



Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

TOSHIKO AKIYOSHI
NEA Jazz Master (2007)

Interviewee: Toshiko Akiyoshi 穗吉敏子 (December 12, 1929 -)
Interviewer: Dr. Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Dates: June 29, 2008
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
Description: Transcript 97 pp.

Brown: Today is June 29th, 2008, and this is the oral history interview conducted with Toshiko Akiyoshi in her house on 38 W. 94th Street in Manhattan, New York. Good afternoon, Toshiko-san!

Akiyoshi: Good afternoon!

Brown: At long last, I'm so honored to be able to conduct this oral history interview with you. It's been about ten years since we last saw each other—we had a chance to talk at the Monterey Jazz Festival—but this interview we want you to tell your life history, so we want to start at the very beginning, starting [with] as much information as you can tell us about your family. First, if you can give us your birth name, your complete birth name.

Akiyoshi: To-shi-ko.

Brown: Akiyoshi.

Akiyoshi: Just the way you pronounced.

Brown: Oh, okay [laughs]. So, Toshiko Akiyoshi.

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Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: And does “Toshiko” mean anything special in Japanese?

Akiyoshi: Well, I think, ... all names, as you know, Japanese names depends on the *kanji* [Chinese ideographs]. Different *kanji* means different [things], pronounce it the same way. And mine is “Toshiko,” [which means] something like “sensitive,” “susceptible,” something to do with a dark sort of nature. Most women’s “Toshiko” is usually more elegant, more woman-like, kinda, that *kanji* they usually use. Mine isn’t. Whatever. [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs] Okay. Can you tell us your parents, both your names of your parents? And where they’re originally from.

Akiyoshi: My father’s name is Katsurō Akiyoshi. My mother’s maiden name is Hiraike, so her name is Shigeiko Hiraike. And they were married, I don’t know when, wherever, [laughs] and when I was born, I’m the last of the four daughters. Four daughters.

Akiyoshi: And, uh, my father had a job in old Manchuria, today it’s called Liáoníng province of China, in [a] Japanese cotton, textile, company. And the time when I was in sixth grade, my father became independent and he started his own company, more like a trading company.

Brown: Can you tell me where your parents are from in Japan, before they migrated to Manchuria?

Akiyoshi: Oh, they were both from Kyūshū, Ōita....

Brown: Ōita?

Akiyoshi: ...province. And, uh ... I don’t know much about [it] except that. [laughs]

Brown: [Chuckles]. Okay. And can you give us your birth date?

Akiyoshi: First part?

Brown: Your birth date?

Akiyoshi: I was born in 1929, December 12th.

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Brown: Twelfth.

Akiyoshi: Twelfth. Twelve-twelve, very easy to remember.

Brown: Right. And you were born, do you know exactly where in Manchuria? I know Dairen [Ch: Dàlián] is what's recorded....

Akiyoshi: I was educated there, but I was born in a place called Ryōyō, Liáoyáng—I guess they maybe pronounce the Chinese way, probably called Liáoyáng—where the big Japanese cotton textile company was. So....

Brown: So when you were living in China, um, Manchuria, or Dairen, did you live with your sisters, so everyone grew up, you had the whole family there?

Akiyoshi: Well, whole family ... Liáoyáng city, it didn't have high school, so all my sisters, they, when they came to graduate [from] grammar school, they all went to Dairen, where [there was] a junior high, high school. So, that's what my mother wanted. Most children, I think, in Ryōyō went to the city called Anzan [Ch: Ānshān], which is about an hour, not even quite [an] hour, maybe 40 minutes' train ride, the next big city from Ryōyō. But my mother wanted them to be educated in Dairen, I guess it's considered a better school for their....

Brown: Now, was this a Japanese school...?

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ...and was there a large Japanese community?

Akiyoshi: They were all Japanese schools. [It's] amazing the fact, you know, I'm thinking about when I went to high school in Dairen, there was ... in those days, [it was] like a man and a woman [were] different; boys had a boys' high school, girls had a girls' high school. And the girl high school alone, [Dairen] had five of them. And each school, I would say, when I was in high school, classes were about 45 students. And we had five class[es], I mean five different, you know, classmates, like, say, Cherries class, and there was an *ume* [plum] club, there was like a chrysanthemum class, things like that.

Brown: Based after, uh, flower names.

Akiyoshi: Yeah, so basically, you're looking at it, girls alone [were] approximately 240 students in one class, one, yeah, one, what do you call...and we had a high school that takes four years. So if you multiply that, basically you have about, a little over one thousand children. Now, this is only girls alone. So, let's say the boys are approximately

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the same number, maybe more or less. So from that you kind of estimate how many Japanese were in Dairen, you can imagine how big the population was.

Brown: And all instruction was in Japanese?

