

# ***On a Tokyo Friday Night***

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley







Strange. The place seems to be more American than America, but the laughing, swaying, singing performers and clientele are certainly typical of Tokyo, 1992.

The walls are hung—cluttered is a better word—with chrome-shiny vintage hubcaps, color-splashed posters, and signs for now-extinct merchandise. They come from a time when James Dean was all the rage, from a time when the overgrown tail fins on American autos made them look like giant robot fish in the heat of mating season.

I know these songs that fill the thick, crowded air. I remember them from my youth, and each with its own palpable, sweetly tinted nostalgia. Each has its own special corner of memory. Of course the Japanese fans, too, have their own set of nostalgic associations for these “Oldies,” even though most, perhaps even all, of those performing and listening had not yet been born when these songs first appeared on America’s pop charts.

As the performance throbs on, my own thoughts wander to another time, a time when anything from Japan was exotic and mysterious.

There was a large Japanese-American community not far from where my family lived and *paterfamilias* would occasionally take me on one of his notorious exploratory shopping safaris there. “Exploratory” they were indeed because neither he nor I had much inkling of what the apparently hieroglyphic labels on the bottles and jars and boxes and cartons said. Fun it was, trying to figure them out. The expeditions were as well “notorious” because of some of the “mistakes” we made. We learned about the taste of seaweed and such that way. It was all so exotic, so foreign, and the music from those years that

now fills this room then seemed light-years from that exoticism.

After our shopping, we would usually stop at one of the many Japanese restaurants dotting that neighborhood. That was my favorite part of the expedition; I loved the food. Almost without exception, those restaurants had soft recorded Japanese music in the background, more often than not some soothing melodies on the *koto* or *shakuhachi*. Their lingering notes conjured up images of a snow-mantled Mt. Fuji looming over a landscape lifted entire from an ancient ink painting.

A slashing guitar riff pulls me back to the present. The rhythm of my pulse urges on and on to the beat of the music. The young Japanese audience sits mesmerized. I am on the edge of totally surrendering to this musical nostalgia when a single wordless blade of enlightenment stabs through my mind. The oh-so-Oriental music those restaurants played so long ago as fitting accompaniment to my first *sukiyaki* and *tempura* no longer evokes any image of Japan. Instead, scenes of my blue-eyed Los Angeles youth dance within me. I think not of Japan, but of California; not of cherry blossoms, but of beaches and freeways and that first girlfriend.

And I know that there will soon come a time—tonight? tomorrow?—when the grinding rhythms of Elvis Presley or Buddy Holly or Chuck Berry will seep into me and my thoughts will turn without hesitation, without conscious effort, to Tokyo, 1992.

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