



Sweet home, Chicago

SINGER YOKO NOGE LEFT JAPAN
WITH NOTHING BUT HER LOVE OF THE BLUES.
SHE LANDED IN THE RIGHT PLACE.

BY RICK KOGAN | TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY CHRIS WALKER

HERE SHE COMES,

the American Dream, packed into a tiny body dressed all in black, except for the red scarf wrapped around her hair, which is also black. Her name is Yoko Noge, and there is a tired smile on her face. She has worked all day and now, walking into Andy's jazz club just before 9 p.m. on a recent Monday, she is preparing to work deep into the night. >> In this, she differs not at all from the hundreds of other people who try—and there needs to be great emphasis on try—every night and day here to make a living making music. >> “I was told a long time ago that this is not the way to get rich. This is not the way to earn a living,” she says matter-of-factly, no hint of bitterness in her voice. “All you have to do is look at all the blues legends who died with no money. You have to do this because you love to do this.” >> Though there are a few longtime fans who nod to Noge and the other members of her Jazz Me Blues Band as they carry their equipment into Andy's, many in the crowd have never heard of her. They know nothing of her dreams or accomplishments, frustrations and regrets. They do not know that she is married to a member of her band, the handsome old guy in the beret. >> Andy's, due in large part to its Hubbard Street proximity to many hotels and fashionable restaurants and bars, attracts a lot of tourists seeking just enough atmosphere and experience to be able to tell the gang back home, “. . . and then this other night we went to this place and heard Chicago jazz.”

What they get this night—every Monday at Andy's and other nights in other places—is something more, a cultural force and a ferocious talent. What they see on stage is a merging of cultures and musical genres; the Melting Pot made musically modern.

In a recent review, Tribune critic Howard Reich described Noge's work as “blues melody and jazz technique merged with the folkloric traditions of Noge's native Japan. Bending pitches with abandon, chanting melody lines rather than merely singing them, Noge seamlessly fused the indigenous music of two seemingly disparate cultures.”

It all looks so easy, sounds so good that it is impossible to imagine the decades of false starts and high hopes, introspection and insecurity, loss and love, that all gathers and bursts forth this Monday, 'round midnight, when the band plays and Noge rips into . . .

*Sometimes I feel
Like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel
Like a motherless child
A long way from home.*

THE GREAT BLUESMAN Willie Dixon once described his music as “the true facts of life.”

Noge is living proof of that. Sometimes, even on stage, she does feel like a motherless child.

And she is a long way from home.

It was in 1984 that she took off on the 6,494-mile journey from Osaka, Japan, to Chicago. The first stop was Los Angeles, where she and her slide guitar-playing husband were taken by some friends to a club where they watched and listened to Big Joe Turner and Big Mama Thornton, who, Noge remembers, “sat at our table after the show and talked. I could not understand very much, but I knew that she was cursing a lot.”

At that time, one could count the number of L.A. blues clubs on the fingers of one hand, so their stay there was brief. Soon Noge was in a car with her husband and two friends, heading east on the old Route 66. Noge does not recall a great deal about that trip. She does, vividly, remember the first time she saw Chicago.

“It was very gray day,” she says. Her accent is pronounced but gives her speech a certain poetry. “Gray sky. Gray buildings. I thought to myself: ‘What kind of place is this? How can I be accepted in such a place?’ I was very scared.”

She and her husband did not speak more than a few words of English. They did not know one person in the city. They were dropped off. A sign hanging from a building on Ohio Street seemed to welcome them: “Tokyo Hotel.” They checked in and then they went out to find the blues.

Noge was not unfamiliar with large cities.



Yoko Noge and her Jazz Me Blues band play a set at Andy's Jazz Club on Hubbard Street. Also performing are Jimmy Alex (right) and Noge's husband, Clark Dean; Avreeayl Ra, Tatsu Aoki, Kaz Terashima and Jeff Chan are in the background.

Osaka was Japan's second-largest city, with 2.5 million people, when Noge was born in 1957, and a place known for its vibrant arts community. Her father was a factory worker at a cement company. Her mother stayed home.

“When I was a child, I always liked to sing. When I would help my mother in the kitchen, cutting vegetables, I would sing,” she says. “I would sing very loud, hoping someone would hear me and discover me and make me a star.”

Her mother tried to nurture this interest in music by enrolling her daughter in piano classes. “I hated it, hated it,” says Noge. “It was so forced, and I didn't want to be forced to play. I cried and cried and they let me out. I did not go back.”