Akiyoshi: There was ... I don't remember having a Chinese student. I think if they spoke Japanese, there probably could have been. But obviously there weren't [any]. So without my knowing it, they were, like, separated. You know, [in] much later years, much later, I don't quite remember, it was over ten years ago, I was asked by NHK television, which is like the BBC, to go back to where I was born and raised, they called [it] *Trip to Where the Heart Belongs* [*Sekai waga kokoro no tabi*, broadcast Oct. 17, 1993], something like that. And it was a new television series, and I was the first one. And I hadn't been there in fifty years at that time. And that time I realized the fact that is, we were segregated [from Chinese]. You know, I never thought about it that way. And, when I went there—see, you can't do this without having a Chinese part of cooperation, and they had people who spoke Japanese fluently, and they are the ones who set up a tour—and from morning 'til evening we had Chinese food. And it tasted very, very good, but there wasn't anything like a, no ocean fish, except with the governor's official dinner, or mayor's official dinner. Other than that, fish, every once and a while that would be the river fish, freshwater fish. And I realized that we were considered, probably, a privileged class, and I thought they were probably looking at us like that. I didn't realize 'til then that Japan is ... one of the things that I was thinking about, sometimes compared to, let's say, this country had a long history of prejudice to[ward] anybody who had color, you know, the black people, or the yellow, whatever. And the old days, as you know, America had segregation, you can't ride on the same bus, what have you. But one thing about Manchuria, now China, their railroad was built by a Japanese railroad company [South Manchurian Railway], but they were more advanced than in Japan: the rails were wider, and also it didn't matter if they were Chinese or American or Japanese—I guess there weren't any Americans there, I don't know [laughs]. Maybe there were some, priests maybe. But, if you had the money, you could ride first class, second class, [??] class, you know. So there was no—as far as *that* is concerned—there was no segregation as far as *that* is concerned. I think that's, you know, something. I never sort of ... also, we were, it was mandatory to learn Chinese, from the third grade. Boy, it's a hard language, Chinese! [chuckles].

Brown: Do you remember any Chinese?

Akiyoshi: Oh yes, yes, but I'll tell you one thing: if I stayed in China for, maybe, one month, without talking Japanese, you know, I think I'd get [it] back. I think I ... because all together, three, four, five, six, then it was junior high, one, two, ... seven years of Chinese. When I was third year of high school that the war was going pretty bad, so in fourth grade the war was ended.

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Brown: When did you learn English? Did you study English in school?

Akiyoshi: English was from high school, the very beginning of high school, and, uh, the war started when I was [in] sixth grade, and about a year later, no, maybe two years later, English was taken off from a mandatory class, and it was you could attend the class as a, if you wanted. So, it wasn't like a regular class, but you could apply for [it]. Which I did, but I did terrible, I mean I was just.... Language wasn't [laughs] my forte.

Brown: So when you learned Chinese, of course, *kanji* is the big difference, and learning all the *kanji*, so....

Akiyoshi: *Kanji*, yes, *kanji*, some [of them] mean the same, because, after all, it came from China. But most of them are different. Some are the same meaning. But it is a really hard language, the pronunciation is hard [chuckles].

Brown: Tonal, as well.

Akiyoshi: Yeah, that's what I mean. It's the same thing, but it depends on the tone ...

Brown: “*Nǐ hǎo ma.*”

Akiyoshi: ... yeah, different meaning. So it's a very hard....

Brown: So you were talking earlier about the difference in the social strata. So, you were considered, your upbringing, your social class while you were in Manchuria, you were very comfortable? You'd only....

Akiyoshi: Yes, I really, I don't think I was the only one, but when I was in childhood, I never even thought about things like that. I was a very, maybe simple-minded. When I was in first grade a third-grade child played the Mozart *Turkish March* and I liked to play just like that, that's how I started playing piano, studying piano. And, uh, always been, if I listened to my parents at home, if I listened to my teachers at school, I'm okay, stay out of trouble. So I never really thought about anything.

Brown: So you just recounted your earliest inspiration about piano, you said you heard another student playing the Mozart *Turkish March*, so, *Rondo Alla Turca* [scats a melodic phrase, last movement of Piano Sonata No. 11 in A Major].

Akiyoshi: Right.

Brown: So this was your first recollection of your interest in music....

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Akiyoshi: Yes, *piano*, yes.

Brown: So ... a classmate? You say another student played this?

Akiyoshi: Yes, no, no, she was in third grade, I was in first grade. So, that's when I started, I wanted to play, so started when I was in first grade, started taking lessons.

Brown: Was this unusual? Did any of your older sisters have piano lessons, or were musical?

Akiyoshi: Well [sighs], I'm not quite sure. The only thing, we didn't have piano teacher-teachers. I had to learn from, uh, there was a music class teacher [who] was the piano teacher. I'm not quite sure how great they were, you know, at that particular point, but I'd go twice a week to his home to study. I still remember it was an upright piano, and I had to go from where I lived, my family lived, to the teacher's house, you'd have to walk for half an hour, to get to the place, you know. And it was very ... when I think about it now, I think in many ways, today people would consider, "Boy, that was a hard life," or something, because everyday you'd have to get to school, walk about half an hour, takes half an hour to *get* to school, and same thing coming back. So, uh, I think it is an American standard, if you're that far, you have a school bus, you know, [we] didn't have anything like that. But, this may not be appropriate time or anything, but when my daughter started going to school here, I realized that I had a much better education than my daughter. And ... it was nineteen-sixty my daughter was going to PS-41 and it was sixty-, lemme see, I don't quite remember, it was mid-sixties, I think. But anyway, she came back and she said, "Well, [there is] no more music class, because the budget was cut." Now, [she said] the next time, "Oh, no more, uh, what do you call, *taisō* [calisthenics], physical fitness education because of budget cuts." And I thought, "What a strange place that this could be," because when I went to school in Manchuria, I'm sure everybody agrees, Japan was a poor country. I can tell by looking at old film how life was very humble and poor, I can tell by films when I see it. But the whole attitude or philosophy is like, children must be educated, must be educated, like to be educated, therefore, budget must be spared. And, vice versa here. And, I don't know about today, but when my daughter went to grammar school, America was the richest country, you know, I don't think as much debt as today [laughs], deficit as today. And I thought it was a very strange country, somehow the priorities were upside down. So that's what I remember, so I think I had a very good education, and music education, as well.

