

A new spin on old songs— in Japanese

Written by Ervin Dyer

Photograph by Tom Altany

A skinny 26-year-old with a white do-rag around his head takes the stage. His cap slopes over the right side of his face, at an angle that's more sweet than street. He wears an oversized shirt and baggy jeans. A silver chain blings from his neck. The music starts and he bounces to the beat in front of the audience. Fans scream. He steps to the microphone and out comes—enka.

The performer, Pitt alumnus **Jerome White Jr.** is on a stage in Tokyo. Though he looks like a rap star, he tenderly croons enka in flawless Japanese. Enka is one of Japan's oldest forms of music, a mélange of blues and melancholy that is still treasured. Jero, as he's known in Japan, has crossed cultural and generational bridges with his soulful interpretations that now have younger Japanese adoring music once appreciated mostly by older citizens. He's the gentle, soft-spoken hip-hopper credited with bringing urban cool to an old favorite. Think of him as Will Smith's "Fresh Prince" singing Johnny Mathis. Last year, his enka rendition of "Ocean Snow" debuted at No. 4 on Japan's weekly music charts and bulleted up from there.

An African American with Japanese ancestry, Jero learned enka from his maternal grandmother, Takiko, who moved to Pittsburgh with her Black American husband after World War II. It was in her home, filled with Japanese dolls and pictures, where her grandson first heard enka. "Something about the sound was so soothing," says Jero, who is Japan's first and only Black enka singer.

At 5, the youngster spoke fractured Japanese, aided by singing along with videotaped enka performances. Eventually, he taught himself the Japanese alphabet and studied the language in high school. At 15, he took his first trip to Japan for a speech competition. Then, as a Pitt undergraduate, he complemented his major in information science with coursework in Asian studies, including a stint as an exchange student in Osaka.

When he graduated, Jero (SIS '03) returned to Japan, hoping to stay forever. He worked first as an English teacher and then as a computer engineer. At night and on weekends, he made the rounds at karaoke contests and was "discovered" by Japan's Victor Entertainment, which gave him two years of voice lessons and then helped him to record "Ocean Snow." Since then, Jero has made other top recordings, appeared in a coffee commercial, and been featured in a calendar. He also makes whirlwind visits to shopping centers and TV stations for enka performances. This summer, he returned to Pitt for a performance hosted by the Asian Studies Center and supported by several other University programs.

"I want to sing enka until I can't do it anymore," he says, "until I sing my last note."

Back onstage, his ballad done, the singer with the youthful wisp of a mustache takes a polite bow, folding slightly at the waist. The diamond studs in his ears sparkle as brightly as Ocean Snow.

Enka

Man