Busiest station in the world
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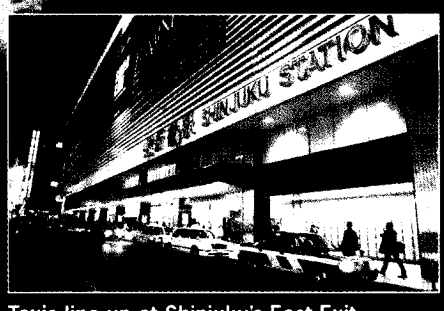
Shinjuku Station keeps the masses moving through Tokyo

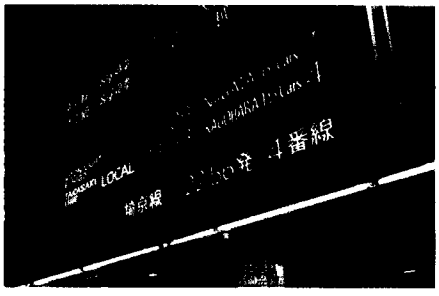
Story and photos by Scott Lothes



Taxis line up at Shinjuku's East Exit.

A Chuo line "rapid" commuter train arrives.

Riders exiting a commuter train swarm a platform stairwell between tracks 11 and 12 at Tokyo's Shinjuku Station. It's a ritual performed by 3.5 million people a day, making Shinjuku the most heavily used train station in the world. And you thought your commute was hectic!



Morning commuters pack a local train (top left). The station's electronic departure boards are bilingual (lower left). Above the long rows of ticket machines throughout the station, color-coded maps attempt to make sense of Tokyo's sprawling rail network (above).

It's 9 o'clock on a Tuesday evening and I need to escape. I'm overwhelmed by the pulsating lights of billboards and store windows, and the swells of homeward-bound pedestrians and automobiles swarming Tokyo's streets and sidewalks. Two yellow arches offer an oasis of familiarity, so I duck through the open-air entrance, order a cookies-and-cream shake, and take it to the non-smoking section on the second floor.

It's 9:02 when I sit down at the window-facing bar. I know this because of the 20-foot-high digital clock on top of a 10-story building in view across a set of railroad tracks. The tracks form the south throat of Shinjuku Station, an intense junction of commuter lines on Tokyo's west side. By the clock, it takes me exactly six minutes to finish my shake. The evening commuter rush is tapering off, but in that short time, I see 14 trains. Several are packed to standing room only.

If Tokyo is the best place to feel the pulse of modern Japan, then Shinjuku is perhaps the best place to feel the pulse of Tokyo. There's a staggering amount of life packed around the station. Multi-story department stores rise from the station itself, and a vast array of shops line the streets. There are nine-story electronics stores and designer clothing boutiques, tiny sushi bars, and glittering *pachinko* parlors (casinos). Just to the west is the largest skyscraper district in the city, where some of the tallest buildings in Japan cast their shadows on the station. On the other side of the tracks are the bars, restaurants, and red-light district of Kabuki-cho, where *all* forms of entertainment are readily available.

The people are every bit as varied as the buildings. Just outside my window, a man wearing a pink rabbit suit prances, bows, claps, strikes a general's pose, and shakes his fuzzy white tail at a glittering *pachinko* parlor. Sitting on my right is a homeless woman whose red, orange, and yellow bags occupy the entire corner seat. Before she leaves, a businessman in a starched three-piece suit rushes into the seat on my left and begins gulping down his burger and coffee. The Shinjuku neighborhood, which took its name from the station, is home to Waseda University, a large city park, and the biggest concentration of foreign nationals living anywhere in Japan. Nearly all conceivable walks of Japanese life roam the streets of Shinjuku, and at some time or another, all of them pass through the station's long rows of automatic ticket gates.

