

Shimokitazawa Life

Anthony Howard

Tokyo, one of the world's largest conurbations, is a relatively new city by Japanese standards and the individual characteristics of its many distinct neighborhoods can often be traced back to their roots as farming villages. Tokyo is also known as one of the great railway cities, and it was the development of the railways that shaped the growth of these villages into the urban and suburban centres of today.

Shimokitazawa, where I live, was clearly formed by this historical process. Today it's seen as a fashionable location in the heart of the city, just minutes by train from two of Tokyo's largest urban centres, but only 60 years ago this was an area of small farming communities surrounded by fields. Railways were first laid across these fields back in the days of horse-drawn carriages. Railway wagons transported manure from the city's horses and 'night soil' out to the surrounding countryside. There it was used as fertilizer for crops that were carried back by the same railways to feed the growing urban population. The first passengers carried on this particular line were troops, travelling to army bases built during the military build-up of the early 19th century. By the 1920s, Tokyoites were prospering,

looking to travel and enjoying their leisure. Private railway companies began building passenger lines to fill the gaps in the national railway network. These companies would operate department stores and sports stadiums in central Tokyo, which their rail lines linked to their amusement parks on the city's edges and to seaside or mountain resorts. Along the lines, they built suburban housing and town centres around commuter stations. Private railways did well because of the leverage this system made possible—city dwellers travelling out to seaside and country, suburbanites heading in for work, shopping and entertainment.

Shimokitazawa owes its existence and character to its location at the intersection of two such railways. The Odakyu Electric Railway links Shinjuku, now the seat of Tokyo's government, to the Odakyu amusement parks about 1 hour out, to the mountain resorts around Hakone and Mt Fuji and to the coast at Odawara and Enoshima. The Inokashira Line of Keio Electric Railway runs from Shibuya, a major commercial and entertainment area, to another large urban centre, Kichijoji, and links with the Keio Line to the mountain resort of Mt Takao. As the population expanded and the suburbs

moved ever further out, these became two of Tokyo's busiest commuter lines.

Shimokitazawa's growth from open fields into a crowded town accelerated in the chaotic postwar years, the heyday of the black market. The market still exists, with its narrow paved alleys and rickety late-night sake (rice wine) stalls. Although the goods are now legitimate, a frontier atmosphere persisted for some time—an old local family friend recalls yakuza gangsters fighting with swords on the station steps even in the early 1960s. Universities established campuses nearby, and the area began acquiring its current reputation as a young person's town. Student radicals hanging out in tiny bars and coffee shops during the '70s became the underground musicians and movie makers of the '80s. By the '90s, it had become a theatre town with one major theatre, several small independent ones and numerous acting studios. Young people flock here at night, not just for the cheap eating and lively drinking places, but also for the music, ranging from amateur bands in tiny basement halls to pub bands, experimental performances, and internationally known jazz.

Some of the miniscule rock bars of the 1970s are still in business, LP covers now



Up and down lines at Odakyu Electric Railway's Shimokitazawa station (Author)



People changing between Keio Electric Railway's Inokashira Line and Odakyu Line (Author)



Crowds of young people at station south exit

(Author)



Busy Shimokitazawa streets

(Author)



Shimokitazawa fashions

(Author)



Well-known live house for professional and amateur bands

(Author)

brown and unreadable, the sound authentically scratchy, attracting a generation of customers yet to be born when these records were made. This time—warp quality is everywhere—teenagers play pool in billiard halls built for their great-grandparents, 10-year olds fill the shops selling 1950s nick-nacks and '20s style candy, students drink in bars decorated in the style of 1900 before going on to high-tech video game centres or tiny theatres for the latest independent animated movies. After midnight on New Year's eve, these same young people line the stone steps to the town's 1000-year old shrine, waiting to rattle the bell and clap their hands in prayer before standing in the icy night drinking sake, warming themselves at the sacred bonfire guarded incongruously by boy scouts. Dreadlocked Japanese rastas carry portable shrines in the festival celebrating *Tengu*, a red-faced goblin god with an

enormous nose, while nearly nude Brazilian samba dancers now enliven the stately kimono-clad dancing ranks of the annual *Awa odori* parade.

The intersecting railways made Shimokitazawa into a town with a cultural scene far livelier than would be expected from its size and location, and the railways continue to bring in a constant tide of people and ideas to keep this small town at the forefront of cultural trends. Soon, the railways will once again make a dramatic impact, as the Odakyu line adds an extra two tracks to match commuter

demand. Most of the line has already been elevated, but on the section through Shimokitazawa all four tracks will be underground. Today's tracks will be replaced by parks and new buildings, and the old covered market will probably vanish, but the town of Shimokitazawa will absorb these changes as it has so many times before, mutating into something new and even more interesting. ■



Anthony Howard

Mr Howard is a writer and translator who lives in Shimokitazawa, Tokyo.