A TEI Project

Interview of Johnny Mori

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1. Transcript

1.1. SESSION ONE (May 18, 2010)

CLINE

Today is May 18, 2010. This is Alex Cline interviewing Johnny Mori . We're at the (Aratani) Japan America Theater in the Little Tokyo area of downtown Los Angeles. This is our first session. Good morning.

MORI

Good morning. How you doing?

CLINE

Okay. Sometimes those really mighty cell phones create cellular disturbance in the recording, so if you get a call, everything goes haywire.

MORI

Really?

CLINE

Yes. It hasn't happened for a while, but a couple years ago I had a couple of sessions where I wouldn't have known until I listened to it back. You know that fabulous sound that gets picked up by amplifiers and things sometimes? (demonstrates) It would just start doing that really loud. At least it isn't in close proximity to the machine. That seems to be part of the problem. Or maybe they're making them these days so that they're a little less disturbing. Okay. We're going to do what we always do in these sessions, which is start at the beginning. So I'll start with a very simple and straightforward, if totally obvious, question. Where and when were you born?

MORI

I was told I was born on November 30, 1949 in Salt Lake City, Utah. That's where my birth certificate tells me.

CLINE

Really? Wow. Okay.

MORI

I was just told this on Thursday, but I can't remember. I have to look at it and see whether or not it was on Thanksgiving Day, which I don't think so. Something like that.

CLINE

I'm thinking that this question will lead up to why you were in Salt Lake City when you were born, but let's start with your parents, first with your father. What do you know about your father's family background? Maybe you could tell us his name and what he did.

MORI

His name was Yasuo Mori. His legal name was Sam Yasuo Mori. His birth name was Ishigaki Yasuo, surname first. He was one of eight children. He was born in Yokaichi in the Myagi Prefecture in Japan. I believe he came to the United States illegally through, I believe, either it was on a boat, but it was a (unclear) passport, which I heard. And just coincidentally, the name on the passport was T, as in Tom, last name Mori. But that was a coincidence, and I have no idea how popular the term "Mori" means. Mori in Japanese, the characters create three trees, which refers to a forest. So Mori in Japanese means "forest." But he came over, and he came over to live or to visit with his sister, one of his sisters that was right above him, older than him. I don't remember how he fell into the sequence of the eight children. I think he might have been number five or six. I don't think he was the youngest. So he ventured to the United States, and he was farming with, I guess, my aunt. They were farming in different numerous places in Southern California. I believe what is significant about a lot of situations pertaining to the Japanese, Japanese American history in Southern California and pretty much in North America and all over the world was the significance of the war in the Pacific (World War II) that the United States declared war against Japan right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1942 (sic). So at that time they were farming in the Mar Vista-Venice area of Southern California, I believe pretty close to Jefferson (Boulevard) and Lincoln Boulevard, in that area.

CLINE

Wow. Down near the (Ballona) Wetlands.

MORI

Yes. Exactly. When they heard the war broke out, the family went to Utah, where the city of Salt Lake City was a free zone, so to speak, in which those that were of Japanese ancestry could live without being put into relocation camps.

CLINE

So how long was your father here before he went to Salt Lake City?

MORI

That's a good question. I think he was here, I think, about two or three years. About two or three years, and then they went back to Salt Lake City. So that was in the beginning, early forties to mid forties, 1940s.

CLINE

Do you have any idea how old your father would have been at that point?

MORI

You know, that's a good question. I know my mom was born in 1921, and I think my dad was maybe eight or nine years older than that, so he was probably born in 1910. So he was probably in his twenties, thirties. 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940s. Something like that. If you do the math, he's probably older than that when he got married and stuff.

CLINE

So for someone unmarried, he was almost kind of on the older side.

MORI

Yes, I believe so. I'll have to go back and look at my birth certificate. It's really curious that he came to the United States, and I'm not sure why after the war. I guess he decided to make a life for himself here in the United States. He was the only son amongst eight children, so he had seven sisters. He was the only son. In Asian families, the son, the first son or the only son pretty much is the holder, keeper of the name of the family, and whether or not he gets, earns the family assets, so to speak, is passed on. So I never knew why he didn't go back to Japan, although I think in the late sixties, early seventies he and my mom went back to Japan. I guess there was some property in Japan that was in his name, though he signed it over to a person in Japanese we call a yoshi, which married one of the sisters and took on the family name, which he also did too.

CLINE

Oh, interesting.

MORI

So move up a little bit here in that he married my mother, who, coincidentally, last name was Mori> . (laughter)

CLINE

I was wondering how that was going to work.

MORI

Right. Exactly. So he legally took on the name, became a citizen, and he legally changed his name to Mori.

CLINE

What was his family's business? Were they farmers as well, do you know?

MORI

I would suspect they would be farmers, I believe. I'm not exactly sure, to tell you the truth. Unfortunately, I have had only a brief conversation over some extended period of time that I ever asked a cousin of mine from Japan what the family business was, but I believe they probably farmers at that time. So that's why he was in Salt Lake City, and they were probably, more than likely, working on a farm in Utah, which I know they were doing summertime in the sugar beet farm. And then during the wintertime all of them worked at—a majority of them worked at, or a lot of them worked at Hotel Utah in Salt Lake City.

CLINE

Interesting.

MORI

Yes. So that was kind of like, you know, the winter work, so to speak. Then they did whatever necessary that they needed to do.

CLINE

So your mom and dad met in Salt Lake City then?

MORI

So then that's part of what that I understand what my dad is. So basically in Japanese he's known as an Issei, or first-generation, here in the United States. My mother's considered to be a Nisei, second-generation American of Japanese ancestry. So her parents were here. They're from Yokaichi Fukuoka. I'm not exactly sure what city. That's where my dad was from, but they're from Fukuoka. I'm not exactly sure why they came to the United States, although I know that there were seven sisters.

CLINE

(laughs) Again?

MORI

Yes, again, and all of them were born in the United States. So my mom, being born in 1921, she was in the middle. Anyway, she was the fourth, and so between her and the next sister there was less than a year. What we called grandfather, Jichan, he was pretty busy. Very busy. I guess he was trying for a boy. So you figure if she was born in '21, 1920, Dad

was born in 1918, then the older one could have been born in 1916, something like that. This is a rough guess.

CLINE

Persistent.

MORI

Yes. So obviously they came over to the United States 1914, ’15, some place in there, I guess. They could have come in, yes, something like that, and he immediately started a family. I have no idea. My grandfather was a gardener. I think he was a gardener. Again, significantly, the outbreak of the war, and my mom was born in Los Angeles. I believe she was born in West Los Angeles, I believe. Again, I’d have to look at the birth certificate. You know, she could have been born in Gardena. I take that back. She might have been born in Gardena, but grew up in the West Los Angeles, which they call the Sawtelle area. She went to Nora Sterry Elementary School. They were, I guess, moving different places in Southern California, and then they were in South Orange County in San Onofre area and they were farming, and I think she had gone to San Onofre High School. I think they were farming and working in San Onofre when the war broke out. She ended up in Poston (Internment Camp), Arizona, and was interned there.

Then the family, the sisters, they were in their twenties when the war broke out. She was born in 1921. They were at least in their mid twenties. So prior to that, the oldest one, the second one, the third one were married, and they, I guess, were living with their families. The top two were in Manzanar (Internment Camp). Well, the oldest one was in Manzanar. The second one, I think, was also in Poston. The third one, she was in Heart Mountain (Internment Camp). And then my mom and the rest of her sisters were in Poston. My oldest aunt, the oldest sister, she passed away giving birth in camp. I had heard stories about that situation. I knew they said she passed away in camp. You probably have explanation of why it’s considered called a camp. Naturally, it’s relocation camp. It’s also been known as concentration camp, also relocation center, different number of names. So when I talk about camp in this particular situation, it’s not about summer camp, it’s not about some other kind of camp; it is incarceration of if you were Japanese American or Japanese, you were stuck into relocation camps, in the camps throughout the United States. So the older one, she died in camp. She died in camp. Later on I didn’t know she passed away giving birth. Then fifty years’ anniversary of the war, in the nineties Life magazine came out with a special edition of the war in the Pacific, and in it it had pictures of the relocation camps, and one of them was a funeral. I had never seen this picture in the family before. It was a picture of a funeral of my oldest aunt in Manzanar, and the caption underneath it, which was taken by Toyo Miyatake. He was the photographer who snuck a lens and some hardware to make a camera, so he made a box camera, and I think he smuggled in some film or he had film smuggled in. And while he was in camp in Manzanar, he pretty much documented the history of the relocation camps.

So the caption underneath it said something to the fact of the Japanese were very resourceful in that they made their own flowers. They made pretty much artificial flowers. They made their own flowers because they couldn’t get fresh flowers in the Owens Valley because the weather was just too harsh one way or the other. So anyway, I saw the picture

and I go—my mom showed it to me and she goes, “Can you recognize anybody pictured?” And I looked at it and looked at it and I go, “Yeah, that’s obachan,” which is grandmother in Japanese, “and ojichan.” And I go, “That’s you and that’s Auntie so-and-so and that’s Auntie so-and-so and that’s Uncle so-and-so.” And I looked at it again and I saw the picture and I read the caption and I go, “Okay, who has the original? Somebody’s got to have the original.” I guess my oldest cousin had it from the oldest surviving sister. She may have gotten a copy. But eventually I got a copy of it from an acquaintance of one of the grandsons from Toyo Miyatake and I asked him and he found it. Ever since, I’ve got a print of that. That was their experience in camp, and the camp thing is another thing we can get into a little bit later on also, too, but it could be endless. But growing up, they all talked about camp, and when I was a kid, the only experience I had at camp I was in the Cub Scouts (of America), Boy Scouts (of America), so I thought it was summer camp, and they talk about social things like that. But then as you got older and older, you go, okay, this is the regular summer camp. This, like, lasted three or four years, so there’s something different about it. But when I was a kid, they just talked about camp.

So my mother was in Poston, and I guess she may have—when they came out of camp, they relocated back to Los Angeles. I’m not exactly sure where they went when they first arrived in Los Angeles. I know there’s a couple of assembly places, so to speak, whether it be previously Japanese Buddhist temples or other Community Centers that people kind of gathered toward in the communities in which they left, whether it be Little Tokyo, whether it be Orange County, Venice area. Those are pretty much centers where they came back to where they knew they could possibly, within a large gathering of people, kind of share resources from their experience in camp and stuff. They ended up in an area which is now, I guess, called Arlington Heights, Jefferson Park area, which is between Adams Boulevard in Jefferson and a few blocks either east and west of Arlington Avenue and some other ethnic cultural communities. That was also known as Sugar Hill. Sugar Hill was one of the few places in which African Americans could also live, and it was right along the site where the houses that were being built there and the size of the property were being built there—this was before Beverly Hills. So the mayor and all the dignitaries from the city and downtown Los Angeles lived in that particular area, so the houses were beautiful. The sizes of the property were huge. They’re still as huge today too. So they lived on Twenty-seventh Street right off of Arlington, and I think they all kind of sort of went there, kind of met at my grandparents’ house. And then from there they were able to find an apartment, a duplex to which my mom still lives in the same place today.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

Yes. That was after they came back from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. I guess they came back to Los Angeles, and then through in Japanese it’s called a baishakunin, so I believe this particular marriage was arranged, and a friend introduced acquaintances, introduced my mom to my dad. My dad was in Utah, and I think my mom may have gone to Utah after the relocation camp, met him, and they came back to Los Angeles, and then eventually moved to Salt Lake City, and they got married in Salt Lake City. I have one older brother. His name is Sam, and he was born in 1947, June. I was born November 30, 1949, so we’re about two and a half years apart. I was also born in Salt Lake City, but I believe we left six

months to a year after I was born in Salt Lake City, I believe, or it could have been a year and a half. Everybody's memory of when we moved out here is kind of sort of vague, but I believe pretty much it was in the early fifties. So we moved back to L.A. in the early fifties. I think we—well, I know we did, we rented a two-bedroom duplex, and they eventually purchased the property. I'm not exactly sure when. I can't even remember when they did, because I think of all the alien land laws, so to speak, of being able to own property.

CLINE

Yes. Housing covenants.

MORI

Right. Exactly. And being Japanese American right after the war. So I'm not exactly sure when all that got cleared up and stuff.

CLINE

Yes. The housing covenants were struck down some time during the fifties.

MORI

Right. So they eventually were able to save enough money, put a down payment. While in Salt Lake City, I guess my dad did a number of odd jobs, like I explained, worked on sugar beet farms, worked in Hotel Utah. He actually ran a restaurant, is what I heard. He made tofu. He was the only tofu maker in Salt Lake City, so he supplied other families and, I guess, another restaurant maybe, making and selling tofu. So that was pretty hard work, raising two kids and doing the restaurant thing. This was a small diner, I think.

So then they moved. I guess he was looking for a different profession and stuff like that. And as a majority of the Japanese Americans, after they came back, I wouldn't say a majority, but a lot of them got into gardening. It was a self-employed business. It was a service thing, you know, something that—I wouldn't say it was easy to get into, but you put into it as much as you get out of it, so to speak. So I guess a lot of folks coming out of camp pretty much got into gardening. It was an independent business. Then you just have to learn enough English to talk to your customers. Basically you just hit the streets and just knock on doors and see if people need it. That was the boom of the housing and everything like that. We lived near a major intersection; it was La Brea (Avenue) and Washington (Boulevard), which is a part of Los Angeles. It was part of the Tenth District, so to speak. It was a little bit further west of where the Japanese American used to call this section of Los Angeles Seinan area.

CLINE

Which is more towards Crenshaw.

MORI

Correct. Exactly. Right off of Crenshaw Boulevard. There were different pockets of Japanese Americans growing up in Los Angeles. Prior to the war, probably it's safe to say, even

though it's not documented, the majority of the people lived in Boyle Heights or East L.A. They all pretty much lived in that area. And then in Little Tokyo area, which is pretty much bordered by L.A (Los Angeles) River on the east and went west as far as Bunker Hill, so to speak and Temple (Street) and south of Temple all the way down to, like, the produce market (Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market), which is down on Ninth (Street) and San Pedro (Street). So all in that area was residential for a lot of single Japanese men.

It was pretty tough to raise a family in downtown L.A. Of course, again, the schools and the shops and this other stuff, so people starting migrating southwest of downtown Los Angeles, but still along streetcar routes, pretty much streetcar routes. There was fairly open space and acceptance of Japanese in the Seinan area, which is west of Sugar Hill. So that was considered to be what we call the old Westside.

CLINE

Earlier when you mentioned the movement toward the neighborhood, you described Jefferson Park. That area I was going to say, that was the Westside.

MORI

Correct. Right. It pretty much went from the natural border of the 110 Freeway, which is the Harbor Freeway, everything west up until maybe La Brea (Avenue) or La Cienega (Boulevard), and from a little bit above Olympic (Boulevard) all the way down to, let's say, Slauson (Avenue) or something like that, that particular area. But it was concentrated within Adams (Boulevard) and Jefferson and Santa Barbara Avenue, which is now Martin Luther King (Jr. Boulevard), so within that area. On Jefferson Boulevard there were a number of Japanese stores. There were two Japanese grocery stores. There was a soft goods store, like a Five and Ten kind of a store, on Jefferson. There were doctors and dentists that had offices on Jefferson, restaurants, all types of businesses, real estate, insurance kind of stuff all on Jefferson Boulevard, and they pretty much catered to the neighborhood. Also in there were African Americans, still quite a few whites, so to speak, Caucasians. I don't think there were very many Latinos at that particular time, hardly any at all. The other part, again, was East L.A., and they're already established before the war, and they had a connection with Little Tokyo by the bridges, First Street, Fourth Street Bridge, so that was accessible to come over the river.

So that's pretty much why I kind of sort of grew up in that particular area. On the block it was very mixed, African Americans, quite a few Caucasians. There were other Japanese American families on the block, three or four, five, six blocks away, within three or four blocks away, scattered families with kids either younger than older than us, a lot of them older than us. So it was a mixed community. It was a pretty mixed community. We'd all play together. Behind our houses was a big empty lot, and we played football, baseball, flew kites. Couple of other kids got into a lot of airplane flying and stuff, so that was a pretty big deal to be able to do that. The neighborhood was really interesting in that we had R and B (rhythm and blues) legend Johnny Otis live on the block. I don't know her real name, but Sapphire from Amos 'n' Andy, she lived in this house right next to the empty lot, and she'd always yell at us to get out of the empty lot, and we did play baseball. We did break one of her windows with the baseball. Somebody hit through her window. Miko Tako from Sayonara, she lived on the other side of the block with her kids. My mom and dad

eventually bought the duplex plus this other duplex that was on the same property. It was two duplexes on the same property, not a fourplex. And this other actor from Hawaii, *Ponsi Pons (sp? - QUERY), who was on TV, and he lived in the apartment. So, different number of folks lived in the neighborhood.

CLINE

Interesting.

MORI

That became pretty interesting as far who came out of the neighborhood.

CLINE

Did you have any other siblings eventually, or was it just you and your older brother?

MORI

Just myself and older brother, just two boys in the family.

CLINE

So where did you go to school?

MORI

Elementary school, we went to this elementary school Alta Loma (Elementary School). Junior high school, even though now they're called middle school, junior high school we went to Mount Vernon Junior High School. And then high school, went to Los Angeles High School. Then in the sixties they built the 10 Freeway, cut through the center of that section of Los Angeles, southwest section all the way out to Santa Monica. So it kind of like was built a little bit north of Adams Boulevard, so Adams was kind of like the natural boundary between us going to L.A. High School or us going to Dorsey (High School) because Mount Vernon fed L.A. High School and Dorsey. So a lot of kids that kind of grew up around the Crenshaw Boulevard area, they went to Dorsey. The summer schools at that time, which is in the sixties, summer school high schools, you could go to any high school that you wanted to during summertime. If you had transportation to get to whatever school you wanted to do, you could have gone to some school out in West L.A. or Venice or out in the (San Fernando) Valley at the time. You could go anywhere. So one summer I went to Dorsey, just kind of hung out and had fun all summer. Did a little bit of studying, got passing grades. But that was pretty interesting.

CLINE

So in terms of your family culture now, what language was mostly being spoken at home?

MORI

My father predominantly spoke Japanese in the house. He understood as much English as I probably understood Japanese or more. He probably understood more English than I

understood Japanese. So Japanese terminology, I talked about the Issei and the Nisei, and now I talk about the Sanseis, which is third-generation Americans of Japanese ancestry. So basically it was part of the baby boomer generation, and so there was quite a few Japanese Americans growing up in that particular area to, I guess, have different cultural significant or cultural churches and social activities and Community Centers strictly pertaining to Japanese and Japanese Americans. It pretty much started with the Issei, the first generation, in terms of helping to continue Japanese culture, now, through different ways. There were judo clubs. So this is basically in the sixties, or actually the fifties, fifties and sixties. Since my father spoke predominantly Japanese, my mother spoke Japanese also, too, again because her family pretty much spoke Japanese with an American education very similar to my experience. So at the dinner table pretty much they spoke in Japanese and then broke out into English when school or whatever subject that we had to deal with and our schedules and our activities. I'm pretty sure my dad understood quite a bit. And then when a poignant subject came up, they pretty much spoke Japanese so we wouldn't understand. Some of it, just osmosis, you pick up on it and know. Then I guess when we were like first, second graders, they enrolled us in Japanese language school, which is part of this dai ichi gakko-en, which had maybe like four or five schools throughout Southern California, Gardena, probably in the Valley, other different areas of Los Angeles where Japanese grew up. I went to the Seinan one, which is Crenshaw and Jefferson. It just so happens one of my aunts, my mom's sister right above her, who she was the closest to in terms of physically living really close to each other and, I guess, those growing up together, so they had a small little mom-and-pop market on Twelfth Avenue in Jefferson, and right behind these stores was this Japanese school, language school. So I went on Saturdays from, like, nine o'clock till three. My cousins, whose folks owned the store, they went like every day after school for maybe an hour, hour and a half, maybe two hours at the school. So they would come home from school and they would go. So they went every day during the week, and I had to go on Saturday, so Saturdays either I had to go to work with my dad—not either. It wasn't a choice. I went to Japanese school. So pretty much went to Japanese school. If there wasn't any Japanese school, then either sometimes after school or sometimes Saturdays I'd go help my dad do gardening. It got pretty serious after a while in terms of doing gardening.

But Japanese school was really interesting. It was a cultural experience in which you try to learn your language. But again, I was like eight, nine years old. I was not very focused on it at all. Going to school six days a week and then trying to figure out English—I mean not trying to figure it out. I mean English is my first language, and then try to understand grammatically English in a regular school, and then going to Japanese school on Saturday and being told something different in terms of grammatically, and then learning a language verbally and written, you know. I pretty much just had fun at school, learned how to make spitballs, paper wads, disc guns, all the good things, fun things. I think I was into it. I studied pretty hard for the first four or five years. Part of it was out of fear for the teacher, in which they'd probably be yelling at us, telling us to be quiet. They were very strict, very, very strict. So we were pretty much focused on learning, so pretty much learned most of my Japanese in the first two or three years and then that's it.

CLINE

And what about academic expectations from your parents? Was there much pressure there?

MORI

There was in one sense, but they knew that after a while we were messing up so much, and we pretty much knew that after we finished some classes or a semester, so to speak, two teachers retired two years in a row after they finished our class. So pretty much we knew after a while, and I just picked up on this phrase after realizing and started cracking up, “social promotion,” and that they just advance you to the next grade, even though my level had stopped at one particular point in time in terms of learning this stuff. So it may have been third-grade, fourth-grade Japanese or something like that. And then by the time I got to fifth grade, I totally was not into it, sixth grade really not into it. Then I even went to a junior high school of Japanese school, which totally blew me away. I had no idea what they were talking about, so finally my parents figured out that this wasn’t happening and quit wasting their money. I just told them that, you know. So I stopped going when I was twelve years old. At the same time we were going to Japanese Buddhist Church, Senshin Buddhist Temple, which I fondly remember and I still attend today. I think there are pictures of me in Sunday school class when I was four years old, three or four years old. So I know we were in the community, ’53, ’54.

Then when I was eight years old I remember beginning to play organized baseball. Again, it was through one of my uncles that owned the grocery store, and the grocery store pretty much for that area was one of two, but it was more Japanese American than this other store was more Japanese. So a lot of his customers were pretty much everybody in the same boat. He extended a lot of credit to folks. There was a lot of families that came. So he and some other guy started, helped start, or the league may have already started, this thing called Community Youth Council. What it was was a baseball league that pretty much had catered to Japanese. I wouldn’t say catered to, but people that were in it were predominantly Japanese Americans. It’s probably a couple of different things. One, I guess accessibility to a Little League league, L.A. (Los Angeles Department of) Parks and Rec(reation). And it could have been also due to physical stature of Japanese American being a smaller stature than the rest of the society. But I think it was started as a social, but sports, kind of situation. And to tell you the truth, you know, they’ll tell you because they wanted—I think a lot of it was the accessibility. Now, there’s a couple of guys that I know that are still alive who helped start the league and stuff, and actually they’re all in their early eighties. Well, they’re all in their eighties. They’ve been honored, achievement and stuff like that in helping to start this particular purpose and stuff. At the time also, too, those individuals come out of camp in terms of the mainstream businesses. There were no lawyers, accessibility, bilingual lawyers as the goal of a community to try to serve its individuals in the community. There were a few doctors in the community that had gotten their medical degree from either the Midwest or back East, and they were studying during the war, or they had gotten their doctor’s license, and so before the war they were practicing in camp, or they were practicing in free-zone cities like Chicago and those particular Midwest cities. And then after the war ended, then they came back to the West Coast.

There were teachers. There were no lawyers. There were no real estate agents. There were no insurance people. A lot of farmers, a lot of gardeners. So they, themselves, were beginning to get into the culture and society in general, the general population, so to speak.

CLINE

Right. The mainstream culture.

MORI

Right. But I'm sure they came up a lot, zillions of roadblocks. So that probably led to the formation of this youth league. They would say it's for the Japanese Americans because the unaccessibility to resources. So whatever the reason, we played against people from all over Southern California. The different pockets of areas, like on the Westside we could field maybe four or five teams with different names. Actually, take that back. We had Halua Dodgers. We had L.A. Dodgers or Westside Dodgers, Westside Giants. We had a group from Venice. And then we also played against Uptown Tigers. Uptown basically is where Koreatown is right now. There was a large population of Japanese that went to Belmont High School. So that was another large population of Japanese Americans, and that kind of extended into Echo Park and then into Silver Lake, J-Flats, what they called J Flats, and they went to Marshall (High School). The folks on the Westside, like I talked about L.A. High School, Dorsey, they also went to Manual (Arts High School). Some started the migration in terms of late sixties, middle sixties, toward down south. So not Gardena Gardena, but places around 130-something (Street). So a lot of them went to Washington High School. A few went to Washington High School. Then there was a large group that moved to Compton. I wouldn't say a large group; small group moved to Compton, and that was very rural at the time.

CLINE

Right. Farms and dairies and stuff.

MORI

Exactly. Exactly. I mean, there's still some open space in Compton in Dominguez Hills area and stuff, right. So, yeah, they raised chickens and farmed stuff out there, had a little plot out there. That was another area. The people finally kind of like migrated into Gardena Gardena area. So that was during the sixties. Then late sixties, early seventies, they moved further south to Torrance, and then another group moved out and joined the farmers out in Orange County, and then the boom happened in Orange County, so that took off. But a lot of families that lived in Los Angeles moved out to Orange County that weren't farmers. There was a large population of farmers, because I have another set of cousins that farmed in Orange County that eventually had to move because of the whole—

CLINE

Development.

MORI

—development and stuff. We can get into that a little later too. So, Los Angeles, language in the house was predominantly Japanese, so there was culture in the house. The whole Confucian kind of thing, you know, before you leave the house, remember that you're a Japanese, remember that you're Japanese American, remember that you're Mori , and remember about your family, this whole kind of thing as you left the house. When you (unclear), "Remember you're Japanese." I'd go, "Wow, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay." "Remember the family." "Okay, okay."

CLINE

What about music in the house?

MORI

We had a record player. In the late sixties, seventies, there was an individual in Little Tokyo called *Watao Awate (radio program - sp? - QUERY). He had a Japanese radio program. There was a Japanese radio program. It was on Sundays. I don't know what station it was. He broadcast it from Little Tokyo. I didn't know what the signal was. I still don't know where all that power came from to broadcast the thing, but my dad would turn on this radio and this Japanese program on. All of it was in Japanese. A lot of it was speaking, a lot of it was news, but a lot of it was music also, too, and he had this music. I really don't know what kind of music it was. Eventually I found out it was inka music, which is Japanese folk music, which is very similar to Japanese American ballads, which sometimes can equate to country and western music in terms of storytelling and stuff like that, or pretty much folk music. It came up after the war. So they took a different form of Japanese music and storytelling and they put it to music, like a lot of cultures do the same thing, whether it's rhythm and blues, whether it's Mexican corridos or something like that, right? Same kind of things throughout the whole word. So that became pretty popular, and it started playing. So there were such individual songs that kind of sort of were popular within the Japanese, Japanese American community. Other forms of music. Here in Southern California they maintain relationships with those from the same prefecture in Japan, so they call them Kenjin Kai, "Kai" meaning group, so to speak, and "Kenjin" meaning places where you had come from. There must have been maybe about twelve Kenjin Kais that I knew of, ten at a time, largest being Kagoshima, one of the oldest, Hiroshima Kenjin Kai.

Again, my dad was from the prefecture Nomiya. They called it Myaken. And they would have these picnics. Every summer they would have these picnics. He called them Kenjin Kai picnics. You would go to Elysian Park or some large park in Southern California, and they would hire this band called the Miiko Taka Band. It was made up of musicians, Japanese musicians, saxophones, drums, accordions, and they also had singers and they would sing Japanese popular songs. So that was the music, Japanese music. My grandmother would also listen to Japanese music on a record player and Japanese radio and stuff. I kind of vaguely heard it and stuff, but, again, not really paid too much attention to it, but it was there.

CLINE

And what about your friends? I'm assuming, based on what you described about your neighborhood, they weren't all Japanese American at all.

MORI

Pretty much listened to contemporary pop music pretty much. That was in the fifties, late fifties. When I kind of recognized music, it had a radio. I listened to the radio, pretty much pop music. And then more so in the early sixties, middle sixties.

CLINE

Top 40.

MORI

Top 40. Began, yes, pretty much understanding music and understanding what that was about, R and B, I guess rock and roll, and then pop music.

CLINE

Being part of the temple and having your parents, it sounds like, insist on remaining connected as much as you could to your Japanese culture, then were there other festivals of the year that you would regularly attend as part of the community, like Obon or any of these other functions through your growing up?

MORI

Quite a bit. Yes, mainly through Obon festivals, and then also through Nisei Week festivals. But the Obon, because there were many different Buddhist churches in Southern California, you went to different communities. So because my family and cousins and aunties lived in West L.A., we used to go to the West L.A. (Los Angeles) Buddhist Church and their Obon and carnival and bazaar.

CLINE

And whatever on Corinth (Avenue).

MORI

Yes, exactly, Corinth. And then there's one in Venice, which is near Culver Boulevard and Centinela (Avenue) on Braddock (Drive), okay, although where they are today, they were actually two or three blocks, maybe four blocks away. There's a Community Center on the west side of Centinela, and the Buddhist Temple's right on the corner. And then there's also this large median that runs down Culver Boulevard. But then they were a little bit off of Culver Boulevard, that I remember, before they moved to the present place. There's one in Gardena, which I think is still on the same site but new facilities and stuff on 166th (Street) and Normandie (Avenue). The Orange County one, I believe it is at the present site, but again a different facility. Downtown Los Angeles has the Betsuin Nishi Honganji (Buddhist Temple). We never went out to the Valley. There was one in San Diego. There's one in Arizona. So anyway, at the time it took hours to get to some of these. Like the one in Orange County, we took like Washington or Olympic Boulevard totally east, and through other side streets and stuff like that we finally got out to Stanton, to Buena Park area, because my cousins have farms out there. They were actively farming and stuff. So we would travel to these different places, and everybody had same kind of food, but different taste. And they would have the same kind of dances because they all got together and danced the same so other people can go to different Buddhist churches, but dance the same dance.

So, within that there was a lot of culture. There was a lot of festivals. There was a lot of activities, and got to meet a lot of different people from those areas. Then the Buddhist

churches themselves in the fifties, late fifties, had its own summer camp, and you got together with all these other campers, and people our age, same age would go to the summer camp up in the San Bernardino Mountains. So you start to meet socially these people from these other areas, which you would probably never run into or meet. And then eventually you would, again, play sports against them because they would be from different neighborhoods. And then socially, because of the car, you're able to go to these different social activities in these different areas of Los Angeles and then you would meet the folks. So you would start to have this lifelong relationship with these people that even still today I still see and I still not necessarily socialize like I did before, but you still see them and it's like old times kind of a thing.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

So culture was there, yes. My parents were definitely exposing me to as much Japanese culture as possible.

CLINE

Maybe because of or despite the diverse community that you lived in, what did you experience in school in terms of your racial identity compared to others at your school? What was your experience?

MORI

It was—how should I put it? There was a distinction of who you were ethnically. We all played together. We all did academics together. Good guys, bad guys, cops and robbers, Indians and cowboys, Americans and the enemy. So when we were playing cops and robbers, it didn't matter. Cowboys and Indians, it was interesting. But as we got older, I mean, we were still young, because I think after a while I'm not exactly sure when you started to understand the significance of a person of color. It may or may not have been struck upside my head or was a culmination of years and situations. So even when we were playing army, you know, we had helmets, we had guns, you know. We had, like I said, a big empty lot, pretty large space to run around in at the bottom of the hill. I know that we played, everybody played together. Everybody changed roles at one particular time or another, and I think we were all—because one week you were an American, the other week—and I think we may have even used the term "Jap."

CLINE

Not surprising, really.

MORI

I think we even used that term when we were playing. "Okay, this week you play the Jap. I'll play the American." I think. It could have easily come off the tip of my tongue very easily to designate the good guy, bad guy. Probably so. This is during the late fifties, early sixties, so there was no terminology of African American. There might have not even been a

terminology of blacks.

CLINE

Negroes.

MORI

Yes. I did not hear the word “nigger” until, I think, I got to junior high school, so that was in the early sixties, middle sixties, ’63, ‘64, someplace around there. Or I take that back, early sixties. But I know I never used that word, but I heard it. And then when we got to high school, it was used in a different way, and none of it was derogatory. I can’t remember what terminology I used describing a person of color. The colored kid, the colored guy, the colored boy, the colored girl. I don’t even know if I used the word “Negro.” Probably I did.

CLINE

I remember “Negro” and “colored people” as being prominent. 1:05:41.1

MORI

And in Japanese there was a term called kurombo, “kuro” meaning dark. And there’s another term called kokujin that I don’t think I ever used, but I used the word kurombo. You know, within certain friends I just used kurombo. And then I guess the early sixties happened, and then the middle sixties happened and all the Civil Rights Movement beginning to happen, and then you would hear these words, derogatory words, both sides. And naturally you would pick it up and you would run with whatever the other kids were saying in school and stuff like that. So there was a situation where, you know, “Jap” came up. “Nigger” was also used. “Chink,” “Chinaman,” “white boy,” “ofay,” “gray boy,” “spear chucker,” “beaner.”

CLINE

Wow. Yeah.

MORI

“Wop.” You know, all that was thrown around in junior high school. High school, not as much. I think you were probably afraid of getting your ass kicked. That’s why you didn’t use it a lot. Those guys were a lot bigger in high school than they were in junior high school. So it really wasn’t a racial thing when we were growing up. You knew it was there. You knew because your parents didn’t go to certain communities, always smiled to whomever they were dealing with, may have made a few comments after, not in front of their faces and stuff, and it laid some kind of impression in terms of the negativity toward other races and stuff. So that set up a lot of stereotype and stuff.

CLINE

Now, your dad was a gardener, and I’ve heard that Japanese gardeners kind of had their own culture, including their own sort of linguistic style, shall we say. What do you know about that, and was your father part of that whole Japanese gardener culture and their

language and way of doing things?

MORI

(laughs) I didn't pick up on it, but I knew that there was a culture. I knew the group of guys that he hung out with at the lawnmower shop. Sometimes he would take me to the lawnmower shop after he finished on a rainy day. You know, we would go to the lawnmower shop, and he would just kind of hang out, you know. He wasn't that much into drinking. Just physically he wasn't—you know, I knew he drank socially and stuff, but most of the time during the weekdays he may have had a beer once a week or twice a week at home after a pretty busy day, to hang out. I'm only mentioning this because, you know, lot of other guys, when they went to the lawnmower shop they hung out, and drinking was part of the social kind of thing, and they'd play cards, and then they talked about equipment, probably talked about, you know, the customers, what to do. They talked about fees. They talked about where you worked. They, you know, bought and sold houses. I mean clients, so to speak, you know, part of routes and stuff like that. Dumped for or five houses in this neighborhood, and they picked up three or four houses in this neighborhood, you know, kind of a thing. So they would swap and stuff back and forth. Majority of it was done in Japanese. Some of it I didn't understand. Some of it was in English.

They started their own gardeners' federation, which still exists today. They got group insurance, got warnings, eventually got warnings of how they should use all the poisons that they were handling and stuff, got breaks on seeds, fertilizer, equipment, you know, the whole bit. And so they developed their own collective, and it was probably based on a lot of the farmers' situations also, too, employing a lot of cops together and stuff and forming collectives and stuff.

CLINE

Where was the lawnmower shop?

MORI

(laughs) There was a couple of them. There was a couple of them, one on Western Avenue right there on Thirty-sixth (Street), Thirty-seventh Street on Western Avenue. There were a couple there, big ones. Then later on in—I was twenty, eighteen, nineteen in the late seventies, late sixties, early seventies he hung out at this place called Moss's Lawnmower Shop. It's on Pico Boulevard and Windsor (Avenue), so it's a little bit east of Crenshaw on Pico Boulevard. Moss's Lawnmower Shop. It actually was the father of this girl whose name was *Donna Hokota Abata (sp? - QUERY). She eventually plays in a taiko group and stuff. She's originally from Venice. He's from Venice too. But that one was not the last, but it was one of the last lawnmower shops run by Japanese in the community after a while up in the Westside, so to speak. There was another one, Kay's Hardware Store too. It's on Jefferson.

CLINE

And there's still George's on Sawtelle.

MORI

Yes, right. George's on Sawtelle. And there's probably a couple in Gardena. Yamada's. They're still there. And I'm sure there's a couple on the east side that I know of. I'm not sure if there's any more in the Echo Park-Silver Lake area, J Flats-Virgil (Avenue) area. I don't think there's any more up there. So he used to hang out there. Then there was another one on Jefferson behind the Shell gas station. I remember that one too. That one these guys got pretty rowdy and shit, and they got drunk and stuff, so that was pretty far out, hanging out there.

CLINE

So as you progressed through school, and you didn't sound like you were particularly invested in academics, but what as you started to get older, if anything particularly interested you in terms of maybe what you were thinking about doing with your life, and how might this have been affected by, as the sixties progressed, the huge cultural changes that start to occur not just nationwide, but worldwide?

MORI

You're right. My folks culturally, Japanese Buddhist temple. I took judo from like eight or nine years old until I was fourteen, fifteen years old, played baseball, football, basketball in Japanese American League, socialized with a lot of Japanese Americans, ate rice pretty much every day, if not every other day, was around Japanese language all the time, went to high school every day, junior high school, high school every day, was in the Boy Scouts, though, at Senshin Buddhist Church. We had a very, very large Boy Scout troop, predominantly Japanese American and other Asians in the troop, and we competed against other troops throughout Southern California. There was maybe one or two other organized —well, for sure there was one at Boy Scout Troop Koyasan, which is located down in Little Tokyo. They had a nationally renowned Drum and Bugle Corps, but then you'd have these Scout camperies and you'd compete against these other folks. And there was another one at Nishi Honganji also, too, and there was a few others, so we competed against them. Not only were we competing against them because they were in the same district, but we were competing against everybody else. We knew we were different. Sometimes we were together, I mean in the same jamboree, and sometimes we were different. So it became a little bit of a pride thing that, you know, despite learning all the skills and everything like that. And for some odd reason they, in terms of the leadership, really were pretty strict or disciplined in terms of having us learn our skills, camping skills physically and also, too, academic-wise. A lot of support from the families, a lot of support. Peer pressure of going up through the ranks of getting whatever ranking that you had. The pressure of getting an Eagle Scout, which I attained at a fairly early age.

So, knowing at that time Boy Scouts and in sports, so this is during your teens, that something is different here. Why are we in this troop of all Japanese Americans? Why are they all in a group that's all ethnically different? Why is this one also ethnically different? So there was no example of an interracially mixed group or troop, so to speak, or sports teams or other things. So all of a sudden you start to perceive things in terms of black and white, and then there's this gray area, and you're kind of in this gray area. Culturally also in this gray area. You hear and understand this Japanese language and culture, and yet you were growing up listening to rock and roll, watching Ed Sullivan (Show) on TV, along with Disney shows on TV, cartoons, war movies on TV, good guys, bad guys, cowboys and Indians. So along with the total population, meaning worldwide, consciousness starts to happen, like

the question that you asked, and it did have an effect. Graduated high school, went to Los Angeles City College, and I had to take a speech class. I was in the library, and I think the topic had to be some kind of a convincing kind of a thing. I came across a book, America's Concentration Camps, took the book, and at that time I understood what camp was at that time, or vaguely understood about the relocation camp. I still was like, "What?" And so I tried to learn as much as possible. There was only a few books available, and this is like '67, '68, '68, maybe, and I take this class, speech class, and I really got into it trying to find as much—there wasn't that much material. Start talking to people. Either they'll talk to you about it or the majority of the people didn't want to talk about it. Majority of the people didn't want to talk about it. There was a few people that talked about it and explained what it was, but it was so incomprehensible that I was not necessarily in denial, I don't think that was it, but I was just so dumfounded that, like, how could this ever happen?

CLINE

Right. Didn't exactly come up in your U.S. history classes at school. (laughter)

MORI

Exactly. Right? The bombing of Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Hiroshima and that's it. Nothing in between. Nothing. And so I got into it. Anyway, I made this presentation in the thing, and I think I took the title of the book, America's Concentration Camps. It was really interesting because I got into a dialogue with the teacher, and obviously she was from Jewish heritage. So when I used the word "concentration camp," she criticized it pertaining to the word "concentration camp," not necessarily on my delivery or my preparedness or not preparedness to the subject and to the presentation. But we got into it a little bit, and the questions she asked me and the situation she asked me I had no answers to. She asked me, "How can you compare the killing of millions of Jews to this harsh environment of relocation camps or what you call concentration camp in the middle of the Owens Valley or wherever it is?" And I said, "Well, people died in the relocation camps too." And she goes, "Well, not as many as so-and-so. They were on a harsh treatment," and blah, blah, blah, "in Germany and rounded them all up." I said, "Well, it's the same thing, but these are the American citizens."

So anyway, we got into this long discussion, which was good for me because I didn't know none of the answers, but soon I did find out the answers, and that kind of sort of like, you know, started my, I guess, understanding of social consciousness, social justice. So it made a big change. So that was the late sixties. I was eighteen, nineteen years old. I registered for the draft. Vietnam (War) was happening.

