

【연구논문】

The Triplet Beat Goes On:  
Reverberations of a Popular “Black”  
Rhythm in the American Mainstream  
Pop and the Japanese Enka

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I. The Beast Against Beauty: contrastive ways of  
rhythmic formation in popular US genres

The title of my paper may need clarification. What is a triplet beat? Instead of wordy explanation, let us resort to Elvis Presley performing it in his second US #1 hit song.

“I Want You, I Need You, I Love You” (1956)

The rhythm guitar repeats the chug-chug-chug pattern for 2 bars, and then the same beat is picked up by Elvis’s voice as he sings the first line, “Ho-ol’-me tight.”

Here again: “with all my ha-ha-ha ha-ha-ha- heart!” Elvis rides on the triplet beat.

This song has the basic 4 beat, but each of the 4 beats is divided into three little beats of roughly equal duration. These little notes are

called triplets.

This rhythmic formation had become a cliché in performing the blues, as the genre evolved throughout the 1920s and 1930s. By the early 1950s, it was already recognized as a kind of marker of the so-called “Black” Rhythm and Blues. Since it signified “blackness”, it was handled with care by executives of the mainstream pop industry who promoted “mildly black” sounds. The following is performed by a well-groomed doo-wop group, the Platters.

### “Only You” (1955)

Once the vocal begins, the triplet beat recedes into the background and is kept solely by the piano, which maintains the beat quite regularly and softly in mid-range keys. The Platters are an African-American chorus group whose singing style was popular among the white middle-class audience of the 1950s. They sang articulately and in clean harmony.

The same beat on the piano keys had for some time been a trademark of a popular rhythm-and-blues man based in New Orleans. This is Fats Domino’s arrangement of a famous country number, “Your Cheatin’ Heart,” recorded in 1963. The beat is heavier, and is kind of draggy. The triplet rhythm of the piano is accentuated by the drums, with the brass section later joining in. The piano keys are lower, giving us the sensation of some weighty body pressing against us. The music is cruder, less polished than the Platters’ doo-wop, but that was OK for many white fans. Fats was mild and funny. He was always smiling; he was never menacing.

Paul Anka, one of the best-loved teen idols of the late fifties,

adopted the same rhythmic format to accompany his passionate wooing: **"You Are My Destiny"**(1958). Here the triplet pattern is taken up by the piano in very high keys, while the bass maintains an ostinato more in the tradition of Tin Pan Alley songwriting.

Let us briefly turn to Japanese popular songs of the same period. Back in the late 1950s, the young urban middle-class boys and girls of the economically expanding nation were more willing than ever to absorb American pop products. Thus it is not surprising at all to find in a Japanese pop song the same drum and bass patterns that had backed Paul Anka.

### **"Blooming in the Rain"(Ame ni Saku Hana) by Hiroshi Inoue (1961)**

This is an old Japanese idol singing a remake of an older Japanese tango number, "modernized" by the then fashionable pseudo-R&B rhythm.

This is a complicated sentence. Let me complicate it a little further.

Not long after Paul Anka, a Lebanese-Canadian teen idol, successfully appropriated into his own performance the dominant rhythm pattern of the Rhythm and Blues, the Japanese teen idol, Hiroshi Inoue, who had earlier made his debut as a rockabilly singer, went mainstream in Japan. "Blooming in the Rain" was a remake of what used to be an old Japanese "tango" song of the 1930s, rendered to suit the taste of the postwar generation of Japan by using the beat pattern borrowed from "watered-down" pseudo rhythm and blues, which the likes of Paul Anka had made popular in the United States.

There is a so-called postmodern overtone in this description. Blur-

ring and mangling of cultural identities are actually very visible wherever we look in the field of pop music. But that is not the point of my talk today. Rather, I would like to explore how mainstream pop, either American or Japanese, managed, during the post-war era, to maintain what seemed like “national” identities despite “foreign” elements grafted onto them.

Let me put it this way. It seems as if some dominant forces are at work-or *were* at work throughout much of the twentieth century-forces that gave American popular songs their American-ness, and Japanese popular songs their Japanese-ness.

Popular music scenes have gone through radical shifts over the years: the jazz revolution, rock revolution and many other major movements and turnovers. But despite all the turmoil, I would like to assert that an overall *cultural* structure has survived. In every decade of the 20th century, it is possible to see in American popular music a certain polarized system. Let us call it the “Beauty and the Beast” system.

