

## Asian American Improvisation in Chicago: Tatsu Aoki and the 'New' Japanese American Taiko

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Publicity postcard from the 2005 Asian American Jazz Festival in Chicago, showing Hide Yoshihashi playing taiko

I attended the 10th annual Asian American Jazz Festival in Chicago on October 1 and 2, 2005, and my head is still full of the sounds from the two concerts I caught. San Francisco-based Francis Wong headed up a sextet that featured AACM member Mwata Bowden, pianist Jon Jang, percussionist Elliott Umberto Kavee, vocalist/poet Genny Lim, and bassist Tatsu Aoki. The next afternoon, two Japanese American drumming groups—JASC Tsukasa Taiko from Chicago and Gen Taiko from San Francisco—presented a tight, spirited program of *kumi-daiko*, or contemporary Japanese ensemble drumming. Within a day, the festival moved from creative jazz-based improvisation to the old-but-new world of contemporary-traditional taiko, and Tatsu Aoki <<http://tatsuaoki.com/>> was the connecting thread.



Tatsu Aoki

Aoki is a fixture in the Chicago jazz scene, and he has organized, curated, and produced its Asian American Jazz Festival since its inception. He is also *Issei*—a Japanese immigrant—who self-identifies as Asian American. In this essay, I look at Aoki's recent work in order to consider the place of the Asian/American in the world of American improvisation and public presentation. Aoki's long-term involvement in the (Asian) American creative improvisation scene is well known, but his more recent work with a Chicago taiko group suggests that the interface between the 'traditional' and the 'experimental' can create new forms of community-based transnational performance. In the previous sentences, I combined the words 'Asian' and 'American' in three different ways and will continue to trouble their interrelationships as I proceed. Putting them together—"Asian American"—dates to the 1960s and the birth of the Asian American movement; it was a self-conscious effort to acknowledge the ways that Americans of Asian descent, regardless of specific ethnic/national background, shared certain histories of discrimination,

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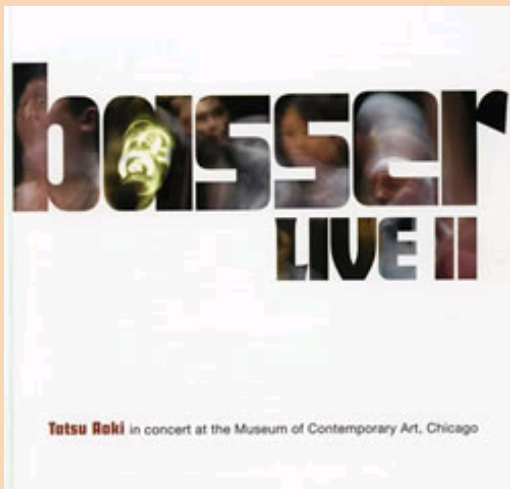
  


CLOSE

racism, and containment (Wei 1994).<sup>1</sup> I opt not to add a hyphen (“Asian-American”), preferring the open space between the two words and choosing not to enter the formulation of ‘hyphenated Americans.’<sup>2</sup> Other kinds of punctuation suggest more dynamic relationships. “Asian/American” joins the two in a manner that affords the possibility of being both at once or moving between the two. “(Asian) American” highlights a kind of Americanness that is Asian American. And so on. I like the two former possibilities but will use “Asian American,” preferring the unburdened adjective while refusing to rely on the dramatic props of back-slashes and parentheses in order to assert Americans who are Asians who are Americans.

Aoki’s musical activities involve several traditions and several sites. In a given week, he can be found in different Chicago neighborhoods playing swing and jazz-based improvisation on acoustic bass, taiko, and *shamisen* (a traditional Japanese fretless plucked lute). I ask the following questions about his efforts to combine acoustic bass and taiko:

- How and why has Aoki ‘returned’ to traditional Japanese music at this point in his life and career?
- How and why do taiko and creative improvisation represent a useful intersection for Aoki’s cultural, political, and musical aims?
- If *Shin Issei* identity is up for grabs (in Asian American terms), how does Aoki’s work solidify its political possibility in some ways and complicate it in others?
- How does Aoki’s work add to, challenge, or disrupt competing narratives about American and Asian American improvisation?



Cover of the *Basser Live II* album

I offer a close reading of narrowly defined materials. Through Aoki and his album *Basser Live II*,<sup>3</sup> I address matters that speak more broadly to the questions driving this entire special issue of *CSI/ÉCI*. Aoki is deliberately constructing a transnational, immigrant Asian American subjectivity through his work. Doing this in Chicago—a major American city with a large number of Asians but scant Asian American presence—has necessitated the creation of new spaces for the performance of Asian American identities in a mindful and heightened manner.

Let me be clear: I am not interested in taiko as an authentically Asian practice, and I am especially not interested in the way its presence in Aoki’s recent music could be read as a way to Asianize improvisational practice. I maintain here, as I have elsewhere, that Asian American creative music has not been directed toward an Asian American nationalism in the ways that certain forms of Black nationalist musics have been a necessary and important critical tool for African American creative musicians. Asian American creative musicians have often focused on constructing an Asian American activism through interethnic encounters.<sup>4</sup> Aoki has long worked through that register, and here I consider the ways that he extends those critical skills into an exploration of a ‘traditional’ Japanese American practice.<sup>5</sup> In working with taiko players, he could be seen to be moving towards sameness (a Japanese musician working with a Japanese idiom), but I argue that something far more deeply dialogical is at its heart. Further, the specific model for activist arts that characterizes Aoki and Asian Improv extends far beyond ‘the music’ into the creation (and occupation) of civic spaces and institutions, including grassroots and non-profit organizing, infiltrating ‘downtown’ venues, and more. This model for minoritarian arts has teeth.

This article examines taiko in Chicago, but taiko is also part of a bigger story about the Japanese

diaspora. Briefly put, taiko is a form of contemporary, folkloricized Japanese drumming. It is hugely popular in both Japan and the Japanese American community but also has an Asian American and multiethnic following. Taiko is probably several thousand years old and has been used in Japanese Shinto and Buddhist ritual for centuries. It is found in virtually every region of Japan and is central to many kinds of festival music. Putting many taiko of different sizes together into an ensemble, however, is a very recent development and is called *kumi-daiko* (ensemble drums). I will refer to the North American *kumi-daiko* phenomenon through this paper simply as 'taiko,' following the practice of taiko players themselves. *Kumi-daiko* is directly traceable to several post-war Japanese musicians in the 1950s who mindfully attempted to revive and sustain folkloricized drumming by contemporizing it. Anthropologist Shawn Bender has constructed the most detailed account of taiko's formative years in Japan (68-154), explaining how several early groups (O-Suwa Daiko, Sukeroku Daiko, and Ondekoza) led to the spectacular success and worldwide popularity of Kodo, formed in 1981 in Japan. Bender traces the ways that some members of these foundational groups turned to 'folk' practices in search of 'authentic' Japanese culture in the context of post-war doubt and social upheaval. Bender estimates that there were thousands of taiko groups in Japan at the time of his research in the late 1990s. Although certain kinds of festival taiko were brought to North America by Japanese immigrants in the late nineteenth century, *kumi-daiko* was imported by Seiichi Tanaka, who founded the San Francisco Taiko Dojo in 1968. Young *Sansei* (third generation Japanese Americans) inspired by the Asian American Movement created other groups. In Canada and the U.S. at the time of this writing, there are approximately 150-200 taiko groups, almost entirely amateur and community-based; some are explicitly Japanese American Buddhist in purpose while others are secular and wide open to all.

North American taiko<sup>6</sup> ensembles locate their activities in many different ways. Taiko has been an important channel through which Japanese Americans explore heritage, though the representational frames around taiko offer an array of complicating issues. *Kumi-daiko* was a folkloricized postwar activity in Japan before it was exported to San Francisco, and it is so profoundly mediated as to provoke the question of access to authentic Japanese culture or practices. On the other hand, it is not easily dismissed as inauthentic, since its praxis and performance have come to carry significant weight in Japan as well as abroad; the westernization and modernization of Japan in the late twentieth century generated attendant anxieties over national identity which in turn drove nostalgia practices that included taiko. In the U.S., some Japanese Americans have looked to taiko for individual and community empowerment by drawing on ideas about Japaneseness that may be critically suspect but are inarguably real sources of strength and affirmation for people in their everyday life. Since the late 1960s, Asian Americans of non-Japanese descent have flocked to taiko in search of Asian-derived practices that offer alternative performative means for constructing minoritarian identity.<sup>7</sup> However, the mediated nature of culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries means that praxis is always authentic while the materials out of which it is built cannot be—that is, North American taiko is all too easily revealed as a construct but the work it effects for its practitioners is real. Handles like 'pride,' 'presence,' and 'celebration' are entangled in the commercial practices of multiculturalism but nonetheless offer tools to Asian American communities responding to systemic discrimination both past and present. At a certain level, the loud, visible, disciplined, and joyous presence of Asian Americans playing taiko is a powerful performative statement that works directly against histories of containment and silencing. The 'work' that taiko enables is thus impossible to generalize but should not be passed over, nor assumed to be stable. For instance, there are indications that non-Asian Americans (especially White Americans) are increasingly drawn to taiko, which suggests that the specific identity work done by taiko will continue to change. If the identity politics of taiko as Japanese American and Asian American are both necessary and slippery, then its passage from heritage work to non-specific globality will also need interrogation. I offer all this to say that taiko is tightly linked to Japanese American and Asian American communities for real, politicized reasons. I will not go into these matters in much more detail here; they are both bottomless and urgently important, and I explore them in depth in my book in progress.<sup>8</sup> All these dynamics inform Aoki's activities in Chicago.