CLINE

Right. Whoa.

MORI

Right. Exactly. I saw this thing might hit me, you know, across my head. It was like, oh, man, you know, the draft, my identity. What am I going to do?

CLINE

Yes. At a time when not only was there the looming specter of the draft and, you know, service in Vietnam, but the Cold War, growing up during the Cold War, the whole nuclear question.

MORI

Exactly.

CLINE

How did that color your view of things?

MORI

It made me to try to understand myself, understand a little bit better the environment that I was in. And immediate-wise when I was nineteen years old, they initiate the lottery within the draft. My number was 174, kind of in the middle. My district office was in Westwood, okay. Other guys' draft board was in South Central Los Angeles. And before that, people were still being drafted, not as critically, and people had volunteered and they were fighting in or had gone to Korea. It wasn't a made-up war, which was in the fifties, but there was still lingering kind of things.

CLINE

Yes. A lot of military presence.

MORI

In Asia, right, you know. So people were going over there, and some people actually had some combat in other parts of Asia and they had come back. And so I realized what was happening militarily-wise with the United States going overseas, even though there was no declared war anywhere, you know. These uncles and cousins were coming back shot. I'm like, wait a minute here. There ain't no war happening. So what was I going to do? What was I going to do? Was I going to get drafted and go to Vietnam? And then folks that were older than I, that were my brother's age, a couple of them got killed in Vietnam or the beginnings of Vietnam. And I go, okay, this is coming, like, really, really close to home. Am I going to go do this or what? And I took the physical and I passed. Not saying that I was trying to get out through a physical, but, yes, I was trying to see whether or not I could—what kind of options I had. The reason why I mentioned Westwood is because my number came up, where these guys in South Central, they were sitting there with like 100, the number 100, and they weren't going to be called up because all the numbers before them, they were filling a quota of folks that got drafted and they were sending off to Vietnam. Westwood, I found out, because so many people had a little bit more financial, more people had a little more money, and if it makes you in terms of how to delay or not partake in the war, they had either gotten lawyers or they got school deferments, which is all legal and fine and everything like that, but they were given a little bit more information than these folks in South Central Los Angeles. So my number came up, but at the same time I was really soul-searching, so to speak, or not soul-searching, but really thinking about what am I going to do. Am I going to go or what? So then I decided to apply for a conscientious objector status through Buddhism, and I went through the process. Went to a hearing and

five people on the draft board. I stated my case of a concept in Japanese Buddhism called ahimsa, which basically means non-killing. So I presented that and everything like that. I dressed pretty much as I am today to the draft board, maybe had a jacket on, but no tie or nothing like that. Stated my case. The question I remember from one, “What would happen if somebody came busting into your house with guns and threatened to kill your family? What would you do?”

CLINE

Right. That’s always the question. (laughter)

MORI

Right. Exactly. So I told the guy, “Well, on one hand, you know, philosophically I would have to see what the situation warrants. If my family is physically being threatened, more than likely then I would try to defend myself.” Then he got into this long spiel about defending the United States and the whole bit and everything like that. So I says, “Well, that’s your opinion. That’s why we’re here in the United States, and that’s why folks are fighting for certain rights and stuff like that, you know, but I think we can do this without, you know, killing and stuff, right?” So went away finally. Two weeks later, got a notice saying “rejected.”

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

I didn’t get, you know, at that level. So I says, “Okay. That’s fine.” Well, not fine, but everything you had thirty days, sixty days to appeal, right. So I had sixty days to appeal, so I thought about it again, went to some draft counselors and talked to them about some stuff. They go, “Okay,” and they go—because you can’t get a job, either, because you’re only limited to every two months you do an appeal, three months you get another appeal, right? So I couldn’t hold onto a regular job either, so I says, well, a minister at the temple—it wasn’t Reverend Mas (Masao Kodani) at the time. And he says, “Well, I understand what you’re trying to do, so if you have time, study Buddhism. Just understand the concept of ahimsa a little bit more.” So I says, “Fine.” So I went to Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, which is part of the Jodo Shinshu kind of thing or something like that, right? At the time also, too, there’s the guy named Dale Minami that was studying at Boalt Law School up in Berkeley, and I’ve heard of his name only through the community through social, through sports. Draft counselor out of here in L.A. says—this is a Japanese American guy. He says, “Go talk to Dale. I’ll call him up and tell him that you’re going to be up there in summertime. So here’s his phone number. Get a hold of him, and you guys meet up and see whether he can help you out.” Because after I got denied here, then they said I could appeal to the state draft board. So I says, “Yeah, I want to appeal,” so send it to the state draft board, which is up in San Francisco. Anyway, that summer of 1971, I got together with Dale. He looked at the reason why. He says, well, it was because of my demeanor. And he goes, demeanor basically means your attitude, right, because they can’t deny you just on your attitude walking in.” I said, “Yeah, I may have had an attitude. They asked me some of these questions. I don’t deny that, but, you know.”

So he said, “They can’t deny you.” So he kind of scribbled some stuff out in terms of what to say in the letter. I says, “You know, I don’t think you do—.” Basically he says, “You can’t—,” just because of my denial and all this other stuff, right? So I did it up and I sent it back the same time as—it’s really interesting—Muhammad Ali was going through his case also, too, even though he declared himself to be a Muslim, but he also said moral grounds, that he was a conscientious objector. So then there was this lull. There was this understanding of different cultures and different religions and concepts of being morally against the war and stuff. So to make a long story short, I received my conscientious status probably somewhere in the spring of the following year. I take that back. Maybe thirty days after that I got a notice saying I passed. But because my number had come up to be drafted, then my number had come up for me to start my conscientious objector status service, which I was supposed to work for a nonprofit organization for the two years that I was supposed to be in the service. So I said, “Okay.” Came back into the community, talked to Japanese American Service Center, which is called JASC Office, and they said that these young other folks that I knew, some of them I knew, were starting this bookstore called Amerasia Bookstore, and it was the first Asian American bookstore that would gather a lot of the informations from all over the world and to house it in one particular place and to help supply the emerging Asian American studies programs at the different schools with materials from students. So I said, “Fine.” So we opened up a store on First Street, and that’s when I began working with it.

CLINE

We’re going to knock off here pretty soon. Where, if at any time during this period or when at any time during this period did you start to have any inclination towards music, or did that come later?

MORI

Happened at the same time.

CLINE

Okay.

MORI

Happened at the same time in terms of exploring your identity of who you are, how can you express it. What I’m telling you right now at the time I didn’t say, “I think I’ll try to find myself culturally and identity-wise because I also need to fulfill the left side of my brain or the cultural aspect of my—.” Some people said my feminine side of what I’m doing, going to do. I had time. (laughs) I had time to check things out. Listened to a lot of rock and roll, R and B. In the back, subconsciously in back of my mind is all this Japanese music, obon, whatever Japanese. It was gathas, whatever, even though they’re Americanized. And so taiko was very physical. Played sports, did judo, right? I’m looking at it, and I had always seen this since I was a young kid, somebody playing in the town in the middle of obon. People would dance around the tower, the yagura, and he would kind of keep the beat. He would play to the music or he’d keep the beat or he’d accent certain dance movements. So, you know, kind of was into it, kind of was not, but I knew each obon had it. And then this other individual who’s very prominent in all our lives pretty much, Reverend Mas Kodani, he

was a young minister and he was coming back from Japan in 1968. He was born and raised in Compton, went to Centennial High School. There were only like four other Japanese people at the school. Two of them out of the five were his brothers, and so there was only a couple of other Japanese American friends. Out of the five guys that were there, three out of the four became presidents of the school, and at that time it was predominantly African American, Centennial High School. But it was really interesting that he was also into African American music at that time. So this is in the early sixties, late fifties.

CLINE

With the race records, as they called them. (laughs)

MORI

Yes. And he even taught African Americans about African music. Anyway, he got interested in Buddhism. Then he went to UC (University of California) Santa Barbara, and then he went to Japan. He came back, and he says, “Yeah, I’ll be back.” And he told temple that, yeah, he’d be back in April, May, June, July, August. It took him three or four months to return to United States from Japan in that he went the long way around. Instead of going east back to United States through the Pacific, he went all the way around the world, went through Russia, went through Europe, did that whole thing. He went to India, Europe, and then came back to Los Angeles. So everybody’s thinking, “Who is this guy? What kind of hot destiny does he have to take his time getting back to the United States? You know, we asked him to come back, and he ain’t coming back.” And he guess he shows up in August or something like that. “Hello. How are you?” So to make a long story short, he introduced us to taiko in a way in which nowadays it’s called kumi-daiko, or group taiko, and you play on an instrument known as wa-daiko, w-a-daiko, or wa-daiko, which is Japanese taiko versus just taiko, meaning drum in Japanese, and kumi-daiko, meaning group taiko, which there is in Japan, but not necessarily as a formed taiko group. It’s a musical ensemble in Japan. There’s another name for it also, too, because it’s called kogaku, which is Japanese classical percussion music, which also includes traditional Japanese folk music too. So that was it. And then all of a sudden he introduced this group taiko to us. And when I saw it and I picked it up, watching it, the physical part of it was there and the cultural part of it was there, so for some odd reason it just kind of like clicked.

CLINE

Wow. Okay. I want to explore that more in depth next time.

MORI

Okay.

CLINE

That work for you?

MORI

Yes, that’s fine.

CLINE

Okay. Great. Thank you so much. (End of May 18, 2010 interview)

1.2. SESSION TWO (May 26, 2010)

CLINE

Today is May 26, 2010. This is Alex Cline . I'm interviewing Johnny Mori at the Japan America Theater in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles. This is our second session. Good morning.

MORI

Good morning. How you doing?

CLINE

Pretty good. It's another incredibly nice day out. We've been having an amazingly nice spring here in L.A. this year.

MORI

Very nice.

CLINE

it's very nice to be able to come here and to kind of stand around by the now finished garden outside while I prepare myself mentally for this interview process. Last time we left off talking about your post-high school years and the change in your awareness about some aspects of your Japanese American heritage, your approach to avoiding the draft and consequent service in the Vietnam War. I want to ask some things specifically related to this and also some things just to follow up some of the things we touched on in the last interview. One of the things I wanted to ask for sure relating to this, for one thing, we talked about how you went to L.A. (Los Angeles) High (School), and we didn't actually talk much about that experience. One of the things I wanted to ask you is as you were nearing the end of high school, we know from the last session that you decided to go to Los Angeles City College (LACC), but what sense did you have what you wanted to do or where you wanted to go once you graduated from high school? What were your interests at that point, if any?

MORI

Good question. I guess that's the question that faces everybody. What are you going to do after high school? I didn't have any really specific interests other than the possibility of—and I don't know why—art, some kind of an art, more visual arts, I guess, in terms of, I guess, the limited amount of art exposure that you get in high school, you know, whether it's art history, drawings, design. So after I graduated, I took a summer school class at LACC, just a beginning art class, and it was more of a design art kind of a class because you worked with paper and stuff and sculptures kind of thing, but overall just a basic art class. I

can't even remember at that particular time if I knew what I was going to do in the fall other than having to take regular general education classes. It might have been during the middle of summer—my cousin's husband was a dental technologist. This is so off, totally different. It's related, but it's unbelievable. He was a dental technician, and I asked him what he did, and he pretty much worked with carving teeth for replacement teeth and stuff like that, crown and bridge, so to speak, gold work and stuff, and then also in terms of dentures, bridges, that kind of stuff. I thought that was pretty interesting. then I met another guy who also was a dental technician. Actually, LACC had a program, one of, I think, only maybe three in Southern California. One was the UCLA Extension, and I think they may have suspended the class or it was kind of like hard to get into, and the LACC had one which I think was only maybe two or three years old. Then there may have been another one out in Loma Linda or something like that. I can't remember exactly where, or a private school or something like that. I think it was a private school.

So I thought, "Well, let me check it out. Let me enroll in it." I was taking this art class, so it was somewhat of an artsy kind of thing because you use your hands and stuff, and I guess I liked doing stuff with my hands. So I enrolled in the class in the fall, and there were a class of, I don't know, twenty-something, and out of that class there was probably seven or eight Asians in the class, and there was probably about five Japanese Americans. A couple of them I didn't know, but I knew of them because they went to Dorsey High School or something like that, so within the community I kind of sort of knew, got to know them, figured out who knew who. It's that whole thing of so many degrees of whatever. By the time you finish conversation, within fifteen minutes we had common friends, common situations, and geographically we pretty much grew up in the same neighborhood. It's a two-year program, this dental technology program. So we took those classes, they were mainly in the morning, along with regular general (education) classes, and then gym classes in the afternoon, because at the time in the late sixties, early seventies, you had to take physical ed, phys ed, and so them we did that in the afternoons. But at the end of the first semester or the first year, so to speak, the class had winnowed down to maybe about fifteen people, and out of the fifteen people all the Asians were still there. And even the instructor, one of the instructors, two of the instructors were Japanese Americans. Now, all of a sudden it's like culturally we all pretty much got along. We didn't necessarily socialize that much other than within schooldays. Then a couple of us took gym together and actually played golf together. After you finished playing basketball, took basketball, tennis, swimming, two rounds of tennis, two semesters of whatever, tennis, and then we took a golf class. Then the last semester we heard that if you could hit a golf ball between goal posts, you could join the golf team. This is Los Angeles City College, right? So there wasn't a culture to play golf in urban Los Angeles, even though there were golf courses and stuff, and my family was not connected with that particular culture.

CLINE

Well, it can be kind of a pricy culture.

MORI

Right. Exactly, you know. Plus, there was just (unclear) I never experienced, other than playing golf at the junior college level. My older brother sort of kind of dabbled in it a little bit because I guess he picked up—somebody gave us or found a used set of golf clubs or something like that. So anyway, long story short, we tried it out. Three of us actually that

was in the dental tech program made the team just so for us to do, and basically it was great. You paid a dollar a day and you're part of class, so a bus came and picked you up every day at twelve-thirty, and we were right near Vermont (Avenue) and Melrose (Avenue), so it's real close to Griffith Park. So every day a bus would come and they'd pick you up and they'd take you to Griffith Park, and you got to play Griffith Park every day for like a buck. We had this standing tee time at one o'clock, just jump off the bus and boom, you know, you get to play. Everybody waiting around got mad because we just showed up and we just walked on the course. But that was pretty good because you got to play pretty much every day for a dollar, and I didn't really know that much about golf, you know. Then the coach, he was a golf coach, but he was pretty much a babysitter and he like playing golf, because he was actually, I think, the track coach, so he doubled as a golf coach. Basically he just, you know, chaperoned for us to go up there, not get too stupid while we're on the course. So I learned etiquette and how to play golf.

But even though LACC was not a golf school, so to speak, the number-one golfer in the state junior college system happened to go to junior college at the time at LACC. His name was (unclear), *(NAME?), this big huge Hawaiian guy. He played to like maybe a one handicap or something like that, or less than that. Anyway, so once a week he'd kind of join us and play, and we'd be out there playing for fun anyway. So he'd come in. He actually was the one who taught us actually different little pointers on playing and swing and stuff like that. Then on Fridays once the season began, on Fridays I guess, you know, they had tournaments with other junior colleges, and we would sometimes just pick straws who would go to the tournament. Or someone says, "I can't make it on a Saturday then." Because there was like two open slots at the very end because there was like four guys and then six guys traveled, and I think five guys played or all six of them played, but they take only five scores or whatever. So you get to play these really nice courses, got to travel all over Southern California. I think I might have only played one or two tournaments and that was it, because I necessarily wasn't that good and I didn't have the time to go out and do that. But anyway, so that was part of the thing. So anyway, I got into doing dental technology and graduated fairly well in the class and stuff like that. After me kind of like having a lot of fun in high school, senior year in high school, to the point where, you know, sometimes I always didn't go to class in high school, I passed fairly with a decent grade point average, but my attendance was not really there in senior class, senior semester. I didn't graduate. I didn't walk. Well, I knew I was going to graduate, but it was close to me walking during the ceremony and stuff, but I did. So I kind of finally, I guess, focused on what I think I needed to do.

So, graduated '67, '68, '69, and then started thinking, as the other example, about history of Japanese Americans, and the camp situation arose and identity, the movement in general, Vietnam War, and all those things kind of—while in college there were some discussions pertaining to social issues and stuff like that. So toward the end, when I was nineteen, going to be twenty, then I started reading a lot more stuff besides relocation camp stuff, incarceration, just about identity in general and just seeing the whole nation kind of react the same way also too.

CLINE

Can I back up to high school just for a moment before we get into that?

MORI

Sure.

CLINE

You said you didn't have a particularly consistent attendance that last year, and high school for a lot of people, you know, a lot of things happen, and some of those things we haven't hit on yet. So there are two things I wanted to ask you about pertaining to high school. One, cars, because this is Los Angeles, and I was curious to know. You've talked a lot about a lot of the neighborhoods where there were other Japanese Americans living and had businesses and things like that, and I wondered how much you were able to get around, how much interest you had in getting around the area, and, if so, where you would go basically to hang out as a teenager in Los Angeles during the sixties. That's my first question. You can go with that.

MORI

In high school, I guess, racially mixture of the school itself was probably, now thinking about it, it was probably about 40 percent African American. It was probably 30 percent Caucasian, and then there were the rest of us. Probably the next largest population was Asians, and then Hispanics and everybody else.

But in terms of school participation, there was all ethnic groups involved in student activities as far as cheerleading, running the presidents of the school, president of the classes, all the different kind of social service classes, I mean groups that were on campus and stuff like that. So actually, though, it was pretty mixed school. Again, mentioned I went to L.A. High School, and I went to the high school that was pretty much brick, the one that you may see at the beginning of Room 222. Then in 1971 when the earthquake happened—

CLINE

Yes, the Sylmar quake.

MORI

—Sylmar quake happened, it kind of pretty much—the reason why I mentioned brick, it pretty much was the end of that particular architectural aspect of the school. The only thing, I think, that survived was the stadium and the swimming pool, but everything else was torn down and rebuilt on the same site on Olympic (Boulevard) and Rimpau (Boulevard). The neighborhood was changing. I mentioned the Caucasian, white kids, and they came pretty much from north of Olympic, south of Wilshire (Boulevard), well, pretty much Wilshire, Olympic area, northwest of Crenshaw (Boulevard) and Olympic, predominantly the white community that lived in—it was on the border of Hancock Park, Fremont Park Place. I remember going to parties up in Hancock Park, huge, enormous houses and a lot of fun. (laughs) But it was something that was, I think, was something out of our realm, so to speak. It was outside of our culture, outside of my world, so to speak. We got to know people that lived up there and stuff, became friends with them and stuff. Didn't necessarily socialize with them other than parties and stuff, that we had school parties or class parties and stuff like that up there. So that was above Wilshire Boulevard.

Then we pretty much socialized around the Crenshaw area, Crenshaw and Jefferson (Boulevard), and there was this one particular hangout, because it was open twenty-four hours a day, called Holiday Bowl. It was a bowling alley with a coffee shop, a billiard hall inside of it, and it was open twenty-four hours a day. The coffee shop served Asian and American food, breakfast, lunch, dinner, and whatever else you needed. So you could get anything any time of the day. So after we'd go out and socialize, we'd all kind of end up at Holiday Bowl, and all ages. There were gangs in the area within the Japanese American community. One is the Buddha Bandits. One is the Ministers, pretty much from the Westside. I don't know why, it's interesting, Japanese Americans are just—I guess we kind of hung out. They was into bowling. These are the communities that were into bowling, Triangle Bowl in East L.A. near Beverly (Boulevard) and Atlantic (Boulevard). Then there was Mission Bowl out in Gardena, and Gardena Bowl. Then there was Mission Bowl. So I guess it was really interesting. They were really into bowling. A lot of community people were into bowling, I guess because physically you didn't have to be tall. You didn't have to be—well, you had to be somewhat coordinated, but it's not necessarily power, you know, physical muscle power, so to speak. So they had these leagues at Holiday Bowl all nights of the week that you could participate in and stuff. So anyway, that was kind of a social thing, too, that men and women bowled, and so the families used to go there. It was a family sport, so you possibly kind of sort of grew up there going, having fun and stuff like that, and then later on just kind of hanging out there.

Then socially, in terms of dances and stuff like that, the different youth groups, whether they be connected with the Buddhist Church or the Christian youth groups. Then later on in the early seventies, then you got into very beginning fraternities and sororities that were beginning to form at colleges and universities. I think the first one at UCLA was this men's one called Omegas (Sigma Tau). There may have been another one called (Chi Alpha) Deltas at UCLA, which is there, I think, before Omegas. Deltas was pretty much a sorority, and they threw dances. There were these venues in the neighborhood. One of them was called Park View. It's in Baldwin Hills right above Baldwin Hills Shopping Center right now. Another one was called Rodger Young *(Village?), which was on Washington Boulevard near Figueroa (Street), right below the freeway, actually. They were just large halls. At the time also, too, there were community bands. Chosen Few, Free Flight, Something Else, Beaudry Express. God, there was a few, a few other ones, and they pretty much would play Top 40. So in the makeup of the bands were pretty much predominantly Asians. They had singers, both men and women, who sang Top 40 songs, mainly R and B (rhythm and blues), and that would be the weekend social thing. There would be one thrown by a group, I wouldn't say during the summertime probably at least once a week, if not two dances at the same time at the same place, so that'd be pretty interesting. They would put together these bands and they would play on the weekends, and so we'd go there. At the time I guess, we'd pay five bucks and stuff. They had a dance, live music. There was hardly—I don't think I've ever went to a dance dance that didn't have live music.

CLINE

Right. This leads right into what was going to be question number two, which is what about girls?

MORI

That's a place— (laughs) Where else you meet girls? Schools and then churches, social activities, and at these dances. For a while, because of the sorority of throwing the dance and the girls being in the sorority coming from many different parts either of Southern California and even across the United States, because this is at UCLA, Cal(ifornia) State (University) L.A., USC. UCLA and 'SC pretty much had sororities. There may have been one at Cal State L.A. Now, Long Beach State (California State University, Long Beach) didn't have one, but they're a little bit further down the line here when we talk about organizations at schools. So they didn't necessarily form a sorority or a fraternity, but they just happened to be one of the very first schools that started Asian American studies, so it was a different kind of a group that formed. I'm not saying that there wasn't socials, there wasn't dances, because they had a couple every year, anyway, to help socially and things like that. So that was one place where you could meet all these other women and stuff like that, girls, and they weren't necessarily from your neighborhood, not that you knew everybody who grew up in the Crenshaw-Seinan area, but these were girls from Gardena-Torrance area and then from further out. We talked about Boyle Heights and East L.A. Now, that migration went a little bit further east to Montebello, Monterey Park, Alhambra, Pasadena area. Pasadena, Altadena, Monrovia, that area was still different from Montebello and Monterey Park, and those who grew up pretty much from East L.A. kind of moved a bit further east. So anyway, they would start coming out to these dances and stuff, and, you know, there'd be, you know, geographical chauvinism in terms of fights, stuff like that, guys, you know, fighting over girls—

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

—and so-and-so and stuff like that. But it was normal kind of people growing up and stuff. So, a lot of things socially you start picking up on and realizing, "Oh, bowling. This is a mixed league? I think I'm going to do that, check it out." Or, "There's a dance over here. Who's throwing it? Okay, well, do we know anybody there? Because if we go there, shit, we might get into a fight or something like that. Are we going out there by ourselves or what?" Or you hook up with your cousin and they live out someplace and they're going to this dance and they ask you to buy a ticket or a bids, what they call a bids, to this dance. You go, "Sure," so you kind of like knew them, so you kind of like started to broaden out in terms of socialization, so to speak. People from Orange County started to come into L.A. So the main large places that were tried and true had parking, easy access, easy entrance. Then the people that ran or had the venues, you know, it wasn't like we—there was no trashing of the place. There was no crazy, wild, throwing stuff like that, so people respected the place. They just fought outside in the parking lot, you know, either after the gig or whatever, you know. That was part of the culture, very much part of the culture, and music was, music culture and stuff in that it's interesting to see Asians play music that you listen to on the radio, and how that developed and stuff, how they would put a little twist to it here and there and do something. Pretty much it was all cover tunes. Hardly anybody wrote any songs on their own. Later on, talking with other musicians and stuff and further on down the road in like the mid seventies and stuff like that or toward the eighties, actually, when further discussion in terms of music within the Japanese American community, in learning about the history of music, Western music within a Japanese and Japanese American culture, the songs that were being played on the radio or on somebody's

phonograph at home was Japanese songs, and they were Japanese folk songs, but they were structured very—they were structured in a way you heard a melody and then like the verses, chorus, verses, chorus, verses, chorus, something like, so it was a structured kind of thing. So you begin to think about it and goes, wow, where did the structure come from and stuff like that, and the songs that they sing in folks songs, you know, and the story that it told and everything like that, okay? So then how did they, or if they could, preserve it in camp? Which a lot of Japanese music they couldn't, because they pretty much rounded up all the ministers, all the community leaders, and all the cultural teachers, because they had, they thought that they had, "they" meaning the U.S. government, thought that they had more of a direct connection, and they were teaching culture and spouting off different kinds of unwanted propaganda to the masses of the people.

CLINE

Pro-Japan nationalistic propaganda.

MORI

Exactly right. And so they were confused as anybody else. So if they were lucky, they were able to have somebody watch the instruments. Some were able to retrieve them from friends or family in the West Coast, and they were able to retrieve them and take them to camp. Some, as soon as they heard, if they found out that you were Japanese heritage or whatever, that some of them, I heard, destroyed their instruments, buried them, and whether or not it was before or after they came out, to show that they were true Americans.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

So a lot of that culture was lost. As time went on in the camps, the second-generation Niseis, they were able to get a hold of Western instruments. There were many who learned or knew how to play Western instruments before they got to camp. They were able to get or play on, you know, pianos, brass, some wind instruments, and later on I heard they were able to get some string instruments, violins and stuff, to the point where they were able to form an orchestra in some of these camps. They were allowed to, or they brought in instruments, and they were playing pretty much forties big band music, Tommy Dorsey kind of stuff, right? Out of that came notoriety of certain bands in camps and certain individual singers that became very, very well known in the camps and even spread to other camps. I may be spreading rumors, but I think there might even have been a tour, a mini camp tour where somebody from Manzanar, something like that, which this woman named Mary Nomura, who became the songbird of Manzanar, she may have been able to travel to other camps to sing and to share, you know, was allowed to share what she was singing and stuff with other camps. And there was about three or four other women like that. Then after camp, then they had formed their own big bands in larger communities. I know Seattle had one, San Francisco, and here in L.A. they maybe had two. This guy named Tak Shindo had a band, and there was a couple other bands in Los Angeles after the war, and they'd play at socials and stuff like that. Then they would start slowly being able to get back into a regular somewhat life and socializing and stuff like that and hearing

stories about, you know, them going up to the (Hollywood) Palladium and dancing up at the Palladium or different venues within Southern California and Los Angeles and stuff.

And then after the camps, the cultural teachers began to kind of resurface, so to speak, come out and teach classical Japanese dance and music, shakuhachi, biwa, types of different kinds of singing, shigin, and noh theater. Classical nihon buyo is connected with kabuki and noh, so this kind of like this continuation of it. So all those things came back, flower arranging, tea ceremony. They all kind of slowly, you know, resurfaced again and stuff. So right now in 2010 there are groups who celebrated hundred-year anniversaries now, what we call the Kenjin Kais, the groups from Japan have documentation that they knew that their ancestors came to the United States in the late 1890s and stuff, so they already celebrated their hundredth anniversary, and a lot of churches and temples are celebrating hundredth anniversaries and stuff. So music-wise and culture-wise it began starting to happen again, and growing up, though, once in a while we would be told we had to go to these different recitals and stuff like that. A lot of them took place at the Koyasan Buddhist Temple on First Street. We just had a program there about a month ago called Hidden Legacy, which this woman named Shirley Muramoto from Northern California, because her mother, I think, was in camp up north, Tule Lake, I think, and she took lessons, she took koto lessons, music lessons from a teacher in camp. I'm pretty sure, yes, she took lessons from this woman, and Shirley eventually took lessons from this other woman who was in camp also too. And she put together this program of those remaining culture teachers, dance, music, pretty much just dance and music, in a program here in Los Angeles. She did one up north in San Francisco and one here co-sponsored by UCLA Asian American Studies (Center). So they had a panel discussion with all these teachers that are still living, mainly all women, pretty much only women, about their experiences in camp pre- and post-, and some of them are still teaching today. So that was pretty interesting, you know, the struggles and stuff like that.

Then some of the instruments people in camp made, had to make, they had to make due what they had to do because they had no instruments and stuff, you know. So a lot of it was taught by singing. Whether you're a dancer or you're a musician, you had to sing the piece because there was no music other than people just singing it, which was the way they taught in Japan anyway, you know, so they just continued that. That pretty much carried over in seeing the Niseis participate in music. I did probably go see a big band and then family bands, the Miiko Taka Band *(CORRECT?) who I remember playing at Kenjin Kai picnics. I may have mentioned that before. So that was a mixture of Western and Japanese music. Another instrument, accordion. In the fifties, in the early sixties there was, I know, probably about two Japanese American accordion bands, and they would be also going to competition, because I know my wife's older brothers, they played accordion, although I may have only heard the older one play just to kind of mess around, but the younger one didn't. He don't remember nothing. So there was introduction of the music in the community, all different kinds, all different kinds.

CLINE

Just before we leave high school, to go back to girls, briefly, was there ever any thought or interest in girls outside your own community?

MORI

Yes, there was. (laughs)

CLINE

You were in a diverse community and diverse high school. What was that about?

MORI

There was always that question of whether or not on different levels, first of all, just your manlihood in one sense or just even the friendships you had with the opposite sex at that particular time. So this is high school. This is in, like, the middle to late sixties. There was still racial consideration, of course, and social consideration. Most of the Caucasian girls came from the more wealthier culture. The African American girls in general seemed to be a little bit more socially advanced, so to speak. That's a general statement, but because the Japanese, the Asian community were fairly pretty much passive as far as socially and outwardness and stuff like that, although individually there were—I knew of guys who did date other races and stuff, so to speak. It was an issue within the community. I know it was an issue within my family. We'd go out together as groups, boys and girls, and different races in the groups, social groups, so it wasn't necessarily a question of going someplace in a mixed group because, you know, it's not a problem. A lot of it was school social kind of stuff. Some of it was outside of school, kind of school things, and we did venture into areas, like because of close proximity to Hollywood, you know, we'd go to clubs up in Hollywood and stuff, and it was outside. So it wasn't like we visited each other's neighborhoods.

CLINE

Right. Okay.

MORI

Like us going out a little bit further south to South Central (Los Angeles), although within the African American community and the Japanese American, it's the same community. So there were a few things that we had gone to together in those particular neighborhoods because they were just in the neighborhood, so that wasn't a problem either, although generally the Caucasian kids, because there were hardly any in our neighborhood, it was not necessarily difficult for them, but we were conscious of that. We were very conscious of that, and to try to make it not uncomfortable for them, but also, too, though, to share our social life, so to speak, with the other cultures. But it was an issue. I mean it did come up in different situations.

As I mentioned before, there were derogatory names. In the locker room, so to speak, there was always those kind of little bantering going back and forth and stuff. It never was used by the coaches. Race was never used by the coaches to talk about it or to pit one against the other. There was never of that. There may have been that inside the family discussion situation about always wanting to try to be better than so-and-so or better than another race, so to speak, my parents had said, you know. They did say it. It could have been a motivating kind of—they tried to make it as a motivating kind of thing. Whether or not it worked or not, I touched on it or referenced that in the back of my mind when I was trying to do something, you know, whether it was to either study harder or athletically try

to practice harder or whatever it was, it probably sat in the back of my mind. I don't deny not saying it to somebody's face at particular times, majority of the time not, because I was always on the shorter stature side and stuff like that, and I just knew I didn't want to get my ass kicked, and so you were very, very conscious of those things. Also, too, you know, and at that time, I guess, in high school, not necessarily understood the whole race thing because we did grow up—we were conscious of it all the time, but yet to the extent of situations that the African American community was going through versus the Asian community versus the Caucasian white community, even the Latino community at the time, too, those kinds of things and who you grew up with and stuff, L.A. High School at the time and its neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhood was not the ghetto.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

There may have been pockets and areas which were very, very low income and the housing situation was not necessarily comparable to other neighborhoods, but majority of the people, they may have been low income and they might have even been in poverty, but it wasn't a drastic situation. The emphasis of the individuals that stayed in school were pretty focused on getting an education. Dorsey, Los Angeles, L.A. High School, Manual (Arts High School), Hamilton High School, and part of Fairfax High School, in terms of the African American community and the middle-class and even upper-middle-class, African Americans attended those schools. So the parents and the economic level of people that went to those schools were on the level of middle-class, so the values, everyone's values were pretty much the same within the minority communities. Even in the Asian community there were poverty, there were individuals who struggled financially, economically and stuff, but the value in terms of education and the respect from folks and stuff like that was pretty high. So I know in my class they had strived to be leaders within the school, took on leadership responsibilities, organizing responsibilities, and later on, those individuals within the school, because you knew who they were, they were very popular, those names kind of sort of stuck in your head. So twenty years or fifteen years after, the names would pop up again in terms of supporting the community, starting businesses in the community, being civic leaders in the community, being politicians in the community from that particular neighborhood, starting banks, knowing what the community needed on all different levels. I'm not saying that it doesn't happen in other communities and areas, stuff like that, but it seems that the level that they were starting off on was a lot higher than other communities or pockets of communities in Los Angeles.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

It was fun. (laughs) It was fun exploring different communities, different cultures. Yeah, it was fun. And my mother still lives in the same house I previously grew up in, in the same neighborhood. That neighborhood has changed. Right now it's still predominantly African American, with Hispanic families moving in and even Caucasians moving into the neighborhood and buying up houses, large houses on the block and refurbishing them and

stuff like that. So there's new energy into that, and it's geographically essentially really, really easy to get to, a lot of things in Southern California. Major streets close by, the freeways are close by, very accessible, but you have to have a car. (laughs)

CLINE

Well, it is L.A.

MORI

You had asked about cars and mobility and getting places and stuff. We were not a very—family-wise, my dad was a gardener, probably worked ten, twelve hours a day, probably at least ten hours a day. My mom pretty much was a housewife, so she was, you know, at home. When we left school, she was home, when we came home from school, so we were not latchkey kids. Very, very lucky to have that situation. So when the time came around to getting some kind of form of transportation, they were able to afford, my brother and I, he had a car first, a used car. He had to have a pickup truck for his gardening route, and I think they were able to finance and get and purchase new cars every X amount of years. About once every ten years they'd be able to get a car. I guess they had saved money and stuff for it. So after they were able to purchase a car, they obviously paid car insurance, but we pretty much had to pay for gas and stuff like that, so we had to go out and get part-time jobs, both of us.

Growing up, I remember jumping on the bus. I can't even remember what number it was. You just knew we had to walk to the top of the hill on Washington Boulevard, and there was a bus stop right there, pay, I don't know, twenty cents, fifteen cents, twenty cents, jump on a bus right there. And then it would take us all the way downtown, and we would get off on Broadway, and we would spend a whole day on Broadway shopping, you know, going to certain men's clothing stores and then also taking in a movie there. So that's when we were, like, probably twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old.

CLINE

You mentioned movies. There were some Japanese movie theaters around town.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

I know there was more than one, but I only remember one from my growing up here. What about those, and how often would you frequent those, and what kind of impact did that have on your growing up and your early adult life?

MORI

We would go to these theaters often. And not paying attention to it, but there were three theaters, and they were within—there were two in Crenshaw area, one on Adams Boulevard near Crenshaw, which really was called the Barb's (phonetic) Theater. Anyway, that was, I

think, called the Kabuki Theater, and they showed movies. And then there was another one called Kokusai, which was on Crenshaw Boulevard closer to Jefferson Boulevard. And then another one called Toho was on La Brea (Avenue) near Olympic. Actually, it was on Olympic and Ninth (Street).

CLINE

Right. I remember that one.

MORI

Toho was the name of a film company in Japan, so they were a distribution company, so they pretty much set up their own movies, brought their own movies over and stuff. Kokusai, I think, was another distributor, and they'd show movies. And then the Kabuki one, I don't think it was there that long, but it was amazing that that was only four or five blocks away from the Kokusai, and I can't remember which one started, what was up first. There was two downtown in Little Tokyo, one on First Street, which is no longer there, and another one called (unclear) *(CORRECT?), which was on Main Street, which used to be called the Tohei Theater, because Tohei was another distribution company. So those two. And then once in a while up in J-Flats and uptown area there was another theater that showed Japanese movies. So there was a substantial amount of Japanese movie theaters.

CLINE

Yes.

MORI

I remember going with my dad and my mom probably about seven or eight times a year. And then afterwards in the seventies, it might have even been in the late sixties, we would kind of go on our own, because this genre of film, they're called the chambata or samurai movies, and they would have the blood and guts and spitting out of blood and cutting off the arms and stuff, and it was pretty hokey then and it's still hokey now, but the storyline was pretty interesting, you know, different kinds of different stories and stuff. But we used to go to those a lot, a lot meaning out of a month we'd probably go three or four times on the weekend or something, three or four times out of the month.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

They would change the movies sometimes every week, sometimes every two weeks, depending upon the movie and stuff, and you would hear stars like (Tatsuya) Nakadai, Toshiro Mifune, Shintaru Katsu, Katsu Shintaru. He was called Zatoichi, which is the Blind Swordsman. So there were a different number of movies and stars and people that you just kind of followed around and stuff.

Then in the early seventies, then there were documentaries from Japan, and then there

were movies about social issues in Japan, about the comfort women in Japan during the war. There was a movie called Sandakan 8, which depicted these eight women who were kidnapped and put on this island to service the Japanese Army, so to speak. So it told that particular story of them. I remember that movie because there was another movie called Goyokin that was playing at the same time, which eventually became my most favorite Japanese movie because of the story, the cinematography, and, of course, the taiko at the very end called Gojinjo, which is a mass dance which they perform taiko on.

CLINE

When did you see that?

MORI

We probably saw that in 1976 or ’77. So they were able to start making films about different controversial things in Japan. We went, I think, back two days in a row. I think we saw both movies three times each night, so six times, and I think somebody even went back another night and saw it two more times.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

So we’d get there like at four-thirty, five o’clock and just stay until the last movie.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

That’s how much we were into it, and I don’t know why. Actually, I think we were going to go see the taiko movie, but we made an excuse to go see Sandakan 8. So that was kind of influential. But prior to that, we heard of the movie Rickshaw Man, which depicted Toshiro Mifune playing taiko, and, probably you remember, told the story about how they saw it in Japan also too. And I think they saw the same movie of Toshiro Mifune, although there was one I heard that was made in the early fifties. He made one, I think, from the middle fifties, which both of us saw in the late sixties.

CLINE

Both of you meaning—

MORI

Meaning another group in Japan. Then Tagayasu Den, he was the original person who started Ondekoza, which later turned into Kodo.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Actually, it was in the same room that a Japanese reporter, writer from Folk Arts Museum in Japan was doing a story about taiko in North America, and he explained, he told us that Den had saw the same movie that we had saw. So that was the similarity at the same time, and similar questions on who did he learn from, who taught him how to play, where did that rhythm come from, where did that style come from. So the modern-day odaiko big-drum solo originally came from that, but what it evolved to today actually originally started with this kind of Eitetsu Hayashi, who's still performing in Japan today, and his form, his attitude, his approach to playing, the odaiko is still taught and still being dissected and analyzed even today by the modern contemporary taiko players. They all kind of like, you know, go off of that. So the media culture, music kind of was around that time, late sixties, early seventies when, I guess, a lot of stuff was here from Japan and people were just trying to absorb it, understand, appreciate it. Going to the movies on the weekends or whatever and probably even sometimes during the middle of the week, which kind astounds me, now that I think about it, because my dad pretty much, you know, woke up before the sun came up. On a couple of occasions he was getting up and going to work and I was just coming home. That was a trip. He'd go to bed, seven-thirty, eight o'clock, get up early, work all day. He'd even work on Saturdays. So Sunday's kind of his day off, but he'd just be still putzing around in his garage and stuff. He always had to be doing stuff.

But around that time was pretty much, to think about it now, was probably the most exposure to Japanese culture. It carried along through the early eighties, all through the seventies and through the early eighties in different pockets of areas of Southern California where something would come up, something would start, but I think it also showed the other cultural teachers that they could do this and survive. Everybody, though, had to have part-time jobs. They still do, a lot of them. A couple of them just did that, and they're still just doing that, teaching, but I'm sure they figured out a way how to survive and stuff like that just on teaching and stuff. It's cycler (sic). I don't know where it is right now. I haven't really thought about where it is right now. It's still there. A lot of people participate in Japanese culture, but I'm not sure if it's as organized and as many students as before, because you can't really tell because they're not on one central place anymore; they're spread out. And some of it has been possibly changed a little bit, diffused a little bit, very similar to, like, martial arts, which is set up with a teacher, the main master. You have all these kind of disciples, so to speak, right? And as it gets further and further away from the masses, so to speak, then it gets little changes here and there and adapts to the environment that it's in. So it is progressing in one sense, so that's the Japanese culture that have been diffused, homogenized, so to speak. And then there are a few that have just maintained the original thing from the get-go because there's no other way to do it or play it, and one of those is gagku/bugaku. I mean that's what it is and—

CLINE

It's set.