Brown: Were all your teachers Japanese? Do you remember?

Akiyoshi: Oh yes, they were all Japanese, except when I started high school and I started taking lessons from a pia- ... there was a music school there, and then I would go there to

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study with, this piano teacher's name was Yang [Xiaoyi]-*sensei*. We called [him] Yō-*sensei*, and it was a Chinese person. Um, miraculously, actually, when I went back to Manchuria, old Manchuria, for the television, they found him, he was over 80 years old, and ... Yang-*sensei*. And I asked him, "Why [do] you speak Japanese so well?" He said, "Oh, I went to, I was educated in Japan, Japanese music academy, he went. It was Musashino Music School. And, uh, of course he was two years [in the] Cultural Revolution, and he was sent to a farm, and he couldn't talk about the music and so on and so forth, nearly thirty years. And he was actually permitted to come back and teach, but that was So he was my teacher, he was a Chinese man, and I still remember, we had in high school, we had one of our classes was the sewing class, had to sew. And the high school had a pool, and I stung my finger with a needle and I went swimming so it kind of became infected, so I couldn't really play the piano, so I just went—I never missed a lesson, *never*, in all that time, I'm proud to say—so I went there and I showed Yō-*sensei* and said, "I can't play because I" So he really got mad at me, he said, "You're a pianist," you know, "you shouldn't do some stupid things like that," or something like that. He got terribly upset and mad at me.

Brown: How old were you? [chuckles]

Akiyoshi: I was probably about ... fourteen? Or maybe thirteen and a half?

Brown: So you'd been studying for a while by then, six or seven years.

Akiyoshi: Yes, yes.

Brown: Okay. Um, I asked earlier about your older sisters. Could you tell me their names, and if they had any musical training?

Akiyoshi: Who?

Brown: Your older sisters?

Akiyoshi: My oldest sister's name is Hisako [spells it]. The second sister's name is Miyoko, who is alive and well, we are very close. And the third sister, it was interesting: my father, like any other Japanese father, uh, man, they always wanted to have a boy. So they got a girl, the next one was a girl, then the third one was also a girl, so he was hoping, he said, "Well, this will be the zero for the girl," so he named her Reiko. *Rei* is like another word of saying "zero." So, then here came [chuckles], here I come [chuckles], so he just named me Toshiko, because that's probably a normal name [laughs].

Brown: Any of them musically inclined, or were either of your parents musically

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inclined?

Akiyoshi: No, actually, I'm the only one, but my older sister always liked opera, and my second sister is a quite accomplished Japanese traditional dancer. My immediate sister doesn't really have any interest in it. My mother was interested in music, but she wasn't very, let's say, she wasn't talented enough. My father was a student, he was very, extremely interested in *nō*, N-O-H, you know, men's

Brown: *Nō* drama?

Akiyoshi: Yes, he studied for quite [a] long time and he actually had a diploma to be, to be able to teach others. So he was *nō* singing and dance, but no one was ... my case was the piano, but the music, you know, was

Brown: But it was more Japanese *traditional* music, not Western or ... well, you said your sister liked opera ... but the training of everybody was more traditional....

Akiyoshi: No, it isn't. Because Japanese school, the music class, is all Western. I remember when [we were] in grammar school, there was "Home on the Range" [laughs], things like that were in the book. And everything was European, Western. If you were interested in learning some Japanese music or dancing, you had to do outside-of-school activity, which my second sister did.

Brown: What kind of music did you hear around the house? Was music played, recordings, radio, or maybe outside, down in the streets? Do you have any memories?

Akiyoshi: Well, when I started to play, started piano, I don't really think much Actually, we had, I think, a gramophone, you had to do by your hands, kind of thing. And my mother liked it, like Deanna Durbin [laughs]. I remember, [when I was] seventeen, eighteen, it had, the label part [of the record] had her picture. And I think it was probably the *Traviata* [sings]. I think that's what it was. Something like that. But other than that, I didn't really hear, except my, as I said, my older sister loved opera. So when, when I was in the fourth grade, my sister was already in high school way up there..., no, graduated high school, actually. And ... Ryōyō is a very historical city for Chinese history, I think, because it had a walled city. But they didn't really have anything, there was a ... today it is the capital of Liaoning province, it's called Shěnyáng, [Mukden in Manchu], those days it was called Hōten [in Japanese]. That was a big city. And there was a Japanese opera company, called [after founder and tenor] Fujiwara Yoshie, Fujiwara Opera Company, [that] came there, and my sister wanted to see it. And, oh, that took ... my mother was traveling, I think she visited her relatives in Japan, so [she] wasn't there. My father had to ask to my school to get me off early because [so] I could take the train. It took a couple of hours to get there. And there was ... that was

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La Traviata. I still kind of, sort of remember seeing [it]. Anyway, maybe because of that I don't like opera [laughs].