Shinjuku Station

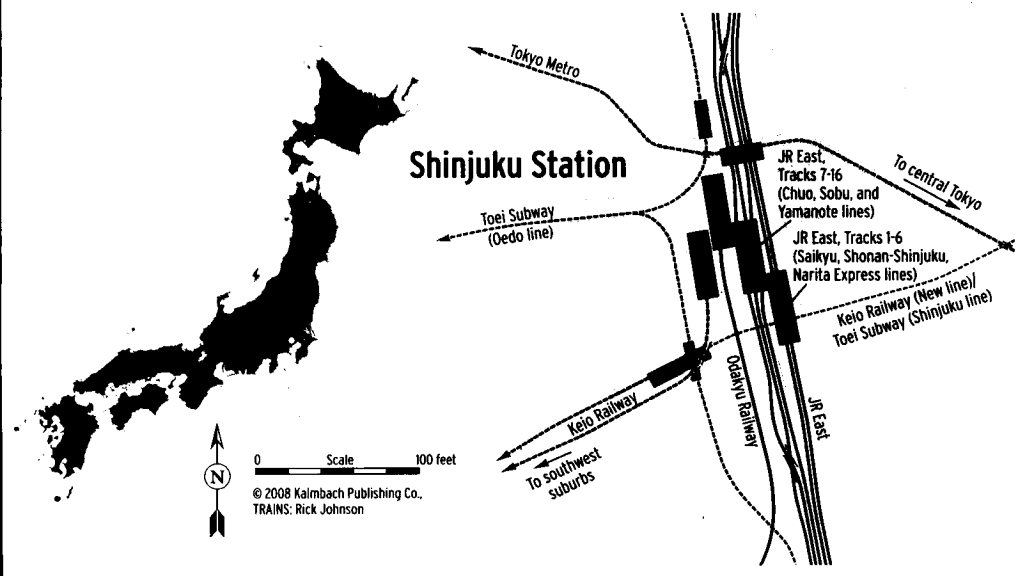
Three different railroad operators and two subway companies serve Shinjuku, in a station complex whose platforms descend from one floor above the street to four levels below ground. The station is connected directly to several large, multi-story department stores, while beneath the streets, a maze of underground passageways connects Shinjuku to three adjacent subway lines.

The first Shinjuku Station dates back to 1885, but like most of Tokyo, it was burned by an Allied Forces firebombing campaign at the end of World War II. It was replaced, then replaced again. The current complex is a monument to modern efficiency, although its construction stirred controversy when several blocks of "Old Tokyo" met the wrecking ball. There really is no American equivalent to a place like Shinjuku, but if you think of Chicago's Ogilvie Transportation Center, only pumped full of super-concentrated steroids, you can start to get an idea.

Shinjuku is the busiest railway station in

Shoppers and rail passengers mingle on the wide staircase leading to Shinjuku's South Exit and the Lumine department store that rises above the station (right). A couple walks briskly through the lower concourse (below).

Skyscrapers at left and department stores at right tower over Shinjuku's platforms.



the world in terms of passenger volume, although just how many people pass through on a given day is difficult to determine. The official numbers come from the ticket gates, and the gates report the total number of passengers. But the same person coming to work in the morning and going home in the evening counts as two passengers, as does a person transferring from train to subway or vice versa, one count for each carrier. That's why it's best to qualify "busiest" as "in terms of passenger volume."

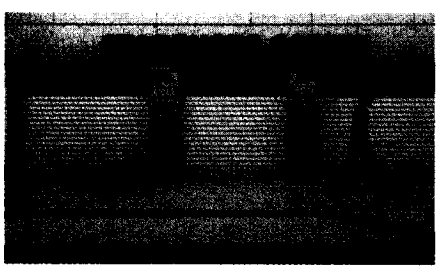
Just how many people are we talking about? In 2006, Shinjuku averaged just under 3.5 *million* people per day. That would be every man, woman, and child currently residing in my home state of West Virginia passing through the ticket gates in a single day. Twice.

The East Japan Railway (JR East) is far and away the busiest of the carriers serving the station, with just under 1.5 million passengers per day. That's still less than half the total volume, though. Two private railroads account for another third of the daily volume: the Keio (KAY-oh) Railway, with more than 700,000 riders, and the Odakyu (oh-DAK-you) Electric Railway, serving almost a half-million. Both private railroads own department stores in Shinjuku, and gates from their platforms lead directly into their stores. The Tokyo Metro and Toei subway lines fill out the balance of traffic, a combined total of 800,000 riders.