MORI

—it's set, you know. It could be the slight tilting of the head, could be the slight timing rhythm kind of part of it and stuff, intonation on the melody and stuff, but it's all right there, you know.

CLINE

This time, the late sixties, early seventies, a time of incredibly momentous changes in the world culturally and politically and everything else, is also the time that you start to become aware of more of the truth of your Japanese American history or story, your heritage, and you talked a little bit about being at LACC and wanting to do a speech based on a book, which I think you said was called America's Concentration Camps.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

What led you to that? If you can name anything, what started to initiate your raising of consciousness in this area?

MORI

At the time there were people that I knew socially, and pretty much my peers were also going to college. I had mentioned Long Beach State and UCLA.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

And socioeconomically, if you went to UCLA, you were smart. (laughter) I mean, it took a little bit more to get into university than it did to get into a state college or whatever, right? But that was the perception at the time, right? And so I only knew a few people going to UCLA, but I knew a whole lot of people going to within the Cal State system, Cal State L.A. And then a whole bunch of Asians and Japanese Americans were going to Long Beach State for some-odd reason, whatever. I guess it was not Cal State L.A., which was considered to be a commuter school. It's one a little bit further away in which you could commute easy enough by car and freeway and stuff, but it was almost a totally different world, you know. It was that extra—from Crenshaw area it'd probably take you about thirty-five, forty minutes to get there, so it was twenty minutes further than Cal State L.A. So this twenty minutes was even a total different world than what we grew up in. It was Long Beach.

So people started going out there, but we'd see them sometimes on weekends at different social activities and stuff. We'd see them at church and stuff because they would come home on weekends and do their laundry and whatever, but they would dorm out there. And they would start talking about social issues. They talked about our history and they talked about just the overall movement and they talked about the community. I'm using all these phrases and stuff in terms of organizing terminology right now, but at the time those

particular social organizing kind of terms were not there, you know. It was like starting from ground zero. So this was '69, '69-'70. The events that took place in the United States, dramatic things took place in the United States in the early sixties and middle sixties, and where the leaders again were being assassinated, Martin Luther King (Jr.) movement, later (Robert F.) Bobby Kennedy, Cesar Chavez. You know, the whole kind of thing were taking place. And finally, I say that now, finally, but at the time there wasn't a central place that the young folks, Sanseis, could feel comfortable with in terms of something supported and also, too, in terms of leadership. There were Japanese Americans that were in politics or beginning to get into politics, but everything was still spread out. On a national level there were Asians and some Japanese, but they were pretty much, you know, behind the scenes, behind the scenes.

There was an organization called JACL, Japanese American Citizens League, that was a social rights group that was my parents' age, my parents' organization, which I thought, and there was all these different kinds of things about the JACL, about the good things that they were doing in terms of helping individuals get back into society, supporting legislation issues, and they were against the anti-immigration laws, and they were also kind of like a semi-social group also too. We knew of them because of things that we heard in terms of how they helped or the organizational things that they tried to do during the camps. They were pro-American. They were not necessarily anti-Japanese, but they said in order for us or the Japanese to be part of any society, you had to sign the loyalty document.

CLINE

Yes. Right.

MORI

And they were pretty much all English-speaking, so they were pretty much Niseis, some younger Isseis, but pretty much Niseis who spoke English and communicated that, and they were probably all bilingual also too. So, not that we were anti-establishment at the time, but we probably were, so we were questioning everything that happened before, wanted to know what circumstance happened. And then we also tried to understand and explore the "no-no boys," the boys who wrote "no" in terms of their allegiance to the United States and the commitment to the United States and had to give up their loyalty to Japan. These were Niseis. They were people that were born and raised in the United States, and they weren't necessarily questioning their loyalty, although they were; they were just trying to exercise their right of being American citizens in that, "Why do we have to sign this? Because we're already American citizens. Why do we have to denounce or reestablish our loyalty to one or the other?" But nothing was written about that. Nothing was spoken about these "no-no boys." Nothing was explained about the resistors, the camp resistors, the ones who did not want to participate. I'm not saying that they were right or wrong. I'm not saying that the JACL was right or wrong in what everybody did. But it's a situation in which it was a situation that people came across in camp at that particular time.

So all these things were kind of pretty much swirling around and being questioned of what you can do and what you can't do and stuff. Me directly, I guess, at that particular time in the camp finally asked my mom, "What camp were you in?" She goes, "I was in Poston," you know, and her finally describing the life in Poston and stuff. For her it was a mixed bag.

She was in her late teens, so it was socially, “Wow, all these Japanese Americans being in one place!” But yet on the other hand, have to be put into these camps and restricted socially and whatever you could do. Plus, you’re in this camp, right? This prison. So talked to her about that, and basically it was like, that ain’t right. (laughs) I mean, I say to myself, that ain’t right, man. Just because you’re Japanese Americans, you’d be taken away for like three or four years, stuck in this camp, denied everything. You had to give up all your property, all your personal belongings. All your material wealth just got taken away from you, man. That ain’t right. So that a combination was seen after Americans getting beat up. Not only that, experiencing the Watts Riots and stuff like that, you know. It just wasn’t right. It just wasn’t right. My peers would come back from Long Beach, and they would just kind of like sit around socially, and we would get together and talk about stuff. They would start describing about trying to learn about those things, to learn about your own history during that particular period of time, which was never explained to you, never giving you that kind of sense, never giving you the opportunity to make a decision whether it was right or wrong, but to understand that, so it wasn’t there.

So they were trying to put together an Asian American studies curriculum, you know. Along with the curriculum, that all kind of sort of came to a head, and so when I saw my friends trying to develop this particular program, seeing me try to figure out what I’m going to do with my life at that particular time, if I’m going to go to Vietnam, if I’m going to fight this particular war, if it was a just war, because at that particular time it was a declared war, but in the middle sixties it was not a declared war. And they did bring up genocide. They did bring up Asians fighting against Asians. What would you do within the community if you came across somebody that kind of sort of looked like you, he had a gun, you had a gun? Okay, are you on both same sides? Is he a decoy? Are you a decoy? You know, what? Guys within the Japanese American community, they would volunteer. They got drafted, you know, all different forms of however just to do what they needed to do, and they did, and I was questioning that, very much so questioning that.

CLINE

How did that affect your relationship with your parents, or did it? How did it change?

MORI

Good question. Very, very good question, because I think I did sit down with them. Well, I had to sit down with them and explain the lottery, explain the drafting and the draft. Even my dad, with his limited English, knew the draft. First time I sat down and had a talk with them about anything significant.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

Up until then, it was, “Okay, we’re going to Boy Scouts,” playing baseball, going to high school, doing this, doing that. Some things, “You want to do this?” “No, I don’t want to do this. Let me go and do that.” But it was the first time I sat down and says, “Okay, look. This is what it is,” meaning I made a decision I wasn’t going to go to the war. I wasn’t going to

go to Canada. This is an alternative that I was trying to seek out, and so I was trying to explain to them as best I possibly could what I was trying to do by becoming a conscientious objector.

CLINE

So you didn't sort of seek their advice in making this decision before that at all, then? This was outside your family relationships that you came to this decision on your own?

MORI

Pretty much.

CLINE

Wow. That's pretty amazing.

MORI

I mean, part of it could have been the language situation in terms of trying to explain it, and at that time I didn't really even know either what I was feeling and how was I going to deal with this, and talking to I don't know how many draft counselors.

CLINE

So you were talking to your folks.

MORI

Yes. But when I made a decision, I did sit down and talk to them about it. Now, whether or not I solicited, asked them their opinion, or I just kind of told them, of course, when you're eighteen, nineteen, you knew everything there was to know. (laughter)

CLINE

Yes.

MORI

I couldn't tell them or ask them, because I already knew my decision kind of, so to speak. But I think, looking back on it, because I think I did sit down and talk to them, it was the first time, they more or less, like, either were surprised or they respected that, and whether or not they thought I knew what I was doing maybe, I don't think I ever convinced them convinced them that what I was doing was right or wrong, whatever, but they trusted me at that particular point in time.

I finished and got a AA (Associate in the Arts) degree from City College, and I was working at the time as a dental technician, so I had done everything that, I guess, was expected to me, so to speak, in that terms. Went to school, got an education, got a job, was working. In their eyes, I was doing the same thing as my cousin's husband was doing. So I think when I

explained it to them, I think my mom and my dad says, “Well, just let us know what the outcome of this thing is and stuff,” you know. It was just, “Okay,” you know. It was never saying, “I support you whatever you want to do,” kind of a thing. They said, “Okay,” pretty much okay. My mom, I’m sure, was very worried about the whole situation. And then I was trying to explain it to them in terms of the appeal process and everything like that, but I eventually told them the outcome of what had happened. I remember seeing Muhammad Ali on TV getting the word that he had gotten his conscientious objector status, and I think I remember saying, “Well, if he got it, I’m going to get it. I can get it too.” And sure enough, I got it.

CLINE

So how did learning more about your parents’ camp experience affect your view of your parents?

MORI

Naturally, it made me understand the struggles compounded amongst all the other economic and social situations outside of camp trying to survive, and actually what they were trying to do for the family and for the future of the family, and to compound that particular short period of time on them was pretty amazing in terms of what they had gone through and stuff. My mom pretty much sometimes still refers to it, not as often. I’m sure she’s coming down with some kind of memory loss, either dementia or Alzheimer’s (disease) or whatever. I’m getting that way too.

CLINE

How old is she?

MORI

Eighty-nine and a half. But she once and a while brings it up in a situation. “Oh, so-and-so.” Or I’d say, “This is so-and-so and so-and-so. You told me that you knew them through camp.” And she’d go, “Oh, yeah, yeah,” and then she’d explain the situation in camp. And yet what we did two days ago she don’t remember. So it’s those kind of things. It’s like the memory kind of a thing.

CLINE

So where was the Amerasia Bookstore?

MORI

That was being discussed in 1970 with, again, a lot of friends, and it just so happens that I had gone to the draft counselor after I had been informed, and I said, “Do you have any suggestions in terms of where I could serve with a nonprofit organization to fulfill my conscientious objector status?” I was at the time looking into John Tracy Clinic, the eye clinic, Red Cross, (Los Angeles) Orthopedic Hospital, so kind of a medical kind of thing, and that’s what my connotation or my understanding of what a nonprofit organization was at that particular time. I had no idea it could be social service. I didn’t know it could be whatever. I just thought it had to be connected with a hospital or some medical thing or

whatever.

And they go, “JASC office, Japanese American Service Center, is a nonprofit organization.” And I go, “Okay.” “And we deal with trying to get a hot meals program, senior citizen program, a drop-in center, a drop-in center for immigrants to talk about, you know, immigration issues, senior care, language care, whatever.” And I go, “Really?” “Yeah, we’re nonprofit. I says, “Far out.” And he goes, “You know, so-and-so and so-and-so, they’re talking about starting a bookstore that deals with Asian American books. And I go, “But that’s a regular bookstore.” He goes, “Well, no. They’re under our umbrella or they’re applying for their own nonprofit status. We’re the physical receiver right now, but eventually they will be independent. And I go, “Wow, I didn’t you could do that. I didn’t know that was a nonprofit organization.” I says, “Okay, I’ll check them out.” I went to a meeting. They says, “Yes, the mission of this particular organization of this group is trying to gather as many literature and English-written language translations of things that affect Asians in the United States.” And I go, “This seems like fun.” (laughter) “There’s men and women in the group, and so this is fun. If I got to do something, I’ll check it out.” But I says, “Is there any pay?” I mean, you know, I could get a job, you know, to sustain myself. You know, I could get paid part-time minimum wage or whatever, you know, working at a hospital or doing something.

He says, “Well, we’re writing all these grants and this other stuff, so there may be a federal job training program, Job Corps program or something like that, that we maybe are (unclear),” and eventually they did, and we got some federal funding and stuff like that and job training money and whatever else. And then there was also this thing called NYC, Neighborhood Youth Council, and they would pay high school kids, you know, part-time summer wages, and so we picked up kids to help us do stuff and stuff, and we were just kind of pretty much scrambling from grant to grant, trying to make some salary and stuff like that. Then all the money that we made on selling the books went back into the bookstore to buy more books, more books, and more books, and, you know, pay an author to come and sign books so we’d sell books and make more books and make more money so we could buy more books. So we were on First Street above a sushi restaurant and next door to a hair salon upstairs. It was one, two, two and a half rooms upstairs, real, real small, very small office. Happened at the same time that the creation of the first Asian American studies at Long Beach State, and then soon after that, UCLA developed its Asian American studies, and all these other Asian American studies or classes started to pop up at different places not only at colleges and university, but also, too, in Community Centers in the community, and they, through the bookstore, would buy and order books through a regular book distributor. They had access to pretty much straight-ahead general publishers that had published books.

A lot of the books were published by other universities’ book printing publishing companies. Princeton (University) had one, Yale (University), Oxford (University), and they would do a zillion titles, but all the ones that dealt with Japanese, Japanese Americans, there were only a few that were by major mainstream publishers, Random House, (Simon and) Shuster and Sons. And I have no idea why they printed what they printed and when they printed it or why they did it, but they did. And so we pretty much did the legwork for a lot of schools and stuff like that in terms of getting materials, seeing what was available. We also got a lot of Red books. We also got a lot of Chairman Mao stuff, Ho Chi Minh stuff, a lot of stuff

from China, (President Richard M.) Nixon diplomacy going over, opening up the trade. So we got a lot of stuff from China that was translated to English, carried Mao hats and jackets, all the communist propaganda, posters, artwork and stuff from China. We'd get it through our connection through Chinatown, and that was pretty interesting. So we'd gather all this stuff. The professors in the early days also came from the community, and so they would know about the bookstore, and they'd go, "Okay, I got a class starting in a couple months." This is summertime. "I need for you to order X amount of books of this particular book." We'd go, "Okay, we'll try to get bulk." A lot of times they don't have them in stock or we had to put a special issue order, and they would have to, like, print some more or whatever, you know. And a lot of times the whole thing about demand and supply. Now you started to ask about Asian American material. Is there potential for us to start printing this thing again or what? And they did. There were novels that were written by Japanese American, Asian Americans that were printed in the thirties and forties that we didn't even know about, that we finally were able to dig up. We were instrumental of actually getting a couple of books reprinted, you know, resurrected and stuff like that, printed, and they used them in the classrooms and stuff. A lot of Japanese books, kids' books that were in English and Japanese.

A lot of stuff about Chinese and Chinese Americans were in print and available, and so that's where the bulk of the stuff was about Chinese Americans. Their cultural and their progress to move forward wasn't interrupted by the camp. They were pretty much staggered by the immigration laws specifically geared toward Chinese, you know. So that was interesting. And then we started doing readings of books. And then at the same time there was also redevelopment of Little Tokyo.

CLINE

Yes. I'm heading into that, actually.

MORI

Little Tokyo got into the City (of Los Angeles). Little Tokyo was now recognized as a district, as an area, as not only a commercial area, but also, too, of a residential area, more so in the beginning as a residential than as a commercial, although they went hand in hand. So in the forties or the fifties, late forties, fifties they started talking about expanding civic center, meaning the government. So then they started looking for a place to build the police station. They figured it had to be near the City Hall. They already had plans for City Hall East, so they says, "Okay, well, next to City Hall is Little Tokyo. Let's take up this particular block." So they took up the northwest corner of Little Tokyo, San Pedro (Street) and First Street and borders Los Angeles Street. Parker Center goes up there. That wipes out a whole block of Japanese American businesses and hotels. So that shifts everything, moves everything, and people start moving out and stuff.

So in the early seventies they start talking about redevelopment. So there was a Little Tokyo Redevelopment Group (Project) put together besides all the other pockets of redevelopment, CRA (Community Redevelopment Agency) areas around the City of Los Angeles. Normandie (Avenue)-Expo(sition Boulevard), Watts, out in the Valley, Pacoima, you know, all these different pockets of areas, East L.A. had the district redevelopment, and Little Tokyo had one. So then at the time they started controlling a little bit. The thing of it

was it was really interesting that the north side of First Street between San Pedro and Central (Avenue) was not in Little Tokyo redevelopment CRA. It was and it wasn't. It was a separate parcel deemed North First Street, and the city government was eyeing that property because it was not included in the redevelopment district or area. The City of L.A. wanted to buy up all of First Street because behind it was a dilapidated Union Church. Behind that was this parking lot for the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) so they figured, "Well, let's expand and let's take over the north side of First street too. We'll let them build a new whatever." So that went on and on, and the community became a little bit stronger and they voiced their opinions. And naturally, the landlords were using Little Tokyo as pawns in whatever. They could have sold the property, you know, but they were possibly holding on for more money. So, the city wants it, the city wants it. So, sure, the city wants it, but I could get maybe a little bit more than rack rate for it or whatever, retail rate for it, so I'm going to hold out, but I'm going to encourage the tenants to protest this whole thing. So it was a quiet protest in one sense.

And then they actually paid people, and then we knew of this move, and they were trying to move people out, and they did. They eventually moved some businesses out because of this threat that the City was going to take over the north side of First Street. At the end of the First Street was Nishi Honganji (Buddhist Church). That was the church.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Right? Sixties and seventies, they were talking about moving because it was old and dilapidated, and they weren't sure what they were going to do, so they bought the property, you know, near the (First Street) Bridge on Vignes (Street) and First Street. So the building was still there, and then the City was talking about remodeling it, right? The community was talking about remodeling it. And then eventually it turned into Japanese American National Museum, JANM, and that movement started in the late seventies. No, I take that back. That movement started in the early seventies, this guy, by Bruce Kaji and a couple of other people. So we were upstairs and we heard about that, and they were giving out money to move, so we were looking around Little Tokyo to move, looking all around Little Tokyo to move. And somebody says, "Hey, there's this empty storefront over here on Second Street." So where we're at right now, if you go directly straight, a beeline to Second Street, cutting through the buildings and everything like that, that walkway was still there, and there was a bar right here on the corner and next to it was this probably about 1,000-square-foot storefront, and that's where Amerasia Bookstore moved to. The front half of it was about 800 square feet, and we built in shelving, display areas, and actually what we did was we built this platform and raised the platform up. It was four feet, and we had the books up here on the top, and we had carpeted and stuff, so you can kind of sit on it and read books at the same time. And then the books were up here, and then on the bottom there were just shelves, and there was a display area in the front for, like, artwork and stuff. We sold plants, indoor plants at the time, right, you know, kind of thing.

CLINE

It was the seventies.

MORI

The seventies. Exactly. And then we put up some artwork, visual arts, pottery, you know, all kinds of different stuff in the front window. And then we put some more books in the side, and we put some clothing up in the side and stuff like people that made and stuff. And in the back was pretty much bigger than the front. It was, like, maybe 900, so it was, it could have been, like, want to say, eight, sixteen, eighteen, could have been 1,800, 1,900 square feet in there. So the back part of it, this other guy and I set up a little silkscreen setup, and we pretty much did all the silk-screening for all the community events amongst our peers and stuff like that. So whatever activity you had, you know, we printed out posters. We printed t-shirts also too. So if you had a protest or if you had some kind of event, we'd print the posters. And then we did readings in there. There was a natural stage up there we could put chairs stuff. People could hang out either up on the top or on the bottom. And then in the back we cleared it out even more, and we set up a larger stage area, and then we did musical presentations back there too. So we moved over there. And then again redevelopment roared its head, so to speak, and then from that spot there, as you could tell, there's a new building there, and then they moved again to over here on Central and Third (Street). There's this other building on this side, which I thought was a pretty hip building. It was a very, very unique building.

So then they moved over there, and they were there for a few years. And then it slowly declined, and then just this one individual kind of like took it on, and he moved it over to Japanese Village Plaza. He used to do framing art stuff, and it was over there for a little while also too. Then after that, it became just a mail kind of a situation, and then it dissolved. But the name, you know, corporation of Amerasia Bookstore, I think, is still there in existence, actually, Amerasia. No, I take that back. It's called Aisarema, which is Amerasia spelled backwards. Anyway, so that went on. It became well known, so we were shipping books all over the United States. So that became a need of what it was in that because there was so many Asian American studies and they were connected with the school, then the bookstore basically ordered directly to the publishers and stuff. So it pretty much served its purpose at the time for a good ten, twelve, fifteen years as a place to get, you know, resource material and stuff.

CLINE

Longer than you would have had to fight the war. (laughs)

MORI

Yes. Actually, I started—I was up there in '71. I was there for the opening. I was there part of the opening, so 1970. Seventy-one, yes, I got the notice to start. It wasn't even eight or nine months later, it wasn't even a year I got another letter saying that my service was over, and I can't remember exactly why. The war wasn't over.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Something about even though my number was called and it was processed, that—and I don't think it was a time in which I first applied for conscientious objector status to the time that I finally got it, if that time was being counted. But anyway, after seven months I got this letter saying that I no longer had to work for a nonprofit organization and my responsibility was over, but I stayed there.

CLINE

Yes. A new career.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

We're going to call it. It's getting late. We didn't get too much more into the taiko thing, but I want to pick up next time talking not only more about the changes in Little Tokyo that happened through the seventies, which are considerable, but specifically your involvement in the taiko and more details about the connection that you made today between the development of the taiko ensemble here with Ondekoza and Japan and Reverend Mas' role in all of this. Does that work for you?

MORI

Oh, yes. A lot of this is more—I'm glad, yes, you're asking, and it may be able to explain the depth because the little different pockets of things that did affect it in terms of my ability time-wise to explore the Japanese American history, and then the cultural aspect of it and the timing of it in the time that was allotted, I guess, for me to practice, so to speak, or to find out more about it because thinking about it, if I had a regular job, I don't know if I would have been able to have that much interest and time when I had the interest and time or interest. Not time, but interest to be able to do that.

CLINE

Well, it sounds like a lot of things came together, even out of things that sounded like they were a little frightening, like the draft, for example.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

It's amazing how things can work out.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

All right?

MORI

Thank you.

CLINE

Thank you. (End of May 26, 2011 interview)

1.3. SESSION THREE (June 2, 2010)

CLINE

Today is June 2, 2010. This is Alex Cline interviewing Johnny Mori at the Japan America Theater in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles. This is our third session. Good morning again.

MORI

Good morning. How you doing today?

CLINE

I'm okay. I'm here. (Mori laughs.) I have to say it's very pleasant to come here, and this is a really nice room, perfect interview room. We left off last time talking about what turned out to be the many years you spent working at the Amerasia Bookstore and what started out to be your conscientious objector nonprofit stint, and it went far beyond that. And one of the things that we want to get into today are the other things you were doing around that time during the seventies besides working at the Amerasia Bookstore and following it to its various relocations as Little Tokyo was being redeveloped.

I did want to ask you, since during the time of your very brief service as a conscientious objector, we talked a little bit about the very large cultural and political changes going on in the country and in the world, the late sixties into the early seventies, and this is a time, of course, that a lot of people associate with a lot of changes in popular music and association with the counterculture, which also included the drug culture, hippies, all that fun stuff that was so pervasive at that time. How much, if at all, did that whole sort of thing affect you during this period when you were also experiencing a raising of your own consciousness regarding things sociopolitical, particularly with regard to the Japanese American experience?

MORI

I think at the time and through—I don't know if individual study and not necessarily research, but having the opportunity to gain understanding and knowledge about other areas in the United States and what things they were also thinking about and how they

were dealing with this either identity or the war and try to develop these connections unconsciously or just trying to know what other people are doing in other parts mainly, like, on the East Coast and New York, where you had heard of different individuals. And they had put out a publication called Yellow Pearl. It's a take on "yellow peril," right? Pearl, peril. There was a group in New York. The Japanese American and Asian community in New York was moderately in size. It doesn't compare to the West Coast, but because of the geographical containment of the structure of New York in terms of Chinatown and everything being compressed into this Manhattan Island and stuff like that, very similar to San Francisco in the Bay Area. And plus, just their intenseness of the East Coast. This is geographical chauvinism, but also, too, what I call the daily life rhythm of New York is a lot faster and intense than the West Coast. So the issues that we're talking about or concerned about were sort of the same, and while I was going through my conscientious objector status and going to Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley—and I can't remember if I mentioned that; I probably did that—studied Buddhism. And then, I guess, trying to communicate with my generation and the next generation, so to speak, through the Buddhist Churches of America organization, in which it was fairly—I wouldn't say fairly. It was very organized in terms of the structure of the Buddhist churches. There was a Buddhist church in every major city in the United States.

CLINE

Right. Now, this is Jodo Shinshu.

MORI

Exactly. Jodo Shinshu versus Zen or Nichiren or other sects of Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism. Had a fairly structured base, and they had a youth program, Young Buddhists Association (YBA), and it had a junior YBA, which was, like, high school kids, and they had another one, just YBA, which was college freshman and above until maybe about—it's a lot less now, but maybe up until about twenty-one. But when we were in it, it extended to, like, people that were still twenty-three and stuff like that, a little older. They called it Senior YBA. They would have Western District conferences in California, West Coast, and they also had a national conference also, too, mainly on the West Coast because that's where the majority of the population was centered. So then all of a sudden we started going to these conferences, and prior to that and even at that particular time there was purely—I wouldn't say purely, but heavy emphasis on social. You know, the guys would go see the girls and girls would come see the guys, and then we would talk a little bit about Buddhism, and then we'd go out and party, you know, and have dinner and dance and, you know, just kind of party. So I remember going to one conference, might have been in Stockton, and it was a national conference, maybe. Take that back. It was at Sacramento. It was a national conference, WYBL, Western Young Buddhists League Association, conference, but it was also through a national conference so folks from the East Coast and Midwest would be able to come and stuff like that. And so this was in probably '71 or '72. I had gone to the Institute of Buddhist Studies, and then there was a couple of guys in it that were older than I was, and they were from L.A., and I knew one of them very well, fairly well, and another Buddhist minister candidate. So this is who the Buddhist Studies was a center that folks would learn. It's kind of like a training for becoming a minister.

CLINE

Kind of like a seminary.

MORI

Yes. Exactly right, but really a lot looser, not as strict. Jodo Shinshu is pretty much that way, anyway. It's more everyday kind of everyday living rather than a monastic kind of situation, but it did have its rituals and, you know, traditions and learning. So anyway, there was about three guys that were going to it, and I went to, like, a summer session, and we're all about the same age. We're all kind of concerned about the war and the draft and everything like that. And because of the conditions in the community and just around, and being in a—studying Buddhism and being just conscious of your surroundings, I guess, it just made you a little bit more aware of things that for our generation didn't seem right, or we were questioning a lot of things. Whether it was right or wrong, it didn't really matter. We were just questioning it and just wanting some kind of an answer to why this, why that. So anyway, along with what was happening in the community, I guess a group of us started this organization called CAB, Concerned American Buddhists, and basically we were taking ideas and concepts and asking the questions, and if there was an answer through Buddhism, saying, "Well, what is the Buddhist word for concept of war?" Because of the Vietnam War. What was the concept of this? What do you guys feel about racism? Or is there a Buddhist stance? Or something like that, right? We wanted them to be against the war, be against the draft, be against the Vietnam War, saying it was injust war and all this other stuff, and the young kids against the establishment, so to speak. You know, we took it and we interjected into discussion groups and all this other stuff, you know.

So we didn't necessarily have a plan, nor did we have the answers, or we didn't even know what kind of answer we were looking for, although we were probably looking for an answer that the Buddhist Churches of America, you know, officially says, "We're against the war," or something like that, right? But, you know, they would never make that statement publicly or even to its members of this congregation or whatever, you know. That's just the way—I wouldn't say a broad generalization, but that's just the way Buddhists are, but it's something an individual basically to make his own decision and stuff, just make sure that you understand and have all the facts. So going with that situation and just being able to communicate with other members, the younger folks, and a lot of them were kind of sort of a little younger than us, but a lot of us were the same age that were in the organization. So we raised these questions, and I don't know what kind of answer, like I'd mentioned, that we were looking for, so we were just questioning everything. And we actually even made this film, this 8-millimeter film of us dressing up in military gear, beg, borrow, and steal for army war surplus. We went to Griffith Park and we made this movie, and I think somebody still has the movie. I'm still looking for it. And then, you know, we were kind of like—and we had American hats on, helmets on, and U.S. fatigues and stuff. It would be looking like we were walking through the jungle of Vietnam or wherever, but it was in Griffith Park. And we were doing this kind of sort of close to the edge of this road or something like that, and so then we were filming. So one minute in a movie is pretty short that they'd see us in American uniform. You know, we were walking through this thing. And then we would confront these folks that were dressed like Vietnamese, with a hat and everything like that, and then we would turn around and it would be us. And then it would show the American soldiers, again, would be us, and we'd kind of go back and forth, right, because there's no dialogue or nothing like that. So this kind of sort of went on, and then eventually somebody gets shot or something like that, and it's the end of the movie.

So anyway, while we were doing this, the reason why I mentioned we were close to the road is because LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) showed up. And then somebody said that there were reports of somebody in the bushes with a gun, and so they asked us all to come out, and I had the rifle.

CLINE

Oh, golly.

MORI

So I came down, and I had my back to them, and he goes, “Okay, raise the gun above your head,” which I did. I knew they were LAPD and I did what they asked. Then I eventually set it down, they walked over, they handcuffed us. And then they were starting to ask us questions what we were doing and stuff. We told them we was making a film, showed them the camera and stuff and a few other things. And we had some other weapons that before we came out of the bushes we just took them out of our pockets, something, and left them up on the mountain, walked out. And other than the rifle, was the only thing we had. So when we turned around, after I put the gun down, I turned around, you know, there was, like, two other policemen out. They had their guns drawn and everything like that. So later on he said, “Good thing you didn’t turn around with that gun in your hand, otherwise I would have shot your ass,” right? So, lucky situation.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

It would be an interesting ending to the movie. (laughter) Anyway, so we took this film and then we spliced it together and we showed it at this conference in Sacramento, and that raised a lot of questions and stuff like that, which is good. So there was these different groups that we were kind of asking questions about, and, again, attending this conferences and stuff. So after, on my part, I guess, it was just trying to raise awareness. And then we finally hooked up with these people in, again, the Bay Area and New York, and they started sending us their newsletters. We started sending our stuff to them via mail and whatever, right, and so called each other up and see what’s up and stuff like that. So from that particular point, in the early seventies, then we would frequently go up to San Francisco or San Francisco folks, Bay Area folks would come down, and we would do joint kind of, you know, discussions and seminars and support each other’s kind of protests and stuff like that. And we became pretty good friends in terms of working with organizations and even helping to develop organizations to help with social services, whatever the situation came up, whether it’s education, housing, arts, food distribution, all those kinds of things in terms using some other ethnic group’s experience in terms of trying to organize community through whether or not it was through the African American community or the Latino Chicano community. It never rose to—or I never knew, there probably was, necessarily a stronger faction within the community, meaning the Brown Berets or the Black Panthers.

CLINE

Yes, right?

MORI

Right? So it never—you just heard rumors of individuals that may have been part of these other organizations that had weapons or—

CLINE

More radical.

MORI

A little bit more radical, yeah, if you want to call them that. Radical situation, yes. So but within the Asian American community I hadn't heard of anything. I knew guys who had, you know, weapons and stuff like that, just in case whatever happened, but I don't remember anybody—hearing of anything or anybody. Maybe one incident. I think it was on the East Coast that I had heard that a couple individuals with part of another group that was in a possible shootout or something like that. But overall. So my involvement in it, I guess, through community involvement was just to help disseminate the information, so kind of giving that example in terms of with the bookstore. So I was working in the bookstore, dealing within the Buddhist Church content and the community, and then still trying to understand and learn taiko. So that was before I actually joined the band, you know, the band. And it was a situation with me personally within playing taiko, was something I just felt very compelled to try to understand as quickly as possible. I don't know why there was the urgency, but maybe it was because I enjoyed it. So there was something that put whatever learning skills, process that I had picked up, you know, into play here, so to speak, you know, try to figure out a way how to study this, how to understand it. But it was very frustrating because there was no teachers here in Southern California, so there was nobody to tell you what you were doing was either right or wrong unless you saw pictures and stuff and just a whole attitude and approach to trying to play the taiko.

CLINE

Before we get into the whole taiko thing, which we're going to get into today, let me just follow up a little bit with what you were talking about. First of all, the sixties, not only is it a time of counterculture and a lot of upheaval, certainly it's a time where—and as you indicated on the more kind of revolutionary side, anyway—there's a really huge development in what we call ethnic studies now.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

You said you were following things that were going on on the East Coast, as well as up in the Bay Area and things, and I was curious to know when you became aware of what was going on coming out of Yale (University), the original Amerasia Journal, Asian American Studies Students Association at Yale started by Don (T.) Nakanishi, who then came to UCLA in the seventies. I was wondering what your memories are of that particular expression of this at the time or if you had any awareness of it at the time. You said you

were servicing the ethnic studies groups and the Asian American studies that were developing in the seventies. I wondered about that.

MORI

That was really interesting in terms of Don Nakanishi, because I had kind of sort of grew up with him in the community, and again, referring back to Japanese American sports. So he played on the team on the Westside, basically at Nishi Honganji. So he played on a team that were called the Wanjis or something like that, and being from the Westside, we'd always compete against these guys. And then also, too, he was a member of Nishi Honganji, which is part of the Jodo Shinshu part of the Southern BCA. So then the Southern district Buddhist Federation, which makes up of churches from the BCA plus other churches like Zenshuji (Soto Mission) and Nichiren (Shoshu Temple) and all this other stuff, they have this summer camp. And so there was a period of time you'd go to the summer camp, like, three or four years in a row and you see the same guys there because they're the same age.

So I think at one particular time Don Nakanishi and I were campmates together, so we lived in the same cabin for, you know, a week, seven or eight days, right? And so then the first year, met him, talked to him, you know, and then we just kind of like hang out at camp as young kids, and the following year the same thing, you know. So you got to know these folks a little better, and then, plus, you saw them in the community playing sports or attending the Buddhist temples and stuff, right? He may have been a half a year older or maybe even a year older. I can't remember exactly, but we were pretty much in the same peer group and doing stuff socially, or I'd see him at conferences, something or other within the Buddhist Church, and then playing ball with him and stuff. So we graduated at the same time, and then him being from the Westside and me knowing him, but not really knowing him, I didn't even know where he went. And then running the bookstore, so this was like '70, '71, right? So, graduated high school in '67, and then he went off to Yale, and so then by the time he, I guess, had established, was four years after we graduated high school. It might have been five for him. And then he stayed out there for a while, like, doing scholastic work and academic work and stuff. And like you said, at the time he was one of the initiators of Asian American studies at Yale, along with some other academics and stuff, right? And, yes, they started publishing the Amerasia Journal, and this is from the East Coast, right, and so we really necessarily heard about the East Coast, right? (laughter) And then all of a sudden I see this Don Nakanishi's name someplace on an article or probably could have been part of a thesis or study or research that they had to do not only for history classes, but also to justify Asian American Studies (Center) at Yale University, right? So then we would start getting—and we subscribed to and we started getting stacks of Amerasia Journals, right? So I started seeing his name on it.

And then I think he probably came back to Southern California during summertime, and he would come into the bookstore, and we would sit down and we would talk about Asian American studies and just Asian American movement in general and stuff, right? And so it was really interesting, and throughout the years I'd see him and talk to him periodically, some of it just social. You'd say, "Hi, how you doing? How you surviving? How's it going?" And then he moved back to Southern California and then he got a job at UCLA or began teaching at UCLA. That led into him being, I don't know, chairman of—

CLINE

Yes, the director eventually.

MORI

—Asian American studies and the whole thing. Within his tenure, I mean, it just exploded, you know, all over, pretty much, but he helped guide it. And then I know there was a situation in which he had to fight for his tenure and fight for his directorship and his professor status, and he had to fight for everything, because up until then there was no academically, I guess, credence to him coming from the Asian American or Japanese American Studies Program, rather than saying he is an Asian scholar or an authority on Japan or something like that, right?

CLINE

Right.

MORI

So he had to justify his academics, what I understand of it, in Japanese or Asian American studies, which at the time there was nobody else. There may have been maybe one or two other persons who had a Ph.D. and dealt with Asian American studies, but not necessarily a Ph.D. in Asian American studies because it hadn't been created yet. There was no program other than a sub-, sub-, sub-major of Asian American studies because it hadn't been recognized as a major subject.

So his name did come up, and we discussed stuff and supported his campaign in terms of his thing at UCLA. So a lot of these little breakthroughs were happening, and the more and more people that I had met in the Bay Area, you know, taught at San Francisco State, this guy Steve Nakajo and different number of numerous people who were able to develop and teach curriculum at the universities and stuff.

CLINE

And Dr. Nakanishi's primary attorney during his tenure case was Dale Minami.

MORI

(laughs) Yes. That was the other connection that we kind of sat down and kind of talked about it after everything kind of settled down and stuff.

CLINE

Also I'm curious, during this time it's a whole sort of counterculture period, and I imagine includes things like the drug culture and there's a lot of confusion around sexual issues and things changing really quickly. How much do you think your connection to the Buddhist Church and your training in that area affected the way you dealt with all of those sorts of things that were going on at the time, or did it have any influence over your thinking at all?

MORI

It had a lot of influence, whether I could direct something directly pointed to this cause or happened, or I dealt with it this way because of this particular (unclear) concept through Buddhism or something like that. The main one was conscientious objector status and the concept of ahimsa, non-killing. And so I had a hard time kind of, like, grasping that particular situation. I mean in one sense, like I just mentioned, the definition is non-killing, and so how far do you go with this in terms of survival, in terms of daily situation and able to feed yourself, so to speak? Do you question everything that happens, from killing an ant to killing a cow or beef, you know, steer to eat a hamburger, so to speak, to understanding life in general? Not getting too esoteric and too out there, but the composition of a leaf or lettuce or a vegetable that you eat and stuff like that, naturally fish, a living thing that has a backbone or whatever. So that also came into question in terms of do I really understand what this means.

On the other hand, Jodo Shinshu allows you the situation to be able to understand the situation that you're in and to understand that there's reality. Buddhism pretty much is based in reality and not necessarily one supreme being as a creator or anything like that. But yet on the other hand, there's some things that happen that there's just no explanation for. In that particular sense it could be called either one of two things, jiriki or tariki. Jiriki is other power, tariki is self-power. So this is something you could take a lifetime trying to figure out, and there is no answer to it, but it is what it is, and so you just kind of have to say it is what it is, and that's part of jiriki or something like that, right? So there's different aspects and stuff like that. You had also asked a thing in terms of—I forgot the beginning part of the question.

CLINE

Okay. In the context of the counterculture, drug culture, this change in, you know, what they called then the sexual revolution.

MORI

In terms of the drug culture—

CLINE

Conduct.

MORI

(laughs) Within the community, there's a lot of experimentation, so to speak, but then there was also a lot of folks in the community that had gained access to drugs, mainly barbiturates, reds, yellows. They were in the community, meaning the Japanese American community, Asian American community. It was there, and I guess it was in the community in general, just drugs in general. Weed, marijuana. There wasn't that much cocaine. There was some hallucinogenic drugs. But in terms of barbiturates, it was a problem in the community to the point where young women and men, teenagers, were overdosing, they were OD'ing on these drugs.

CLINE

Wow. Why do you think barbiturates so much?

MORI

That's a good question. I guess because it was what was available in the community, whereas the speedballs and all this other stuff wasn't necessarily available. It wasn't as easy to get in the community. So there was major issues with drugs and overdoses, which also led to heroin use and stuff like that. So out of that group, the Asian American Drug (Abuse) Program, which is still here. The issue's still in the community even today. Naturally, it's changed to meth *(CORRECT?), ecstasy, and all this other new kind of drugs and stuff like that. And within the Asian American community there's still a problem with alcohol, and in the new immigrants pretty much with smoking and alcohol, just part of the culture, you know. But back then, Asian American Drug Abuse Program, AADAP, was started by community folks mainly through people, again, of my generation that had experienced some drug usage, (unclear) abuse, and people that were in gangs and stuff, I mentioned a few gangs and stuff, that, I guess, knew the destruction of these outside influences in the community, started the organization to help get drugs and kids and families in how to deal with that. So all these pockets of support groups were starting all over the community, and finally they came together within the Asian American Drug Abuse Program, AADAP. There were a substantial number of kids, like I mentioned, that OD'd. There was at least about ten folks that I knew personally, kids that OD'd.

There were a few folks my age at the time that we were in our twenties, mid twenties, and these kids were, like, high school kids, and there was a few older kids, adults that were into drugs and stuff like that, but mainly kids. We were just trying to help them with youth programs and sports programs. And then it got into the family situation, and a lot of them were from families that both parents were working, so the kids were latchkey kids and stuff like that. So, guidance in terms of that. Not that it's stereotypical, but that's just the life and the situation of an immigrant family at that particular time or a minority family at that time, that both parents had to work. I was very fortunate that my mom was pretty much a housewife. My dad pretty much took on the responsibility of income earner. But it was a problem, a major problem in the community. The interesting other situation that you had mentioned in terms of sex and sexes and stuff like that, whether it was generational again or within the Asian American community, was the prominence of the male role in the family and the—I wouldn't say breakup of the family structure, but what I was told and know for a fact within the Asian community family structure that was very, very and it still is very tight, the family, in terms of just sitting down and dealing with a meal, dinner, so to speak, that everybody eats together. And within the Asian custom you take care of your grandparents, so to speak, because a lot of times they live with the family, with the older son or the older daughter or whatever, right? So you grew up with this learning process of a grandparent and a parent and a child, and then the parents would go off to work or whatever, and the grandparents would help raise the children and stuff. And that was kind of sort of the structure before the war.