At one end of the pole is the *Beauty*, the “fair,” “heavenly,” “ethereal” kind of music that features gently flowing melodies and well regulated harmonics, the kind that has been appreciated by the modern European ruling class. Aria singers and ballet dancers among other performing artists of High Culture show how exquisitely they have defied the forces of gravity. They take us to a simulated aviation of the soul, freed from the cage of flesh.

This is Stephen Foster’s composition “*Beautiful Dreamer*”(1864). These so-called “parlor songs” were popular among the American middle-class throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. This singing style, as well as its melodic and rhythmic features remained

dominant well into the mid-twentieth century, especially in Broadway and Hollywood musicals.

At the other end of the pole is the *Beast*. In Foster's times, there was the up-tempo "negro" music played by blackened-up minstrels. Those comedians often acted as Zip Coons and Jim Crows. One hundred years later, a bluesman called himself Howlin' Wolf, and sang an appropriately titled song: "Evil" (1959).

In white America, before the spread of rock music and the pleasure-seeking lifestyle that accompanied it, this kind of music was regarded by many as sinful. The heavy, pounding beats themselves were un-Christian. They belonged to savages and pagans. But such wild, beastly abandon, when wrapped up neatly or comically on stage, had always been at the center of American entertainment since the times of the early minstrel shows (the 1840s). True that music as "raw" as this had been relegated mostly to "race music" before it found mass audience among the white middle-class youth of the 1950s, but the polished versions of syncopated beat music—from ragtime to hip-hop have always been a big driving force of the twentieth century mainstream American pop industry.

Let us go back to our discussion of the triplet beat. This rhythmic pattern derived from what is generally known as the *shuffle beat*. The shuffle beat is the beat of the blues that splits each of the 4 equal beats within a bar into a longer/stronger stroke followed by a shorter/weaker one, going like TAHN-ta TAHN-ta.

This is Big Maceo's "Worried Life Blues" (1942). Pay attention to the ratio of the longer stroke to the shorter one. It is close to two to one, suggesting that, with a little more pounding energy, the beat can easily break into the familiar triplet sequence.

The blues, of course, carries the emotional content of being blue, melancholic and low-down. The weight of trouble is felt upon us as we plod along, or *shuffle* along. And conventionally this slow continuous beat conveys exactly that weighty feeling.

We should note that the blues, or the *folk* blues of rural self-taught musicians from the American South, did not necessarily feature this rhythmic routine. The pattern became eminent only after the establishment of the blues as a more or less pop genre. That is to say, as “city folks” sought to hear signs of “blackness” in the blues, the genre as a whole moved to the direction of more articulately identifiable music, with features that signify (varying degrees of) “black” authenticity.

It is also important to note that in its transition into a popular form, the blues underwent a process of refinement-cum-simplification. Through this process of acquiring more uniform musical features, it gradually came to occupy the position, both symbolically and musically, as the opposite of “beautiful” songs taught at school and sung on Broadway stages. In other words, as the blues seeped into the hearts of a wider range of people, it gathered those features unto itself that would make it more readily recognizable as the *Beast* of American music.

In the years following the end of World War II, as more African Americans who had migrated to Northern industrial cities flocked together to modern juke joints, the blues, now electrified and played fast, no longer specialized in life’s letdowns. Perhaps the blues never “specialized” in any one feeling, but for the time being, it was tailored to suit the tastes of night-time city workers, more readily expressing life’s thrills and bodily pleasures.

This is Camille Howard’s “**Rock Me Daddy**” released in 1950 by

Specialty Records, one of the independent labels of "race music." The phrase "rock me," of course, has an openly sexual connotation. This is a "bad" piece of music- "bad" in the sense of "being very best" as prideful members of African American communities have always used the word to mean. Now the question is, how does the emphatic triplet beat relate to all that badness?

This song, "**After the Ball,**" is regarded as the first of U.S. mega-hits. It was written by Charles Harris in 1892, and is said to have sold 5 million copies in sheet music. The 1890s was a time when songs enjoyed by middle-class Americans became danceable. Sentimental lyrics were matched with accompaniments of a dancing rhythm, mostly the waltz.

In the waltz, the three consecutive pulses go OOM-pah-pah, Oom-pah-pah(strong-week-week strong-week-week). This rhythmic formation is a simulacrum of riding a swing. I mean the swing children ride in the playground. The weight of the fast downbeat is gently led upward into the air. The beat does not accumulate in your body; it does not press you down; it does not stimulate. It is a clean, graceful beat-or at least felt to be so by the bourgeoisie and by everyone aspiring to adopt the aesthetic standards of the rich and cultivated.

