

# DRAGON DANCE: A JAPANESE *JAZU KISSA*- INSPIRED COMMUNAL LISTENING EXPERIENCE IN THE HEART OF EAST BELFAST

Philip Arneill

## Side A

### 1. Origins

Music cafés existed in Tokyo as far back as the 1920s and were dedicated to the enjoyment of an eclectic range of music styles. [1.] The subsequent evolution of dedicated audio listening spaces, where quiet focused listening is the norm, may not be wholly unique to Japan, but they are by far the most ubiquitous there. The creation of silent spaces for quiet, reflective listening to music in Japan seems fitting: based on my personal experience as a resident of Tokyo from 1997–2017, Japan is a country that is more than comfortable with silence. While many of us fear the dreaded ‘awkward silence’ in social settings, silence plays an important part in effective communication where it has been “institutionalized and where social behaviors have become cultural”. [2.] Although classical music cafés exist, by far the most common of these listening spaces are those dedicated to jazz music, traditionally played on vinyl through high-end audio equipment. Known colloquially as *jazu kissa(ten)* – a vernacular fusion of “the Japanese pronunciation of ‘jazz’ and an abbreviation of the word *kissaten* (喫茶店), which translates literally as ‘tea-drinking shop’” [3.] – these spaces grew hugely in number and popularity throughout Japan in the post-war period, due in part at least to the financial and economic barriers to listening to music in domestic settings. [4.] One key element in achieving the silent, deep listening experience so characteristic of the traditional *jazu kissa* – from the late 1950s to 1970s in particular – was talking bans that were regularly enforced for periods of each day to allow customers to focus solely on the music. Although talking bans have now largely disappeared, except for a few notable exceptions such as Tokyo’s Eagle and the demarcated listening seats in Kobe’s Jam Jam, experiencing what Schwarz calls the “sonorous envelope” of being completely immersed in sound is still a possibility in many *jazu kissa*. [5.]



The focus of this paper is Tokyo Jazz Joints: Belfast, a listening event inspired by the culture of Japanese *jazu kissa* that took place over the course of two hours on 5th December 2021 (Figure 1). The event was hosted by me, Philip Arneill, a Northern Irish photographer and researcher. The inspiration for the event was Tokyo Jazz Joints, an audio-visual project which has documented the unique world of Japanese jazz listening spaces since 2015, which I conceived and co-created with American broadcaster and writer James Catchpole. Designed to create a lasting document of Japanese *jazu kissa* before they vanish forever from the musical landscape, Tokyo Jazz Joints has visited and photographed 162 of these spaces (jazz coffee shops and bars) across Japan. The project can be found on [tokyojazzjoints.com](http://tokyojazzjoints.com), accompanied by a podcast series, produced since 2020, that further contextualises the images by sharing some of the stories that lie behind them and situates them in a wider Japanese sociocultural context. The sense of entering one of these spaces as accessing a hidden world is described by Fadnes: “Walking through the *kissa* door is an invitation to enter a fascinating subcultural niche – on the one hand inwardly welcoming, on the other outwardly exclusive.” [6.] While there is no doubt that *jazu kissa* may seem for some intimidating from the outside, there is also no guarantee that they will necessarily be welcoming on the inside. This sense of ‘intimidation’ may be personal perception as much as anything else, and may also depend on one’s age, gender, jazz knowledge, reasons for visiting or, indeed, Japanese language ability. [7.] Rather than attempt to replicate a *jazu kissa*, however, the aim of this event was to create an experience *inspired* by the spirit of these listening spaces, augmented by displaying large photographic prints from the project and sharing personal anecdotes to resituate *jazu kissa* culture within a localised setting. Although ticket numbers were necessarily limited for logistical reasons, arguably creating a sense of ‘exclusivity’ for those unable to secure one, the event was welcoming and inclusive of all, regardless of any of the aforementioned factors. [8.]



Figure 1. Tokyo Jazz Joints: Belfast flyer (© Philip Arneill 2021).

