip-hop in Japan is ultimately global or local? I argue that we can gain insight into both questions through the concept of *genba* globalization, which analyzes the global in terms of how it is refracted through performances in particular *genba*. Rather than focusing on the cultural form itself, I draw attention instead to performance and the collective energy of the participants. A closer look at a specific club event can clarify what I mean.

With light snow falling on a blustery evening in February 1997, about three hundred people are crowded into a humid, smoky, basement Shibuya nightclub called Family. It is one large, dark room, with a bar along one wall and a mirror ball providing most of the light. Most of the audience members are in their early twenties, with relatively equal numbers of men and women. We have come to see 6C Night, a monthly Japanese hip-hop event that has been going since the early 1990s (and continues through 2005). The night’s activities begin at around 11 p.m. with a DJ spinning records, but the bulk of us show up after midnight, when the trains stop running for the night. The three live acts—Rip Slyme, Mellow Yellow, and Rhymester—perform from 1:30 a.m. to 3 a.m. The live show winds up with an open-ended freestyle session. Two microphones circulate among the fifteen or so people milling around the low platform that serves as a stage. We in the audience skeptically evaluate the latest new talent. One after another, newcomer rappers grab the mic and shout a minute or two of their rhymes before someone else dives in for a turn. Most of the rappers, in their late teens to mid-twenties, are men, but a couple women try out too. It is a free-for-all, ruled by the ability to hold the stage through a clever turn of phrase and a catchy delivery.

Then there is a pause as one of the more well-known rappers takes the mic. The scratch-scratch of the DJ’s turntable counts time as Gaku-MC holds the microphone to his lips: “Moriagatten no ka?” (Are you having fun yet?), Gaku tries to move the crowd by screaming “Yo!” but we have been exhorted by the previous fifteen freestyle emcees to yell “Ho-oh!” a few too many times. Gaku has his work cut out for him.

“What do you know what 6C stands for?” he yells. “Funky Grammar!” yells the crowd, the name of the hip-hop collective that organized this event. “Eeh?” teases Gaku. Then he signals to DJ Yoggie that he is ready, and the opening measures of the Jackson Five’s “ABC” start up, looped over and over as the DJ switches back and forth between two records on parallel turntables. Gaku gets his freestyle going (in Japanese), syncopating his rhymes against the catchy track, referring to the club, the heat, and the sweat drenching everyone’s clothes. The flow of his lyrics gives us all a bounce, and because it happens to be Valentine’s Day, he riffs on dating, saying he is going to “show us his manhood,” punning on sweat as a reference to sex, threatening to take off his clothes, then saying, “If you feel like I do, put your voices together and yell!” Now we are all moving, and with an explosive unity, we wave our hands forward and screech. Gaku says, “Yo, peace, I’m out” (in English) and leaves the stage. We in the audience smile and nod to each other. This is what we came for.

As the event continues, break-dancers from Rock Steady Crew Japan battle in a circle on the dance floor. After that, MC U and Krea, two emcees who years later will top the pop charts in the group Kick the Can Crew, engage in a freestyle battle in which each emcee must rhyme his first line with his opponent’s last one. The rhyming is all in Japanese, and the audience is hooked, laughing at the puns and insults flying back and forth. Krea: “Ha, you’re nothing but a laughing stock [owaranai],” MC U: “A laughing stock? I’ll never stop!” (Owara? Owaranai!) Afterwards, the deejays go back to playing their mix of current hip-hop, mostly from the United States, but with some recent Japanese tracks mixed in, along with old funk and soul records. At around
5 a.m., the bartenders usher us to the exit. Outside, dawn is breaking, and the Tokyo trains will soon start running again to take us home.

Beyond Global / Local

What can we learn from this freestyle session to extend our understanding of global and local sources of agency and influence? Does the example of RG Night show us whether hip-hop in Japan is ultimately global or local? Does the event represent cultural homogenization, or does the presence of rappers where there were none before constitute an increasing diversification of Japanese culture? Evidence from RG Night could be marshaled to support either side of the debate.

What we might refer to as homogenization is apparent in that self-described rappers engage in freestyle using English-language poetics (rhyming couplets, accented rhythms). The artists employ hip-hop performance styles including call-and-response, body language, fashion, and DJ scratch techniques. Gaku says in English “Yo, peace, I’m out” as he leaves the stage. Most of the records being played are American hip-hop, and much of the audience knows all the songs, as evidenced by the shouts of approval in the opening measures of the deejays’ selections.

But localization is apparent as well. All the emcees rap in Japanese to a Japanese audience about things that are meaningful or cool to them. Few American emcees would have any idea what they were talking about. Moreover, calling this “hybridity” is helpful only to a degree because we would like to know why Gaku’s particular mixture of styles differs from those of Krevya or MC V. The notion of hybrid assumes core sources (whether Japanese or hip-hop), yet styles in the scene shift over time and depend on whether one is an underground/indie or a major-label star in the pop realm. Depending on what one focuses on, local diversification and global homogenization proceed simultaneously.