Tatsu Aoki

Joseph S.C. Lam has argued that, whether or not “Asian American music” is a useful category for thinking about Asian American musical activity, it is certainly a useful way to illuminate Asian American struggles, which have included discrimination, racist violence, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and more. Lam asks, “ What does Asian American music, its presence or absence, tell about American culture and history?” (30). I have argued that Asian American identity may not be signaled through any one-to-one correspondence between sounds and ethnicity or politics. Rather, music (whether produced or consumed) is a highly unpredictable site for identity work, especially for Asian Americans because of our absence from the American public sphere. Any Asian American musician focused on the production of an Asian American music must decide how to line up intent, musical sounds, and reception. Orientalist reinterpretation is the omnipresent problem. One way to create sounds that signal Asian Americanness is to insert Asian instruments into non-Asian musical practice. This is sometimes ‘effective’ in the sense that it offers unmistakable visual and sonic signals to audiences, but it also sets up the possibility of hearing/seeing Asian Americans as permanently foreign. At that level, Asian instruments and Asian musical sounds can have the important pedagogical function of forcing audiences to think about the Asian-western encounter if a critical consciousness is built into the activity.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Aoki deploys taiko in an activist manner; his performers’ location in the local Japanese American/Asian American community is central to his purpose. He connects to traditions through performers, and he does not position performers as stand-ins for, or representatives of, musical traditions. Traditions therefore cannot become stand-ins for race or nation, though they emerge out of those valences. Instead, as in the most politically grounded creative improvisational practices, the musical encounter between individuals carries history forward, right into the negotiation of the resulting sounds.



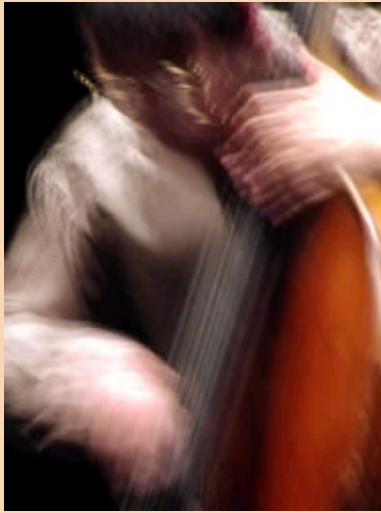
**Tatsu Aoki**

Aoki is deeply informed by two interpolated streams of improvisational effort, the AACM and Asian Improv. He has collaborated with many of the AACM giants, and his placement in Chicago is central to his own sense of identity as a creative musician. He has been involved with the Bay Area circle of Asian American musicians since 1993, and has participated in their long and considered historical connection to the AACM. Aoki has been the President of Asian Improv Records since 1999 and brings its various recording artists to Chicago several times a year for concerts; Asian Improv staff member/musician Jeff Chan moved from San Francisco to Chicago in 2002 in order to help develop a Midwest arm of the organization with Aoki. In short, Asian American musical ties between the Bay Area and Chicago are strong. The Asian American jazz scene in Chicago is in some ways a coalitional cousin of the lively Bay Area scene, but in other ways is a frontier outpost because the factors that can create that ineffable thing—a feeling of Asian American presence—haven’t yet emerged in Chicago.

Aoki has written, “Who we are is what we sound like, and what we sound like is who we are.”<sup>10</sup> I begin with an overview of Aoki’s life history and his approach to Asian American musical practices in a Midwest American environment.

## **Biography**





**Tatsu Aoki playing the bass**

Aoki has lived in the U.S. since 1978. His friend and collaborator Anthony Brown has described him as follows:

[Aoki's] prodigious achievements as a soloist notwithstanding, he has also created a body of music with an astounding variety of collaborators representing the stalwarts of Chicago's creative jazz traditions including Fred Anderson, Von Freeman, Afifi Phillard, Mwata Bowden and Hamid Drake, all the while maintaining his foothold in the rhythm & blues community with Elijah Levi and Yoko Noge. Tatsu Aoki is in fact the most recorded Asian American creative musician.

His mother was a *geisha*, a courtesan trained in the traditional Japanese arts of music, dance, conversation, and entertaining men. She was born around 1940 and was a professional *geisha* by the age of sixteen. Tatsu was born in 1957 when she was only seventeen or eighteen, and his father was a Japanese filmmaker. His parents never married; indeed, Aoki says that, as far as he knows, he comes from a long line of *geisha* and is the first in his matrilineal family to have married. 'Aoki' is his mother's and grandmother's family name. He grew up in a downtown Tokyo *geisha* neighborhood, surrounded by the traditional Japanese arts. His mother was not only an accomplished traditional dancer but also listened to jazz and swing, so he grew up familiar with both popular and traditional musics. He started learning how to play the *shamisen* and *shime* (a small laced drum, used in small ensembles as well as in massed taiko ensembles, pronounced *shee-may*) when he was very young, and told me that "the whole house was an entertainers' training camp," constantly full of music (personal interview).

Aoki took classical piano and guitar lessons as a child and learned to read western musical notation. He started studying bass when he was twelve or thirteen. He told me that no one was interested in traditional Japanese music at that time, so he joined a rock band as a teenager, and when one of the more senior members ordered him to play electric bass, he did. At the same time, he played *shamisen* and electric guitar in a small *chindoya* group (a hybrid traditional/popular form of street music played by buskers) and played taiko with a Tokyo group. When he was fifteen, he switched to the acoustic bass, which immediately felt right to him. The absence of frets was familiar to him from years of *shamisen* playing, and he was used to playing the *ji*, or repetitive bottom part, from years of accompanying *geisha* singing and playing, so, he said to me, it felt comfortable to hold up an ensemble in that way (personal interview).

Aoki started exploring free jazz almost immediately and came to it without much western music training at all—he feels that his real musical foundation was in traditional Japanese music. In 1976, at the age of nineteen, he spent some time in the U.S., returned to Japan briefly, and then moved to the U.S. in 1978 and never left. He learned English at Ohio University and then lived in Los Angeles (which he didn't like, finding it too spread out), New York City (too much like Tokyo), and then Chicago, which he liked immediately. He had known experimental filmmakers in Japan and was drawn to the avant-garde film scene in Chicago, centered at the Art Institute of Chicago. The sounds of the AACM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago thrilled him. In short, Chicago's adventurous arts environment appealed to him, and he has been in Chicago ever since. Aoki subsequently received a BFA and MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in film, video, and new media and is now an Adjunct Associate Professor in that program. Through the 1980s and 1990s, he performed widely and became increasingly interested in the Asian American movement and issues of identity. By 1999, Aoki had become President of Asian Improv Records (AIR) [www.asianimprov.com](http://www.asianimprov.com) the non-profit label dedicated to the creative work of Asian American musicians.

I am especially interested in Aoki's carefully chosen position as "*Shin Issei*" (a 'new' Japanese immigrant and first-generation American) and Asian American.<sup>11</sup> The term *Shin Issei* disrupts any tidy understanding

of the Japanese American community and is used to describe more than one kind Japanese immigrant. *Issei-Nisei-Sansei* distinctions are clear signifiers for Ethnic Studies scholars, denoting the ways that American immigration laws shaped Japanese American identity. The *Issei*, the first generation of immigrants, arrived in the U.S. from 1890s-1920s; restrictive legislation meant that very few Japanese emigrated to the U.S. between 1924 and 1945. The *Nisei*, the second-generation children of the *Issei*, were born in the U.S. but generally grew up in households with Japanese parents; most were young adults during the WW2 internment and struggled with double standards for American citizenship. The *Sansei*, or third-generation children of the *Nisei*, came of age during the tumult of the 1960s and many were politicized through the Asian American movement and the Japanese American reparations movement. *Shin Issei* or 'new' *Issei* are a much more ambiguous category; the phrase simply indicates that these Japanese immigrants are not part of the emigration that took place in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. 'Shin Issei' was perhaps first used to refer to the so-called war brides who arrived in the U.S. after 1945. After 1965, the recovery of the Japanese economy led to the arrival of other *Shin Issei* through new kinds of global and Pacific commerce. Significantly, the phrase does not suggest an American identification of any kind, let alone any Japanese American or Asian American connection. Aoki's effort to assert his own *Shin Issei* position as a new kind of Asian American is thus unusual, deliberate, and—I think—useful. Given deepened xenophobia and anti-immigration hysteria in the U.S. since the 1990s, Aoki's awareness of how an immigrant can identify with and participate in ethnic identity work is important because it illuminates the culture-making function of immigration in American society.

The AACM has played a very important role in Aoki's work. As I have explained elsewhere, the AACM has long served as a musical and political role model for the Asian Improv musicians<sup>12</sup> (who have collaborated extensively with AACM members over the years), so the connection is direct as well as ideological. Aoki's relationship to the AACM is perhaps the most direct of any Asian Improv participant. As a Chicago resident, he shares the AACM's urban musical environment and openly acknowledges its deep influence on his thinking. Afifi Phillard was one of his teachers. Aoki has played with almost all of the AACM members and has featured many on his own albums. He said that he sees himself as having a strong purpose as an Asian American creative musician: "We're not White, we're not Black—we need our own music. My musical life is deeply influenced by Black music in many ways" (personal interview). Still, he feels that Asian Improv does some things more effectively than the AACM, like having a recording label and long-lived festivals in San Francisco and Chicago, for example. These infrastructures have furthered the work of Asian American creative musicians in sustained and sometimes unexpected ways.

