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Photographs by Barbara Alper for The New York Times

New York Attitude, Made for Tokyo

Japanese Hooked on Fads Tune In for a Slice of Night Life

By EDWARD WONG

As the Japanese television cameras rolled, the break-dancers and rap artists, the rave kids and a drag queen in a glittering pink dress swaggered off a humid street in the Flatiron district and into the wall-thumping interior of the Cheetha Club.

Some of the amateur performers came to battle it out for a \$500 cash prize. Others just wanted their faces beamed straight into the pulsing neon heart of Tokyo.

"We got the party tied up here to-

night!" yelled the host, Voodoo Ray, his right hand twirling a microphone, his hair neatly braided into cornrows. "How's everybody doing?"

The crowd screamed. The floor quaked. And the taping of another episode of "Soullook: Seize the Night" was under way.

The weekly half-hour series on Japanese late-night television tries to give its viewers the straight-up dope about New York night life and black pop culture. Or, as one audience member summed it up: "Ed Sullivan in a discotheque."

Fuji Television began broadcasting the show in April. Its first episode drew about 180,000 viewers, mostly teenagers. Since then it has grown in popularity, with about 300,000 people tuning in in recent weeks. And starting next week, it can be seen in New York City on channel 56 of Manhattan Neighborhood Network, a Time Warner cable-access station, every Wednesday from 11 to 11:30 p.m.

Just as shows like "Iron Chef" have attracted a devoted following in the United States by revealing an offbeat side of Japanese culture, "Soullook" (pronounced "Soul Look") hopes to draw young viewers in Japan by offering up a slice of the New York underground. For years, music variety shows have been big in Japan. But until now, none have taped regularly in New York, considered the trendiest city by many Japanese club kids.

"I want to show that anything goes and everything happens in New York City night life," said Mitsuo Watanabe, 51, the executive producer. "Everyone has a good time here!"

That image of New York resonates with many Japanese youth, said Mark Schilling, who wrote "The Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture."

"New York is a big topic in Japan," he

Japanese hipsters have been watching "Soullook," taped at the Cheetha Club. Just Begun Crew, above, and Hedda Lettuce, right, a drag queen, were taped for the show.





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Mitsuo Watanabe, 51, center, executive producer of "Soulook," has capitalized on Japanese fascination with New York. "I want to show that anything goes and everything happens in New York City night life," he said.

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said in a telephone interview from his home in Tokyo. "It's where a lot of Japanese pick up information about American trends."

On the show, attitude rules. If you don't have it, the producers say, don't even bother coming to the auditions, which are sometimes advertised in The Village Voice and Backstage. Those who have made it onto the show include a lawyer who pranced around the stage unrolling toilet paper as classical music played in the background, and a drag queen named Hedda Lettuce who belted out a version of Aretha Franklin's "Respect."

"It's such a sad collection of talent," said Lynda Mota, who was in the audience recently. "I just can't believe that in New York City, this is the best they can muster up."

No matter, say the producers.

"It doesn't matter if they are good in terms of music skills, but if they have the character, a strong character that will play well on TV, we are interested in them," Mr. Watanabe said. "Compared to Japan, there are so many people in America who believe they have a talent, who believe they have something special to offer."

In his pitch letter for "Soulook," Mr. Watanabe tried to explain to network bigwigs the appeal of such artists: "The people of the new generation, who will build our future, have been waiting for these heroes."

Mr. Watanabe knows something about showmanship. For 22 years, he helped produce a weekly music variety series in Japan called "Yoru No Hit Studio." At its peak in 1975, about four million people watched each episode. Japan's most popular singers appeared on it, as well as American superstars like Frank Sinatra and Madonna.

After the show ended, Mr. Watanabe said he felt he no longer had a purpose in Japan. Music was his life. But the show had run its course, and a lot of Japanese pop music was behind the times, struggling to imitate American genres like R & B and hip-hop.

So, he thought, why not go where the trends were starting?

Mr. Watanabe liked to think that he still had his finger on the pulse of the fad-conscious generation. He saw more and more kids in the glittery Shibuya district of Tokyo walking around with baggy jeans and Kangol caps. He knew about the teenage girls called ganguros (black face) who dyed their hair platinum blonde



Reverse, an all-girl group, won \$500 at one of the tapings. Artists have included a Latin rap group and a lawyer who unrolled toilet paper.

and went to tanning salons. Some even made pilgrimages to Harlem.

"There's always been a segment of the youth culture in Japan that has been wrapped up in American black culture," Mr. Schilling said. "But now you see the look everywhere."

In recent years, several Japanese pop idols who have adopted elements of black musical styles have hit it big. Teenagers swooned over girls like Namie Amuro and the R & B-

A Japanese TV series on New York life is coming to New York.

inspired Hikaru Utada, whose first album sold more than seven million copies.

With "Soulook," Mr. Watanabe is unabashedly trying to capitalize on that trend. In the title sequence, an animated black graffiti artist spray-paints the show's logo onto the screen. Another animated character, a black D.J., mixes records on a turntable. "Smoking and drinking on a Tuesday night," the opening rap goes, taken from "Shadrach," a Beastie Boys song.

The show taped its first nine epi-

sodes at El Flamingo, a Chelsea nightclub, but recently switched to Cheetah, a regular hang-out for hip-hop royalty like Lauryn Hill and Puffy Combs. (But artists of such stature rarely show up at tapings.) Besides the stage competition, each episode also features three one-minute segments that introduce the viewer to other happening dancehalls ("Club Hunt"), street fashion ("What's So Cool?") and favorite records of D.J.'s ("Heat the Beat").

Mr. Watanabe chose two young black hosts: Voodoo Ray, who also tours the world as a stage dancer for acts like Mariah Carey and the Backstreet Boys, and Alexis Brown, a student at Hofstra University. On each show, the two join three other wise-cracking hipster judges to decide the night's winner. Future shows will also feature Toshi Kubota, a Japanese R & B singer who has short dreadlocks.

"I've met enough Japanese cats that like hip-hop and follow the hottest break-dancers," Voodoo Ray said. "They'll know the top 10 and the hottest videos."

Many of the show's acts have roots firmly planted in street culture. Take the break-dancers called the Just Begun Crew. At Cheetah, the four boys in baggy orange shirts spun their stuff for the crowd, even though one of them fell off the stage in the middle of the act.

"I could take dance lessons from those guys seven days a week, 24 hours a day," said one of the guest judges, a blonde woman in a tight black dress, as she reclined on a cheetah-print couch. "Naked dance lessons."

Some people in the audience watched the performers with perhaps a touch of envy. Tony Lopez, who was grooving on the dance floor, said his band, which played music "kinda like Lou Reed, you know, alternative," thought he might have a shot at getting on the show one day. His date, Camilla Tee, dancing with a cigarette between her lips, also thought that her four-person band would go over well with a Japanese audience.

"You know what else I like about this show?" she said, pointing to the open bar. "It's great that everything's free. This is an expensive city."

The taping certainly was easy on the pocketbook. Just ask the five members of Zero Tolerance, a Latin rap group. They walked away with one of the night's \$500 prizes. Sure, their moment in the spotlight would be seen mostly by teenagers who knew more about growing up in Tokyo shopping malls than on the streets of Brooklyn. But any stage was better than none, and an award was an award.

"There's, like, no way to explain," said Norma Justiniano, one of the teenage rappers. "It's, like, something that somebody always wanted, and I got it."