



2-26-2010

Tatsu Aoki Interview

Brian Callahan
DePaul University

Recommended Citation

Callahan, Brian, "Tatsu Aoki Interview" (2010). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. Paper 19.
http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/19

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Interviewer: Brian Callahan

Musician: Tatsu Aoki

In-Person School of the Art Institute 37 S. Wabash Ave. Chicago, IL 60603

Date: February 26, 2010 2:55 pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



Brian Callahan: All right, so you're a musician and a filmmaker and an educator in Chicago, is this correct?

Tatsu Aoki: Right, yes.

Brian Callahan: How many years have you been playing jazz?

Tatsu Aoki: Well I started jazz music in Japan in reflection from traditional Japanese music, you know I didn't want to do that anymore when I went to high school so I switch, so, so getting into the jazz will be, I don't know, I must have been 17 or 18 so over 20 years 20, 30 years!

Brian Callahan: 30 years?

Tatsu Aoki: Over 30 years.

Brian Callahan: Wow. What was it about jazz that brought you to that genre of music instead of say, you know, blues or rock and roll or...?

Tatsu Aoki: Well see, jazz and blues are very similar, because I still perform with a lot of blues musicians and a lot of jazz musicians together, so umm, let me ah, put them into the same category for now umm, ah, the Western or, or black music, to Japanese music was um, ah... I was, if you read my bio, I was born in this very special environment of a geisha family so I was trained in ah classical geisha classical music, which is a little different than mainstream classical music. Um, which is very similar to how blues music originated. Because geisha culture is not a mainstream culture in Japan. And ah, my music training, which is today I think people listen to my music when I play my geisha music to be a classical Japanese music. But at the, for so many years they were not really classified as classical Japanese music, there was like a ghetto music. So um, under-rated the tradition, under-rated traditional art music, which is very similar to blues music, very similar to gospel music, very similar to jazz music. So, there are the structural idea of the music relates a lot more the jazz and blues music more so than rock and classical music for the reason of this concept of improvisation that classical music like Japanese classical music which is kabuki music called “naguata” that’s written music and the geisha music and folk music are improvised music based on, a lot of that stuff is based on improvisational all though a lot of that stuff is formulated, but on top of the formula, you improvise, so it was easy for me to see and listen to blues and jazz when I was a teenager rather than ah, certain parts of rock music I can listen to you know, but ah, rock music is not really quite improvised music, its different, so I got interested in that. Also, my youth in the late 70’s was spent on when the Japanese had a lot of underground arts movement, so along with that experiment with that experiment of film, performance, mixed media, you know, and avant-garde jazz avant-garde music were very popular in my youth, and I picked up Chicago’s avant-garde music which is you know, generated by this small organization call AACM, and ah, I was really really influenced by people like Arnold Samble and Fred Anderson and all these people. Now I sort of work with them, but they were my inspiration. And basically so mixture of, you know, basically getting out of that environment that I was in, to doing something new.

Brian Callahan: Is jazz still really underground in Japan?

Tatsu Aoki: No, no, no, jazz, I think jazz is ah, people call me a jazz musician but I think my kind of jazz is not the mainstream jazz music you know, so its very experimental, very avant-garde.

Brian Callahan: You mean in America its not or in Japan it’s not?

Tatsu Aoki: Both.

Brian Callahan: Yah, because when I listen to some of your stuff online I thought to myself that that’s not the jazz that I’m used to hearing.

Tatsu Aoki: No, no, and also all my mentors, you know, from Chicago are not the mainstream jazz musicians. So, I think, I always be careful when people call me jazz musician. Its not really jazz in the way you know. But when I collaborate with blues musician I do play bluesy music so you can kind of relate to that.

Brian Callahan: In an interview with Charles Sutto, you said that in New York you couldn't get a read on the pulse of the city. It was going to be either New Orleans or Chicago and you chose Chicago.

Tatsu Aoki: Well because it's a rooted idea, you know, a rooted music idea of rooted community. From the East Coast I think this is much more, what do you call it, "country side" right? So, in Japan too I think, I come from Tokyo so my profile is a little more like New York, and I'm very proud of Tokyo culture. You know, when I play traditional music it's very much of Tokyo music, but I was interested in that rooted, non-New York sound. And I think you can tell by looking at the rock music as well. There's a big difference between the rock bands coming from the West Coast to East Coast. There's a different sound and I was really attracted to that.