A hub for Japan Rail

Five JR East lines converge on Shinjuku, then fan out again. Foremost among them are the Yamanote (ya-ma-NO-tay) Line, which is the belt line connecting nearly every major neighborhood of central Tokyo, and the Chuo (CHOO-oh) Line, which short-cuts the Yamanote Line by heading east directly through the center of Tokyo, and to the west takes an inland, mountainous route to Osaka. Then there's the Sobu Line, which parallels the Chuo Line across town before continuing far into the eastern suburbs, and two north-south lines, the Shonan-Shinjuku Line and the Saikyu Line. These five lines are split over 16 tracks through Shinjuku Station as follows:

1 to 4: Saikyu and Shonan-Shinjuku lines
5 and 6: Narita Express (airport service)
7 and 8: Chuo Line (Tokyo rapid trains)



A double-deck express train races taxis (top) outside the station. A salaryman (above) passes the closed entrance to a coffee chain that's as common in Tokyo as it is in the U.S.

An endless stream of commuters pours through the Tokyo station's busy South Exit.

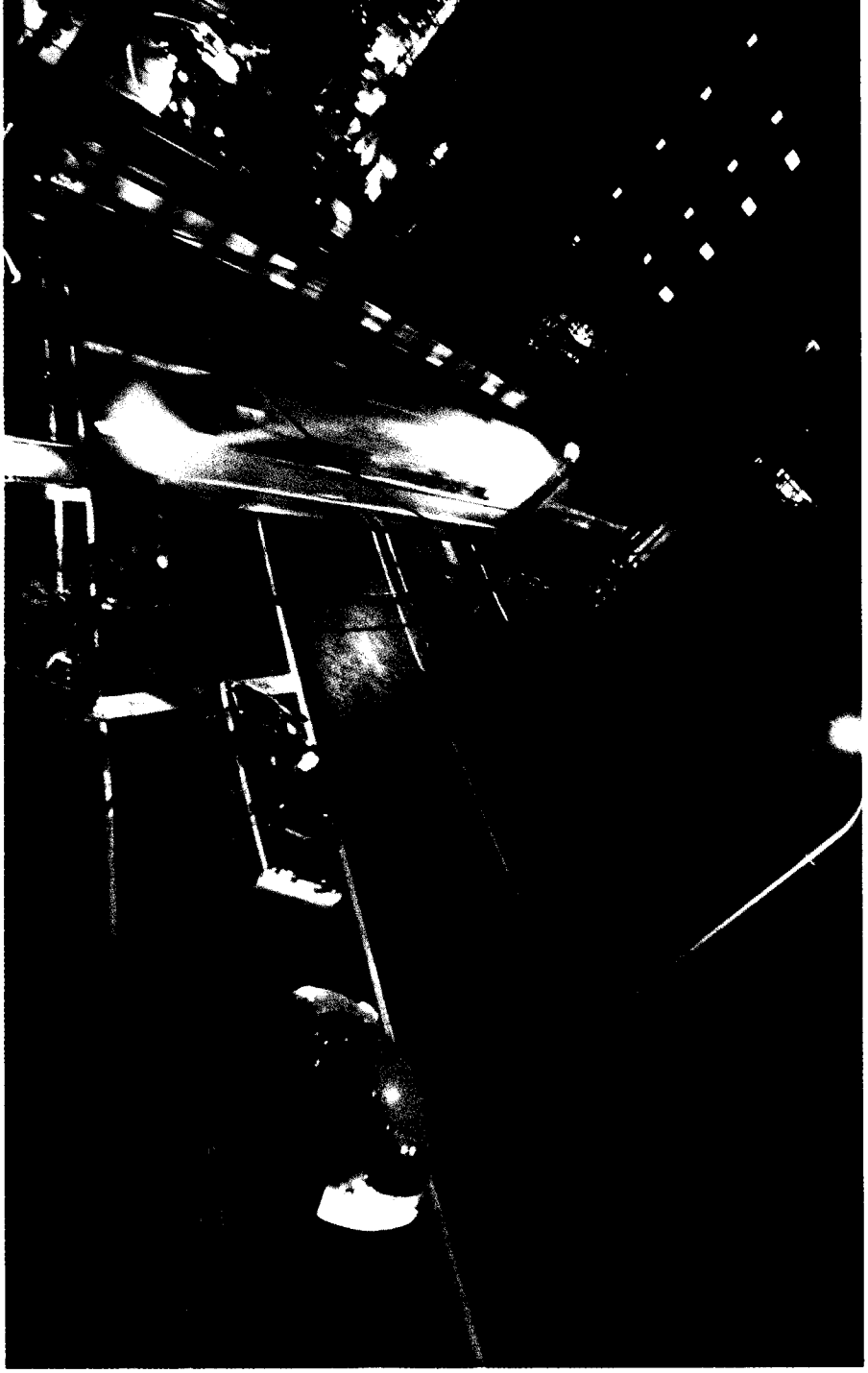
9 and 10: Chuo Line (express trains)
11 and 12: Chuo Line (rapid trains)
13 and 16: Sobu and Chuo lines (locals)
14: Yamanote Line (counter-clockwise)
15: Yamanote Line (clockwise)

