

Going From Bond Girl to 'a Normal Life'

By MARTIN FACKLER/ © 2017 The New York Times
March 6, 2017 at 14:59 JST



Mie Hama, a former actress, at her home in Hakone, Japan, Oct. 28, 2016. Hama, who appeared in the 1967 James Bond film "You Only Live Twice," decided to leave Hollywood behind to live "a normal life." (Ko Sasaki/ © 2017 The New York Times)

HAKONE, Japan--In 1967, Mie Hama was Hollywood's newest sex symbol. That year, the 23-year-old Japanese film star appeared alongside Sean Connery in the James Bond movie "You Only Live Twice," playing 007's bikini-clad bride, Kissy Suzuki. She was also featured in Playboy, which proclaimed her "the Brigitte Bardot of Japan."

Yet, Hama never appeared in another Hollywood film. A few years later, she walked out of her contract with the Japanese studio Toho to marry and raise a family, telling dumbfounded executives that she wanted "a normal life." She remained a celebrity in Japan but completely revamped her public image, becoming a television and radio host, an advocate for preserving old farms and farming techniques, a connoisseur of folk art and the author of 14 books--on child-rearing, manners and self-discovery--that have proved enormously popular among women.

For decades, she seldom talked about the 007 film and her status as one of Asia's first Bond girls (along with her Japanese co-star Akiko Wakabayashi). But now, as "You Only Live Twice" turns 50, she has become more willing to reflect on her bittersweet moment of global stardom and her decision to discard that in search of something more authentic and personal.

"It was an honor to be a Bond girl, but once was enough," Hama, now 73, said in an interview at her home in this quiet mountain resort town. "I didn't want that image to stick with me. I am actually a subdued and steady person, but I felt that somewhere beyond my control, others were creating a character named 'Mie Hama.'"

Even a half-century later, Hama (who pronounces her name MEE-ay HAH-mah) seems to distance herself from her former movie actress persona. She wore a quietly elegant beige-green kimono, her hair boyishly cut above her ears, a far cry from the image of a Western-style beauty that made her one of the heroines of the golden age of Japanese film in the early 1960s. Her home, made from century-old lumber that she collected from old farmhouses, is decorated like a museum of Japanese traditional crafts, with large pottery urns, stenciled fabrics and paintings of nearby Mount Fuji on display. Absent is any poster, photograph or other hint of her prolific film career in Japan, or

of her brief moment in the world limelight as a Bond girl. "That is all stored somewhere in the basement," she said. "I don't like to dwell on the past."

Hama said she never felt at ease on the silver screen. Born in a blue-collar Tokyo family whose small cardboard factory burned down in World War II, she grew up poor. She was working as a ticket puncher on a bus at 16, when Toho discovered her. She quickly became a major star in Japan but spent much of her free time trying to escape on backpacking trips to Europe and India, where, she said, she agonized over whether to stay in acting.

She had already starred in almost 70 movies, monster films to teen romances, when she was asked to audition for the Bond film in 1966. She said she thought the director, Lewis Gilbert, picked her because he had seen "King Kong vs. Godzilla," a 1962 Japanese monster movie in which Hama played Kong's love interest.

"I had never seen a 007 movie and had no idea 007 was such a huge international hit," she recalled. She didn't realize what she had gotten herself into until arriving in London, when someone from the studio demanded a look inside her suitcase. She obligingly opened it to reveal some T-shirts and bluejeans, she said.

"You're a Bond girl now," she recalled being told. "The clothes you wear, the jewelry you put on, we will manage all of that." The next day, expensive dresses began appearing at her hotel room door. "Everything from my weight to the height of my heels was decided," she said. "It may have looked glamorous, but for me, it was all a huge ordeal."

During this lonely time, she said she received important emotional support from her co-star, Connery, whom she described as a kindred spirit from a working-class background. She said Connery became a role model, a professional who was down to earth off camera but who could magically turn into the dapper superspy at the shout of "Action!"

"I was just a girl," she recalled. "Every morning, he asked if I was having any trouble. He also had a tough life before becoming a star, so he understood me." Even today, she still respectfully calls him "Sean Connery-san." She said she now regrets not trying to speak with him more or get to know him. She never met Connery again after the movie's release. (Connery declined to comment for this article through a representative, who said he was retired.)

In Japan, where much of the movie was filmed, the role increased Hama's cachet by catapulting her into the tiny pantheon of Japanese actors who had made it in Hollywood, including Toshiro Mifune and Machiko Kyo. It also helped cement her image: At 5-foot-5, she stood shoulder to shoulder with many of Japan's male leads.

"Mie Hama was seen as a modern beauty able to hold her own with actresses in the West," said Sota Setogawa, author of several books on postwar film. "It turned out that that was not the real Mie Hama but just an image."

It was an image that Hama tried for a time to maintain. Photos from this era invariably show her clad in a white bikini. She played a Bond-like role in at least one subsequent film made in Japan, appearing as the villainous foreign agent Madame Piranha in the 1967 "King Kong Escapes."

But she said she turned down many offers from Hollywood to play similar roles. She dropped out of films altogether to marry a television executive--they remain married to this day--and have her four children. She said she was looking for something but didn't yet know what.

At 40, she said, she finally had her epiphany while driving through rural Japan. She came across an old farming village that was being torn down to build a dam. She yelled at her driver to pull over and was heartbroken to meet an old woman being forced out of her home.

"Japan was giving up its real self in its rush for economic development," Hama said. "I realized that Japan had to get back to its real self. And so did I."

She said she spent the next three decades telling fans to value what is authentic in Japan, and in themselves. In her most recent book, "Solitude Can Be a Wonderful Thing," she encourages other women to live in a way that is true to themselves, even if others oppose it.

"It can be lonely to live on your own terms, but it is the way to real happiness," she said. "My experiences have taught me that."

(March 3, 2017)