

SOUNDS

BIG IN JAPAN

LOCAL ROCKER GENO McMANUS
INVADES THE EAST

CHARLIE QUILL
?????



Geno McManus is big in Japan. No, really.

The popular Buffalo guitarist and songwriter – known for his work with the British-Invasion-style group, The Ifs—is starting to make a big splash in the land of the rising sun.

It all started in 2000, when McManus, working as a sideman in local rocker/club owner/attorney Michael Lee Jackson's R&B band Animal Planet, performed in Okinawa as part of a USO tour.

"The people who were handling us took us out one night and we went to a bunch of clubs where I got up and performed with some of the Japanese blues/rock bands that performed on the Island," McManus recalled. "After that I became friends with one of the people in the group of Japanese that were showing us around, and before we left for Korea I gave them a CD I had of some of my songs."

During the next few years, McManus stayed in touch with the contacts he made during that trip. Over time he discovered that they all shared a passion for American big-band and lounge music.

"Sinatra-type stuff," McManus said. "At the time, in 2003, I was working as an engineer at Chameleon West, and was mixing Michael Civisca's 'Blue Skies' CD. When I finished it I sent a copy over as a gift, and the result was they wanted to book Michael to perform, but wanted me to come along as his manager/tour coordinator."

They also wanted McManus to bring his guitar.

"My new Japanese friend and her group of friends also were interested in my music too, and thought that by having Michael go over to do the Jazz show, they could also find a place for me to do some acoustic performing as well," he said.

McManus accepted the offer and accompanied the honey-voiced crooner Civisca on a five-night

non ones." The success of that show inspired McManus's Japanese contacts to help develop a career for him in Japan.

"They have been working very hard for the last two years trying to expose me to the entertainment industry," he said.

McManus has made 10 trips to Japan during the last two years, performing his original material, both solo and with a Japanese backing band. He has also started

McMANUS SAID HIS JAPANESE MUSICIAN FRIENDS ARE EAGER TO PLAY SHOWS WITH HIM HERE IN BUFFALO AND ARE FASCINATED BY THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN BUFFALO.

engagement with a Japanese backing band in Karuizawa, a small, picturesque tourist town about an hour outside of Tokyo by Bullet train.

"When that work was done they found me a show," McManus said. When the time came, McManus called on all the experience he had gained during years as a performer in Buffalo and delivered a knock-out tribute to John Lennon and The Beatles that the folks in Karuizawa are probably still talking about.

"The reason they chose Karuizawa was because John Lennon used to live there," he said. "And they knew from visiting Buffalo a couple times that I did a lot of Beatles songs and was partial to the Len-

learning how to sing his songs in the native language.

"I wanted to sing some songs in Japanese—to give people a break from all of the English stuff, and to show my appreciation for them letting me play in their country," he said. "At the time I only spoke enough Japanese to ask where the bathroom was and could I please have another beer!"

McManus has recorded several songs specifically for his Japanese fans, one of which was written in English and then translated into Japanese with the help of his manager. The song, "Aino Fukkatsu" (Eye-No- Foo-KAHi-Soo), has become kind of a minor indie hit in Japan.



"It gets airplay in the Cities of Nagano and Karuizawa – it's known by the people in Karuizawa as the 'Karuizawa love song,'" he said, noting that a small company in Japan picked-up the song and shot a video for it. McManus recorded the song in Buffalo with some of the many aces who live in this town, including Joe Rozler, Jeff Schaller, and Dave Hill.

"I knew these guys could really make the song come alive," he said. The song's success has led to plans for two CDs to be recorded in Buffalo with Japanese musicians, tentatively scheduled April, 2007, with Robby Takac producing.

"I have two bands there that I work with," he said. "One is a trio in the vein of Crosby Stills, and Nash, and we play a lot of Beatles type stuff, as well as a number of originals that I have that fit that style. That band is called The G.E.T., named for Geno, Erick, and Taddaki (www.gmcmusic.com). The other band, the backing band, I have is more of a rock band that performs the rock original stuff that I have as well as some select '70s classic rock-style stuff."

McManus said his Japanese musician friends are eager to play shows with him here in Buffalo (plans are in the works) and are fascinated by their counterparts in Buffalo.

"They have a lot of respect for and curiosity about the Buffalo music scene and its musicians," he said. "Buffalo is such as arts-driven city. That's something that can't be found in Japan, at the local level, at least not like it is here. Where else

can you get a producer who has sold millions of CD's, and you can still run into him at the Pink and do a shot with him? So it's not only music in Japan now. It's like a giant cultural exchange program."

"The people in Japan have totally received my songs and shows with incredible support, hospitality, and encouragement, even with the language barrier," he said. "Also, communicating with the Japanese musicians is easy too as it seems that musicians are pretty much the same anywhere, totally proving that music is the universal language."