An island platform serves each pair of tracks, and the islands are connected to two concourses, one above track level and one below. Locals and rapids are both ordinary fare trains, but rapids stop at fewer stations and offer some seat reservations. Express trains require an additional fare, stop only at major stations, and offer both reserved and unreserved seating. Locals and rapids typically serve commuter routes, while most expresses cover longer distance, intercity runs.

Tracks 15 and 16 were added in 2007 to provide dedicated tracks for the popular Narita Express to Tokyo's international airport. Before the improvement project, there were only 14 JR East tracks; airport trains shared tracks 5 and 6 with Chuo Line expresses. (The photos in this story were made prior to the platform expansion.)

The earliest commuters start appearing before 5 a.m. Most are taking the first trains of the day to work, but a few particularly dedicated "salarymen" are taking them home. After catching a few hours' sleep, they'll be back in their offices before lunch. The tide grows steadily and rapidly, and by 7:30 the morning rush is well under way.

On the Yamanote loop line, which is as much a conveyor belt as a railway, 11-car trains depart every 2-3 minutes in both directions. Given that the Yamanote loop is 21.4 miles in circumference, that each train is 726 feet long and takes 65 minutes to complete a circuit, and that there are 25 trains per hour each way, 17 percent of the line's two tracks are occupied by passenger cars.



Traffic backs up as two Odakyu Railway trains pass at a grade crossing outside the station.

A lighted diagram below the train board indicates which stops Odakyu trains will make.

And every one of them is packed so tightly the doors can barely close.

Each Yamanote Line track shares an island with a Sobu Line track going the same direction. The Sobu Line is only slightly less busy than the Yamanote, with departures every 3-4 minutes during the rush. Yamanote and Sobu trains often arrive in parallel and overwhelm their island with throngs of commuters who bulge at the doors before pouring out onto the platform from both sides, squeezing past the passengers waiting to board, then packing into the stairways and escalators to be swept into the incessant surge through the concourses and onto the streets.

A few tracks over, the orange, 10-car rapid trains of the Chuo Line roll in every 2 minutes. They are, of course, equally crowded, particularly the inbound trains on tracks 7 and 8 headed for downtown Tokyo. Tracks 11 and 12 handle the outbound traffic. Trains arrive on alternating tracks during peak periods; at less busy times, the odd-numbered tracks are not used. In the morning rush, though, all four tracks are humming, with the wind of departed trains still whistling as the next arrivals are being announced. The wave of passengers already stands four and five deep in two rows for every door, with four or five sets of doors per car.

By mid-morning, the rush has calmed to a steady flow that will last throughout the day and well into the night. Although another much longer surge will come with the evening commute, it is considerably less concentrated than the morning crunch. With the headways between trains on the Yamanote and Chuo lines opened to a gaping 4-5 minutes, there's finally room to breathe on the platforms and enough space to explore the station.

The concourse above track level has four convenience stores, some half-dozen restaurants, and a bookstore. Passengers enter and leave the concourse through about 50 automated ticket gates spread over six different entrances. Four lead to the street, one is a direct transfer to the Odakyu Railway, and one connects directly to the Lumine (LOO-me-nay) department store. Just beyond those gates, passengers can purchase tickets from 39 automatic vending machines, many of which will accept 10,000-yen bills (about $95). There are also two staffed ticket counters open 15 hours a day.

The lower-level concourse is far more business-like. Its seven entrances have 80 automatic ticket gates and an astonishing 92 ticket vending machines. There are five exits leading to streets and department stores, and one direct transfer each for the Keio and Odakyu railways. There are also three staffed ticket counters, also open 15 hours a day. Their main function is selling reserved seat tickets, which cannot be purchased from the machines. The machines dispense only unreserved seat tickets — although the word "seat" is used loosely. During much of the day, an unreserved seat ticket only guarantees enough floor space for two feet to stand on ... probably on the next train, but maybe the one after it.

By rail and subway

Just outside of the Odakyu Railway's station platforms, two city streets cross its main line at grade.