Such conundrums recur endlessly in the debate over globalization’s effects on culture. Two sociologists whose work emphasizes opposite ends of the heterogeneity-homogeneity spectrum offer touchstones for a much wider range of scholarship. Roland Robertson (1995) focuses more on cultural diversification by local actors. He uses the term globalization to refer to the processes by which the global is transformed by local actors and circumstances. In fact, Japan gets some credit for the concept because, he explains, globalization is a translation of the Japanese marketing term dochaku (to take root), a reference to the process of making global products fit into local markets. For Robertson, glocalization is meant as an improvement over terms like indigenization or domestication that emphasize the local to the exclusion of the global. Robertson emphasizes their interpenetration.

At the other end of the spectrum, George Ritzer (2004, 73) proposes the term globalization to focus on “the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations . . . to impose themselves on various geographic areas.” He emphasizes the ways these institutions aim to “grow” their power, influence, and profits (hence, globalization). He describes such processes in terms of capitalism, Americanization, and McDonaldization, and places them under the overall rubric of what he calls the “globalization of nothing.” In this context, nothing refers to that which is “centrally conceived and controlled and largely lacking in distinctive substance, while something is defined as that which is generally indigenously conceived and controlled and possesses much in the way of distinctive substance” (20; emphasis added). From Ritzer’s perspective, a Big Mac is nothing; Cutilletta ham from Italy is something. Ritzer also identifies credit cards, faceless service persons, fast-food chains, and the like as “nothing.”

I would argue that both glocalization and globalization suffer from an analytical emphasis on the cultural forms themselves rather than on the ways they are put into practice. Capitalism might not be all bad if it promotes the autonomy of underprivileged people, for example, in the ways the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh offers microinvestments to entrepreneurial women. Such capitalism seems somehow different from the kind of capitalism spread via Wal-Mart. Similarly, some global homogeneity can be beneficial if we are talking about the spread of human rights, democracy, environmentalism, clean drinking water, or an end to AIDS. Moreover, depending on the scale of analysis, we can draw different conclusions about effects. Take voting, for example. Voting in a national election constitutes participation in global ideas of democratic process; it reinforces a national identity by defining rules of citizenship; and it also enacts individual choices in contests between local candidates. Global standardization, nationalization, and localization all get reinforced simultaneously. Determining whether this is glocalization or globalization cannot be accomplished, it seems to me, by focusing on the characteristics of the cultural form (voting) itself. Moreover, the global/local debate sets up a contest between abstractions that may not be appropriate to the issues on the ground. Is global/local the appropriate measure for understanding the conflict between global labor standards and global capitalism?
It seems to me that whether something is locally conceived is less important than how it is implemented.

Genba Globalization

In this respect, *genba* offer a way to distinguish between different paths of cultural globalization by focusing on performativity. Now we see why *genba*, as sites of actualization, offer a means to conceptualize the difference between the globalization of Wal-Mart, Disneyland, and McDonald's and the globalization of human rights, democracy, and environmentalism. The latter depend on *genba* for their transnational diffusion. Although Wal-Mart and McDonald's could be conceived of as *genba*, they differ in the sense that actors tend to be more constrained in terms of the patterns of production and transformation. Unlike McDonald's, other global forms that depend more on open-ended *genba* emerge from a collaborative focus on energy and attention, an improvisatory working out of goals and processes, which may be inspired by global and local reference points but which are determined only after the fact in historically contingent positions. In this sense, a freestyle session offers a metaphor for *genba* globalization.

This helps explain the importance of focusing on locations and performativity. By beginning with the *genba*, the actual sites of cultural production, we can see how the global and the local intersect. More important, we can conceive of these intersections in terms of the ways they intervene in ongoing struggles. We might call this process *genba* globalization because it highlights the ways the global, here meaning everything one can draw on (not just "foreign" ideas), is refracted through performatively located and thereby put back into the world. This gives us a model for understanding some of the unevenness of globalization by drawing attention to the terms of competition (or battles) and the conditions required to win. Gaku, performing in the freestyle session after being cut from his major label, underscores his sense that recording again depends at least partly on continuing his performance in clubs. Because these performances generally unfold in the language of the participants, I use the term *genba* in this text rather than an English-language neologism. It should be emphasized that these different paths of cultural globalization (Wal-Mart versus *genba*) because the music is performed at all levels, from highly commercial mass media (e.g., television commercials) to independent, underground club venues.

This discussion raises some key questions. Given that performances gain their force because they speak in a certain way to a certain kind of crowd, how can we contextualize a club event like RC Night in the broader context of Japanese youth culture? Working further outward, how are youth and the music world contextialized by larger business and government interests? After answering these questions, I will return to a consideration of the music scene and the differences between underground club events and commercially successful pop stars.

Youth Culture in a Changing Japan

Japanese youth who came of age around the turn of the twenty-first century faced difficult economic times. Although they were children during the boom times of the bubble economy of the 1980s, they entered adulthood after a decade-long recession that started in 1992. As the economy stumbled, businesses retrenched and unemployment rates among young workers rose.