Over the years, I had heard Aoki play many times as a sideman, but I gradually became aware in the 1990s that he had begun to lead some very interesting improvisational ensembles. He told me about his personal politics of location on a snowy evening at Hothouse <<http://www.hothouse.net/>> in Chicago in December 2002, when I listened to him play with Yoko Noge's Jazz Me Blues band as he does almost every Monday night. We chatted between sets, and he told me that he regards himself as *Shin Issei*, as a 'new' immigrant/first-generation Japanese who is very much an Asian American. He said that he had long identified with Asian American issues and began thinking of himself as Asian American through his musical experiences—as a participant in primarily African American musics—as well as through the process of raising his children as Japanese Americans in Chicago. During the 1980s and 1990s, he felt a more and more pressing need to define an Asian American presence in that city. He was inspired by the extensive Asian American cultural/political work going on in California's Bay Area, but his own excitement over the ways that Asian American performance literally created Asian American space in San Francisco made the absence of such activities in Chicago all the more evident.

In a more recent interview, Aoki said that a lot of his music is "very repetitious," and that this aesthetic preference comes from the Japanese chamber music tradition, in which repetition, simplicity, and subtle change is valued (personal interview). He views this as one of the most basic differences between him and the AACM musicians. He likes "to do the same thing over and over. It's like tea: you're going to find infinity inside of this cup" (personal interview). He is drawn to cyclical musical structures and gestures, and to variations that are so subtle as to be unnoticeable. He said to me,

My music is very redundant, very repetitious. I've been using ideas from traditional Japanese aesthetics for a long time, and it has to do with my inability to adapt myself to western music. I couldn't really get a kick out of western ideas of excitement. If you think about the western orchestral kind of thinking, you have three horns and they all play harmonies: one plays the melody and the second and third harmonizes it. But if you look into older Japanese music, they're all in unison—you have three instruments and basically they're all playing the same thing. So I think you can hear that in my music. [ . . . ] If you listen to my big band [in the Miyumi Project], they're all playing the same thing all the time—four horns are all going AHHHHHH, each in a slightly different way, but they're basically playing the same line. I think it's very Japanese—everyone's doing the same thing, you know. It's very much a totalitarian idea—like everyone wears the same teeshirts! In my latest album *Graphic Evidence* featuring Francis [Wong] and Jason [Kao Hwang], it's really obvious—I'm

just doing the same thing over and over again in the bass line. (Personal interview)

I asked him whether other musicians ever give him a hard time or question his preference for repetition, and he answered,

If the person is up for a jazz jazz kind of thing, then they're going to have a problem because they want to hear the changes, and I go exactly the opposite way, I don't want to hear any changes, I'm just going to give them the same thing over and over again. I can put more emotion into a style of playing where things don't change—then I can just go deeper into the same thing rather than giving a nice chord change. It's like Billy Strayhorn—those are beautiful chord changes, but I could never get myself into that. Technically, I can play it, but if you're talking about the feeling and emotion in those compositions, I really can't do it—I could only imitate it. I am not emotional at all about it. (Personal interview)

Aoki also linked his habits to the Japanese ensemble structure of having one instrument, usually the *shime*, play an ostinato pattern known as *ji*:

The aesthetics I have for the bass is mainly holding it down—holding the rhythm down for the other guys. So it's like *ji*—I grew up playing *ji* for everything, so the bass is the same idea as *ji*—you just keep the music down to the earth. I feel like a lot of jazz bass players play too many little notes so that it almost doesn't sound like a bass anymore. It sounds like a cello or guitar, and I really like the classic idea of the bass having the job to hold it down. (Telephone interview)



**Tatsu Aoki (left) and Francis Wong (right)**

Saxophonist, composer, and improviser Francis Wong has worked extensively with Aoki, so I asked him how he would describe Aoki's bass playing. Wong said that he thinks Aoki has a strong Chicago style, characterized by an emphasis on the lower strings of the bass (rather than deploying upper extensions). He said that Aoki absorbed this way of playing bass from Fred Hopkins and Malachi Favors Maghostut, among others, and described it as having a strong "bottomness" (personal interview). He agreed that Aoki tends to stay with a musical idea until he's thoroughly finished with it, and this—combined with his tendency to keep returning to the tonic, or to certain motives—means that his playing "drills down" in several ways. Wong said that this bottomness is connected to Japanese ideas about music and thus suggests how Aoki's aesthetic sensibilities reflect his experiences in both Japan and the U.S. (personal interview).

In short, Aoki regards himself as an Asian American creative musician and describes his gestural sensibilities as Japanese though he plays in an idiom that is clearly and idiomatically defined through the aesthetic of African American creative music. He noted that only African Americans can become members of the AACM and that "it has to be that way" (Aoki, personal interview)—that this is a necessary means for creating the social, cultural, and political spaces within which a uniquely Black form of expression could emerge. Similarly, Asian Improv Records must focus on Asian American creative musicians, and while non-Asian Americans may appear in its recordings, they generally perform as sidemen.<sup>13</sup>

Aoki has worked with Chicago taiko musicians for almost ten years and several of his albums—*Basser Live* (1999) and *Rooted: Origins of Now* (2001)—feature taiko players. He is the Artistic Director for JASC Tsukasa Taiko, which was established in 1996 by Hide Yoshihashi, who is still the group's Director and instructor. Yoshihashi was born in 1978 in a Chicago suburb. His parents were Japanese nationals who returned to Sapporo in Hokkaido, the far northern island of Japan, when Yoshihashi was three years old. Yoshihashi grew up in Japan but returned to Chicago in 1993 when he was fifteen, and he is thus bilingual and bicultural. He studied taiko briefly in Hokkaido while still in junior high and later joined Chicago's

Midwest Buddhist Temple group, Waka Taiko. When Waka Taiko's teacher left the group in 1996, Yoshihashi established Tsukasa Taiko with the remaining members of Waka Taiko. Yoshihashi was then only twenty years old. He met Aoki and started working with him in 1999 as a member of Aoki's Miyumi Project Big Band, for which he played taiko. With Aoki's help, Tsukasa Taiko quickly developed its own identity. Aoki worked to get Tsukasa Taiko housed at the Japanese American Service Committee of Chicago,<sup>14</sup> a non-profit community organization founded in 1946 to serve the needs of the *Issei* and *Nisei* (Japanese immigrants and their American-born children) who left World War II internment camps to resettle in Chicago and start new lives (JASC). In 2004, Tsukasa Taiko moved into a more spacious rehearsal space at the JASC, where Yoshihashi teaches several taiko classes each week.

Aoki and Yoshihashi have worked together for about seven years at the time of this writing, and Aoki takes his mentoring of Yoshihashi very seriously. The two are teacher and student as well as collaborators. Aoki is the Artistic Director and Producer for Tsukasa Taiko and looks after its bookings. He estimates that he features Yoshihashi in 90% of his own gigs. His involvement with taiko, through Tsukasa, is twofold. First, he supports its activities as part of his involvement in the Japanese American community of Chicago. He recognizes the fact that Japanese Americans have strong motivations to play taiko as identity work, and he works with Tsukasa to deepen its skills. Second, he works with Yoshihashi to clarify Tsukasa's mission—its goals in playing and performing. In this sense, his purpose goes far beyond taiko in and of itself; Aoki's work with Tsukasa is part of his broader purpose of creating spaces where Asian Americans create community through performance and transform Chicago in the process. Aoki sometimes plays with Tsukasa, often on *shamisen* and sometimes on taiko, but he never wears the folkloristic Japanese costumes worn by the rest of the ensemble and says that he doesn't think he "looks good" as a taiko player (personal interview).

Aoki's approach to taiko is the crux of this essay. He treats taiko as an Asian American and North American form, though he is obviously familiar with its Japanese history and practice. When he encountered taiko as a teenager in Tokyo, it was still the early days of the *kumi-daiko* movement, when a heady mix of 'traditional' folkloric drumming with jazz and Latin rhythms was informed by the politics of disaffected Japanese youth (Fujie). Aoki understands how taiko creates a strong, noisy, and insistent Asian American public presence. He has two relationships with taiko: he supports how Japanese American practitioners explore and construct heritage through it, but he also deliberately creates new contexts for playing taiko. When he talks about this, his language shifts. He thinks that taiko isn't only about community-building and not only about creating an Asian American music. He aims to make it into "art," and he does this by folding it and its practitioners (especially Hide Yoshihashi) into his improvisational work. I turn now to some of the ideological tensions that make this work unusual and promising.