## 2. Space

The space for the event was chosen for several reasons. Sound Advice is a new record shop opened in 2021 by Belfast-born DJ, collector and co-creator of pioneering queer club night Ponyhawke, Marion Hawkes, within the confines of the recently opened Banana Block, a community and cultural centre in the heart of a slowly gentrifying area of East Belfast (*Figure 2*). It is a traditionally working-class Protestant district, sitting in the shadows of the famous yellow cranes of Harland & Wolff shipyard in which the infamous Titanic was built. This intersectionality presented a perfect focal point for the event: a place where a diversity of local people, the culture of Japanese *jazu kissa*, photography, vinyl and active listening could meet. The shop became an enclosed space when its large metal door was slid across, separating the event from the outside and ensuring an undisturbed listening experience. It could be argued that in this respect it represented one example of Kun's concept of the audiotopia – inspired by Foucault's earlier conceptualisation of the heterotopia – in that it was a space, sonically and socially,

where disparate identity-formations, cultures, and geographies historically kept and mapped separately are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification are never predetermined. [9.]

Sound Advice was also sufficiently sized to host 36 participants safely, as some COVID-19 protocols were still in effect, albeit in a less restricted form than before. It was agreed in advance that no more than 36 tickets would be available to guarantee not only the safety of attendees, but also the intimacy and intensity of the experience. A ticketed event, in combination with the expected etiquette, satisfies Foucault's fifth principle of a heterotopia, namely,

a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place ... To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. [10.]



Figure 2. Sound Advice, Belfast (© Philip Arneill 2022).

Doors opened at 7 pm and once everyone was seated and comfortable, I gave a brief welcome to the event and introduction to the origins of Tokyo Jazz Joints. The rationale and expectations for the evening were then explicitly established: three jazz tracks had been chosen for focused, deep listening and, as such, the audience was encouraged not to talk, to put their phones away, and to refrain from documenting the event for social media during these tracks. Each track would be introduced before communal listening. I also explained that between the three curated tracks, a selection of jazz would be played on vinyl (at a lower volume) while the audience chatted, ordered drinks, or used the bathrooms, to offer a counter to the dedicated listening sections. These rules were not intended to restrict enjoyment, rather to facilitate complete immersion in the music, create an exclusive communal experience, and encourage active listening to jazz. I felt that clarity was key here as most of those present could not have known what to expect otherwise, and although the event was intended to be a little challenging, its foremost purpose was nevertheless to provide a unique and enjoyable experience. The three tracks were chosen for their connection to the Tokyo Jazz Joints project. Length was also a consideration, as I wanted to choose tracks long enough to facilitate immersion but not so long that attendees may have become bored or distracted. Placing to one side the subjectivity of taste in jazz (or indeed any music), it can be argued that they are tracks with an evocative atmosphere and impeccable musicianship: all three have a similar feel and may be loosely classified as part of the ‘spiritual’ jazz genre. Before listening, each track was prefaced by a story of their anecdotal significance to the evolution of the project. Based on comments from some participants, the discovery of jazz artists not previously known to them – even those considered part of the canon – was also a by-product of the overall experience.

### 3. The Awakening

*A solitary, haunting sax cuts through the cold December air. The sound of Billy Harper soars above bowed heads, invisible – not only to the closed eyes – as it spills through the space. Faithful to the track’s name the gradual crescendo is reminiscent of a large, soporific animal rousing itself from sleep. I’ll forever associate it with the image of a rhino, rising slowly and steadily, building towards eventual action. Captivating.*

The inspiration to play ‘The Awakening’ by the Billy Harper Quintet from the 1979 album of the same name was a rhinoceros. Not the mammal of Asian or African origin, however. Bénédicte Berna, the owner of Rhinoçéros, Berlin’s only *jazu kissa*-inspired bar, situated in the eastern district of Prenzlauer Berg, described the signature track for his lovingly crafted space in these very terms (*Figure 3*). He likens the slow controlled way in which Harper builds the track to his bar’s eponymous animal waking gradually from a slumber on the African savannah. [11.]



Figure 3. Rhinoçéros jazz bar, Berlin (© Philip Arneill 2021).