These economic changes have served to undermine a core ideal of Japan's postwar middle-class society, namely, that hard work in school will lead to a good job. The breakdown in the transition from school to work affects the meaning of education and of the working world. I observed firsthand the pressure put on young students to move up the ladder of success through hard work in school when I was employed in a rural Japanese junior high school for a year (1988–89). I was as an assistant English teacher on the JET Program. Each Monday, when the principal addressed the assembled school, he would emphasize the importance of studying in order to pass entrance exams to high school and, later, college exams, which would, in turn, guarantee a good job. By this logic, the status of one's school would influence the status of one's career. This was, in short, the credentials society (gakureki shakai).

But if studying hard no longer led to a job, what should one be working for? In 1995, the rapper Zeebra of the group King Giddra commented on this broken chain between school and work.

The “credentials society” crushes even

Kodomotachi no yume made hakai
shite kita

Kakureki shakai unoku dekita kai?

But things are changing, aren’t they?

Kawatte kiteru n jya nai?

And aren’t you just shutting up

Tada sore damatte

and watching it happen?

Mite ru n jya nai?

This year’s survey of college grads

Kotoshi no daisotsu no kyō chōsa

says that almost a quarter of them

Kimarazu yatsu no ota sō sa

still have no job. Seriously,

Yonbun no ichi ga mada
that makes it nothing more than empty talk.

—King Giddra (1995) "Shinjuku no dangan" (bullet of truth) Sora karo no chikara (the power from the sky) (P-Vine/Blues Interactions, Japan, PCD-4768)

As members of an underground group (at the time), King Giddra challenged youth not only to recognize the difficulties faced by Japanese society but also to speak up about them.

The labor researcher Reiko Kosugi (2004) confirms that before the early 1990s, a majority of young people in Japan entered the labor market as full-time workers. After graduation from high school or college, most would get contracts with no fixed term. After the recession, however, many companies hired fewer new grads, and those who were hired typically became part-time employees with fixed-term contracts (53–54). Through the latter half of the 1990s and into the new century, Japan witnessed a dramatic increase in unemployed youth and so-called freeter, who are working on an arubaito (from the German Arbeit), or part-time, basis and who are “free” in the sense that they are not wedded to a single corporation.

About half of the people I spoke to at the hip-hop clubs identified themselves as freeter (many of the others said they were students). I was struck by how the freeters would acknowledge their status with a bit of pride. They were not beholden to some enormous corporation; they could avoid a salaryman’s hours and obligatory after-hours socializing. When I asked exactly what kind of work they did, however, many freeter became somewhat embarrassed, not wanting to acknowledge their jobs as waitresses, sewer workers, department store helpers, or convenience store clerks. Yet while they tread water in the working world, they swim against the current when they go out to all-night clubs.

Because the Tokyo club scene is active between midnight and 5 a.m. (with live shows around 2 a.m.), clubbers head out just as many regular office workers are rushing to catch the last trains home. Clubbers are dressed up, leisurely heading out—a literal movement against the mainstream, a rejection of daily work rhythms in favor of leisure and consumer activities. Yet the clubs are not only a space for play, leisure, and the rejection of rigid work lives; they also serve as vehicles for the delivery of some overt political messages in the live shows. So when emcees “move the crowd,” it gives us some sense of the crowds they move.

In January 2003, I saw the underground group MSC perform on a Wednesday night at around 3:30 a.m. in Roppongi. MSC’s lead rappers Taboo and Kan addressed some of Japan’s recent social and economic shifts in a song called “Shinjuku Underground Area.” In Shinjuku, an area of downtown Tokyo, one can find government office buildings and gleaming corporate high-rises not far from dilapidated residential areas that have been encroached on to make way for new construction. In the song, Taboo describes the Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō as “a pop idol stealing land to make more dollars, francs, yen, marks,” and the bankers in the high-rises “plundering for themselves in neckties.” Kan views Shinjuku as a microcosm of the hypocrisy of Japan, where expensive new buildings become the sites for government failures, banking scandals, and corruption that differs little from that found among the organized crime syndicates who run the nearby Kabuki-cho red light district. In one line Kan portrays a salaryman, a symbol of Japan’s power in the 1980s, now walking dejectedly, looking down and wondering when “restructuring” (risutonri) will result in his being fired. Kan asks, “Does your life have any purpose?” For the b-boy or freeter watching the salaryman, the implicit answer, of course, is “no.”

A year and a half later, in July 2004, I saw MSC perform at Milk, a small club in the Ebisu section of Tokyo. They fired up the audience by arguing that it was the fans in attendance who had the power to bring about structural reform (kōzō kaikaku) in Japan. They used this bureaucratic language to reinterpret the prime minister Junichiro Koizumi’s campaign promise to change Japan’s corporate and government inefficiencies (corruption, mismanagement, bad loans, etc.). MSC’s song suggests that structural reform could begin in the clubs, with the limitless potential the artists see in their music. The group began with a call-and-response, then broke into the chorus to one of their signature songs.

structural reform! (fans: structural reform!)
modern rap moving forward without limits
feelings of guilt dying, reform the system

kōzō kaikaku kōzō kaikaku
shinka suru gendai rappa ni genshū
kōzō kaikaku
shinde ku zuikkan kōzō kaikaku
wa naku

The audience nodded in unison and joined in singing the chorus, transforming the slogans of politicians and economic reformers into a language and style appropriate to today’s Japanese youth. Kan explained to the audience after the song that the transformation would begin right there in the club.

