



Jason Matsumoto, Artistic Director of Ho Etsu Taiko

**Amy Klouse (AK): Tell us a little about yourself, where are you from and why have you chosen Chicago as your home?**

Jason Matsumoto (JM): So actually, I grew up in Wilmette, which is a northern suburb of Chicago. I've spent most of my life here and I am fourth generation Japanese in the United States with 100% Japanese ancestry. The exception of living in this area was when I went to school in Seattle at the University of Washington where I studied general business administration, with an international business element to it. While there, I had the opportunity to study abroad at Sophia University in Tokyo for one year as well. To me, Chicago is a very embracing city and it has always felt like home. That made it even more compelling to come back. My family has continued to live here as well so that is another obvious reason for my return.

**AK: What do you do now in Chicago?**

JM: It's interesting because it is almost like I'm living in two very different worlds. One is my career, where I work at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange doing product pricing and product strategy. The other is running a non-profit with Ho Etsu Taiko. I try to strike a balance and make both of them work which can be a challenge at times.

**AK: How did you become involved in Taiko?**

JM: I have a funny story. So, my mom and dad both played taiko. My mom was playing up until she was about 8 months pregnant with me. I think I heard the taiko when I was still in the womb and I feel like it is kind of in my blood to play. I got more seriously involved because my parents were the teachers at the Midwest Buddhist Temple in Lincoln Park and I joined very early because there were so many drums all over our house. It influenced me hearing them all of the time so I started to play. Taiko has been very interesting because as you go through life, there are stages, but taiko has been the one constant force throughout my life. From age 4 or 5 to now, which is 32.

**AK: Did you play when you were in Japan as well?**

JM: Yes, in Japan I played with an offshoot group attributed to the Kumi-daiko movement. I studied for a very short time with a person who was a part of that. I also played with some local community groups in Tokyo while I was there.

**AK: Can you tell us a little more about Ho Etsu Taiko. For instance, how did Ho Etsu Taiko form?**

JM: Ho Etsu basically formed out of the youth group that played at the Midwest Buddhist Temple about 17 or 18 years ago, which, as you know, my parents were the teachers and directors of. At a certain point, there was a large group of kids who were around the same age that had an interest in taiko and my parents decided to form the “new” Ho Etsu youth group at the temple. One problem with Buddhism in America has been attracting enough young people, however. When I came back to Chicago after graduating college, I went to play with Tatsu Aoki at Tsukasa Taiko. I also taught for a bit at Tsukasa and learned a lot about music during that time. I then went back to Ho Etsu and kind of took it over and opened membership to non-temple members about 5 or 6 years ago so as to attract more young people interested in learning this art form. We’ve been trying to learn how to play music more like an ensemble and less like a traditional kumi-daiko group, which is only drums. We want to layer music and use different instrumentation to bridge a gap between our musical influences growing up and this traditional taiko. And we are figuring out how to make it work together.

Currently, we have 8 members and we are all between the ages of 25-34. Ho Etsu is almost like a small family. While we still are closely connected to the Midwest Buddhist Temple, we are also a separate organization. I am the artistic director, so I write new songs and teach everyone new songs. I also assign other members of our group to do finances, marketing, communications, etc. The group is run like a non-profit, our work is all volunteer based with people who are passionate about it and like to spend the time on our work. We practice a lot, especially when preparing for upcoming shows, and are asking people who are not professionals to commit a lot of time to taiko. The expectation is that people are studying the music ahead of time at home as well and are prepared when we practice together.

As a consequence, not everyone stays. The decision is usually mutual and we understand if it becomes too much for a member to handle. Every year, we run classes and from those classes, we choose those who we think can contribute and become a taiko apprentice for a year. When we select a new member, a committee evaluates certain things like skill level and how they interact with others (group dynamic).

**AK: What do you hope to bring through taiko to Chicago and other areas you visit?**

JM: First of all, I would say taiko is still pretty niche, especially in the Midwest where there is not a huge epicenter of Japanese culture like there is in other places like Los Angeles, New York, or Japantown in San Francisco. There are not large populations of Japanese nationals living in a city, we have that here in Chicago to an extent but it is not as concentrated as it is elsewhere. As a result, not a lot of people see or experience Japanese culture as much here. So we are trying to introduce people to how fun taiko is. I’ve never done a show where someone has come up to me to say that it was not impressive or not very interesting and I think taiko is a musical vehicle to connect people to Japanese culture. As a group, we are pushing ourselves to become better musicians as well as introduce taiko to people in the Midwest area. The furthest we have traveled in the United States is

to Los Angeles and internationally we have played in Canada, but our primary focus is the Midwest region.