Rhinoçéros is just one example of a growing number of audio listening spaces springing up globally, often based on the model long established in Japan by traditional *jazu kissa*. [12.] A fully functioning audio bar from Tuesday to Saturday, Rhinoçéros regularly hosts listening sessions on a Monday evening under different guises, e.g. ‘Astral Traveling’ and ‘No Room for Squares’. These are advertised as such, and no walk-ins are allowed. Admission is by reservation only to encourage active listeners with a love of the music, and the evening is centred on the appreciation of a specifically chosen record that begins playing at the pre-advertised ‘needle drop’ time. Introducing active listening to recorded music in a public space to a German audience – one so specific to the Japanese *jazu kissa* – has not been without its challenges, and for many customers was a new experience; some had simply come to Rhinoçéros for a drink and to socialise. This required clarifying the rules and rationale explicitly before the ‘needle drop’, which were repeated until the norms and etiquette were established. Berna described this process thus: “It’s a thin line, but eventually after a while, if you stick with your own rules people get it.” [13.] Jali Wahlsten, owner of *kissa*-inspired Black Forest in Buenos Aires, describes a similar culture clash:

In the beginning it was random ... you know, people can’t behave as you ask them to. But then, we organised a booking system that you have to be on the guest list to get in ... I got to know the people personally and you could tell the profile ... these people come in for the music, they will listen and there will be enough of them ... the critical mass, those [people] set up the mood for the evening. [14.]

The gradual establishing of accepted norms, i.e. that the event is primarily a listening experience and people should not talk during the chosen record being played, may have been accelerated somewhat in Rhinoçéros by Berna’s characteristically direct approach. When asked how to get this finer message across to those who persist in talking over music, he summed up his strategy in no uncertain terms, declaring, “if people talk, one of us will tell them to shut the fuck up and get out”. [15.]

## Side B

### 4. Dahomey Dance

*I might’ve imagined the autumn leaves. I’m not even sure how the album came into my possession but in the story of my life, that first day when I dropped the needle, I was lying on a cheap double bed as the Glasgow autumn rattled the old tenement windows that framed the high ceiling and worn floorboards of the room. I will forever connect the twists and turns of Coltrane’s solos with swirling leaves in burnt orange, reds and yellows, a colour palate mirrored in the beautiful cover of the album itself.*

‘Dahomey Dance’ is the first track on the B side of John Coltrane’s 1961 Atlantic Records album, *Olé Coltrane*. Taken from one of my favourite jazz albums, it was a suitably atmospheric choice for an audience to be enveloped in for ten minutes and 48 seconds, and a shorter option than the almost twenty-minute title track, something that felt like a risk for a first-time event audience. The album also has a distinct association with Tokyo Jazz Joints: it will always remind me of photographing the sleeve propped up in a small serving hatch as it played at peak volume in the impossibly dark and loud Down Beat, in Yokohama’s historic nightlife district of Nōge (*Figure 4*).



Figure 4. Down Beat, Nōge, Yokohama (© Philip Arneill/Tokyo Jazz Joints 2015).

## 5. Dragon Dance

*My camera rises and falls in time with the music, attempting to frame the frenetic motion of the moment. Tucked tightly in a small square in Japan's largest and unapologetically commercial Chinatown, a crowd watches the procession gleefully. The music shifts back and forth from its insistent, hypnotic rhythm to sudden chaotic bursts of sound, during which the dragon comes violently to life, head twisting and turning, eyeballing excited onlookers. Like a geyser, as quickly as the burst of energy erupts, it dissipates again, led ever by the music, into another slow snaking motion, until it builds again.*

'Dragon Dance' is a track by Makoto Terashita and American saxophonist Harold Land, originally released in 1983 on the *Topology* album. It was chosen not only for its beauty and my own love of the track, but also so that the huge contribution Japanese musicians have made to jazz culture might be recognised at the event. The track I played was not from the *Topology* album (although it is the same version), but from BBE Records' second instalment in their trilogy of Japanese jazz compilations by Tony Higgins and Mike Peden: *J Jazz Volume 2 – Deep Modern Jazz from Japan 1969–1983* (Figure 5). All three albums in this compilation series use multiple images from the Tokyo Jazz Joints project, providing a satisfying circular connection from *jazu kissa* to the project and back again through the creation of this event.



Figure 5. *J Jazz Volume 2 – Deep Modern Jazz from Japan 1969–1983* artwork proofs

(© BBE Records, used with permission) [16.]