When rappers promote standards of value different from those of the ruling powers, they also stake a claim to alternative sources of authority. Japanese hip-hop can be seen as a sphere of public debate, oriented toward youth
but simultaneously integrated into entertainment-industry structures and, at a remove, government goals for youth in society. MSC's use of the bureaucratic term kōzō kaikaku, which refers more commonly to a reorganization of business structures and financial lending arrangements, reminds the group's audiences that Japanese hip-hop functions as part of a public debate questioning mainstream political values. Needless to say, the structural reforms promoted by MSC reflect aims very different from those of Japan's prime minister. We should note that the underground effort of MSC operates within a larger world of commercially successful popular music as well. Interestingly, Japanese government and business interests are increasingly turning their attention to the economic power and soft power of entertainment industries, a development that also contextualizes the location of nightclubs, hip-hop, and youth culture in Japan.

Underground to Pop: Diverse Powers of Popular Music

To develop a more nuanced understanding of power in popular music, we must also consider policy makers who view entertainment businesses as a key to reinvigorating Japan's economy. Like other advanced economies, Japan faces the challenge of responding to the migration of manufacturing jobs to lower-wage countries such as China. One response focuses on strengthening so-called content industries (kōentsutsu sangyō) such as music, film, anime, manga, publishing, and the like. In July 2002, a cabinet-level committee assembled under the auspices of the prime minister's office proposed making Japan an intellectual property–based nation: "Making Japan an intellectual-property-based nation means expressly establishing a national direction which places emphasis on inventions and creation, and in which the production of intangible assets is recognized as the foundation of industry, i.e., the production of 'information of value' including technology, design, brands, and the content of music, movies, and the like. This is a national policy underpinned by the vision of revitalizing the Japanese economy and society."10 In this vision, music's power is defined in terms of its economic ability to support industry. As a national strategy, the report emphasizes the importance of strengthening copyright, patent, and trademark laws, as well as stepping up enforcement regimes.

A geisha perspective illustrates a possible shortcoming of such government efforts. Policy proposals such as this tend to provide detailed analyses of how to protect and exploit already-created content, while offering only vague ideas about how to promote the production of creative content in the first place. The strategy report nodded in the direction of revising educational goals to in-
Protecting intellectual property is the more visible policy action for the moment. The irony of this situation does not escape notice. A writer who works in the anime industry (and who shall remain anonymous) reacted to the government’s interest in popular culture by noting that protecting intellectual property will benefit entertainment corporations but may offer little of value to those in the *genba*, that is, the illustrators and others who actually produce the works in anime studios. He suspects that copyright protection may generate more income for the production company overall, but is unlikely to trickle down to the animators themselves.

This brings us to questions of how media production operates. How important are hits to the overall music business? How can we conceive of the different levels in an overall music scene? What is the relationship between the underground clubs and mainstream pop vehicles?

One of the challenges in evaluating popular culture forms involves determining how to represent the differences between hit cultural products (hit albums, blockbuster films, best sellers) and the great mass of cultural products that do not sell very well. As one pop music observer noted, too often big hits are viewed as representative of this abstract entity called popular culture, rather than being seen as what they are—albums that happen to have become popular (Ross 2003, 88). This is one reason my study focuses on nightclubs and recording studios, namely, to portray firsthand the kinds of dynamics that determine what moves up into the spotlight and also to provide a wider view of the range of music being produced lower down the scale of popularity. Nevertheless, we must consider the relationship between what reaches the top and what fails to generate large economic returns. This is especially important because the widening interest in entertainment industries’ ability to generate economic growth and soft power hinges above all on the major hit products.

The recording industry is remarkable both for its reliance on hit albums and for its general inability to predict what will be a success. Among the record executives I spoke to in Japan, the general expectation was that 90 percent of albums would fail to return a profit. A study of entertainment industries in the United States identifies the same failure rate for new album releases and notes that Hollywood fares only somewhat better, estimating that 60–70 percent of films lose money (Vogel 2001, 35). The reasons for these failure rates are numerous and complex, given that budgets for promotion and marketing can in some cases rival production costs. Moreover, artists complain that some record companies use dubious accounting methods to limit the payment of royalties to the musicians (Love 2000). A key point is that entertainment industries tend to rely on a relatively small number of hits to support the majority of the business.

A look at sales in 2002 Japan provides a window into the range of returns for different albums. Of the 1,374 albums tracked by Oricon during the 2002 calendar year, 5 percent sold over 300,000 copies (hits), 32 percent sold between 30,000 and 299,000 copies (passable, at least in hard times, for the majors), and 41 percent sold fewer than 10,000 albums (low sales). The top-selling album of the year, Utada Hikaru’s *Deep River*, sold over 3.5 million copies. This is comparable to the cumulative sales of the bottom five hundred releases for the year. The top ten albums moved around 30 million units total, which is eight times the total of the bottom five hundred releases. If we focus only on albums that could be deemed a success (say, sales above 80,000 units), it would only constitute one-sixth of the releases for 2002.9 This rate is a little better than the one in ten cited by industry insiders, but given the size of some marketing budgets, situations occur in which 80,000 in sales can seem like a failure. East End X Yuri’s 1996 “Ne” single following their million-selling successes is a case in point.