And then when everybody was put into the relocation camps, then the family structure, even though you lived together, was sort of broken up in that when you went to go eat in the mess hall, so to speak, families usually did not eat together; they ate within age

groups, so to speak. So the parents ate with parents and the kids ate with fellow friends and kids. And plus, you sat in there with a couple hundred families of people, right, that were sitting in this massive mess hall in shifts and stuff like that too. So everybody didn't necessarily eat together, and so that kind of broke down the family situation also. So that may have been one of the situations. And then also, too, the male figure within the family, you know, basically got stripped of their manlihood, so to speak, that they thought that they couldn't do anything about it. For one thing, they couldn't. Second of all, that they felt that that was, you know, very, very undignified because they was raised in terms of the family structure of the male in the family, you know, being the breadwinner and stuff. So that stripped away a little bit of their, you know, the structure. And then when they came back out of camp, then they pretty much forged ahead, said, "Okay, they stripped this part of my dignity, so I'm going to deal with the family structure the best I know how." So you've got to also imagine that these kids, some of these kids—I say kids now, but when they were going through this and when they came out, they were pretty much adults. But yet on the other hand, some of the family structure—and I'm not a psychoanalyst nor am I a therapist on this thing, and a lot of this is what through all the different reports of the effects of camp had on my generation, the future generation in terms of families and culture, like that, it was discussed. And so they forged ahead and wanted to be all American, for one thing. Second of all, they wanted to get back some dignity, so they were pretty much decided they wanted to be, again, the head of the household, felt that responsibility. So a lot of times then they pretty much took the role model of, I don't know, a Western family, and the husband goes off to work and the mom stays home and watches the kids and stuff like that. So I know a lot of times the father was probably still head of the family, but a lot of times didn't have any relationships with the kids and stuff like that, the whole story and stuff like that.

CLINE

Yes. It wasn't there.

MORI

Right. So by the time it passed on to my generation, there was still this machoism in terms of the male machoism, so to speak, in the family and in the community. And yet the women in the community started to understand women's rights, so to speak, or the femininity situation, but yet the support and the contribution that women had in the community in general and overall, and yet part of it was some cultural differences within the Asian family structure. And so I remember hearing about men's groups and women's groups and them joining together and having the discussion groups and support groups for each other, and then eventually came together and talked about these men and women issues and stuff like that. The women's movement I thought at the time was interesting, and I supported them wholeheartedly in that they were getting the shaft in a lot of situations. In the workplace they were doing the same amount of work but getting not as much money. And then within the family structure, within the Japanese and Asian culture, of walking three or four steps behind the male when they was walking around. I just went, "That's weird stuff," you know, and I just pretty much grew up on the situation. And I knew my own personal family structure, which my dad and the part of his language barrier, like I mentioned before, and stuff, and he spoke Japanese, and my mom translating for us and stuff. It being sort of kind of an arranged marriage, and so in terms of where people are at, you know, watching Ozzie and Harriet on TV or Father Knows Best, you know, these kinds of family structures on TV with the father and the mother and the kids and the family on TV. It's so, like, you know,

this all-American structure, right? So you kind of, like, think about it and stuff, you know. Trying to describe it at the time was not necessarily what was on TV, so it wasn't the current word "dysfunctional family" or anything like that, but it wasn't what we see on TV.

So there was a lot of confusion and stuff like that in terms of how you were supposed to structure this, how the format was supposed to be in terms of the family, and especially in an Asian American family where you had this heavy-duty culture, because you would go to meetings and stuff like that and all the men would sit together and they would sit and talk. All the women would be over here in the corner. They would be sitting there talking. And then the kids would be out playing and just, you know, just playing. So there was this division also, too, within that situation and stuff. But I mean, you know, they all worked together pretty much within the organizational community, church or whatever. There was always a male leader, so to speak, right?

CLINE

Right.

MORI

But the women supported, you know, that whole situation. So within my generation there was discussion about it in terms of women's rights and equality, gender equality. So there was that faction.

CLINE

And also a last question relating to the Buddhist part of your life. Actually, starting in the fifties, but certainly through the sixties and definitely in the seventies, there became a lot more interest in Eastern religion partly coming out of the whole cultural shift that happened in the late sixties, and more Western people, more American people interested in things like Buddhism. The establishment of Zen centers and all that sort of thing started to really take off in the seventies. What do you remember seeing, if anything, in terms of an increased interest in maybe even at your own Buddhist temple at Senshin, with regard to non-Japanese showing an interest?

MORI

Good observation. Correct. In the seventies there was a lot more exposure to Eastern cultures. At Senshin there was either interracial marriage at Senshin, and Senshin's an interesting situation in which just geographically Nishi Honganji Center was based in downtown Los Angeles in Little Tokyo, and its history is pretty interesting in that it was a center for those, for people that left, unfortunately, had to meet there to go to camp. And after they were released from camp, a lot of people came back to that particular location and used that as a Community Center, so to speak, to either store stuff or just kind of like stay there till they found a job or other places to live and to rent, you know. In 1930—actually, before the war, some folks from Little Tokyo had moved out toward that particular area, and they had created, like, a Japanese school out there and then teaching Japanese language, and so the people started to move out toward that way. And then there was a group of individuals—this could be folklore. This could be exaggerated over the years in terms of saying this. But there was a group of people that were at Nishi that had its own

kind of sort of thinking in one sense or wanted to try to do something a little different, and they were bilingual, actually, also too. So they were older Niseis, and they had moved out to the Westside, so to speak, or the old Westside, to that area, Seinan area, and they wanted to start their own church, part of Jodo Shinshu, part of Nishi Honganji, Jodo Shinshu. And so all these folks that were teaching and very involved with Nishi moved out there.

So not that it's always had this aura or this thing of being a rebel kind of a church, so to speak, but it kind of still did, and most of the churches in Southern California, Buddhist churches, are really interesting in that they captured the name of the city that they're in, and not necessarily a Japanese or Buddhist name, so to speak, like Los Angeles Nishi Honganji, Gardena Buddhist Church, Orange County Buddhist Church, San Francisco Buddhist, San Fernando Valley, Sun Valley, San Diego, Vista Buddhist Church. But Senshin is the only Buddhist church in Southern California that does not have an area of the city in its name, like Westside Buddhist Church. I mean there's a West L.A. Buddhist Church or Seinan Buddhist Church. It just has Senshin, which means to cleanse one's kokoro. One's kokoro means not necessarily a soul, because there's no soul in Buddhism. In certain Buddhism, in Jodo Shin there's no reincarnation or anything like that, so there's no soul. But to cleanse one's, I guess, mind and understanding, to be open to knowledge, so to speak, to empty your cup, so to speak. So that's what Senshin means. So it's always been, like, "Where's Senshin? Where you from?" "Senshin." "Oh, okay, yeah, yeah. I heard of it. Where's it at?" So even that is really interesting. And then through the Watts Riots, through all these things, and where it sits in southwest Los Angeles, although it sits two blocks away from the campus of University of Southern California, USC, but people who have lived in Southern California, there are people today who have been living there, oh, fifty-something years who have never been to Senshin because they're afraid to go to the neighborhood, and yet they may be going to Nishi Honganji downtown, and there's homeless and burglary and whatever on the streets down there and stuff, you know. Their temple looks worse than ours in terms of the fortification and everything like that, bars and barbed wire, whatever.

So it's always been a little different, always from the very, very beginning. So the ministers that we've had there have also been very, very interesting and different in that in the sixties there's always been a Japanese and an English speaker, always. And it's very rare for that size of a temple that didn't have that much population of membership to have two ministers, and one catered basically directly to English-speaking. But basically that was just a feature. They were just so far, not necessarily ahead of themselves, but they were, because they saw the potential of English speakers, and that's why one of the reasons I think a lot of people moved from Nishi out to Senshin, because they pretty much had all just Japanese speakers except this one minister named Takemoto, Arthur Takemoto. He was one of the first to go to Japan after the war, study, and then come back and be an English-speaking minister, a bilingual minister, pretty much. And he pretty much from there helped spur a lot of other interest in other Japanese Americans to do that. So he was at Nishi, so he was Reverend Mas' mentor, so to speak. Told him to go to Japan and study, go to Santa Barbara. He went to Santa Barbara, but he told him to go to Japan and study, which he did. So the church's involvement and my pretty much involvement kind of sort of fit, you know, comfortably. I mean, I've got to sort of have to say that now because this is just what I was dealt and how it kind of sort of came about.

CLINE

Now, you mentioned in an earlier session Reverend Mas' story and how he was from Compton and grew up in a largely African American community, studied in Japan, took his time coming back, but brought back, interestingly, a lot of the traditional musical aspect of his culture. I guess now based on what I remember reading, he started as the minister at the Senshin in the later seventies sometime. Is that right?

MORI

Late sixties.

CLINE

Oh, really?

MORI

Yes. Sixty-eight.

CLINE

And you were still attending there, so you knew him when he started there.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

Before we get there, so were there more Western people coming then to the temple at that point?

MORI

I had mentioned interracial marriage, so that wasn't a problem. Not that it would be, but that wasn't a problem. Some places it could be a problem, but it wasn't a problem. And then there were some people that had come because of the ministers before, Reverend Unno, Taitetsu Unno, who's a professor at Smith College back East, and then his other brother, named Reverend Tetsuo Unno. I grew up with the Unno family because the father, Enryo Unno, was the minister there, and they were also serving with him, under him. And they both pretty much left the church to each of them pursue academics, as far as furthering their study of Buddhism. And so the older one, Tai, Ph.D. and teaches back East. And then the second one, he probably gave up his search for or dealing with trying to get a Ph.D., but he's a very, very well-known scholar in the Buddhist world, so to speak, so he's always out lecturing and giving lectures and stuff like that.

So I grew up with really at the time that I didn't even know it, right, you don't even know, with a very influential, very scholarly Buddhist that made understanding of Buddhism very palatable, very understanding, you know. So I had always thought of that. Each temple also had an English-speaking person, so to speak. It just so happens Senshin was very, very

unique in that situation. So, following that, and then Reverend Mas kind of comes on to the scene, so to speak, right? So what I was going through the later part of applying to or discussion about when I was going to do, conscientious objector, a lot of it was discussions I had with Reverend Tets Unno. Reverend Mas was there '68, '69, so that's when I started getting to know him and stuff, but even I thought, like, he was a little out there. (laughter) But we were pretty much on the same wavelength, I mean same vibe in terms of him supporting me and stuff. I didn't know him as well, you know, because he had just got there and I was eighteen years old and heard different things about him. And then he pretty much followed in the path of his predecessor's English speaking. And then the father, he retired, and then another reverend came in, (Hoshin) Fujikado came in. And so when this change started happening, he still pretty much respected, and Fujikado was the head minister, and that was fine and stuff, and then he started introducing people to the ritual. Now, the structure of a Sunday Buddhist service was structured what I understand of a Christian service format. You have a benediction. You have a reading. You sing a hymn. There are more readings. The reverend or pastor or whatever gets up and gives a talk or a sermon. You have some other readings. You sing another hymn. And then there's a closing recitation or something like that, right?

And so growing up, that was the Buddhist format, and so that was the Buddhist format, because I had never gone to Japanese service that happened after the English service in the morning because there was more kids and stuff, but they always used to have a Japanese service afterwards. And so I had to wait for my dad or something like that, so I went into it and sat there. I didn't understand anything, but they didn't have all these readings and sayings. They may have stood up and sang a Japanese song or something like that. The minister spoke in Japanese, which I think I probably got bored and fell asleep and just woke up and saw it, but I had to sit in there because my dad was in the service. And then whenever Mas came, he goes, "You know, this is a Christian format, and I think we ought to try to go back to a Japanese format." And somebody asks, "Well, what is that?" And he said, "Basically, there's no sermon in the service. It's done afterwards. So it basically is just chanting." And the chanting primarily was done up until, and it still is, primarily in a lot of temples just by the minister or the ministers that were there, and so they did all the chanting. They did all the thing up in the altar part and all this other stuff, and the congregation just sat back, and the only thing they participated in was reading of some saying or joining of readings and standing up and singing what you call a gatha, which is a hymn. And some of the gathas, or hymns, are Christian, and they just substituted the word "Buddha" for "God" or vice versa and some other disciples' names rather than the other disciples and stuff.

You know, it's pretty interesting. It was pretty funny in one sense. When I grew up and realized that, you know, what the Pledge of Allegiance also is, too, in terms of God, and when you were a Boy Scout or Cub Scout, you said, "Put my faith in God," and all this other stuff, right? And so those kinds of things, started questioning even that. So at the same time you're questioning your identity, questioning your religion, questioning all these things. And so then Reverend Mas just started bringing up all these questions and wanting to kind of sort of change it and stuff. So he was, I guess, the low man on the totem pole, and he spoke English, but he also understood Japanese very well, too, because he spent seven or eight years in Japan, and so he understood, so he started promoting chanting and he put this group together, and he went to a conference, a seminar. Chanting was just usually done by ministers, but here it is, he has this group of, like, ten people that are

chanting. And chanting is not necessarily done as a performance or anything like that at the time. And so they performed or they did these chants that either only the ministers would do or you couldn't do without X amount of ministers because they had to all learn, because there was different parts and each person was assigned a different part. And so it was presented at a seminar, and within the ministers they didn't go as far as saying this is heresy or anything like that, but they were questioning what he was trying to do. Then these other Nisei English-speaking ministers thought it was great, and Reverend Tai, Reverend Art Takemoto, and a few other ministers said, yeah, this is what needs to be done because within the practice of Jodo Shinshu there is no other physical practice, like Zen, sitting. The Zen of this, the Zen of that, the Zen of taiko playing, the Zen of drum playing, the Zen of tea, the Zen of archery, the Zen of motorcycle fixing, right? All these different books and concepts were focused on becoming egolessness, you know, going someplace else within your mind so you don't always consider thinking about your ego and stuff like that. So that's a concept of Buddhism, right, so you sit there and you just sit, right?

Jodo Shinshu had none of this. Had ritual, but no big flash or no big thing that you did except chanting. And what were you chanting? It's these words, ideas, and concepts from the sermons from the Buddha, so to speak, and was translated, and then by the time it got to Japan, a lot of things could have happened to it. China, and then there's Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism. Japanese Buddhism is Mahayana, but it has influences of Theravada, which is the stricter Zen and the Mount Hiei kind of thing of walking around this mountain a hundred days straight, right? Somebody just finished that. Saw it in the paper. That's amazing, right? Do this for seven days straight, and you totally, like, can't sleep. It's weird. I mean it's out there, and somebody just finished it again. So anyway, so all this chanting was done in, like, this weird language, even though it's Japanese words. But what kind of meaning does it have? And so am I just spouting this stuff and not knowing what it is? So naturally somebody tried to translate it, right, and still the words and translations, independent upon who you are, still didn't make any sense, right? And so then after a while it was not necessarily understanding what you were doing, but it was just the practice of chanting, of saying these syllables and concentrating on the syllable and doing it as an individual and then doing it in a group. So that's the main concept and idea of playing taiko also, too, and music in general.

CLINE

Yes. Right.

MORI

And so through taiko it was a way to become understanding yourself and understanding your situation, immediate situation at hand. And at the time if you get so engrossed in playing or doing something, then at that particular second that you go, "Far out. I'm totally focused and locked into this," all of a sudden your ego starts coming back into play because then you start (unclear) and you say, "I got focus. I got focused. I got lost." So you say, "I got lost," you're not lost.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Right. So anyway, he started this chanting group, so all those questions came up. What are we chanting? Why are we chanting all this stuff? So this is a ritual of Jodo Shinshu. That's just what the thing they had. So they started this group. After they did this presentation at the seminar, they got so frustrated that they started this group called Kinnara. Kinnara means Buddhist celestial musician. So actually started out as a chanting group, okay? So then they got so fed up with it, so they applied and they got this nonprofit status, and yet they were functioning within this Buddhist Churches of America and all these other ministers with the board members and stuff like that. So they could do stuff and say, "Oh, Kinnara. This is a Kinnara event."

CLINE

Oh, I see. Okay.

MORI

And people would go, "Well, who's Kinnara?" And then they would explain who Kinnara was. They would explain who Kinnara was and what they were trying to do. And basically they would use the answer, everybody says, "Oh, we're just trying to go back to our roots, Japanese Jodo Shinshu ritual," in which chanting would happen, mainly a lot of chanting, some phrases and stuff. And after you finished the service part of it, then you would go to another hall and you would have a lecture.

CLINE

I see.

MORI

Then you would have the sermon, so to speak. But it would be outside of this particular ritual that took place. So anyway, he wanted to reestablish this formal Japanese service format at Senshin within the Buddhist Churches of America, and actually there was a lot of opposition, so that's why Kinnara was started.

CLINE

And I think my date regarding Reverend Mas must have been maybe when he took over as head minister. Is that what—

MORI

Probably what you're looking at, because it's probably in the seventies or something like that. So this was in the late sixties and early seventies, and part of the ritual was gagaku that was performed every day at the main temple in Kyoto, honzan in Kyoto, as part of the service. And lo and behold, there was a gagaku teacher in Los Angeles at UCLA at the (Department of) Ethnomusicology, Suenogu Togi, Togi Suenogu. And he went to go talk to him a couple different times, just explaining who he was and stuff like that and what he wanted to try to do, and Togi said, "Sure. Put it together and I'll help you teach the class."

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

So that was in early ‘70, because Kinnara was formed ’69, went to retreat, and then they had this what was called a Kinnara retreat up in San Luis Obispo. There’s a temple in San Luis Obispo, beautiful temple, and it’s pretty remote, but yet right next the freeway, but remote, a real nice area. They had this retreat, and basically what we did, we sat, they sat. I didn’t go to the first one; I went to the second one and from there on. It was in 1971 when I went. But a year before that, then they started kind of like—before that gagaku was happening, and then taiko started happening also, too, at the same time.

So they had this Kinnara retreat, and they had experience sitting, waking up early in kind of a semi-monastic, and this is only for, like, a week or even less than a week. So they called in (Kyozan Joshu) Sasaki-roshi from the (Rinzai-ji) Zen Center here in Southern California to go up there and to teach them how to sit so it was done right from the get-go, right, not somebody coming in. And so he taught and he explained Zen, the translation and stuff like that, and talked about different ideas and concepts and talked about sitting. And he also talked about his understanding of Jodo Shinshu. And it worked. Got up every day at five o’clock and you sat for twenty minutes, you got up, you walked around, walking meditation, sat back down for another twenty minutes, and then you cleaned the temple, but no talking, nothing. That was your toban, your work for the day. And then somebody was assigned to cook breakfast or meals for that particular day, so they had to go shopping. So there was no leaving the compound other than if you had to go shopping in the car. No smoking, no drinking for a whole week. On Wednesday in the middle of the week you fasted for one day. You were able to drink, and if you had a medical problem, you could eat and stuff like that, and maybe you could have a fruit, but that was about it. There was no—you know. Plus, you being out there in this temple environment and stuff accentuated boredom. It accentuated trying to understand your physical being and your mental being, right? So it was pretty intense. The number three is very interesting too. By the third hour of that day, by the third day of that day, all the bullshit was gone, right? Your relationship with people that were there—a lot of people you didn’t know. Some people you knew but you didn’t know, and some people you knew very well because they were whatever. So by the third day, you were tired, you were done bullshitting, you were tired talking about yourself, you had thought you had known another person, which you really didn’t know, and so part of it was, like, okay, now the conference or the seminar or the retreat starts because you can’t bullshit no more, because you already bullshitted for the first three days, so to speak, right, so now hopefully it’s the true you.

So you had these other days to now start talking about whatever. So Buddhist ritual, what you want to do, what you experienced growing up as a kid. Was that relevant to you? Did that justify whatever you were doing? Can we do this? Is it going to continue? Do we try to promote the ritual aspect of it as far as the practice for Jodo Shinshu? And these guys were pretty much the scholars, the future scholars of Jodo Shinshu, and they were sitting here at this retreat, because they eventually translated a lot of works by a lot of scholars from Japanese to English. So they were talking all this stuff also, too, right, and they were in their thirties, because if I was eighteen, nineteen, Reverend Moss was ten years older than

I am. He was twenty-eight, twenty-nine. He was probably thirty when we started doing these retreats, and these guys were, like, his peers, so they may have been thirty-five, forty years old, right? And lo and behold, these are the guys who'd be doing the translations and the people that are now considered to be academics of Jodo Shinshu in the United States. So they were talking about what they could do in translation and Buddhist concepts and start talking about stuff like that, and they came back and it started to pick up and grow. And so that was the basis of Kinnara.

CLINE

Okay.

MORI

And then taiko emerged and then gagaku emerged. Gagaku pretty much was studying with Togi-sensei. So he was here for the mid, early—I had heard he had met Dr. Robert Garfias at UC Irvine. He wrote the book of gagaku here in the United States and bugaku. He wrote the book. And so they had talked about meeting each other and stuff, and actually, Frank Gehry also took one of his classes. I don't know if you heard that story.

CLINE

No.

MORI

He took a gagaku class at UCLA. I found this out when the (Reigakusha) gagaku group came two years ago to Walt Disney (Concert) Hall to perform.

CLINE

Oh, yes. Right. I was at that concert.

MORI

Yes. So Frank Gehry was there, right, and he explained his involvement with gagaku and the hall, and he says, "It just had to happen. In the back of my mind it had—." Robert Garfias was there and explained gagaku, and Frank Gehry came out, right, and explained the whole situation.

CLINE

So Togi-Sensei was overseeing and training the gagaku/bugaku aspect, but you said there wasn't really anybody to teach taiko.

MORI

Taiko. No.

CLINE

So how did that happen?

MORI

We pretty much picked up pictures, books that had festivals in Japan, and Reverend Mas came down to Little Tokyo or called up his other friends up in San Francisco and asked them, “Hey, are there any records or books about Japanese music and stuff?” And they would send it to us. People in our congregation knew what taiko was, and they’d either go to Japan or they’d make trips to wherever, and they would keep an eye out for us in terms of records and pictures and stuff like that. So they would start giving us albums and pictures of taiko and music and stuff, and we would listen to it.

And then, as I mentioned before, Reverend Mas would be at his apartment and stuff and we’d be listening to music and stuff, and he’d put on different various records. And after a while, we couldn’t tell the difference between Japanese drumming and African drumming. He slipped in an African drumming group in there, and, “Far out. What part of Japan are they from?” He starts cracking up and he goes, “Man, they’re from the west coast of Africa, Senegalese drumming,” or something like that. So he expanded. And so then we didn’t know how to stand. We didn’t know how to make any drums or anything like that. We pretty much started from scratch. And then we were playing taiko like we possibly thought we knew what we were doing. We didn’t know what we were doing, but other people thought we knew what we were doing because they had seen taiko, obon taiko, but they hadn’t seen kumi or group taiko.

CLINE

So what were you playing on when you started?

MORI

So when I got interested and got into the group, somebody was going to do the Hollywood Christmas Parade. It was one of the Japanese dance groups, and they needed some drumming to go along with it or people carrying stuff or a person that was kind of playing taiko on a float behind the dancers to the music. So these guys that were playing before I got into the group were practicing, and then I kind of sort of got interested in it, seeing what they were doing and stuff. And it could have been because there were so many women that were there dancing and stuff like that, too, part of the dance group, the Japanese classical folk dance group, you know. That’s what kind of caught my eye too. They were all dressed up and stuff. You know, far out. So they’re playing for all these women over here, so I think I’ll check it out. So they go, “Oh, yeah, yeah.” And Kinnara’s always been a situation when you walk in the door, when you walk into the social hall at Senshin and you walk in, traditionally in Japanese music, any kind of a culture thing, you sit and watch. That’s part of the so-called discipline and training or whatever. So you go in there and you sit and watch. But Kinnara’s situation is you put into it as much as you want to get out of it, and it works on a situation of dana, which is giving, and it’s unconditional giving, in which you would give something, donate to something. And naturally, our egos say, “I want some recognition for this. I want to be recognized that I gave X amount of money.” In a lot of situations, in majority of situations it works, because you see your name published in a newsletter and you see the amount that you gave, and then you see other people that gave, right? It’s something you know you couldn’t—but you go, “Wow, so-and-so donated

twenty dollars. I only donated ten dollars. Next time I'm going to donate twenty-five dollars so my name will be above there." So it gets into this ego thing, right?

So Kinnara's always been about understanding yourself. So basically if you give something within Kinnara, you try to do it without, again, any kind of pat on the back, so to speak. So that's really hard for an individual to do. So again, you give as much as you want to get out of it, but what you give is something that you really want to try to do, or you give without any attachment to it. You try to become non-attached to things, which is very, very difficult to do in every situation.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

But it's there. I mean, hopefully you try to strive for that, right? So Kinnara has never asked for anything in return. So there's no fee, initiation fee. There's no practice fee. There's hopefully after a while your own personal dana of giving back. So whatever you give back is up to you, whether it's monetarily you give back, whether it's your blood, sweat, and tears that you give back to the group Kinnara or to Senshin Buddhist Temple to help, you know, maintain the facilities or the function of it. Have people joined Kinnara and then joined the temple? Yes. Have people who are members of the temple who joined Kinnara? Yes. People that just walk off the streets that want to play taiko? Yes. Are they part of any other temple or anything like that? No, they just come to play taiko or play music. Are they required to pay? No, they're not. But hopefully they understand the structure of Kinnara, and so what they gain out of it they return in some way or somehow down the road or whatever. But that's not a criteria or anything like that. So getting to that part, you walk in the door of Kinnara Taiko, you sit around and you watch, and then if there's a break, somebody would go up to you and ask you your name and talk to you, what situation, why you want to come, and what are you doing here and stuff like that, just friendly, though, you know. And then they'll hand you a pair of bachis, sticks, and say, "Okay, play." Or, "You want to play?" "Well, I don't know how to play." "It's okay. Just play." And then you experience playing, at least hitting it and stuff. And then we'll slowly teach you the stance and the concept and how to hold and, you know, the basics and stuff like that. But you could do that from day one.

It is total opposite from a traditional Japanese or Asian way of teaching in one sense as far as understanding it, knowing the basics, doing this, doing that before you're able to play a stick, be handed a pair of taiko sticks. So I've heard different stories with people who were with the San Francisco Taiko Dojo that didn't play for, like, three to six months, but they just had to do exercises, they had to do yelling and run around the block and all this other fundamental stuff before they actually got a pair of sticks. And even when they got a pair of sticks, they were old sticks, and you got to play on an old tire or a stack of phone books or something like that. So you never really got to play the taiko until X amount of time which you knew a pattern or a piece and stuff. So in one sense I understand it, because you didn't wear out the skin of the real taiko, so to speak, and weeding all these other people out to be able to hang in there. So after you finish this five or six months of training, so to speak, apprentice thing, then if you're committed to come X amount of times a week, a month, or

whatever, then they would, you know, start teaching you stuff. And I'm not saying that's good or bad. That's just the way it was. And Kinnara's always on the opposite. As soon as you walk in the door and you want to play, they'll hand you a pair of sticks, and we'll figure it out and we'll teach you whatever you want to learn down the road. There are cliques within the group. Because we've been together for such a long time, there's natural kind of people that—you know. And there's a lot of quirkiness and stuff like that, you know. So if you can hang in there for X amount of time until we are able to find time to teach you, then that's part of the process also too. You know, so the whole social aspect of it, that's part of the Kinnara or any group dynamics, right?

With Togi-sensei it's very structured when we started beginning in the seventies. It's a lot looser now. Even he's a lot different in terms of the teaching. But you sit down and he'll tell you to play. I remember this first day I went in there, I sat down behind the kakko, and he said, "Play." And I go, "I don't know what to play. I don't know how to play. I don't know what you're talking about." A night before, because we practiced on Thursdays taiko, on Friday nights at UCLA in the depths of Schoenberg Hall at the musicology room, so we go downstairs, and I was told that on Sunday or Saturday there's a service that Kinnara's going to play for, but they didn't have a drummer or kakko player. So Reverend Mas says, "Hey, why don't you come to practice. We need a kakko player." And I go, "I have no idea what you're talking about. I have no idea how this is going to work." So I just come, and I said, "Okay, I'll come." So I sit down, and whether or not Togi-sensei thought or maybe I knew what they were doing, I mean I had seen taiko, but I didn't even know kakko, biwa, odaiko, shoko, whatever. I didn't even know that, right? And he said, "Play." And I says, "I don't know what. I don't know how to sit and hold or whatever." He showed me and stuff like that, and he sat right behind me, and he says, "Okay. This is pattern one and this is pattern two. So when I kick you, play pattern one."

I says, "Well, how long?" And he goes, "When I kick you again." All right, this is in broken Japanese or whatever. I says, "Okay, I'll do it." So then he kicks me, and so we start, right? And I don't even know the count. I can't even count it. I can't even feel the music. The music is irritating. He plays hichiriki. It was blowing in my ear. You know, the sonic sounds and whatever like that, I couldn't even count it. (unclear) you were talking about.

CLINE

It's very slow.

MORI

Yes. Plus, it's very slow, right? So he kicked me, so I played pattern one, and he kicked me again and I stopped. He kicked me and I played pattern two. So we did that for the whole evening, went to the gig, didn't know how to put on the costume, whatever, sit down, kicks me again. I said, "Okay. This'll work." You know, he kicks me. And then I says, "Man, I ain't doing this no more. This is too stressful. I don't even know what's going on." So about two or three months go by and he says, "Hey, we need another kakko." I says, "No." I says to Reverend Mas, I says, "I have no idea what we're doing here." So finally Reverend Mas sits down and he says, "Okay." He explains a little bit to me, and he explains the counting, the timing of it. So I go, "I still don't know what you're thinking and I still don't know what happened, but I'll deal with it. I'll check it out." So one practice I sat back, I just sat in the

corner and I watched. Togi-sensei was also counting it out, tapping it out and stuff, and he was playing kakko and stuff. I didn't get it, but I says, "Okay, I understand at least the persona or the vibe of the group and what it is."

So I faked it for another two or three months, seriously faked it. I mean, I had no clue what I was doing. Didn't know where the one was, didn't know the count, didn't know nothing.

CLINE

Wow. Had you even heard gagaku music before?

MORI

Hell, no. Hell, no. I may have seen it or heard it on one of the records that Reverend Mas played, he showed pictures, and I'd probably seen Kinnara play a couple of times, but I wasn't interested in it at all or nothing like that. None whatsoever. And then finally, I think, after a year, I finally understood the count, but I couldn't follow the count. Even though I knew there was a count, a rhythm to it, I couldn't follow it because I couldn't understand the music. I didn't know any of the melodies. I didn't know what to accent on or anything like that. Later on, through osmosis, Togi says, "Oh yeah, I play an accent on the first beat and on the third beat, so that's a clue of what's significant and where things are at." So I kind of picked that up. Five or six years go by, I pick up a little few things here and there, and I switched instruments and I started playing the sho. I think I started playing the sho, but I also tried playing the sho, which I did for a year or a couple of years. Then I played the biwa because the biwa's timing was the same as the kakko, so I mean you play on the first beat of every measure and you play some other stuff in between. So that was another percussion rhythm instrument. And then I started playing the odaiko, which goes along with the kakko, so I knew what that was about. And then the shoko played the same thing as the kakko. So the percussion I understood. And then I tried playing the flute, and I picked that up, and that went along fairly well. And then the ultimately test was playing the hichiriki, and then I could not make a sound on that frickin' thing for I don't know how long. "Relax, relax." Yeah, right. I never played a double reed instrument. I didn't even know what the concept of the double reed instrument is about.

After a while, I just kind of just, "Forget it," you know. But I never learned a melody instrument. But, you know, just through hearing it now, you know, after thirty-something years or forty-something years, forty years, finally understand it a little bit, just a little bit.

CLINE

And you had no musical training at all.

MORI

None whatsoever.

CLINE

You never aspired to be a drummer or anything?

MORI

No, I take that back. I did. You know, I aspired to be a drummer. When I was in elementary school, this one teacher had me play these rolls as they were arranging the flag in front of the school for some kind of a ceremony or something. And so I go, “Oh, far out.” So I did it twice. Kind of got a little bit interested, and my mom asked me, “Hey, you want to take music lessons, drumming or anything like that?” And I go, “Yeah, kinda sorta,” right? And then I never really followed up on it. And then in junior high school I took this band class, orchestra class, so I had to play something. So teacher wanted me to play—I wanted to play trumpet or something like that. He says, “Play violin.” I go, “I ain’t playing no violin. That’s sissy shit. I ain’t playing that.” So I start playing trumpet and I was having a hard time just melody-wise. You know, fingering was not a problem. Melody-wise I just couldn’t.

And he says, “Okay, you want to play drums?” I says, “I’ll check it out.” And so just real simple snare (drum) and cymbal, and the snare and a bass drum. Basically a snare and bass drum in an orchestra, that was pretty much it. So these other percussionists in the group, older guys in the group, in junior high school starting showing me a little bit of other things technique-wise and a few other things and stuff. And then there was this trumpet player, Lester Smith, and he was a protégé of Louis Armstrong. He was his protégé, so he could play anything. I mean, you know, he was just phenomenal, and this is in junior high school. So he told me, “Okay, play this.” So I was just playing this basic rhythm. It was maybe, you know, one, two, one, two, one, two, three, four, whatever, right? Then he goes, “Cool, you got that. You got the rhythm. Just keep it steady.” And then he’d show me a few other little things here and there, right, or rim kind of thing and just, you know, the rim thing. So we were doing that in class, right, and the teacher walks in, right? The teacher walks in and he goes, “Okay, what are you guys doing? I told you guys don’t play anything that I don’t give you music-wise,” and stuff like that, right?

CLINE

Oh, boy.

MORI

Yes. And I was going, “Oh, okay. Whatever,” you know. I didn’t know what I was doing because I just started drums. So a couple guys behind me go, “Fuck you,” right? And so the teacher goes, “What?” He goes, “Okay, you, you, and you and you get out of here. Go to the principal’s office,” you know.

And I go, “I didn’t say nothing. I didn’t say nothing.” I didn’t point. I said, “I didn’t say it. Did I sound like—I didn’t say that.” The teacher goes, “I don’t care. You guys, all you guys get out of here.” So I was leaving the room, I was going out the door, and I turned around and goes, “Well, if I want to get blamed for something, if I’m going to get suspended or whatever, fuck you!” So that ended my formal music education class. (laughter)

CLINE

A dramatic conclusion.

MORI

Yes, right. That ended it right there, and I didn't get back into it. And then I didn't even get back into it after that.

CLINE

Wow. Well, your time is coming up, and we're going to have to hear the story of what you were playing on as far as taiko drums next time—

MORI

Okay.

CLINE

—and how you went about figuring out what precisely to do to realize the playing of taiko here in Los Angeles during the 1970s. Okay, thanks for today. We could just talk for hours, clearly.

MORI

Sure.

CLINE

I look forward to next time. (End of June 2, 2010 interview)

1.4. SESSION FOUR (June 16, 2010)

CLINE

Today is June 16, 2010. This is Alex Cline interviewing Johnny Mori on what is actually our fourth session. I said last time it was our fourth session, but it was really our third session. This is the price I pay for doing two interviews simultaneously in the same week. So, good morning once again.

MORI

How you doing? Good morning.

CLINE

Okay. How are you doing?

MORI

Fine, thank you.

CLINE

Good. We left off last time talking about the beginnings of Kinnara and Reverend Mas and the beginnings of your experience there trying to learn how to play gagaku music. We were headed into the beginnings of the taiko experience with Kinnara, and one of the things I wanted to make somewhat clear, if possible, is you said that playing the gagaku music happened there before the taiko ensemble started. Is that correct?

MORI

Yes, officially, in that the coordination of organizing and putting together and asking (Suwahara) Togi-sensei at UCLA to teach this group gagaku did begin a little before, or did begin before the taiko group, although taiko—there was a very, very loose group who at the time was talking to an individual at Senshin (Buddhist Temple) known as Mr. (Henry) Inouye. And Mr. Inouye, historically back in terms of his relationship with Senshin, was the Japanese school teacher, principal. When Senshin broke off from Nishi Honganji, there was —and I'm not exactly too sure the timeline of the exact facts, but there was a Japanese school on the Westside a couple of blocks away from where the existing temple is now, and it was a Japanese school in a large house or something like they converted into a Japanese school with different rooms and stuff. So that was there before the official Senshin congregation was happening, so to speak, or the organization of the group began to meet.

So anyway, he also played taiko for obon, and he was really interesting in that he knew all the dances. Apparently, there may have been somebody else who played taiko before him, but he knew all the dances. Nobody at the time, I don't think, had any formal training in terms of playing taiko for obon. The reason why I mention he knew the dances is because I think majority of the taiko players who play for the obons play to the music and don't play to the dance, or a combination of the both. So since they're playing to the music, it's a different feel than just playing and accenting either moves or accenting stuff within the music. Not saying that I'm contradicting myself in terms of the bigger emphasis on knowing the dance, right, the music. Nowadays it seems more important to listen to the music and know the dance because a lot of the music that is used for the dances has changed. It has been modernized, in which there's a full band with bass, saxophone, contemporary instruments that are also played during for the dance. So it's a different kind of music, so to speak. It feels different. This Mr. Inouye was very, very unique. Henry Inouye is very unique in that he knew the dances, and so he played and accented some parts of the dance, some part of the background singers they call kakegoe, which is, you know, the phrases sang either underneath or to accent the lead vocal, so to speak, you know, and it's part of the piece where the groups sings it while they dance, stuff like that, accents certain aspects of the music. So anyway, he knew that, so some people, younger guys at Senshin wanted to and needed to learn how to play obon taiko. And this is totally different than kumidaiko, group taiko, wadaiko, Japanese taiko. It's totally different. People associate it as together, but it's two different things, because there was an individual that came from Japan in the mid seventies, so to speak, that played a straight pattern or two or three patterns over everything, and it didn't work, but that's the taiko that he knew.

So there was always a problem, and there still is a problem, because the younger folks—it's not necessarily a problem because there is no official obon taiko sensei or teacher in the United States or anywhere, actually. There is none because everybody has their own style.

Everybody comes from a different prefecture, state, or city in Japan and village where they do their own style of obon and they have their own music and stuff. And because there's fifty million different dance teachers, there's fifty million different interpretations of a singular folk dance, right? The music is pretty much the same, but again, the interpretation of the music and the dance. So there was some individuals who wanted to learn obon taiko, and they were kind of like hanging out with them, but this would only be during the summertime, knowing that obon is coming up in July or something like that, right?

CLINE

Right.

MORI

And then there was a group that—and we were working with this Japanese—I mean working with this dance teacher. I think her name was Kumori -sensei *(CORRECT?), and she was interesting in that she kind of sort of found a niche in knowing the folk dances, even though she came from a classical background, knowing folk dances and learning them, and then teaching them to the Southern District churches, temples. And not that she had designated herself the teacher, but because she had credentials, so to speak, as a classical dance teacher, you know, and she was a pretty good teacher. People kind of referred to her in dance moves and some other situations.

So she had asked some people in Southern District or in Los Angeles, she put a group together with her own students and some people from the different Buddhist churches in Southern California to dance in the Hollywood main parade, in the Christmas Parade, so to speak, and in doing so, she kind of had a trucker-trailer follow them with the music, and on the flatbed truck was also a taiko player, I guess to add to the ambiance and stuff. And not only women danced, but men also danced, and they would kind of like trade off, and they'd be holding these streamers and stuff like that. It would be a real festive look for a parade, Hollywood Parade. So then people needed to learn the music, so that's why they also hooked up with Mr. Inouye to help them teach them how to play, you know, music for the obon, I mean for the dance, and I can't remember which dance. So there was about three or four people that did that.

CLINE

I see.

MORI

So there was a group that started to learn obon taiko. Then Reverend Mas and George (Abe) and a few other people, the story goes, were putting away the taiko, and they had played for, like, three hours straight after, you know, after obon happened and stuff. That sort of began the idea of taiko group. I believe that happened in '69, but I think the formation of the gagaku group was, like, in maybe 1969, 1970, and then later on that part of the year the taiko group also started. I mean, it wasn't very much longer after each of them started another one started, combination of stuff.

CLINE

So in terms of your involvement, were you doing both simultaneously when you came to it, or did you start with the gagaku and then—

MORI

I started with the taiko first.

CLINE

Oh, okay. I see.

MORI

Yes. So I didn't know nothing. (laughter) Gagaku was like someplace from out of nowhere.

CLINE

Yes. Right. Not the kind of more physical, almost athletic approach that seemed to be appealing to you either, actually a far cry from that.

MORI

Yes, yes. I had never heard it before. I had never seen it before. I had no idea what it was. None, zero, zilch at all. And I think I may have listened to it maybe just a few times prior to me being asked to go to practice, which also led to a first performance.

CLINE

And this is when you described last time Togi-sensei kicking you when to start playing, when to stop playing.