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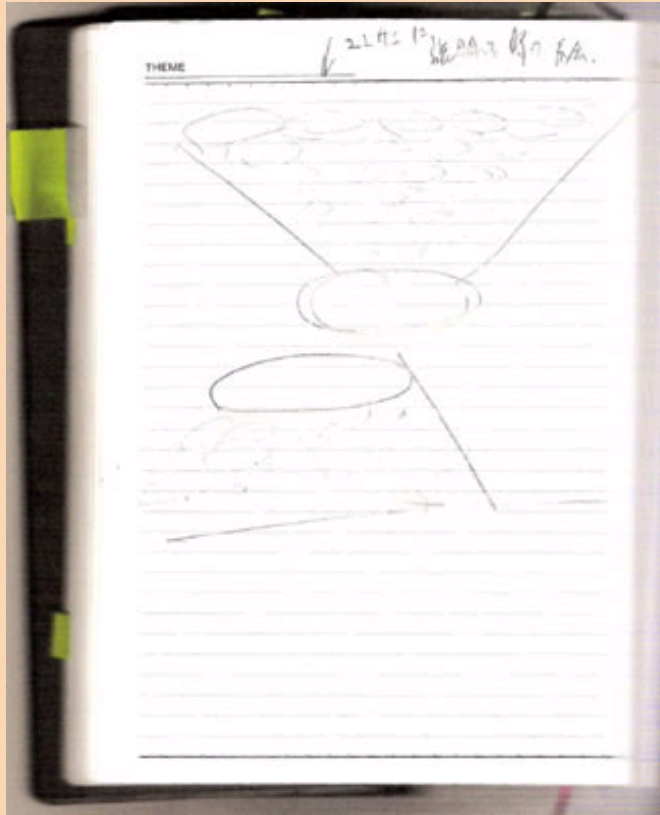
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Publicity postcard from the 2004 Asian American Jazz Festival in Chicago, featuring Basser Live II. Kneeling, left to right: Ryan Toguri, Hide Yoshihashi. Standing, left to right: Tatsu Aoki, Amy Homma.

The album *Basser Live II* features Aoki on acoustic bass and three taiko musicians from Tsukasa Taiko: Hide Yoshihashi, Amy Homma, and Ryan Toguri.

Aoki created "Basser Live" in 1998. He has released no fewer than six albums of solo bass work, but Basser Live is an on-going project to link his solo bass to other instruments, and the name is a play on his daughter's reference to his work as a "basser" and the liveness of his improvisational work. *Basser Live* (1999) featured Aoki improvising on bass with percussionists on Asian drums (taiko and Korean *buk*), and *Basser Live II* (2004) was a set of ten pieces featuring three members of Tsukasa Taiko. Combining acoustic bass and taiko is certainly unusual. In Aoki's hands, this somewhat unlikely combination brings out unexpected qualities in both instruments; the bass is sometimes percussive and the taiko are lyrical. In *Basser Live II*, Aoki was trying to reformulate how taiko functions musically. He led, but in a markedly interactive manner. The improvised pieces were put together by deploying "set menus," as he put it, in which he planned large sound relationships and then "choreographed" them with the taiko players. In his journal, the sketch of an idea for a piece demonstrates how he was thinking about structure. The large circles in this sketch are "sound events"



that are built up out of smaller events, and the material for some of those events was prearranged. Aoki said he enjoys “taiko taiko,” the meat and potatoes of North American *kumi-daiko*, which includes everything from arrangements of Japanese traditional works (“Miyake,” Hachijo,” etc.) to works composed by American taiko players in the style of Japanese drumming (“Kinnara”). Still, he stated that a lot of *kumi-daiko* is musically predictable if not formulaic, and he said “The problem with taiko is that taiko players have forgotten they don’t have to play all the time! They haven’t discovered the beauty of playing only part of the time” (personal interview). So he deployed taiko in a range of ways: taiko plays only in certain movements or sections, or off-stage (as in Kabuki), or as transitional music. Long moments/events featured only Aoki’s bass playing. He was also trying to bring improvisation back into taiko; he noted that the spectacularly choreographed work of Kodo (the preeminent professional Japanese *kumi-daiko* group) may be loved by audiences

worldwide but emphasizes athletic competition over “the music itself,” aiming for how big and loud a spectacle can be created. He said, “Kodo is like Stomp, Cats, the Blue Man theatre—it sucks!” (personal interview). Taiko music has become more and more fixed/pre-composed, even down to the *ji* (bass lines) played on *shime* (small, high-pitched taiko). Aoki was trying to unsettle these expectations.

I will focus on the relationship between Aoki and the three taiko players in *Basser Live II* to show how a new kind of diasporic taiko and a new kind of improviser emerge simultaneously. Different kinds of authority came into play during the process, and the terms of authority, knowledge, and encounter were defined by immigrant relocation as well as minoritarian sensibilities. Aoki noted that it was rewarding to work with Yoshihashi over such a long period—and through Yoshihashi’s early years as a young musician—because he was able to encourage skills that were unusual for taiko players. Part of this involved teaching them “when to do nothing.” As he put it, “We have to talk about all that. There’s a part where you do a lot, and there’s a part where you do nothing” (personal interview). Most importantly, he built in places where the taiko players improvise. I asked Hide Yoshihashi about this and he said,

I hated improvising—I still do sometimes. When I was in the Miyumi Project, I had to improvise, and I hated it—I had to do it for two years, but he [Aoki] always gave me the chance to grow up and be strong—to be a good improviser, so I just kept doing it even though I hated it. He was always, like, “Hide—solo. Hide—solo. Go. Go.” I was like, Oh god, here he comes. But after 3-5 years, it’s nothing now. I still have trouble sometimes, but it’s more comfortable. After that, I got more interested in improvising and in writing more music. I have ideas but they’re not quite there yet.

I asked him what he “hated” about improvising, and he answered,

The timing, and I didn’t know what to do, and I was scared about making mistakes, and scared that people might not like my solo, and I would get nervous—that’s why I hated it. I’m now more comfortable—sometimes I have confidence, and sometimes I don’t. (Telephone interview)



The members of Basser Live II. Left to right: Hide Yoshihashi, Ryan Toguri, Tatsu Aoki, Amy Homma

George Lewis has written persuasively that improvisation is inherently pedagogical (“Teaching Improvised Music”). He notes how improvisers frequently end up arguing that improvisation should be taught in the schools as a corrective to dominant western models of fixed, reproductive musicking even though they tend to debate whether or not improvisation can indeed be taught. Jazz and creative improvisation, he writes, offer “trenchant models of alternative musical thinking,” and “musicians have moved to identify and create an alternative pedagogy through direct intervention in the pedagogical process—either without the support of traditional institutions, or in direct challenge to their perceived hegemony” (83). Lewis recounts his own experiences learning improvisation as a young musician (in a Chicago high school, in New Haven, and especially at the AACM School of Music in Chicago), and his account bears a strong family resemblance to Aoki’s efforts with Tsukasa Taiko. Lewis describes his studying/playing experiences with older improvisers as a series of “apprenticeships,” and refers to Chicago clubs as “Chicago-style institution[s] of higher learning” (89). Aoki’s work with Tsukasa Taiko, and with Yoshihashi specifically, conjoins the apprenticeship model that marks some corners of improvisation culture even as it takes place in a *dojo*, a traditional Japanese ‘school’ (for martial arts, music, etc.), and an explicitly Japanese/Japanese American pedagogical environment in which knowledge and experience are located in authoritative individuals. Though *dojo* means a building or hall, it also suggests a particular approach inseparable from that individual teacher and disseminated through embodied encounter. As a sponsor and home, the Japanese American Service Committee of Chicago extends the *dojo* concept into the practice of creating spaces/places within a community that are explicitly dedicated to sustaining Japanese American spirit, memory, and future presence.

Significantly, Aoki’s methods for drawing Yoshihashi into improvisation were more than a little authoritarian—in some ways.<sup>15</sup> From Yoshihashi’s account, it is evident that Aoki expected compliance when he told Yoshihashi to improvise. Yet it is also clear that Aoki is ironically self-aware (consider his comments about Japanese tendencies toward “totalitarian” everyday practices like willingly wearing identical clothing) and perhaps not so reflexive about occupying a space of unquestioned authority when teaching a Japanese apprentice. Yet his actual pedagogy is fundamentally informed by improvisational aesthetics. He insisted that Yoshihashi improvise, but didn’t tell him what to do. He cleared the space for Yoshihashi’s improvisation in no uncertain terms, but left it open. His approach to taiko improvisation is multivalent in ways that could be contradictory but instead invite a real encounter between rather different aesthetic fields. The complete authority of the traditional *sensei* and the partnership of the improviser are both present. Aoki was drawn into the diasporic practices of taiko and Yoshihashi was pushed out of the comfortable, self-contained sphere of heritage and authentic Japanese culture.

Thinking in terms of ‘experience’ rather than ‘authority’ opens up the most productive understanding of Aoki and Yoshihashi’s pedagogical relationship, and George Lewis’s work once again provides insight. Lewis describes how Chicago musicians Fred Anderson and Von Freeman rejected the model of the competitive “cutting session” and instead promoted jam sessions focused on building musical confidence through “cooperative learning” in which different levels of experience were a given, but those with greater experience had the responsibility to actively nurture less experienced players rather than “cut” them through competition. Lewis writes that this approach “was, for many musicians, deemed more



emblematic of the music to come, especially with respect to how this music has been understood to reflect its social environment” (“ Teaching” 89). Aoki was also trained in that environment (though at a different historical moment) and has evidently chosen to teach improvisation in much the same way, though in this case to young musicians in the hybrid environment of the community center *dojo*, with all its contradictions.

Aoki’s work process with the three Tsukasa players in *Basser Live II* took several steps. Aoki came up with the concepts for the pieces; he would relate the narrative or story for a particular piece (“This is a love story, this is about railroad workers,” etc.) and might provide a melody or directions. He would then ask Yoshihashi “to figure out what to do with it.” Yoshihashi described the process as follows:

I [would] have an idea and would play it for Tatsu, and he would say, ‘I want more of that, I want this kind of stuff in there’, and I would think about it and say, OK, and then I would try to form my idea following his but would see whether it flowed or not, and would then play it many times... until he liked it. But he’s easy-going he doesn’t complain, he’s just like, ‘Go ahead, do what you’re going to do’.