Brown: [laughs]. Okay. So, um, while you were studying piano, did you have any preferences as far as the repertoire? Did you like Mozart, Chopin? Did you like Beethoven?

Akiyoshi: No, first, [I] started like everybody else. You start from [Gabriel] Baille and [Carl] Czerny 30 [*New Studies in Technique*], 40 [*Daily Exercises*]. About 40, then you went to other things, then the same time you do [a] sonatina. By the time it was Yang-sensei it was sonatas. But, like every other, studying piano, there was a normal procedure. It's not like today, people do some other different ways. So that was the way it was. I didn't really have any preference or anything. But when I went to high school, as I said, going to the sonatas, obviously it was Mozart and Beethoven, and, uh, I was very much into Beethoven. I was really ... and then I remember in high school and I saw, those days it was 78 [RPM records], so it's like if you have like a concerto or something it doesn't go on one [record], so you have to have one or two or three or something like that [chuckles]. And I still remember Rudolf Serkins' *Apassionata Sonata* [Piano Sonata No. 23, recorded 1938], and I listened and—ooh, ahh—I really kind of admired [it], and I was thinking, well, someday maybe I'd like to visit Germany. Things like that.

Brown: So it was Beethoven's music? Was it the particular way of playing it? Or just the sound or both?

Akiyoshi: No, I think it was Beethoven's music. His music was ... it's not quite ... you know, I don't think [at] that particular time I didn't think anything the way I'm analyzing today. Beethoven's music is more ... [to] some degree, I think—this is probably a far-out analysis—but Coltrane, like, compared to Sonny Rollins ... Sonny Rollins, if it was everyone like that, you might as well forget about it, or something. Certain things, Beethoven had certain things, more, try harder kind of things. Mozart, on the other hand, is very natural and sounds always like angels or whatever it is, or, sounds more natural, and it wasn't interesting to me. Beethoven was the one I kind of identified myself with. So I think everybody is different, but it was just, that's what I kind of, I think, identify, you know.

Brown: Did you finish high school before your family emigrated to Japan?

Akiyoshi: No. No. Before I finished high school [the] war was ended. So I was an "honorary graduate," just like anybody else in my class. So, that's the year I was supposed to graduate, the following year in March. Here, everything [begins] is September, but in Japan it was March, the [school year] starts from April. So the war

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ended in August, so there were a few more months to go, which we all did not go, we just graduated “honorary” [chuckles].

Brown: So when the war started, do you remember, did it impact your life, or, economically or consciously?

Akiyoshi: Oh yes, of course [sighs]. You know, one of the things about that ... I have been ... I wasn't going to school in Japan, so I have no experience of air raid, I have no experience of *severe* conditions, because Manchuria was still ... and also something to do with my father's business, I don't remember having a problem with a shortage of food or things like that. So actually I didn't really start thinking 'til I was third year in high school, there was.... Either you started going to a factory to sew military clothes, or also, if you wanted to become a nurse. And I thought, well, in the war if I can do something, I should become a nurse, and I volunteered to become a nurse. And I went to my mother and I said my father said it was okay, and I went to my father [laughs] and I said my mother said it was okay, because my father's business was in Ryōyō, so still he periodically visited, but I was in a school in Dairen, and at that time, because I'm probably the youngest, my mother came with me to live. So [the family] was kind of, sort of separated, in a sense. So I told both, “He said okay, she said okay” [chuckles].

Brown: [laughs]

Akiyoshi: So I went and I had training for four months, and [after] four months' training was going to be finished, that's when the war was ended [laughs].

Brown: So *then* what happened.

Akiyoshi: Then, after that it was very difficult. Uh, what I understand is this may not be all the gossip, it could be very true. Because when you start thinking about how the Japanese military runs, what I understand was the ones who decided, they had a meeting, they thought maybe ... you know, we were about fifteen and a half years old, all [of] us, to give them [students] poison, instead of them becoming prisoners of war or something, that's what I understand. That was actually, even that came up at the meeting. So I'm very happy to know that they decided to try to send them back to their parents. That was a very hard trip when I think about it, because you had to go under the..., at that time, Russia was already into the war and Russians were already into Manchuria. So, under the hiding from them, you had to go to certain points, you stay in ground....

Brown: Underground.

Akiyoshi: Not underground, a tent, you know what I mean. I'd never done that before [laughs]. So that was kind of a hard trip. One time we were on the train and the Russian

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soldiers came through, and everybody, we all cut our hair very, very short, and it was ... we had one those uniforms, and it was dark so there wasn't anything [that] happened or anything. That was also kind of [a] not pleasant experience. Anyway, that was hard and it was ... think about ... the place where we were trained, it is on the map, it was close to China. When you're looking at Manchuria and China, the land is the same, except it's separated by a border, whatever it is. And Dairen, it is close to China, and Ryōyō is in the middle, kind of the middle of Manchuria. Sort of north in the middle, northeast, little bit east, in the middle. And where we were trained, it was close to Dairen, it was west of Dairen. The way they came is, they go ... I was the first one, I left ... they stopped [in] Ryōyō, and I stopped, and everybody thought I shouldn't go home, but I did. Which means ... logically speaking, Dairen would be the first, because it was closer, than to go to Ryōyō, if they were, you know.... But they went around [Dairen], meaning they probably had to go that way to hide from the so-called enemy. It took a long time, I think that was a hard trip. And when I got off the train and I walked to my home and I got to my home, there were Russian soldiers [who] were taking all [of our] things from [the] house [chuckles]. And our house was in front of a park, you know, and in the park, [there were] all these Chinese merchants waiting [chuckles]. And they go there and they were selling [our things], of course, the Russians, and they'd come back and get more [chuckles], take something away. I was....

