

Escape From Japan



D. J. Kaori found success spinning records in New York, and her rise has inspired others yearning to shun traditional Japanese roles.
Nathan Shanahan/WireImage

By Sheridan Prasso

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AT the Terminal 8 food court of Kennedy International Airport, over a breakfast of Coca-Cola and greasy Chinese noodles, Miho Mimura slipped her hand into her new American boyfriend's and the tears started to flow. "I'm sad, I don't want to go back to Japan," she said.

She looked tired, her complexion worsened by the fierce fluorescent lights. It was the morning after her 23rd birthday, and she and her boyfriend had stayed out celebrating until the wee hours.

"Today I expect cry, so no makeup," Ms. Mimura said in her imperfect English, rubbing her eyes. The emotion was understandable. Her three months in New York had changed her forever.

Ms. Mimura had come with a broken heart, after splitting with a Japanese boyfriend. To pay for her plane ticket, she took a second job in a bar in Tokyo, supplementing her \$10-an-hour wage as a clerk in a clothing shop.

She came to New York to heal. She came to dance, particularly the hip-hop moves she had practiced in Japan. And she came to New York, like thousands of other young Japanese, to find herself.

In the East Village on any given weekend night, throngs of such Japanese crowd the restaurants known as izakaya that have sprung up on and around St. Marks Place, in an enclave sometimes called Little Tokyo. With red paper lanterns and cacophonous dins, the restaurants serve delectables like raw liver sashimi and grilled rice balls, to tables of expatriates known in Japan as "freeters" (a combination of free and the German word for worker, *arbeiter*), or "NEETs" (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

As a Japanese version of slackers, such young people are often derided at home as selfish for drifting through part-time jobs or trying to develop talents in the arts — photography, music, painting, dance — rather than contributing to society by joining a corporation or marrying and having babies. The pressure can be intense.

Many escape to New York, staying from three months to three years. "In New York they feel they don't get any pressure, that New York gives them freedom," said the Japanese-born owner of the Sunrise Mart, a Japanese market in Little Tokyo.

The influx is at least a decade old, but unlike in the mid-1990's when men and women freeters came in equal numbers, now it is largely a female wave — a result of the recovering economy in Japan that has made it slightly easier for young men to find corporate jobs upon graduation.

Some of the youths are financed by their parents. Others say they wait tables, even when lacking work permits, in Japanese restaurants in New York where little English is required, or take cash jobs like posing nude for drawing classes in Chelsea art studios.

“Three months ago, I asked my parents to send me money, and they said, ‘This is the last money!’ ” said Misaki Ishihara, 23, an aspiring makeup artist from central Japan, near Kobe, who has been in New York for two years. “My parents are so conservative, they can’t believe I’m here alone. They want me to be married to a Japanese man, an established man, make some kids and live in the same house with them. I can’t even believe I am from that family. I am so different!”

Ms. Ishihara’s New York sojourn has included learning to surf on the Jersey Shore, studying English and establishing credentials for her career. “I want to go back to Japan eventually, but now is not the time,” she said. Her dwindling cash supply notwithstanding, her favorite pastimes are, she said, shopping, clubbing with hipsters on the Lower East Side and partying.

Peter Pachter, who runs the American Language Communication Center in the Hotel Pennsylvania on Seventh Avenue near Penn Station, has watched the ranks of his Japanese students increase 14 percent, to about 500 in the last two years.

“There’s a feeling that they kind of blossom here; they finally get a chance to express themselves,” he said.

A number of Japanese freeters have become role models in Tokyo by finding success in New York; their stories make their way home via the weekly radio show “Good Day New York,” which broadcasts “live from the Big Apple” to 12 million Japanese from a studio on Fifth Avenue, and the “D.J. Kaori Show,” which reaches listeners all over Japan.

D.J. Kaori, the host, began spinning records at the restaurant Match in SoHo in the mid-90’s. After being discovered by Funkmaster Flex of Hot 97, she graduated to D.J. jobs for celebrity parties. That translated into a recording contract for one — and now eight — CD mixes in Japan.

“It was so hard in Japan to have the confidence to say, ‘I can be what I want to be, I can do what I want to do,’ ” Kaori, now in her 30’s, said in a mellifluous voice. “New York is very free. I thought, ‘If I want to do this, I can do it. In Japan you have to follow the rails.’”

In Tokyo bookstores, guides like “Finding Yourself in New York,” and “The ‘I Love New York’ Book of Dreams” fuel the fantasies of those would follow in Kaori’s footsteps. In an indication that a phenomenon has truly taken off, there’s a contrarian title, “Even If You Live in New York, You Won’t Be Happy.”

New York now has the largest number of Japanese living in any city outside Japan: 59,295, according to last year’s Japanese Foreign Ministry data. But the Miho Mimuras don’t register in those statistics. Like the majority of the nearly 475,000 Japanese who landed at Kennedy and Newark airports last year, she was officially a tourist. In her allotted 90 days in the United States, she took more than 850 photos — “my memory souvenir!” — of the Statue of Liberty, of Picassos at the Metropolitan Museum of Art when the guards weren’t looking, and of Harlem, Radio City Music Hall and all the other places on a Japanese girl’s must-see list.