In high school she joined an American folk music club, memorizing the songs of such stars as Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary. “If you were hip at the time, America music was it,” she says. “We were all mostly Bob Dylan copycats. But if you wanted to be hipper than that, then

you played the blues.”

What drew her to the blues was, very specifically, “Talk to Me Baby,” by Elmore James, the Mississippi-born blues guitarist/singer who died in Chicago in 1963.

“It blew me down the wall. A chill was running up my spine,” says Noge. “Something came to me: This is what I was looking for.”

Thus inspired, Noge formed the Yoko Blues Band. “My parents hated this. The blues was not something associated with proper girls who were going to college,” she says. She was going to college, Ottemon Gakuin University, with the lazy intention of getting a degree in sociology. “But mostly it was to satisfy my parents.”

The band had some success beyond playing at coffee shops and, as Noge recalls with a laugh, “at ski resorts up in the mountains where we have to play outside, freezing.” The band entered a TV-sponsored contest, and its original song, “Dirty Old Man on a Crowded Train,” won first prize and a recording contract. But as

her career began to soar, her mother began to sink into depression and mental illness.

“I had a very tough time to try to save her,” says Noge.

She was 24 when her mother committed suicide, and Noge still wears on stage the red obiage (kimono sash) that once belonged to her mother. “It gives me a strength by reminding me,” she says. “I tried to save my mother, but I could not do it. And so, when I wear the sash I become in touch with all kind of feelings, feelings of warmth and cold. There is longing and sorrow. But also, there is joy.”

The death of her mother allowed her, she says, “to feel free to do what I want to do,” to answer the siren call that had been echoing in

her head . . .

*Come on,
Baby, don't you want to go
I said come on,
Baby, don't you want to go
To that same old place,
Sweet home Chicago*

“There was no other place. Chicago was the blues,” she says. “I came here to sing. But first I had to listen, to hear the real thing. When I came here, the blues was somebody else's voice. I came here to search for my own voice.”

The real thing at the time still existed in real places, but barely. By the mid-1980s, the blues had become less cultural thread than booming commodity. The city-sponsored Blues Festival in Grant Park started in 1984, introducing packs of young, affluent white people to the music, and they helped jam North Side clubs, give birth to new clubs and make the blues music scene more chic than anyone could have imagined.

“I thought I would be rejected or alienated because of my features, my language, my upbringing. I know that to some people I was just a novelty. But there were so many warm hearted people . . .”

—YOKO NOGE

This was terrific for performers who were used to getting paid, as more than one put it, “little more than bus fare,” but it was also helping wipe out many neighborhood blues bars.

In 1985, a man named Gino Battaglia was about to open a place called Blue Chicago on State Street near Oak Street. “The original idea was to open as a bar and grill,” he says. “But we started talking about other ideas, and it hit us that there was a need for the blues in this area. A lot of people come to Chicago and want to hear the blues, but they don’t know where to go. Or are afraid to go there.”

Noge didn’t know enough to be afraid, and she and her husband traveled by bus to the ramshackle clubs on the South and West Sides that attracted almost exclusively local crowds. The most important of these for Noge was Marie’s Lounge, then on Pulaski Road near the Eisenhower Expressway in the Garfield Park neighborhood. That was where she heard bassist Willie Kent.

“We got to know him, and he really took us under his wing. I would be his guest singer and my husband would play in the band,” she says. “We would play every Sunday and then have a chance to see many different clubs. That is how I got to sense the scene, to see how the audience reacts to the musicians and the musicians react to the audience.”

Noge is a small person, a hair or two (or a red scarf) over 5 feet tall, and the clubs tended to be small and packed with people, making the stage all but invisible from most of the room. So when she sang with a band, it often led to encounters of a similar kind.

“Was that you I heard singing?” a black man would ask after her set.

“Yes,” Noge would answer.

“Damn. I thought I was listening to a black woman sing,” the man would say. “That’s why I decided to come on in from the street and listen. You sounded good.”

The reaction surprised Noge.

“I was expecting that people would reject me. I thought I would be rejected or alienated because of my features, my language, my upbringing. I know that to some people I was just a novelty. But there were so many warm-hearted people, even when they would talk to me about their war experiences, like, ‘I was stationed in Okinawa after the war.’”