### **Patti Page, "Mockin' Bird Hill" (1951)**

Even sixty years after the "After the Ball" craze, the waltz beat still attracted a big fraction of Americans. The thrill here is the trill of the birds she wakes up to in the green hills of America.

Compare it with this.

## Presley, "Heartbreak Hotel" (1956)

The "white man with a Negro feel" immediately became an international sensation when he made his major-label debut with this song. The vulgar, suggestive triplet beat of black rhythm & blues is not foreign to this man who had grown up in a poor neighborhood of Tupelo, Mississippi and later, Memphis, Tennessee.

Now listen to this guitar solo. Each stroke on the guitar accumulates on top of each other, as if to press us downward, earth-bound. It feels as if we were, if not being raped, being driven by a throbbing sexual desire. In fact, this is where Elvis does his infamous pelvis gyrating.

In the year 2001, it may be difficult even for Koreans and Japanese to find any serious sexuality in this, but in the days when the OOM-pah-pah of waltz was the norm of organizing three successive pulses, the strong triplet beat must have sounded as "bad" as could be.

The enormous success of Elvis clearly exemplifies that the system of "Beauty ruling over the Beast" was in danger of being overthrown. The scale was about to be overturned, hell being raised, the Beast on the verge of prowling, almost ready to take command of the world. The musical regime of spiritual emancipation which had surpassed bodily sensations was in deep trouble.

## Presley, "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" (1956)

I hope the sheer contrast between the rhythmic feel of this song and of the waltz can be better recognized now than before, when I

first played this. Both are ways to arrange a sequence of pulses in sets of three, but how different the effects are felt to be!

But do all R&B triplet beats necessarily sound so sexually enticing? In preparing for this paper, I listened to many American hit songs of the late 1950s, and noticed that this was not always the case. There was something strange going on. It was as if some agent were there trying to desexualize the triplet beat.

An outrageously interesting example is a song called **"The Teen Commandments"** (1958). Three teen idols, including Paul Anka, take turns in telling their young fans to "be humble enough to obey" and to "turn away from unclean thinking."

The backbeat and the triplet strokes of R&B are still heard in the accompaniments, but the piano is just gently stroking the higher keys, and the guitar chords are played in arpeggio.

The "gentrification" of the triplet beat seemed to have been complete by 1960. The soft high-note piano and gentle brush stroke on drums had now become a routine format for slow ballads like **"I'm Sorry"** (Brenda Lee, 1960).

The triplet format was so "white washed" that Percy Faith, master of mood music, applied it to his **"Theme from 'A Summer Place'"** (1960). This movie theme was number one on the Billboard chart for nine consecutive weeks.

Of course, rock 'n' roll never died, but after Elvis himself stopped singing the slow powerful blues and adopted the faster eight-beat format (as in "Hound Dog"), there appeared no culturally significant blues numbers in the American music scene—until, that is, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin released the Beast once again for a countercultural festivity of "sex, drug and psychedelic blues."

## Janis Joplin, "Ball and Chain" (Live version at Monterey Pop Festival, 1967)

She shouts "Na-Na-Na Na-Na-Na" in triplets, with pounding power much greater than Elvis's. But we also remember that by the 1980s, even Janis's stage recordings had lost much of its original vulgarity in the face of punk and thrush metal sounds of the same era.

I think it is time to pose a hypothesis:

Twentieth century American popular music has been strongly polarized. It has been threading through the field of opposition: levity against gravity, the heavenly against earthy, the ethereal against bodily. The nature of this polarity is presumably both religious(i.e. of Christian convention) and "racial." The antipodes correspond with the contrasts that are assumed to exist between "white" and "black" music. Of the pair, the "black" characteristics constitute the drive, creating fads and booms since the ragtime of the turn of the century to "gangsta" rap of the 1990s. But somehow these characteristics are appropriated and subdued along the way, the same formal traits becoming part of a more genteel, more widely appreciated music of the following era. The strong triplet beat that derives from the rhythm and blues provides a vivid example that illustrates this process.

## II. Matrix of Perseverance: the rise of enka as the song of truth

On such hypothesis, we now turn to the cultural dynamics of

Japanese popular music.

In Japan, as (presumably) in many other countries culturally dominated by the West, there were somewhat schizophrenic situations in which people, especially the educated, negated their own folk music (which they still cherished deep inside) to aspire for, adopt and absorb the “superior” and more fashionable kinds of music coming in from the United States and Western Europe.