Brian Callahan: What did New Orleans not have, what was New Orleans lacking?

Tatsu Aoki: Well New Orleans, I was interested, but the kind of rooted music New Orleans has was not really the same as Chicago. Chicago is a very blues rooted, you know, heavy blues sound and I really, even with the people that plays the completely avant-garde music you know the black musicians, they are all rooted in this blues and its similar to geisha music. It's rooted in folk music in many ways.

Brian Callahan: When you got to Chicago, how was your welcoming? Did you difficult to get into the music scene? You said now these people who were your mentors you are now playing with them, and kind of colleagues with them. How was their acceptance to your style?

Tatsu Aoki: Well, I think the masters that I work with, they didn't really have any problem with that. But I think that generally people do have a problem because we have to face, one is the Asian stereotype, so people will immediately think, can you really play this? You know, that's also, we get this from black people and white people. With the classical music we don't really get this because a lot of Asian people play classical music. So, but when it comes to something non mainstream, you know, then people say, wow can you really play the jazz music. That's a...I think that's a fight against the stereotype.

Brian Callahan: So people were pretty surprised when they saw you with your instruments, saw you with your bass?

Tatsu Aoki: Yah ,yah, I think so, but I also play the shamisan, which is a lute, Japanese three string lute, so um, I think they knew that I come from an ethnic background. But I think it's difficult to have a status, because I think if I'm just um playing jazz like everyone else is playing the jazz music then I wouldn't be where I am today. I came to where I am today because I play a unique Asian American experience. You know, because my band, my music has a lot to do with you know the mixture of the Asian tradition and the contemporary Chicago jazz music. And that's why I think I am where I am now and if I was just playing like everyone else, mainstream jazz it would be

extremely difficult. I think I benefit from playing a different kind of music. So I don't think that really satisfies the issue of minority much in a sense that you know, I have a very unique style of the music that represents experience of immigrants. So, you know, sure if I play standard, mainstream jazz and be out there as a bassist like some of the cats do. Would I have the same recognition that I have today? I don't think so. So, so, that's always a problem. I think I have recognition today because I play different music.

Brian Callahan: That make complete sense.

Tatsu Aoki: But in general, you know, a lot of racial experiences you go through. Because I remember so many times when I started out you get jokes about, Asian jokes. When you're on tour you realize that you're not respected by the spectators as much as black musicians in the field.

Brian Callahan: By the audience or by the musicians too?

Tatsu Aoki: By the audience, by the promoters by the producers. Not the musicians, musicians are always playing music with us, so they're used to, they know we can do this, you know, we play. And in some instances we play a lot better than some others.

Brian Callahan: So the musicians were the ones who accepted you, it was everyone else?

Tatsu Aoki: It's always the organizers, producers, writers, you know, those are the ones that you, you are, you feel that you are bumped out all the time.

Brian Callahan: Did you have a hard time playing in some of the clubs when you first got here?

Tatsu Aoki: Well I don't think, no, not really because it took me a long time to lead my own group, you know, because I was always hired by great jazz musicians, you know, avant-garde jazz musician in Chicago, so I was okay in the clubs. But, um, yah generally your not accepted as a leader. And I thin I needed a lot of help from some key figures in Chicago. They did help me and now I am okay to be where I am now.

Brian Callahan: Who were the ones who helped you the most?

Tatsu Aoki: I think exactly the director at the Jazz Institute has endorsed my work many times and that would put me into many places. You know, like being at the Chicago Jazz Festival is one of the endorsements form the executive director, you know, Lauren Deutche, the director. Without her, that would be very difficult. Or you know, somebody, producer from Southport records, he was, you know, I think venturous enough to put out the album, you know, let my name into the label. And Fred Anderson was my mentor in free jazz. He took me and he hired me as a sideman in many places and took me to the tour, international tour, so I was recognized that way. So those are the, you know, help.

Brian Callahan: Your biography said you had 60 different recording projects...