MORI

(laughs) Yes. Yes, it was just a nudge, because we all sit down on, you know, cross-legged style, so he's sitting around behind me. He just kind of kicked me with his foot. I mean it wasn't a kick kick, but he nudged me with the foot every time I had to play. So, began playing gagaku and playing taiko. Now, gagaku had a teacher, so it was really interesting in that there was direction. I mean there was a plan here, you know. If you didn't know, you just asked the teacher, so to speak, or he'd show you what you need to play. So whether or not it was any easier or harder is hard to say versus the taiko group having no teacher, us making everything up from the instrument through what we were playing, through what we were wearing. It was all new kind of a situation, you know.

CLINE

Now, you said that Reverend Mas had some recordings of taiko drumming.

MORI

Right.

CLINE

Were you beginning your musical material based on what you were hearing from recordings, or where were you getting the pieces to play from?

MORI

In the beginning we were just listening to albums, yes. So all kinds of different albums, whether they be from Japan, Asia, Africa—

CLINE

Oh, wow.

MORI

—wherever. It kind of had, like, a rhythm or a beat to it. We would just sit there in his apartment and just listen to everything that he had. And then we would borrow, take them home, listening to them, and then we would kind of memorize a pattern that we liked, a couple of them. And then the next time we met, we came back and we just kind of, like, technique-wise try to pound it out or, you know, do it. And then we played that for a while, and then we'd add things to it and stuff like that. So some stuff made no sense at all. Some stuff just happened to go along with each other and stuff, you know. And then listening to a lot of Japanese records, and there were maybe a couple, three rhythms that you heard throughout the albums that were kind of sort of reoccurring, and different layered things were put on top of it. Like I said, there was maybe about three or four patterns and that was it, and we kind of picked up on that and then we played it. And then there was a simple piece called matsuri, which means festival, and that particular pattern or piece pretty much we kind of picked up, and you hear it a lot on different things. So we kind of learned that, and then we just kind of added our own thing to it.

CLINE

So what were you playing on then? I mean, you had to come up with sort of a family of drums in order to do this. (Mori laughs.) I think a lot of people, when they think of taiko, they think of the very large drum that I can't imagine you can go find, you know, down at your percussion store. So how did you get around that?

MORI

We were playing on one taiko. It was a real taiko, I mean, you know, from Japan, and it was probably a Senshin. I don't know when the temple had gotten it. All I know is they were playing it for obon and it was there, and it's still there today, too, you know.

CLINE

To do the kumidaiko, you have to have more than one. (laughter)

MORI

Yes. So one day I went to Senshin, and then there was this barrel. On one side it had leather, processed leather, regular leather being held onto this half of—I mean not half a barrel, but this really light barrel with one end cut off and this leather stretched over this end of it, and it was sitting on a chair. And Reverend Mas says, “This is the taiko I made.” I go, “Cool. This works.” And then we looked at it and he goes, “Okay, well, this is a start.” There was a number of us that were into it now. I mean, they were so, you know—it was looking through the Yellow Pages to find who sold barrels, wooden barrels, and where you could buy them and stuff like that. There was a place in East L.A. that sold used barrels, wine barrels, fruit concentrated barrels, and they were thicker barrels. And then there was a wine-making store or a beer-making store in San Pedro that had supplies for making beer and wine, so went out there to San Pedro and they had oak wine barrels. They were heavy. We weren’t sure if that’s what we needed or wanted. I think we bought one anyway. We didn’t buy the thickest one, I don’t think, the heaviest and most expensive one, but a medium-size barrel. This was after probably about six or seven other thinner barrels and only skin on one side, because we only figured it out how to cut one end off and stretch the skin over one end because we didn’t know how to cut off the other end. Well, we knew how to cut it off, but we didn’t know how to maintain the barrel and keep the barrel from not falling apart once you cut off both ends because of the ends holding it together and the bands.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

So then there must have been—we made probably about six, seven, eight barrels with just one side, figured out a kind of a stand, a tripod kind of stand that we, us Boy Scouts, would kind of, like, lash together on one end and press the taikos on the short end, and we’d just play it that way. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes we just took a folding chair and turned it upside-down over on itself and it worked, but it was a funky-looking thing, you know. So we thought that might have been it, and then somebody suggested, “Well, why don’t you fiberglass the outside of it or fiberglass the inside of it. At least everything would be held together. Then that way you could cut off both ends.” So we go, “Okay,” so we tried it. So I think we fiberglassed the inside of a barrel, not the outside, but the inside. And then we cut off the other end and it held together. We kept the bands, the two major bands in the middle of the barrel on it, cut the two ends off it, and it held together. We kind of sort of skinned it the best we knew how at the time, and then it kind of looked okay. It sounded terrible. (laughter) It sounded like basically playing in a plastic tube, so to speak, because the hardness of the fiberglass on the inside made it real pingy-sounding.

CLINE

Right. Very bright.

MORI

Real, real bright because of this hard surface inside. And then we go, “Okay, that don’t sound right. This don’t sound like a real deep-sounding taiko like it’s supposed to sound like.” So then somebody says, “Well, why don’t you fiberglass the outside.”

And then I think we fiberglassed one on the outside, and it sounded a lot better, naturally. The hard surface on the outside was really hard and difficult for us to tack in the skin after we decided how to skin it, right? At that time, skinning-wise, we were still pulling the skins with a pair of pliers or something on each side, so we had not had the sophistication of how they would skin taikos, period. And then somebody goes, well, you know, instead of using fiberglass, which was really messy, you had to mix the polymers together, and you had to make sure you laid the cloth out right and put enough resin on it and stuff. We says, “Forget that. Why don’t we just do the hard epoxy resin on the outside.” So we did that. So basically it looked like—(laughs) It looked like, it looked like, it looked like a used oak wine barrel, a planter or a chair or a tabletop because it had this really thick resin on it, right?

CLINE

Oh, yes. Right.

MORI

So it looked like a bar table or something like that, right? But it held up, you know. So we were doing that for a while, and then we were mixing the resin so it was thinner and thinner but still held up, right? And then we were still trying to figure out how we were to skin the taiko. Somebody gave us a picture of skinning taikos in Japan of how they used to do it a long time ago, in which they used to skin two sides at the same time, in which they would soak the skins in the water, and then on its side they would put holes in the skins, and they would basically lash the rope between the two skins and you would have them going back and forth. And then they put a wooden dowel in between on each rope, and they would twist the dowels.

CLINE

To increase the tension.

MORI

Exactly. So that would tighten it up. So we tried that, and it worked, and it worked. Then somebody came back, and it might have been this guy Etsuo Hongo, who was the guy who came from Japan in the seventies. Either he came back and showed us pictures or it was Kenny Endo that showed us pictures while he was in San Francisco on how San Francisco Taiko Dojo skinned drums. Or I think basically what it was, he got pictures from Japan on how they skinned drums. It’s kind of hard to describe, but if you were to place a small platform on the floor, and then you would put carjacks on top of the small platform, you would put a board on top or a round circle cutout piece of plywood a little bit larger than the size of your diameter of your drum, you’d put your drum on top of that, so this is all vertical. Then you would put the skin on top of the drum, and then there would be holes inside the skin, and then you would lash the skin down to a frame that is underneath the jacks. So, in essence, you are pushing the barrel with the jacks up through the skin, which is being held down by the ropes to the frame underneath the jack.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

You would let it down because the skin stretched, tightened the ropes, and do that, like, about two or three times. And then the third pull, so to speak, you're there.

CLINE

Wow. A lot of work.

MORI

But then you didn't know how much you would push this drum through the skin or how tight you would want to have the skin. And then because depending upon the thickness of the skin and where you put the hose to lash and stuff, naturally, a lot of times the rope would tear the skins. So this is the very beginning, okay? And so then that was a problem, too, so right before tour, you pretty much put the tacks in and you were done. (laughter) Let it dry a little bit, and cut off the remaining part of it, and then you had yourself a skinned taiko. And then you did that on the other side.

CLINE

Wow. This is a lot of dedication to get this all happening.

MORI

Yes. There was a lot of, you know, trial and error, so to speak. Then there were carpenters, I guess you could say, or people who had very creative minds and either worked with barrels or kind of, like, took it to another level. Here in Southern California this guy named Stanley Morgan, and he was really interesting in that he was a woodworker, worked with wood, worked with his hands, had hardly any—didn't have any really formal training in taiko, but he was one of many probably throughout the United States—I take that back. There was probably maybe about four or five guys in the United States at the time who took the barrel apart, physically took the barrel apart and put it back together again and figured out a way how to take it apart and put it back together again so it still is round and made the barrel a little more consistent as far as the outside appearance of the taiko. So he was able to individually mark each stave, put it back in the order in which it was made, but he did it in a way in which he used wooden dowels or wooden nails in between the staves as guides to put it back together. And because of the angle of the staves and still have the ring, to maintain this roundness to it, so he would drill the holes in the sides of the staves, put either nails or wooden dowels inside of it, do the same thing with the opposite stave, and then put it back together. So he would kind of join it together. Then he would make a donut for the inside so that it would be round on the inside. The staves on the outside, the bands on the outside were to keep it, pull it together tight, and you would knock it down. Then he also put a band around it and then tightened up, winched it up that way so that it would tighten it up in between the staves.

So he figured all that out so that you could cut off both ends of the taiko. Some people left the donut on the inside, made it as a ring, a wooden ring on the inside and attached that to

the inside. Some people took out the rings so that it was clean on the inside. So it all depends upon how structurally you made this taiko. So now it's starting to get a little bit more sophisticated.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Individuals in other parts of the United States, after we helped start the taiko group—and this is very significant in Denver. We did this road trip in 1977. Kinnara went to Salt Lake City, Ogden, Utah, which is right near each other, and to Denver, and we performed in those three cities, and we did gagaku. We took the whole gagaku group out there with Togi-sensei and the whole taiko group, so there was quite a few people that went, and we performed there. And soon after that, they started their own taiko groups in Denver and in the Ogden-Salt Lake area.

CLINE

What kind of venues were you performing in?

MORI

Pretty much in the Buddhist churches, so that was our pretty much connection with the communities. Denver was really interesting in that there was a group of individuals who took taiko to its very, very raw beginning in that they were skinning their own cows, so to speak, or getting skins fresh from the slaughterhouses, and they were pretty much processing their own skins—

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

—cleaning them with lye or whatever, taking off all the fur part, and they were curing their own skins. So this is in Denver, in the country, so to speak, not that far out of the city, but still the people were doing that, were able to do that and learn how to do that.

This one guy whose name was Mark Niyoshi, he was into woodworking and he was into carpentry and stuff, and he had worked with a couple of other guys. They were into making everything. They were even modifying the barrels. They were refining the process of gluing barrels together and stuff. Mark, I think, was so into it, he did go to Japan and he studied or learned or lived with a taiko maker, and he got as much out of it as much as he could. But yet in terms of the raw materials available in the United States, he was able to get, you know, large logs, so to speak, and he tried to figure out a way how to make a taiko out of one solid piece of wood versus the barrel method, so to speak, staves and everything. But he came back and he started making taikos. In the beginning stages, he tried making it out of one solid piece of wood, and then he looked at his resources, and he figured, well, maybe

he had to try to make his own staves.

CLINE

Yes, I was wondering if anyone had decided to make their own barrels just for taiko drums yet.

MORI

Exactly. So then that way he knew that they could be more consistent. He could figure out all the angles. While he was there, he understood or learned from different taiko makers either the formula or the proportions for the inside cavity of a taiko. Each taiko maker makes his own sizes and makes his own dimensions and length and diameter and whatever, and they pretty much have their own design even for the inside of the taiko, depending upon the size and the sound that would need to be created. So some really, really fine taikos have, like, this herringbone cut on the inside of the taiko, so it's not smooth. Other ones have their own different designs on the inside, pretty elaborate designs, pattern designs that they would either make up or have somebody, an artist, paint on the inside and they would cut it out just because the inside had to be rough, so to speak. So he started doing that, and he started making his own staves, and so everything was controllable and everything could be made to a certain size. He could, I wouldn't say, mass produce them, but he could cut X amount and put it together, and the taikos, in terms of the size, at least, would be uniform. So he got into doing that. 0:35:27.0

CLINE

I see.

MORI

And then from Denver a bunch of people moved from Denver to Mount Shasta. So at the same time there was a couple families from Northern California that also moved to Mount Shasta, and then these two other individuals, Russell Baba and Jeanne Mercer, moved to Mount Shasta, and they played taiko with Seiji Tanaka and San Francisco Taiko Dojo. So this little community of taiko folks in Mount Shasta, and this guy Mark Niyoshi again started refining his taiko-making. So he was pretty much the first one just dedicated to making taikos in the United States. He played a little bit, but not that much, but he played enough so he knew what it needed to sound like, what it needed to look like, and everything like that. So he was pretty much the first.

So, from that, the process, people picked up on it, and so there was always some handyman in the community or some handyman at the temple or something like that, that played taiko and they could also work with their hands. So everybody started refining taikos, making their own taikos. Today there's probably about, I'd say, one, two, three, four, maybe five, six taiko-makers that make their own staves, make everything from scratch-scratch. I have not yet seen American-made taiko out of one solid piece of wood. Small shimedaikos, which is the size of, like, a snare drum, I've seen those made out of one solid piece of wood, but I haven't seen any larger ones they call naganos. I haven't seen those. A lot of it has to do with the dryness of the humidity here in the United States.

CLINE

Yes. Certainly on this coast, it's very different from—

MORI

Right. Exactly. Right. Because there was other African American percussionists, Bill Johnson, Bill Jones *(CORRECT?). God, I can't remember his last name. Anyway, he was an African American percussionist, and he played a lot with Grover Washington (Jr.). Anyway, and he just happened to live in Southern California. He invited me over to his house, and he was making percussion instruments and smaller drums out of one solid piece of wood, so he'd have all these logs in the backyard, and they'd also have this kind of like tar-like covering over each end of it so that he said that it locked in the moisture. Not locked in, but, yes, pretty much kept the moisture in so that when it naturally dried, it wouldn't dry too quick so it wouldn't crack. So he and I talked for hours and for days, but we never were able to make a taiko together.

CLINE

You mentioned Kenny Endo a little while ago. How did you make contact with him, and what was his role in this at this point?

MORI

Kenny came to an obon in West Covina that Kinnara was playing at, and this is probably in 1973, so this is, like, maybe just a couple years after Kinnara began playing. Seventy-three, '74, he came and approached us and wanted to play. I think he was going to UCLA. I think he was a regular drummer, a trap drummer, and he said this is what he wanted to do. He was very interested in it. I can't even remember if he'd ever seen taiko before, but he came to a little obon, and he says, "You know, I want to check it out." So he started coming to Senshin, and we started exposing him a little bit more to Japanese culture stuff. I think while he was at UCLA he also took a class from Togi-sensei, a gagaku class.

CLINE

Yes, I was wondering.

MORI

Yes. So soon as he got in Kinnara, things started to open up to him because I think he grew up in La Mirada, La Habra area, so there's not that much culture there, Japanese culture especially, so this kind of opened his eyes a little bit to what was available to him. So he played with us for, like, maybe about five years, and we introduced him to other Asians that are playing music in Southern California, not the Top 40 musicians, but jazz musicians or people that were kind of into more world music. But world music wasn't world music.

CLINE

The category hadn't been invented yet.

MORI

Exactly right. So he wanted to take another step in playing taiko. He was really, really into it. He moved into L.A., he's still taking classes at UCLA, and I think he graduated from UCLA. And then he decided to go to San Francisco and play and study with Seiji Tanaka. So I think he did that in, like, '74, '75, '74, I think, because when I went up there again and lived up in the Bay Area in '74, he had been playing with him because he had taken me to Tanaka-sensei's practice in the city. I think I was in Berkeley at the time, hooked up with him. Tanaka-sensei knew of Kinnara, but I don't really know if—he may have seen us just once, but then again, he may have never seen us at that time. He may have not seen us, but he's heard of the taiko group, he's heard of myself through Kenny Endo.

So as soon as I went in there, into the practice room, there was a regular drum set, which was Kenny's, and there was taikos in this room. This is at the Buchannan YMCA in San Francisco. Tanaka says he was sitting at Kenny's drum set and he was just kind of messing around and playing. I guess Kenny had showed him some stuff, and then Kenny was playing on the regular drum thing. They were just messing around together, and I just picked up a pair of sticks and I just started playing with them. Had no idea what they were playing. And then he immediately started teaching me some patterns, and he goes, "This is matsuri taiko. This is the warm-up that I created." So he started teaching me some basic stuff. This is during the summer, and I was going to the Institute of Buddhist Studies, and then that's like a six-week program, six- to eight-week program. Can't even remember. Six-week program. So then I had hooked up with Kenny again, and I went back over there and he started teaching me more stuff. The timing that I went over there was really interesting. It was between classes or between his own study classes or his practices and stuff, and whenever we can kind of get together when he had free time, so to speak, or either before or after the class, usually after the sessions that he had with his students. So one time I was able to go there, and I think either I saw the beginning or the end of one of his practices, or maybe both. He was very, very disciplinarian, so to speak, and traditionally Japanese-taught in that as many repetitious exercises, physically fit before you started playing, you'd be able to pick up the stick. When I was there, you know, these guys had to run around the block. This is at the Peace Pagoda block on Geary (Street) between Webster (Street) and Octavia (Street), Laguna (Street), and this is a huge, long-ass block. He made them run around this block like five times or something like that. People were just totally—you know, plus come back and do, like, twenty-five, fifty sit-ups, twenty-five, fifty pushups, right? I ain't doing that. (Cline laughs.) And I was saying, "Man, this is good." I mean he's working them and stuff.

Then there was the older senior people that they were playing on taikos, and, you know, there's folks that's just sitting and watching. Some of them had a pair of sticks, some of them didn't have anything, and they were all just sitting their seiza style with their feet underneath them and stuff, and they were just watching practice. Some of them were able to practice long because they had bachis. Others didn't, but they were just tapping it on their knees or whatever, right? So there's different levels and different stages. And I was just watching. Then class was over. Then while they were doing this pattern, they were doing these series of practices, he would literally go around and he would strike people, you know, on the back, on the arm, take his foot and kick their thighs or something like that or kick their calves if they're not standing properly and stuff like that, right? So, I mean, you know, he was yelling at them and screaming at them, you know, giving them some encouragement, telling them and stuff like that. Men and women were in the class, and

they were just all sweating and they were just yelling and they were just committed. And I go, man, this is crazy, you know. This is, like, man, this is like—wow, this is like—he was just yelling and screaming at them. Man, this is, like, I couldn't—I don't know if I would be that dedicated, you know, to kind of hang in there.

CLINE

Yes. It's like drumming boot camp.

MORI

Yes. Drumming boot camp, you know. It was Japanese bushido samurai spirit kind of thing. Man, it was like whoa, this is, like, really deep, because I mean, you know, at the time it was in the early seventies, you know. It was like whatever, man. This is like, you know, flower period. This is the hippie days. This was, like, the free movement, free kind of whatever it was. And I go, "Man, this is like the opposite, man. This is, like, discipline, rigidness. This is crazy." So after they left, I was sitting there, "Man." I says, "You know—." And I don't know why, but I says, "Man, this is—." And everybody highly respected this guy. He was a sensei. You know, rituals and bowing and all this stuff and very formal and stuff, you know. And I go—I don't know why I said, "Wow, I don't know if I could study with you," jokingly, smiling, you know. "You're pretty tough here, you know." And he kind of like laughed, chuckled a little bit, too, and he goes, "Well, that's how I learned, and, you know, that's just being a true taiko player," kind of a thing. And I'm thinking, "Well, if this is what taiko players have to deal with, I don't know about this," right, you know? But after he started playing, he kind of like—you know, naturally he kind of relaxed and stuff like that. And then he just started showing me some more patterns and rhythms and stuff, and he says, "Let me teach you this. Let me teach you that," right? And I had never picked up a stick with him. I mean, he just handed me a pair of sticks and we started playing, you know. He showed me a couple of other stance, and that was about it.

Kenny was all this time, too, and he's helped me out and stuff and explaining some stuff, you know. And then after that, we'd go out and have a beer. It only lasted maybe about forty minutes, half an hour, forty minutes. So I did that about three or four times while I was up north during that period of time. Then in the fall, Kenny called me up and says, "Hey, Tanaka-sensei's coming down to L.A. He got this gig at this department store." I think it was Broadway or Bullock's at the time. "And they got this East-West campaign." So they invited him down to play taiko inside the department store, and he wanted to know if I would play with him. I go, "What do you mean, if I want to play with him?" And he said, "You know those patterns that he taught you?" And I go, "Yeah." He goes, "Well, those are the foundations of these pieces in which he's going to have you play, so you already know those." I says, "Yeah." So he says, "Okay." So then he came down and he gave me some stuff to wear, his stuff, and he showed me these other things. So then out of maybe five gigs there was in L.A., I played on four of them, and they were all either inside the department store, and if it was in a mall, which there was malls at that time and I can't remember which one, we played right outside the mall. Then the mall people got pissed because it was too loud throughout the whole mall, so we had to go back inside and play not as loud.

So the reason why I'm bringing this up at this particular time is very, very significant in that

—so he was in L.A. for probably about a week, a little over a week, and this is in the fall, actually probably in the wintertime, because Kinnara was not practicing like it usually does or did after a while, which we practiced year-round. We just practiced seasonal right before started in spring, early spring, late winter, and then we practiced for obon, played at the obon, and then kind of took a break after obon until the next spring. So we were in between this, we was in this cycle, kind of, so to speak. So we called up people, “Hey, Tanaka-sensei’s in town. He says why don’t you do a workshop or whatever or just get together with us, you know, so why don’t we practice.” So we’d round up maybe about eight people to come and practice. Then there was this really young kid that was there, and he was, like, eight years old or something like that. So he comes walking in with a skateboard in his hand and he’s chewing bubble gum and he’s blowing these huge-ass bubbles. He says, “Okay, let’s play this piece, Ashida,” right? So we started playing, and he just kind of standing there slouching, and he’s playing the bass and he’s blowing bubbles, right? And Tanaka-sensei and these guys from Japan were there, and they were watching, you know. Then I think a few of them were staying at my apartment or something like that, right? And then after practice, Tanaka-sensei came over, everybody was kind of just hanging and just kind of relaxing, and then right before he split, he called Kenny and was talking to Kenny, and these other guys from Japan were there. They were talking kind of in Japanese and broken English and stuff, and I wasn’t paying attention to the conversation. And then he split, you know. It was cool, and he split.

Then after folks had either gone to bed or whatever, Kenny says, “Hey, you know, I need to talk to you.” I says, “Okay.” And he goes, “You know, Tanaka-sensei and this guy Tosha said they were very, very disappointed in your practice.” And I says, “Well, you know, it was a real casual practice, and we just pulled it together because Tanaka-sensei was in town.” And Kenny goes, “He understands, but he says, you know, the style and method of how you practice and how you guys played while you were playing the taiko was, to Tanaka-sensei, not taiko. He didn’t go as far as saying it was very disrespectful, but he says it was not taiko in the spirit of taiko, so to speak.” And I go, “Really?” And he goes, “Yeah, almost to the point or to the point where Kenny said—.” And Kenny was in this really weird place because Tanaka-sensei’s now his teacher. We weren’t his teacher. But he’s caught in this thing. He says, “Well, I don’t know how to tell you guys this, but Tanaka-sensei and his other guys had asked me to ask you not to use the word taiko.”

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

And I go, “Far out.” (

CLINE

laughs.) And then we had got together, a bunch of us just kind of got together again and reviewed what Tanaka-sensei had taught us just so we didn’t forget, and other people learned different parts so that, you know, when we put it together, we were able to put the pieces together. And so we talked about that. I brought it up and I says, “You know, Kenny told me, you know, Tanaka-sensei asked us not to use the word taiko.”

You know, then we're all sitting around talking about it. Reverend Mas is there and stuff, and he was really interesting. He didn't say too much, which he usually does since he has a lot to say, but he didn't really say too much because everybody else was kind of, like, throwing it out. Says, "Man, that's like—I thought that's what we were doing, was playing taiko, and we were doing our own thing, so to speak, because we didn't have a teacher and stuff like that." And so we says, "Well, let's think about it, you know." And then over the weekend either we had a taiko performance or we gave a demonstration someplace, somehow, and then we got together again the following week, and somebody says, "You know, I want to talk about this taiko thing." "Sure." "You know, these ladies came up to us and said they really appreciated us playing taiko, playing this, and they felt very, very natsukashi," which is very melancholy. Reminded them of Japan, of home, of festivals. And so then we kind of, like, looked at each other and go, "Wow, that's pretty deep too."

CLINE

Right.

MORI

In fact, what we were trying to do, we, I guess, unbeknownst to us, it kind of, like, opened our eyes to say that, well, I guess what we were doing in the eyes of some folks that because we called it taiko, they also associated taiko, and they put an interpretation to it how best they wanted to interpret themselves, and they expressed this by telling us of their appreciation in remembrance of taiko. So then after a while, we kind of still talking about it, and it kind of bugged us for maybe about a month, you know.

CLINE

Sure.

MORI

And then we got to a point where I remember (unclear) says, "You know, there is no connection between the type of taiko that we're playing right now and what they're doing in Japan." He says, "They aren't doing this. There are no taiko groups in Japan. There is no Japanese Buddhist taiko. There is none. They don't do this." At the time there was maybe only a few groups in Japan that considered themselves a taiko group other than a taiko group that would play for an event or festival in a village that that particular village is known for, and they don't necessarily do it as entertainment, although they do, but part of the ritual for the festival. So he says, "There's no connection. The elderly lady and gentleman who called this taiko, to them it's taiko, and it's up to us to decide what we want to call it." So he said that we should still continue to call it taiko because this is what it is. So we thought about it for another week, came back together, and I remember I even told Tanaka-sensei, and it's always on the interview and basically a lot of it just said, "Fuck it, you know, this is what we consider taiko, what other people around us perceive to be taiko, so we're going to keep using the name taiko." This is no disrespect for Tanaka-sensei or anything like that, but—so there was always then this un—and we'd see each other. Tanaka-sensei and I'd see each other at festivals and stuff because the world of taiko is getting smaller. I mean, it was getting bigger, but it was also getting smaller. We'd run into each other, and he knew that Kenny had talked to us about it, and he knew that he'd asked

us not to use the word taiko. And I think for ten years he had never seen us play after that.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

MORI

At least ten, fifteen years. And we never played with each other until just recently, because our styles are totally different. He had his cities and communities that he had gone into that he started taiko groups, and we had gone through an invitation through the Buddhist Churches of America to perform at these different cities. New York started a group; Chicago; Seattle; Portland; Sacramento; San Diego; Vista; Gardena; Orange County; San Luis Obispo; Fresno; San Jose. All these were started at the Buddhist Churches. Some of them continued the program or taiko within the temple administration, so to speak. Some of them started at the church and then it went out into the community and organizationally it's not connected with the temple. Some have a dual thing in which now they practice at the temple, it is still connected with some festivals, but yet on the other hand, it's an independent organization away from the temple, but they use it still. So many, many different kinds of things. So we were all totally two different worlds, you know, doing taiko. San Jose kind of learned stuff from us and then went and studied with Tanaka-sensei, so then he considered them to be underneath him. Then they got to the point where they developed their own style and they were very, very recognized on their own, so that was a little bit of an interesting kind of situation also, too, because once you start with a teacher, then, you know, customarily you're with that teacher for life, so to speak, right?

CLINE

Right.

MORI

But because they were starting to learn and develop relationships with a lot of other groups and even with groups from Japan, like Ondekoza and Kodo, they started a relationship with them. So there was different numbers of kinds of relationships that were beginning to form or not form and stuff like that.

So, getting back to Kenny Endo, he was always very, very committed to Tanaka-sensei because after he spent X amount, five years, in San Francisco, then Tanaka-sensei made all the introductions for him to go to Japan, so that while Kenny was in Japan, he was first introduced to Daihachi Oguchi, who was credited for the group forming of a large group taiko ensemble. Then he always was introduced to O-Edo Sukeroku Daiko group, which four individuals developed the slant stand and the Tokyo style of performing on taiko. Then through other connections he was introduced a little later on in the eighties to the group Kodo, and he knew those individuals also too. Then through the whole process he had an interest in learning traditional Japanese drumming, and he started with a Japanese form of percussion, and he eventually became the first foreigner to get a degree in hayashi, which is formal Japanese drumming, and get a name, a title, and stuff like that. But all along he would, you know, go back and forth from United States to Japan, and he would, like, share what he knew from these different groups, either rhythms, patterns, pieces, little things of

skinning, because when he went to Japan, he hooked up with Miyamoto (Unosuke) Shoten, which was a taiko maker and Japanese classical instrument maker, and he learned from him through the skinning process of making those barrels. And he also eventually hooked up with Asano, the company Asano, taiko also, too, who makes all the taikos for Ondekoza and Kodo. So he'd kind of, like, be the conduit for stuff to come back to Japan, and a few other people went over to Japan and studied taiko, specifically started taiko, and opened up the gates for a lot of people to go Japan and study taiko, because at that time there may have been only one or two other people that had gone to Japan just for visits and to learn little things and came back to Japan, but he actually went over there and lived there, so he'd provide all the information and stuff, you know. So he's totally invaluable to taiko in the United States.

CLINE

Right. I've been waiting to ask this, and you brought it up yourself. When did you become aware of what Ondekoza was doing? I know they did tour early in their existence and they came to L.A.

MORI

So in 1975 we were approached by this Sansei guy named George Kochi, and he was interested in music. He grew up in the Venice-Mar Vista area, and he had come into the Amerasia Bookstore and wanted to talk to George Abe about shakuhachi. And so George goes, "Sure," you know, so they kind of sort of hooked up. I think he may have been in and out of UCLA or something like that, and I think he lived in the Marina (Marina del Rey), and he just wanted to learn how to play shakuhachi, among other things. He had a connection to Japan for some way somehow. So we started hearing about these other taiko groups in the other parts of the United States, San Francisco, and then this group called Ondekoza from Japan. A few of the people from Japan had started coming to the United States as individual taiko players that weren't necessarily connected with anybody, but we heard of them. And so we really never got together with them because they always—because Tanaka-sensei, he'd be the connection because he'd go back and forth to Japan and he'd tell us about this.

So I can't remember what the connection was with this guy George Kochi, who eventually worked at the JACCC (Japanese American Cultural and Community Center) *(CORRECT?) in the eighties, late eighties, early nineties. So he told us of this group called Ondekoza that was going to be touring the United States, and they played this really big taiko.

CLINE

(laughs) Right.

MORI

And they showed us a picture of him and stuff. We says, "Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay." They were asked to play, or anyway, through somebody somehow, either they booked themselves or they booked four shows at the Embassy Auditorium up on Wilshire Boulevard, Wilshire Ebell Theatre. So all of us were pretty excited to go. We bought tickets in the center of the theater and we went to go see it. May have seen pictures of him, may

have not, right? They asked if they could practice or work out at Senshin, and Reverend Mas said, “Sure. Where are you guys staying?” They were staying at this motel up on Vermont (Avenue) and Third (Street). They had this old school bus that somebody had, George Kochi had found or something like that, that was transportation. But we also heard that part of their discipline was that they were, like, into running.

CLINE

Right. Marathon running.

MORI

Marathon running. And we thought that was pretty crazy, but that was part of their whole ritual and their discipline and stuff. So some of us, they says, “Yeah, you can come to watch our practice and stuff like that.” And this guy (Tagayasu) Den had actually come before, and he came to one of our practices. He says, “We would like to share with you all this other stuff, and we’d like to show you different things and stuff like that.” And us being who we were, just coming off of this Tanaka-sensei thing, thinking, “Who are you? We don’t need your help.” (Cline laughs.) “We’re doing our own thing. We’re not playing Japanese taiko. We’re playing Japanese American taiko.” So in essence, we said, “Sure, come. You can use the social hall facility and all this other stuff, but we don’t want to get together with you and have a whole workshop or nothing like that. That’s okay. That’s fine.” Then one day we said, “Well, we’re going to have to come and check them out,” so in the daytime some of us were kind of hanging out, and these guys would just kind of get there and they’d be all sweaty and everything like that. We’d go, “How’d you guys get here?” He goes, “We ran here.” “You guys ran here? Where’d you guys run here from?” “Oh, from our motel.” And I go, “What motel?” And then (unclear) goes, “Oh yeah, the one up on Vermont and Third.” We go, “And you guys ran from Vermont and Third all the way down here?” And they go, “Yeah, yeah. Not a bad run. Lot of traffic, but not a bad run.” We’re going, “Damn!” And then they started practicing, working out, no drums or little few drums that they had and stuff, right? (telephone interruption)

CLINE

All right. We’re back on.

MORI

There was probably about fifteen, twenty guys, and they all ran. Everybody ran. In the beginning they didn’t have any taikos, and the taikos that we had weren’t necessarily that good. So basically they just did drills, and they’d have their sticks. Then they would play patterns and pieces and they’d be singing everything, or they would just practice on stacks of newspaper or telephone books that we had, because that’s what we were practicing on, or tires and stuff, and they would practice their patterns and stuff.

Then I think right before the performance at Ebell, they brought the equipment. They trucked it in. And all of a sudden these, like, unbelievable, beautiful taikos were sitting in our social hall, and the sound that they made from these things was unbelievable. But they were very respectful for the neighborhood and everything like that, so we heard them, but we didn’t hear them. I mean we heard parts of them. Then we went to the Ebell and were

totally, totally blown away. I think, after that, we went to every concert that they had. Went back probably four nights, right? They were just totally mesmerizing. I mean, the first time was just crazy. It was great. So that kind of like just totally set off people's ideas, discipline, possibly, what it may or may not take to get to a certain particular level.

CLINE

That's a very athletic sort of approach, physically rigorous.

MORI

Right. Then before they left, we had a potluck dinner. Everybody got together and we fed them and stuff. We actually played for each other kind of sort of. We had the potluck. The first time they came through, we just may have gotten together and we had a potluck. The second time they came through, might have been a couple years later, we did the same thing, hosted them there, but then we played for them. Kinnara felt confident enough we played for them just to show them what we do. And, you know, we were all embarrassed and we was all new to this whole thing kind of thing and stuff. So that was in the late seventies, '78, '79. We had just come back from Utah, the road trip. We were feeling pretty confident and stuff, confident to the point where we felt comfortable of what we were doing. Otherwise we would have never volunteered to play for these folks. It's one of those things, right?

CLINE

Right.

MORI

But we played for them, and the whole concept going back to us not playing taiko or anything like that, that was part of it, but yet on the other hand, it wasn't because we got over that hump. And so we were playing our style, and at that time Kodo—I mean Ondekoza did not smile.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

They were very, very closed. They were, I think, on the verge of having to go one way or the other.

CLINE

Yes. This is pre-mutiny. (laughs)

MORI

Pre-mutiny, yes. Right before they broke up and became Kodo, split up and then took his group back to Tokyo, and the rest of them stayed on the island of Sado. So they knew this

is the second or third time they've been to the United States. The second time was just as awesome, but they did not let you get into their world, so to speak. There was still this non-emotional look on their face when they played all the patterns, except the person doing the odaiko solo, but he was facing the other way, so you really couldn't see his expressions or anything like that, but you knew he was into it, and that was Eitetsu Hayashi who was playing the odaiko. They came to a practice, and we pretty much kind of like were laughing, as we do when we play taiko and have fun while we play taiko, and so it was really interesting that Eitetsu—and I don't think the leader, Den, was there, so Eitetsu would be the senior member of the group—was asked a question, "What did you think about Kinnara?" And he goes, "Ondekoza plays heavy drums. Kinnara plays happy drums."

CLINE

(laughs) Interesting.

MORI

It was. So because of that particular situation and the more touring that they did throughout the United States, and the more that they hooked up with taiko groups in the United States, and I think their relationship that began pretty strongly with San Jose Taiko. San Jose Taiko has a very, very outwardly, almost too happy of an expression at times when they played taiko in the beginning. They had a couple of women in there who smiled through the whole thing and stuff, which, after a while, it didn't go along with the piece. But that was just the evolution of taiko anyway. So then right before Kodo broke up—I mean Ondekoza broke up, there was an encore piece that they played that they finally showed emotion, whether it was the difficulty of the playing and focusing and concentrating, you could see that on their face, or because it was the last piece, it was the encore piece, that they smiled and gave out more of an expression of joy when they performed, and that started to allow the audience to get into them and feel what they're starting to feel and vice versa. Then after that, when Kodo began, they were trying to find their personality also, too, so the first couple times they were pretty non-emotional except, again, for the encore. And ever since that time, more and more a piece within the repertoire or the program had showed emotion, you know, a little bit more playful kind of stuff, a little bit more interaction with women in the group also, too, so that opened stuff up.

CLINE

Yes, because Ondekoza, when they performed here, the women only played the other traditional Japanese instruments like koto and—

MORI

Right. Or they only danced.

CLINE

—shamisen or they danced.

MORI

Exactly. Or they only danced, right?

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Right. And then they started changing and evolving themselves and stuff like that. And there was many discussions that we had with Kodo. They were allowing themselves to discuss their taiko playing internationally and within the United States. And so because of that dialogue that they started to have with the groups of the United States, they had now finally respect from the Japan groups to the groups of the United States in terms of equipment that we were basically making ourselves. They pretty much bought from somebody or given to them or exchanged for them that we were making our own taikos, our own costumes, even playing our own pieces based on traditional Japanese pieces. Kodo was pretty much and Ondekoza was pretty much doing the same thing.

CLINE

Right. Right.

MORI

They had gathered all these masters or these elders from the villages and either went to them or brought them to the island of Sado, and they taught Kodo exactly how the piece is played, the rhythms, the timings, and all the nuances. And then Kodo made it more accessible to everybody else, the presentation, the rhythms, the costuming, everything. Then they decided they had to be more open. So that was interesting, whereas other groups from Japan still thought that because they were from Japan and playing on taikos, that they were the authority of taiko playing, but not until they started talking about the timing of it with Tanaka-sensei in ‘68 and Kinnara in ’69. Then three or four or five years later, then San Jose started, you know. So four or five years later, that’s Suwa Taiko (Association) New York started or Denver started. So that was really interesting, but I mean we didn’t really analyze it or figure it out until years later. So the Kodo’s philosophy even today is very open, you know. They say that there’s not necessarily one individual person that is credited for taiko in Japan, and that there are other styles and things.

But there is a group in Japan called the Nippon Taiko Federation, and they’re on the conservative side of ideas from Japan. About eight to ten years ago now, since the Emperor asked the educators in Japan to reintroduce the country to its own culture in schools, that they were consulted as being, I guess, an organization that they, themselves, accredited cultural teachers within their organization, so that if you were to be a taiko player that was accredited that now that the Education Department of Japan wanted to teach taiko in public schools, then who would be qualified? So Nippon Taiko Federation, along with the Nippon Federation in general, said that because we accredited these people so they can teach taiko in public schools.

CLINE

Right. According to their idea of what that is.

MORI

According to their ideas and understandings, correct. Whereas other taiko groups, some taiko groups said, “Well, again, there is no master teacher. There is no standard way of teaching taiko or, in that fact, Japanese culture.” I agree with that on both sides because there has to be some level of proficiency so that somebody learning would be learned from a person who knows what they’re talking about, you know, at least up to a certain level. And then you need to make your own decision up to that then, and then you go out and study whoever you want to study.

But who gives them—Kodo just asked the question, who gave them the authority to say who was credited and not credited. I mean, you know, again, conceptual-wise, there has to be some kind of a level of teaching proficiency. But that was really interesting when they came out with that statement, saying, “Well, there is no right way or wrong way. There is a certain attitude and fundamentals, but—.” So that was really interesting that Kodo, as a very respected group, would make that statement and would have a very, very strong relationship with the United States and North American taiko also too.

CLINE

And what would something like the Taiko Federation view of, for example, attractive young women taiko ensembles be? I mean my question being, beyond proficiency, are there other traditional attitudes that are attached to this authority?

MORI

Yes, yes. One of them was—but, you know, because of the international feminist movement, there were separate taiko groups, men’s groups and women’s groups. But for the longest time, until the middle eighties, did they figure out that they could play together, you know, musically. Physically there may be some differences, but technique-wise you’re on pretty much the same, you know, level kind of thing. So, yes, there were custom things, there were traditional things that were not accepted, so to speak. So, you know, the relationship between America and Japan is an ongoing discussion within the taiko community and Japan culture, period, not necessarily just taiko.

CLINE

Before we knock off, I wanted to just ask you one thing, which hopefully you can answer without going into too much length. We can continue it next time if it’s an issue. But you talked about when Kinnara started, how you started to develop material based on listening to records, and you started to talk about—and you talked in detail about how you started to make the instruments. What about the stance? What about the physical, the movements and the look of the taiko that you started to do? Where were you getting that information from and what were you basing it on?

