

the KODŌ beat

鼓童



*Encore in the lobby of the Powell Symphony Hall, St. Louis
photo by Motofumi Yamaguchi*

Kaoru Watanabe's U.S. Tour '01 Report

Kaoru Watanabe, age 25, was born and bred in St. Louis, Missouri. Both his parents play for the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. After a 2 year apprenticeship and one year as a probationary member, Kaoru became a full-fledged member of Kodo on April 1st this year. He played taiko as a child and studied jazz flute and saxophone at the Manhattan School of Music. Here is his personal account of his first tour abroad with Kodo and his first time home in 3 years.

I played mostly fue on this tour, 3 or 4 pieces and

taiko in one piece, *Mikazuki no Yoru*. The big thing is that I was speaking English, that was such a big deal. I didn't grow up speaking much Japanese and so for the first time since joining the group I felt like I was one step ahead, instead of one behind. It was the first time in 3 years I felt I was being *helpful*. I also realized going back to America that yes, I am American. It was so liberating to speak English. I loved shopping, just going into stores and talking to the clerks. At night after the show I would be glued to the TV watching *Laverne and Shirley* or something, pure junk, but I was just soaking up the stuff. Kind of embarrassing.

My first impression of America was how big the cars and trucks are. These giant pick-ups that wouldn't fit on half the roads in Japan. I was also struck by how obese so many people were. The working style in the theatres is different too. Everything is more laid back and less precisely scheduled.

San Jose was special of course because San Jose Taiko had a pot-luck party for us. In welcoming us Roy and PJ said it was always special to have Kodo as guests, but this time it was extra special because I (an American taikoist they had seen growing up) was there. That was very nice of them. In Denver ex-Kodo member Bob Ward met us with his kids. We also went to a jazz club with local taikoists Nancy and Gary Tsujimoto and I broke out my flute and jammed along as Chieko danced. Afterwards the drummer – on hearing we were with Kodo – talked with Yoshikazu for about 20 minutes and then gave him a cow bell and some sticks. Yoshikazu invited him to the theatre the next day and let him play the odaiko. Those are the kind of great two-way experiences that make touring so memorable.

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As a brand new member it was difficult facing the great standing ovations we got each night. I felt I hadn't done anything to deserve it. It was hard for me to smile, I felt I *should* smile, because smiling is a way of paying back the audience, but it's hard. The middle school workshop tours I went on in Japan were a good experience for that reason. There you had a reluctant audience who didn't know anything about us. We had no idea how they would react. Eiichi told me this is what it was like in the old days. It was like getting back to basics.

Of all the performances I was most nervous about St. Louis. I didn't know who would be in the audience, but of course there were lots of family and friends. Everyone came back to my house where my mom had laid on a great spread of Japanese food. Sushi, sukiyaki, onigiri, even Kirin beer. One of the members almost had tears in his eyes. People from the taiko group I helped found, St. Louis Suwa Daiko, also came. It was great.

This was Kodo's 3rd trip to Carnegie Hall. A lot of my friends were in the audience from Soh Daiko and assorted jazz friends. I think I had forgotten how important these people are to me. The 3 years just seemed to disappear. Seeing them in one way made it hard for me to want to return to Japan. It didn't make sense to be so far away from them, but at the same time it made me feel good about going back to Japan, the fact that they were so proud of me, of what I was doing. I could give something back to them by their seeing me up on stage.

After NY we went to DC. It was a foggy, rainy day. Most of the members had a sense of relief because they could go home after 2 months, but it was kinda sad for me because I knew it was going to be my last concert in America.

There were times when I wondered if I really fit into Kodo. As a jazz musician 'doing a show' goes against many of my instincts. I brought up these doubts with an old jazz friend and mentor after our show in New York and he said, 'Yes, Kodo is a lot of show, but what they are doing musically is really happening and so really valid.' I now feel the presentation is as important as the music itself.

As for my thoughts on learning from tradition, it's



The tall flutist is corn-fed Kaoru helping to hustle CD's at a book and record store in NYC. photo by Kazuki Imagai

not about *going back* to learn from the likes of Duke Ellington or Beethoven, as much as it's about trying to *catch up* with them. I watch Yoshikazu play and I find myself thinking, 'This is why I am in Kodo. To learn from this.'