Brown: So your family wasn't in the house?

Akiyoshi: Of *course* they were.

Brown: But everybody was still taking out the belongings?

Akiyoshi: Of course.

Brown: While they were there?

Akiyoshi: They were soldiers, you know. And, uh, so I just came home [in] the middle of all this. My father he was like really, I think he was probably frightened, "Oh my God!" [chuckles]. So that was.... And the next day, he had arranged so that there would be an underground, you know, you can go to a.... You know Japanese have *tatami* [bamboo woven floor mats], and under *tatami* was the floor, and under the floor was a little room for ... just a little bit of room so we could just hide there.

Brown: So you were hiding underneath the *tatami*, underneath the floor. You were hiding from the soldiers because you were afraid that they would...?

Akiyoshi: That's right, because they came, but you never know. They basically came to get the stuff, but sometimes they were not.... So, you know....

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Brown: So after they ransacked your house, then what happened with your family?

Akiyoshi: Oh, just, we were fine, I was the only one who wasn't together [with them], except my oldest sister was married to a military man, so they were in China, they weren't there. Um ... this was, as I said, it was 1946, uh...1945, excuse me, summer, and 'til 1946 we were permitted, we left there, the first time it was occupied by Russians, then there was the Chinese communist army, and at that time they occupied ... a lieutenant—actually his wife was also a lieutenant—they occupied our house's upstairs. And then after that, it was the [Chinese] Nationalist Army, Chiang Kai-shek's army, and they occupied the upstairs, too. The time we were leaving, they were getting, you know, more communists were coming in, but that's when we left. But it took, uh, it was almost a year. But, I think we were earlier than the people in Dairen.

Brown: So what happened to your father's business?

Akiyoshi: Well, what happened? [laughs] I mean, we couldn't have anything.... Everyone who went back to Japan from any[where] abroad—not just China, I'm sure there were other places—they could only bring what you could carry. No jewels. And also, there was a ... [the] *yen* changed to new [currency], so all the money, it didn't mean anything, and it was a ... I remember it was one person, ¥1000 per person, was given by [the] government when you got into Japan. So we were four children with parents, so I think it was ¥6000 was given from the government. I remember getting into ... it's near Hiroshima, a place called Ujina, you know, port, and you got in there and you got DDT on the top of your hair, *bong* [laughing]!

Brown: Really?

Akiyoshi: Yeah, yeah [laughs].

Brown: So as [laughs] soon as you got to the port, they disinfect[ed] everybody like that?

Akiyoshi: Well, I think it was because everybody was coming back from wherever it was, they're probably, maybe carry[ing] something. American soldiers, we all got powder, white powder, DDT, *pshoo, pshoo* [laughs].

Brown: Oh, from American soldiers.

Akiyoshi: Of course, from [the] American side, you know [chuckles].

Brown: So what was your first impression when you got back to Japan? [Was] this your first time in Japan, then?

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Akiyoshi: No, I had been several times with my mother, because my mother often visited, and because I was the youngest, so she always took me along, so many times. But [sighs], first, I tell you, first my impression from Ujina port back to where my parents came from—we settled in Beppu city—and the train, to me the train looked like a real toy train, because I think I mentioned earlier, the train in Manchuria was wider, railroad was wider, and a much better train, and in Japan it was still kind of narrow. Even today if you go to some parts, northern parts or someplace, also Hokkaidō railroad, it's still old, narrow. So first my impression was, “What a small train!” [chuckles].

Brown: So you're sixteen years old, you've already [laughs] got training as a nurse, a volunteer nurse, you have piano lessons. Do you have an idea of what life, or what you want to do for a career?

Akiyoshi: No, actually, my parents wanted me to go to medical school. But we got back to Japan in July—I don't quite remember, fourteenth or fifteenth, I think, middle of July anyway—and I mentioned earlier that the Japanese school starts [in the] spring, so I had a few months. And meanwhile, [in] Beppu I saw this dance hall, they had a flier pasted on the window saying “Pianist wanted.” So I went in because ... I knew my parents no longer could furnish me with a piano, it was that kind of condition. They didn't even have a place to live of their own for the time being. So, uh, I went in and I was hired like immediately because.... See, Beppu city, it is a very small city, I don't know if you [know], I'm sure you do, it's a hot spring [resort]. So there was a small [U.S. military] camp, meaning there were many dance halls for Americans. And, as you know, Americans could not come to Japanese [places], Japanese could not go to Americans'. So Japanese wanted to dance, too, so there were Japanese dance halls, a few of them. There weren't that many musicians living in Beppu. So I said, “I play piano,” and I was hired just like that [chuckles].

