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Japanese Blues

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Japanese Blues

Andrew JAMES

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Significance of English

In 2002, I began to do field research on Japanese blues musicians active in the Fukuoka area. Over a three-year period, I conducted interviews with twenty Japanese amateur and professional musicians in order to understand why they play the blues. This research was spawned by a question that occurred to me while visiting Fukuoka "live houses" (or clubs where live music could be heard for the price of a drink and cover charge): why doesn't anyone sing in Japanese? If it is true that blues is a feeling, then it seems reasonable to expect the singer to want the audience to understand what he or she is feeling. There are countless definitions of blues, but I prefer guitarist and vocalist Brownie McGhee's explanation for his choice of subject matter: "Sometimes [people] want to know why all our songs are about whiskey, women, and money. We haven't found anything in life more important than that to sing about" (McGhee). Blues generally is about the important things, expressed on an earthy, comprehensible level. Putting aside complex musical theories about 12-bar blues and flatted notes, the international appeal of blues remains strong in large part because of its thematic simplicity. I hypothesized that the music would have even stronger appeal for a Japanese audience if it was sung in Japanese, and the listener could understand the lyrics. However, my research showed that none of the twenty blues artists interviewed sings in Japanese. All of the musicians who participated in the study unequivocally connected blues with English. When pressed on the contradiction inherent in a monolingual Japanese blues musician singing in English to an audience that does not understand English, the interviewees saw no contradiction at all. The real blues, the study participants all argued, must be sung in English and its spirit, or message, will supersede linguistic barriers. Even if you do not understand the lyrics at all, you can feel the power of the blues.

1.2 Vocal Problems

During visits to live houses in Fukuoka City (Namazu and Club 49) and nearby Yahata (Live Andy), I encountered a barrier to musical appreciation. While the instrumentalists were invariably talented and polished, the vocalists left more than a little to be desired. Even the singers with good voices often had serious pronunciation or intonation problems that rendered the lyrics incomprehensible; some vocalists made ill-advised attempts at falsettos and growls which served as sad reminders of the physical distance between Mississippi and Kyushu. And yet the enjoyment of the vast majority of Japanese salary men and office ladies who frequented the live houses on weekends, sipping Jack Daniels and cocktails, appeared unimpaired. Indeed, the singers themselves did not seem to realize there was a problem. The majority of the musicians and audience members did not speak English, and most singers admitted in their interviews to having learned blues by playing along with CD's and records. It should not have been surprising, then, to find that the average Japanese bluesman's live performance is more recreative than creative. There could be no higher compliment for these amateur musicians than to be told that the rendition of a particular song by Hound Dog Taylor or James Cotton sounded just like the recorded original.

1.3 Is the Real Blues English?

My research into Japanese blues began with a question about English. I wanted to know why these musicians insisted on singing in a language they did not understand. The standard response was that the blues is in English, and if one attempted to sing in Japanese the result would no longer be the blues. This strain of logic inevitably led to a discussion of the nature of the blues. In this paper I examine the significance of English for three amateur blues musicians: Mikazu, a vocalist and self-professed "Queen of the Blues"; Nagasaki Slim, singer and harmonica player; and Kazuki Kakihara, singer and slide guitarist. The interviews, which are quoted frequently throughout, were conducted in Japanese in 2003 and 2004. The interviewees' responses have been translated into English by the author.

MIKAZU: QUEEN OF THE BLUES

2.1 In Bessie's Shadow

Mikazu is the stage name for a female vocalist who was, at the time of our 2004 interview, around thirty years old, and had been singing the blues for roughly ten years. Originally from Tokyo, she calls herself the "Queen of the Blues" as a tribute to her

greatest influence, Bessie Smith. Mikazu's trademark song, "Downhearted Blues," was one of Smith's biggest hits. In 2004 Mikazu was operating a beauty parlor out of her own home by day while singing the blues at Fukuoka live houses and private parties five to seven nights each month. She was usually accompanied by a band called Ecstacy, which played a mixture of soul, 1960's Chicago blues, and women's blues from the 1920's and '30's. Mikazu performances were at least as memorable from visual and sensory standpoints as they were musically. She dressed in revealing formal evening gowns in a style reminiscent of Bessie Smith (see photo), and took the stage trailing clouds of sweet perfume, with flapping feathery boas, and long, dazzling fingernails. While her vocal range and power were limited, she sang with emotion and, by 2004, had achieved a devoted following of both male and female fans. As her favorite musicians, she listed old country blues artists from the 1920's and '30's, such as Furry Lewis and Blind Blake, and most of the representative blueswomen from 1920 to the present, including Etta James, Koko Taylor, Big Mama Thornton, and Memphis Minnie.

