

# Making noise about keeping the decibels down

Daniel Krieger  
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Yoshimichi Nakajima was waiting for the train one day at his local station in Tokyo when he politely asked the station attendant to lower the volume on his microphone. He was told that would be "difficult," so Nakajima lent a hand by grabbing the mic and throwing it onto the track. He then recounted all of this to the station master, who was speechless. Nakajima, a rare breed of Japanese anti-noise crusader, has also taken a speaker from a liquor store and tossed it outside as well as seized a megaphone from a police officer.

"I've done such things on numerous occasions," he said recently in an email. "And I never once regretted doing them."

For a culture that places a high value on quiet, Japan can get pretty noisy sometimes, whether it's the loud and long-winded announcements on trains and buses, the big cacophonous TV screens around shopping centers, the right-wing nationalist's trucks that drive around blaring marching music and imperialist slogans out of loudspeakers or the infamous election campaigners who likewise promote themselves at ear-splitting volumes.

Though there are laws that limit most amplified sounds in public spaces, they typically aren't enforced. Campaign trucks are even exempt from the laws, so in 2007 Yu Ito, then a member of the Metropolitan Assembly, set up the NO! Senyo Car network, whose anti-noise logo conveys that message.

When it comes to making noise in public, free speech trumps the right to privacy, a state of affairs that has driven Nakajima to distraction ever since he returned to Japan from Europe several decades ago and realized how noisy his native country is.

Nakajima, 68, is a philosopher and author of a series of books about noise in Japan, including his "Japanese are Half Fallen" (2005), where he provides an account of Japan's irksome "culture of noise" that includes unnecessary

announcements in train stations, the endless loops played in stores, talking escalators and ATMs, and the use of cranked-up loudspeakers just about everywhere. In addition to being a profound annoyance, he argued that such relentless noise desensitizes and even infantilizes people, rendering them docile. But despite his bold acts of protest, he acknowledged that ultimately nothing can be done because "most Japanese people don't see 'noise' as a problem, and a large percentage of them actually want this 'noise.'"

Daniel Dolan, a professor of business communications at Waseda University, discovered this when he was writing a paper about the issue titled: "Cultural Noise: Amplified Sound, Freedom of Expression and Privacy Rights in Japan," published in the International Journal of Communication in 2008.

Dolan, 54, who moved to Japan 20 years ago from Seattle, found that his Japanese wife and acquaintances couldn't fathom the fuss when he broached the subject and expressed his dismay. Talking to Westerners, however, he encountered understanding, which jibed with a study cited in his paper that found Japanese are far more tolerant of environmental noises than Americans (and less likely to complain about them).

Nevertheless, Japan does have legally binding sound ordinances, much like those of the United States. To prove that these laws were being broken, Dolan took decibel readings with a sound meter where announcements were publicly broadcast and confirmed that they often exceeded the 70-decibel limit. But when he brought the evidence to officials at the local city office and asked why these infractions were permitted, they shrugged and explained that they were understaffed and just had to let it go.

From his research, which focused only on amplified sounds that can't be avoided, such as those heard outside of stores or in the streets, rather than in places people choose to frequent, such as a pachinko parlor or train, he concluded that there's one simple way to lower the volume of the soundscape.



"Sound management reform would consist of enforcing laws that are already there," he said, "not necessarily creating new ones." But despite the fact that such noise can raise stress levels and cause discomfort, to some at least, he has abandoned this line of inquiry. His paper didn't lead to any discussion of the matter, and continuing to harp on about it would only alienate people anyway.

"It's got to be something that Japanese people care about and push to change," he said. "And I haven't felt that at all."

Chris Deegan, an anti-noise activist who hasn't yet given up the fight, agreed that reform must come from within. Deegan, a 70-year-old translator from London who has lived in Tokyo for over four decades, was once all set to leave Japan because of this very issue. But then, by chance, he heard about an all-Japanese anti-noise group, Shizuka na Machi wo Kangaeru Kai — The Group that Thinks about a Quiet Town — and buoyed by a new sense of solidarity, decided to stay. After the founder quit out of despair, Deegan became the director of the group, which he said has about 60 members nationwide, who are "striving to make Japan just a little quieter."

He is in charge of the group's annual publication, Amenity, and organizes get-togethers among members, most of whom are Japanese who have spent some time in the West. Considering the Sisyphean struggle they are up against, they are utterly willing to compromise and have to settle for tiny victories. He and a few members once gently asked an agent at Tachikawa station to turn down the volume or increase the interval of a no-smoking announcement loop they found intrusive. To their surprise, he shut it off. However, six months later

## Want to hear more from the quiet ones?

Chapter 1 of Yoshimichi Nakajima's "Japanese are Half Fallen" is available in English at <http://bit.ly/halfallen>

Daniel Dolan's paper can be read at: <http://bit.ly/dolanpaper>

The homepage for Shizuka na Machi wo Kangaeru Kai is [http://sky.geocities.jp/bunka\\_so\\_on](http://sky.geocities.jp/bunka_so_on)

No! Senyo Car is a network concerned with electioneering noise pollution, and can be found at: <http://no-senkyo-car.com>

**Noisy vehicles: A campaign van, equipped with megaphones, drives through Tokyo before the 2007 Upper House elections.**  
JACOB EHNMAR, (WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/EHNMAR)/CREATIVE COMMONS

it was back on because, the agent said, lots of people had asked why that announcement was no longer broadcast.

