

[Book Review]

## *Nenes' Koza Dabasa: Okinawa in the World Music Market*

*Nenes' Koza Dabasa: Okinawa in the World Music Market*. By Henry Johnson. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 166 pages. ¥10,050 (hardcover).

Okinawa has a unique island culture, a contentious history, and musical traditions that are distinct from other parts of Japan. While many introductory books on Okinawan popular music have been published, mainly since the 1990s, this book enthusiastically focuses on *Koza Dabasa* (literally, “That’s Koza”), the fourth album by the Okinawan four-woman pop group Nenes (“elder sisters”). The author regards this album, which explores Okinawa’s eclecticism, the island’s culture, and its history of war and peace, as iconic in Okinawa’s popular music history in connection with exoticism, and as an emblem of Nenes’ success in the world music industry. Viewed from the standpoint of *Koza Dabasa* and Nenes, the distinctiveness and exoticism of Okinawan popular music is discussed.

A uniqueness of this book is taking up “island culture” as a subject for discussion of the album. This is because islands and islandness are important elements of Okinawan cultural expression. The author mentions that the concepts of islands, hometown, and *shima-uta* (island folk songs) are used throughout *Koza Dabasa* and that the culture and life differ from island to island: Okinawa Island has an urban cosmopolitan setting; on the other hand, life of Kuroshima (Kurushima) Island is blessed by nature. A penetrating insight is that the lyrics and music of each song create a tension between the idealization of tropical island life and the reality of the dark and troubled history of Okinawa caused by being involved in one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific War.

The contents of *Koza Dabasa* blend elements of Japanese and global popular music with Okinawan distinctive cultural elements such as the *sanshin* (three-string lute), *shima-uta*, the vocal style, *shima-kutuba* (community languages), and musical scales. They are typical traits of what is called *Uchinā* pop or “neo-traditional popular music,” which represent a hybrid style of the Okinawan culture being referred to as *champurū*.

It was in the 1960s that Okinawan professional musicians started to perform such a *champurū* style of music. Among them, Four Sisters, a group of sisters from Uruma City, is said to be a forerunner to Nenes in aspects such as the group’s name and their appearance. *Uchinā* pop gained popularity among Okinawans, Okinawans in mainland Japan, and Japanese in general around the time of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan in 1972. A leading performer, Shoukichi Kina, and his band Champloose disseminated a reggae style of

upbeat music to a wider national and international audience. Sadao China, a singer, *sanshin* player, and songwriter, was another key person.

In 1990, Sadao China organized Nenes, and since then, he has produced and managed the group. *Ikawū*, the first album by Nenes, released in the following year, became the best-selling CD of Okinawan popular music up to that time. The timing was soon after the World Music boom, and it was when Okinawan folk and popular music became popularized in Japan with the development of Okinawan tourism as a spot with affordable prices.

*Koza Dabasa*, produced with famous US guest musicians and released in 1994, is said to be the peak for Nenes. The author points out that the success of *Koza Dabasa* was led by 1) the accomplishments and reputation of the initial members, especially of the leader, Misako Koja; 2) the contributions of Kazuya Sahara, who was the arranger, performer, and computer programmer; 3) their repertoire; and 4) the timing.

Up to the present time, the members of Nenes have changed six times, replacing departing members with younger members. Nenes' practice of renewing its lineup follows that of Japanese mainland idle groups such as Morning Musume (1997– ), AKB48 (2005– ), and Sakura Gakuin (2010–2021), as the author mentions. However, their primary performance stages are different: Morning Musume is connected to a TV program, AKB48 is highlighted in direct communication with fans at a special local theater, and Sakura Gakuin focused on their school life activities, while Nenes has been based in a touristic *min'yō sakaba* (folk song bar) live house in Okinawa.

The current Nenes lineup returns to the stage at their *min'yō sakaba*, an entertainment venue for tourists for the consumption of cultural food, drink, and *shima-uta*, and performs regularly to sustain the repertoire of Sadao China and previous lineups of the group. The newest lineup inherits the group's legendary repertoire, including *Koza Dabasa*, and the way of self-exoticization of the initial Nenes through its music, fashion, imagery, and performance style, tying them strongly to the place. Going with the times, Nenes has developed their own distinctive brand, blending various cultural sounds, consolidating their appeal to world music consumers, and periodically reinventing themselves with lineup changes and exploration of assorted popular music styles. This book not only illustrates the past glory established by the initial lineup of Nenes but also updates their way of cultural production and representation of the multiple Okinawan identities through their musical performances. Accordingly, this discussion of *Koza Dabasa* and Nenes in the world music market contributes a scholarly work on island cultural studies and the anthropology of music in general. The logical and clear arguments, text development with high-quality English interpretation and accurate orthography of Okinawan and Japanese terms, and useful information referring to plentiful previous research are admirable. This book is accessible and enjoyable for fans of Okinawan popular music, and they might particularly appreciate the back matter of the book, which includes: References; Discography; Appendix 1: *Koza Dabasa* track list; Appendix 2: Studio albums; Appendix 3: Compilations, live, and self-covers; and Appendix 4: *Nenes'* members.

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