Brown: And Beppu is B-E-P-P-U?

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: So, uh, what kind of band, what was the instrumentation for this band?

Akiyoshi: Its leader was a violin player. I suspect he probably was, used to be [in] the navy band. He was an elderly person, everybody else was younger. And it was violin, accordion, drums, alto saxophone, piano. That's it.

Brown: All Japanese musicians?

Akiyoshi: Of course. And there was a Hit Kit ... you remember Hit Kit? I don't know.

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[Army Navy] Hit Kit [of Popular Songs] is one of the things that the servicemen ... every month or maybe twice a month, I'm not quite sure, it was American hit songs. It was for the American servicemen. And you could get them, I think they had all those, you know, "Five Minutes More," or like "Shoo Fly Pie," what have you [laughs], things like that. It was lead sheets, that's what they played. I didn't know any chord symbols, I'd never seen [those] in my life. So I said, "What's this?" So the violin player said, "Oh she doesn't know anything!" And, uh, "Can you play piano?" So I played Beethoven's Sonata No. 3 [sings], and he said, "Oh, she can play piano!" [laughs] So that was the beginning. And, uh, I was hired for the dance hall for Japanese. I think that was probably a good... it was lucky, because a Japanese record collector.... When jazz was exported to other countries—I don't know about Europe, but exported to Japan—they mostly appealed to the upper-middle-class young people. So they had, some of them had collected records. And this person was Mister Fukui. He's still alive and well, I hope. I saw him three years ago. But ... he was one of the collectors. And he noticed my playing, so he invited me over to his home, and he played Teddy Wilson's "Sweet Lorraine"—this became a very famous story. But when I heard him playing it, I said, "I want to play just like that!" So that was my first introduction to jazz. And I think it was lucky the fact that he played Teddy Wilson, because as you know Teddy Wilson played such a clean, beautiful—actually swing-style pianists all played very clean—but his in particular, he had a technique, and his own runs were like the same string of pearls, you know, like beautifully played, and it was not like today, in the old days people didn't use the pedal, so they all came out so nice and clean. And that was really good, I think, it appealed to me a lot. So after that I tried to listen to records—he had a couple of different records—and about eight months later, I was hired in Fukuoka city. So I moved to Fukuoka city. I was seventeen years old, I think, seventeen years old. My parents were like [groans]. But one thing about ... when Japan lost the war, there was a certain structure that was broken, in other words, the family, the structure had always been the father was the beginning, was at the middle, and he's the big pole; the mother [was] the support, the parents, and the children were supposed to listen to the parents, like that. When the war was ended my father, for a while he didn't know what [had] come over, what hit him, because it wasn't *his* fault that he lost everything, and he hadn't even foreseen, the Japanese *never* thought they were going to lose a war. So, they lost it, he lost everything, and he really didn't know what to do. And that affected the children. I was at that time fifteen years old, and it just affected.... And when we went back to Japan that was already broken, the way my father had to try to find a place for us to live, too, and so on, and meanwhile I took a job in a dance hall, and that was, like, unthinkable for ... my father got really mad. But, uh [chuckles], because the normal situation in Japan in those days, the girls never worked, they don't work 'til they go to ... then they married. It's not ... if you're in the middle class, the girls are not supposed to work. So, it's a special dance hall, my God, you know, evil place [laughs].

Brown: [laughs] What else, what ... you mentioned a few titles, but what was the

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repertoire? I mean, what was the repertoire you were playing, so this gives an idea of what kind of dancing was going on?

Akiyoshi: Well, I don't quite remember everything. As I said, I remember "Sweet Sue," you know, "Shoo Fly Pie," or "Five Minutes More," I remember those. "Home on the Range" was there, too. Things like that. I don't remember 'til later on when I was hired and then moved to Fukuoka, and I was hired by a big band. This was the first big band [excitedly], and it was Ryūtarō Yamada and his band, his orchestra.

Brown: Say it again? What was his name?

Akiyoshi: Ryūtarō Yamada, yes. He was an old musician, played trumpet and piano, I understand. But [at] the officers' club, you kind of had to, somebody had to stand in the front to wave his arms [conduct], so he had to do that, so he needed a pianist. So I was the one. And this was really great, because the officers' club had a—we call [it] *denchiku*, you know what I mean?—like a gramophone, you had to do by hand, but this was, because it was plugged in, you didn't have to do that. And...

Brown: Like a jukebox?

Akiyoshi: Yes, it was more like a jukebox, not really, but it's still a gramophone, it was the same thing, except it was run by gears, electric. And they're bigger. And that was the first time I saw a V-disc [Victory disc]. V-disc was a 12-inch, you know, plastic, like before that, a 17-inch, if you dropped it, it broke. But this didn't break. So that was like a pioneer of, later on, the 10-inch LP, I think. Because this was already 45 [RPM] speed. And that's when ... daytime I could practice piano there and I listened to all those records. That's the first, that was a really great job for me. And then I ... and then of course this was a large ensemble, so they had, you know, the stock arrangements, they were given by, I think, the American side to the band. So they were all stock arrangements. And then, stock arrangements usually, like a four-bars intro, then they have ensemble, then there was a [place to] modulate, because the middle part was for the singer. So that's what ... since we didn't have a singer ... and stock arrangements usually had a tenor solo, trumpet solo, something like that, then it was ensemble, then finish. That was a stock arrangement. And I remember a lot of those. And I remember one was ... the pianist had nothing to do, you know, in a big band, just *chang-chang*, so one day there was a new one, it was "Near You," and its middle part was a piano solo. And I was very excited, of course [laughs]. So [scats] "near you" [scats] "near you." So I was ... [in the] daytime I practiced my "improvisation" [laughs]. I practiced my "improvisation" like mad! I was hoping he [Yamada] was gonna call that sometime, and then one day he called it, and my heart went *doot-doot-doot*, so I played what I practiced. So, Mr. Yamada said, "Everybody backstage!" You know, there was a band room. And he said, "Did you hear her play? Did you hear her play? Just because she tried to come