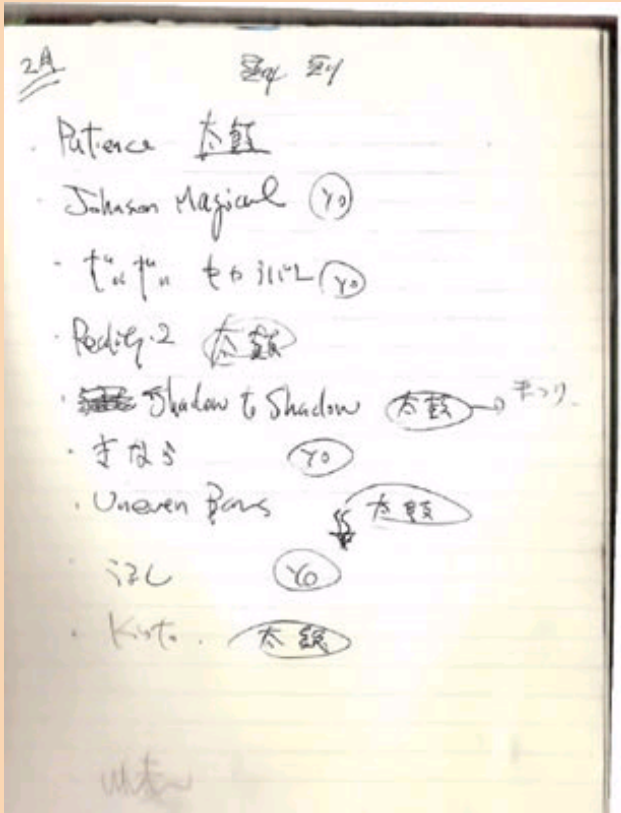
I asked whether Aoki ever vetoes any of Yoshihashi’s ideas, and he answered,

No—not much. He just gives me ideas—he doesn’t say no, but he’ll suggest, ‘Do more of that stuff, or do something NOT that kind of more, do it more like this’. He doesn’t say, ‘I don’t like that’. (Telephone interview)

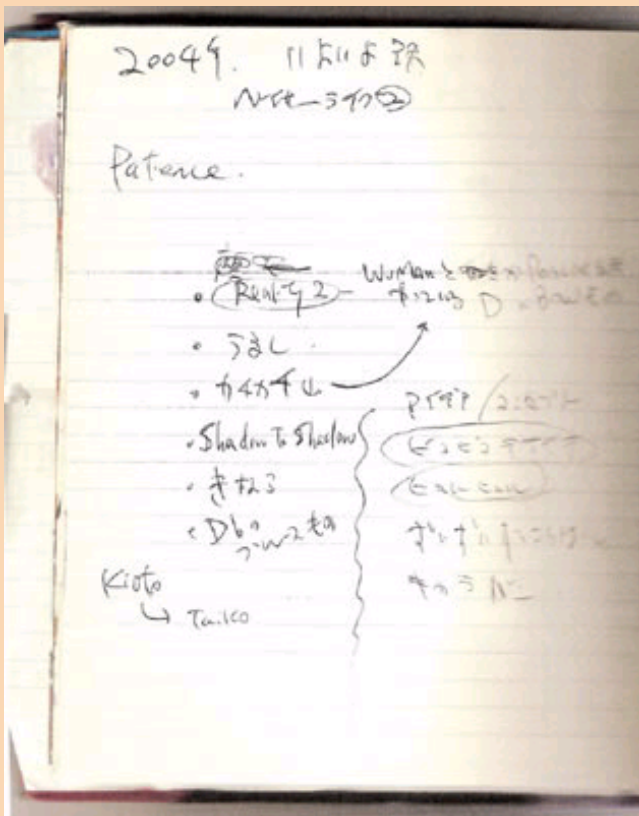
Aoki sometimes had specific ideas for taiko rhythms that he jotted in his notebook and/or tried out with the musicians, but he often left the specifics of the taiko parts up to Yoshihashi.

Although the pieces were improvised, Aoki and Tsukasa had performed some of them many times and this allowed them to ‘settle.’ Aoki is not sure whether his taiko players really understand how unusual their work with him is, or whether they have a clear sense of its artistic value. As he puts it, they’re young and in some ways have simply accepted these practices as normal (personal interview). This in itself is a remarkable intervention into diasporic taiko practices, since Aoki is essentially socializing a core group of young taiko players to think and interact musically in ways that are generated by the terms of creative improvisation, and they are also embedded in North American taiko practice. That is, Aoki is not lifting taiko out of its Japanese American and Asian American context and forcing it to operate in modernist terms; he was not trying to transform the taiko players into something wholly different from their training. Rather, he was adding onto their skills and expanding their tool kit, asking them to step into some new environments without losing their home base in the *dojo*. He is fully engaged with the community priorities that maintain taiko as serious heritage work,<sup>16</sup> but he also provided the young musicians with additional musical (read: cultural and political) skills. He cultivated the ability to think and react to musical presences from ‘outside’ taiko as a useful skill that was meant to work equally well in non-musical environments. Pedagogically, the music is always about more than music.





Aoki worked on the *Basser Live II* program for months. Alternating solo bass with taiko was one consideration among many. In an early list of pieces (dated February 2004, three months before the May 1st concert), notice the circled word (which looks like “yo”) which says “taiko” in *hiragana*.



The next version changed the order a bit.



The third version began to take the blocking and the physical arrangement of the taiko vis-à-vis the bass into consideration. At the top of the page (between “#1” and “Patience”), note the sketch of the double bass and two round *shime* (small drums, here on short stands, which implies that the musicians would sit on the floor behind them).

Stage  
 Instructions  
 for  
 Taiko  
 Players

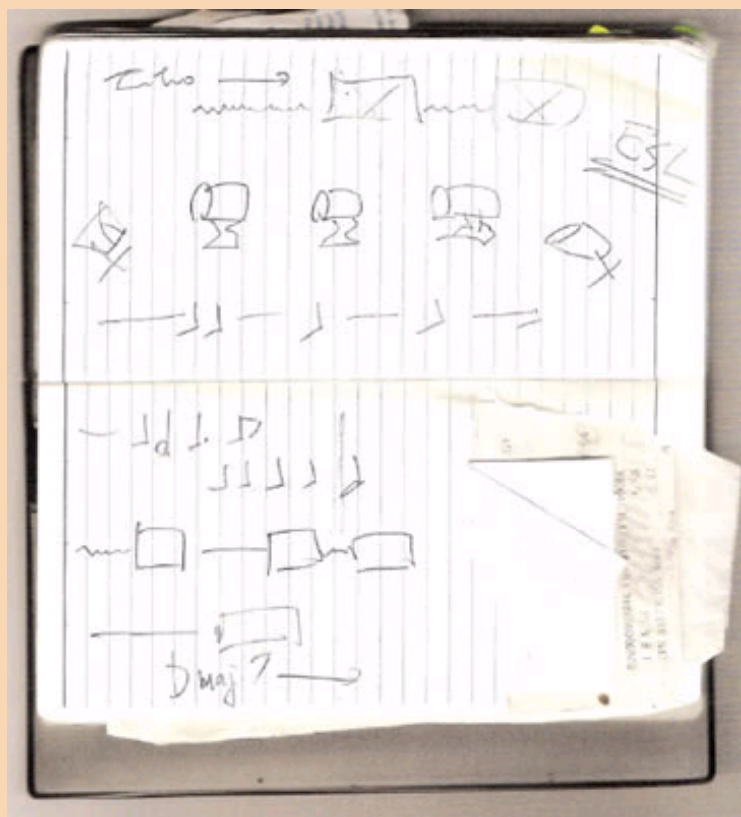
1. Patience
2. Tatsu Solo
3. Tatsu Solo-
4. ES-L (Reality II)
5. Tatsu Solo
- Talk
6. Shadow to Shadow
7. Tatsu Solo
- Talk
8. Uneven Bars
9. Tatsu Solo
10. KIOTO
11. Taiko Improvisation – Tatsu/Hide starts

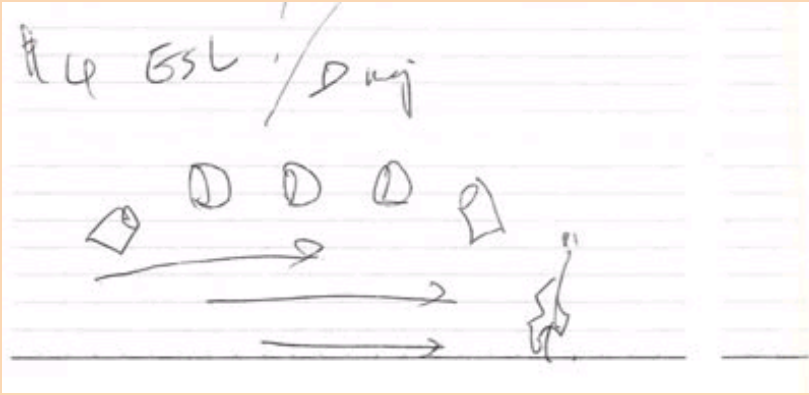
This final list, written in English, was the sum total of the instructions given to the taiko players. Nothing was notated; all the musicians worked and responded spontaneously and/or from memory.