The Japanese and American queens of the blues, Mikazu and Bessie Smith

Photograph of Mikazu by author, 2004.

Photograph of Bessie Smith from Peter Newark's American Pictures, undated.

2.2 English and Emotion

Although Mikazu did not speak English well, her renditions of blues classics were generally comprehensible. In a written interview, she said that she does not sing at all in Japanese in spite of having "absolutely no confidence whatsoever" in her English accent and pronunciation (Mikazu). When asked why she does not sing in Japanese, her

reply betrayed a strong belief in the blues as a fixed musical form. Rather than building on past forms, she is reaching into the past in order to recreate:

> I am Japanese but the blues pierced my heart, and it was in English, not Japanese. There is something in the blues that comes across, though not in words. You can't see it and you can't verbalize it, but I can feel it in my body. The rhythm, tempo, and stories of the blues were all expressed in English and that is the language of the blues, I think. (Mikazu)

The blues, she appears to be saying, simultaneously transcends and is bound by (the English) language. Just because the blues that Mikazu enjoys began in English, it does not logically follow that they must continue to be sung in English—a language she herself cannot speak. However logical analysis and technical soundness are not Mikazu's strengths. It is her emotional honesty that has made her a favorite at the live houses around Fukuoka. As Andrew Painter noted in his analysis of the—to Western eyes—apparently talentless "tarento," or Japanese television celebrities, charm is of far more importance for Japanese musical audiences than actual performing skills. Japanese teen idols "are rarely good singers in the technical sense of the term, but what they sell . . . is not skill but a kind of charisma that works all the better when it appears familiar and human" (233). It is possible that Mikazu endeared herself to some blues fans not through her skillful recreation of the blues, but via her creation of a charismatic, emotional persona.

2.3 Understanding (English) Blues

When asked to express her comprehension level of the blues lyrics she sings as a percentage, Mikazu refused, explaining that she makes efforts to recreate the feeling of the blues to enhance audience appreciation:

> I try my hardest to check the lyrics in many ways. As much as possible I try to sing with the same emotion [as the original singer]. But the period and the living environment are totally different now from then. Although I don't understand [the past], I always put the feelings of people who are living here and now into my music so that the listener can feel the same things. (Mikazu)

Whenever I attended a Mikazu show, there were usually around twenty people crammed into the bar—a good turn-out for Fukuoka—and most of the customers belonged to her small but devoted group of fans. Like her idol, Bessie Smith, who "succeeded in part because she masterfully straddled the line between vaudeville and the blues," (Spottswood 91), a Mikazu show was about more than just blues. There was also sex, sentimentalism,

and humor to take the audience into the realm of theater or, perhaps, vaudeville. In David Evans' study of tradition and creativity in blues music, Big Road Blues, he noted that when blues singers are asked to describe their chosen musical genre, "they rarely define what they regard as the blues' formal characteristics. Instead they concentrate on the blues as an emotional state" (16). This certainly accorded with Mikazu's own description of her attempts to sing English lyrics, and they were further supported by her definition of the blues, outlined in the following section.

2.4 Conclusions: Rendering English Less Significant

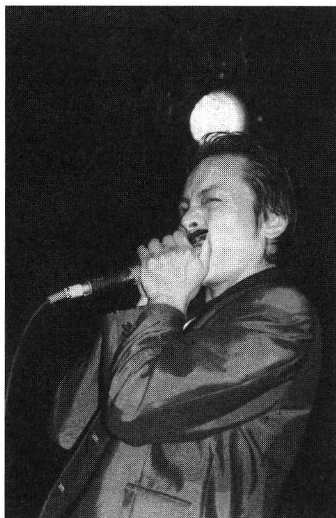
Like most of her peers in the world of Japanese amateur blues, Mikazu overcame linguistic limitations in two ways: by providing an introduction to each song with a Japanese synopsis of its themes; and by giving the audience something else to enjoy in place of lyrical meaning. In our interview, she defined blues as: "Everything in life. Everything I have felt. Everything that is living. Everything in the world. All of me" (Mikazu 2). The blues, as represented by Mikazu, may not have been a living artform, in the sense of building on previous existing forms, but it had direct emotional appeal. The language barrier was overcome not musically—although her lead guitarist, "Hurricane," did provide some energetic solos—but personally, by her stage presence and the cathartic experience she offered. In sum, it was quite conceivable that many of her followers came out to see Mikazu and her show, rather than to listen to her.