She had a favorite East Village restaurant. She marveled over \$5 T-shirts at H & M. “Very cheap!” she exclaimed. She stood in front of store windows imitating the mannequins. She took classes almost every night, mostly at Broadway Dance Center on West 57th Street, a studio heavily populated with young Japanese women. She saw “Stomp” because the 13-member cast includes a Japanese woman who, like Ms. Mimura, came to New York to pursue a dream of being a dancer.

On her very first Saturday night in the city last March, at a clandestine Japanese lounge operating without a liquor license in Midtown, Ms. Mimura ordered a drink more appropriate to the girl she still was than the woman she aspired to be: milk and Malibu rum. She had arranged to meet a fellow student from her first hip-hop class who went by the nickname Smiles, and a friend of his. Before their arrival, Ms. Mimura confided, “I want American boyfriend.”

She spent those first weeks struggling to learn her way around the city. She found it difficult to navigate the subway or to find Internet access. For a month, she slept on the couch in the Brooklyn apartment of her best friend from childhood, a design student at LaGuardia Community College. The two women spent hours in deep conversation.

Ms. Mimura wrote in her diary about her ex-boyfriend and why he had abandoned her. In one entry, which she allowed a reporter to read with the help of a translator, she confided that she had been needy and insecure around the boyfriend. Six months after the breakup, it was still hard to let go. She phoned him from New York and they talked about why their romance had ended. “I still need him,” Ms. Mimura said.

One night, Ms. Mimura went to the East Village club Sin Sin, at a monthly party called “Soulgasm,” where a well-known dancer, Henry Link of Elite Force Crew (who has danced for Michael Jackson and Mariah Carey), often shows up. The party is popular with young Japanese women interested in hip-hop culture.

About 1 a.m. Mr. Link appeared, dressed in a T-shirt and track pants, and soon a circle formed around him as he danced. From time to time challengers stepped into the circle to battle, using their own dance moves, with crowd reaction measuring their success.

Ms. Mimura bounced with anticipation. In Japan, she never would have tried such a thing, but when an opening came she handed her beer to a bystander and plunged into the circle. Mr. Link stood back in admiration, and spectators nodded and clapped.

“At Sin Sin I wasn’t nervous, just not thinking about it,” she said later. “I felt really happy — everybody cheering. I felt so good!”

A dancer from the Bronx named Mark stood on the edge of the circle watching Ms. Mimura’s impressive moves. He walked her to the subway after the club closed at 4 a.m. She thought he was “very kindness,” she said later, and agreed to dinner and a movie the next Saturday night.

But Mark showed up two hours late, and when Ms. Mimura sought an explanation he babbled at her so quickly that she didn’t understand. It was a stilted evening, hampered by language difficulties and hurt feelings. But still Ms. Mimura was eager to see him the next week at the House Dance Conference, another monthly event at a club.

When she did, however, the initial spark was gone. Smiles, her first American friend, was also there. A 22-year-old student of graphic design at New Jersey City University, he is partial to tank tops that show off his biceps. At the club, he took a proprietary interest in Ms. Mimura’s welfare, making sure she got a prime spot on the edge of the challenge floor to watch the action.

Slowly, Ms. Mimura was gaining confidence about living in New York, discovering an inner strength. She signed up to go to a national dance contest in Boston, where she made it to the semifinals. Her new friend, Smiles, wished her “Ganbatte!” a combination of “Good luck” and “Knock ’em dead” in Japanese.

But she didn’t win. She blamed too much technique and not enough feeling for her loss. She needed to let the freedom of New York and the let-it-all-hang-out attitude of Americans into her heart while dancing, she said. “Japanese dancers copy, not create,” she said, “and I’m more like typical Japanese dancer.” She resolved to be more American.

Shortly before she was scheduled to return home, over dinner on St. Marks Place, Ms. Mimura declared that New York had changed her. “I wasn’t strong at all when I came here,” she said. “In Japan, I had people to rely on, but in New York I didn’t have any people. I have to rely myself, so I became stronger. In Japan, I am a little bit shy. But in New York, people have freedom, and that freedom is very good for me.”

She said that when she returned home she would pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. She had been promised a promotion if she returned to her job at the clothing store in Tokyo, but Ms. Mimura resolved to take a less demanding job to leave time for dance. Indeed, since returning to Japan in June, she has kept that promise to herself

and is working in a mobile-phone shop, while entering dance contests — three so far.

It was a mild summer morning when she arrived at Kennedy for her flight home. She had bought a second suitcase for all her purchases — 30 pairs of Tommy Hilfiger socks for friends back home; a crystal statue for her ex-boyfriend's mother; a stuffed bear for a grandmother; jewelry for her mother and sister; and for herself, dancing shoes and piles of new clothes.

Smiles was with her. At some point in the previous days, it seemed clear, he had become her boyfriend. He helped load her suitcases onto the baggage scale. They headed to the food court.

Alternately crying, then finding something to laugh about, then crying again, Ms. Mimura took out her camera.

She wanted to remember the moment.