



I interviewed Tatsu Aoki for the December 2015 issue of the JIC's monthly newsletter in conjunction with the upcoming Tsukasa Taiko Legacy Twelve/ Reduction events on December 19 & 20. Tatsu Aoki is active in various Chicago communities in different ways. He is a performer and director of [Asian Improv aRts Midwest](#) which includes [Tsukasa Taiko](#) and [Toyoaki Shamisen](#), a jazz composer and conductor in [the Miyumi Project](#), a director of [experimental films](#) showcasing the arts, and an instructor at the School of the Art Institute and Northwestern University.

**AK: First, would you tell me a little about being born into an artisan family in Japan? And how that has impacted your music and film style?**

TA: Right, I was born into this family. In English, the simplest way to explain this profession is to say my family maintained a geisha house. Technically, my family was in charge of a particular part of the geisha business called *okiya*. *Okiya* is the training corner of a geisha complex. So, we trained and dispatched geisha. My grandmother and ancestors started this probably prior to the Edo period (1603-1868), but as far as I understand, my family name is "Toyoakimoto." Later on, the name was changed to "Toyoaki" [dropped the -moto at the end] because the family started to specialize in cuisine as well but wanted to maintain loose ties to geisha arts. So, when I was born in 1958, the family was already renamed to Toyoaki and we ran a cuisine house as well as a geisha business that was about to be closed down. In preparation for the Tokyo Olympics in the 1960s, the city kind of coerced smaller geisha businesses to close down.

I grew up in four areas of Tokyo: the Yotsuya area, Fukagawa, Shinbashi, and Nippori where we trained a lot of geisha although it was increasingly a business that was being pushed to the wayside. As far as I can remember, the sound of shamisen, flute, and taiko were with me all of my life. When I was a teenager, I did not want to do traditional

music anymore. I basically rebelled and wanted to do something new and at the time the Tokyo Underground Arts movement was taking off. I became affiliated with a lot of experimentalists in Tokyo like filmmakers, writers, and other artists. This was the start of when my mixture of Western music and Eastern music formed. In many ways I am a product of late-1970s Japanese art movement. I met so many interesting people like Kobo Abe and Shuji Terayama who were my *sempai* \*. I admired them like gods and became associated with so many different artists. [\* *sempai* is a Japanese word with a similar meaning to mentor in English, but does not necessarily imply as strong of a relationship]

My mother was also listening to a lot of jazz music so while we played taiko and other traditional instruments during the day at home we'd listen to jazz in the evening when my mother was around. Additionally, there were many American customers who went to the geisha houses who brought toys and other products from America and other Western countries. I already had stereo sets, tape recorders, and other gadgets like that in the late 1950s to the early 1960s that were brought to us from foreign clients. That was a pretty big influence as well.

The impact, if there is an impact on my artistic career, would be these influences in the 1970s and Chicago music from that time. Specifically black avant-garde jazz music. That was a huge impact for me. I decided I wanted to come to Chicago to see and meet these people. I played extensively with avant-garde jazz musicians, then in the mid-1980s, I realized I needed to bring my own heritage to Chicago and I wanted express the legacy of the music from where I grew up. I felt I needed to create another music niche. It is a strong idea of intangible, tangible value. I knew from early on that I needed to do this, to sort of cultivate my own field in Chicago so I can grow my own crops. I am blessed and lucky to have so many people who have stuck with me for decades and the funding I have that has been generous and gracious to let me do what I believe. This is an interesting thing about America, the idea of philanthropy is very advanced in this country compared to Japan. It is really something special about this country.

To begin the process [of establishing a Japanese musical presence in Chicago], in the 1980s, I collaborated with existing taiko players, but I had to go to the West coast to get associated with a lot of people in LA and San Francisco who already were well established in those cities. I brought to Chicago these West coast elements because I needed to nurture my own associates. Then, I found several young drummers in Chicago and I became involved in shaping their basics. Tsukasa Taiko was founded by Hide Yoshihashi in 1996 and I started working with the group in 2001 when Tsukasa started collaborating with Asian Improv aRts Midwest [then named Innocent Eyes and Lenses (IEL)].

**AK: Very interesting. Why were the geisha houses cleared out in preparation for the Olympics games in the first place?**

TA: It was a "clean-up." Parts of Tokyo were being designed to accommodate international guests, and these smaller *okiya* houses were not good for the neighborhood. My family was not really pushed out of the areas we were in, but because of the entire economic movement we lost customers. The economy was booming but people were becoming more interested in new, modern luxuries. The whole neighborhood changed because the trend was for more cafes, restaurants, and other global establishments to come to Tokyo. In light of these circumstances, my grandfather and grandmother decided to fold it and temporarily moved to Ginza until I was in middle school

The trainers of the traditional arts were still there, however. By the late 1970s, nothing traditional was cool. No one would be interested in you if you played taiko or shamisen. But if you played electric guitar and sang American rock or pop songs, then you were popular.