After the tour was over about 10 of us headed out to California to Mickey Hart's Studio X for an extended recording session with some of the finest percussionists in the world. What a setup he has there. Horses, llamas, ping pong table and a pond. Mickey Hart is not only Grateful Dead's drummer, but he also holds a position at the Library of Congress as their authority on world percussion. We were joined in the studio on successive days by the likes of Puerto Rican conga player Giovanni Hildago, Brazilian percussionist Airto Moreira, American percussionist Micheal Hinton, Azam and Greg of the group Vas. Blues harp legend Charlie Musselwhite dropped by, and to wind things up we worked with this year's featured guest at Earth Celebration, tabla master Zakir Hussain. These are all first-rank people and though I was only there as one of the helpers, when they needed extra bodies, we were invited to join in. It made me realize how undeveloped my sense of rhythm is - inaccurate and loose. The heads of these guys are just swimming with rhythms. Zakir gave us a basic rhythm to play, quite tricky, but it sounded Japanese to me and very taiko-like. When I asked him afterwards when he composed the piece, he said, 'Oh I just made it up then. I don't know anything about the taiko but that rhythm seemed to me as if it would fit.'

Amazing.



Eiichi leads a workshop hosted by The Midwest Buddhist Temple Taiko in Chicago photos by Shinichi Sogo

USA Taiko & Voice Workshop Tour

by Daniel Rosen

Putting together the Kodo 2001 North America Tour was no means a simple task, but now that I am based in America, it certainly made it easier to get in touch with local taiko groups and start building relationships. This year, throughout the month of March, Eiichi Saito and Yoko Fujimoto did a total of 26 workshops in 10 cities throughout the United States, with over 20 taiko groups represented. Eiichi was in North America in 1999 for a short taiko workshop tour, but this year marked the first time that Yoko would present her 'Voice Circle' workshop in the USA. The tour also included 3 special Voice & Taiko combined 2-day weekend workshops. Yoko also did 6 workshops in Hawaii solo.

In Eiichi's workshops I watched people hitting the taiko first cautiously and then without reserve, surprised and delighted by his playful energy. In Yoko's workshops I watched people go from being mortified by the sound of their own voice, to not only being comfortable singing, but to singing with a joy as if they had discovered their own voice for the first time. I would like to send out a heart-felt thank you to all of the local taiko groups who hosted the workshops. Their enthusiasm and generosity of spirit was overwhelming. I know that both instructors and students alike enjoyed the rare opportunity to spend time in the casual atmosphere of a workshop which concert settings simply don't allow. This year's tour was no doubt the start of many long-lasting relationships.

Excerpts from the March 18, New York Times article: 'Kodo Drummers Make Way For a Voice'

by James Oestreich

... during a recent series of workshops here for members of taiko groups from the Los Angeles area, Kodo was first encountered in the form of a soft-spoken, petite woman, Yoko Fujimoto, the company's principal vocalist...even some of the workshop participants seemed dubious about the role of voice in taiko performance. True, spontaneous-seeming but not quite random shouts punctuate performances...(and) 'Kiyari,' once a lumberjacks' ditty and now popular at weddings, (is) lustily sung by four men. But Ms. Fujimoto, drilling the Americans in endless variations on rudimentary folk or ritual songs, seemed to be striving for something more basic: not so much individual vocal refinement or panache as a unity of group spirit based on listening to one's fellow performers, a heightened sensitivity to musical surroundings. In this sense her



Yoko teaching to sing with no fear

efforts fully complemented those of Eiichi Saito, a drummer more in the standard Kodo mold, who led other workshops and joined with Ms. Fujimoto in a day of combined taiko and voice. And these goals of mutual attentiveness are wholly in tune not only with Kodo's performance ethic but also with its largely communal lifestyle. ...Her intense personal charm, evident despite the need for a translator, seemed to win over the workshop skeptics as effortlessly as her low, soulful singing inspired them. Her voice, with its surprising heft, especially memorable in a haunting elaboration on a simple Ainu folk song, seems to emanate from some deep well in her small body. What is required to put a folk song to your own ends, Ms. Fujimoto suggested at a workshop, is, first, whatever knowledge can be had of it, then a feeling for it and, finally, respect. As long as these are in place, she said, 'there's no right or wrong.'

As result of our disaster relief fundraising we sent 3 tonnes of Sado rice to 1,600 Miyakejima householders evacuated to the mainland.

We planted some *keyaki* (zelkova) at Kodo Village as a first step towards our dream of playing drums made from home-grown wood.

As of April 1st 2001, players Yuichiro Funabashi, Masami Miyazaki and Kaoru Watanabe became full members. Kazufumi Sakuma also joined as a production staff member.