McManus's rise in the Japanese rock scene and his friendship with Goo-Goo Doll Robbie Takac, led to a hook-up for another Buffalo band, the Juliet Dagger.

"I got a call from Robby and the folks at Good Charamel asking if there was any way I could help The Juliet Dagger get an appearance somewhere in Tokyo," McManus said. "They were going to be spending a few days there en route to Osaka, where they were headed to record with the singer of the band Shonen Knife. My manager and I came up with not only a place, but a replacement drummer, as the Dagger were going through a change of drummers at the time."

Getting a gig in Tokyo is no small feat.

"Most definitely not!" McManus said. "Their pay-to-play scene is worse than New York and Los Angeles combined. But I have been lucky to get shows, through the tireless support of my manager as well as the extremely dedicated musicians that I've had the pleasure to play with."

McManus said future plans may include a performance in China next Spring with his Buffalo band, The Ifs, along with Dwane Hall's Stone Country Band. He traveled to Shen Zhen recently to meet with Chinese government organizers of China's Cultural Industries Festival.

"We made a good impression—if it all works out with the logistics then the two bands will be invited to perform there," he said.

McManus will return to Japan in February to begin pre-production on one of the new CDs.

As usual, he will continue to act as an ambassador to his hometown. "I really love to talk about Buffalo and the arts scene here everywhere I go," he said. "I would love to see a lot more cultural exchange. This town has the best musicians per square inch than anywhere else in the world I have visited. Why else would Ian Gillan come here to record, and then use Buffalo musicians in his back-up band, and use The Pink Flamingo for his CD cover?"

FRIDAY NIGHTS AT OPM

WORLD CLASS DJs
INVADE BUFFALO

ANNA MILLER
DJ

Most weeknights, Opium Lounge is like any other nondescript storefront on downtown's docile Main Street, but when Friday rolls around, deep beats and dirty bass lines pour out of every crack of the small club, as some of the best DJs in the world expel their energy into the dynamic crowd.

Opium has become the place in Buffalo for electronic music, and is steadily making a name for itself on the international level. The tour route for some of the DJs who come to heat up our city reads like a top 10 vacation guide: Lisbon, London, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Los Angeles... Buffalo? Why not?

Owners Brian Nelson and Sean Spurlock have built up a solid reputation for themselves and made Opium not just club, but a destination. The people come for the music—the turnout depends completely on the DJ, Nelson said—and the musicians come for the people.

"Artists like to come to Opium for the simple fact that it's now known to be a good vibe and a good party," said Matt Rodriguez, an agent with AM Only. The a New York City-based agency represents some of the hottest acts tearing up the dance scene, including Charles Feelgood and DJ Irene, both of whom spun at Opium in the last two months. DJ Irene, who has performed in front of thousands at music festivals like Coachella, packed Opium with heads for a nonetheless intimate show on January 12.

In fact, the intimacy Opium offers has been a major factor in pulling in artists, Nelson said. Because it is a much smaller venue than many of the DJs are used to (200 instead of 2,000 heads), they appreciate the chance to interact with their audiences on a closer level. The

crowd is literally in the DJs face, tearing up the small mirrored dance floor.

"They love to perform there, where they can get in a more intimate show," Rodriguez said. "A lot of the DJs don't get to do that when they're on a larger tour. It's their chance to connect with a small crowd, and they always walk away from it with positive things to say."

When Nelson first started bringing in DJs for drum n' bass night at Opium, they often came because the proximity to Toronto allowed them to do two shows with relatively little hassle. Nelson explained that when the shows started, about 70 percent of the DJs were shared bookings with a larger club in Toronto. Now, thanks to the good words spreading around the DJ scene, those numbers are inverted.

"It's really taken on a life of its own," said Nelson, who has been throwing drum n' bass nights in Buffalo for 10 years, previously through the former Atomic and Groove nightclubs. "I just take a step back and realize if it wasn't for the fans coming out it wouldn't be happening."

Chris O'Conner, who spins house as DJ 3PO, said Opium works because most of the crowd knows how positive it is that Nelson is getting outside talent into such a small market. "The people here have to be very supportive," he said. "If 10 percent of the people didn't show up, any show would be dead."

But they do show up, and they show up for the music. "It's pretty much the only really good thing going on in this scene in Buffalo," said Ryan Joy, DJ Tweek of the local duo TweekNasty, regulars at Opium who have since been getting national gigs. "They're really the only guys doing something this big, everyone goes there all the time. And every DJ I've talked to loves playing there—it's got a good vibe and the crowd's right in your face."

So now, thanks to support from DJs and fans alike, what started three years ago as a party every few months for the love of the music progressed, to even Nelson's surprise, through a monthly and then biweekly affair, into the weekly big beats blowout it is today.

Check out Geno on the web

www.gmcmusic.com (japan)
www.theifs.com
<http://tinyurl.com/2trtdc>