I now turn to three specific pieces from the *Basser Live II* performance and album in order to consider the ways that these performers brought creative improvisation and American taiko into conversation. I was not present at the actual performance on May 1, 2004, but worked from the live album, video footage, and extensive conversations with Aoki (and a brief one with Yoshihashi) in 2005. I chose these three out of the

ten works featured in the program because they represent a range of interactions between Aoki and the taiko players, from bass alone to lots of taiko, and from highly pre-arranged to highly improvised. I suggest that the particularities of who participated—a *Shin Issei* and a *Nisei Kibei*, of different generations<sup>17</sup>—and Aoki's intent to create a new kind of taiko performance and a new kind of taiko player were central to the result. As with most improvised performance, one could say that the product was important but the process as much so. Further, this slice of time—a performance on a single day that was the result of months/years of preparation—is part of an on-going creative/working/personal relationship between Aoki, Yoshihashi, and the members of Tsukasa Taiko that is still broadcasting its own possible futures. At another level, then, this is a stopping-off point in the ethnography of long-term interaction between particular musicians, and the shape of my questions is suggested by the terms of Aoki's politics and his approach to creative improvisation itself. Creative improvisation can be 'about' encounters between liberal humanist individuals (the romantic, ahistorical view that a level playing field can simply be asserted and that everyone has the agency to simply speak or perform 'themselves'), but Aoki's base in minoritarian social justice work creates radically different terms. He is attempting to help young cultural workers find the means to participate in multivalent conversations. If this happens in an environment of historicized awareness, then it is worth considering how long-term, repeated engagements between improvising individuals enact something powerful and valuable. Similarly, one could examine the repeated musical encounters between Aoki and Mwata Bowden, or Aoki and Francis Wong, or Francis Wong and Glenn Horiuchi, and see the shape of productive, emergent social formations in the sustained cultural work of those encounters.

Aoki's titles for 'pieces'/improvisations are often playful and richly suggestive. Certainly he knows how to play off the orientalist expectation of Asianness, but little if any of his work offers simple point-by-point narratives 'about' Asian American identity or one-to-one correlations between sound and message. Rather, the 'work' of identity operates at a deeper systemic plane. He is well aware that some listeners are poised to hear him as Japanese, and he confounds those expectations in some ways while pushing it down to a deep level of sensibility at another. Thus his piece "EsL" isn't 'about' speaking English as a second language (that *ur-sign* of the foreign) even though one could argue that, in other ways, the dashed expectation is part of the message. Two-thirds of "EsL" was bass alone. For most of that time, Aoki played a drone on the lowest string, occasionally throwing in ghostly high-pitched harmonics from the next string by double-stopping. The taiko ensemble came in three times, playing tightly choreographed, pre-arranged material the first two times and improvised material the third/final time.





Aoki had shown me a page from his journal in which it was evident that he had a specific idea for the visual effect he wanted in “EsL,” as seen by the audience. The five drums are represented by the circles and cylinders, and the double bass stands by itself at lower right. The three arrows represent the sweeping visuality of the taiko players’ arms striking the drums in the direction toward Aoki on bass. This was made possible by the specific kind of drum that Aoki had in mind—the Miyake style of drumming—which is very distinctive.<sup>18</sup> I asked Yoshihashi how he came up with the taiko part, as it was obviously pre-composed and carefully choreographed. He said,

The storyline involved [the two lovers] meeting a first time, and the second time feeling more comfortable together, and the third time they’re—it’s gradual. The first time, I put only a little bit of drumming in, and the second time a little more, and the third time, it’s really long. The third time, they really get into each other. He said he wanted it really strong at the end—the third time—he wanted Miyake style, so I was like, OK, all right, so I just put in music following his idea. I put in movements as well, and choreographed us together as a group. (Personal interview)

\*\*\* audio : [EsL](#) (11.5 MB) \*\*\*

In performance, “EsL” featured several characteristics that are central to Aoki’s concept for *Basser Live*. Aoki’s on-going fascination with high-culture Japanese conceptions of musical time (drawn from *noh* and *gagaku*) marked his extended solo bass passages. Two of the taiko ‘events’ were collaboratively designed by Aoki and Yoshihashi and were rehearsed and then inserted into the overall design of the piece. The final taiko section, however, was completely open-ended and improvisational; it broke up the military precision of the unison ensemble and separated the musicians into individuals with improvisational agency. That final section was the result of Aoki telling Yoshihashi to tell the other two taiko players what to do, and yet the outcome was a departure from the usual taiko practice of everyone doing the same thing together. Indeed, what could be read as a hierarchical chain of command resulted in a section of unrestricted improvisation.

\*\*\* video : [EsL](#) (3 minutes) \*\*\*

“ Shadow to Shadow” featured the taiko performers more than any other piece. Aoki suggested that each of the three musicians choose their own taiko, and they agreed beforehand to play instruments on which they felt particularly comfortable. Ryan Toguri thus gravitated to the *odaiko*, which suits his size and strength; Amy Homma is partial to playing *chudaiko* on the diagonal stand that allows the performer to employ large circular arm motions; Yoshihashi chose to sit while playing two drums (a *chudaiko* and *shime*) with padded mallets, in a supporting role. The order of solos was blocked out ahead of time, as was a general agreement that Aoki would begin alone.

\*\*\* video : [Shadow to Shadow](#) (7.5 minutes) \*\*\*

The first minute and a half featured Aoki alone on double bass,<sup>19</sup> tapping out a percussive melody on the strings with a chopstick. When I mentioned that I had seen Japanese American bassist Mark Izu do this, Aoki said,

It’s kind of our tradition—not just me. Taiji [Miyagawa]—the bass player for Glenn Horiuchi many years ago—when you listen to *Issei Spirit*,<sup>20</sup> Taiji uses a chopstick. That’s our tradition—I think a lot of Asian American bass players do that chopstick thing. I’ve done it for a long time. On my duet album with Malachi [Favors Maghostut], we both use chopsticks. (Telephone interview)



In using a chopstick, Aoki was thus deploying and evoking a technique developed by Japanese American bass players. He adopted it in order to signal Asian Americanness, and he identified it as such. Aoki's solo, chopstick-driven introduction to "Shadow to Shadow" was free-metered and unpulsed. Playing on a dark stage, standing in the center of a spotlight, hunched over his bass, with the three taiko players kneeling, heads down, the mood was contemplative, reflective, inward.

"Shadow to Shadow" is possibly the most interactive piece on *Basser Live II*, calling for the taiko players to perform solo improvisations. Soloing is also emphasized in North American taiko practice, and is usually built into a piece by giving each player a space to show their stuff. Solos are supposed to be improvised, or should appear to be, though some performers work out solos beforehand; they generally combine rhythmic play with choreographic virtuosity (swinging arms, twirling drumsticks, etc.). Yoshihashi told me that "Shadow to Shadow" had first been part of the Miyumi Project big band, Aoki's large ensemble assembled over 1998-99. The Miyumi Project was Yoshihashi's, Toguri's, and Homma's introduction to creative improvisation; it was a stretch for them in the best of ways, since none of the other musicians were taiko players, and it exposed them to the give and take of improvising with the same musicians over several years' time. Yoshihashi told me that Aoki had given them little besides start/stop directions for this piece, and had used it as a means to improve the taiko players' improvisational skills. They knew the 'storyline'/structure, which they had created together through discussion, but otherwise didn't know what was going to happen during any given performance. He said they weren't comfortable with it, especially at first, but by the time they performed it in *Basser Live II*, they had practiced/performed/improvised the piece many times, and "just went right into it" (telephone interview).

One section of "Shadow to Shadow" is particularly satisfying to watch because it illuminates the pedagogical foundation of the *Basser Live* project. At that point in time, Amy Homma was a very strong taiko player who was still learning how to improvise. "Shadow to Shadow" ends with Homma improvising alone on *chudaiko* and combining sound, bodily motion, and silence in a strikingly effective way. Yoshihashi fades out, leaving her playing beautifully simple, spare rhythms filled not with sound but with expansive arm movements: striking, drawing back in large sweeping motions, striking again, shifting her weight from the left to the right leg, freezing into stillness for a beat and then striking again. The piece closes with a sense of movement that continues on through silence that is defined by the meditative choreography of the body—Homma's motion through sonic stillness.

Right up until almost the last minute, Aoki referred to the piece "Taiko Legacy," an extended bass solo, as "Kinnara." This is the only piece on the album drawn directly from a taiko piece, and it features no taiko whatsoever. "Kinnara" is the signature piece of Kinnara Taiko, one of the very first North American taiko groups, established in Los Angeles in 1969 by a group of young (mostly) third-generation Japanese American Buddhists at Senshin Buddhist Temple.<sup>21</sup> This piece is well known to other North American taiko players; it is based on distinctive Japanese festival rhythms and immediately communicates a feeling of upbeat community spirit. It is legacy music carried forward; the 'traditional' festival rhythms are instantly recognizable to any taiko player but their contemporaneity is, too. Bringing the piece into Aoki's improvisatory bass playing involved another degree of separation, or another layer, or another node in the web of referentiality. The fact that this was being done by a *Shin Issei* with an Asian American self-identity complicated its message very effectively indeed, and of course this was deliberate—renaming it "Taiko Legacy" made Aoki's purpose clear. Aoki makes the piece his own in a gesture of homage and partnership. It is not immediately identifiable as "Kinnara," but once you know it's there, it's unmistakable. Aoki said "Jazz reviewers have noted that I play the bass like a taiko drum, and I think a lot of people would agree with that" (telephone interview) (though I also wonder, once again, how much of this is a receptive re-Japanizing of his work without understanding the *Shin Issei* sensibility behind it). Listen to part of the piece.