The Pyramid Structure of a Music Scene

I would suggest viewing the structure of a music scene as a pyramid (see figure 10). Rather than focusing primarily on the very narrow slice of performers who have achieved megahit status, we can learn more about the processes involved and the range of participants by considering what it takes to move up to the top of the pyramid. Reading from the bottom upward gives a sense of the historical trajectory of many successful artists, though we must bear in mind that most falter on their way to the top and that movement is not unidirectional.

A few points deserve mention. In thinking about how artists move up the pyramid from newbie fans to amateur performers to paid performers to first recording sessions (often featured on more established groups’ songs or on a compilation album), we can see that the steps to getting significant support from a record company depend in part on passing the gates at each level. Depending on their position in the pyramid, artists also face different demands regarding what constitutes success in order to keep a career alive. Selling 20,000 copies at the indie level may represent a huge success, while for a major-label artist such numbers are likely to be seen as a flop. I would emphasize that the arrow on the right of the pictured pyramid indicates relative financial considerations (more outlays and more support), not the general
movement of artists, who are likely to climb and fall over the course of their careers.

Another key point is that only a fraction of musicians get record deals that can introduce them to huge audiences, and among those, only a fraction become big stars. In other words, top hits may tell us more about what it takes to move through the gates at each level, rather than representing “what most people want.” Studies of such gatekeeping by the popular music scholar Keith Negus (1999) show how personal preferences and corporate cultures interact to guide the decisions made about promoting some kinds of artists over others. I consider some of these dynamics in the Japanese hip-hop scene in chapter 7. Notably, even artists who make a living on their music move up and down the pyramid during the course of their careers, depending on whether their sales meet their companies’ expectations.

Viewing a music scene in terms of a pyramid provides a more nuanced understanding of how to interpret the significance of different levels and kinds of success. For example, it would be a mistake to use Utada Hikaru’s pop success and Mdbc’s relative invisibility as evidence of what the mass of youth want. What reaches the top level of pop-music status reflects competition among that group of major-label artists who get visibility in mainstream media outlets, rather than representing the outcome of a level-playing field battle among all the musicians active at any given time (up and down the pyramid). In the diagram of the pyramid, I have tried to highlight how media promotion vehicles shift from minimedia (flyers, free papers, word of mouth) to mass media (magazines, radio, television) depending on the backing of record companies. To some, this structure might suggest that record companies have an overwhelming influence over what music is produced and marketed to the public, but this is only part of the picture. For although record companies have a tremendous amount of power in gatekeeping, they have much less control in determining what will become a hit.

I would propose a second graphic for thinking about power in the recording industry, one that emphasizes the dynamic interaction between the different actors in a music scene (see figure 11). To get a schematic sense of the interacting players, we could begin by focusing on four groups of actors: artists, record companies, media outlets, and fans. Each group maintains a somewhat distinct set of roles in the larger picture. Each has certain types of power, but success depends on all four working in tandem. Artists’ success emerges from the buildup of energy and attention among these different players. Each group has power over only some aspects of the process, and only limited influence over the others. In general, artists must network to gain access to live shows and recording opportunities. They are expected to come up with their own musical styles and to perform effectively in clubs and studios. Yet the power of artists (their influence and status) depends on
the reactions of record companies, fans, and the media. This model depicts a circular game of rock-paper-scissors that is always unfolding, always in play, and always in the process of becoming. The genba is a place where differing orientations and differing roles intersect, and although one site cannot explain all the key factors, the collective focus on the clubs provides a starting point for evaluating the locations of power in popular culture.

Although the genba of nightclubs illustrate the different roles and diverse forms of power within a music scene, I do not mean to suggest that everything can be witnessed in these sites of cultural production. As the lines that go around and not through the central hub in the diagram indicate, not all interactions can be viewed through the sites of genba. Still, the graphic representation indicates how conceptions of power that focus on binary relationships—such as artist-fan, artist-record company, and so on—tend to underplay the dynamic network effects that generate success.

Now we have an explanation for why politically oriented hip-hop is more likely to be performed in clubs rather than played on the radio. The standards of value for club audiences differ from those of the executives who make programming decisions in the media and in record companies. Groups with powerful oppositional voices can occasionally break into the cultural mainstream if the media and fan support proves sufficient. But if we assume that the absence of political groups in the pop charts indicates a general political disengagement on the part of fans, we ignore the larger picture of media and record company gatekeeping that controls who has access to mainstream marketing muscle. Such gatekeeping is one of the structural reasons why an underground group like MSC may have more potential to bring about change in political structures than their sales alone would suggest. Still, let us consider the more commercially successful major-label artists for points of contrast.