MORI

Good question. A lot of it in the beginning were just—well, a lot of it in the beginning was no stance. (laughs) No foundation. You stood in front of the taiko and you hit the drum. No

correct posture. Possibly just figuring out of how to play the slant stand, naturally one foot in front of the other, a wide stance very similar to a martial artist. And then your upper-body routine or form was what you brought. (laughs) There was some looking at pictures and seeing how they were standing and possibly how they struck the taiko. So we just kind of looked at that and copied it, again through movies and pictures. But there was no reason or rhyme why you stood the way you stood or why you moved a certain particular way. My favorite program at the time was Soul Train and a combination of just, like, listening and watching these individuals dance and stuff, but rhythmically listening to the music. Again, growing up in a predominantly African American community and a minority, so-called minority neighborhood, there was a lot of raw music and rhythms coming from that neighborhood. So then to watch it on TV to be a little refined and watching these contemporary dance moves that they were doing, some of it were like, “How do you do that? That move looks really cool. I want to put that into playing taiko.” Or, “I like that rhythm, so I think I want to teach myself how to play that rhythm and then present it to the taiko group and come up with a move that I would feel comfortable, but that move still looks cool.”

CLINE

Wow. Interesting.

MORI

And then at the time we would go see everything. There was, like, about four or five of us that would say, “Hey, man, so-and-so dance group is going to be playing at so-and-so place.” A lot of it was out at UCLA. A lot of it was just in the community. So we would go and see a lot of different things, so that began opening up my eyes to a lot of things, a lot of music, whether it’s contemporary, mostly contemporary, but some classical stuff, too, you know, and dance. I think we even went to go see a ballet, a regular ballet, and that was a trip, because that was, like, “What are they doing?” “I don’t know. Do you know the story?” You had to read the book to figure out the story of the ballet piece or whatever, and that was a trip. But you see the preciseness, you see the dynamics of the performance, and then you saw the dance formations, so to speak, how they would get on and off the stage, the different configurations of how they set up, how they moved between themselves, athletically, you know, how people would glide through the air, jump and glide through the air. And then these guys would come out, and they would start of kind of slower, and all of a sudden they’d do these leaps across the stage. That was like you sit there and you go, “Man, this guy got some hang time. Give this guy a basketball. Can that dude dunk the ball? I bet you he could dunk the ball, and he could be up a long time, and so he could fake people out with his jump shot. Man, you ought to ask him if he could jump with the ball with his left hand or something.” So all of a sudden this athletic thing started kind of emerging into this ballet thing, and then contemporary dance, jazz dance, tap dance, and tap because it had movement and rhythm with your feet, right?

CLINE

Yes. Right.

MORI

So basically it just opened a lot of stuff, that it just wasn’t music, and where you do you get

these inspirations from. So people would come into practice, “Hey, I got me a cool little move,” you know. So we would watch the move. Okay, part of that move, where can you hit the taiko if you want to hit the taiko? Or if it’s going between drums or just one drum or if you dance around the drum, you know, or what? You know, as you got this cool move, so is there a rhythm that goes along with it? And he goes, “Yeah, man, I got this rhythm.” So we’d play the rhythm, he’d do this move, and I go, “Okay, well, what are you going to do with this move, you know? Are you going to try to put the music into the move, or then there’s music and you try to create the move to the music?” So at that time it was exploring and figuring out how to get the music and how to get the move, so there was no one particular place and there was no one individual that was the writer or the choreographer.

CLINE

Right. I see.

MORI

So maybe for the next three months this person is, like, into this piece and he wants to develop this piece, so we support each other.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

Some of it was, like, you know, “Chris, man, this ain’t gonna work. Screw it. We ain’t doing this,” and we’d move on or something. And sometimes we’d come back with a different perspective or a different eye on the piece or the movement. So not until some of us started to hook up with Tanaka-sensei, then we’d bring back these moves and a stance and it all made sense, and then after we got over this or started to develop more and more relationship with Kodo, then it was really interesting that they would teach us stuff, but, unfortunately, it would be after the potluck, so everyone’s full and didn’t really want to play, and then we’d just socialize. But once in a while we’d get them to kind of, like, show us some stuff, you know, and we had these different workshops and this one piece called Miyake, which you spread your legs out really, really far, and basically you’re playing this taiko at pretty much coffee-table height. So you have to physically get down that low. So we had this workshop doing this for, like, four hours, and not that we were always down, you know, in this crouched position for four hours, but majority of the time you were. So for the next ten days, literally, man, I was, like, hurting. The next two days I could not walk.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

But we started learning different postures and things, stuff like that. Along with that, we finally began learning proper technique, because people were getting hurt, you know, didn’t know the basic fundamental mechanics. So we had people, friends of ours who were chiropractors come in and says, “Oh, no, you can’t do that.” And then we had formal

dancers come in and explain, “Oh no, your knee can never go past your foot,” right, you know?

CLINE

Basic mechanics.

MORI

You can’t lock your arms or your legs. You know, so just fundamentals like that that none of us were dancers. None of us had formal training musically or movement. And so we then started obtaining these resources. Taiko players would say, you know, give us more practice and lessons, and we would also teach them, too, in terms of a little bit more freedom and expression and movement, because they’re pretty much rigid. They have a certain way, certain style, and they never usually deviate. Kodo was in a situation where they never played anything that wasn’t part of their repertoire, so a lot of them didn’t really have skills to improvise, you know, because they were just never taught, and they were given that opportunity to go outside of what they understood.

CLINE

Interesting.

MORI

So until Eitetsu Hayashi picked up a taiko, started smiling and started improvising, they didn’t ever open anything up for Ondekoza or Kodo.

CLINE

Wow. Interesting.

MORI

Because these guys pulled me aside, “That’s the first time we’ve ever seen him smile while he’s playing taiko.”

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

“This is the first time we see him play something other than a piece for Ondekoza.” So they was like, “Wow. This is a first for us too.”

CLINE

That’s a real Japanese American taiko. (laughs)

MORI

Yes. But later on did we know the functionality of the way to stand, not that any particular stance or movement was called anything, meaning, like, take karate or kung fu. You have tiger stance. You have crane stance. You have grasshopper stance. You have swan stance or something like that or movement and stuff. In taiko there's not—a lot of it is just functionality in terms of balance. A lot of it has to do with balance and executing or playing the large taiko.

CLINE

Right. Well, I think we'll call it. It's twelve noon. And we can finish maybe next time. We'll see how it goes, but we want to get into your experience playing with Hiroshima and what happens to your wife after the seventies. Okay?

MORI

Great.

CLINE

Thanks.

MORI

Thank you. (End of June 16, 2010 interview)

1.5. SESSION FIVE (June 23, 2010)

CLINE

Today is June 23, 2010. This is Alex Cline once again interviewing Johnny Mori in this lovely lounge-like room on the first floor of the Japan America Theater in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles, and this is session number five. Good afternoon.

MORI

Good afternoon. How you doing?

CLINE

I'm okay.

MORI

Great.

CLINE

I had a nice walk in the garden next door before coming over here, and I feel pretty good.

MORI

Good.

CLINE

We talked a lot last time about the history of Kinnara taiko and gagaku, and about some of the other taiko ensembles that were developing around that time, including those from Japan. We talked about Ondekoza coming to Los Angeles for the first and second time, their continuation in the form of Kodo and their connection to an interaction with Kinnara Taiko. What I want to get into today is to follow a little bit more on the development of that story, but also particularly get into some of the other activities that you wound up doing simultaneously with Kinnara Taiko and gagaku/bugaku. And one of the things that I have to assume happened along here somewhere toward the end of the seventies is you got married and had a family, started a family.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

When did that happen?

MORI

That relationship began in 1975. We did get married in 1980 in Los Angeles, got married in Los Angeles. We were living together for a while, about five years before.

CLINE

Where did you meet?

MORI

Actually, I had known my wife, I guess, future wife at the time, and I met her at a dance at Senshin, I guess when we were about fifteen or sixteen years old.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

MORI

And then through the years we'd run into each other through different Junior Young Buddhists Association, which we called Junior YBA, part of the Buddhist Churches of America youth groups, so to speak, and we'd run into each other at different conferences, different dances, socials. So that was in the sixties. Then we'd see each other in different activities within the community, so it was within the community and also, too, within the context of Asian American movement. She was associated with a number of different organizations, as with myself, again, because of the conscientious objector situation that I

was in in the early seventies and with my participation at the Amerasia Bookstore. That was located downtown, and at that particular time the social services along with the Asian American movement—it's not necessarily saying that it was headquarters in downtown L.A. and in Little Tokyo. I would probably broadly say it was located in Los Angeles. But it's just that the two community groups that had spurred the social activism was a group known as what we called JACS office, Japanese American Community Services, and there was kind of like an umbrella organization at that time. From that started this Pioneer Project, which that was outwardly Japanese and Japanese Americans, so they were considered to be Issei, first-generation Japanese, that there were a lot of single individuals and elderly, so not necessarily did they have a family, whether they'd be widowed or they just didn't have family in Southern California. So this particular organization, Pioneer Project, dealt with those particular issues and needs of those individuals. That was a very, very universal subject or concern within the community, and it began the roots of organizing in the community.

So I was working with Amerasia Bookstore located in downtown L.A. She was working with a different—she grew up in West Los Angeles area. There was a group in West L.A. that had formed sometime after the early seventies, probably in the mid seventies, and I believe it was called ITA, which is—I can't remember the initials for it, but basically it was (unclear), and it was kind of like a service organization because there was Japanese American community in West Los Angeles Sawtelle area, and they were trying to organize the youth out there and just do social service activities and events in the community and stuff. But she also worked at an organization called Storefront, and that was based in Southwest Los Angeles, which was considered to be the Seinan area, which I described, the Jefferson (Boulevard) and Crenshaw (Boulevard) area. It was called Storefront because the physical location was based out of an old storefront on Jefferson Avenue and Ninth and Tenth Avenue or something like that. And it was really interesting. It did serve the Japanese and Asian population in the Seinan area, but it was more broadly based and helped deal with the community in general. So it dealt with other races, so to speak, within that particular Seinan area. Because of the environment that the organization and the physical location, where it was, it dealt with issues that concerned that particular neighborhood. So it was a group that started to deal with and had confidence in relationships or understanding who they were as Japanese Americans contributing to that particular specific neighborhood, so they felt confident enough and organized enough that they would be able to outreach to the other races that were basically living in the community. And at that particular time, and even today—well, at that particular time it was predominantly African American community. So whether it be issues of street cleaning, drugs, just issues that dealt with a neighborhood, so to speak, they were involved, Japanese American or Asian American base, but it also dealt with the public. So anyway, she was also working in that particular situation.

Then Kinnara had started, right, in the early seventies. And her mother—my wife's name is Wendy. Her mother, her and two other women were very, very interested and curious about Reverend Mas Kodani in terms of what he had to say from when he gave his sermons and also the concept of Kinnara. I can't remember exactly—see, Kinnara always used to have lectures, seminars, and it was open to everybody in Southern California in terms of the Buddhist Churches of America. So we would go out, you know, so-and-so is speaking, and we'd bring in other speakers also, too, and develop a dialogue. We used to have the spring and fall seminars, and Senshin Buddhist Church also adapted that, has adapted that. Before, Kinnara used to do these different workshops and seminars. The issues basically, or

the topics, were pretty much basic Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and stuff, but they would bring in, I guess, scholars that were translating Japanese Sanskrit, Chinese text into English and would be able to present it in English. So anyway, Wendy's mom, she would come and she would attend these things. Part of Kinnara Taiko also, too, were these weeklong retreats. In Jodo Shinshu there is no bells and whistles. A lot of its practice dealt with internal examination plus also, too, of chanting, and that's part of the practice of Jodo Shinshu. So Zen, you sit and meditate. In other—Nichiren has literally chimes and gongs and sparks and all the bells and whistles.

CLINE

Were these the retreats in San Luis Obispo?

MORI

Correct. So these were the retreats in San Luis Obispo, and so she had attended these retreats. Her and her friends would attend these retreats. It wasn't until, like, two or three years down the road that Wendy came to the retreats too.

CLINE

Oh, wow. Okay.

MORI

So she came, and she was interested in Kinnara. She was interested because she's also attended the Buddhist church at West L.A. and certain functions and stuff. And there was a minister there named Reverend Art Takemoto that was there. He actually was Reverend Mas' mentor. So because of that—and he was also part of the original board of directors for Kinnara. So I think he had talked to Wendy's mom, and her and her group came up, following Reverend Takemoto to these seminars and stuff. Wendy was kind of sort of interested in it, too, because it was different and because some members of it that were in it started to deal with issues, social issues also too. So she started attending some seminars and some retreats, and so then we reconnected then. Then she joined the taiko group in '73 or something like that also too. Then we began our relationship in, like, '75. We had gone to see a friend of ours get married up in San Jose together, and that's when the relationship started.

CLINE

Wow. And what's her name again?

MORI

Wendy, Wendy Sahara. Yes. Wendy Sahara.

So we lived together through the late seventies. In '79, in December, my father had passed away. Her father actually had passed away, I think when she was, like, sixteen or seventeen years old, so that was in '67, '68, '69, something, somewhere around there. Her father had passed away. He was a gardener, and it was a gardening accident or something

like that. So she had been without a father for some time. So anyway, my father was in the hospital for about, like, about a year dealing with a serious illness and a condition, and, unfortunately, he passed away before we had gotten married, but he knew that we were eventually going to get married and stuff, right? So this was in, yes, '79. The relationship has been very good all these years, and I think it had to do with probably the values, family values. More than likely, our living situation was very similar in terms of economic situation the families were in, going to temple, Buddhist temple, and dealing with stuff in the community, being able to relate to both sides of the situation and stuff. We got married in September of 1980 and talked about having children, but did not really try until '82, '83. Our first child was born in May of 1983, and then the second one was born in August of 1986.

CLINE

And who are they, for the record?

MORI

The oldest one is named Misako, Misako Jessica Mori , and the younger one is Chiemi Renee Mori. If you do the math, they're in their twenties now. So there was the whole growing up with two girls kind of situation and stuff, got to be involved in the community activities and stuff and do Japanese American sports or Japanese American sports leagues. Then also through different number of circumstance situations we enrolled them in a magnet school, which basically is supposed to be socially, economically academic, and mixture of folks. It happened to be Westwood Elementary School and then later become basically one of the first few charter schools in the LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District) system, so to speak, so it's called Westwood Charter (School), I believe, right now. The principal and the community was very supportive of it.

The younger one, when they initiated, unfortunately, was caught in the new ideas, new curriculum in terms of teaching methods and stuff like that. So it took a couple of years for it to kind of sort of get settled, so to speak, in terms of how they were actually going to administer charter schools and what was the responsibility of the parents, the teachers, and the administration. So everybody had to buy in. It wasn't necessarily misgivings from the teachers, but they needed to adjust how they were going to teach in this particular environment was a little bit different. What they taught was still pretty much basic elementary-school curriculum. How they were going to do it, how they were going to share the information, and how they were going to get support from the administration or the school district and the community in general, so it took a little while. And so growing pains, you know, cost a little bit, not money or anything like that, just cost time and understanding of how that system worked. But they benefited from it. They later went on to Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies (LACES), which was very close to our house.

CLINE

I was going to ask where your house was, so maybe this is a good time.

MORI

Basically, like I had mentioned before, I pretty much stayed within the Tenth District of the

City of Los Angeles, and so when we got married and had the first child, we were living up near Los Angeles High School. And then right before the second one, we had the second one and then we got kicked out of that apartment or duplex because the owner's daughter wanted to live upstairs. So then we moved next to our mom. In the process of that, we were looking for a house or another residence, and we came across a house around the Pico-Fairfax area, and we purchased that in, like, 1987 or something like that, and we've been living there ever since. The home school at that time would probably have been Crescent Heights (Elementary School), which is up on Olympic. The middle school would have been Emerson (Middle School) way out in—

CLINE

In Westwood?

MORI

—in Westwood.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

The reason being is because—yes, that would have been the one. And then the high school would have been Fairfax High School. The reason why Emerson was because Louis Pasteur Junior High School was taken over by the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies, which was the magnet school they eventually went to. So we went to Westwood Charter until—I think my daughter was the last graduating class of sixth grade, and then she entered LACES in seventh grade. I think. Then the youngest one graduated elementary school at the fifth grade and went to LACES as a sixth grader. LACES used to go from the fourth grade to twelfth grade, and then after they initiated the fifth grade in elementary schools, then they changed it over to middle school to a high school. But even still, the thought of a twelve-year-old in sixth grade walking the halls with a seventeen-, eighteen-year-old individual was really interesting, really, really interesting. We need different people at the different schools, whether it be at Westwood Charter and at LACES.

So it was a really interesting mindset of being a parent and trying to find the best educational opportunities for your children. Not that my parents didn't have to worry about it, but yet on the other hand, your home school was your home school. I went to Alta Loma Elementary School, I went to Mount Vernon Junior High School, and I went to L.A. High School. So it was pretty much set, so to speak, in terms of that situation. But because of the transfer rules and the magnet programs, there's a lot more options here what you can do and can't do, and the whole tax credit kind of thing and all this other stuff, so it made it a little bit more complicated. So all of a sudden we're starting to do some research and some homework here in terms of what school you're going to send your kids to and stuff, you know, to see whether or not—how are you going to educate your kids in the best environment, safe environment and academic environment, you know, to see how best you could do. The standards probably have changed and different number of factors have changed, so it just made it really interesting and a little bit more pressure in terms of

finding these opportunities and being able to get into these opportunities, because with the magnet program you have all these point systems and stuff like that, how to get in and stuff like that, and so it's a little bit more trickier and a lot more long-term planning in where your kid's going to get educated. Them attending LACES, it was a very small school in terms of population. So it has six grades there or seven grades there from sixth grade into twelfth grade, but there was only 1,200 kids on campus, so each class pretty much was only, like, 200 people in the class. So if you started—and even if you didn't start—pretty much you knew everybody in that school from the sixth graders to the twelfth graders, and you knew all the faculty, too, because if you were going to be there for six years, that's a long time. Other than being in elementary school, you know, that's the next longest time that you're going to be at one school. So it's good and bad. I mean, you took advantage of it in terms of knowing the teachers, knowing the counselors, and then having to support the school, you know, with whatever fundraisers or just physically being there and helping out and stuff like that, going on field trips and stuff like that. In our situation it was a very ideal situation because it was basically a home school because they would literally be able to walk to and from school, although they never walked to school. They walked home from school, but they never really got it together in time in the morning to walk to school. It was literally just basically a mile away. But they walked home.

So anyway, that particular environment was old-school, so to speak. You know, we were very lucky we didn't have to stick a kid on a bus, two hour, whatever, to go to a school in the Valley or wherever else. We were very fortunate. It was still predominantly African American. Because the way the charter school and magnet school situation, there were (unclear) different, diverse racially school, and so it was pretty good. The teachers were very, very good, and especially the counselors. So by the time they got to tenth grade, parents and students started going to college, pre-college meetings. So they helped give you, the parents, information for finances, applications, and prepared the students very well in terms of how to fill out an application, what they needed in the application, all the requirements to get into all the colleges and universities. They started while you were in the ninth grade just to prepare you for that eleventh grade or that twelfth grade in October when you've got to start sending the applications for college. So they were on top of that. I felt they were very, very prepared. First year in college, the freshman year, both of them said that they were prepared academically to deal with the classes that they were stuck into.

CLINE

Where'd they wind up?

MORI

The older one went to San Francisco State (University). She didn't necessarily have a clue what she wanted. She didn't have a major going into that school, but she wanted to get out of Los Angeles. She knew a couple of people that were applying to that school, and she wanted to check out San Francisco. It was close enough, but yet far enough away. So she did that, and she eventually got into urban planning, so she graduated in urban planning, and a minor within Asian American studies. She dabbled a little bit into it when she had to intern for the Community Redevelopment Agency in the City of San Francisco around the same time that (Hurricane) Katrina happened, and so she was doing interviews, conducting interviews with displaced people from New Orleans. So she said that was interesting

because over half of the people that applied, unfortunately, they were homeless from the City of San Francisco, trying to get a little bit extra housing, you know, if it was available. So there were some key questions that they had to ask in terms of locations within New Orleans, and if they didn't know, they knew that they weren't from New Orleans. So anyway, she dealt with that. Then she applied for a different number of jobs within the urban planning situation, whether it was for the government or whether it was in the private arena, so to speak. Unfortunately, she did not get any jobs in that particular situation, so she ended up into retail and has been working in retail pretty much ever since, bouncing around from different clothing retail situations. They're really interesting in that they're all the first-time stores in the City of San Francisco, meaning H and M, which first store on the West Coast was in San Francisco. She helped open the store. Then she got offered to work at Juicy Couture women's boutique in San Francisco, so she helped open that store. And then Barney's New York in San Francisco that she also helped open was and still is the head of the jeans section within that particular store. So she's always been in the retail and customer service kind of situation.

The younger one was really interesting. In talking with her teachers or the counselors and the teachers, she was a little bit more focused in the eleventh and twelfth grade. She wanted to work in customer service, and she wanted to get into hotel and restaurant hospitality. She wanted to help organize stuff, kind of like being an event planner. This may have come from me in terms of the shows that I have produced, different areas of programs and events that we helped, I helped put on in L.A. Also, too, my role that I had played within the band (Hiroshima) as far as tour managing, having to deal with airlines, freights, hotel bookings, hotel rooms, and just ground transportation, getting from one city to another city, and running that. So I guess she would see that. She applied to the University of San Francisco, which is a private school in San Francisco, small school. San Francisco State was also a small school, too, although San Francisco State was pretty much a commuter school very similar to Cal(ifornia) State (University) L.A. (Los Angeles) here in Los Angeles. But they liked the smallness of the school. They liked the weather of San Francisco. For Chiemi, though, she applied, and she asked for early admissions. So she was pretty set on this particular school and the major. So she got accepted. It's really interesting that, being a private school, she was out in four years. The older one, Misako, she, unfortunately, took, like, five and half, almost six years. The second, the last half of the year or last (unclear) she only had to take two classes. But because within the state system it's hard to get classes, they're not available, and you've got to take certain classes in sequence, and if you didn't, you've got to start again the following year, so that was one of the reasons why she had to take a little longer. So financially it cost the same amount of money. Chiemi finished, she finished in four years. Misako took almost five and a half, six years. So that total cost pretty much came out the same. Private schools pretty much have its own funding in one sense, even though they do get some state funding, but pretty much they have their little pools and pockets of money that they're able to offer the students.

So Chiemi pretty much was pretty focused, and she graduated in four years. She was highly liked and recommended by the faculty, and she got recommended for a job with Four Seasons (Hotel) in Palo Alto, and she got accepted. She took the interview, she did very well, she got hired in a manager training program at Four Seasons, and it was an eighteen-month program. Unfortunately, when she graduated, she was working there, and after the first year then the economic downturn happened and it just hit the wall. Her position got cut, but she still worked at the hotel in different other areas. So she was able to stay on for

another nine, ten months, and recently she changed jobs. But she eventually said she'd probably go back to that in either event planning or customer service or HR. So right now she's in customer service with a large national jewelry company, and so she doesn't deal with patrons directly; she deals with the sales folks that sell to the—kind of like an Amway, Mary Kay (Cosmetics) kind of setup in terms of how it's run. So she deals with the sales associates, so to speak. She's only been there for the last three years.

So they like it in San Francisco. Both of them are still in San Francisco. Both of them like it there. The older one was thinking about possibly sometime moving back to L.A., but it's not, you know, nowhere soon or anything like that. So they understand what we do. There are some advantages and disadvantages. Growing up in the early years, I'd be on the road traveling a lot and stuff.

CLINE

Yes, and we haven't gotten into that yet. Hoping to get to (unclear).

MORI

And even when between the older one and the younger one, luckily, the older one I was in town in May. The younger one, since having a second one is not as big of a deal as the first one, I had gotten a substitute for a performance, and it was day by day. The person came down from another city, rehearsed, and stuff like that. Then actually we had the younger one, I think two days or three days, three days before we were supposed to go on the road, and so then after, had the baby in his office, and the younger one came home. Then a couple days later she says, "Yeah, you can go on tour. You can go out and do these gigs," and stuff, right, because in Los Angeles she had support. Her mom was there and my mom was there. Her friends were there, and at that time—yes, so she had support there, so she said she felt confident enough. Plus, I was no good anyway. I didn't deal with stuff, and she used to have to get up because she breastfed anyway, so I was useless. So she says, "Okay, go out and make some money so you can pay the bills," you know. (laughs) So I left. But the other person accompanied me. It was already booked that they would come anyway, so they came on the road. So, luckily, it worked out that way.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

So the timing was fine. So we've been married ever since.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

Yes. That's a pretty good relationship.

CLINE

Excellent. So between the Amerasia Bookstore and hitting the road, I presume this is with Hiroshima—

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

—how did your life change in there? Clearly there's a transition that happened in here somewhere.

MORI

So as I mentioned before, started playing taiko pretty much considered the early seventies and worked at the Amerasia Bookstore from 1970, '71, and then still playing taiko or trying to develop taiko all along and stuff, still working at the bookstore. Then I did a performance with the band in '73 called The Monkey Play. I don't know if I described that situation, but—

CLINE

No.

MORI

—the band, Hiroshima, was formed in the late sixties, early seventies, so they were playing. And then internally they kind of broke up. So the original members broke up in probably '71, '72 area right there. Then they reformed the band again with a different drummer, a different lead singer, and a new bass player and a keyboard player. So all that was left was the guitar player, Peter Hata; koto player, June Kuramoto; leader of the band, Dan Kuramoto. And they asked me to come into the band. They didn't really ask me to come into the band; they asked me to perform in certain performances and stuff, and I said, "Okay." So I went to a couple rehearsals. We kind of like were just playing—I was playing some rhythms, and then they had come up with—I played for them certain rhythms, and then they, meaning Dan and Peter, the guitar player, came up with a piece. It was an instrumental, and I just played a simple rhythm through the whole thing and that was pretty much it. Played an introduction, and that was the beginning of it.

CLINE

: How did you meet these guys?

MORI

I knew June from high school, junior high school, so I knew June. You know, I went to junior high school, and then when she was in high school, I left all contact with her. Then the Asian American movement started happening, like I mentioned, and then they started having these cultural events to kind of, like, revisit your culture kind of thing to help secure or help confirm your cultural identity, so to speak. Anyway, so they had this cultural night

at UCLA, either some fraternity or some group. And we had started hearing about June Kuramoto playing this koto. We had heard about what the instrument koto was. We were not familiar, but we knew what it was and we knew what kind of sound that it made, but this was the first person that we had heard about when we were playing taiko, these individuals that we went to go see her play at UCLA. It might have been either the Sunset—

CLINE

Recreation Center.

MORI

—Recreation Center. Somebody had rented out, I guess, one of the spaces up there. We went up there and checked it out, and she played koto. For some-odd way or reason because she played the koto, it looked, it sounded interesting. It wasn't boring. (laughter) Not that it made sense, but it's just that because she was my age and I knew who she was, and she was playing the koto. And I had no idea if she was playing whatever she was playing right, but some-odd way or reason there was this cultural connection to what she was doing, and all of a sudden, like, "Wow, man," you know. "She got it together here," and she could play these pieces and stuff like that. That was amazing. So then she was the contemporary connection to Japanese culture and Japanese instruments.

And then this other guy that used to be at—well, as I said, (unclear), George Abe, who still plays Kinnara and they do this Japanese Festival Sounds Educational Group, and we go out and do this, he was playing shakuhachi, and I believe in the early seventies his teacher was still alive, and so he would be taking lessons. So there was some connection there, too, of folks of our generation now getting back in the Japanese culture, but, you know, we didn't really know this was happening, I guess because they were taking these lessons and not telling anybody.

CLINE

(laughs) Interesting.

MORI

Yeah. Because whether or not they thought it was uncool to be taking these lessons of these traditional Japanese instruments. I mean, June has this long story about, you know, being dropped off—well, basically, she would have the teacher come to their house and teach, and eventually she may have started going to the teacher's house, but pretty much in the beginning the teacher would come to the house, because that's how strong the mother wanted June to learn koto. Or June actually said that she may have seen it in a community concert or may have seen pictures of it, and she told her mom she wanted to play that. So her mom found a koto teacher, Madame Kazue Kudo in Southern California, and she had talked to her about coming to the house because they didn't have a place, she didn't have a classroom or anything like that. So she did. She came to the house, and I guess maybe her and another girl from the community came. But June wouldn't tell anybody she took these classes. She came to the United States when she was, like, five or six years old. She was born in Japan and came to the United States. But she was born in Japan, but she was born to a Nisei father, second-generation father, so she was an

American citizen, and she eventually pretty much stayed in the United States. But she would never tell, and especially in junior high school and high school. So she would never tell anybody, especially her peer group, that she played koto until there was a situation in which she finally had to cop to the fact that, “I got to go to koto practice. I have a koto recital, and I can’t go do this thing,” a social thing, right? I’m not sure her peer group made fun of her or whatever, you know, because I think at the particular time also, too, there was a piano teacher that would go around to different people’s houses and teach piano, so it was almost the same thing. But she even put some restrictions on herself by saying, “Well, this is koto. This is even more obscure than the piano,” right? So she studied on her own and learned and stuff like that. So she took this all through high school and stuff.

So finally after she graduated high school, I think she was going to college or something like that, and she may have gone to LACC (Los Angeles City College), and then she started really liking it a lot, really a lot, and then she started supporting her teacher, doing all these recitals and stuff like that, and finally confident enough to represent the koto at these other school kinds of things and within the community and stuff like that. She felt confident enough to go out and do that. All the same time—and this is what she tells us too—at the same time—she said she didn’t know how she did it, but in between her lessons or before she either got taught or after, she’d also bring a transistor radio, and she’d listen to, you know, rock and roll stations or pop stations on the radio right before and right after. So a lot of R and B tunes and stuff like that, a lot of Smokey Robins (and the Miracles), the Temptations and stuff.

So the late sixties started happening, and then she started relating to a different number of guys within the community that was beginning to start functioning and working in social service groups and stuff like that. And also Asian American Studies started happening at Long Beach State (California State University, Long Beach). So her brother went to Long Beach State. His name is Tracy *(CORRECT?). Then Dan Kuramoto was also at Long Beach State as an art major or something like that. He had grown up in East L.A., went to Roosevelt High School, and he decided to go to Long Beach State and enroll in the art department. At the same time there were a number of folks from Los Angeles, from all over Southern California that pretty much was the core for Asian American Studies at Long Beach State. It was considered the first Asian American Studies. So they formed this particular group. So anyway, Tracy told June, “There’s this guy, Dan Kuramoto, on campus, and he plays flute,” and I think she may have needed a flute player to play this piece called “Sakura.” It was a flute-koto piece, duet, right? So then he had asked Dan. Dan was a self-taught musician also, too, so he figured it out. He has a pretty good ear. So she played, I guess, the melody or kind of wrote it out because her music was in Japanese, his is—and I don’t even know at the time whether or not he could read music or play, but they figured it out. Anyway, they played together, and then they did a second performance together, and then that started the relationship. So then she was in the band. The concept of the band used traditional instruments. Same time after Santana, Earth, Wind, and Fire happened, right? So then somebody had asked—they figured that out later on somebody had asked the question, where’s the Asian representative with Earth, Wind, and Fire and Santana and coming from those particular ethnic communities?

So Hiroshima started in the late sixties, early seventies. And then with the koto there was a koto, a lead singer named Nancy Sekiza, which eventually turned into Atomic Nancy,

because her folks own Atomic Café on First (Street) and Central (Avenue) that was open till, like, four o'clock in the morning. So that used to be the hang after you'd—late night or whatever night you could also go to Atomic Café and get a bowl of udon noodles and kind of chill out and try to sober up before you went home. She was a sixteen-year-old, Hollywood High School, Japanese American girl. She loved to sing. She was actually, the way she dressed, her manners and (unclear), she was the original Cyndi Lauper, believe it or not, her mannerisms, the craziness of her stage presence and everything like that. So she sang. There was this other sixteen-year-old drummer named Randy Yoshimoto. Then we had this young Chicano guy, Jesse Acuna, played percussion and sang. Then they had gotten this woman named Terri Kusamoto; she sang. And a bass player named Danny Matsumura (phonetic), a keyboardist named David Iwataki when I got into the band, and Dan and June. They invited me to play, to jam at this club in the Crenshaw area, and I did. They asked me to play at a school performance, and I did that, we did that. And then this thing called The Monkey Play, and the producer-director on that was this guy named Julian Falk, and he used to own this—his mom used to own this store up on Sunset Boulevard near Virgil (Avenue) and Sunset area. I can't remember the name of the store. Anyway, so he had relationships and connections with the industry, entertainment industry, Hollywood because I think his mom had this store that had all kind of Asian stuff in it, so people from the industry would come to her store to pick up stuff for sets, the large pillows, fans, stuff that had to deal with Asia kind of stuff. Eventually China opened up, so they used to get a lot of stuff from China, imported from China, soaps, Mao jackets, Mao hats, pins, whatever, and that.

So anyway, he'd have some kind of connection with all these folks in Hollywood, whether or not they be assistant directors, producers, writers, choreographers, behind-the-scenes people, and there were a lot of Asians that worked in the industry. So he pulled all those folks together. Somebody came up with a script based on the Chinese folktale, The Monkey Tales, about a monkey going around and having all these different little escapades, so to speak. At the time kung fu was becoming very popular, was a new word, a new martial arts set within the community and stuff. So there was a master in Los Angeles at the time, and they figured out some choreography moves along with some dancers, and he was pretty much the Monkey King. Anyway, first time that anybody had pulled the resources from Hollywood into a play, and the band did the music for it. Then after the play was over, then the band did a concert. So I was involved with the concert aspect of the play, so that was the first official time that I got into playing with the band.

CLINE

Where did The Monkey Play happen? What was the venue?

MORI

The Embassy Auditorium.

CLINE

Oh, downtown.

MORI

Downtown on Grand. Unbelievable stage, unbelievable acoustics in that place.

CLINE

Yes. I've played in there. I don't know what kind of shape it's in now, but yes.

MORI

It's still there, though, right?

CLINE

Yes. It's still there, as far as I know.

MORI

Yeah, I think it's still there. It's a functioning building, I think.

CLINE

It's a hotel or it was. I don't know.

MORI

It was a hotel, and there were some kind of issues about the noise to the rest of the hotel, I believe.

CLINE

Right. I know they stopped using the auditorium sometime in the eighties, I think.

MORI

Something like that.

CLINE

Interesting.

MORI

Yes, because somebody just did a recent study about acoustic environments in the City of Los Angeles. That theater came up, and then the Variety Arts Theatre on Figueroa (Street). That came up also, too, along with the Wilshire Ebell (Theatre). So those three venues just came up because they're naturally acoustically very, very good. But anyway, so we did that thing there, and that led to other performances and stuff. Sixty-three, '64, '65, '66, '67. So I was still playing taiko. It was getting a little bit more involved. I mean it was getting a little more participation in it and stuff. The band was still doing a lot of these cultural situations in Fresno and in the Bay Area, so we would travel to different places within the state, down to San Diego, wherever these small clusters of the community, Asian community. Not only that, these campuses that had fairly decent population of Asians. So

we went to Fresno, of all places. We played at Fresno State (California State University, Fresno), and then came back to L.A. Then because we grew up in—the band that I performed with, June Kuramoto, she went to Dorsey High School and Dan went to East L.A. Dan Yamamoto, the drummer, he went to Dorsey also too. So within the Crenshaw area in Leimert Park there was a gallery. It was an African American gallery called the Brockman Gallery. Dale Davis and Alonzo Davis, they were both artists. Actually—

CLINE

Alonzo is the artist, I think.

MORI

Alzono, and Dale was actually an art teacher at Dorsey High School. So they may have remember June's and Danny's name because actually Danny played in this band with Childs.

CLINE

Billy Childs?

MORI

Billy Childs.

CLINE

Really?

MORI

Yes. (laughs)

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

So he played in this quartet in Dorsey High School, and, naturally, they won the talent show, the school talent show, and Danny was the drummer and Billy Childs was in the group too. So Dale and Alonzo may have remembered Danny and June, although they didn't know each other because June was a lot older than Danny. But anyway, Alonzo and Dale were at the forefront of looking at artists and the arts as a viable source of employment. There were federal job assisted programs that were happening at the time. One of them was called CETA.

CLINE

Oh, yes. I know what you're talking about. CETA.

MORI

CETA program, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act.

CLINE

Yes. Exactly. And there was funding from—

MORI

Exactly. So his idea and concept, and he pushed for it and he got it approved in that artists and musicians need support also, too, and it is viable, because of Hollywood in one sense, it is a viable job-training position. So Brockman Gallery pretty much applied to be the administration organization for the CETA program. We couldn't apply as a band, so each individual in the band at the time applied for a position, and so I think there was six slots available. We applied for it, but there was eight or nine people in the band, so we split the money as we'd get it, you know, paid during the week. We'd put it into a pool and we'd split it up. So we were able to do that, so we were able to practice and play every day.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

Your requirement was to play in a public venue. I think at one particular time it may have been weekly or twice a month or something like that, to do a free concert, public park, a high school someplace. So they had hooked up with LAUSD, and we played at all the high schools within the southwest area of Los Angeles: Dorsey High School, L.A. High School, Hamilton High School, Crenshaw High School. We might have played at Manual Arts (High School). We played in Westwood at the park right next to the Federal Building. We actually played at Watts Towers. All the public municipal art galleries, Barnsdall (Art) Park, the one in our neighborhood. I can't remember the one—it was an old (unclear). But anyway, we played a lot everywhere. And a lot of people, to this day, that are as old as we are or a little younger than we are, say, "Yeah, I remember you. I remember the first time I saw you." I says, "Oh, really? Where was that, at some club in Hollywood?" He goes, "No, at my high school," you know. (laughter) So that was great exposure because you had this captive audience that were there, and it made an impression on these kids.

So anyway, that allowed the band to practice, to figure out what we were trying to do. Seventy-eight, '79, or actually in the beginning of that process between '73 and '77, '76, I was in and out of the band, more out than in the band, so to speak, because there was no really formal relationship or nothing like that. They'd call when they had a festival or something like that or when they deemed appropriate for me to perform with them to showcase the Japanese instruments. Apparently, in that time they had hooked up with Quincy Jones, and they did a demo for Quincy, and Quincy didn't sign them. For some-odd reason at the time Quincy did not sign them or support them, but they still had a relationship with him. This is going to come back to Quincy Jones eventually. That's why I mention it. We're on that particular timeframe. That was considered to be somebody's ultimate goal at that particular time, to get signed, you know, to have a record deal, get

your music out there, plus be able to meet with Quincy Jones. That was another situation. So we did the CETA program and we played in this park in Westwood. There were, I guess, some flyers put up in the campus at UCLA and around Westwood and stuff. There was this actor from New York, Aki Leong. He played all the Asian bad-guy roles in all the war movies and stuff like that. Anyway, he just happened to be walking around Westwood and he saw the flyer. Simultaneous at the same time, somebody had asked him the same question of, "Where's the Asian American Earth, Wind, and Fire? Is there an Earth, Wind, and Fire Asian band?" He had heard of the band, and all of a sudden it struck another note in his mind, Hiroshima. So he contacted this guy named Wayne Henderson.

CLINE

Oh, yes.

MORI

(Trom)bone player for the Cru—

CLINE

Crusaders.

MORI

Jazz Crusaders.

CLINE

Right.

MORI

Right? So they had hooked up, and he had contacted the manager of our band, who just happened to be John Kuramoto's brother. He used to play with the band Hiroshima a long time ago before I got in there. And they hooked up this meeting, and then they hooked up this showcase to play for Wayne Henderson. So he came, we met him at rehearsal studio, SIR (Studio Instrument Rentals), probably. He came down, he checked us out. He was very enthusiastic about it, and he says, "Yeah, cats, I want to get you guys a record contract deal within four months." We go, "Yeah, we heard that before. Sure." So within a week he goes, "Hey, man, I got this place up in Hollywood. I call it At Home Studio." It's up on Sunset (Boulevard) and Gower (Street) right near the other studios and stuff. So we went up there, we rehearsed for two or three days, got some material together working with him. He says, "Okay, I got some appointments arranged for some record people to come in and check you guys out." So we says, "Okay." So then Mercury Records came by. Atlantic Records came by. Dr. (George) Butler from Columbia Records—

CLINE

Dr. George Butler, yes.

MORI

—he came by. So all these guys who I had no idea who they were, they all came by, and so all of a sudden I'm thinking, "This guy's legit. He's for real. This is Wayne Henderson, right? He can get these guys to come out."

And then there was a week that went by, a couple weeks that went by, and he says, "Okay, I got another showcase for you." And I says, "Okay, who is it?" "Well, I got Mercury coming back again, and then I have Arista Records coming." And I didn't even know who Arista Records was. We knew Dr. George Butler, we knew Columbia Records, we knew Atlantic, we knew Mercury, but we didn't really know Arista Records, right? So then this guy named, African American guy, Larkin Arnold (Jr.) came, and he came and checked it out and he liked it, and he came up and he started asking us questions about the koto, about the taiko, what we were all about and stuff. Then a couple days went by and he says he wants to come again and listen to either the same material or different material. So he came back again and he listened to it again and he goes, "I think you guys got something here. I need to bring my boss here. I think it looks very promising." So we go, "Okay." So he mentions this guy named Clive Davis, right? So some of us did some research on him. Some people knew who he was, and at that time he wrote the book (Clive: Inside the Record Business).

CLINE

Yes. Well, he started Arista Records.

MORI

Right. But at the time he also wrote the book. He wrote a book about the industry.