\*\*\* audio : [Taiko Legacy](#) (7 MB) \*\*\*

Throughout "Taiko Legacy," Aoki stayed way down on the two lower strings and never ventured beyond the confines of a single octave. The tessitura was so low that sometimes the listener is more aware of the texture of his percussive plucking than anything else. He ended with the classic festival (*matsuri*) rhythmic pattern of Don! Don! Don-don!, played twice. In some ways, Aoki was playing taiko on the bass, but in other important ways, he was evoking and incorporating taiko into his own bass idiom. This piece "drills down," as Francis Wong says, in a manner that is utterly idiosyncratic to Aoki's playing (personal interview). It was at once distinctively Japanese and Chicagoan; generated by both taiko and jazz, it was homage to both. One of Aoki's driving metaphors is legacy. He evokes the word again and again in both his taiko heritage work and in the Asian American Jazz Festival. His purpose is as much about creating an Asian American musical legacy as about preservation or heritage (telephone interview). Or rather, the legacy couldn't exist without the concomitant work of past and future.

## Midwestern *Shin Issei* Asian/American Improvisational Tactics: Conclusions

In his “ethnographic memoir” about improvisation and pedagogy, George Lewis writes that certain patterns marked the ways he was ‘taught’ improvisation in a number of contexts:

Despite the wide stylistic and aesthetic disparities among the musicians with whom I spent my early apprenticeships, I believe that certain common tropes were key. These included an explicit pedagogical nurturance; a valorization of the psychological connection between musician and the audience-as-community; a hybrid pedagogical experience and musical practice with particular emphasis upon diversity of intellectual and cultural outlook; catholicity of musical reference; a contextualization of music as incorporating personal narrative; and a framing of music, not as autonomous “pure expression,” but as directly related to social and historical experience. (91)

Lewis did not necessarily receive these principles in any orderly way; rather, his list is ethnographically derived from years of participation and his own interpretive effort to understand the logic of his experiences as an apprentice improviser. These patterns (through design) also characterize the approach taken by Aoki, Wong, and Asian Improv generally. Aoki not only absorbed these ideas about pedagogy from various AACM musicians but also worked through them at yet another level alongside Asian Improv musicians. He is now operationalizing them with members of Tsukasa Taiko, but it is important to understand that Tsukasa Taiko is not a kind of laboratory for him. All three of Aoki’s children are in Tsukasa Taiko, so his investment in this group takes many forms. Part of that investment means supporting Yoshihashi as the group’s Director. Thus, mentoring and encouraging multiple sites of authority is central to his mission.

I asked Francis Wong how effectively he thought the 2005 Asian American Jazz Festival brings taiko into Chicago’s soundscape, and he simply said, “We have to go downtown” (personal interview). Puzzled, I asked what he meant. He explained that the Asian Improv strategy is to enter public discourse by working in the Asian American community but then literally taking the sounds and presence of that community into ‘downtown’ spaces, or the public spaces that define and symbolize the authority of Chicago or San Francisco. Asian Improv can make an impact by creating connections across and between communities, and this is how a city’s—or a society’s—priorities can then be shifted. This tactic results in “overlaid spaces,” so that the Japanese American Service Committee and the high-prestige presenting space of Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art are conjoined in ways that potentially transform both.

Jason Stanyek has written extensively about intercultural improvisation, or improvisation across difference, and he argues that such work is most effective when its politics and aims do not presume an arrival at agreement or sameness. He writes that,

Improvisation is a form of architectural thinking that re-imagines what has been given, it is a modality of intercorporeal action that is provisional, it always holds open the possibility of a rearticulative gesture.

Improvisation requires a degree of empathy for its rearticulative potential to be set in motion. And by empathy I don’t mean unanimity. (274)

Aoki’s work with Tsukasa Taiko strikes me as extraordinarily promising because of his emphasis on rearticulation. He shares the Asian Improv understanding that their project is not to create a unified ‘Asian American music’ or even a unified Japanese American taiko, but rather to create the conditions for how such musics might be generated. He assumes the interrelated importance of a serious, respectful grounding in established practices (taiko and jazz) and the responsibility for paying both forward. His “architectural thinking” operates in multiple ways: through the actual activity of improvising, but also through creating/sustaining new critical spaces (the Asian American Jazz Festival and the Tsukasa Taiko *dojo*). His purpose is not to define authoritative forms of taiko, jazz, or improvisation but rather to put them into conversation in an informed manner. Indeed, the principled means for all this is one of the key strategies that he brings to the Asian American public sphere.

Aoki’s work is deliberately embedded in narratives about Asian/Asian American improvisation. Obviously, he has sought new ways for thinking about the broader project of Asian American presence, community, and identity; his work reaches out beyond music-making. Further, he views himself as an active participant in those processes, and his trajectory from immigrant to apprentice to leader was not happenstance. He represents part of the Asian Improv experiment of transforming/creating community through musical practice, but he does his work in a Midwestern environment that differs significantly from San Francisco, where Asians and Asian Americans are a majority minority population. His chosen identity as *Shin Issei* Asian American is powerfully wrought and is part of the broader narrative of how any immigrant chooses to ‘become’ American, and on whose terms, because he is simultaneously Japanese, Japanese American, *Shin Issei*, and Asian American. His version of *Shin Issei* Asian American identity is transnational but rooted, committed to the work of Asian American community-building. Asian American

identity is always chosen: its construction as a responsive identity speaking to historicized discrimination immediately announces a certain political location, and Aoki has chosen to be Asian American for those reasons.

The ambiguities of the immigrant who chooses to align himself with American communities of struggle opens up to a comparison with another arena of identity work. Postcolonial scholar Françoise Vergès calls for a “cosmopolitics” that is “grounded in the rejection of ethnic or nationalist absolutism from a (post) colonial position” (169), that exists in the “contact zone” between (170). Drawing from Frantz Fanon’s rejection of Creole mimicry of the French, she argues that Creole cosmopolitanism was compromised by its base in universal humanism, which left it inadequate to the task of critically responding to the colonial condition. Fanon took its agentive foundation and transformed it into “revolutionary internationalism,” which she says “revived Creole cosmopolitanism by giving it a new vocabulary (the vocabulary of Third World’s revolution), a new face (the angry young man), a new discourse (the redemptive role of violence)” (Vergès 176). Living in a world of translocal movement but still hoping to create community, albeit one with fluid boundaries, led Fanon to reformulate the postcolonial Creole and cosmopolitanism. Vergès suggests that this new dialectic reclaimed difference for the colonial subject. As she puts it, “Cosmopolitan revolutionary internationalism reintroduced race and class” while insisting on vigilant attention to the conditions driving translocal movement in a colonial world (178).

While the parallel isn’t exact, Japanese American culture could be seen as a creolized cosmopolitics that constantly refashions Japanese culture for its own use in the face of Japanese American erasure, and this dynamic revitalizes the tired formation of heritage work. Further, thinking about the politicized *Shin Issei* Asian American as engaged in a cosmopolitics opens up a new critical possibility for both musical encounter and American urban spaces. In Asian American terms, *Shin Issei* identity is available for interpretation and reinterpretation, and Aoki’s work solidifies and activates its political possibility. Rather than e-race his foreignness or allow himself to be absorbed into a purely Asian American political project, Aoki’s movement between Japan and Asian America takes place within an imaginary that includes Japanese ethno-chic, the global corporate, and ethnic nostalgia. The cosmopolitics of the revolutionary immigrant is risky but powerful. Drawing on the contradictory rhetoric of heritage and access to originary culture (of several kinds), Aoki is authentic in startling ways; he is the son of a geisha and the student of Black nationalist musicians.

In sum, Aoki has ‘returned’ to traditional Japanese music at this point in his life and career for considered reasons that transform what he originally knew about it. Drawing taiko and creative improvisation into conversation through the bodies of his apprentice-colleagues is a logical site for Aoki’s cultural, political, and musical aims. His work is a contact zone between Japanese and Japanese American identity, between Japanese American and Asian American cultural work, and between uptown and downtown sites of urban authority.

Reading *Arcana*, John Zorn’s collection on improvisation and “comprovisation,” I am struck by the difference between George Lewis’s and Miya Masaoka’s essays from most of the others in the volume. Many of the contributions are overwhelmingly first-person in their orientation and direction. The author-musicians focus on their own activities and their own musical strategies as definitive. In contrast, Lewis (“Teaching Improvised Music”) and Masaoka address the ways their actions are embedded in certain communities and histories and how this informs their understandings of improvisation. Tracing the powerful effects of the AACM’s model for community and musical interaction through the improvisation world offers a specific picture of a political ideology in motion, embraced by some musicians and resisted by others (Lewis, “Gittin’ to Know Y’all”). Aoki is trying to change taiko at the same time that he is trying to create interesting improvisations. His awareness as an improviser and the particular kind of improviser that he is—one who is steeped in AACM and Asian Improv aesthetics and methodologies—means that he is actively exploring the very terms of culture-making as well as the conditions for making interesting music. The sensibilities that define some forms of creative improvisation can thus generate new kinds of musical communities defined by an awareness of history and transnational movement.