"You'll swear the gates are down more than they're up," is how those crossings were introduced to me.

The gates were up when I arrived on a Wednesday evening as the rush was ending. I peered down the double-track line for a few quiet minutes when several pedestrians and a few cars were the only traffic over the

crossings. Then the gates dropped, and sleek, white "Romance Car" limited express trains passed in each direction. The gates were barely up for 30 seconds before they lowered a second time. Three commuter trains passed and street traffic backed up for several blocks before the gates finally lifted. The mini-traffic jams were barely untangled when the warning bell sounded and the gates dropped yet again.

I remained by the crossing from 7 to 7:30 p.m. In that half-hour, the gates were up for just 11 minutes, and down for the other 19, or 63 percent of the time, guarding the passage of 18 trains.

Odakyu Railway's Shinjuku Station is the eastern terminus of a busy, extensive system serving Tokyo's southwestern suburbs. Odakyu's station tracks are split among two levels. The Ground Level, adjacent to JR East's platforms, has three tracks handling express trains, while the Underground Level manages a parade of local and semi-express commuter trains on only two tracks. Every track has a platform on each side, one for passengers waiting to get on and another for passengers getting off. This arrangement speeds pedestrian flow through the station, eases congestion, and enables trains to arrive, unload, load, and depart very quickly.

Japan Rail and Odakyu's 21 tracks see nearly 2 million riders a day, or a little more than half of Shinjuku's daily traffic.

Even busier than the Odakyu is the Keio Line, whose facilities are located to the west of, and another story below, Odakyu's lowest level. There, on only three tracks, nearly three-quarters of a million passengers pack in and out of Keio Line trains every day, making it the busiest non-JR station in Japan.

Deeper underground, below the Keio platforms (themselves two stories below ground level), are the subway platforms. Tokyo has two different subway companies, and both serve Shinjuku. The Toei (TOE-eh) Subway has four tracks: two for its Oedo (oh-EH-doh) Line, and two shared between its Shinjuku Line and the Keio Railway's New Line. (On many private Japanese railroads, electric suburban trains operate interchangeably with subways, hence the platform sharing.) The Toei Subway handles more than 350,000 Shinjuku passengers on an average day. Finally, there's the Tokyo Metro, whose two-track Marunouchi Line pumps nearly another quarter-million daily riders in and out of Shinjuku.

Tight squeeze

With so many people moving through such a relatively small area, some personal violations are inevitable. However, defining traits of Japanese culture include orderliness and group harmony, so altercations over line-jumping, missed trains, or personal space invasions are practically non-existent.

One of the biggest problems to plague Shinjuku, and many other Japanese stations and trains, is groping. In a packed commuter train with constant incidental contact, hands can freely wander with little fear of being caught. The problem is compounded by those very same traits of orderliness and harmony, which discourage many women from speaking up or confronting their predators. The railroads have responded by designating "women-only" cars in many trains during peak times, which has proven fairly successful.

Save for one incident, Shinjuku Station has been free from terrorist activities. In April 1995, authorities thwarted a sarin gas attack orchestrated by the Aum Shinrikyo cult. The doomsday cult had successfully carried out an attack on the Tokyo subway a month earlier, but at Shinjuku, vigilant station staff foiled the plot.

There is one glaring omission among the myriad express and local trains parading through Shinjuku every day: There is no bullet train. When the bullet train network (*shinkansen*) was beginning to expand in the 1970s, Shinjuku was slated to become the southern terminus for the Joetsu line linking Tokyo, on the Pacific coast, with Niigata, across the country on the Sea of Japan. The high mountains between the two cities drove construction costs skyward, and Shinjuku

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If you go

Shinjuku is the best place in the world to feel the crunch of a commuter-train rush hour. The trains run every few minutes, from early morning to well into the night, in a dizzying array of paint schemes and body styles.

The Japanese love their trains, and the country has about four times as many railfans per capita as the United States. Enthusiasts can take photos from station platforms, overpasses, and all public places without worrying about questioning from security guards or police officers. Just be careful to stay behind the yellow lines on station platforms and out of the way of passengers and railroad staff. If someone does ask you to move, it is because you are in the way of operations. Get out of the way quickly and gracefully. (An apologetic bow is appropriate.)