Such complexes are observable in Japan’s popular music scenes throughout the twentieth century, but here, let us focus on the period of global rock revolution, approximately from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. During this period, Japan’s popular music, while still largely rooted in its own ethnicity, was avidly absorbing elements of American and European pop music. This hybrid music enjoyed by a great majority of Japanese was called *kayokyoku* (歌謡曲). It was an amalgam of everything. Most songs used European or hybrid melodic scales, though a hit song may sometimes be sung by a *geisha* in styles true to old traditions. Backing musicians were usually trained in jazz (and later, Latin and rock) and used, wherever appropriate, the same technical routines as in Western pop music.

During the 1950s and 1960s *kayokyoku* actively divided itself into subcategories according to the flavors added to them. They ranged from “pure European” and “moody Latin” to “unabashedly Japanese.” *Enka* (演歌) is the name given to the last group. The next song I play belong to a subcategory called Urban Kayo, this song belongs to a more Westernized layer of the *kayokyoku*, as the singer’s partly American name, Frank Nagai, may suggest.

## “West Ginza Metro Station” (Nishi Ginza Eki-mae)

Let me translate its lyric somewhat literally.

ABC XYZ. I always say this, you know.  
 I needed a kick again tonight. So I got off the subway,  
 And ascended the stairs, to face these neon lights  
 Shrouded by night fog. It's such a cool sight  
 To see from West Ginza Metro Station.

I often play this song in class and get a big laugh out of my students. But in 1958 at the dawn of kick-seeking youth culture, this song may have sounded moderately cool. Well, maybe not. The idea of the blaring brass, the piano, the bass and the drums all playing the triplet beat in unison was apparently a miss. The songwriter-arranger would never again repeat this formula with Frank Nagai. The young audience in the late fifties did not think it was cool, probably because the unison of triplet beats gathering momentum in crescendo sounded too much like traditional Japanese drumbeats.

The more successful urban Kayo around this time was “**Black Flower Petals**” (*Kuroi Hanabira*, 1959, sung by Mizuhara Hiroshi). The rhythm section is lighter, accompanied by beautifully ornamental strings in higher keys. It has more “white” elements around it than “black.” The vocal, however, is characteristically East Asian if not uniquely Japanese. The beat keeps the body energized, but the singing is not violent or sexually aggressive. Nor does Mizuhara sing “his heart out” in the grandiose way Paul Anka had done in “You Are My Destiny.” The singer is passive, suffering the beat, his passion

creating ever intensifying tension which is carried to the very end.

It is probable that the success of this song—it received the Japan Record Award for 1959—made *kayokyoku* songwriters become aware of the fact that the popular R&B backing routine was more suitable in Japan for songs of passionate suffering, rather than for songs of sexual desires and aggression.

A few years later, 1966 to be exact, the craze for the Beatles and the Monkees finally reached the Japanese masses. But the “group sounds,” a new hybrid genre invented by the industry for rock-loving teenage audiences, did not last long. What took root in the sixties from the influences of rock revolution was *not* the noisy eight-beat shouts but an empowered branch of Japanese blues, now taken as *enka*. This is Mori Shin-ichi in his debut number “Breath of A Woman Sighing” (*Onna no Tameiki*). Listen to how the singer Mori Shin-ichi’s voice pulsates in triplets.

Mori’s sighing, choking vocal has all the “beastly” features. Maybe “beastly” is too strong a word, but at least he bares his emotions in a way few decent American singers would. In addition, this is a transsexual song, a song of a woman deceived by a man, which is sung by a man in the language of a woman.

In the United States, such a song could have been banned, at least from television. In Japan too, fans of Joan Baez probably frowned at this performance, but this record sold extremely well, and in a couple of years Mori was to be recognized as the best, emotionally deepest *enka* singer of his generation. In 1971, Mori received his second vocalist-of-the-year award with this song, “Mother” (*Ofukuro-san*).

Mother I see you in the sky when I look up.  
You became my umbrella on rainy days,  
And told me to be an umbrella for the world someday.  
I will never forget the truthfulness I learned from you.

The ethical emotional beauty of this song is conveyed passionately in the rhythmic scheme which has its distant origin in black rhythm and blues. How could it be so?

To answer this question, we need to take a broad, systemic view of modern Japanese popular music as a whole. Thus appears, once again, another polarized picture. On one end is the beautiful songs of Western civilization-Italian arias and the immaculate harmonies of boys choir-which the modernized Japanese revered and aspired for. On the other end is the traditional Japanese commoners' songs, with all its "primitive" characteristics of children's play songs or adult's drinking songs.