Rip Slyme: The Biggest Hip-Hop Hit of 2002

What is an example of a recent hip-hop hit? After years of performing in small clubs, the five-member Tokyo-based group Rip Slyme finally achieved a big hit. The five band members were born between 1973 and 1979 and released their first album in 1995. Seven years later, they released the album Tokyo Classic, which sold over 920,000 copies during 2002. It finished in ninth place among the top-selling albums of the year. Two singles from the album did quite well too. The group’s top single, “Rakuen Baby,” finished number 31 in the year for sales and number 39 among the most requested karaoke songs. The value of the group’s total sales was roughly ¥3.7 billion ($35 million). Although the five-member crew did not sell as much as pop divas Utada Hikaru and Hamasaki Ayumi, or the rock band Mr. Children, that year, Rip Slyme does provide an example of what pop hip-hop achieved in 2002. The album came out in July, and the top single mixed images of beaches, bikinis, suntans, and surfing. Here is the chorus:

endless-summer paradise baby tokonatsu no rakuen beibi
coconuts and sunshine crazy kokonatsu to soshain kurijii
gonna hold you till the morning motte ku asu no asa made
summer day summer day


This type of puppy-love imagery and the nonconfrontational, inoffensive lyrics align with the larger J-pop world. The use of English-language lyrics in the chorus, for example, rhyming “asa made” (until the morning) with “summer day” (samaei de) is also a common feature of J-pop. The music mixes Spanish guitar and programmed beats in a way that is undeniably catchy—but is it hip-hop? Based on the sound of the group’s hit album alone, some rap fans denigrate Rip Slyme as “merely pop” (tada no kayokoyoku). Yet Rip (as they are affectionately called) spent many years performing in underground clubs, including participating in the 1997 FG Night event described above. Their passage through the clubs gives Rip a fair amount of legitimacy in the eyes of many hip-hop artists in Japan, even if it is respect tinged with jealousy over the group’s phenomenal success.

Dabo: Major-Label Gangsta Fantasies

Not all major record labels promote hip-hop as a subgenre of J-pop. We might consider Dabo, who performs harder-edged, more abrasive tough-guy lyrics. He began with the crew Nitro Microphone Underground and signed a solo deal with Def Jam Japan, whose female head, Riko Sakurai, we will meet in chapter 6. The original Def Jam in New York City was founded by Russell Simmons, and its early, extremely successful artists included Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and LL Cool J, to name just a few. In 2001, the original Def Jam launched Def Jam Japan under the umbrella of Universal Music, at the time the largest record company in the world. Dabo was one of Def Jam Japan’s early projects.

Dabo’s first album Hitman was slickly produced, with booming tracks, on-location photo shoots, magazine advertisements, and even music videos (see
figure 4 for the album cover). The promotion videos featured Dabo driving expensive cars, waving platinum jewelry, and bragging about being a hit man: gunning down enemies, making hit records, and knocking the ball out of the park. Most striking to me is the imagery in this song featuring Tokona X (of M.O.S.A.D.), which aimed to strike a chord with fans harboring gangsta fantasies.

Yakuza punk, you wanna kill me? chinpura, ore o koroseteru ki?
Hal you’re too soft Hal amai wa kochi tora
I’m a pro, the gunman in the dark . . . puro yami no ganman . . .
Tokarev, rifle, bazooka, tokarefu, raifu, bazuuka,
machine gun, hand grenade mashingan, teriyasan
you choose how you’re gonna die, ha! erabe deiso de shinenda Ha!


For some Japanese fans, hip-hop is attractive because it offers this exciting “realness” of mortal combat. Driving expensive cars, outsmarting criminals, and outrunning the cops—it beats studying for exams or working at a convenience store. There are, of course, very real differences between rapping about guns in the United States and in Japan. Gun deaths in Japan number fewer than a hundred annually. In the United States, about thirty thousand people die from guns each year (about half of them homicides, half suicides and accidents). African American youth are especially at risk. Thus violence and desire mingle complexly depending on one’s location.

So Dabo’s fantasy is not real, but is it an imitation of the West? Perhaps not. Japan produces plenty of homegrown gunplay imagery on its own. People get gunned down all the time in the anime series Cowboy Bebop or Ghost in the Shell, in countless Yakuza films, and in the movie Battle Royale (dir. Fukasaku Kinji). One of the more striking examples is manga artist Santa Inoue’s series Tokyo Tribe. Serialized in Boon magazine, the story follows several street gangs from different sections of Tokyo and its environs battling it out with swords and guns in fits of ultraviolence. The youthful gang members listen to hip-hop, eat at Denny’s, and mix with various elements of Japan’s underworld of drug dealers, prostitutes, and Yakuza. Gangs guard their turf. It could be anywhere, but the comic is set in Tokyo and reflects a domestically produced street-culture toughness. Even calling this “glocalization” suggests a source elsewhere, when in fact the imagery comes from several intersecting streams at once.