Noge worked days as a waitress at a Japanese restaurant. “They taught me to say one of the first sentences I learn in English, ‘May I help you?’” Her husband found part-time work as a carpenter, and they lived in an apartment in New Town. But things were not happy.

“It was much harder for my husband than for me. He grew tired of being a Japanese man in the United States,” she says. “It was very hard for him to feel accepted. It is so much easier for women . . . We are these cute, exotic things. He was just sick and tired of the racism he felt.”

After a couple of years, the couple came to a hard decision and returned to Japan, where they were divorced. She returned to Chicago alone, and the first night in her apartment she awoke to find a burglar in her room.

“He did not see me at first because I am sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor, and there I am, thinking that I have come here because of my love for the black music, and now I will be killed by a black man,” she says.

The man took all of Noge’s money, \$3,000, and left her shaken, in more ways than one.

“It was one of the things that forced me to realize that I had no idea who I was,” she says. “Where was my place? Every song, I try to act and perform like black singers.”

She asked herself a question, “Who are you?” and found an answer: “I cannot be black. I am a Japanese woman.”

She got a new job, as an editorial assistant at the Chicago bureau of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun (or Nikkei as it is more widely known), the respected Japanese financial newspaper, and she began to sing a few songs in Japanese. In time, she felt confident enough of her own singing to look for work. She was offered a one-night club job and asked a friend to accompany her on the piano.

“I was so excited, but on that morning of the show he calls and says, ‘Yoko, I can’t play with you tonight. I got a better-paying gig.’” she says. “I shouldn’t, I won’t say his name, but he makes me tell myself, ‘I will never rely on

anybody else but myself. I will learn to play [piano].’”

And she did, under the tutelage of the great Erwin Helfer, whom critic Reich calls a “virtuoso . . . one of America’s most effective interpreters of vintage boogie, blues and jazz.” It was through Helfer that she met Clark Dean, soprano sax player and future husband.

He remembers the moment. “Erwin and I were coming back from a gig in Florida and pulled up to his house at 3 in the morning. And as we walked to the door, through the glass I saw this funny little round face and I thought to myself, ‘Now that’s an interesting face.’ We didn’t actually meet that night but I remembered that face,” Dean says.

Noge had been house-sitting for her piano teacher. “I do not remember that night,” she says, but she does remember first meeting Dean at Lilly’s, the bygone Lincoln Avenue bar/music club. “I loved his sound. What warm sounds. When he played I would feel like my body was filled with cotton balls.”

Dean is a charming man, and perhaps the last man alive who looks cool in a beret, which he wears almost constantly. His musical road, though not as long or culturally complex as his wife’s, has been as interesting.

A native of Petoskey, Mich., he spent a few years in the Army before coming to Chicago to study photography at The Institute of Design, the famous school founded in 1937 by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian painter/photographer and former professor at the influential Bauhaus in Germany.

Cameras in hand, Dean moved to Minneapolis, where he worked as a staff photographer at the Walker Art Center and opened his own commercial studio. He spent 25 years there, had a wife and three sons.

“But I was frustrated with having to deal with art directors, with the commercial photography politics,” he says, a big smile crossing his face. “I came back to Chicago on business in the mid-’70s, fell in with some bad company, and it’s been wonderful ever since.”

“Bad company” was the Chicago music scene. “I had played saxophone as a kid and in high school, but not very seriously. And in the Army I played in the worst band imaginable,” he says. “I gave it up almost entirely when I was in Minneapolis. But back in Chicago I hooked up with a couple of old friends from the Institute of Design who played music, and we started play-



Noge and her husband rehearse in their Oak Park home, where they throw a “legendary” party every year.

ing some clubs. Then I met Erwin and we started palling around and . . .”

In the interim, he and his wife divorced.

And then came Yoko.

In 1987, six months after meeting, they were married at the Third Unitarian Church in the Austin neighborhood, not far from the couple’s cozy Oak Park house. Noge’s father flew in from Japan along with some of her friends, who spent days cooking a Japanese feast.

There was, of course, music.

NOGE, ALONG WITH Dean and other musician friends—who included such seemingly disparate talents as Tatsu Aoki, the Japanese-born jazz bass player/composer, and the late Sonny Seals, the blues guitarist/singer—was on her way to a new sound, to forming her band. “I decide to play what I wanted to play, not just what is popular. I would not be afraid to explore new sounds, different things, more original. And the audience started to like it.”