One interesting ethnomusicological feature of elementary Japanese songs was that most of them had the basic rhythmic pattern of TAHN-ta TAHN-ta, which is no different from African American's shuffle beat. In modern Japanese music classes this rhythm was too indigenous, so the teachers tried to make sure, often in vain, that children sang "correctly," true to the notation that designates the ratio of the longer and shorter syllables to be three to one, TAAHN-ta TAAHN-ta, so that the song would *bounce*, not shuffle.

As early as in the 1930s, talented songwriters of *kayokyoku* made inventive use of the rhythmic affinity of Japanese ditties with American blues, creating another hybrid genre simply called the *buruusu*, characterized by a slow 4-beat rhythm and the harmonic

minor scale. The first *buruusu* songs were chic, with an urban and American feel, but as the impact of R&B changed the rhythmic treatments of hit tunes in America and its influences reached Japan, something happened. *Buruusu* began to merge with *enka*, empowering and modernizing the latter as the truest conveyer of passion for the Japanese. Such was the case of Mori's songs which were previously introduced. Let us now hear Fuji Keiko singing her most memorable song, "Keiko's Dreams Bloom by Night" (*Keiko no Yume wa Yoru Hiraku*). In 1970 she was as sensational as her daughter Utada Hikaru of today.

Fuji sings of the dark miserable past of a teen-age girl, in a voice low and husky charged with vengeful spirit. This song is "deep," in almost the same sense that Mississippi Delta blues are routinely described so. It touched the hearts of lower-class *enka* fans and young, middle-class rock and blues fans alike, while at the same time helping to close the historically persistent gap between the Imported and the Indigenous. Songs like this paved the way for *enka's* social ascent. After Mori and Fuji and a handful of other original artists, it became OK for an educated Japanese to like it openly. It was OK to sing a song of ethical nature like Mori's "Mother" in the R&B influenced, intensified dynamics of the *enka*.

**I conclude my talk with a simple recapitulation of my story.**

(1) In the polarized Beauty-Beast System of American Popular Music, the Beast role was adopted by African-American bluesmen and blues-women whose songs were typically accompanied by sexually

loaded triplet beats.

(2) The world became rock 'n' roll crazy when Elvis Presley exhibited the physicality he acquired from black music culture.

(3) In mainstream pop, the triplet beat with which Elvis Presley sensationalized himself eventually became "sanitized."

(4) When it was picked up by the Japanese, the beat tended to be intensified.

(5) The triplet beat empowered *enka* in the years between 1966 and 1971, while raising its status. Theretofore, *enka* had been regarded as belonging to the old, the rural and the urban underclass. After it merged with the R&B-derived triplet beat, *enka* was recast into the musical vessel for conveying deep, true emotions, not necessarily the crude kind, but also emotions gushing out of the suffering, enduring, beautiful *kokoro*(heart).

Before ending, I would like to play one more *enka*, sung by a young woman of the late 1970s. The song is called "**The Wintry Seascape of Tsugaru Strait**"(*Tsugaru Kaikyō Fuyu Geshiki*, 1977). This song is especially interesting in regard with today's discussion. The lyric escapes the metric control of Japanese poetry to surrender itself, so to speak, to the direct command of the triplet beat. It goes:

*U-e-no ha-tsu-no ya-ko-o re-'sha o-ri-ta to-ki-ka ra*

(Ever since I got off the sleeper train from Ueno)

The rhythmic dynamics of this song is quite different from that of "Heartbreak Hotel." While Presley sang with a strong attack on the first beat of the first bar, Japanese *burūsu* singers never employed that method. Here, the singer Ishikawa Sayuri raises her vocal

intensity gradually along the rising curve of the melody contour, which reaches its peak towards the end, at “*o-ri-ta*” to be exact. We have observed the same rising wave of emotion in Frank Nagai’s “West Ginza Metro Station.” I remarked that the attempt to combine the traditional dynamics of Japanese drumbeat with the cool R&B sensation was a miss. In my opinion, the failure is one of translation. In America, the heavy trodding beat is basically the stuff that *sex* is made of. To the Japanese of the days of *kayokyoku*, before their indigenous rhythmic receded, the triplet beat worked differently and had an entirely different signification. The beat turned inward. Its power gradually accumulated. It simulated oppression and perseverance, and singing your heart through such repressive power mirrored the experience of opening up your heart and revealing your darkest, innermost truths.

The development of such an art occurred only after the “bad” sexual performances of R&B artists have been fully digested in Japan.