## 6. Revelations

Tokyo Jazz Joints: Belfast was an experiment in every sense. An untested concept, there was no guarantee of success – or even indicators of what success might look like. However, my feeling was that an appetite existed for something different. To maximise the impact of the audio and facilitate the sense of being fully immersed in sound, a large speaker stack was placed in each of the four corners of the space. These were connected to a pair of Technics 1210 turntables through an Allen & Heath mixer. Being surrounded by sound is one manifestation of what Schwarz calls “oceanic fantasy”, among which he includes sex and swimming. [17.] The three curated tracks were played at a volume that, while it would not cause discomfort, would discourage talking at least, if not rendering it impossible altogether. The effect was disarming at first when combined with the expectation to sit and listen in silence. Even as the event organiser, what I found most difficult – as did others perhaps – was to stop, breathe and just listen to the music. As the needle finally dropped on ‘The Awakening’, I found I reached almost instinctively for my phone, a reflex I had to resist. I’m certain I was not alone in this but on the few occasions when I felt brave enough to look up, everyone, without exception, was still – some had their eyes closed, absorbed in the music as the rich strokes of jazz painted new colour on the white brick walls of the venue. People seemed to have agreed to the rules, bought wholly into the experience, and given themselves over to the music.



Michael (voice note)

All tickets sold out within 24 hours of being advertised, with multiple requests for more to be released. Everyone stayed until the event finished at 9 pm, despite the biting cold of a poorly heated warehouse space on a Belfast December night. Feedback from participants, who

completed a simple survey on Google Forms, and in some cases shared the voice notes embedded here, elaborated further on the experience. While unique events will always have a novelty factor that may ultimately wane, it is my belief that an interest in Japan, the revival of vinyl as a commodity and a desire for analogue experiences in response to the intangibility of music in the digital streaming age will sustain further iterations of Tokyo Jazz Joints listening events. The event created what Bartmanski and Woodward characterise as an

engagement with ritual [that] renders vinyl a carrier of deeper aesthetic and political meanings, an antidote to the hegemony of digital listening cultures' reliance on multinational conglomerates which provide the homogenous platform and means for music listening. [18.]

In 2022, the ability to have a communal experience where personal silence is the pervading dynamic is increasingly difficult. It is no longer unusual for the darkness of the cinema to be interrupted by the glare of phones. Live concerts are documented with phones throughout for sharing online. The quiet of nature is punctuated by the ping of incoming messages. Even the solemn, regimented church services of my youth have been largely supplanted with worship bands, coffee bars and an improvised running order.

Theatre remains one of the few spaces now in which the prevailing expectation is silence, and singular engagement without phones, snacks and (in many cases) even drinks. Even this last bastion of a communal audio-visual experience is under threat from the multi-tasking and short-attention-span culture. Acclaimed actor Michael Sheen recently had to stop a performance of *Under Milk Wood* at London's National Theatre to chastise an audience member, after their phone rang five times in 45 minutes. [19.]

As well as being a celebration of Japanese *jazu kissa* culture, Tokyo Jazz Joints: Belfast can also be read as a reaction to these trends. It provided an opportunity for a group of people of different ages to congregate and appreciate three jazz recordings, simultaneously as one communal body and as individual listeners. Although it is my proposition that this was the first time a Japanese *jazu kissa*-inspired deep listening event had taken place in Belfast, it also draws a through-line to a lineage of similar listening-focused events. In the 1960s, record collector Gerry McQueen "would host 'listening nights'", to which he would invite different audiences to discuss the blues and jazz music he played to them. [20.] In bringing a flavour of Japanese *jazu kissa* to the city sixty years later, Tokyo Jazz Joints: Belfast has added to this rich legacy through its curated communal listening experience in the heart of a changing East Belfast.



Julie (voice note)



Aoife (voice note)



Catherine (voice note)



David (voice note)



## 7. Outro/Reprise

*As I wrap up by thanking people for coming, it blows my mind that I'm here. Here in a city that I've spent 30 years running from, here imparting to strangers my passion for a project started in a country 6,000 miles away, that I ended up in by chance and then grew to love as my home for nearly 20 years. A bit of a dragon dance of my own really.*



Figure 6. Jam Jam, Kobe (© Philip Arneill/Tokyo Jazz Joints 2022).