In March the 2nd *Taiko Kokan* (Taiko Exchange) stayover workshop was held at Kodo Village. Designed for the seasoned taikoist, this is an occasion for enthusiasts to network, teach and learn from each other.

Our new CD '*Tataku*' made it to number 7 on Billboard's World Music Album chart.

'The Rhyth Mix' plan a study tour of Tokyo and Sado in Sept. Check out: www.rhythmix.org/japan2001.html

in brief.....



upcoming performances

Japan Tour

May

4 Hyogo Kobe World Kinen Hall 06-6233-8771
Eitetsu Hayashi (taiko soloist/former Kodo member), Kodo,
Wadaiko Matsumura-gumi (Kobe), TAIKOZ (Sydney)

24 Niigata Shibata Shimin Bunka Kaikan 0254-26-1945
26 Yamanashi Yamanashi Kenmin Bunka Hall 055-235-3975
27 Shizuoka Rose Theatre 0545-60-2500
29 Shizuoka Hama Hall 053-413-6677
31 Aichi Kota Chomin Kaikan Sakura Hall Sold Out

June

1 Aichi Aichi Kosei Nenkin Kaikan 052-263-7171
11 Saitama Omiya Shimin Kaikan 048-624-0188
12 Saitama Iruma-shi Shimin Kaikan 042-964-2411
14 Gunma Isesaki-shi Bunka Kaikan 0277-53-3133
16 Chiba Mori no Hall 21, Matsudo 047-365-9911
18 Tokyo Hokutopia Sakura Hall 03-5237-9999
19 Chiba Togane Bunka Kaikan 0475-55-6211
20 Chiba Kimitsu Shimin Bunka Hall 0439-55-3300
22 Tokyo Humming Hall Sold Out
23 Tokyo Ota Kumin Hall Aprico 03-5744-1600
24 Tokyo Ecorma Hall, Komae-shi Sold Out
27 Kanagawa Green Hall Sagamiono 042-742-9999
28 Kanagawa Kawasaki-shi Kyoiku Bunka Kaikan
044-222-3090
29 Kanagawa Yokosuka Geijutsu Gekijo 0468-23-9999

Aikawa Kinzan Matsuri

July 27 Aikawa, Sado Island 0259-86-3630

Earth Celebration 2001

August 17-19

Shiroyama Park Concerts (Aug. 17-19, 19:00 - 21:00)

17 Kodo

18 The Taal Ensemble featuring Zakir Hussain (India)
with Ustad Sultain Khan, T. H. Vinayakram,
V. Selvagananesh and Antonio Minnecola.

19 [Celebration] Kodo and The Taal Ensemble

EC Theatres

18 15:00-17:00 [Sound Forest] at Ayusu Kaikan
Ryutaro Kaneko, Ryo Watanabe, Haruhiko Saga,
Tsubasa Hori
18 21:30 - 23:00 [Yukiai -utuwasakarap-] at Kisaki Shrine
Chieko Kojima, Oki, Haruhiko Saga, Norihiko Yamakita
19 10:30 - 12:00 [Sound Sparks III - The Carnival]
at Kisaki Shrine
Akira Nanjo, Ryo Watanabe, Masahiro Mizuno, Eiichi
Saito, Sachiko Abe, Kazuki Imagai, Ayako Onizawa

Mini-Workshops

[Japanese Taiko], [Japanese Taiko Lite], [Samba],
[Kendama (Japanese cup and ball game)], [Juggling],
[Haka], [Let's Play Hawai'ian Percussion],
[Hawai'ian Lei Making & Chant], [Ogi Okesa Folk Dance],
[Rediscovering Light]

Exhibition & Lecture

[Revival of the Ancient Polynesian Voyaging Canoe]
[Traditionally Dyed Fabrics of India]

Ticket sales start on **June 1st**. 'Earth Celebration Cyber Garden' will be up on our website from May. Please visit the site for further information. An advance tickets order form will be sent to members of Friends of Kodo in May.

Notice to Kodo Beat Readers

Kodo Beat is a newsletter focusing on the activities of Kodo and is sent quarterly to members of *Friends of Kodo*. *Friends of Kodo* is dedicated to bringing Kodo closer to our audience and fellow taiko enthusiasts. Membership is available to all. As well as receiving *Kodo Beat*, members also get special advance ticket reservations for selected concerts in Japan, the chance to buy original goods available only to them, and selected discounts on a range of Kodo goodies. For further information about these offers contact us or check our website.

For those readers who only want the newsletter, an on-line version is available on the Internet.

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