NAGASAKI SLIM: PROFILE OF A HARMONICA BLUESMAN

3.1 Background

As his stage name suggests, the harmonica-playing lead vocalist of Nagasaki Slim and Blues Young Blood was born in Nagasaki in 1970. He is slender, and the nickname "slim" is a common one, used by famed bluesmen such as Memphis Slim, Lightnin' Slim, and Guitar Slim. In September 2003 Nagasaki Slim was working as a cook in a *bento* shop making boxed lunches. He had been active on the amateur blues circuit for ten years, roughly the same length of time as Mikazu, though Nagasaki Slim was far more musically accomplished. He was playing eight to ten times each month at the time of our interview. His signature song, "Rocket 88," is a raucous fast-talking tune from James Cotton's catalogue. Many of Nagasaki Slim's renditions of classic blues tunes, such as "Off the Wall" and "Feelin' Good," seem to have been learned from Cotton recordings. A close listen to the instrumental "The Creeper" shows how well Nagasaki Slim mastered Cotton's favorite licks (Cotton). Blues Young Blood's lead guitarist, Rokket Soejima, once

told me that Nagasaki Slim was so taken with James Cotton that he made the band learn every song on a Cotton live album, prompting the other band members to plead for the inclusion of someone else's songs in their repertoire. Nagasaki Slim is self-taught on the harmonica, having learned to play by listening to records and playing along. In 2004 he was easily identified by his short, bristly hairstyle and preference for performing in a suit and tie, like the black harmonica players from Chicago in the 1950's and '60's.



Two harpists always dressed to kill: Nagasaki Slim and James Cotton

Photograph of Nagasaki Slim by author, 2004.

Photograph of James Cotton by Val Wilmer, undated.

3.2 Working Man's Blues

In comparing Nagasaki Slim and Mikazu, numerous superficial similarities arise. Their performances tended to be at least as emotive and cathartic as musical. They had taken historical blues figures as models. While Mikazu's costumes and chosen nickname, "The Queen of the Blues," were borrowed from Bessie Smith, Nagasaki Slim's persona appeared to have been constructed largely around the image of James Cotton as flamboyant 1960s band leader with a dose of Little Walter's temperamental perfectionism. He was the no-frills blue-collar bluesman who had struggled forward by his own strength and abilities. While Mikazu, in the mode of the early women blues singers, offered an escape from reality through costumes, sentimentalism, and an alluring package, Nagasaki Slim was firmly rooted in reality. In the manner of the early black male blues singers, he showed respect for the audience by appearing in his Sunday best. The energy of his live shows suggested that the austere, perspiring figure on the bandstand was working for the audience. The concept of serving one's fans is particularly strong in the Japanese

music world, as Christine Yano noted in her study of *enka* singer Shinichi Mori: "Mori [. . .] takes the humble position of a servant working hard to please his fans. Like all good servants, his skill presumably rests upon the ability to anticipate his fans' needs [. . .]. This image of the striving servant is essential to his charismatic appeal" (screen 14).

Although Nagasaki Slim used the image of the working man in his shows to build a rapport with his audience, his musical interpretations were buoyant and energetic. Critic Jeff Todd Titon has pointed out that the assumptions that blues songs "reflect the singers' direct experiences" and that "one should 'have' the blues in order to sing blues well" are erroneous. Many blues singers, Titon notes, have confessed to having too much fun playing and singing the blues to feel blue and they were simply playing music in the style that the audience liked (Titon 40).

3.3 English: Picking His Spots

Nagasaki Slim was a proud man who frequently mentioned respect and honesty, holding back neither in his live performances nor his proffered opinions. When I asked him why he did not sing in Japanese, he replied, "Because that could never be blues" (Slim). Like Mikazu, he balked at expressing the depth of his understanding of English songs as a percentage. He wrote: "I don't know. Naturally I am trying to reach the point of full comprehension" (Slim). He made efforts to enunciate properly through a deliberate, barking-style of delivery. One song in his repertoire, "It's Not The Spotlight" a ballad made famous by Bobby Bland, Rod Stewart, and others, was particularly clear and comprehensible because of its slow tempo and repetitive structure. In the refrain, the singer lists all of the things that the gleam in his lover's eye does not signify:

> It's not the spotlight, it's not the camera light,
> It's not the street lights of some old street of dreams.
> It ain't the moonlight, not even the sunlight,
> But I've seen it shining in your eyes and you know what I mean. (Stewart)

This was one of Nagasaki Slim's most convincing and popular tunes. However, when he attempted Big Joe Turner's "Flip, Flop, and Fly," he hit a linguistic wall. The F's become closer to S's and the long lines delivered in a rapping tempo were too fast for his tongue to keep up.