I would argue that the central importance of the gun fantasies in Dabo’s videos has nothing to do with glocalization or imitation. What Dabo’s videos illustrate is that major-label support can buy slick production and promotion styles, yet at the cost of adding to the number of hands contributing to the overall project. The movement away from the artist’s onstage performance toward imagery that works in the boardroom helps us understand the links between gangsta and executive. Indeed, the album’s title Hitman explains it best of all. Using the imagery of guns, expensive cars, and professional sports is less a reflection of stereotypes of African Americans, a theme explored in chapter 1, than the expression of a desire to be associated with commercial success. Whether Dabo came up with the ideas himself or not is unimportant. The key point is that we can see the alliances deemed central to building Def Jam’s global brand, as when Dabo shouts out “Def Jam Japan” in songs and in the videos. Dabo is a talented emcee attempting to translate this “stance” (sutansu) into the tough language of young people, especially young men, in Japan. At the same time, he promotes an idea of commercial success through gunplay hip-hop that takes performance into the realm of fantasy. Dabo’s Hitman effort, despite major-label backing, failed to generate a big hit, a reminder that major-label promotion is not sufficient to guarantee success.12 Moreover, not everyone agrees that Dabo’s tough-guy rap is any more hip-hop than Rip Slyme. In fact, one emcee wanted to prove Dabo was not hip-hop at all.

Hip-Hop Proof: The Battle between Dabo and Kan

Hip-hop offers an intriguing case study of popular culture in part because of its ontological questioning of its own ranking of artists, fans, and media networks. The pyramid of the scene does not come ready-made, but evolves through ongoing competition among different groups and families of groups against the backdrop of a changing Japan. A genba perspective starts with these performative locations to see how different perspectives highlight alternative values for music. In this regard, clubs are notable for providing a space where the boundaries between the majors and the indies are more fluid and where the battles for legitimacy and significance sometimes occur face to face.

In Tokyo, July 20, 2004, was one of the hottest days on record, never dipping below 40 degrees centigrade (104 degrees Fahrenheit). On the streets, salarymen were wilting, women in light cotton kimonos were dressed for summer matsuri (festivals), and hawkers were handing out paper fans adver-
tising the latest cell phones. Although it was a Tuesday afternoon, O-East, a large performance space in the love-hotel area of Shibuya, held a hip-hop and reggae showcase starting at four in the afternoon, clearly hoping to pull in students on summer vacation. The performers ranged from dancehall newcomer Bigga Rajii, veteran emcee Uzi, “the ג milli,” and hip-hop team Haga-kure, whose name echoes the title of an eighteenth-century book of sayings about “the way of the samurai” (Yamamoto 1979). (This gives a small sense of the eclectic references characteristic of artists’ group names.) Although the air conditioning cooled the roughly seven hundred fans in the pitch-black space, tempers flared onstage during the final performance. Mósózoku, the headline act, opened their set with a video clip showing a fantasy of them as car-jacking toughs, selling high-priced stolen vehicles to Yakuza and then gunning them down when the deal went bad. It was furry (bad boy) style to the fullest. They were clearly competing with the other groups before them—Maguma mcs from Kyoto, Kaminari Kazoku (a Tokyo mainstay), and Romero S.P. from Yokohama—to be the baddest of the bad. Mósózoku featured the female reggae sensation Minmi, who led the crowd in a spirited “k.u.c.k.” chant. Then one of the group’s emcees, Hannyka, called Dabo out on stage to join him for a song.

Dabo, trim in a white tank top and low-slung jeans, got the audience moving with his distinctive gravel-voiced style, rapping a song called “Ososhiki” (“Funeral”). In the middle of the song, Kan of msc jumped on stage, ran up to Dabo, and stood right in his face, staring him down. msc were not on the bill, but they had performed a song with the previous act Shonan no Kaze. At first, Kan said nothing. He just stared down Dabo as the latter kept rapping, trying to back away, clearly wondering what was going on. A few other emcees approached, but Kan would not be pushed away. Then, before Dabo could finish his verse, Kan grabbed the microphone out of his hand, while the nő stopped the music and a dozen artists and hangers-on ran up and began pushing Kan around. It was a tense moment, clearly one punch away from a full-fledged brawl, and indeed Mósózoku had been at the center of a brawl in a major freestyle battle the year before. But before any violence started, Kan challenged Dabo to a freestyle, right then and there. A collective “whoa” rose from the audience. Dabo, looking pained but feigning bemusement, had no choice but to accept the challenge. That Kan could jump on the stage and challenge Dabo in public highlights the openness of this genba and the fluidity of boundaries in clubs.

Kan started an a cappella freestyle that drew a contrast between the independent hip-hop scene in Japan, where he and his crew remain, and the majors’ scene, where Dabo is respected. Kan said repeatedly that he was showing his “proof of hip-hop” (hippuhoppu no shōmei), emphasizing his verbal skill and his choice of themes (i.e., rapping about Japan’s poor, not some entertainment-based fantasy world). Dabo then took his turn with an a cappella freestyle, putting down Kan’s style and questioning his legitimacy and his motives. Didn’t Kan just want to raise his status by challenging a more successful emcee? After the show, I asked Kan about his beef with Dabo. Kan explained, “When I rap, it’s not things from a manga or a movie. I’m rapping about real life. The beef isn’t about business, even though I only get released on indie labels, and he works with major companies. The issue is that I have higher hopes for hip-hop in Japan. It shouldn’t just be for show.” (Unlike Kan, Dabo did not come out in the audience after his performance, or I would have asked for his opinion as well.)