"The problem was ordinary people," Deegan said. "They don't seem to be affected by it." Group members also send letters to railway companies and local municipalities and write about their experiences for Amenity, whose latest issue is out this month. For him, the greatest sonic nuisance comes from the emergency PA systems in smaller locales that play melodies and regular announcements that can mercilessly go on and on.

"Ultimately, if we could get Japan down to the level of a Western European country, that would be fantastic," he said. "But for the time being, if we can just drop the noise any small degree at all, we'll be happy."



NO! SENYO CAR

# Don't be afraid to take the kids out

## CHILD'S PLAY

Jason Jenkins



Autumn in Japan. The days grow shorter, the air grows cooler and two of my favorite events occur: The changing of the leaves and Halloween celebrations — the best American cultural export ever, as far as I'm concerned.

Sure, the Japanese have incorporated a number of holidays from the West, all while creating their own traditions. For many people in Japan, Valentine's Day is actually two separate events and segregated by gender, while Christmas has become synonymous with cake, fried

chicken and a table for two at a swank restaurant. Halloween, I believe, proves to be a better fit for Japan's cultural predilections just as it is. It has its roots in respecting — and even communing with — the dead, which lines up well with ancient O-bon traditions, and Japan has more than its share of home-grown ghost and monster stories to be told around a campfire. Halloween's present themes of costumes and fright also jibe with the Japan of today, where horror movies and *cosplay* still rake in billions of yen every year.

You'd think that Halloween events would blanket the archipelago by now, and some would argue that they have, but a large majority of these are aimed at an audience much older than the trick-or-treat age. Clubs and bars will have their parties (and well they should), but families need not despair, as there are a number of places in and around Tokyo to get into the Halloween spirit.

The most obvious venues are Disney's sister parks in nearby Chiba. I'll spare you any recommendations, as you already know whether this interests you. I'm not a big fan of Mickey's franchise, but I have been a handful of times, and enjoyed myself best during the Halloween season. The weather is more accommodating for the long lines, and there's something appealing about seeing Disney's cute-and-clean style go slightly macabre (ghosts, skeletons, etc.).

The capital's landmarks — new and old — have also caught on to the holiday. Tokyo Sky Tree will have dance performances and dress-up days on the two weekends leading up to Halloween, as well as on Oct. 31 (a costume changing room will be provided). Not to be shown up, Tokyo Tower is having a similar event of its own, where families can rent costumes and have their picture taken while inside the tower itself.

Head west into the ritzier parts of

town and you'll find more Halloween fun. The Roppongi Hills complex, for example, will have its Halloween festival at the Roppongi Arena stage near the entrance to the TV Asahi headquarters. Taking a cinematic theme this year, participants are encouraged to dress up as movie characters for the parade from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Oct. 25.

The following day, the Harajuku Halloween parade begins around 11 a.m. and lasts until 5 p.m. Many of the shops along Omotesando and in Omotesando Hills hand out candy, and costumes are encouraged. Event organizers want families to purchase tickets, and understandably so, but there is still fun to be had walking around, whether you're an official participant or not.

All of these events are fun and very child-friendly. They are also an adorably sanitized and overly commercialized simulacrum of Halloween. Most of the costumes you will see will be superheroes, Disney characters and people who have simply thrown on a cape or witch's hat. There's nothing wrong with that — it's a lot of fun, especially with younger ones, to march down the street with this fun group of kids and parents. But if you want to see spectacular outfits, you may leave disappointed.

There is, however, a place where people take their costumes seriously — Kawasaki. On the afternoon of Oct. 26, Kawasaki Station will be swamped with ghouls, aliens and all other manner of the phantasmagorical. Regular participants of the Kawasaki Halloween Parade really make a spectacle of it, donning creative and elaborate handmade costumes.

As the hordes of faces pass through the street, you will see the cute and the horrifying — often simultaneously. This is my favorite Halloween event in Japan. I have only been a spectator, but I'll admit that it may not be for everyone. The prudish may blush at a few risqué



outfits, but it's the occasional gruesome costume that really merits consideration here. If your children are young or overly sensitive, be careful, because walking among those dressed as pumpkins, kittens and the Mario Brothers are some truly horrifying costumes involving blood and gore. I've taken my kids, and they enjoyed it, but you've been warned. If it does sound a bit much, though, there's also a parade for kids under age 6 the day before.

As for other events, the Tokyo International Parents group will have a party Oct. 12 at Shiohaze Park in Odaiba, while several Tokyo neighborhoods have begun a tenuous tradition of trick-or-treating. In years past, Halloween decorations and bowls of candy have been waiting for costumed kids in places such as Yoyogi-Uehara, Hiroo, Shimokitazawa, Azabu's Seta neighborhood and the Shoto/Kamiyama area of Shibuya. You could try these places, or perhaps ask around in your own neighborhood. With Halloween poised to go mainstream in Japan, the trick-or-treating might be closer to your doorstep than you realize.

