

Sleng Teng: How a Japanese woman influenced Jamaica's reggae

By Yuri Kageyama
The Associated Press

TOKYO — A musical revolution in Jamaica has a connection with a bouncy rhythm from a portable electronic keyboard that's the brainchild of a Japanese woman.

The pattern that resonates in the 1985 reggae hit by Wayne Smith, "Under Mi Sleng Teng," came from the Casiotone MT-40, which went on sale in 1981, the first product Hiroko Okuda worked on after joining the Tokyo-based company behind G-Shock watches.

"It's really like my first child, and the child turned out so well it's outright moving," said Okuda, honored as "the mother of Sleng Teng" among hardcore reggae aficionados.

Sleng Teng is a form of digital Jamaican music that began in the mid-1980s, part of the rich repertoire of the disco-like genre called "dancehall." No one contests the key role played by artists like Smith and King Jammy, as well as the humble, battery-operated, \$150 MT-40.

One of the rhythm patterns Okuda created called "rock" on the MT-40 evolved into "Sleng Teng riddim."

As legend goes, Noel Davey, the Grammy-winning keyboard player for the Marley Brothers, got an MT-40 from a friend, who picked it up in California. Before, Davey was blowing into a Melodica portable keyboard for that sound.

Davey was toying around with the MT-40 and chanced upon the beat that's in Smith's megahit "Under Mi Sleng Teng."

And the rest is history, so to speak.

"You don't plan," Davey said, when asked about that moment.

There are so many buttons on the MT-40, he was "fooling around," found it, lost it, then had to look for it and found it again.

"It was a searching process," he said from Kingston, Jamaica.

The power of reggae comes from its healing effect, like "therapy," being a music for the poor, for those moving up against apartheid, for the people, he said.

Davey, who has never been to Japan, said he would like to meet Okuda. The two share something in common — just as he feels he has never been properly credited for his role in the history of reggae, he stressed Okuda deserves credit for the Casio instrument.

That groove went on to inspire much of subsequent reggae, distinctly heard in works by Sugar Minott, Ibo Cooper, Gregory Isaacs, and Dennis Brown.

Michael "Megabass" Fletcher, a musician in Jamaica, said repetitive music isn't inferior.

"It has its place," he said, demonstrating Sleng Teng on his bass. "A good song is a good song."



GLOBAL MANGA. Pictured is an image from Sanshiro Kasama's *Deadpool: Samurai*, published in Japanese in 2021, and in English in February 2022. It marks the first partnership between Marvel and Japanese comics publisher Shonen Jump. (DEADPOOL: SAMURAI © 2022 MARVEL, story by Sanshiro Kasama, art by Hikaru Uesugi, translated by Amanda Haley, lettered by Brandon Bovia, via AP)

Made-in-Japan manga goes global with Webtoon, Deadpool

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Webtoon in South Korea, founded in 2004; Line Manga in Japan; and services in the U.S., Europe, and other nations, recently hit 82 million users a month. Growth is especially strong in the U.S.

"As a platform, we wish to offer benefits for the artists in offering the best environment, in terms of readership size and profits, too, of course," said Baku Hirai, chief operating officer at Line Digital Frontier, which oversees the Webtoon business in Japan. "By being on our platform, the work is relayed both domestically and globally, offering the chance for becoming a global hit."

Although taking off two decades later than in South Korea, Webtoons are here to stay in Japan.

Works are being developed in Japan that

bring together the best of Webtoons and manga, says Kojuro Hagihara, chief executive of Tokyo-based Sorajima Studio, which produces Webtoon works for various platforms.

"All we need is a mass hit, something people who don't usually read Webtoons will be interested in. To do that, we need to create a Webtoon work that will be turned into a series on Netflix or Amazon Prime," he said.

The 2021 startup studio has gathered investment from traditional Japanese manga publishers like Shueisha and Shogakukan. The studio has three works out so far, all profitable, including one published in the U.S. It plans 26 works for this year, and 50 for next year, which would rival the productivity of Webtoon studios in South Korea.

"Things are going super well," said Hagihara.



INSTRUMENTAL WOMAN. In this photo released by Casio Computer Co., Hiroko Okuda holds, at its headquarters in Tokyo on February 9, 2022, the Casiotone MT-40 portable keyboard player, which she created in 1981, the first product she worked on after joining the Japanese company behind G-Shock watches. A musical revolution in Jamaica has a connection with a bouncy rhythm from the portable electronic keyboard that's the brainchild of the Japanese woman. The pattern that resonates in the 1985 reggae hit by Wayne Smith, "Under Mi Sleng Teng," came from the Casiotone MT-40. (Casio Computer Co. via AP)

Fletcher said other keyboards were also used to play Sleng Teng, such as the Casio CZ-101 and Yamaha DX100, from Casio's Japanese rival.

"Sleng Teng will never die," said Fletcher, who has performed or produced songs for Shaggy, Maxi Priest, and Alborosie.

Okuda, whose graduation thesis at Kunitachi College of Music in Tokyo was on reggae, was among the first recruits at Casio Computer Co. assigned to work on musical instruments, then a new sector for the company.

The company didn't have very many musicians, and she was the one with background in world music. Okuda had immersed herself in reggae in the late 1970s, including going to Bob Marley's concerts in Japan.

Okuda worked out six kinds of rhythms for the MT-40, including samba, swing, and waltz, creating a bass line and a beat.

She also created two licks called "fill ins" to be played between sections of a song — or at the start of a song, as it is in "Under Mi Sleng Teng."

For the prototype, she initially had an even more brash punk-rock-like rhythm called "avant garde." The managers killed it as "too crazy."

At least the "rock" pattern got approved, Okuda recalled with a laugh.

Casio's main business was calculators, not keyboards, and so Okuda's invention didn't make much of a wave at her company. Okuda said she was usually among a handful of women in a room filled with men.

"I was a pioneer in so many places, and there were Japan's old ways everywhere I went. I had to put up a fight each time," she said.

She was never promoted to managerial positions, and never chosen for a business trip abroad. She has not travelled to Jamaica, or anywhere else except for China.

When asked if she has any advice for working women, Okuda pointed out having a special skill tends to help. She also has an extremely supportive husband, who took on much of the childcare responsibilities.

That definitely helped, she said.

The family shares a love for music, and music is always playing in their house. When they were younger, Okuda did feel a bit sad when her daughter and son would see her off at the door, singing, "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's work she loves to go," to the tune in Walt Disney's "Snow White." These days, they joke maybe she'll win the Nobel for the MT-40.

A more recent Casio technology Okuda has worked on is Music Tapestry, which translates music being played into a fluid visual image on the computer. Flowers float and swirl in time to the notes. Circles, squares, and triangles dance about on the screen. Its sale date is undecided.

She doubts any of the reggae musicians know she is behind the MT-40. And how her MT-40 became part of such great music is nothing short of "a miracle," she said.

"If I can ever meet them, I just want to express my deep gratitude. I want to tell them thank you so much for finding the rhythm and for using it," she told The Associated Press.

Casio still sells keyboards. The CT-S1000V, set to go on sale this month, turns words into vocaloid-like singing. The smaller portable versions come with dozens of preset rhythms.

In the 2010 model, the rock pattern was called "MT-40 riddim" in honor of where it all began.

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