**AK: When you started working with the avant-garde musicians in Chicago, what are some new ideas or techniques you started to apply?**

TA: The African American avant-garde artists were very interested in the East. Eastern elements were brought into their experimental music and I learned how different sounds can coexist. The concept of coexisting is not the concept of catering. It's having both aesthetic values to be somewhat equal and work together. Most present-day Japanese applications of music caters to Western rhythms, including most taiko music. This combination of Eastern and Western musical influences is seen in my work with the Miyumi Project.

Tsukasa Taiko does not bring in these coexisting elements. This is because it is the policy of my group and that is how I differentiate our style from all the others around us. The majority of what I see in contemporary taiko culture I do not believe and I try to offer what I believe to all of my performers and continue on that particular tradition. The cultural programs I am involved in (Tsukasa Taiko, Toyoaki Shamisen and Fujima Ryu dance) are consistently studying how to present the virtue of Japanese cultural aesthetics and ethnic pride of being Japanese.

**AK: As a musician and teacher, what do you hope to bring to students or people you perform for?**

TA: As a musician, we have to be partially educational in what we do in order to teach others how to play. So while I teach at the School of the Art Institute and Northwestern, this is so others become familiar with my art form and Japanese aesthetic values. I have a certain unnegotiable aesthetic value as a Japanese immigrant. That goes into things we eat, think about, and the art we do. It is my aim to teach people that part of the aesthetic. I am also hoping that the core of the Japanese immigrant aesthetic value

stays the same. Taiko, shamisen, and the dance program that I manage are just examples of how we may be able to maintain this aesthetic value. And this is very similar to eating food. Oftentimes, so much of the aesthetic value has been altered to the point where it does not carry the original intention of the aesthetics. I'm not talking about the styles, style can change. But the core aesthetic has to be maintained. I believe this idea is very philosophical. My work intentionally represents the original purpose of the art form and I want future generations to understand the virtue of Japaneseness which is not carried on very well in society.



**AK: As you were saying, Japanese culture tends to be present more so in the West and East coasts. And while I am not a first-generation immigrant, I can understand your perspective. There has been a history of assimilation in America and while this is changing, I am sure that children from immigrant parents want to be more like their peers and at times do not see the value in learning Japanese language, playing Japanese instruments, or things like that.**

TA: Yes. I'm worried most about educating the core value, but I use taiko to explain because it is a part of Japanese identity. I'm not a politician or a scholar, so I try to do this through art. Taiko is a great example of how everything got messed up through institutionalization. I do not really like what is happening with modern taiko and our group is very active. This reminds me of an article I once read about the differences between Japanese and American businesses. The Japanese are always worried and insecure about their performance and the American concept is that everything is great. Modern taiko is always interested in hitting and my taiko aesthetics focuses on the parts in the music that you don't hit. The aesthetics is very similar to kabuki music, the parts

that seemingly do not have much significance are the parts that drive the music. In order to understand it, you have to know the traditional Japanese music and the other Japanese arts. Understanding art forms like literature, painting, gardening, tea, etc. are also extremely important.

**AK: How long have you been doing Taiko Legacy and Reduction?**

TA: Legacy is on its twelfth year now. It started out as an annual student recital but has evolved to become a presentation of our cultural belief. From around Taiko Legacy Five, it started to become more about my artistic statement with the group. There are two beautiful things: 1) The youth in our taiko community are helping carry this on and believe in the aesthetics and 2) It is an avenue to demonstrate what we believe. About three years ago when we celebrated the tenth anniversary, I created the special Reduction program. Reduction uses a different aesthetic that represents the Underground Music I talked about earlier in the interview using traditional drumming. The museum really liked it and it has been well attended so the program has continued. A lot of people come to both shows where they see both traditional and an alternative aesthetic to the art. For me, it makes perfect sense to do Taiko Legacy and its alternative Reduction as a pair of concepts and beauty as they try to express the same core aesthetics. Additionally, around the time that Legacy and Reduction will be showing at the MCA, one of my experimental films will be playing as well.