CLINE

Oh, okay. I see.

MORI

So anyway, so some people knew of or heard of him. I think Dan and some other people in the band knew of him. They went out and bought his book. They came back and they read it, and they explained who he was and stuff like that and why he was given Arista Records versus him being Columbia Records, basically.

CLINE

Yes. He used to be with Columbia, yes.

MORI

Right. So, okay, so he came down to rehearsal and he checked it out and he goes—because Larkin Arnold said, "I think I'm going to try to sign you guys, but I need to meet with my boss." So Clive Davis came. I didn't know who Clive Davis was. I mean, eventually I did, but, you know. So he came down, he says, "I like you guys. I think we'll probably talk to your lawyer. I think we'll work something out." Says, "Great." Then Larkin was pretty much the overseer of the group. Now, Larkin, you know, previous to him signing us, was

instrumental, I think, in signing Natalie Cole. Eventually he became part of the situation in which he signed Diana Ross to, I think, RCA Records or something like that after she left Motown, and then a different number of African American groups and people that he had signed. Then he had signed Luther Vandross and then also, too, signed some kid named Michael Jackson, and we found out who he was in terms of, you know, his Larkin Arnold, right?

So then we were still with Arista Epic Records or something like that—no, no, Arista Records. And then he left, and then he signed with Epic Records. Then we were with Clive Davis for two albums, and after the second album—the first was very successful, second one was pretty successful too. A tune off the second album got nominated for a Grammy (Award). So right before that, though, we had a meeting with Clive, and he started talking about changing the name of the group and hooking us up with Rick James.

CLINE

(laughs) Sorry.

MORI

No. That's the same reaction that I had too. I go, "Who?"

CLINE

I did not see that one coming.

MORI

Rick James. So you've got to figure this is, like, '82, '83, because we had put out the first one in '79, finished the second one in '81, and so we were talking about the third album, right? So then he's talking about hooking us up with Rick James, see if he can produce, help us write and produce shows and stuff like that. So Rick James being Rick James, he comes walking in there, and we're at the studio and stuff like that, and he plays stuff for us, and he says, "Yeah, no, I know what you guys are doing." He comes in, and after all the bullshit happens, right, and stuff like that, he goes, "Oh, yeah, I got a guy (unclear)." He sits down and alls he says, "You know, I'm gonna sit here, and in one sense I can sit here and I can take your money. I can take the company's money and I can take your money because this is your project, in essence. But," he says, "what I do and what you guys do are totally different, you know. I can make it work or they will, the company, will make it work if we go ahead with this situation, right?"

So we all kind of, like, hung out for a while, kind of cracking up and laughing and stuff like that, but we knew it wasn't going to work, you know. Had dinner with him and stuff like that, met with him, you know, made it worth his while, you know, and the company's time. It was on the company's dime anyway, but it was basically our dime.

CLINE

(laughs) Right.

MORI

So we went to the Grammys and we saw Larkin Arnold at the Grammys, and right before that he had already left for Epic Records, Columbia Records, right? So then we had started talking to him about is there any room there for us to go there. He goes, “Well, let me check it out. You guys have solid numbers, so it’s not a problem in terms of economically being able to have you come over to the company; it’s just the deal between you and the lawyer and the company.” So our lawyer at the time, and still is, I think, probably, this guy named Jay Cooper, one of the top three lawyers. And the reason why we got this guy is because June, while being a musician, she had her second job, she worked with this guy named Richard Rosenberg. Richard Rosenberg was part of Regent Booking Agency. He eventually got in to merge with two other companies and came up with Triad Bookings. Eventually he went over to, I think, William Morris (Agency) or some other large company. So he was kind of an agent lawyer, and so he recommended this guy Jay Cooper to us, and he was a friend of Jay’s, and Jay says, “Sure, I’ll handle them.” Then I don’t think June worked for him, but anyway, she set up that relationship, so that’s how we got him. We were in his office one day, and basically he called Clive Davis and he called Tommy Mottola while we were sitting there, and he talked to them. “Hi. Can I speak to Clive?” You know, far out. “Hi. Can I speak to Tommy Mottola?” And he would have this conversation with them. So he was in that situation where he could call anybody in the business and they’d speak to him on the spot in the minute.

So we go, “Oh, shit. This is great.” So anyway, he worked it out. So we moved over to Epic Records, and I think we did four or five albums with Epic Records, and Larkin Arnold was pretty much our executive producer at the same time he was doing Off the Wall, Thriller, and Bad (all by Michael Jackson). And then all of a sudden he started getting a little bit too much power from the company, so they kicked his ass out. So then we were doing the fifth, the sixth album with Epic, Columbia/Epic. Then because we lost our main support mechanism there, then eventually, you know, the relationship kind of waned, and we got out of that relationship. But it was a great, great, great run, I mean unbelievable run while we were with Epic/Columbia. And at the same time, we were working—this is late eighties, middle eighties. We had gone to Japan a couple times, three or four times. First time we went back to Japan, that was unbelievable. That was the first time June had ever gone back to Japan, and this is in 1980, the end of 1980, beginning of 1981. Actually, it was 1981 in January. Went to Japan and went to the Philippines and then went to Hawaii, and it was unbelievable. Before that, the first time we went on the road outside of California, our first performance was at Howard University in Washington, D.C., African American school. Had no idea, no clue whatsoever as to whether or not what kind of response we were going to get from anybody outside of California. There was two shows. Both shows were sold out. Very unbelievable reception the first show. During certain solos, on their feet, whatever. Second show, apparently there was a buzz for the second show. It was standing-room only, and I’d say through 90 percent of the show everybody was standing. Hit the stage. From the get-go to the end was unbelievable. First time, the best memory of anything, right? I mean you would always remember that situation. So that was almost too good. It was almost too—the first tour was almost too unbelievable, to the point where we never got cocky, we never got overconfident about who our audience was or that we can show up anywhere and we’d get a full house and get standing ovations everywhere we went, but it went from that was the first outside-of-California performance, and it was a great, great understanding of what was happening, great response. So at that time it was kind of like,

"Wow. Maybe we are doing something right here. Maybe we are being able to communicate our experiences through music to other folks." So that was really unbelievable. Then we went on kind of this mini tour, played Cleveland, the Front Row Theater, which is in-the-round. We opened for Angela Bofill, hooked up with all of these other East Coast musicians, developed relationships with these guys. Fantastic being on the road. First time in a tour bus, so to speak, right? All these first-time things in the early eighties. Again, going to Japan, having all these different experiences in Japan, checking out all the technology in Japan that they had that wouldn't come to the United States for, like, about five or six years later: stereo TV, remote control, TV studio cameras, moving lights. All this stuff was there in Japan. You'd walk into the studio, there's nobody in there, no other human being in there except you doing what you're doing, and these robotic hammers, these robotic lights, you know, focusing on you and stuff. It was nuts, man. It was eye-opening, man, the technology and the concept that other people, other countries had. That led to more touring, national touring, the second album, and then more touring, then eventually the switching of record companies.

CLINE

So were you making your living doing this now at this point, or how were you—what was your employment situation? Especially earlier on when you said you weren't so intimately involved in the workings of the band.

MORI

Good question. In '83, I also started Japanese Festival Sounds, which was an offshoot from Kinnara Taiko, but it used available other taiko players that (unclear) with Kinnara or kind of, like, Danny Yamamoto kind of got into Japanese Festival Sounds too. It was just two of us, George Abe and myself, and Danny got added into it. So at that time I was able to do school performances, some corporate gigs, and just kind of hustle as much as I could.

CLINE

Wow. So you were Mister Freelance.

MORI

Yes. Very freelance.

CLINE

From gig to gig.

MORI

Gig to gig. Yes, exactly.

CLINE

And was Wendy working at this point?

MORI

She was working. She was working. Yes, she was. We all had to work, so to speak. Luckily, our parents were able to watch the kids while we were out working full-time and doing stuff. So it was a struggle, as even today could be a struggle for working musicians and stuff.

CLINE

But it sounded like, based on what you were saying, you were also in kind of a road manager capacity with Hiroshima.

MORI

Not at that time. Only until the late, late, late eighties and the early nineties did I get into that particular position. Yes. Eighty-nine I started.

Eighty-nine was really interesting also, too, in that from the middle eighties, though, I'd been talking with people at the Music Center (of Los Angeles County) because I was on a roster of Music Center on Tour, which I still am. And so then within the Music Center on Tour roster there was individuals that were with an educational performance company at the Music Center, and they were part of the Music Center on Tour program. I had got into discussion with one of the directors about Asian American material, folk materials for these guys to go out and perform in schools, so I hooked him up with some Japanese folk tales, other Asian folks tales that they rewrote in a played form so they could present it at schools. So then they started talking about the band, and apparently there was a grant to develop a play, and it was a play about a biography of some entity or some person. And it just happened to be he was interested in the band and the band's story of it being in L.A. So we had gone through, like, three or four different grants, foundation money, and all this other stuff. Then it got to the point where we hooked up with the director, Gordon Davidson, head of CTG (Center Theatre Group).

CLINE

Yes. Mark Taper Forum.

MORI

Exactly. So we sat down with him and explained what the concept of this was. So it went from this kind of sort of director to this other director named (Robert) Bob Egan, and he was pretty much second or third in command up there creator-wise. So we sat down, and he took on the project, found some funding for it, did a couple of—actually, we did, like, three series of meetings, and then they came up with a couple different scripts. Then we literally locked ourselves into a room for, like, about three weeks straight, and basically doing the same thing that we're doing now, doing oral interviews and oral explanations of our lives growing up in Los Angeles and how that related to the band and how that affected the band.

Then he and his staff transcribed everything, documented every subject, and that took probably another two or three weeks. Finally came up with an outline of different story

scenarios and lumped them together in certain scenes and developed a script. There was many different versions of it. Finally came down to a couple of versions, settled on one, and again, that got refined, too, but did a public reading, I think did a reading, then a public reading, and it had some legs. Gordon Davidson came in and he says, “Okay, this has some legs. Let’s see if we can get some support from the community and some funding.” The Asian American community stepped up, friends of whatever, Mark Taper Forum, friends of the Music Center, and there was an Asian component in that that was started prior to that to help support Pacific Overtures.

CLINE

Oh, yes, the (Stephen) Sondheim musical.

MORI

Right. That and maybe a redoing of another contemporary play or something like that. So there was this ad hoc kind of Asian American support group for the Music Center. So all of a sudden this became a project. At the same time, we were working on another album, so we said, “Wait a minute. Time out here. We can’t do both at the same time.” It’d be unbelievably a marketing—you could look at it as a marketing nightmare or you could at it as a very, very positive situation that you have two things simultaneously occurring that could support each project, and it worked out that way for the better. I believe the play was in April-May timeframe, and I think we released the album (East) in the fall, late fall of 1989. I don’t think it was the other way around. No, it was after.

As we were composing the music for the play, all the music was new. Maybe one song was from a previous CD. Everything else was new, and basically it told the lives of four of us in the band, Dan Kuramoto, June Kuramoto, Danny Iwamoto, and myself, growing up in Los Angeles. Started a little slow. It gained momentum. By the last—I think it was an eight-week run with two weeks of previews. By the time it ended, the last two weeks were all sold out. I think it was the second highest grossing play at the Mark Taper behind Zoot Suit.

CLINE

Oh, yes. And I remember when that was at the Mark Taper Forum.

MORI

Yes. So that was really interesting and really unbelievable in that they don’t do plays about people that are living. Most people have plays when they’re dead, right? So that was really interesting. That was really an eye-opening kind of situation of the potential certain entity or certain organization or certain group and what it can do and stuff like that, you know.

CLINE

Yes. Well, it’s pretty rare to, in a sense, get that kind of treatment, which is really an honor, in your own city long before (unclear).

MORI

(laughs) Yeah, you know. So it's like, "Wow! This is great." So that was pretty interesting. Then the nineties came. The music business started changing. Our time at Epic/Columbia was up, and so then we started making some other relationships with other record companies. We knew this other woman that happened to come to the play that because she was Asian and she was Japanese and she was working in the record business industry, that she felt after the play she said, "If anything we could do for you, let us know." So we called her up and explained what our situation, and at the time she was, like, a vice president for Qwest Records, Quincy Jones' label. Called her up and explained what the situation was in terms of us leaving the record company or getting dropped, and to see whether or not Qwest Records would be interested. Lo and behold, they were. Had a series of meetings. Then Quincy was aware of the situation. He remembered the band very clearly. We didn't even sign a contract with Qwest Records, and Qwest Records says, "Why don't you guys come over to the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, and why don't you guys play. And then you guys can have a meeting with Quincy Jones."

"Sure! Sure," you know. "Sure. Not a problem." Pulled it together, jumped on the plane, went to Montreux, Switzerland, and played at the Montreux Jazz Festival. The night before, we had dinner with Quincy at this chateau up on the side of Lake Geneva, overlooking Lake Geneva or Lake Evian, one of the two, Lake Evian, I think, because in the distance you'll France, where it's at and stuff. So that was amazing. Soon after that, we came back and we signed a record contract with him, and we did two albums with Quincy Jones. He wasn't as hands-on as what we had possibly hoped for, so to speak, but his organization was real good in terms of them taking care of business for the first one and then the second one. Then we were going to do a third one, and then all of a sudden he lost interest in the company, so to speak, or some financial support from Warner Bros., who was his distribution company and mother company, pulled a little bit of rug from underneath him and stuff, so he wasn't able to continue giving us the support that he had, so he fired, you know, his president. Then this woman, JoAnn Tominaga, who was the woman who originally signed the contract, she actually became president for a while of the company. So we were just about to release a CD with her, and she went ahead and we released it and got some support from the company. Then it got real crazy after that, and so we kind of like were still with the company. Then we eventually signed with a subsidiary of Windham Hill (Records) * (Hip Pocket Records?).

CLINE

Oh, yes. Right.

MORI

We got into doing that, yes. But the run is still happening. The band is still together. The band is still signed to a record company, which is amazing.

CLINE

And what is it?

MORI

It was a subsidiary of Windham Hill. Above Records (Heads Up Records)?

CLINE

I don't know.

MORI

I don't even remember the name of the company, to tell you the truth.

CLINE

And this is Windham Hill after they had become part of A and M (Records)—

MORI

Exactly.

CLINE

—and then A and M went the way of (unclear)—

MORI

Whatever it went onto.

CLINE

(unclear) Polygram (International).

MORI

Then Windham Hill got absorbed by some other big company again or got absorbed by BMG again. So in one sense it went full circle, because when we were with Arista Records, it was BMG, and so we kind of went back with BMG. So that was—started cracking up. That was pretty funny. Above Records. Anyway, so they're still with the band. They're still touring, you know. The business has totally changed.

CLINE

Yeah, that's for sure.

MORI

So, you know, no longer in the band. But it took me places where I never would have ever think I'd ever go to.

CLINE

Yes. I don't imagine you ever imagined you were going to become a touring musician.

MORI

Never. None whatsoever. That was the furthest thing—I didn't even consider that whatsoever, you know. And playing an instrument that I had, first of all, no formal training in, you know, whether it be in fundamentals or whatever, none whatsoever, even within the instrument itself no real formal training except on attitude and culturally understanding. That I had training for or had a relationship in that area and stuff like that, but a lot of that was still self-taught and still kind of, like, you know, figured it out kind of situation. So the music part of it was still new, and it's still kind of sort of new, you know. But where it has gone and where it came from and where it's gone in terms of the lifetime of myself. I'm still in the business. I mean I'm still in the music business, so to speak, entertainment music business. So right now, you know, the early part of this particular decade in the thousands, 2001, 2002 it got really, really frustrating because of just the distribution situation and the marketing of your product and live performances. It got kind of deprived of good leadership, actually, not within this organization, but in the field in general.

CLINE

Well, there's a lot of confusion in the music industry now about just what its product is and what to do to keep it going, and it's become very ephemeral.

MORI

But I think in terms of music-wise and what is being performed, it's fairly interesting. There's nothing new. It's being repackaged in a more gutsier package. There are more musicians, but less accessibility to those musicians on one hand, on the straight commercial side. Yet on the other hand, the advent of the Internet just explodes everything, too, because you have access to all that stuff too. So that makes it a little bit interesting too.

CLINE

Yes. True.

MORI

I'm still very curious about it, still very interested, still very amazed by the different arrangements of rhythms and melodies and stuff and what people have to say and how they're saying it, because I feel like, you know, all the people that are in the arts, you know, a lot of documentarians, believe it or not, right, I mean besides doing this oral interview, which you get it straight from the horse's or the ass' mouth, but in terms of people in the arts are expressing their environment and their relationship with the environment and their living situation, and they're documented in the medium that they've chosen to communicate in. So there's so much mixture of melodies and rhythms and concepts that it's kind of sort of exciting not only listening to the music, but also visually seeing people perform their music and how they interpret it, you know, through their body, so to speak, whether it's through dances and just movements on stage and stage presence and stuff. You know, then you get into the whole other aspect of videos and all this other stuff.

CLINE

Yes. Since the eighties, MTV (Music Television) changed everything pretty heavily.

MORI

Yeah. And then some goodness to it, yet on the other hand, sometimes it may stymie your own creativity because you're being presented with this music video interpretation of the concept that the artist thinks or somebody else thought of what the music is, and it's quirky enough so that it gets played a lot, so that it gets more exposure or whatever, you know, whether it's crazy enough to be controversial for it to be out there.

CLINE

Yes. So we're kind of at the time here, and I can safely say that we're not through with your oral history yet, so we'll have another session and wrap it up.

MORI

Great.

CLINE

I want to talk more about where things are at with you now, your work here, your feelings about being a Japanese American taiko-playing world representative of this area, this culture, this scene, and your feelings about where you think it might be headed.

MORI

Great.

CLINE

All right?

MORI

Great. Thank you.

CLINE

Thanks for today. (End of June 23, 2010 interview)

1.6. SESSION SIX (July 7, 2010)

MORI

Seven-seven.

CLINE

Right. Today is 7/7. It's July 7, 2010. This is Alex Cline interviewing Johnny Mori at the Japan America Theater in Little Tokyo, and this is session number six. Good morning.

MORI

Good morning. How you doing?

CLINE

Okay. How are you?

MORI

Fine.

CLINE

Good. Last time you talked a lot about the sort of trajectory of the band Hiroshima and your involvement in that, sometimes somewhat intermittent involvement in the band, but their success and how it turned you into a touring musician, something you clearly had never imagined for yourself before that, perhaps. Today I want to follow up on that and ask you some specific things about your involvement in taiko drumming and in its role in the community, so to speak, and how it's evolved since you started with Kinnara Taiko at Senshin Buddhist Church. First let me ask you, since you didn't really get into it, you mentioned how, when you were first playing with Hiroshima, the sort of role that you played musically. In one of the tunes you sort of played a pattern and just kept the pattern going. I wanted to ask you how you viewed your changing role in that ensemble, musically how the taiko drumming role in the music changed over the years, and how you viewed your role as a contributor in that band's sound as it progressed.

MORI

The original concept of the band, again, was developed by Dan and his brother John and June Kuramoto in relationship to presenting or putting something out there representative of the Japanese American community. Because of June's performance or practice of koto or just her feel and her interpretation of Japanese classical pieces, and how that was integrated with contemporary music, melodies, rhythms, it was something very unique, and I guess it was the expression of that particular generation which pretty much nurtured its history through the late fifties and sixties and culminated in the early seventies, so to speak.

There were probably tinklings of this particular idea in concept probably in Japan. No doubt about it. People were just kind of experimenting and having interest in world music in general, and probably tried it in Japan a long time ago in terms of integrating both Western and Japanese or Eastern instruments. But I guess when the band started doing it and started experimenting with different sounds sonically and through recording, that it developed its sound of the koto, melodic, but the bass and the foundation of the band was pretty much rooted in Western and the American sound, rather than if you were to do it from Japan, what the emphasis would be on. So that was pretty interesting in that, just like I said, the basic foundations of sounds of the kick drum, the snare, the drum set, the bass, and, I guess, some bass chords and stuff like that from pianos and just the bottom end, the rhythm section, so to speak, of the band was pretty much American, the sound of it and stuff. So putting the Asian melody on top of it, on top of a Western sound was probably

very—well, it was unique at the time. Then came the taiko, which was another rhythm instrument, so to speak, and added to the rhythm section, but we experimented, I think, also, too, with the sound of the koto and the taiko, its sound, tone, and the placement of where it would be in the recording, because does it play the same rhythm or the (unclear), like, a kick drum or a bass rhythm? And yet it does because in certain songs it helps support the rhythm. But yet on the other hand, a lot of times just that bass sound gets lost, so many similar frequencies, so to speak, and sound cancellation and however you want to describe it and stuff.

So it took a little bit of experimentation and placement of that particular sound, and because the sound is so very large, it took us a bit to figure out who and how we could record it. Luckily, we had a large enough space when we began recording, one of the large studios up on Sunset Boulevard that was an old CBS studio that we were able to start in. So that gave enough space, but we've experimented in every large venue in Los Angeles, pretty much, through all the sound stages at Paramount (Studios) and Sony Studios and Paramount Studios just to find the right sound, right space. Then we also did it in a very, very small space also, too, just to see, you know, what the tone difference is and stuff, and experimenting in different places to see how it sounds and stuff. So all of those, developing the sound was very, very important. Part of it was in the beginning it was new to everybody. Half the time I had no idea what the sound engineer was talking about, none whatsoever. (laughs) You know, he'd pull out these thousands of dollars of microphones and stuff, and the placement of the microphones in the rooms were just totally interesting where they would put them and stuff. And yet it was amazing the sound that they had to be able to capture, and it was so exacting it almost caused a problem because of the overtones and the kind of music that we were playing and, again, the mix and the length of the sound, you know, mixing or getting fused with the bass and the drums and stuff like that. So it took a little bit of a while to figure all that stuff out. But I think unconsciously, and after kind of, like, trying to analyze or describe or categorize the kind of music that we were doing in different levels and describing this different interview, so to speak, how you would describe it and stuff, and we never really came up with a good answer or anything like that. I mean, still to this day it's not necessarily clear. But I guess the large taiko, the lowness of it, the sound, the frequency, and then the melodic sound of the koto, again, were at opposite ends. So the whole thing of opposites, the whole thing of equality, in one sense, of one without the other, the yin and yang of music or of philosophy and stuff.

Where June pretty much, you know, told her and expressed her feelings and stuff like that through the koto, melodic things, her instrument is very, very classical, and the way in which it is played is very proper, very, very set, so to speak. And then mine, it covers very, very many different kinds of styles, but because of the style of matsuri taiko, or festival taiko, it's a lot more visual, so to speak. So she would communicate through her melody and the soulfulness of her performing, and mine would be more visual and more dramatic at particular times, in a sense. I thought that added to the concept of the band and the philosophy and the concept of the band. It took a while to develop that. A lot of the music that I played, again, after a while, developed into short grooves, short rhythm patterns or accents, and certain emphasis during the choruses or the bridges and the out and stuff like that, in which it kind of helped help the momentum of the song or something like that, again, just minor accents here and there. But again, it was part of the band, and it still is part of the band as a representation of, I guess, Asian instruments. Music behind it was developed in many, many different ways, in which somebody would have a specific rhythm

or piece that I would play, and then it would, again, be very, very similar to, like, a rhythm section kind of a thing and how it's recorded. And then other times it would just be a groove would be played and I just played on top of that, certain specific things and certain things that were just pretty free. Other times they just let the tape roll, you know. You'd just jam, and kind of came up with stuff on top of that. So, you know, it's many different ways. And then from that, choreography was developed in terms of for the live shows and stuff, you know, which was my particular contribution to the band. But I think that was the unique thing about the band, one of the unique things about the band. So, yes, it was a real interesting concept in time.

There wasn't any major arguments or anything like that in terms of what was going to be on the album or what songs we were going to play and stuff like that, because nobody really wanted to tread on other person's space and stuff like that. Although in the beginning there were things in which I didn't know musically or felt uncomfortable with, certain patterns that I thought that wasn't necessarily unique to of my limited knowledge of Japanese percussion and stuff like that, so there was a little bit of a discussion behind that, but nothing major or anything like that, just some artistic growing pains kind of a thing, you know, because nobody really knew exactly, and we were kind of, like, throwing stuff together and putting here and there and stuff. It was really interesting. It was really interesting. Now that you look back on it and how the band evolved and its history and stuff like that, it was pretty amazing. It was pretty being at the right place at the right time, so to speak. Since that particular time, naturally there are Asian and Asian American artists and artists from Asia that are probably more internationally known than contemporary and pop artists from the United States that we don't even know about, you know. The popularity worldwide is huge, but some things get restricted to United States. Some things that are, you know, run through the right channels would never be exposed to people in the United States. There's this restriction, so to speak, or tariff or however you want to call it from outside artists coming in, being exposed in the United States.

So the door was kind of sort of open. The door is still open. But nowadays it's almost like—and even I'm kind of sort of guilty of it when programming or getting into discussions about co-presentations here at the theater in terms of the program's popularity, the artist's exposure, its mainstream way of how to market and promote an event so that financially it doesn't lose any money and stuff. You know, we're all kind of sort of caught up into that and don't want to think that way, but, unfortunately, we do. So thinking that way and trying to find out what is out that, what's available, and what people are being exposed to or can be exposed to is pretty interesting. So a lot of stuff is also educating people to what they might be interested in, or there's something that they're interested in, but how to get that to them is another situation. With the band in its very, very beginning there was not always, but not until—first, second, third, fourth, fifth—not until the sixth album was even an inkling of the band's photo being on the front of an album. The first album was a picture of a noh theater mask. The second album was called Odori, which means dance. We had this Japanese nihon buyo, classical Japanese dance on the front, and in the background—it was taken on (Los Angeles) City Hall East, so City Hall was in the background, our connection to Los Angeles and the Japanese culture. The third one just had characters of the number three, just three strokes, brush strokes, horizontally. The fourth one was called, I think, Another Place, and that just had a seascape or some picture of the ocean. The fifth one had the character of the number five, Go. Or actually, the album was called Go, G-o, so that was also the number five in Japanese, which was the number five. Then the sixth one

was called East, and that one had elements of immigration, so to speak, to the United States, had a real small subtleness to it in terms of Statue of Liberty, the Golden Gate Bridge for Angel Island and Ellis Island and Angel Island, and certain images of patriotic kinds of things, but yet on the other hand—and that was the album that we did in conjunction with the place Sansei.

So even that, the music business, what you consciously and unconsciously were able to do was really interesting, and yet was really interesting in that our executive producer and some in the record business, because we mainly were put into the companies that had somewhat of a R and B kind of jazz or jazz division, so to speak. It started off in jazz kind of bins, and it still is, but in terms of who took on the promotion of it and the marketing of it, what division within the record company. In the beginning, all record companies had specific divisions, jazz, R and B, pop, you know, country and western, alternative, all that stuff. There was always somebody in charge of that particular division. And so there was somebody who knew exactly all the ups and downs about that, you know, and they started combining divisions, jazz, we were into R and B, and kind of R and B-pop kind of thing. Then there's different categories in terms of R and B and stuff like that too. But they didn't know where to put us. (laughs)

CLINE

Yes. When the genres aren't clearly defined or there's a lot of crossover, they really get confused. They don't know what to do with that.

MORI

Exactly, you know, because we weren't X, Y, or Z, so to speak, right? Which was okay. But they pretty much put us and started us off in the jazz bins, and we are, again, still there today. So that was really interesting in that, in hindsight, you know, jazz really wasn't a moneymaker, but musically it was really interesting, and the company kind of sort of had to have that division, so to speak, if you were considered to be a large company, Columbia, Mercury, Atlantic, EMI, Warner Bros. So all those had major divisions, and jazz was a division. And again, it slowly shrunk and got absorbed by something else and stuff, right?

CLINE

Right. (DUPLICATE TIME STAMP?)

MORI

So the atmosphere or the vibe, again in hindsight and at that particular time—and this is not an excuse, you know. All of us were actually trying to find that magic answer, so to speak. You know, we would sit and discuss the different possible avenues of promotion. Where is the community? Where is the audience? Who is the audience? Support from the African American community was great because the songs were being played pretty much on all R and B stations, a few pop stations. There were smooth jazz stations, Quiet Storm stations, and here in L.A. there was KJLH. There were the jazz stations, the Bay Area's KBLX. Here in L.A. there was KKGO and some other stations that would play album cuts and stuff like that. Back East and Midwest was pretty much R and B stations, so that exposed it pretty much to the African American community. So pretty much the venues that we played

at to promote the album were pretty much in major African American cities: Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago. And it was really interesting in the South, all the major cities of Florida: Miami, Orlando, Tampa, St. Petersburg, Gainesville. And in Tennessee was really interesting: Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis. All of those cities we played a number of times, and it was amazing. On the West Coast it was a lot of support, again, too. Then there was always two jazz stations in the area, one predominantly African American and another one kind of smooth jazz, and smooth jazz stations kind of sort of won out. But that was really interesting. At that time in the eighties, people didn't necessarily listen to the smooth jazz stations or the Quiet Storm stations. Smooth jazz stations, it was just background music. The Quiet Storm stations, they were very supportive in terms of selling merchandise, the CDs, and also people coming to concerts. So that was really interesting. But again, you know, nobody really knew how to market or promote it. It was very frustrating. (DUPLICATE TIME STAMP?)

CLINE

Yes. And the scene is even more, I think, genre-specific nowadays. Marketing is very definitely targeted, you know.

MORI

Right.

CLINE

Falling in the cracks is a treacherous thing.

MORI

(laughs) Yes. But, you know, the longevity of the band is—still have a record contract right now. It's still touring a limited amount, just pretty much—it still is able to do an East Coast run, a Florida run, and even a Texas run of Houston and maybe Fort Worth and Austin, and then Southwest, Phoenix and stuff. The Northwest was very supportive of the band because there were some venues up there, Jazz Alley up in Seattle and this other place called the Triple Door and a number of other places that still book the band once in a while and stuff. But again, it has a lot to do with exposure and the radio stations. So that pretty much killed the music business quite a bit, actually, quite a bit.

CLINE

When the band started with its unique instrumentation, it was pretty novel to have a band that combined traditional instruments from another culture and instruments associated and styles associated with popular music, R and B, American music. Now that's not so unusual, and certainly everything has been explored, combined, and now we even have a category that people use, which you mentioned yourself a little while ago, world music. How would you evaluate Hiroshima's contribution to that development in music, something that I think isn't so novel anymore, if it's still not the most commercial direction to go?

MORI

(laughs) Yeah, that's an interesting question. You know, one's own participation and one's,

I guess, patting on the back or ego kind of thing saying, oh, yeah, you know, hopefully that the band's sound and its concept and ideas help spur the next generation of world music, so to speak. I think it did add to it, you know, because at a particular point through the eighties, I mean through the late eighties and nineties at its peak, so to speak. Especially in Asia it was welcomed, I think, as much so as in Europe, but I guess because of the association with Japanese or Asian instruments or Japanese instruments, I think it opened some doors, you know, to quite a bit of people. Being in the position that I am in, in terms of working within the Japanese American community and a venue (the Japan American Theater) in which we do have Japanese artists from Japan perform on the stage, and the musicians that come through were told that I was an original member of the band and stuff like that, and they recognized it. These are all younger artists that play classical Japanese instruments, but yet I think like—not necessarily like, but through their experience understood the concept of the world music and the fusion of what was going on and stuff. Then the older ones, in terms of our generation, you know, because of the exposure of the band in the eighties on Japanese television, so to speak, and in Japanese magazines, a lot of them are very, very familiar with the band, very familiar with the band. I mean, when we went to Japan the first time around, there were two TV programs that we were on. One was sponsored by NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai), and that was interesting in that we played with Katara Kisaku *(CORRECT?), who was, I guess, a very, very young—he was a very, very young classical Japanese percussionist. They put us together to play this song on the TV, NHK, and that was in, like, 1980, '81. Then he came to the United States through UCLA through one of Judy Mitoma's programs, and it was these masters from Japan and Japanese hogaku percussion and noh/kyogen, which is Japanese comedy, classical Japanese nihon buyo, classical Japanese dance.

In the United States it was always Suenogu Togi that taught at UCLA at (Department of) Ethnomusicology bugaku and gagaku. They were here for, like, a two month-program, which I took. I may have mentioned his name before. He eventually, about ten years ago—yes, right after I started working here about ten years ago, I think at the age of sixty-four he was declared a living national treasure in Japan. He was the youngest at the age of sixty-four. At that time Japan was going through its identity, in which the Emperor asked the education department—I may have mentioned this also, too—that instead of having their kids in the educational system learn Western instruments, violin and piano, that they were to integrate or develop a curriculum of Japanese traditional instruments, and he was part of that movement, so to speak, in terms of recognizing Japanese artists and making them living national treasures to help promote Japanese arts and culture within Japan. So we were able to study with that and to do that. He had a series, a number of concerts that took place here in Southern California, public and private concerts and stuff, and he brought over some musicians, some part of his school, Katara School, some part of this other school called Mochizuki School. There was one individual, his name was Kiyohiko Semba and just goes by his name, Semba. He's a very unique individual. I mean, his father, his grandfather, his lineage of family played hogaku, Japanese percussion, classical form of Japanese percussion, and folk percussion. But he was different. (laughs) He was very, very unique, very, very outgoing, very, very trying to use his broken English and stuff. I didn't known necessarily how to approach them, or they didn't necessarily know how to approach us because when in public, they're pretty much very formal, very non-expressive or anything like that. Something about this guy was very unique, just very free, very, very open.

We got into this dialogue in a hotel near UCLA where they were staying at, and he started asking me questions like, “What did Katara-sensei teach you?” and stuff like that. He showed them stuff. And he goes, “Oh yeah.” And he goes, “Check this out.” (unclear). He started playing this and he started playing it, and then he started saying little cute things here like, “Oh, this is for mikoshi,” the shrines that people carry on their backs and push up and down like that. There’s a particular rhythm for that, a couple of rhythms, actually. Then he would just be pounding it out or playing it on top of a counter in the hotel room or something like that, right, and I just picked up on it. And just that one particular time in which he taught me, I remembered. After all these years, I pretty much remember it. His name came up throughout the years also too. This was in, like, 1984. He had come to the United States to perform with another artist a couple different times, and the first time I met up with him again and started talking to him. We had a common friend, Kenny Endo, pretty much knew of him because I guess him being that unique and his family, and he, Kenny Endo, also studied within the Mochizuki School of percussion, so he obviously knew him. When we were in Japan, I had a chance to see his performance group, and as I just told you, he tripped me out and blew me away. There was, like, about fifteen guys sitting on the floor with Western (tom-)toms, various sizes of toms, and some people had one stick, some people had two sticks. Then they were play this whole mess of percussion kind of things, and I think there was one guy with a flute or something like that, a yokobue.

This was in Tokyo, so the whole atmosphere was, like, really a happening, a performance piece, and it was amazing. It was totally amazing. And yet two days later, we go see him at the Grand Kabuki playing this classical hogaku music, right, and doing the whole classical thing with all the etiquette and the proper thing and everything like that. But we talked about it, and he knew who we were, who the band was and stuff, so there was some notoriety. When I mentioned before that Quincy Jones took us to Montreux, Switzerland for the Montreux Jazz Festival, it was unbelievable in terms of the people in Europe in that particular area who knew the band, who knew of the band. The thing about it was really interesting, the band, though, never really did a tour in Europe. You know, that was really surprising to me in terms of uniqueness of the band. We never had a tour in Europe, you know. It could have been timing. It could have been a number of different kinds of things that we did. The band was very, very cautious and had really, really good advisors and really good advice. It was on the old-school, so to speak, which was beginning this transition to this other idea and concept of getting the money, and then the time is now. So you try to develop the best of what you had at this particular point in time and worry about later later, whereas the old-school guys were pretty much based on selling of a unit, of an album, and then getting to the point where you pay back the record company and then you see royalties and stuff like that. Then once you kind of sort of promote it and marketed the first one, and then you go onto the second one, whereas I may be over-exaggerating or have my own idea and concept of the record business at the time where you do the first one, it does great, so that gives you momentum to the second one. You hurry—not hurry, but you do the second one, and that’s pretty good too. You get to the third one, you kind of sort of hit a wall, but you’ve got to get something out because you’ve got to get it out. And then that one doesn’t do very well, but the first two ones kind of carry over through the second one. So then the fourth one happens, and then the fourth one does okay.

I’m saying this only in that I’m very appreciative, when you’re looking back—again, a lot of this is hindsight because of the age and how long you’ve been into the business, but we’re very fortunate that at that time, you know, the record companies had the money and they

were spending it, and they did see some kind of long-term kind of thing. We signed numerous extensions of the contract and stuff like that because it's, like, usually a three-album deal. Then after the third one or during the second one you sign for another one, another three-album deal kind of a thing, which is good and bad because, you know, you were locked into them for the next seven years, a seven-year kind of California contract, personal service contract thingy. So they were protecting the future, you know, their future with you. So then you're kind of like that. But the new concept basically is you got this money and people spent the money, so when they got to the next one, they had to take out a loan for the next two or three CDs. And then, you know, people went bankrupt: Luther Vandross, Toni Braxton, TLC, and then probably another fifty to a hundred that you don't hear about because they're not the big-name artists. So I think that's what really got the record company in trouble, giving all these mega-million-dollar deals to Janet Jackson and Madonna and whoever else came by that could kind of sort of do something. So it just totally changed.

So the band had this idea and concept in the beginning of pretty much sticking to old-school, and kind of went that direction in terms of the advisors in which the band had had and the old-school lawyers that we had and stuff like that, you know. But they were very grounded. I mean, they were in the business X amount of years before us, and they're still in the business now. I'm sure they retired, because they were fairly, you know, up in age and stuff, right? So the band, in terms of its influence worldwide, again, had some affect on the world, you know, in terms of that kind of music, and then within the United States also too. As far as other Asian American bands, again, since the—and I'm not exactly sure whether or not this is true or not, but since they didn't know how to deal with it and they had slowly eliminated all the different departments and divisions of how to do it, and I think they just lump you all into the smooth jazz category now, and so they try to do the best that they can in terms of getting your music out there, unfortunately relying on your own uniqueness to try to promote it and stuff like that. But the artists that kind of were there when we were kind of sort of there or also had an international presence was, like, that individual, Kitaro. He'd write, you know, music for scores of movies and stuff like that, and was one of the pioneers, and still is, for New Age music and stuff like that, right? And then there were other artists that kind of were nurtured through different aspects that were allowed to be part of the niche that they felt that they could market and stuff and potentially. The thing of it, even today I think—well, I take that back. But up until mainly only about maybe eight years ago did anybody in the United States really know how to market to the young Asian audience, not only in the United States, but overseas. I think the promoters and other record companies and executives and just promoters outside of United States have no problem. It's just within the United States, and it's limited accessibility how to outreach these particular communities in the United States. They still haven't got it yet. Yes. They really haven't gotten it.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

It's really surprising in terms of the connection with globalness, so to speak. They haven't gotten it yet. We're still segregated.

CLINE

Wow. This actually plays into my next question, which is Hiroshima, aside from its musical contribution and influence, is also sort of like, you know, I think, seen as the Little Tokyo house band, so to speak.

MORI

(laughs) Yeah.

CLINE

Representatives or ambassadors of the community here, the Asian American, specifically Japanese American community, but also nationwide, because especially when you started, there really wasn't anyone else doing what you were doing. What, if anything, do you see in terms of the impact of the band and the music as sort of this ambassador role of Asian Americans, Japanese Americans in the United States and how that's viewed perhaps here and outside the United States?

MORI

There is a responsibility on the band to be part of the community. Like you said, it does or it has adopted a number of different kinds of descriptions, a house band, a garage band from L.A., all those number of titles, so to speak. There's a balance, though, of its performances and what it does, what it should do, what it needs to do. All those are positives and negatives.

I think the band could have, even while I was in the band, could have done a lot more to participate in community events and help support it by its performance in that particular event. Yet would that, does that, did that affect mainstream play at the jazz festivals in Southern California or the venues in Southern California? If you were to play at a free event, you would get some honorarium to perform, and it'd be to an Asian American festival, so to speak. It would be promoted in all the local newspapers, all the ethnic newspapers, not necessarily in the L.A. Times, but its exposure would be pretty extensive, to the point where a Cerritos Performing Arts Center (Center for the Performing Arts) date would be affected by this particular Asian festival, so to speak, you know. So there had to be some balance of performing at Cerritos or any large—I just use Cerritos as an example at that particular type of a level, whether it be Cerritos, UCLA, Long Beach Jazz Festival, Playboy Jazz Festival, which we played in numerous—a couple, three or four times that I participated in. So there was a balance. There needs to be a balance and stuff. Usually we write requests, you know, on pieces of paper and look out the year, look at the year, and see best how all this thing kind of, like, slotted into play, where maybe we can do, when we could do it, the timing of it. So timing was pretty interesting and important about it. Whether we were doing a number of performances so that we could just jump in and do this free thing, or if we had to put the band together and rehearse for this free thing, or if it's part of the tour, then it's a lot easier to do that, you know, because you've already got everybody together. Everybody's rehearsed, and you just jump in there and do it, the whole crew and the band, the musicians, and you're in and out kind of a thing, you know. So there was different scenarios that affected the band.