Tatsu Aoki: Yah, I have more now.

Brian Callahan: Oh, well I guess this is a bit out of date.

Tatsu Aoki: Probably, I have 60 plus of my own projects, I'm a sideman for a lot of others. I would say over 100 recording, easily by this time.

Brian Callahan: Wow, that's a lot! Are there any that stand out in particular to you? Any that have any special meaning above the rest for any reason?

Tatsu Aoki: I think, I think my own and the Miyumi Project is really memorable, you know, it's the first time I was able to bring the taiko drumming which reside in the community for so many years into the mainstream stages with my presentation, so that and I have another project called Baso live which is just the bass and the taiko drum. And I perform a few times at the museums and I have a couple releases and those are the memorable pieces. Then of course my work with Fred Anderson is always important because it's a musical collaboration, but I think it's a political acceptance when, you know, when you have a internationally famous artists and you're part of his project. And he was never, he never had a, any problem with my being Asian. I think it was always producers, writers, promoters, people who have the power. Because artists really don't have the power to produce and promote. So my, I mean, I can tell you many experiences with city officials and programmers you know producers that deliberately bumped us out. I think the result is you can clearly see how many Asian led band or lead group are introduced in many of the festivals, you probably don't see any.

Brian Callahan: You just brought up the Miyumi Project, I was going to ask you to kind of describe what exactly your band was?

Tatsu Aoki: It is a, I think very, very Chicago avant-garde jazz, but it's very Asian, and a template that I have for the Miyumi Project is that many times when the Asian instruments collaborate with Western music 99% of the time they are playing Western music and the instruments are Eastern, Asian instruments. Which means that all the musical idea are based on Western music and the instruments are Eastern, Asian instruments so that there's a collaboration. And Miyumi Project is reversing the idea. The Western instrument in trying to play the Eastern music. And my Baso Live Project is the same way. That my notations on my Western fiddle has something deeply to do with the Asian concept and not visa versa. So a lot of times when you say Asian collaboration with the Western music, Asian music is giving in to the Western music.

Brian Callahan: So this is the Western Music giving into the Eastern music?

Tatsu Aoki: Right, right.

Brian Callahan: How has your current music been accepted in Japan, back home, when you go and play?

Tatsu Aoki: Well, the only ones that Japan's accepting of my music is that there has been very strong interest by the classical shamisen players to learn the geisha music. So I go back there to play, teach, the geisha music, because there's not many left that know about that music. Asian American music, Japan is not interested in that. I don't think Asia is interested in Asian American. Asia is always interested in the West. And the West is always interested in Asia. That's why we have issues in Asian American.

Brian Callahan: Stuck in the middle?

Tatsu Aoki: Right. Because, see the majority of America is okay dealing with Asia, so when you say international, that means you invite Asian and you invite other people to America, but they don't really think about the Asian American diasporas that's connected to Asian American collections. So, that's how we get bumped out. See, my experience with Japan, the homeland is that Japan, Japanese are not interested in Asian American, they are very interested in Western music, very interested in America, currently Europe, because America, American profile was kinda popping out in the international arena (laugh).

Brian Callahan: So would they be more interested in, say, you know, and American boy band or rock and roll?

Tatsu Aoki: Or jazz, mainstream jazz or blues. And part of the problem is this, I think it connects to the Asian American arts too, we're all brainwashed, you know, from 1900 on to be anything Western, it's better than Asian. So Asians come with the preconceived idea that if you become Western that's better, see?

Brian Callahan: Why do you think that is?

Tatsu Aoki: Well you know, for Japan and Korea, a lot of it has to do with the war [WWII]. You know, we completely lost the war, you know. For Japanese, mainly restoration in the late 1800's is something, because the government decided Western is much better. So Western equals civilization and Asian equals non-civilization. So they still carry that complex. So when you look at the majority of the immigrant families they want to assimilate to white culture and that's the better life rather than constituting our own community. So, I think nowadays we study Asian American issues so I think things can be changing a little bit, but until now, I strongly believe that we always were taught that Western is better.

Brian Callahan: Do you think that has something to do with why the traditional geisha music faded out?