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up with something, she sounds like a Filipino!” [laughs] Those days, Philippine players had better sense as a jazz player, so obviously, because they were under, they were colonized by America for a long, long time. So they’re exposed to jazz longer than [laughs] Japanese. And that was really funny!

Brown: So that was a compliment.

Akiyoshi: Yeah!

Brown: [laughs, claps] Well, let’s go back, you said the first jazz recording you heard was Teddy Wilson. Teddy Wilson is improvising. Up until this point, had you even improvised? Had you even ...?

Akiyoshi: Yes. No, I prac—I had to take from records. I had to take the solo and song, because I didn’t know any songs. So solos, and I tried to play that solo. It doesn’t make any difference, especially when I was in Fukuoka, I took a solo, from eight bars, you know, Wilson’s solos, things like that, everybody’s. And then I tried to play it on the piano.

Brown: So you were transcribing, or just by ear memorizing and then playing, transposing to piano?

Akiyoshi: No, I had to play many times to, just to....

Brown: So you were actually writing and transcribing?

Akiyoshi: Right, exactly.

Brown: And then you used that? Okay, so we’re going to change tapes.

Akiyoshi: Okay.

Brown: Okay, Toshiko-san, I wanted for you to, um, as much as possible to describe that process, since you were classically trained as a pianist, and you heard Teddy Wilson, and so, Teddy Wilson is improvising, so what is it ... how did you acquire the ability to improvise?

Akiyoshi: By taking all [of it] from records. [It] took me a long time to take it, because I didn’t have that quick [an] ear. And many times, you know, play it, and then take it on the sheet music, and then I tried to play that, as many as I could. That is the way I learned, mainly, the jazz language. Also, the different tunes, you know, different.... Because there wasn’t anything, books, or anything like that in those days. Interesting

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thing is, like—I said Mister Fukui, I told you about, so I was there [Beppu], and then I moved to Fukuoka and I was in the officers’ club, and I did the same thing, listen to records and take out, now... and I tried to play it on piano. And that’s how I learned. Meanwhile, Mister Fukui sent me the book, *How to Play Jazz Piano* [possibly *Modern Piano Method*, 1933], it was a piano *kyōsoku hon* [method book], you know, like a lesson book, written by Vincent López. I’d never heard [of him] before. And as ... you have to remember that I’d just started, I didn’t know anything about anything. And when I think of it now, apparently this was like a ragtime piano book, and, uh, this was the first time I saw, what do you call, you know, stride, *un-cha, un-cha, un-cha*, stride. Yeah, I saw, the first time in my life I saw this, and it had “Twelfth Street Rag” and things like that in there. So, this was really exciting to me, and I was trying to play. And, uh, Mister Fukui much, much later, he was talking to me about his memories, which I’d forgotten completely. He said, “I sent you a book, and a week later you sent me [it] back. So I thought, ‘Maybe she didn’t like it.’” And I said to him, I said, “No, I copied everything,” so I said Now, when I start thinking, that’s true, that happened. So, he was really encouraged, he probably felt like a Professor Higgins! [laughs] Anyway, so ... that was very exciting, doing all this. But it’s mainly, learn [to] improvise or something by getting to know the players. In those days I had no discrimination, I copied *everybody* ... and, uh, to get used to jazz language. Then, as I mentioned earlier, on “Near You” I would try to, you know, play my own, but not *truly* improvise, but it was practicing my improvisation, and I kind of performed that, but do what I was going to do. Something like that. So, by doing this, I learned a little at a time, I became my own. I think it’s one of the good things, I think about, is when you don’t have a book, you’re not learning from a book. But if you learn something from a book, you go one process, you go with the head, then you have to digest that one. But [if] you’re doing [it] by yourself, copying a book, copying a record and trying to play it, there’s no one cushion. So once you did that, it’s already yours, digested. I think it’s the hardest way but probably the best way. Charles Mingus, when later on I was with his group, and we used to rehearse [at] his apartment, he had no written music or anything, he sang [the melody], and you have to remember that. You know, I think that’s the best way, to Small group, I guess, you can’t do that with a large ensemble [laughs].

Brown: Well, I worked with Cecil, Cecil Taylor does! [laughs]

Akiyoshi: But that’s the best way. And, uh, my case was, that’s why I say “learn by yourself,” by that It’s always been one way, maybe, I’m grappling, maybe ... it was not so convenient a time as today, there weren’t any records available, you couldn’t buy [them], first of all. But, on the other hand, it was probably a good time, that’s the way I had to learn, which was probably was the best way. So ... so, by the time when I went to Tokyo, which was ‘58, I believe, somewhere....

