

Japan: Hip-hop's new home

By Alecia McKenzie

TOKYO - In neon-lit Roppongi in the Japanese capital, boys in baggy pants and baseball caps break-dance on a busy street. In the trendy Shinjuku neighborhood, rap music blares from speakers in a music store, while would-be instrumentalists try to play along. And in the youth Mecca of Shibuya, a young hip-hop band performs live to promote their latest compact disc (CD).

Yes, across Tokyo and in much of Japan, hip-hop is now in your face after years of being underground or confined mostly to nightclubs.

Major recording companies such as Sony Music Records and Universal Music's Def Jam Japan have been snapping up local rap bands, realizing that "hip-hop rules", as one entertainment magazine put it.

A prize Sony signing is Loop Junction, a band of five young men playing an innovative blend of acid jazz and funk, while their MC raps about life and relationships - all in Japanese. Their third album, *Turkey*, was released last month and has been gaining rave reviews.

Meanwhile, Def Jam Japan hopes to strike gold with Ai, a singer who has a sexy, cool persona, and who is being marketed as an alternative to more hard core performers. She could be described as the Missy Elliott of Japan, albeit a slimmer version. She certainly dresses the part, in trainers, track suit and floppy hat, like her famous US counterpart.

"Hip hop was underground for a long time, but now it's definitely becoming more and more mainstream, and its popularity is continuing to grow," said Tsuyoshi Kosuga, Loop Junction's guitarist. "But one sad result is that the music has become more commercial and the creativity is suffering."

Kosuga, 28, said his band was hoping to take the music in a different direction, away from formulaic imitations of hip-hop stars from the United States. "I think we can do a little bit better," he said with a smile.

Indeed, many critics bemoan the loss of creativity in Japanese hip-hop, saying the music and dancing had more of a cutting edge in its so-called underground days.

According to most accounts, hip-hop arrived in Japan in the late 1980s by way of nightclubs in Tokyo neighborhoods such as Roppongi and Shibuya. The clientele then was mostly black US military personnel, Jamaicans and Africans studying or working in Tokyo, curious Japanese youngsters and tourists.

But by 1995, Japanese hip-hop bands had formed a growing movement, often opening for US rap performers and gaining experience moving an audience.

They were sometimes booed off the stage, but they kept at it and in the process developed a Japanese style of hip-hop that combined various genres but drew most of its inspiration from the United States. Still, the lyrics tended to avoid sensitive subjects such as politics or crime.

In late 2000, Universal decided to launch a Japanese branch of their Def Jam label, realizing that, "at last rap and hip-hop have become a natural part of the Japanese music scene", as Kazu Koike, the general manager of Universal Music in Japan, told reporters.

While rap refers to rhymes spoken to a drumbeat or background rhythm, the term hip-hop can be used to describe the music, dance, fashion and lifestyle of rappers.

Now, signs everywhere prove that young people are increasingly attracted by hip-hop's cool and subversive image. In addition to dancing in clubs, such as the Zion in Roppongi, they are buying the music in loads.

Last year, Rip Slyme, a Japanese hip-hop band, sold more than a million copies of its *Tokyo Classic* release, the first hip-hop album to attain such sales here.

"The reason that rap resonates for young people in Japan today is that it's cathartic, and it allows them to express themselves in a way that traditional Japanese culture doesn't do," said Kyle Cleveland, a lecturer in sociology at Temple University of Japan. "It allows them to be emotional."

But Cleveland added that much of rap's appeal is superficial, and there are recurring questions about the authenticity of the music in Japan. "A large part of the hip-hop audience is attracted by what they perceive as exotic," he said. "It's a kind of ethnic tourism."

Cleveland notes that a major feature in the marketing of the music is the "stereotyping of black culture", as he puts it. Some marketers of hip-hop promote "subterranean values and depict African-Americans in ways that would be considered racist in the United States", he said. They use images that depict aggression, violence and hyper-sexuality.

Record-company officials, though, say things are changing. Masako Masuda, a publicist at Sony Music Record's subsidiary Mastersix Foundation, said, "I think it's getting better. Young people are listening to much more music than 10 years ago and they are aware of the issues. They don't believe in the stereotypes."

However it is marketed, a main distinction between hip-hop in the United States and Japan is that in the former the music started on the streets and worked its way up to being mainstream - while in Japan, it has developed through professional performers and is now being pushed by record companies.

The members of Loop Junction, for instance, met while studying in Boston at the prestigious Berklee College of Music, and guitarist Kosuga admits that they have never

actually listened to much hip-hop. He says his influences are more acid-jazz, even Metallica.

Still, their record company is promoting the latest CD as real hip-hop jazz groove. Take away the rapping, however, and the music sounds more like jazz.

It is not only the labeling that is important, but the look of the artist. Def Jam's Ai has been transformed since she signed with the company, and now a casual observer would be forgiven for thinking she were of African-American origin.

According to Paul Jackson, writing in the Daily Yomiuri newspaper, "Def Jam has been looking to establish itself as the major player on the local hip-hop scene, and Ai fits into this picture as an R&B [rhythm and blues] singer with a hip-hop edge that will attract more mainstream fans to the label than the more hardcore releases of her label mates."

Other bands that are marketed as hip-hop acts do mostly fusion music. Whatever the differences, however, hip-hop looks set to be around for a while in Japan as long as fickle consumers there consider it cool.

"At the moment, the music is really mass market, and although it's stuck a bit between commercialism and art, we all want it to be the real thing," Loop Junction's Kosuga said.