Tatsu Aoki: Geisha music faded out due to the economy. It's another whole interesting story. Geisha culture is based on the concept of having mistresses. And mistresses equal

economic advancement. So, Japan did have that time in first 1700's. That time was so wealthy that everybody, they were able to have mistresses. Post-war Japan, some of the economic revival that took place in the 50's, some parts of Japan were able to do it. In the 60's some parts of Japan were able to do it. In the 70's, no part of Japan were able to, very few parts of Japan were able to do it. Because people were so busy becoming salary man and you don't have that leisure to spend an extra \$1000 a month for your mistress. So many of the geisha houses went out of business. What's interesting is that Tokyo Olympic was 1964 and Olympic sanction came into Tokyo and they wiped out most of the downtown small businesses to do this Olympic.

Brian Callahan: I had a question and you pretty much answered it, it was about your geisha background. It was how did your geisha background influence you? In your bio it says you did your first performance at the age of four. Did you know at four years old that you were going to be a performer?

Tatsu Aoki: I didn't know I was going to be a performer, but I knew by teenager that, that was something I could do well, aside from taking classes. You know, some kids are good at, they could say, I'm really good at math, and among all that stuff I just realized that well you know, I'm ah, I'm kind of made like a performer. So I could do this very well.

Brian Callahan: Is it something that your parents pushed you toward?

Tatsu Aoki: Well they didn't push me it was the environment. Because, you know, my mother was busy with her business and she would leave me alone at home and grandmother was a trainer of geisha ladies and she would have me beside her all day long and I'm sitting there listening to all these lessons that's all music and dance and everything else and I grew up like that. So I just knew what to do with that. And it didn't really take to long for me to get some degree of technicality of playing the jazz music or you know rock music. I was into rock music.

Brian Callahan: How long have you been with SAIC? [School of the Art Institute of Chicago]

Tatsu Aoki: I graduated in 1985 and I started teaching here in 1985. But, it's only a part time faculty job, so I don't teach here full time.

Brian Callahan: Are you mostly film here or music too?

Tatsu Aoki: Yah, film. And some semesters I teach Asian Identity in Cinema and I also teach that class at Northwestern.

Brian Callahan: So you don't teach any music courses?

Tatsu Aoki: No, so it's kind off funny, I teach experimental film or film history. That's kind of my part time job; my day job so to speak is playing my music. (Laugh)

Brian Callahan: How is doing experimental film and all these other things with film, how much of an impact does this have with you? Would you say that jazz is your first choice or would you say that film is?

Tatsu Aoki: Well it's all really the same. You know, because some things that I want to talk about cannot be done in music so I try to do it visually with the film. And some films or some ideas that I have are not able to express by making film so I do music. Other ideas that I have I talk, like this with you. So, it's all part of my life as an artist. So I don't really have which is which. I still produce a lot of short experimental films and play music.

Brian Callahan: How did you get into filmmaking?

Tatsu Aoki: Well, well my biological father was a filmmaker, so I was born between a geisha lady and a filmmaker. So, I do half and half.

Brian Callahan: Well, that's all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Tatsu Aoki: Well, this is for your Asian American Class?

Brian Callahan: Yes, Asian American Art History

Tatsu Aoki: So, I think it's always, we're always fighting with the idea ah, in my music I try to bring in Asia, strong. Because the concept that we have from the traditional Asian music or art is different from Western and I feel that we don't really have to sacrifice our basic concept to the Western aesthetics. And I think we can constitute wonderful artistic ideas by using Asian basic concept aesthetics. But so much of this world has been given to Western idea and I think Asian Americans are generally sandwiched in between that. You know, you have a few exotic oriental kind of you know stereotype and you are up against new world, you know techno Asian. But Asian American culture is really, really deep in its own category. It's a very, very wealthy culture. Not the Asian culture, I'm talking about the Asian American Culture, and it should be investigated more. And I think I can say most Asian American students today, even people in the position of leading, like professors or the teachers probably all agree that we are not getting the best leaders of a lot of the stuff, you know, politics, arts, social environment, social positions, we're still not really up there and being bumped out and it has something to do with not Asian and not completely so-called American, you know, it's a complete American, but it's an Asian American. So, I think its not accepted well to the American society. We have a ways to go and it's good that you guys are interested in this, because you can see the issues.