For a Japanese audience that does not understand English, a flurry of incomprehensible English may not present a problem. But native speakers expect to have a general idea of what is being sung about. While one of the greatest Mississippi Delta bluesmen,

Charley Patton, has been called "all but unintelligible to anyone hearing him for the first time" because of his strong dialect and the poor quality of remaining recordings (Davis 99), the combination of historical legend surrounding Patton and the passion in his music makes incomprehensibility almost alluring. Obviously there are few contemporary amateur musicians capable of creating a personal legend to compensate for muddled enunciation. Native speakers of English who are unable to comprehend the lyrics are likely to feel cheated: for how can one be emotionally or intellectually moved by nonsense? In general, Nagasaki Slim was not singing nonsense and his deficiencies as a singer related more to speed and lyrical complexity than to mechanics or linguistics.

3.4 A Desire to Communicate

When asked what one should do to become a great bluesman, Nagasaki Slim replied: "Daily practice. Experience. Respect. Humility. Guts. If you like blues, if you love it . . . I think that's important" (Slim). Since he was working hard to improve himself and was one of the more deliberate Japanese vocalists I encountered, it would not be surprising to find Nagasaki Slim a more polished singer in a few years. The fact that he saw music as a communicative medium was also encouraging. He admitted to feeling frustrated by his inability to speak English because it prevented him from communicating freely with American musicians (Slim). He was frequently called on by touring American musicians as a sideman, a testament to his abilities. He played on a CD with Texas boogie-woogie pianist Nat Dove in 2000 (Dove), used to play with (the now deceased) Arkansas Fats, an African-American vocalist, in the 1990's and often accompanied New York bluesman Floyd Lee on his Japanese tours.

3.5 Nagasaki Slim Conclusions: Striving Forward

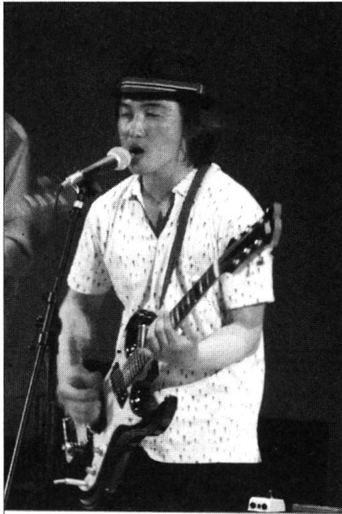
Many of the questions that Nagasaki Slim declined to answer on his written interview were ones that suggested that he may have a complex about his own ability to produce "authentic" blues. He refused to name his favorite musicians, answering only that he liked "people with high ambitions" (Slim). He placed his understanding of English blues lyrics at "between 0% and 100% for various reasons" (Slim). Regarding the nature of the blues, he was again evasive, claiming not to understand the meaning of the question about the difference between Japanese blues and American blues: "Since I don't know how the questioner defines 'Japanese blues' there is no way for me to answer this question" (Slim). He offered a cryptic definition of his favored musical genre: "The blues is the blues" (Slim). He also refused to give the names of musicians who he did not consider

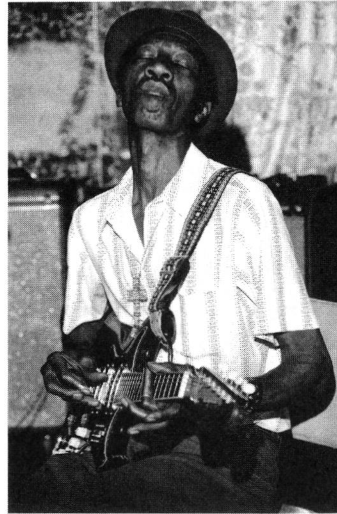
real bluesmen. This was somewhat of a trick question (which he, perhaps wisely, did not fall for), but the answer usually provided some indication of the the depth of the respondent's feelings towards the blues. Some respondents, for example, listed Jonny Lang and Eric Clapton—white rock musicians who have profited financially from their association with the blues—as blues pretenders. Other respondents, such as Mikazu, who (regardless of her nickname) may feel that their own position in the amateur blues world is insecure, tended to admit anyone and everyone as a blues artist. While Nagasaki Slim skirted most of the issues raised by the interview questions, he seemed, ultimately, to believe that blues is an indefinable feeling reached through the process of striving. It cannot be condensed into a simple formula: "There are even black people who can't play the blues. People who can are the ones who try to play blues and try to become blues musicians. Aren't the people who can't play the blues the ones who have taken a single aspect of the blues and adopted it as their own, saying, 'this is it'?" (Slim).