All Japan Rail stations sell platform tickets. These one-time use tickets are good for two hours of access to the platform area. Prices vary, but run from 110 to 160 yen (about $1 to $1.50). They are available from most ticket vending machines, usually in the lower right-hand corner. Buy one, insert it in the automatic ticket gates, and get your fill of action on the platform. Be sure to keep the ticket, though, as you'll need it again to exit the gates.

About 660 feet directly south of the station is a wide overpass that, despite some high fencing, offers good views of the Japan Rail tracks. Just to the southwest are the two grade crossings on the Odakyu line, the second of which also has a pedestrian overpass with unobstructed views. — *Scott Lothes*

For more information, visit the following sites:
Japan Rail passes: http://japanrailpass.net/eng/en001.html or http://www.japan-guide.com
Train travel in Japan: http://www.seat61.com/Japan.htm
Japanese railroad groups: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/jtrains
Ome Railway Park: http://www.kouhaku.or.jp/english/ome/omenyuen.html

A Yamanote Line train at rush hour is filled with "salarymen," "office ladies," and students.

Who is that masked man? Just a germ-conscious commuter on the Yamanote Line.

was eventually skipped in favor of existing bullet train facilities at Tokyo Station.

For now, Shinjuku remains 13 minutes away from the bullet train network via the rapid trains of the Chuo Line. A new Chuo Line, however, may someday change that. In 1970, studies began for a Tokyo-Osaka Chuo bullet train using magnetic levitation technology. Japan has been conducting maglev tests on its Yamanashi Test Line, and capacity issues on the existing bullet train network may soon push construction forward. An April 2007 article in *The Japan Times* reported that the Central Japan Railway hopes to begin commercial maglev service between Tokyo and Nagoya in 2025. When completed, Shinjuku could be the first stop west of Tokyo on the new line.

In the meantime, patrons can content themselves with Shinjuku's newly overhauled South Exit, which leads to a new bus terminal, taxi stand, and broad pedestrian mall designed to improve traffic flow on the sidewalks and on adjacent National Route 20.

Finding peace in the chaos

It's now 6 p.m. on a Thursday and I've foolishly packed myself, sardine-like, into a Yamanote Line train for a ride around the loop at the height of the evening rush. At one point, another JR train pulls alongside me on a parallel track. Our two trains' combined 21 cars are uniformly filled to the gills. We arrive simultaneously at the next station, just as two other trains depart in the opposite direction and a third gets ready to go. The doors of 21 cars open in the same instant, overwhelming the already crowded platforms. I'm trying not to hyperventilate. For nearly everyone else, it's just another stop on the daily commute home.

At 8 p.m. the trains are still crowded, but the frantic pace has slackened. By now, many of the riders have made their first after-work stop at a bar or restaurant. The train is still quiet — Japanese trains are almost always quiet — but the tense, edgy quiet of two hours ago has softened into something mellower. Ties are loosened, and a faint smell of alcohol floats among the standing, reading, text-messaging, and dozing passengers.

At 9:40 p.m., back at Shinjuku, I stumble out through the still-teeming madness of the South Exit, only to be greeted by ... peace. At the edge of a sidewalk, a band is playing. It's a young trio of a guy and two girls. The spiky-haired guy is playing an acoustic guitar. Both girls wear skirts with tights, fuzzy boots, and hats. One is on percussion, the other alternates between lead vocals and flute.

Their music is quiet but commanding, a whisper to drown out the city. The crowd is small but attentive, and growing steadily. Couples snuggle or hold hands, and most passersby give a respectfully wide berth. Two hurrying men, one on a bike and another running, cut in between the band and the spectators. They're met with a host of scornful looks. The next cyclist eases to a stop, dismounts, and carefully walks his bike through the little concert. The cyclist after him stops and joins the audience.