I thought overall, though, the band did a fairly, fairly good—had a very good support mechanism for the community and tried to do this as fair as possible, not only, again, to the band members, but to the community. Naturally, everybody can do a lot more than what they do. Right now the times have changed with everything. I think the band probably could do a lot more stuff, could do a lot more stuff, but just getting together and stuff like that and, you know, rehearsing, pulling stuff together and doing it at a certain particular level, I think, is pretty important too. So there are members of the band that have other side projects and stuff like that all the time going, so it's not like, you know, they're idle and stuff. But as a unit I think there's still a response and there's still requests for the band to do quite a bit of things like that, so there's still pretty much of a name.

CLINE

Yes. It's interesting, in a way, that the band identity is perhaps a bit like individual identity in that it's perceived as sort of this, you know, Japanese American or Asian American band, and there's, I would suspect, a part of the band that wants that to be something to be maintained and nurtured and encouraged, and yet, at the same time, perhaps perceived as irrelevant as you want to move outside that label, that restriction, and just become universal, you know.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

That's an interesting sort of little issue or dilemma that probably anybody who's kind of created a niche for themselves has to contend with, because, you know, their success and identity within that niche, and at the same time probably desire to break out of it—

MORI

Right.

CLINE

—and just become, you know, well, it's just music in this case, you know. It's good music or it's not good music, and maybe shouldn't matter whether it's Asian American or what genre we are trying to be sold under or anything. I don't know. Just a thought.

MORI

Yes. When you listen to stuff on TV or just on the radio and stuff, you get to, you know, the NPR (National Public Radio) stations and stuff, and they play a lot of different kinds of music, different kinds of programs and stuff, you hear different music on those stations and stuff, and a lot of the sounds sound very familiar. The rhythms may sound familiar. The tonality of the instruments sound very familiar and stuff. Then the majority of the time, you know, either you got to the song, in the middle of the song or whatever, and sometimes you don't know who actually did it or anything like that, right? Some things, you know, you may be able to go to the station's website or call the station and find out who it was and

stuff, you know, if it's that interesting to you and stuff. But there are quite a few times in which you go, "Wow, is that the band kind of playing? Do they have a new song or CD out or something like that?" So the sounds and the whole thing in terms of the music fusion is really interesting. We were a part of the jazz fusion, I guess, terminology in the early eighties, and then a different number of—smooth jazz, quiet jazz, Quiet Storm.

CLINE

Contemporary jazz.

MORI

Contemporary jazz. Right. Exactly. It's all these so-called classifications and stuff. Then within the band, I guess, they came up with the phrase "cultural fusion," you know.

CLINE

Wow.

MORI

Yeah, it's all dependent upon who puts a title on it for what particular purpose and what particular geographical area of the United States, I guess.

CLINE

Right. During the time that you were with Hiroshima and going on and off the road and having that very different experience, Kinnara Taiko was still going, as it still is. How did Kinnara Taiko evolve over the period from when it started up to the present day in terms of, perhaps, the people involved, how it presented itself, the sorts of venues or the sorts of opportunities it had to present itself. Do you know how much it's changed over the years or not? How would you sort of describe that?

MORI

It's interesting now we fed back on it, because pretty much Kinnara celebrated its fortieth anniversary last October, and we put a list together of as many people as we could remember through photographs and just people's me

MORI

es and the relationships with contacts that we still have kind of gathered and stuff. There was quite a few people that had gone through Kinnara at one particular point or another, whether it be gagaku, bugaku, or taiko, or just even study classes and retreats that the band had, I mean that Kinnara had, not that the band had, but that Kinnara had. It still has a concept of dana, of giving, of trying to give without any attachment to it, of an egolessness giving, of anonymously contributing to doing something without any recognition, which is very, very difficult for, I think, any human being. But at least you're made aware of your actions and what are you doing, which is actually a very, very good beginning. There's been a core group of individuals from the very, very beginning, the one constant being Reverend Mas Kodani, and then this guy George Abe, and then, I guess,

myself. Although they came in later, I guess around ’73, ’74, then Chris Yamashita, and later on Donna Hokoda *(CORRECT?), Joann Yamada *(CORRECT?). Sharon Kogi *(CORRECT?) came in probably in the late seventies. And all of us have pretty much been with the group. Younger folks have been coming in and out, and then there’s now a very, very strong core of younger folks that are in there that kind of hung in there and have gone off and played with other taiko groups and have come back.

Kinnara’s very, very open. It’s not like you have to study with us and you have to do what we do and stuff. You’re free to do what you need to do, and just hopefully responsibility-wise you come back and either share what you learned and stuff like that or something like that. The main idea of being as open as possible, I think it’s still there. You run across people who play taiko from other groups in other cities and have moved to Southern California for whatever reason, and they see you perform and they start talking to you about it. We tell them, “Yeah, if you like doing it, on Thursday nights at eight o’clock come to Senshin and just play, you know. You’re welcome to play, and this is what we do.” So that openness is still very part of Kinnara. It goes the different levels underneath that in terms of, again, putting into it as much as you want to get out of it. It’s still that. There’s quite a bit of concepts that are hard to describe, but after a while, I think they get it, and there’s no really structure structure, so to speak, although there are people that try to put, like, a curriculum kind of thing to it and kind of have a set kind of stages of learning. But after a while, people who are in it see that there is the—it’s not necessarily discipline, but there is some kind of a structure to it. There is some kind of requirements. There are certain phases of learning. And I guess it works different ways, you know. Throughout your whole education process in growing up, there’s always a grading kind of thing, there’s always a teacher, there’s always certain levels of achievement, and you’ve got to have that. No doubt about that. You’ve got to have that. So this is something that is not necessarily opposite, but it is something that is self-rewarding, and it does look at your ego. It does look at, you know, how you interact with people. Pretty much that’s what it is. And after a while, people get it, which is really interesting, and some people deal with it and some people can’t. I’ll see people come in and out. They just have to kind of, like, be either reassured that we’re still doing it the same way we’ve been doing it.

So it’s hard being part of it and part of the process and part of the group for such a long time, and this even goes with the band also too. You’re so much involved with it, you can’t really see or get an outside perspective unless somebody from the outside looks at it and says, “Well, that’s Kinnara for you.” Or, “That’s Kinnara and the old-school in what you guys do and the feel of the group and all those things.” You don’t necessarily define it or can you define it. Whether or not you should define it when you’re going through this particular process, I’m not exactly sure, but there is a definite Kinnara. There is a definite kind of uniqueness about it.

It has changed. It has to change, and it’s got to change. It’s inevitable, you know. The only thing about change that doesn’t change is the rule of change. Impermanence, right? Everything is changing except the rule of impermanence. That can be expanded, you know. That can be totally, totally expanded in how you view stuff like that. It has, I think, led people to change. It has led people to, again, change, whether they had all this energy and the desire to explore and stuff, and it kind of sort of calmed those people down. Then on the opposite side, it took some shy person, so to speak, you know, gave them confidence to

express themselves in certain situations. So you see that subtleness in people, and I'm sure it's the same way with myself and other members in the group. As much as and as long as we've been performing and who we've been performing and stuff, you know, there's always new people to come and check it out and stuff, find out what it is and stuff.

It's going to be interesting. The next North American Taiko Conference is next year, next August 2011, and it's going to be up in the Bay Area, basically around Palo Alto at Stanford University campus. It's going to be administered by, be organized by people in that particular region and in the Bay Area. San Jose Taiko and then also, too, San Francisco Taiko Dojo with Seiichi Tanaka is also involved. He's into it, and a number of groups from around that particular area are also into it too. So that's going to be interesting. It's always interesting, I guess, going out and seeing different kinds of groups, see what they're doing and stuff, getting together with the larger taiko community every two years. Not really sure about the future of Kinnara. It is changing. A lot of the older folks, we are in—not a lot of us, but there are a few that are in their late fifties, middle to late fifties, that are gaining upon sixty. And sixty's not necessarily a magic number or anything like that, but it's one in which, you know, you have time, like myself right now, to reflect about, by doing this oral interview also too. There are some younger people that are stepping up and saying that more energy and more new pieces, variety of kinds of things are needed to keep everybody engaged. And yet they're still really interested in learning the older pieces, all the older pieces, the Kinnara pieces that are signature pieces for Kinnara. So they're really interested in revamping those, putting those back together again, so to speak.

So the leadership for them is really interesting because now they are given that responsibility, whether or not they take it by the hand and expand on it or just kind of bide time until they find their own niche or something like that. So they're given that particular thing, and so some of them like it. Some of them are probably more fearful of it because it's added responsibility. Hopefully, the older members in the group would be able to let go of it. That's interesting also, too, to be able to let go of it. As much a part of your life it has been, to—it's not necessarily walking away from it, but basically it's to let the organization and the direction and the future of it, let it go. There's no way—because remember I talked about that Kinnara thing. Like I said, it's hard to put a finger on what that kind of Kinnara thing is, but it's there. They understand it. They know what the aspect of it. And if it changes, that's fine, too, because that's a necessity of the individuals that are participating at that particular time.

CLINE

With the increased awareness and popularity of taiko, how have the type of people who are coming to Kinnara to participate in taiko and also in gagaku/bugaku changed since its beginning?

MORI

Kinnara doesn't necessarily go out and recruit people. I mean, I don't know if that's the right word. And we don't do as many public performances as we used to. And in terms of influencing, to have people come up to us and wanting to take lessons or how to join the group and stuff like that, since we don't do that as often in terms of performances, we don't get as many calls for them to come and check it out and stuff. A lot of it's referrals. Part of

it is the physical where it is, you know, near Central Los Angeles in one sense. Yet on the other hand, it's sitting next to USC near the (Los Angeles Me

MORI

al) Coliseum, which not necessarily is the safest neighborhood in the world. But yet on the other hand, it's one in which if somebody really wanted to participate, that's part of the deal.

So the people that are interested in taiko for right now and for Kinnara is a little bit of a looser group. I mean it's more and more out of curiosity. But the strongly interested in it, they will take the time and effort to come to Senshin, and it's one that would seek us out. And after they get into it, they see that it's very casual. It's very casual, and you have this learning experience, but it's pretty open. To someone coming that is serious about playing taiko, not that the person that's coming to Kinnara's not serious either, but somebody that wants to make it or get to a point where, "Can I do this as a career? Can I survive off of playing taiko?" I mean, that's the other side of the fence to where one wants to do this as a career or as a job, so to speak. So those folks, you know, they'll see, we'll give them a little bit, and then we'll tell them, you know, there's this group called TaikoProject and then this group called On Ensemble, and then there's San Jose Taiko, there is Portland Taiko, and these are professional groups within the United States that if you seriously want to play taiko, you need to join one of these other groups as a full-time, you know, 24/7 participant of playing taiko. You know, so we'll start you off and everything like that, but if you want to take it another level, you've got to participate in the other group. So a member of Kinnara Taiko is somebody that still wants to have fun doing it on a part-time basis and get into this thing. Now, whether or not they come in and they think, "This is an Asian discipline thing that is going to help me put some discipline and some regimen and routine into my life," total contrary. That's on the opposite end of the spectrum. That's not what Kinnara Taiko is about.

Gagaku is really interesting in that most people who come in it have some kind of musical background or musical curiosity, have some kind of understanding of Asian culture, had one time or another picked up a gagaku instrument through a stint in Japan, through learning it in Japan as they were growing up in Japan. So, a lot of people, whether or not they're Japanese nationals or something like that, but a lot of them seem to have somewhat of a musical background. And then there are some people that are in it and they learn just enough of it to be part of the group, which is fine also, too, which is more than interesting in terms of their participating in this because their reason for playing this thing is for whatever reason, but it's just to be part of the group and to participate in it and to learn some kind of Japanese musical instrument, that's fine also too. Then the dance part, the bugaku part of it, is self-discipline and group discipline to learn the particular moves and to learn how to dance this particular piece, which is really interesting because there is no teacher teacher. A lot of it is watching a video, or there are members of the group that could teach you a whole dance or a couple of dances. So it's a combination of stuff. So it's that kind of an individual.

CLINE

When Kinnara started, it was very much a connected function of Senshin, and therefore

would be in some way connecting with the people who go to Senshin, which would be largely Japanese Americans. How much has that changed, if any, since the beginning, in terms of the types of people who are participating in Kinnara's musical activities?

MORI

Because Togi-sensei had taught at UCLA, he had pretty much his class, so to speak, and then which changes on a semester, semester, quarter, quarter situation. He's always had a group of individuals, probably about six or seven individuals, that one way or another still play gagaku or still plays gagaku, but with the passing of Togi-sensei, and even before the passing of Togi-sensei, within the last fifteen years or so and since the time that he left UCLA, they were still in Southern California, and those individuals still play gagaku, and those individuals were not necessarily of Japanese or Asian descent.

It was pretty interesting. I mean, I've been playing with these guys off and on for the last thirty years, twenty-five years, and some of them I'm just realizing what they do outside of gagaku. You know, brain surgeons. Seriously, brain surgeons. I just found this out about six or seven months ago that these guys are brain surgeons or these guys are mathematicians and different various numbers of occupations. I had no idea what they did. (Cline laughs.) But the common thing was playing gagaku, which is interesting because it's a set thing. I mean, you know, it's interpretation of the feel of how you play it and what you play and accents here and there and stuff, you know. I'm not sure whether or not what we're playing is either homogenized, Westernized, or changed of how it's being played in Japan today. I don't know. But in terms of the teaching and the finer points that were taught to us by Togi-sensei, in the older days when we went to play with folks from Japan, the musicianship and the understanding of it is very similar, is very close, you know. I mean what he taught us was how he would teach in Japan if you were in Japan. So the level of his understanding, his passing along how a particular piece is supposed to be played is pretty universal, I mean is pretty consistent what it was when played in Japan. You know, their interpretation naturally is totally different also too. So at this particular point in time I'd say, yeah, those are more probably, if you were to put a label on it, would be more consistent and have more lineage in terms of the finesse part of it, interpretation. But when we got together and get together with him, it's pretty close. It's really close.

CLINE

You grew up here in L.A. You never really imagined, I suspect, that not only would you become a touring musician, but it wasn't common to, as a young Japanese American, have any outlet, interest, opportunity to learn something that's more traditionally Japanese culturally. Now a lot of this is available in a way that it wasn't when you were young, and it appears to be continuing. How has learning these traditions and playing this music and combining it with your Americanness, has it affected or changed you as a person in how you reflect on your identity and your history as a Japanese American?

MORI

You're right in that growing up, and even in the twenties, early twenties, this wasn't even a thought. This was not even a consideration. In certain aspects it was so outside of the realm of thought, it wasn't even part of the mix, so to speak, as they say nowadays. There were no examples. There were no people that were into it that I knew of at the time. Later I

had found out that there were quite a few individuals that were professional musicians out of the Japanese American community, but I didn't know that existed until the middle to late seventies as an option, as even an inkling of a possibility, even with my limited resources. But I guess being around other creative individuals, being around an atmosphere which people were going in the same direction, so to speak, and was very fortunate and able to jump on the train, you know. I was not the conductor. I was not the engineer. I wasn't even the guy in the caboose. I jumped on the train, though, was able to get on the train, and it went through totally different places that I had never expected to be or expected to go, which I had mentioned before. Yet nowadays, still on the train, still being able to contribute to the train, maybe where I'm in the position of filling the coal cart to power the steam engine. I don't think I'm even in the engine taking the coal and fueling the fire. I may be putting the coal onto the train or I'm on the train and helping to load the train with coal so it can get someplace, but there are other folks that are driving the train, engineering the train. I probably have taken my turn as a steward on the train, a porter man on the train, so to speak, you know, helping people get on the train. What they do after they get on the train, you know, I'm not sure. Help collect tickets, help with the train. And the train is still moving, which is still good. The train is still moving.

How do we go about nurturing newer artists and stuff like that? Just to provide opportunity and the resources and let them know that the resources are still there, are there. There are a few individuals that are attempting to get into the business or to make this a career, and they're quite successful, because whatever they're doing, they have a very, very solid foundation in their art, in their craft and technically how they're doing it. The hardest part, I'm pretty sure you understand this also, too, is, I guess—and it's not the commitment. The commitment is there. You can tell in their work habits and just the proficiency of the technique, and the performance is totally unbelievable nowadays at such an early age also, too, which is great. But I guess the training and the proper attitude about just the whole thing in general, I think. You could have the discipline but not necessarily the concept. You've got to have this understanding, and understanding the goal changes all the time and the people that are involved in it changes a lot and stuff. But I think it's still pretty promising. It's not as massive of a movement as it was probably about six years ago, eight years ago. It's kind of leveled off, I think. That might just be in the case of Kinnara in terms of people approaching Kinnara and performing in Kinnara. But then you look. Some areas are expanding, some are staying the same or even decreasing. The exposure and level of taiko is expanding on college campuses, which is really interesting, to where I know of a number of college-age individuals that will academically achieve certain levels that they could apply to a school, to a couple of schools that have very, very strong taiko programs, and that was one of the factors of applying to those particular schools. Right now I think Stanford (University), because of the consistency of its advisors, school advisors, very, very strong, very, very strong, unbelievably strong. Stanford University, which is a unique situation. I mean you've got to be financially fairly—you know, or you've got to be academically or something very unique about the individual to be able to get into the school. UC (University of California) Irvine, which has a group called Jodaiko, which is also a very, very strong group. UCLA, Kyodo Taiko. They have actually two groups, so Kyodo Taiko, which is the oldest taiko group amongst colleges and universities. They have another group called Yukai Daiko, which is a fun taiko group. Not saying that Kyodo's not fun, but there's a heavy-duty audition process to get into Kyodo, and their performance level and history and just attitude. Yukai's a little bit more lax on that, but I mean still has to have, I guess, some kind of requirements to get into the group and stuff like that. It's a little looser. And then there's groups at UC San Diego; USC, who Kinnara's beginning to work

with; UC Riverside has one. There's one, I think, within the Claremont-(Harvey) Mudd group of colleges, and I think they were called Psycho Taiko or something like that.

CLINE

(laughs) Okay.

MORI

While we're on that point of naming different groups, there was a Tumbleweed Taiko from Texas. There's a Ragin' Cajun Taiko group. There is a Raging (Asian) Women's Taiko group. There is Grass Valley (Taiko) location; Moab, Utah Taiko; Moab Taiko; Bitchin' Blazin' Bachi Taiko group *(CORRECT?). So, yeah, there's all these different number of names of all these different taiko groups that are there, which is really interesting, which is really, really interesting. So the collegiate situation is interesting, and so, like I said, different areas of levels of groups, and I think the older groups, consistent across the board, are talking about secession. They're talking about us members gracefully bowing out, changeover. So all those things are being discussed of the older folks and stuff, older groups and stuff like that. So that's very positive, because if you're talking about secession, you're talking about continuity or the group being able to continue and stuff. It's not like it's dying out and stuff. So Kinnara, I think, is in that growing pain, movement pain and stuff like that, you know, to whether or not I still attend taiko practices, or do I more go toward the gagaku practice or something like that, right? So it varies. It all depends on the amount of time and effort you put into it, again. But it is still progressing. I think the taiko community is still progressing, different areas of strengths, but it kind of sort of tapered off. I haven't heard of any new professional group besides TaikoProject or ensemble and a few others kind of scattered around, and most of those groups' membership is—I mean group-wise it makes sense. It's from four to eight, ten people in the group. So because of that many people are relying on taiko to help supplement their income, then it has to be pretty steady for anybody to have any kind of steady income that you're looking at to be able to survive.

CLINE

Out of your encounter with your traditional music culture, you also started Japanese Festival Sounds, which I had gathered is a way to perhaps help interest people, and therefore continue some of that interest in those sounds, in that music.

MORI

Right. It actually started out of the need—I don't know if it's need, or the request for partially an educational kind of component of taiko in Southern California, and also a professional group that could perform during the weekdays. That's the simplest way to describe how it began. So, through different numbers of situations that I encountered while in the eighties of playing taiko around Southern California, and, I guess, the Japanese Festival in terms of its strong kind of suit, so to speak, and the need for having this particular art form within the schools, and, I guess, my initiative or my needing to see if we could make a go of this professionally, so we did a number of, I guess, exhibitions in an educational setting or a youth/kid program setting, which I can't really remember what environment we were on, or it could have been just at a festival in someplace in Southern California, that people would approach us. A lot of them were just basic individual teachers. They would say, "Hey, you guys do this for schools? Can you come to my school or my class

and kind of give this demonstration?" And at the time the majority of them were Japanese American teachers, which there are a lot of them, or Asian American teachers. At the time we go, "Well, it's either the whole group or it's not none of us." Or, "Yeah, maybe a couple of us can come out and do something," and we did that for a while. It was like trying to figure out how to do this and where and whatnot.

And then somebody approached me and said, "Hi. I'm with this group called Learning Tree."

CLINE

Oh, right.

MORI

"And we're part of L.A. city schools, but we're not part of L.A. city schools." And I talked to them and they said, "Let's meet," so I went down and met with them. They explained the program and how many years they'd been doing this and stuff like that. Then I'd work with them to help nurture, put somewhat of a program together that made kind of sort of some sense. Then we did that, and we were getting to some bookings in schools and stuff like that for the first year, and it seemed to work out. Then the following year I got approached by another individual and said, "Hey, we want to see whether or not you would be able to perform out of the Music Center," so the Music Center on Tour Program. And I said, "Sure, I'll check it out. I'll come to an audition." And then I think the other guy couldn't do it, so actually I was just doing this audition by myself with one taiko, and I think I took a boombox, and I played this rhythm and I did the lion dance. Then I just did this taiko solo and explained a little bit about the taiko, and at that time I think the presentation was no longer than eight to ten minutes. That was it. And this is the truth. I followed a dog act. "All right, Butchy. How much is one plus one?"

CLINE

Oh, no.

MORI

He had these numbers around his circle, and he would circle around the circle, and he would stop, and he would pick up the number two and put it down. "Okay, how much is three plus three?" This dog would circle around again, and he'd pick up the right number.

I followed a dog act. At that time I was just going, "This ain't right. This ain't right. This ain't happening, man. This is weird, man. I ain't gonna be on no roster with no dog act. Are you crazy?" They didn't make it because animals aren't allowed on campus and stuff like that and the whole bit. You know, kids and dogs are not allowed in school programs, so they didn't make it. So then I had an interview right after the performance and stuff, right, and they go—the first question, "How committed are you to doing this?" And I looked at them and I go, "First of all, I'm here. This is the middle of the day. This is out in Carson." They just picked a school, right, that's supportive of the program. "Driving all the way out here, taking three hours out of my time to do this ten-minute audition. You're asking how committed I am?" I says, "Give me a break." I had an attitude of the yin/yang that day,

right? That was in the early eighties, ’82, ’83, because I formally got Japanese Festival Sounds as a DBA (“doing business as”) in, again, ’83 or something like that. So I was playing with the band. The band had a couple albums out and stuff, so I pretty much committed to trying to make a living off of playing taiko, so that’s why I was there. But that day I just had an attitude, and I think I showed up in Levis and I just threw on a hapi coat. I can’t remember if I had a hachimaki or anything like that. Then she goes, well, the talk was fine, but they commented about the costuming and stuff like that, right? I says, “Well, I didn’t know what I was walking into, to tell you the truth, and how formal of an audition this is and what it was,” and everything like that, right?

Then we got into more discussion and stuff, and then another rephrased question came about in terms of getting commitment and stuff, right. So I said, “Look, this is a situation in which, you know, this is not going to be an exclusive, either. I mean if some teacher comes up to me and asks me, I’m going to take it because this is a potential part of my livelihood,” stuff like that. So anyway, to make a long story short, about a week later they called me up and they says, “You’ve been accepted.” I go, “Wow, that’s pretty good.” And then he says, “Well, your costuming could be, you know we’ll talk about that, but you scored the highest on your interview.” (laughs) And I go, “Oh, really?” I says, “Yeah, I wasn’t having a good day that day. I just had an attitude and I apologize.” I told them, “I followed a dog act.” I said, “Man, I was questioning your credibility and your whole thing and all this other stuff. That’s ridiculous, right?” I said, “That’s totally ridiculous.” So he says, “Oh, you’re in the group.” So ever since then. So then I pulled in George Abe, plays flutes and stuff like that, and we were doing it, a couple of us, and that was getting older. Then I pulled Danny Yamamoto in it and stuff, you know, so that’s been working out pretty fairly well. Then also, too, so basically I just turned it into a business, I mean into a professional taiko group. So at the time then it was just San Francisco Taiko and Japanese Festival Sounds that were a professional group, although later on I found out that Tanaka-sensei, I guess he was—San Francisco Taiko Dojo and him in itself was a professional taiko group. He made his income in living on teaching taiko and doing these performances and stuff like that. So he and his group were pretty much professional, not necessarily now as much, although I mean he’s still teaching and earning a living off of playing taiko, but at the time he and I were the only ones, and so were doing all this stuff.

Then it expanded to the point where I was doing Performing Tree, Music Center on Tour. Then Orange County Performing Arts Center also has a—because the administrators from the Music Center went to Orange County and they started it up. So I was on their roster, and I also was on the roster of this thing called ICAP, Intercultural Appreciation Program, through L.A. city schools. It was a fairly funded program in which they paid you $100 or something like that for you to go out and do this thing in a school or something like that, and you had to block off, like, three weeks, performed every day for three weeks. So that was interesting, and I did that for one semester. Then after that, I was still with the group for, like, about two or three years after that, but I told them I only anticipate on, like, maybe a week at a time, and I laid out the weeks so I could do this and stuff, so that worked out fine. I also was on the roster of—in Santa Barbara—Children’s Project? * (CORRECT?) Anyways, run out of the school district up in the Santa Barbara area. So coming from Santa Barbara, parts of Ventura, but mainly Santa Barbara, north to Santa Maria, San Luis Obispo, Templeton, and Paso Robles. So we did that for, like, about five years. We’d go out there at least two or three times out of the school semester from September to June, and we’d spend at least four days up in that region at a time, do two in

the morning and one in the afternoon, two shows in the morning and two shows in the afternoon while we're there. So we'd drive up there on one day, do two programs in the morning, in the afternoon, stay overnight, two in the morning, two in the afternoon, stay the next day, do two in the morning. Sometimes we'd come home after that or do two in the morning, two in the afternoon, and then come home after that, or stay over another night and do one in the morning and then come home. So, San Luis Obispo, Santa Maria area, Santa Barbara, we covered that.

So there was, like, about four or five groups that we were connected with, and we would go out and do school programs and stuff. So it worked out perfect because I wasn't on the road, and we were just doing all these school programs and stuff, so exposed taiko to a lot of kids and stuff. That, and then recording sessions, which was outside of Japanese Festival Sounds, but sometimes we did it as a group. A lot of times more so, though, we did it as individuals and hooked up with different number of composers. A lot of them were independent, and so whether you ran stuff through the union (American Federation of Musicians) or not, that was whatever helped the financial situation here and there. Then I hooked into Hans Zimmer, and so we were doing the play. As we were doing the play Sansei in '89 at the Mark Taper Forum, he had come to see a show and had talked with Dan and June about doing some stuff for a movie called Black Rain with Michael Douglas and N_____ *(NAME?) and stuff like that, and so they did some music with that. Then from then on, we obviously had this relationship with him. Then after that, I worked with him. Eventually we did Pearl Harbor. That was really interesting, him being of German descent, and it kind of showed both wars, European conflict and the Pacific conflict. He said, "Why don't you come and see the movie first, see if you guys want to do this." So we went into his place and he showed us the whole movie. It wasn't that good of a movie, and it's still not that good of a movie. (laughs) Because of that, he says, "It's your choice how you want to do this." Right? So we said, "Okay," and we decided to do it. So we did that.

The other film that was very, very, I think, very historical in one aspect of it was The Thin Red Line, the newer version with (Terrence) Malick as the director, which he hadn't done a movie in ten years up until that time we did that one, and that was a trip. That was another interesting situation because it delved into the minds of the soldiers on both sides of the war. So that was pretty fun to do. Then we did a—he didn't do it. Did he do it? I don't think he did. Or did he? I can't remember if he did a Star Trek movie or not. I can't remember if he did. I don't think he did, but anyway, the band did a Star Trek movie. And then I did a number of movies with him with Tom Cruise, his series of action movies.

CLINE

Mission Impossible, maybe?

MORI

No, the one before that one.

CLINE

Don't know.

MORI

It might be Mission Impossible. One of those I did with him, and that was fun too. Then he did one of the last geisha, (Memoirs of a Geisha) *(CORRECT?) or he did The Last Samurai. One of the two he, or something like that. So we jumped in and did that one also too. So we had this pretty good relationship him, and he was very, very understanding. He asked you to check it out before you want to participate in it. He has no form of saying, “You want to do it?” And if you refuse to do it, no big deal. He gives you that option and stuff like that.

That was interesting for him, too, because he was in a dilemma, and I think every composer is in terms of how much electronic music versus live music that you had to put into your movie. I don’t know whether or not—if there’s a percentage or if there’s an unwritten rule or if there is a rule if you do X amount of a movie, you’ve got to use live musicians or you’ve got to do this and do that. I’m not sure what that deal is. But I remember going in there and he had this track already laid out and stuff, and he just said, “Just play on top of it. This is the feel that I have here for it, and so if you want to play over it, go ahead, play over it. Or play over it and just do it.” So we did that a number of different times. And I know part of it, too—and he was pretty up front about it. He says, “This is the feature of what it is, and for me sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.” This is not a long time ago when we started playing. “But I tell you up front, I’m also capturing the sounds because it’s not there. There’s no canned taiko yet.”

CLINE

Right. Sample.

MORI

“Sampled thing that I can just call up the library and get and stuff like that.” Right? He said, “Part of it I’m just sampling all this sound.” I says, “Fine.” So he gave me all the copies of the sounds also, too, so I have that, which has changed over the years and stuff like that. But he says he had it and stuff, so when I went in there for the next movie, then I started cracking up, and he knew that I knew that this was me that he had sampled and he put into the track already, right? So he made it pretty simple, “I need this feel, and this is kind of sort of what I have in mind, but why don’t you play how you feel it right now,” and stuff like that. So I said, “Okay.”

So that was part of Japanese Festival Sounds, and I’m still doing it today. It’s an immediate reaction from the kids if they understand it or don’t. It’s, yes, like I said, immediate reaction, and the kids don’t lie. They like it or they don’t. Fortunately, they’ve pretty much liked it through all the situations. Yes, so I’m still doing it, although with the economy the way it is and school cuts and teacher layoffs and stuff like that, it’s less and less of a priority in terms of what it is. The good and bad of it, the schools are still getting or still have to provide arts and cultures, and instead of, unfortunately, hiring even a part-time music teacher to go into the schools two or three times a week, they only can provide mass assemblies, possibly. So the program that I have is pretty much a performance and explanation and stuff, forty-five-minute format and program. Whether or not I’m going to be getting a lot more performance calls because you’re just affecting more masses at one particular time than regular doing even a residency week or a month-long or a four- to

eight-session residency with a school. I'm not sure whether or not that's been—which I'm probably sure it's been cut out also, too, or depleted or reduced or something like that. So usually September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May, June, so that's usually about a nine-month session in terms of when school's in. I used to get a minimum of twenty, twenty-five schools on a year or even more, thirty schools a year. Last semester that just ended, last school semester I had mainly only did ten, eight to ten schools, twelve, ten schools at the very, very most maybe once or twice a month or something like that, maybe twelve schools, and that's it. It's getting a lot harder for the exposure for arts in schools, so that makes it tough. So that's what Japanese Festival Sound's about.

CLINE

We're getting near the end here, and I just do have time for a couple of questions—

MORI

Sure.

CLINE

—but I can try to keep it concise. How did you get the job here at the Japan America Theater?

MORI

Oh, man. (laughter)

CLINE

That interesting?

MORI

It is, actually. I mean, whether or not I describe this or not from the very beginning, but my association with the community, the (Japanese American) Cultural (and Community) Center and its concept grew out of a building that was on Weller Street, which is over here on Weller Court, and where the Kyoto Grand (Hotel) is, more so around there. Anyway, this building called the Sun Building, which housed a lot of cultural institutions or cultural teachers and social service groups, it was the rallying point for Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization, and so they were symbolically—this particular building was one in which they were going to tear it down and build this hotel. But where were they going to put these cultural teachers and cultural classes and these social service groups? So there was no place for them to go symbolically, and so then a lot of young folks—because JACS office, Japanese American Community Services Pioneer Project was in this particular building, it became a symbol. So then they chained the doors. They refused to open the doors when the sheriff's department came and tried to evict everybody out of the building. So it became a rallying point, right? So this is a preface to saying that this particular building, this particular organization grew out of that and the need and necessity. So at the same time they decided they were going to build this cultural center, and this particular cultural center was going to be—and so all these negative or all these—and I was probably part of it also,

too, in that we said, “Sure, you’re going to tear down this building, but are you going to be able to provide an affordable facility for these groups to go to? Even though you’re going to build this façade, it’s going to cost you a lot of money to build this place, and after you get them in there, then are they going to be able to afford the rent and stuff like that?” So then through government subsidies and everything like that, they were allowed to move over all this other stuff, over to the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, JACCC.

So then we were protesting this place also, too, to tell you the truth. (laughs) It was crazy. At the time I was working at the Amerasia Bookstore, and not that we were physically picketing or protesting, but we were the young anti-establishment group that was against everything that Little Tokyo had to do with reestablishment and everything. So anyway, the place was built without our protest and stuff. People moved in. So this place opened in 1980, ’81. I did a taiko demonstration in what is now called the North Gallery or Community Gallery, and I did a series number of them, because there’s this woman that was in here had written this grant or something like that, so they got some money to do these cultural programs and stuff like that. I jumped into it, and then I was giving these Little Tokyo tours some taiko. Then when I was doing one, then they introduced me to the new executive director, which the first one was Jerry Yoshitomi. He was a local Southern California guy. But he had done some work and he was in New Mexico working for the Western Arts Alliance. I can’t remember if he was the executive—he was the executive director at the time. So he moved back to L.A. and he became the executive director, and he started introducing the community to funding through the LA (Los Angeles) Department of Cultural Affairs, the LA County Commission of Arts, California Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts and all these other foundations, the Ford Foundation, the Doris Duke Foundation, all these foundations and stuff that were happening, and he got the ball the rolling for the JACCC.

I think around ’83 he asked if I would be an artist in residence, and so I said, “Sure. Okay.” So there was, like, four of us that were artists in residence at the time. There was myself; another performer artist known as Nomoko (Nobuko) Miyamoto, she has a group called Great Leap; a photographer named Patrick Nagatani; and a playwright and an author, Momoko Iko. So four of us were the first artists in residence at Little Tokyo. So I taught taiko to community groups, already established taiko groups, gave workshops, as much information and fundamentals as much as I can. So I was doing that for, like, three—it was a three-year thing, and I think I did it maybe for five years or something like that. They renewed the grant. Then from that, my involvement, because I was at California Arts Council, my involvement became more and more with CAC. Then there was community groups headed by (Bernard) Jack Jackson out of Inner City Cultural Center, and he was pretty much the godfather of the minority arts movement in Southern California, along with a different number of other organizations, Plaza de la Raza, Watts Towers, John Outterbridge, Jack Jackson—Bernard Jackson, Jack Jackson. And then Jerry Yoshitomi was part of the mix also, too, now. So they had all kind of got together, and they nominated me to represent Southern California on the California Arts Council, and they were talking about multicultural arts grants. So I was on the committee for the very, very first multicultural arts advisory committee panel, developed the multicultural grants and all these new starting kind of grants and stuff like that.

So then I was helping out with the Center through the eighties and nineties. Late eighties,

early nineties, I kind of stepped away from the Cultural Center. I was on tour with the band. It was the band's heyday and stuff like that. Middle to late eighties, nineties, I started co-producing or helping out the Center producing shows, getting acts onto the stage, and developing artists and stuff like that. Then I was co-producing some stuff. And then unfortunately, the executive director, Duane Ebata, passed away in 2000, ten years ago. So some people on the staff that I knew, and they knew what I was doing, that I was co-producing shows, they asked me to help with the programming. So I kind of sort of jumped in as a consultant. That lasted for, like, about three and a half years as consultant. Still doing stuff with the band. Then right around the end of 2003, the middle of 2003, they asked me to be staff, so I says okay, but I told them only, like, thirty hours. I mean, I was able thirty hours, qualifying for full-time status and the whole bit. Then within that year I had to make a decision, because I was co-producing some stuff here and dealing with the band and dealing with the booking and the touring of the band, working with a booking agency. For some-odd reason—I can't remember if I told the story. For some-odd reason they double-booked, I double-booked myself a gig in Phoenix and Vegas with the band and a show here in the Center, and I was producing the show here at the Center. The booking agency actually had changed the date and only told a few people in the band, and I wasn't aware of that until three weeks later after they had agreed to the change.

So anyway, got a young guy to take my place, Shoji Kumera *(CORRECT?), and now it's history, and I pretty much retired from the band in 2004. So for the last six years I started off as being producing director of performing arts, so I was working in the program area, and then about four years ago, three and a half years ago, they had asked me to be general manager of the theater because the individual that was the manager, he retired, so I've been doing that since. The decision to make that change in '84 was I had two girls in college, going to be in college, one was in college, the other one was going to be in college, and I needed a steady paycheck in one sense. So that's how my involvement got here into the JACCC.

CLINE

Wow. You've had involvement in so many really influential aspects of the Japanese American community here in L.A. Reflecting back on that and how that makes you think about yourself and who you are, your identity here and all that means, is there anything you want to add here before we call it, before we end this interview? Because clearly we could talk for months.

MORI

Months.

CLINE

Easily.

MORI

I guess it just pretty much stems from the fact in terms of sharing and of exposing the community, the broader community, to the voice of the Japanese American community through whatever means I can. There are newspapers in the community. There are voices

on the radio within the community. There are voices on television, certain television outlets in Southern California that are able to squeeze some Asian American news within their channel and stuff like that. The presence of Asians within the media in terms of the news, local news, is prominent or it's there, it's visible. Within regular television programming it's not there. It could be there. It could be better. It's there a little bit, but it could be better, like anything else.

So just being able to help that particular exposure to where more people know about a certain thing, the less misunderstanding they would have about a particular issue or event or a person. So I try to make it as personal, in one sense, as possible in terms of making sure certain elements of the community don't repeat itself in the bad sense, but, unfortunately, it is and it does. The good and the bad, unfortunately, circles itself, recycles itself. It just comes up in a different form, so to speak. So not that it was a personal crusade, but basically one would hope that you would be able to pass something on to the next generation, and in my case, to the kids, my kids, my daughters, so the whole same cliché, it doesn't happen to them. But more and more I'm thinking about it—and I don't wish this on anybody, but a form of this they're going to experience in one way or the other. So hopefully, the next generation would have more understanding over it so that the degree in which it is presented to them or they're confronted with, that they'll have the resources to deal with it, that they will have the resources, whatever situation, to deal with it, and that hopefully they could walk away from it, the worst-case scenario, they could walk away from it or they'll understand it and they'll be compassionate to another human being in terms of how they deal with it. Before, it was not necessarily that I was going to help save the world. Egotistically, you think that you can make a difference, and one person can and possibly could make a difference in one sense. But yet it's possibly through age or whatever, it's just a situation where try the best what you could do. But being able to pass along the better points of what you think you have learned to the next generation or make it at least somewhat easier.

There is signs that there is progress. Ten-year-old kids, twelve-year-old kids have these particular fundamentals that I didn't learn until I was twenty-five or thirty years old, right, and ideas and concepts of what it is. But I think there is a base established by the different groups and different individuals that I think is very strong, that has been developed, that those individuals in the future will be able to see what the foundation is, and then I could build on top of that and have the understanding that there is this solid foundation in the base that they can move on from but also come back to. I had did this Videolog with Huell Howser.

CLINE

Oh, yes.

MORI

Yes. And I guess it turned into California's Gold, and that was done in '89 also, too, I think. He had saw the play Sensei, and he had come and we did an interview and he shot a whole day and even maybe a couple days at Senshin. He was getting the drum and doing performances and him following us to a school and doing a school program, capturing all that and stuff, right? So part of that has exposed as many kids as possible to taiko and also

it exposed Japanese American kids to have some kind of understanding of their own culture and not feel bad that something weird and obscure is not part of the mainstream, so to speak. So all those kinds of things are included in, I guess, a summation of what this is all about and stuff like that. So somebody may listen to this interview or read the interview or whatever and gain a little more insight in terms of, I guess, me, my life, and somebody growing up within this particular environment in Southern California, which is fun.

CLINE

Cool. Well, anything you want to add before we turn the machine off?

MORI

Probably, but not right now, you know? Probably a couple hours from now or tomorrow I'll be sitting there going, "Oh, man, I should have told him that," or, "I should have told him this," or whatever.

CLINE

That's how it always is.

MORI

Yes.

CLINE

Well, I'm sorry to have to end these, but we've reached that time. We're trying to keep the interviews that we're doing now from being just hideously monumental.

MORI

Sure.

CLINE

But obviously there's no end to what we could mine here, but we'll end the mining expedition for now. Speaking for myself, thank you so much for taking all this time and for sharing so much that's of so much value, and on behalf of the Center for Oral History Research at the UCLA Library, thank you very much.

MORI

Thank you. Appreciate it. (End of July 7, 2010 interview)