

# Drumming Up Interest in Japan

The San Francisco Taiko Dojo is the oldest Japanese drum group in the United States. **Tony McNicol** visited the group.

**T**he easiest way to find America's best-known taiko drum group is to follow the noise. Wisely, the San Francisco group is based on an industrial estate well out of earshot of residential homes. Polystyrene boards are suspended from the high ceiling of the practice room in a futile attempt to absorb the noise. Drums around the hall range from snare drum size to one as big as a compact car.

Barefoot students bow in turn as they enter the room. Most are impressively muscular, and when the energetic practice gets going, it's apparent why. With all the flailing and jumping about, and chunky drumsticks they wield, it's a wonder students don't don crash helmets. They practice in pairs, each somehow managing to pick out a separate complex rhythm amidst

the cacophony.

Their director, sixty-six year old Seiichi Tanaka, is a stern stocky and bull-necked man with bristly white hair. After the warm-up he instructs three students to give a demonstration and gives his comments as the other students, still panting, kneel and watch. "Above Monday, below Thursday: that's your situation," he barks. "The movement is very choppy and not smooth." He peppers his English with snatches of Japanese and occasionally orders Japanese-speaking students to interpret. "Generally very amateurish performance," he frowns. The routine is for an upcoming festival in San Francisco Japantown. "If audience is drunk, maybe OK."

Tanaka was born in Tokyo, but grew up in Nagano central Japan. He

went to the United States in 1967 and founded the San Francisco Taiko Dojo just one year later. It is the oldest taiko group in the United States, and many leaders of some 200 other groups have been Tanaka's students at some point. Tanaka has been a full-time drumming teacher for thirty years and now has 200 students. About a quarter are children, the youngest six years old.

Taiko-like drums were first imported in Japan from China around the seventh century. They were used in court music, religious ceremonies, on stage in noh and kabuki and in local agricultural festivals. Today there are countless taiko groups all over Japan with distinct traditions and styles. Taiko has also become a performance art—largely through the efforts of a jazz drummer named Daihachi Oguchi. From the early postwar years Oguchi promoted taiko around Japan and abroad. He was also involved in founding the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, but tragically died last year at



the age of eighty-four after being hit by a car.

## Drum Fusion

Tanaka describes his group's distinctive drumming as a mixture of traditional and contemporary rhythm infused with dance and martial arts. It is a fusion, jazzy style for the American melting pot. "The American taiko has more expression... sometimes funky," explains a jovial Tanaka over a cup of green tea during a session break. He is far less stern when not gripping his drumsticks.

Naomi Ture, whose mother is Japanese, has been studying taiko for two years. "I was kind of curious about my own culture," says Ture. "The first time I heard taiko it pierced right through me and I wanted to jump right on stage and be part of it." She says she enjoys the movement, rhythm and endurance, as well as the elements of improvisation. "We just have to feel it and play," she says.


John Rocheleau is also part Japanese. He makes the two-hour car journey from Sonoma County twice a week to practice. "It is physically de-

manding, but I like the old-school approach, the discipline," he says. "I want to work really hard and sweat—and that's what Tanaka-sensei offers." He tells me that the group is very diverse, including Korean Chinese and Vietnamese members as well as Japanese and American.

Ting-Chi Li from Taiwan has been studying at the Dojo for seven years. She teaches Mandarin Chinese at a local high school. "The drumbeat releases all your stress and brings out your true feelings," she says. Li says she has become more interested in Japanese culture since starting taiko. She even had the chance to travel to Taiwan with other group members for a drumming demonstration.

Far from taiko's Japan homeland, the group has sometimes had to improvise. Imported drums can cost up to tens of thousands of U.S. dollars, so beginners at the Dojo practice on old car tires at first. "It's something that you can't destroy and it teaches you how to hit properly," says Rocheleau. The group has twenty Japanese drums for performances, but they make their own practice drums too: California wine barrels covered with cowhide.

As well as traveling to Europe, Asia and the Middle East to promote taiko, each year the group performs at San Francisco Japantown's cherry blossom festival. It is a busy recruiting time for them. They also have friendship links with taiko groups back in Japan. "When I started we were struggling [for recognition in Japan]," says Tanaka, "but after ten or fifteen years the Japanese groups have to recognize the American taiko movement."

They are not short of renown in the United States either. Tanaka's drummers have performed with a host of well-known musicians including Art Blakey, Bobby McFerrin, Tony Bennett and Tito Puente. The dojo contributed to the *Apocalypse Now* movie soundtrack and drummers appeared in *Return of the Jedi*. Tanaka says that his dream is to make the word "taiko" as recognizable in English as "karate" or "sushi." It is bombastic drumming for a big country. "This country is big and has large-size people too," says Tanaka. "So I want students to express themselves big." 

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From left, San Francisco Taiko Dojo director, Grand Master Seiichi Tanaka; enthusiastic students in full flow; a class in unison