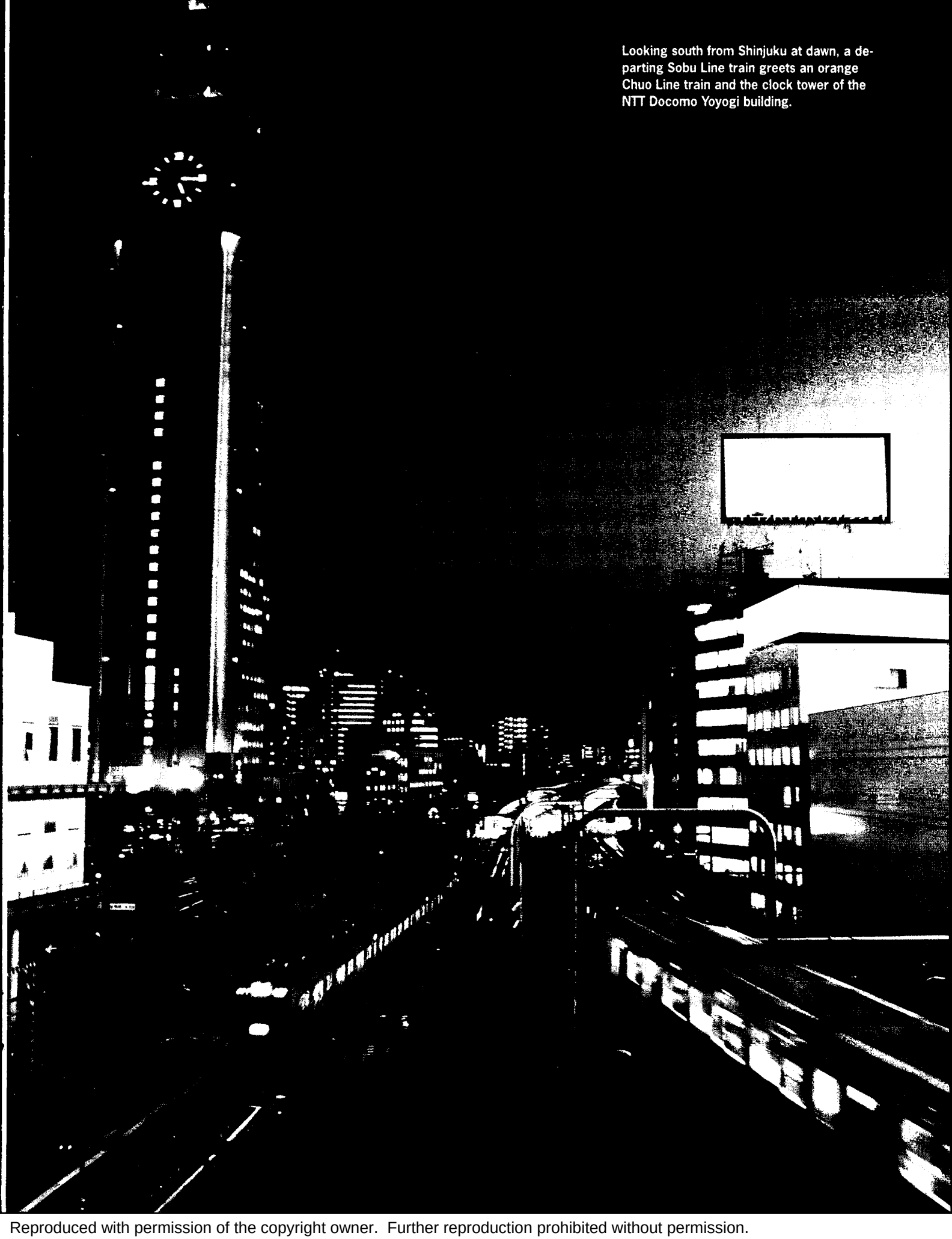
The song ends, and there's some applause. A few in the crowd drift away, but several more commuters stop to listen as the next song begins. There's an Andean influence in the music, and it mixes with the band's Japanese folk cadences to form a soothing, calming sound. The band's name is Sol, the Spanish word for sun. As long as they play, their glow is bright enough to overpower the electric glare of Shinjuku's signs and shops.

By design, Japan's busiest train station possesses a technological efficiency that reduces its enormous volume of passengers to so many cubic feet and ticket numbers. Yet for those willing to pause and look, Shinjuku also offers havens of peace in the midst of Tokyo's regimented, fast-paced cycles.

As the flute wafts into a high solo at a song's crescendo, yet another train rumbles by on the elevated tracks just around the corner. Later, when the music has ended, most of the crowd will be on one of those trains, finally going home. For a few more songs, though, for the people who are listening, those trains are the farthest things from their minds. T

A young band named Sol charms a crowd into standing still at the world's busiest station.

SCOTT LOTHES worked in northern Japan for a year and a half as an English teacher. He acknowledges the assistance of Dustin Kidd, whose translating services helped make this article possible, and Alexander Craghead.



Looking south from Shinjuku at dawn, a departing Sobu Line train greets an orange Chuo Line train and the clock tower of the NTT Docomo Yoyogi building.