My research on taiko and creative improvisation has usually proceeded along separate channels but came together in this consideration of Aoki’s work. Taiko and improvisation are usually sounded in rather different social environments, and they depend on rather different models for how music creates templates for critical interaction. Some corners of improvisational practice offer forceful models for performative conceptions of music-as-culture; Asian American taiko is—sometimes, in some hands—an anti-nationalist, liberatory, oppositional, joyfully embodied practice-as-presence. Creative improvisation is permanently utopian as a social practice, while North American taiko teeters on the edge of centralization, institutionalization, and mainstream appropriation even as it effects serious ground level identity work. Neither tradition necessarily does any of the things I’ve suggested but gets there only if its practitioners insist on it. Both are sites for Aoki’s political and musical aims. Their intersection in the *Basser Live II* project suggests the power that place, practice, and critical pedagogy can lock in when improvisational strategies are activated.

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## Glossary of Japanese Terminology

### *chindoya*

A raucous form of hybrid western-Japanese street music performed by small groups of 3-4 performers and a singer who would carry sandwich boards for businesses to promote their services. They are gaudily made up and usually costumed in *yukata* (traditional cotton robes). One performer generally wears a frame supporting several percussion instruments, often a *shime* and a small metal gong called *kane*. Others play clarinet, *shamisen*, or even electric guitar. They perform songs and short skits in between busking, with lots of slapstick and boisterous behavior.

### *chudaiko*

Mid-sized drum with two heads tacked onto a hollow wooden body. Placed on a variety of different stands. Usually played with 16-inch drumsticks.

### *dojo*

A traditional Japanese 'school' (for martial arts, music, etc.), always led by a particular teacher.

### *Issei*

' First generation', i.e., the generation of Japanese who emigrated. In the U.S., changing immigration legislation meant that the *Issei* arrived between 1880-1924, and their children, the *Nisei* or second-generation Japanese Americans, were mostly born between 1910-1930.

### *ji*

Traditional Japanese musical structure of having an ostinato pattern maintained by one or more instruments, often the *shime*.

### *odaiko*

Largest drum, placed horizontally on a stand at shoulder-level or higher and played by one or two musicians (one on each head).

### *shime* (or *shime-daiko*)

Small, high-pitched two-headed drum with heavy rope laces. Played either sitting or standing.

### *shamisen*

Three-stringed traditional Japanese fretless lute played with a heavy wooden or ivory plectrum. Played by both men and women in a variety of contexts, including *geisha* music (to accompany songs called *kouta*) and theater (e.g., Kabuki and puppet drama).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The field of Asian American Studies is based on precisely this understanding. The construct of the 'Asian American' is meant to acknowledge longstanding problems faced by Americans of Asian descent and to reoperationalize the ways that Asians have sometimes been regarded by other Americans as an undifferentiated group. Individuals who self-identify as Asian American (usually in addition to their specific heritage) are well aware of ethnic and national differences across Asian immigrant groups. I work from a base in Ethnic Studies, which presupposes the shaping force of racism and its systemic effects on American society. My use of the term 'Asian American' thus stems from an informed decision to attend to difference by using the terminology and categories proposed by scholars working in these areas.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "hyphenated Americans" has generated many decades' worth of discussion about the nature of American identity, the metaphors that best describe it, and the plasticity it dis/allows. It goes back to the



nineteenth century and used most famously by Theodore Roosevelt, who said “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism” (392). It has been used as an epithet to suggest divided allegiances. The Japanese American Citizens League, among other groups, has argued for dropping the hyphen so that there are only adjectival forms of the American.

<sup>3</sup> Tatsu Aoki's CD *Basser Live III* is available on [www.asianimprov.com](http://www.asianimprov.com) and [www.JMStore.com](http://www.JMStore.com)

<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to go into much detail, but politically-directed interethnic creative improvisation has been central to the work of Asian Improv artists. See D. Wong, *Speak it Louder* 275-298 for more on this, with attention to musical encounters between George Lewis and Miya Masaoka, and between Joseph Jarman, Francis Wong, and Glenn Horiuchi. See Asai, “Cultural Politics” for a consideration of Fred Ho’s radically interethnic model for improvisation and social change. See Dessen and Robinson for considerations of how the Asian American improvisation scene in the Bay Area has related to other (raced) American streams of creative music. Coming back closer to the subject of this essay, Aoki’s albums with Malachi Favors Maghostut (*2x4*) and Roscoe Mitchell (*First Look: Chicago Duos*) are models of their kind and represent sustained efforts between musicians of color with shared political sensibilities.

<sup>5</sup> See Susan Asai “Transformations” and “Sansei Voices” for useful examinations of how Mark Izu, Glenn Horiuchi, and Nobuko Miyamoto have explored, drawn on, and transformed ‘traditional’ Japanese musics via a self-consciously Japanese American location. See also Miya Masaoka’s “trans-cultural” exploration of the *koto* and Japanese court music, and their influences on her musical sensibilities as a Japanese American.

<sup>6</sup> Referring to ‘North American’ taiko is a referent from the taiko community and reflects an effort to be mindful of Canadian developments in the tradition. (I am not aware of any taiko groups in Mexico.) American and Canadian taiko share some things but not others. Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians both experienced internment during World War II but not in identical ways. Canadian and American ideologies of multiculturalism are not identical but inform the contexts in which taiko helps define Asian American and Asian Canadian presence. Like the term ‘Asian American,’ North American taiko’ is a construct that is meant to recognize the shared experience of heritage work in diaspora.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Asian American’ activities are often marked by an informed and self-conscious deployment of markers from different Asian cultures, which is meant to create environments of inclusiveness as well as to promote attention to diversity within the Asian American community. Since the emergence of the ‘Asian American’ concept in the 1960s, certain events reinforced identifications across Asian American political concerns. For instance, the struggle for reparations for Japanese Americans incarcerated in internment camps between 1942 and 1945 was taken on by Asian Americans generally as an example of how anti-Asian xenophobia affects all Asian Americans. Similarly, the hate murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin in 1982 prompted organized responses by many different Asian American groups. In short, the political construct of the Asian American is meant to enable coalitions across different Asian ethnicities.

<sup>8</sup> Provisionally titled *Big Beats: Taiko in California and Beyond*.

<sup>9</sup> See Everett and Lau; and Lam 1999 for more on the politics of inserting ‘Asian’ sounds into western art music and into Asian American musics.

<sup>10</sup> Opening credits to the unpublished *Basser Live II* DVD.

<sup>11</sup> See Waseda 227-234 for more on the impact and contribution of *Shin Issei* musicians in Southern California from the 1950s to the present. She offers a detailed consideration of how *Shin Issei* artists and teachers contributed to the maintenance of the traditional Japanese arts.

<sup>12</sup> I refer to them in this way though they themselves do not use this handle or regard themselves as a formal group in the way that the AACM involved membership.

<sup>13</sup> Notable exceptions include Fred Anderson and Max Roach, who lead on AIR albums.

<sup>14</sup> When Aoki was wondering how to ensure a strong community base for Tsukasa Taiko, Francis Wong suggested housing it in a Japanese American community center, based on the model of Gen Taiko, taught by Melody Takata. Gen Taiko is based in the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern

California (JCCNC) in San Francisco's Japantown.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to one of the anonymous readers for really pushing me on this point. Working out from my ethnographic observations, s/he saw “something paternalistic and dominating” in Aoki’s approach to teaching improvisation and questioned the extent to which improvisational practice should, or must, generate pedagogies that acknowledge their own ideological base of authority.

<sup>16</sup> The theme of the 2005 Asian American Jazz Festival in Chicago was “legacy,” meant to signal the ways that both taiko and improvisational jazz need to look back as a condition for moving forward.

<sup>17</sup> Yoshihashi could also be described as *Nisei Kibei*. *Nisei* = second generation Japanese American (since he was born in the U.S.) *Ki* is short for *kaeru*, which means ‘return’; *bei* is short for *bei-ko-ku*, ‘America’. *Kibei* thus means a Japanese American who has lived in Japan but returned to America. *Kibei* are usually fluent in Japanese.

<sup>18</sup> Originally from Miyake Island off the Izu archipelago, an *odaiko* (one of the largest drums in the ensemble) is placed on a horizontal stand at about stomach level; two players face each other and play in an impressively strong and physically demanding manner, necessitated by a deep stance in which the hips are brought down almost to knee level and each musician strikes with a clean horizontal stroke across the body. The stand, the style of playing, and the actual piece of music are originally from Miyake Island but have been arranged and rearranged by Japanese and non-Japanese taiko players, so that the resulting folkloricized renditions are known throughout the taiko world as “Miyake style” and are instantly recognizable as such. It is beautiful and the physical effort involved is very evident.

<sup>19</sup> Aoki originally composed this motive for the soundtrack of Changjae Lee’s documentary film *Edit* (2005).

<sup>20</sup> *Issei Spirit*, Glenn Horiuchi.

<sup>21</sup> See Waseda 263-64 for a brief biography of Kinnara Taiko.

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Tatsu Aoki

<http://www.avantbass.com/>

<http://www.tatsuaoki.com/>

Asian Improv aRts

<http://www.asianimprov.org>

Asian Improv Records

<http://www.asianimprov.com>

JASC Tsukasa Taiko