

## Tokyo's high lonesome

In recession-tossed Japan, the chic find solace in the mournful twang of American bluegrass

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TOKYO — Deep in the heart of Japan's capital is a little patch of Tennessee. There, a style of music born in poor, rural America is gaining favor among the salarymen and sophisticates of this rich, cosmopolitan city in which the good times seem gone.

That piece of Tennessee is the Rocky Top, a bluegrass club about the size of a large living room on the third floor of a commercial building in the glitzy Ginza district.

The club has been there for two decades, but for the first 15 years it was largely ignored and consistently lost money. Only since Japan's so-

called "bubble economy" burst and the country hit harder times, said owner Kazuoki Koyanagi, have Japanese come to appreciate what Bill Monroe, the late father of bluegrass, described as that "high lonesome" sound.

**'Japanese people love that sad and lonesome sound. This music is like no other.'**

— Band leader Masuo Sasabe

"There's a psychological aspect," Koyanagi said during a break from behind the bar. "I think young people these days have a different feeling. It may look like they're having fun on the outside, but they look lonely to me. And I think acoustic instruments heal."

Despite its popularity, the Rocky Top is not easy to find in the densely packed and garishly lit Ginza. Nor is  
See JAPAN, Back Page



In Tokyo's Rocky Top nightspot, meant to evoke a Southern honky-tonk, the New Applesseed Band lets loose with a country serenade.

## Bluegrass strikes a chord in Japan

■ JAPAN  
from Page 1A

it easy to reach. After negotiating Ginza's neon-splashed warrens, fans must navigate a narrow, winding hallway, then insert themselves into an elevator barely big enough for three Japanese or one full-size, grits-and-gravy Bubba.

But it's worth the trouble, because the Rocky Top is no phony tourist trap. It's the real deal, or as close as one could hope to find 7,000 miles from the Appalachian hollows where bluegrass is rooted.

A scruffy cowhide is tacked to the wall behind the small stage. Near it, one bumper sticker exclaims, "God Bless America," and another proclaims, "If it ain't country, it ain't music."

One recent evening, just beyond a pair of middle-aged salarymen in gray suits nursing a \$75 fifth of Jack Daniel's, Monroe looked on approvingly from a poster on an adjoining wall.

But it's the music, not the decor, that makes the Rocky Top authentic. On a good night, when a group like the New Applesseed Band plays, the music is as technically accomplished and as heartfelt as just about anything you can hear in Nashville, even if the lyrics are served up with a Japanese accent.

### Melting language barriers

But that doesn't matter; most of the fans don't understand English anyway, which seems not to detract from their enjoyment of the music. Despite their sober business attire, men and women hoot like hillbillies when they hear a hot mandolin riff or some fancy banjo pickin'.

"Japanese people love that sad and lonesome sound," Masuo Sasabe, leader of the New Applesseed Band, said between sets. "This music is like no other."

Sasabe, who works a day job as a Yokohama architect, is a serious enough bluegrass musician to have been made an honorary citizen of Huntsville, Ala., in 1991, after showing his stuff there with an earlier version of his band.

He and his band first visited the United States in 1975 on a pilgrimage to find an authentic bluegrass festival. Few Japanese had even heard of bluegrass then, and Sasabe

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knew it only through a few albums he found riffling through Tokyo's record stores. Sasabe, now 48, had been attracted to American folk music at age 14 by the Kingston Trio. But when he heard that bluegrass fingerpicking, he was hooked.

During their first trip to the States, Sasabe and his band landed in Seattle, then drove 13 hours a day for six days before they found their first festival. It was in Pennsylvania, at Gettysburg, which Sasabe remembers as "the fighting place." The festival organizers were so amazed by the notion of a Japanese bluegrass group that they invited the band to play a couple of songs, which turned into a 30-minute set. When it was over, Sasabe recalls proudly, some good ol' boys passed their hats and collected \$300 from the appreciative audience.

While Sasabe was by then already addicted to the music, it would be years before a bluegrass habit developed in Japan. Today, there are two major annual bluegrass festivals in Japan. One attracts so many bands that it lasts from 10 a.m. one day until 3 a.m. the next, even though each group has little stage time.

"Bands drive for 10 hours to play 10 minutes," he said.

Rocky Top owner Koyanagi says it took the economic downturn in 1991 and the stagnation that has followed to make large numbers of Japanese appreciate bluegrass. He said the appeal is not merely its distinctive sound but the

fact that bluegrass is the kind of music that can be made at home.

Koyanagi, who also owns three pubs, said it was routine during the booming 1980s for a businessman to spend \$200 on his way home from the office on a few drinks and some snacks. Now, big expense accounts are much less common, so people seek better value for their entertainment yen. He noted that the cover charge at the Rocky Top is typically only \$10 or \$15, a very modest sum by Ginza standards.

But the popularity of bluegrass may have less to do with going out than turning inward. Many younger people have begun to cultivate themselves — and perhaps medicate the pain of diminishing expectations — by learning to play rural America's hurtin', drinkin' and cheatin' songs on guitars, mandolins and banjos, according to Koyanagi.

"When Japan went into recession, acoustic instruments started selling more than electric instruments," he said.

### Similar roots seen

Whereas Sasabe regards bluegrass as unique, Koyanagi thinks it shares many characteristics with traditional Japanese folk music. Even the banjo, he said, has a lot in common with the Japanese three-string samisen.

Koyanagi said he was slow to take to bluegrass, but "now I love it — I'm crazy about it." His only complaint is that the fast-paced music is not appropriate for driving.

"I try not to leave bluegrass tapes in my car, because once I put it on, I speed up," he said. "On the highway, it's easy for me to pass 130 kilometers per hour (about 80 mph) when I play bluegrass, so I try to keep only low-key music in the car."

### IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

**Rocky Top:** 7-8-19 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo.  
Phone: 011-81-3-3571-1955.

**Takarazuka Bluegrass Festival** (near Kobe):  
Spring, summer and autumn. Summer festival, the biggest, is the first Thursday-Sunday in August. Contact: B.O.M at 011-81-797-87-0561.  
Fax: 81-797-86-5184.

**Hakone Bluegrass Festival** (near Mt. Fuji):  
The last Friday-Sunday in August. Contact: Mr. Nakanishi at 011-81-0473-23-2615.