One who particularly liked it was Marguerite Horberg, who in 1991 opened an avant-garde club called the HotHouse in the Flat Iron building on Milwaukee Avenue.

“I had known Clark, loved the way he played and first met Yoko at the wedding,” says Horberg.

“I was so intrigued by Yoko’s story and loved the band. When I opened my club, I booked them for a ‘Blue Monday’ set and they never left.”

When Horberg moved her club—after a nomadic two years at various sites—to more spacious and handsome digs on Balbo in 1998, Noge and the band came along.

“Yoko was surrounding herself with these jaw-dropping giants of the local scene, people who were not seen or heard enough,” says Horberg, who will be opening a new club in Manhattan and is planning one in the Bronzeville neighborhood here. “And not only was she expanding artistically and gaining confidence, she was becoming the go-to person here on the Asian cultural front.”

At the end of 2006, Reich named Noge one of the Chicagoans of the Year in the Tribune’s Arts & Entertainment section’s annual tribute to local artists. The story was headlined “Yoko Noge: Visionary redefining jazz, blues.”

When the HotHouse closed last year—Noge played the final show—she was worried about finding another steady gig, which is to a band what water is to a boat.

“Yoko came in one night and that was that,” says Chris Chisholm, the manager of Andy’s. “I was looking for something steady for Mondays

and she started in January. She’s played what are traditionally the worst months for a club—even worse this year because of the weather—and she and the band have done well. I can’t wait to see what kind of crowds we get now.”

Mike Jeffers should help. He is a jazz drummer and publisher and editor of Chicago Jazz magazine, which is planning a May cover story on Noge.

“She and her band have created a unique way of combining traditional boogie woogie, blues, jazz and Japanese flavors of music into one high-powered vehicle for creativity,” he says. “She’s also helped the jazz audience here grow because of the accessibility of her music. There are many jazz bands in Chicago and probably even more blues bands, but there is only one Jazz Me Blues Band.”

Noge smiles when she hears that. It is a night in late February, her 51st birthday. She looks a decade younger or more. The same can be said for Dean, who is 81. They are sitting together at a table in a restaurant near Andy’s.

The affection between the two is palpable. Dean puts it in words: “She is a remarkable human being, an incredible person. I would hang out with her even if she didn’t play music.”

Continued on page 21

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Now arrange the circled letters to form the surprise answer, as suggested by the above cartoon.

"In New York or Los Angeles the focus is on commercialism. Chicago lets artists explore, experiment."

—YOKO NOGE

Noge

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But that is what they do and what binds them in ways probably not possible for the average how-was-the-office-today-honey? couple.

Noge and Dean throw a legendary annual party at their home. "Just an amazing thing. You can barely move," says Horberg. And they return to Japan every fall. They love performing there, seeing old friends and Noge's younger sister, but also use the trips to recruit talent for the Chicago Asian-American Jazz Fest, which she co-founded in 1995.

But even with her success, Noge hasn't been able to give up her day job; she continues to work for Nikkei, having risen from editorial assistant to researcher to correspondent. She has written stories for the newspaper about one of her idols, Chicago blues queen Koko Taylor, and recently flew to Alaska to research and write a story about an Eskimo tribe.

But it is the music that matters most, and there is talk of a new CD, which would be the band's fifth and would combine Japanese folk music with Chicago blues. It is a hybrid that Noge calls "Japanesque," and she has been exploring and refining it in live concerts for the last couple of years at such clubs as The Velvet Lounge, Katerina's and Green Dolphin Street.

"There were all those years I never thought of playing music. Now I can't imagine my life without doing it," says Dean. "And Chicago is the greatest town for music in the world."

Noge agrees. "In New York or Los Angeles the focus is on commercialism. Chicago lets artists explore, experiment. And the audience supports new ideas in music. Look what the city has done for me."

Dinner is over. Coffee is on the table. Though it's getting late and there are many things to do tomorrow, they might just head over to Andy's and hear who's playing. □
rkogan@tribune.com

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Solutions to last week's puzzles

Quote-Acrostic:
 W(ALTER) LIPP(MANN):
 RIVALRY (OF) NATIONS:

We must be struck by the contrast between our capacity as a people to generate offensive power, and our ability to decide correctly when, where, how and to what ends we shall exert our enormous influence.

Jumble answers (Jumble appears above)

"RISE" TO THE OCCASION

—A winning cake recipe must do this—

IMPAIR NORMAL BELONG FRACAS CLUMSY JOBBER