

the KODŌ beat

鼓童

What is Taiko?

*Drummer and student of anthropology,
Shawn Bender and his thoughts on taiko.*

Shawn, a doctoral student in the department of anthropology at the University of California at San Diego, has spent the last 2 years in Japan on a scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education. He has studied under, and played with Sukeroku Daiko Hozonkai in Iidabashi, Nihon Taiko Dojo in Asakusa, Musashi Daiko in Miyoshi, Saitama, and Kodo. His research centres on what Japanese taiko is, its history, and where it is headed.

Shawn Bender was born in Edina, Minnesota on July 26, 1969. His parents moved back to their native Winnipeg, Canada, right after he was born. His grandfather used to say there are 2 seasons in Winnipeg: winter and July. In his 3rd grade the family moved to Minot, North Dakota. He began playing drums in his elementary school band and he also took piano lessons until the 7th grade. After school he would come home and either fool around with his computer or stick on a *Rush* tape and play along on his drums. He claims to have learned more from listening to Rush than from any drum teacher. In high school he was also in the jazz and marching bands and was chosen for *McDonald's All-American High School Band*. They played at the Chicago Charity Christmas Parade, the Fiesta Bowl in Phoenix, the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, Carnegie Hall and in Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. As they marched passed 42nd Street the 'little kid from North Dakota' had great trouble concentrating on the music, surrounded as they were by 'LIVE, XXX Nude Girls!!!'

After studying political science and economics at the University of Minnesota he spent a year in Japan teaching English. He decided then upon a career in



*'The house that taiko built': Kodo's Rehearsal Hall
watercolour by Johnny Wales*

anthropology and entered the graduate programme at UCSD. For his doctoral research he has combined his interests in Japan, anthropology and drumming.

Taiko and drumming aren't the same thing though, as his various teachers of taiko in Japan never tired of reminding him. He wasn't moving his body enough, his body and arms weren't synced, and he should hit the drum harder! Small fast western-style stuff wouldn't pass. The idea is to hit hard and slow. Especially with Sukeroku Daiko, the *furi*, the way you actually hit and dance around the drum is very

volume fifty-five

winter 2001

important. When you play western drums you sit in the back with the minimum amount of movement. Unless you're trying to play heavy metal, its cooler if you look like you're not working at all and yet all this wonderful sound is coming out.

In studying Kodo he interviewed all the players and senior staff trying to find out why they came to Kodo, what they do and what they want to do in the future. He went to the Apprentice Centre about 3 times a week because one aspect of his research was to watch how the apprentices essentially become 'kodo-ized'. In working alongside them he also learned about Sado, through cooking, woodworking, making *waraji* straw sandals and chopsticks out of bamboo.

As for his preliminary observations of the world of taiko, and differences between taiko in the West and Japan, he notes that in the West one sees taiko as presented as being representative of Japanese culture. In Japan however, players don't talk of it in those terms. When asked, 'Why are you playing taiko?' they reply, 'Because its fun, because I like it, it feels good.' Players in the U.S., particularly people at the taiko conference, are apt to say, 'Its part of my identity as a Japanese'.

Shawn reports that in Tokyo it's very hard to find ordinary people interested in taiko, and players are generally only interested in the style they are involved with. In the U.S. players are concerned about taiko's roots and the state of the taiko community. They hold taiko conferences in the U.S. and Canada. They want to meet, exchange, have workshops. In Japan its all about '*shu ha*' and 'This group doesn't want you to play their piece', and 'We play this style not that'.

Shawn feels that the successful people in the world of taiko haven't given enough credit for their success to their fans. There is much talk about the production side of the equation, but not the consumption side. *Why* did people begin playing taiko, *why* did taiko become so successful? Taiko literature is all about why players got interested and started playing, why they decided to play it their way, why people are still playing it now, what types of taiko are they playing now? There is nothing written about *why* people are paying money to go and see taiko.

He feels a lot of the success of Kodo is due to their



Shawn and a doctor's sled in front of the Sado Museum

appearing when there was a growing interest in world music. He ascribes world music's popularity to there being so many people now living in a suburban kind of environment – a place of little traditional culture – so they are looking to other cultures to find what's missing in their own lives. As an example he offers Kodo staff member Atsushi Sugano, who grew up in suburban Tokyo, surrounded by buildings with very little 'traditional' Japanese culture around him. At the taiko conference, though he was a representative of Kodo and was certainly thought by those around him as Japanese, when asked about his identity he said 'I'm a hippie.' He identifies himself more with the counterculture in the U.S. where he studied, than with being Japanese. One of the reasons he came to Kodo was in search of himself, or at least his Japanese self.