**Philip Arneill** is a Belfast-born photographer and AHRC Northern Bridge PhD Researcher at Ulster University. Co-creator of the audio-visual documentary project 'Tokyo Jazz Joints', his work explores the illusory ideas of home and culture by exploring insider-outsider dynamics, interstitial spaces and autoethnographic issues of place and identity. His current research is a subjective exploration of inherited Protestant identity, through the creation of a multi-faceted image and text-based archive of Orange Halls in Ireland and beyond. His work has been published and exhibited worldwide and can be found at [www.philiparneill.com](http://www.philiparneill.com).

### Sleeve Notes

1. Atkins, E.T., 2001. *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan*. Duke University Press, p. 49.
2. St. Clair, R., 2003. The Social and Cultural Construction of Silence. *Festschrift for Masanori Higa*. San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University, p. 3.
3. Arneill, P., 2021. Tokyo Jazz Joints: Japanese jazz kissa as heterotopia. *Jazz-hitz*, (04), pp. 81-96, p. 84.
4. Ibid.
5. Schwarz, D., 1997. *Listening subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*. Duke University Press, p. 7.
6. Fadnes, P.F., 2020. *Jazz on the Line: Improvisation in Practice*. Routledge, p. 136.
7. For a new visitor in particular, the sense of intimidation on entering a small, unfamiliar space to drink or listen to music, and the necessity (for non-Japanese at least) to communicate in another language, is not restricted to *jazu kissa* by any means: Japanese cities and towns are full of multi-level complexes which contain a dizzying array of themed snack bars, eateries and places to drink coffee or alcohol.
8. This is one of the wider purposes of the Tokyo Jazz Joints photography project, podcast, and indeed this paper: to create an access point to the world of jazz *kissa* for people who may not otherwise have it due to geographical, physical, musical or financial reasons.
9. Kun, J., 2005. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Vol. 18). University of California Press, p. 23.
10. Foucault, M. and Miskowiec, J., 1986. Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), pp. 22-27, p. 26.
11. Berna, B. 2022. Personal interview.
12. Black Forest, Buenos Aires; Spiritland, London; Bar Shiru, Oakland, CA; and Goldline Bar, Los Angeles are some other notable examples of these. Rhinoçéros owners Bénédict Berna and Martina Carl had not yet been to Japan themselves when they discovered the world of jazz *kissaten* on the recommendation of a friend. An internet search brought them to the Tokyo Jazz Joints project, and so in lieu of personal experience, the look and feel of Rhinoçéros was modelled on images from the project.
13. Berna, B. 2022. Personal interview.
14. Wahlsten, J. 2020. Episode 27: From the Black Forest to Buenos Aires. *Tokyo Jazz Joints Podcast*. Available from: <https://soundcloud.com/tokyojazzjoints/from-the-black-forest-of-buenos-aires> [Accessed 29 August, 2022]
15. Berna, B. 2022. Personal interview.
16. BBE Records, 2019. *J Jazz Volume 2 – Deep Modern Jazz from Japan 1969–1983*. Available from: <https://bbemusic.com/product/j-jazz-volume-2> [Accessed 24 August, 2022]
17. Schwarz, D., 1997, p. 7.

18. Bartmanski, D. and Woodward, I., 2015. The Vinyl: The Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 15(1), pp. 3-27, p. 22.

19. David, C., 2021. *Michael Sheen stops performance to ask audience member to switch off phone*. Wales Online. Available from: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/theatre-news/michael-sheen-stops-performance-theatre-21015230> [Accessed 9 August, 2022]

20. McLaughlin, N. and Braniff, J., 2020. *How Belfast Got the Blues: A Cultural History of Popular Music in the 1960s*. Intellect Books, p. 295.

## Links

Tokyo Jazz Joints website: [www.tokyojazzjoints.com](http://www.tokyojazzjoints.com)

Tokyo Jazz Joints podcast: <https://soundcloud.com/tokyojazzjoints>

Voice notes available from:

<https://on.soundcloud.com/SaE1> (Michael)

<https://on.soundcloud.com/mS7Z> (Julie)

<https://on.soundcloud.com/9Zu3> (Aoife)

<https://on.soundcloud.com/qPX1> (Catherine)

<https://on.soundcloud.com/3E9o> (David)