**Halloween past: Taking kids to the Harajuku Halloween parade, which passes through Omotesando, is great for kids, with many fun, child-friendly costumes and shops passing out candy.**  
JASON JENKINS

## Where to look for something spooky

Tokyo International Parents and Pals: <http://bit.ly/TIPPhwn>

Disney Sea and Disney Land Halloween: <http://bit.ly/TDSHwn>

Kawasaki Halloween Parade: <http://bit.ly/1yaGaop>

Roppongi Hills Halloween Parade: <http://bit.ly/RPHShwn>

Tokyo Sky Tree Halloween Magic: <http://bit.ly/TSTMhwn>

Tokyo Tower's Halloween Celebration: <http://bit.ly/TTWhwn>

Harajuku Halloween in Omotesando/Harajuku: <http://bit.ly/HRJKhwn>

## ON: FASHION

by Misha Janette & Samuel Thomas

It's that time of the year again

Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tokyo, from Oct. 13 to 19, may, strictly speaking, be for industry insiders, but there are always some events anyone can take part in.

For fashion shows, Tokyo has a discreet open-door policy that you might want to try to take advantage of. Most shows take place at Shibuya's Hikarie complex, and if you dress the part (think of it as fashion *cosplay*) and get in line early enough, you could find yourself watching the runway for real.

The Versus Tokyo event on Oct. 18 is also open to the public and features top-class Japanese brands such as Facetasm and Toga Virilis plus an all-night event with musical guests to fuse the two artistic worlds together. (M.J.)



COURTESY OF NE-NET

<http://tokyo-mbfashionweek.com/en>

## Anrealage takes on Paris



The Japanese brand Anrealage debuted at Paris Fashion Week late September. Unlike most labels, its clothing often revolves around conceptual uses of technology and fabrics, which made the Paris showing quite a risky move. But, judging by the continuous applause throughout the entire show, it was a huge success.

For the Paris collection, titled Shadow, dresses and jackets were made from white heat-sensitive fabric and overlaid with black stencil-like garments that, once warmed by lamps, left subtle patterns beneath. These so-called "performance" pieces were sandwiched between black-and-white looks in exaggerated shapes and decorated with studs or pearls. It was an extremely strong show, which means Tokyo will have to say "goodbye" to Anrealage as it says "hello" to the world. (M.J.)

[www.anrealage.com](http://www.anrealage.com)

## Matatabi with added FRUITs

Street-fashion magazine FRUITs has been archiving the best of Harajuku street fashion for around 20 years, making it one of the coolest magazines

to be both seen in and with. In a rare collaboration, it has teamed up with accessory label Matatabi from cult streetwear brand Talking About the Abstraction to release a series of clutch bags designed to look like copies of the magazine.

Appropriately made from a paper-based textile, the clutch comes in three variations, the original FRUITs magazine, its menswear spin-off TUNE and the internationally focused STREET. The fronts of the bags are reproductions of past covers of the magazines, but the reverse is a real advert for Matatabi — a clever bit of postmodern branding. (S.T.)

[www.tata.co.jp/matatabi](http://www.tata.co.jp/matatabi)

## Putting kimono on the catwalk



With the notable exception of progressive kimono designer Jotaro Saito, traditional Japanese garments are largely absent from the official Mercedes-Benz-sponsored Tokyo fashion week. Fortunately,

however, this neglected genre has a chance to take center stage in Nihonbashi with a whole host of kimono-focused events planned from the Oct. 11 to 28.

Founded in 2007, Tokyo Kimono Week aims to propose new possibilities for traditional Japanese aesthetics, all the while recruiting followers to keep such fashion alive. It is the latter that is the focus of this year's celebrations, and there are plenty of opportunities for kimono novices to participate and be dressed by experts. If you prefer to just observe, though, you are still more than welcome. (S.T.)

[www.nihonbashi-tokyo.jp/kimono2014](http://www.nihonbashi-tokyo.jp/kimono2014)

## An idol sense of style

Every month seems to bring news of magazine closures with the loss of *gyaru* (gal) mag Egg still reverberating throughout the Japanese media landscape. This month, however, there's a rare arrival.

Overture Magazine bills itself as a "fashion and idol culture magazine" and repackages the male-dominated Japanese idol culture for its ever-increasing female fan base by placing the spotlight firmly on style and ignoring some of the less-palatable aspects of the industry.

The first issue is now available and features a fashion editorial with Mai Shiraiishi of Nogizaka46 on the cover, while inside, there's a feature on the group's collaboration with streetwear label New Era. Whether the magazine will stand the test of time is yet to be seen, but it certainly seems that in the current climate such niche publications stand a better chance of survival than big-budget publications. (S.T.)

Overture Magazine at [amazon.co.jp](http://amazon.co.jp): <http://bit.ly/overturem>