KAZUKI "SLIDE-ON" KAKIHARA: BOTTLENECK BLUES

4.1 Introduction

Kazuki "Slide-on" Kakihara is a bottle-neck (or slide) guitarist and vocalist who had been playing Chicago-style blues for nine years at the time of our interview in 2003. He was born in 1973 in Fukuoka and fronted the band Barrel House, playing four to five times monthly in the local area. As his favorite blues musicians he listed four guitar giants: Elmore James, Hound Dog Taylor, J.B. Hutto, and John Lee Hooker. James, Taylor, and Hutto were at the center of the Chicago slide guitar blues scene in the 1950's and '60's. At the time of our interview, Kazuki was working construction by day and, when not performing, could usually be found drinking bourbon on a stool at the blues bar Namazu several nights a week. In comparison with Nagasaki Slim and Mikazu, Kazuki was more approachable and less concerned about his projected image. Aside from his trademark fedora and open-collar shirts, which appeared to have been borrowed from the wardrobe of Hound Dog Taylor, Kazuki's persona was all his own. He played from the heart, without adornment.





The resemblance between Kazuki "Slide-on" Kakihara and Hound Dog Taylor goes beyond the bottleneck and gritty vocals. Note the hats and shirts.

Photograph of Kazuki Kakihara
by Minoru Tanaka, 2003.

Photograph of Hound Dog Taylor
by Marc PoKempner, 1974.

4.2 English: Accepting One's Limitations

Kazuki sang exclusively in English. He explained that he had no talent for songwriting and disliked attempts to play the real, deep blues in Japanese. "It's okay for other people to do that, but I would not feel comfortable doing it myself. It just seems so affected. I prefer the vagueness of the English lyrics and the way nuances can be taken in so many ways" (Kakihara). He placed the accuracy of his pronunciation at 50%, admitting that if a native speaker of English listened to his music, he or she might not understand him. He claimed to understand approximately 70% of the lyrics he sang for the following reason:

> I want to understand the songs. It may be no more than my own personal interpretation, but I want to sing with my own interpretation. I was going to an English conversation school before. The things I learned were really the basics: the past tense, the present. That's junior high school stuff. But within the flow of the songs if I tried to piece it together with the words I knew there seemed to be something there that I could interpret as a story. (Kakihara)

Most of the songs that Kazuki was playing at the time of our interview were slide classics with simple stories — mostly about women who have left, are still desired, or are oblivious to the singer's feelings. His song catalogue included Elmore James's renditions of "The Sky Is Crying," "Talk to Me Baby," and "Shake Your Moneymaker," and Hound

Dog Taylor's "It's Alright" and "She's Gone." Kazuki's English was comprehensible. The emotional impact of his style combined with the simplicity of the material made problems with intonation and pronunciation a non-factor.

4.3 A Fitting Model: Hound Dog Taylor

The artist Kazuki had most closely modeled himself on, Hound Dog Taylor, never quite opened his mouth wide enough to get all of the lyrics out, though the ones that made it to microphone were tortured and passionate. Kazuki sang in a moaning style similar to Taylor's. At times, the resemblance was uncanny. His guitar-playing tended to be closer to Elmore James's clear, ringing style than to the fuzzy, murkiness favored by Taylor and Homesick James. Most of the songs in Kazuki's repertoire had simple lyrics with plenty of repetition and no thematic complications. After all, there are only so many ways to say that your woman has gone and you want her to come back. His music was quite accessible for native speakers of English. When it was difficult to be sure what Kazuki was singing, it did not seem to be because of his accent or intonation, but because he had copied the original 1960's recording too closely. For example, when I went back to listen to a recording of James's "It's Alright," I found that the same sections of Kazuki's version which were difficult to make out were unclear on the James recording.