Shawn stresses his admiration for Kodo having managed to thrive for so long. 'It is beautiful stepping inside the Rehearsal Hall at Kodo Village and thinking 'This was the house built by drums! It might not be a perfect plan or perfect organization, but they have a direction, they have a vision, and very incrementally they are moving towards that vision. Every step of the way they are making very important decisions. To see people who have achieved a level of stability but are trying to improve things and move forward, I find impressive.'

'This was weird being on the other end of the interview. I want to offer many thanks to Kodo for their support and patience with me. I also want to give my warmest thanks to my home-stay family the Kusakas. They made me feel truly at home on Sado.'

Kodo Close-up:

Takeshi Arai, Player

18th in a series of profiles of individual Kodo members.

Takeshi Arai was born in Chichibu City in Saitama on May 9th, 1969. He has an older and younger sister. His dad was a truck driver, and his mother was a housewife who held part-time jobs. He remembers a happy childhood, from early in the morning until sunset outside playing in the mountains, swinging from the trees like Tarzan. Between the ages of 9 and 12 he played taiko in the local *Yataibayashi* group.

After school, not sure of what career he wanted, he went to Chuo University in the suburbs of Tokyo. There he ostensibly studied commercial trade, though he devoted most of his time to a sports club, where he played basketball, volleyball and skied. He went to classes for a bit in first year but scarcely any in 2nd and 3rd, putting his graduation in doubt. He put his nose to the grind stone in 4th year and managed to scrape through. After university he could postpone choosing a career no longer and joined the Edwin Jeans company. As he wore jeans all the time, it seemed as good a choice as any. When he phoned for an interview he was told 'You will have a better chance if you don't wear a suit.' So, in spite of being a Levis man, he bought some Edwins and wore them to appointment. At the initial meeting he was told that when he returned in a month for his interview with the president to make sure to grow the beard he had recently shaved off. 'If you don't have it we won't hire you!' Duly whiskered and uniformed in jeans and polo shirt the president said mysteriously, 'You have a logo on your breast, that's one accent, you have a beard, that's 2, and your collar is standing up. That's 3. Too much! He feigned comprehension...and got the job.

That lasted for about a year and a half but he didn't find it very stimulating. In December of 1991 he happened to see a Kodo performance. He remembers thinking, 'Gee they look like they're having fun'. They had a pamphlet saying they were looking for apprentices and that the age limit was 18 to 25 years. As he was about to turn 25 that May he thought it was his only chance so why not give it a try? Making the long trip to the interview on Sado's remote northern

coast the bus driver let him off in the dark in the howling wind by the sea. He must have made a good impression because back home he got a call saying he could become one of the 5 apprentices that year, 2 women and 3 men. He got used to the life without too much



trouble. The year passed in a flash, and unlike most other members, he never remembers wanting to quit. Though unable to read music, and not a fast learner by his own reckoning, he says he practiced hard until he had learned the music with his body. Soon after joining he was off to Lisbon and London where, at the enclosed space of Sadler's Wells, he first experienced the power of the applause pouring over him. It felt wonderful, but he wondered if I had really earned such an ovation after so little time with the group.

As for the difference in Kodo's *yataibayashi* and the Chichibu original he says, 'The local one is more improvised, not measured like Kodo's and has lower-pitched drums. Back home they play on and on for hours on end as the festival carts wend their way through the town. Oh yes, and they don't wear loin cloths, its really cold that time of year!'

One reason he doesn't regret quitting Edwin is that he had to make small talk all the time with the various store owners. But with Kodo there are so few words necessary and yet such impact. At Kodo meetings he never says a word. His wife Kazuko, a Kodo staff member, makes up for his silence though, so he feels they make a well-balanced team. Their first son Kentaro was born last year on August 29th.

He doesn't strive to be a lead player, his goal is rather to be the best *ji-uchi* (support) player in Japan. After 9 years in the group he has finally reached a level where he can relax and simply enjoy the concerts. He has come to that place where he saw Kodo the first time. Now he too is playing drums and having a great time.