**AK: How has Legacy changed over the years?**

TA: I think over the years I became more specific about the aesthetics. The First – Fifth Legacy was more about showing our ability for community engagement. Now, I've already embraced the community with people who are interested in us. Anything after Five - Ten, I am much more specific. I look at the twenty-three and twenty-four year old ensemble players that started when they were eight. Both the kids and parents have sacrificed so much to participate in drumming and it is very moving. Over the last three, four years, my performers have become more focused so I adjusted my programming to utilize their talents to the fullest. I already have a solid group of professional drummers so it is not really about the group or finding others to follow, it is about how community people are engaged in our specifics about Japanese aesthetics. In Japanese, the word *bitoku* is a beauty that can educate you, benefit you, that can help you understand a little deeper. It is a type of virtue that I bring to Taiko Legacy and it has changed into that. We are dealing with very high caliber music right now that is still community art but our demand is high and our performers are living up to it.

**AK: Do you have to do a lot of outreach to recruit others in your taiko group and other projects you are involved in or do people often come to you with interest?**

TA: For my performing crews, most come to me and want to do it. People don't realize that when you want to do this for real as an artist, it is your life and is a lifetime commitment. While we find it to be extremely enjoyable and fulfilling work, it is a mission. It's very different from having fun doing this on the weekends. It requires your body and soul completely.

**AK: What has been something that has been a challenge for you to overcome?**

TA: The first thing that comes to mind is going up against commercialism and institutionalism. It is a great thing in many ways, but the other side of the coin is that these systems can cause the original intention to be lost. Also as an arts organization, funding is always challenging. That is the most difficult part and I think my group is the only group in the Midwest right now that has fulltime traditional artists on staff and we need to see more of these people. That is not to say having this as a hobby is bad, that is another way to cultivate, but to have the real educational value someone has to be doing this as a profession as well. I like my taiko drummers and dancers to be making a living. We lost this culture of paying your piano teacher \$200 a month, now everyone wants to do it for \$25. For the people trying to make a living off of teaching their skills in the arts, this is a major struggle. Tsukasa Taiko has over 70 performances a year including community performances and professional shows, but how do we maintain this? The Japanese community, as compared to other Asian communities like the Chinese, do not have as many active individuals in the arts because I think, of the social factor involving WWII and the internment of Japanese Americans. There is a gap between that community and with new Japanese coming to the US. It is hard to fill that gap. I'd like to bridge it but it is very difficult to do that and is always a challenge.

**AK: Do you have any collaborations coming up or plans?**

TA: Many. On Halloween, I just finished one project at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum called "Pages." "Pages" was a tribute to a Japanese experimental film director Teinosuke Kinugasa who in the late 1920s made this movie called *A Page of Madness*. It was a monumental work for its time, considered the first avant-garde movie in Japan by many. Because it was such a massive project I did a tribute using taiko and worked with Melody Takata from GenRyu Arts [the Sister Dojo in San Francisco]. I am finishing up two new CDs as well with my taiko ensemble. And I am finishing up one long movie, which will be premiering in the fall of 2016.

**AK: What is the movie about?**

TA: Well, the movie is about a Chinese immigrant's forced labor. I made a short movie last year about the same subject matter and used Angel Island as the location where detainees were held. This new one is a story in New York. I worked with Asian American dancers, so it is a dance movie and I think it will premiere at some local film venues or museums.

Among other things, we are also working on writing academic documents on our aesthetics as well. This is to address the problem of too many do it yourself traditional arts practice today. These are not inherently bad, it is great that the culture and understanding is spreading, but this is how the aesthetics are lost. Nowadays, kids are learning how to play taiko and other things on YouTube and someone shows you how to through videos and not close interaction. The fun part is that anyone can do it, but the bad part is that is not carrying on the original meaning.

**AK: Would you argue that is the case for a lot of Japanese traditional arts, there is an aesthetic being lost? That it is great the popularity is spreading and people are eager to learn but that they are not doing it in the right way necessarily?**

TA: Right. I'm not sure we can complain about that in the post modern world. In the post modern world, the attitude is often who cares or rather the question is not the issue anymore. We get to learn and participate in something new. I am on the other side of the fence, however, saying that there is value to the real cultural and aesthetic lineage. If you look at taiko playing as a fun thing to do, it's a whole different route that you interpret. I like to offer educational value.

**AK: Is there any kind of personal quote you'd like to share?**

TA: I want people who are interested in creative things to "never quit looking for something that is not there." It is not practical to look for something that is not there but that is where the true art is.

I also believe that people in the modern world are more interested in what they want to do than what needs to be done. It is not really so much about what I want to do, because what I want to do is stay at home, read a book, sleep and eat. But what needs to be done to present this aesthetics we believe in must use taiko, dance, shamisen. People spend too much time debating and figuring out what they want to do. Cultural education is about what needs to be done to keep the original aesthetics intact so that this can be passed down or even rediscovered in the future.