Brian Callahan: Well this is the point behind doing this kind of research.

Tatsu Aoki: Right. And I think you know, behind the scenes stories are the most interesting. We can all tell you, any of us can tell you all these things, its one of those things, it one of those minority equaled, i.e. Asian American experience that you only notice because you are Asian American. I had so many chances, so many, well I shouldn't say chances, so many occasions that I was able to express that publicly and I also had so many times that I had to put it in my, you know, in myself, because it's awkward to tell people about it but you know it. Like I don't want to argue all the time, if I was a white man this wouldn't happen to me, I don't want to say that, but at the same time you know that's why it's happening.

Brian Callahan: Have you seen any progress in the time that you have been here? Since you've come to America, have you seen America progress in acceptance?

Tatsu Aoki: Well I think a little, very little. But you know, the longer you stay here in this country, the more you become more Asian American than Asian and I know, one, Asian's will have a better chance of being accepted than Asian Americans. Because Asians are visitors and visitors don't have a social impact. Asian Americans are residents and may have social impact. So, the majority don't like the minority with the social impact, so I think that's the main impact. I can see from the institutions that a lot of the white people get promotions a lot faster than we do, you know? And so, is that really based on the criteria as it is like an equal criteria or not? It's a very difficult subject matter to talk publicly about. But if you're minority you kind of know.

Brian Callahan: What would you say to the model minority that Asian Americans are sometimes pegged with? The minority that doesn't speak out and does well in school and so on?

Tatsu Aoki: Well I think it's part of our nature that all of Asian families pay a lot of attention to education. And education is really important to all of us. So that, it is true that when you look at Asian American communities their really nice, they play nice roles as role models, but it also backfires. I think it a jealousy when people make fun of that, good at math (laugh). It is true though, so um, the stereotype is I think, I can accept the stereotyping as long as it is really based on the respect of the reality. So, stereotyping math is better (laugh) then stereotyping as a gangster. So that's part of our, ah, legacy I think. Our, I think our cultural legacy for Asian American is generally speaking we have a good ratio if a good education. And our sacrifice ration for our parents is really high. Asian parents really sacrifice a lot for their kids' education. And I hear that's very true with the Jewish community too.

Brian Callahan: Do you think that second and third generation Asian American who are fully engulfed in the Western culture who have grown up with white friends and, you know, might take it for granted a little bit more, how much their parents have sacrificed for them?

Tatsu Aoki: I sure hope that they would understand sometimes. When they're young they may not realize. But being Western is a, I think if there are no more issues of being

Asian American there maybe the time that we don't really talk about it. I think basically being Asian American is something that was discussed because there was so much problem with being Asian American. So now, we have to study it, so, so now we have to study this. If there's any, if there's no issue than we will be happy. Then we just be very happy and very proud of the Asian heritage. But a lot of times we are not happy because we feel that we are getting bumped out

Brian Callahan: With the music scene, you said the promoters and the higher-ups, the people who really control the scene, were the least accepting of you, as an Asian American. Do you see that changing any time soon? Or is it going to be a long road?

Tatsu Aoki: That's a long road. I think they are very receptive to Asians, you know, producers and promoters, because it's, immigrant is always hard. I think not only Asian American, but we can talk about Middle Eastern American, Iranian American, they are always having a hard time, because you know, its easy for some American producers to invite, say someone from Asia rather than lets invite someone from Asian American Community, because they contain different things.

Brian Callahan: Do you think it would be different if more Asian Americans obtained those higher positions of being promoters and producers?

Tatsu Aoki: Yah, of course, of course.

Brian Callahan: Do you foresee that happening?

Tatsu Aoki: I'm not too much into politics, but I don't really see any Asian American politicians to many times yet. I don't see Asian American producers to many times, I don't see Asian American music-related business owners to many times. I think that has to do with producers, you know, presenters, curators. All these positions decide what to do.

Brian Callahan: Okay, well thank you.

Tatsu Aoki: Well I hope I answered all you questions.

Brian Callahan: Yes, I think this was great.

Tatsu Aoki: Ok good.

END