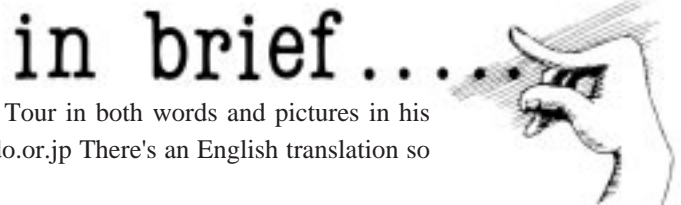
Player Sachiko Inoue married fellow player Kazunari Abe and from this fall appears on stage as Sachiko Abe.

Player Kazuki Imagai reports on the American Tour in both words and pictures in his Tour Diary on Kodo's home page. <http://www.kodo.or.jp> There's an English translation so why not check it out?

On May 4th a *Kobe Earthquake Restoration Event* will be held at which a number of original Kodo players will appear in joint performance with Eitetsu Hayashi among others.

In March Eiichi Saito and Yoko Fujimoto will be holding a series of taiko and song workshops in LA, Denver, Chicago, Boston, New York and Washington D.C.

Players Takahito Nishino and Michiko Yanagi left Kodo near the end of 2000. Best of luck to them both!



upcoming performances

USA Tour

January

29 Eugene, OR Hult Center

February

1-3 Stanford, CA Memorial Auditorium

7-11 Los Angeles, CA Royce Hall

14 Colorado Springs, CO Pikes Peak Center

15-17 Denver, CO Auditorium Theater

20 Lawrence, KS Lied Center

21 Lincoln, NE Lied Center for the Performing Arts

24-25 Iowa City, IA Hancher Auditorium

27 Cedar Falls, IA Gallagher-Bluedorn PAC,
Univ. of N. Iowa

March

1 St. Louis, MO Powell Symphony Hall

3 Springfield, MO Hammons Hall

4 Tulsa, OK Chapman Music Hall

7 New Brunswick, NJ State Theater New Brunswick

8 Princeton, NJ McCarter Theatre

9 Newark, NJ Prudential Hall

11 Boston, MA Symphony Hall Boston

13 Ithaca, NY Bailey Hall

15 Philadelphia, PA Anneberg Center

16 Greenvale, NY Tilles Center for the Performing Arts

18 Purchase, NY Theater A

20 New York, NY Carnegie Hall

22 Washington, D.C. Constitution Hall

Japan Tour

May

4 Hyogo Kobe World Kinen Hall

24 Niigata Shibata Shimin Bunka Kaikan

26 Yamanashi Yamanashi Kenmin Bunka Hall

27 Shizuoka Rose Theatre, Fuji-shi

29 Shizuoka Hama Hall, Hamamatsu-shi

31 Aichi Koda Chomin Kaikan

June

1 Aichi Aichi Kosei Nenkin Kaikan, Nagoya

11 Saitama Omiya Shimin Kaikan

12	Saitama	Iruma-shi Shimin Kaikan
14	Gunma	Isesaki-shi Bunka Kaikan
16	Chiba	Mori no Hall, Matsudo-shi
18	Tokyo	Hokutopia Sakura Hall, Kita-ku
19	Chiba	Togane Bunka Kaikan
20	Chiba	Kimitsu Shimin Bunka Hall
22	Tokyo	Higashiyamato Shimin Kaikan
23	Tokyo	Ota Kumin Hall Apurico
24	Tokyo	Ecorma Hall, Komae-shi
27	Kanagawa	Green Hall Sagamiono
28	Kanagawa	Kawasaki-shi Kyoiku Bunka Kaikan
29	Kanagawa	Yokosuka Geijutsu Gekijo

Kodo Juku '01

Kodo Juku are multi-day, sleepover workshops where participants can get a taste of the Kodo lifestyle as they discover their individual potential.

Voice workshop: June 21-24 (Held in Kodo Village, hotel accommodations)

Taiko Workshop: Sep. 19-23 (Workshop and accommodation in Kodo Apprentice Center)

Contact us for details, or check our website.

Application deadlines: Voice Workshop- First come first served basis / Taiko Workshops- July 27

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.

Kodo Village, Ogi, Sado Island 952-0611, Japan

Tel.0259-86-3630 (Fax:3631) e-mail: JDC03000@nifty.ne.jp

Kodo's official website: <http://www.kodo.or.jp>