In the end, the crowd seemed to respond more positively to Dabo’s rap. Based on the bad-boy artists in the day’s lineup, it makes sense that the crowd would respond more favorably to Dabo. Although there was no movement by those onstage to determine a winner, Hannyka concluded that we all had witnessed “real hip-hop” (konomono no hippu hoppu). This speaks to a sense of participation in a global movement that values the connection between lyrics, improvisational skill, and public competition. Such an ideology is not unique to hip-hop, but it does contrast with more mainstream J-pop, where lyrics for the top teen idols are commonly written by others and often speak of generic love or abstract fantasies. Indeed, it was this fantasy side of popular music that Kan was protesting against, something he had also rapped about on msc’s first album, which criticized Dabo (though not by name) for appearing in a video driving an expensive suv, even though Dabo does not have a driver’s license. These tensions between entertainment and politics, business and performance, boil over in today’s Japanese hip-hop, thus extending the idea of battling samurai beyond the bounds of hip-hop and out into mainstream Japan. The question is, where will it lead Japanese youth?

Conclusion

The concept of genba globalization focuses attention on performative epicenters and outward waves of influence. Clubs in the Japanese hip-hop scene exemplify this kind of epicenter, drawing together the range of participants who actualize the scene by improvising as they go. Indeed, I would suggest freestyle in clubs—as a particular kind of open-ended, improvisatory battle—symbolizes an understanding of globalization that focuses on particular con-
tests for power among diverse social actors. One advantage of this perspective on global culture is that it does not attempt to classify whether certain aspects are local or global, imitative or real. Rather, the global is performed. When it works, history is made. What happens in clubs, of course, is only a small part of people's everyday lives. I also discussed the larger social contexts of Japan's changing society: the rise in the number freetet facing an uncertain economic future; the end of the credentials society; and the increasing questioning of middle-class ideals. Meanwhile, corporate interest in content industries and the government's interest in soft power points to a growing centrality of popular culture in the political economy of Japan. Clubs deserve a privileged position in the analysis of hip-hop in Japan because they are the location where the diverse actors converge to evaluate the scene. Clubs focus people's attention and energies. They constitute key spaces for gauging the fuel that keeps hip-hop in Japan.

I also argue that the idea of the genba offers a way of moving forward with some of the insights concerning new approaches to the study of culture within and beyond anthropology. Gupta and Ferguson's emphasis on location, rather than the local, draws attention to the political consequences of cultural activities. This presents a useful alternative to thinking of cultural styles as primarily defined by a village, community, or, by extension, a national group. This move within anthropology is mirrored by a more folk understanding of hip-hop culture as something that transcends national boundaries while also providing firm ideologies for living and acting in the here and now. By this logic, cultural interventions derive their force not from their origin, but through a collective embodiment in a genba. For example, it is there that independent rappers and major-label rappers both get the opportunity to make their case for success.

In this sense, MSC's idea that structural reform can begin in a late-night club, among students and freetet questioning their place in a changing adult world, is not so far fetched. To dismiss their ranting because they have not sold millions is to accept entertainment companies' definition of value and the spurious idea that strong sales offer an accurate reflection of democratic desire. In fact, only a small fraction of the artists making music can get the backing needed to produce a hit. As the media increasingly plays a significant role in economies and politics, we need a deeper understanding of these dynamics, and an ethnographic perspective, even from the smoky bowels of underground Tokyo, reveals a wide range of places in which to look for new imaginings of a better future.

CHAPTER 4

RAP FANS AND CONSUMER CULTURE

On July 7, 1996, about four thousand rap fans gathered at an outdoor amphitheater in downtown Tokyo to attend the largest Japanese hip-hop event up until that time. The showcase, called Thumpin' Camp, featured over thirty rappers, deejays, and break-dancers from Japan's underground scene. The heavy rains failed to dampen the spirits of the audience, who cheered and bounced and waved their arms throughout the three-hour show. The energy of the crowd had its effect on the performers. At one point, Mummy-D, a rapper with the group Rhymester, paused between songs to acknowledge the fans. "I've got something to say today, so listen up," he said.

This hip-hop scene was not made only by us. It was not made only by the people on stage here today. I want you to give it up [sasage yo] for all the rappers, deejays, graffiti writers, and dancers in Tokyo! [cheers from the audience; the DJ starts the music for the next song, but the rapper yells] Wait, wait. Not yet, there's more. For all the b-boys who came from outside Tokyo and who are planting the roots of hip-hop in other areas, give it up! [cheers] And last, the people who have come here, you who understand Japanese hip-hop, for all our supporters (sappōtai), give it up! [cheers]

With that, the DJ started the backing record. A plaintive bass line drooped out a groove that was gradually met by a pounding backbeat. The rappers started