**AK: What has been the most difficult thing you have had to overcome? What did you learn from that experience?**

JM: If I look back, I would say one of the most difficult things for me growing up was understanding my identity. I grew up in a very Caucasian American suburb, a community that was not very diverse. When I went to the west coast for school, there were a lot more Asian Americans and people to interact with that came from similar backgrounds. Figuring out who I was has been a challenge. Even when I went to Japan, I was expecting to feel like I fit in there and it was home but when I went, I felt very American. I thought to myself, I made it all the way to Japan but I still don't know who I am! But when I came back to the United States and started playing taiko more seriously, I realized that we cannot fit into one specific bucket but are a combination of many. We are our own unique selves. That discovery process took a long time, feeling like I did not fit into some defined area.

**AK: Do you have any personal quote, philosophy, or words you live by that you'd like to share?**

JM: My philosophy through taiko and through music is to convince people who used to play music to play again. I think that's really important, I find myself getting caught up in my job and feel there is one track. But there is so much more. There are a lot of people who went through intense musical training and give it up because they need to make money or they need to do this or do that. When I talk to people, especially with Ho Etsu Taiko working out new and interesting collaborations with other musicians, a lot of times I meet people who tell me they were very good at one point. I try to convince them to pick that instrument back up to see what could happen. Pick it back up, once you've already learned, it is a lot easier to start again. You've done all of the hard work already, it's kind of hidden and you need to have or make an opportunity to use it!

**AK: Tell us about your upcoming show, ROTATIONS.**

JM: Our group is at a stage where we are very serious ensemble musicians. As the Artistic Director, I think about who I want us to work with and learn from in the taiko community. On top of this list of people is Shoji Kameda from On Ensemble in Los Angeles, who studied in Japan, grew up playing taiko, and is an electronic and world music composer. I reached out to him about a year ago and we've been working together the past year and I pitched the show to him and I asked if we could collaborate with him and he agreed. So we have been thinking about how we incorporate each other's members into the other group and also thinking about new music that would highlight the combined groups. Since May or so, we have been working on writing new music for the show while bearing in mind how to bring each group's members into the other groups songs. We're very excited to present ROTATIONS!

**AK: Would you say the music is more experimental for ROTATIONS? Are you combining taiko with different genres?**

JM: The one thing I learned from Shoji is to build music in a very textured or layered way. So we are trying new things with the drums and this is a bit of a new direction for us. We have one song that is brand new that incorporates vibraphone instrumentation and English lyrics to be sung on top of

the music. Sumie Kaneko from New York will be there as well performing koto, shamisen, and some folk singing while Shoji will do a special type of throat singing.

**AK: Do you have any future plans of events or ideas?**

JM: There are two collaborations we really hope will work out for next year. One is working with a cajon performer and a flamenco singer. The other I have in mind is that I really want to write music that combines taiko with a brass band. We might also be hosting a professional taiko group from Australia next year, but this has not yet been confirmed.

**AK: Has there been anyone that has really inspired you in taiko, or someone who now inspires you?**

Yes, a lot of people know of Kodo because they are probably the most publicized and most successful group that is internationally recognized. It is absolutely impressive to see the precision, endurance, and stamina that they play with. And the passion that comes out on stage with them. When I saw that when I was young, guys that look like me, not 6'5' basketball players, and felt the pounding sensation from their huge drums it felt more attainable for me. I'd definitely leave the shows thinking I want to do that someday.

Today, people like Shoji who are taking this idea of taiko and pushing it to the next phase of what it could be inspires me. It encourages me to mix taiko with different musical influences and experiment with different instrumentation and musical traditions as well.

**AK: What is the best part of performing taiko?**

JM: Sharing taiko music with the audience. You see their reactions and feed off of their energy which makes you keep trying harder. Performances are much more exciting for us when playing for an engaged audience.

**AK: Any final message?**

JM: Come to the show!

