Where the Songs Linger, but the Tune Is Different

By MARTIN FACKLER

NAHA, Japan — On a dark street behind the T-shirt shops and the crowds of the touristy Kokusai Dori strip, in a tiny club filled with a smattering of gray-haired customers, Sumiko Yoseyama lifted her microphone to conjure up a bygone era of crooners and big bands.

In a husky voice, she sang “Fly Me to the Moon,” “You’re Getting to Be a Habit With Me” and other songs that she performed as a teenager at the servicemen’s clubs on American bases, back when Okinawa was still governed by the United States military. Now she is 72, but the sepia-toned photographs on her club’s walls still show her as a smiling young woman with visiting American entertainers like Les Brown and Bob Hope.

“It was a different era, a gorgeous time for music in America,” said Ms. Yoseyama, “and Okinawa was part of it.”

That era ended in 1972, when this southern island reverted to Japanese control. Now, Okinawa is a destination for sun-worshiping young tourists from the Japanese mainland and the site of angry protests against the shrunken but still considerable American military presence here, with its noise, pollution and crime. But there are also a dwindling number of holdouts from an earlier time when Okinawa was still under American rule and the United States itself was a youthful and confident power in a golden age after World War II.

Nostalgia for that older America is one of the draws for mainland Japanese tourists and the smaller number of visitors from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The island’s ties to that era are perhaps most visible in the ubiquitous A&W drive-ins, where customers order onion rings and root beer floats next to painted murals of grinning Sandra Dees in bobby socks. A&W says it opened its first Okinawan store in 1963.

Some of Okinawa’s Americana is a recent imitation. At the military surplus stores along Kokusai Dori, the main tourist drag here in the Okinawan capital of Naha, many of the camouflage shirts are fashion statements designed in Tokyo and made in China. But there are pockets of genuine holdouts, like in Tsuji, Naha’s seedy red light district.
Around the corner from brothels known as soaplands is Steakhouse 88, where diners feast on T-bones, tenderloins and other large American-style steaks that are unusual elsewhere in Japan. The owner, Yasuji Kinjo, said his father learned how to cook steaks in 1953 when he opened a nightclub for American servicemen. Mr. Kinjo said he grew up among the wealthy Americans and their Okinawan girlfriends, who called their men “honeys.”

“The honeys could be scary, but most were very kind,” said Mr. Kinjo, 58, who turned the club into a steakhouse after Okinawa’s reversion to Japan. He said Okinawa shared a similarly ambivalent view of its period of American rule, which began after invading American forces seized this island from the Japanese during a ferocious battle in 1945. He said the Americans had trampled on Okinawan rights, but were also appreciated for building roads and schools and for generally treating Okinawans better than their prewar Imperial Japanese masters did.

Like many Okinawans, he said this once-independent island kingdom had not only received but also modified American culture, as it had the cultures of its other foreign overlords in its past, China and Japan. He said his chefs had brought a level of Japanese-style perfectionism to American steaks that had attracted proposals from Chinese businessmen to open franchises in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

“They know Okinawa had a genuine connection to that old, bright and strong America,” Mr. Kinjo said.

Such nostalgia was apparent on a recent evening at the steakhouse, where slightly built Japanese customers sat in oversize American booths while a jukebox played “Rock Around the Clock.” One, Kazue Okimura, a 52-year-old salesman from Tokyo, said he had come for a taste of a time when not only the United States but also Japan seemed more youthful and confident.

“We want to see the remaining traces of that time,” he said, sawing a rib-eye steak.

Those traces are disappearing fast. A block away from the steakhouse sits the site of the Teahouse of the August Moon, a brothel-turned-dinner theater that was once a center of social life in American-occupied Okinawa. In 1956, it became the inspiration for a Hollywood movie of the same name starring Marlon Brando.

The teahouse closed five years ago after its Japanese clientele migrated to the newer restaurants and music halls on Kokusai Dori.

“It was a hard adaptation when the Japanese came back,” said Iva Hosaka, 58, the last proprietor. The teahouse was started after the war by her mother, an accomplished courtesan in prewar Okinawa who became an American citizen after marrying an American administrator in the occupation government.
Ms. Yoseyama, the jazz singer, said that just as damaging as the return of the Japanese was the advent of rock 'n' roll. She said she and other musicians had lost work once the American soldiers discovered the electric guitar, and the rebellious counterculture driven by the Vietnam War.

She said she got her start at age 12 in 1952, a time when servicemen and their wives still dressed up to spend an evening out dining and dancing to live music. She sang with big bands at places like the Naha Airmen’s Club and the Camp Zukeran Top Three Club to earn her family extra money. She said the American wives at first gave her chewing gum and ice cream, though she eventually became a top act on the bases.

After Okinawa reverted to Japan, she opened her club, called Interlude, and eventually recorded four albums, including one in 1983 with the American jazz great Mal Waldron. But in recent years, she said, most of the musicians from “the American era,” as she calls it, have died.

Ms. Yoseyama says that age has forced her to reduce her performances to two or three times a week, and to go home at 1 a.m. — early by the standards of Okinawan night life. But she said she wanted to keep on performing while she could.

“It was an opulent time, but even America has no more Ella Fitzgeralds,” Ms. Yoseyama said. “We were lucky to have been part of that old era.”