4.4 Impressions of the Blues

Although this paper focuses on only three of the twenty blues musicians interviewed over a two-year period, Kazuki's thoughts on the blues and the nature of Japanese blues were perhaps the most thought-provoking. He seemed to understand that native speakers of English who listen to Japanese blues musicians might feel, at times, that something was not quite right. He summarized the difference between the blues being played in Japan and America in this way: "To a certain degree, Japanese blues musicians tend to insist on playing in the way that the musicians they respect did it. In America I think that there is more of a tendency to try to change the existing form. That is surely because of the language. For example, Americans can change the lyrics" (Kakihara). Of all the Japanese blues I heard, Kazuki's music had the strongest appeal because of its emotional honesty and lack of ornamentation, in addition to his obvious abilities as a slide guitarist and vocalist. His definition of the blues showed a balanced view of life and music. He thought the blues was close to the Japanese concept known as "kidoairaku," a compound-word made up of four Chinese characters that signify joy, anger, sadness, and

pleasure. "It's emotion, I think," he said of the blues. "The feeling started from dealing with sadness, I think. Some people want to do sad things when they feel sad, some people try to be happy, and some people get angry. All of the emotions are in blues, aren't they? I guess in English you would call that 'soul'" (Kakihara).

CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The Demands of the Audience

Whenever I attended a live blues show in Fukuoka, there were never more than two or three Westerners in the audience. Usually I was the only one. After the show, the vocalists often approached my table to ask if I had enjoyed the music and if their English had been comprehensible. Some, but not all, of the vocalists would ask this question. Many would inquire about the meaning of mysterious phrases such as to "ball the jack," a reference to an American dance popular in the 1940's, which I did not understand either. Gradually I realized that blues lyrics had a different significance for me as a native speaker of English than they did for Japanese musicians and fans. Mikazu, Nagasaki Slim, and Kazuki Kakihara were playing blues for a Japanese audience that did not expect to understand much of the lyrics at all. The average Japanese fan depended on the pre-song introduction to give him or her a rough idea of what was coming—and the rough idea was enough. As the photographs included in this essay demonstrate, Japanese blues can be as much about recreating a specific time and place in musical history through costume as it is about sound.

Occasionally, when I listened to a vocalist with particularly poor English skills the results were comedic, in the same way that an impassioned actor with no feel for the nuances of the English language reading a Shakespeare tragedy with a thick foreign accent might provide his audience with unexpected moments of levity. The three musicians profiled in this paper each chose to convey their feelings about life through the medium of American blues, modeling themselves after figures from musical folklore. Mikazu's emotional conceptions of unconditional acceptance and love were expressed through her recreation of the 1920's singer Bessie Smith. Nagasaki Slim's gritty, honest view of life highlighted the importance of traditional blue-collar values such as hard work and respect. It is to be hoped that he does not follow the energetic band leader James Cotton's example too closely by blowing out his lungs (Dahl 103). Kazuki Kakihara's enjoyable brand of bottleneck guitar squeezed joy from sadness, reducing blues to its most basic, emotional level, free of adornment.

5.2 Why Not Sing in Japanese?

It remains unclear why none of the blues musicians I encountered sing in Japanese. More often than not, the interviewees told me that the blues must be in English. I interpreted this statement to mean that they were initially attracted to the renditions of blues by classic American bluesmen and women and this is the music they wished to recreate. Over the past thirty years, artists such as Ali Farka Toure from Mali (known as the African John Lee Hooker) and Clifton Chenier, an African-American from Louisiana who sang in French, have sung the blues in languages other than English. They have successfully incorporated indigenous instruments such as the calabash and the washboard into the blues framework to create new sounds. I did not encounter any Japanese blues musicians who attempted to update the blues, or give it a Japanese twist.

Ultimately, the fact that the lyrics are written in English is probably of more significance to Japanese amateur blues musicians than the meaning of the lyrics themselves. If the words to a famous Muddy Waters song were translated and sung in Japanese, the result would be an unrecognizable musical genre, since blues (or so I was told) is American, not Japanese. The audience at an amateur blues concert in Japan generally knows what American blues sounds like, and they know what the old bluesmen and women looked like. Thus, visitors to live houses are able to connect with blues performers through their created personas and through the trademark sounds of the blues. The meaning of the songs is not necessarily lost. It just assumes a role of lesser significance.

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