Brown: No, ‘58?

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Akiyoshi: No, *gomen*, I'm sorry.

Brown: 48, 48.

Akiyoshi: I think it was [19]48, uh, it was summer. And, uh, I was a little bit, I was a little bit, kinda, trying to play, improvise and so on and so on, you know. When I went to ... Mister Yamada, he was an old man, I mean an old-timer. There were a few old timers, Japanese old times, who used to play on the boats. I think, one of the most important, probably the one was [trumpeter] Mister Fumio Nanri, because [they] had a Nanri award set up by *Swing Journal*. I'm the first recipient. But, that was a long time ago [1975].... But anyway, he was a trumpet player. And all those musicians were, after the war, whenever they started they were the ones who used to be leaders of certain groups, and so on. There was a trombone player, played a little bit like Jack Teagarden, and tried to sing like that, too. That was in Tokyo. So I really wanted to go to Tokyo, because there wasn't anything in Fukuoka that I could learn. And he [Yamada] gave me an introduction letter to [one of] his old players, you know, old buddies, a drummer, his name was Ikoma, Tokuji Ikoma, I think it was. And also he gave me ¥5000 as a gift, you know, a going-away present. That was my monthly salary in those days. And in *those* days that was considered a very, very good salary. And ... it was Tokyo ... there were most, there were a lot of clubs, dance halls. There weren't any jazz clubs, it's a dance hall, and usually the top floor of a department store. And it was one in Gotanda, it was Shirokiya department [store], top floor, and there was a ... they were playing for the dancers in the daytime. I went there and ... he died several years ago, he was a drummer called George Kawaguchi, who is very well known. And, uh, most people don't know that there was Teruo Yoda, he was a tenor saxophone player, and there's Fumio Matsumoto, a trumpet player. And they were playing. And I thought, "Whaa...!" [laughs], you know, "Whaa, fantastic!" I was like watching, I was, "I wish I could play like that!" That was my ... so, as I say, I had introduction to.... This was a very interesting thing about ... it was Ikoma and his band, this was a show band. And Tokyo station, Marunouchi side—I don't quite remember if it was six o'clock, or five o'clock, I don't quite remember—but you had to be there. Then you waited, and most of the time, not all of the time, but most of the time there was an American truck [that] would come, one of those khaki-colored trucks. And we got on to that truck and went to the camps. And, camp, there they had a show, and we had to back up, so we were a show band, so you had to be able to sight-read. So, I was a pretty good sight-reader in those days, you know, so I got a job and that was ... sometimes a juggler, sometimes an opera singer came, you know. And I still remember, her name was Araki, I think, Miss Araki, I still remember her face; she was a very beautiful woman. But, anyway, she would sing, and I had to back up on piano. All these things. And the juggler was *great*, because the juggler usually [was] a small-group jam session, because there was no music, other than, usually had music and you had very little, said, "You go from here to here," blah, blah,

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blah, so on and so on. Juggler was just, “We want the tempo about like that” or something, and we just had to.... This was [the] most, you know, fun.

Brown: You were mostly jamming.

Akiyoshi: Yeah, well, mostly, yeah, right [laughs]. I don’t know how well I did, I probably did pretty bad. So did everybody else. But, uh, that was ... sometimes we’d go to two different places in one night. Go from there, go from there, something. Sometimes no check would come and there was no job [chuckles]. Something like that. It was kind of interesting because that was very good experience, because it was something that you had to do at that particular moment [chuckles]. We got a job, I should say he got a job at an officers’ club, St. Luke hospital at, uh ... it’s still there, at Tsukiji, there was an officers’ club there. And, uh, Mister Ikoma’s band got a job there [chuckles]. The first time I had this long dress [chuckles]. It was ... there, I had to wear them, you know, so it looked nice or something [chuckles]. I was cursed ... I think it was ... I was seventeen years old at that time, maybe going on eighteen, something like that.

Brown: Were you the only woman in the band?

Akiyoshi: No. There were no women in the band, um, there were no women in the band.... Any woman in the band those days in Japan was a pianist. There were no horn players, in Japan those days. Now, you know, now there are a few, but....

Brown: Now, when you first got to Tokyo, you said you saw the band, and you said, “Oh, I want to play like them.” What style were they playing? Were they already playing bebop? Or were they playing...?

Akiyoshi: Who?

Brown: The musicians, you said, when you first got to Tokyo.

Akiyoshi: Oh, no, no.

Brown: You said, “Oh, I want to play like....”

Akiyoshi: Those days, everything was swing style.

Brown: Swing style.

Akiyoshi: Everything was swing style. So the drummer would play [scats], like that [chuckles].

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Brown: Right.

Akiyoshi: Anyway....

Brown: Can you do that again? [laughs]

Akiyoshi: [Laughs]. Anyway, so I was actually pretty in demand, because I was playing like Teddy Wilson style, everything was that. And there was a number one pianist in those days, his name was Mister Matsui, Hachirō Matsui. He had, he was playing with a small group, and there was another department store, the top floor, and, uh, Ikoma-san thought I should study with him. So he says, “Well, I don’t teach, but if you want to come watch me play, it’s fine.” So off-days, which was quite often, I went to his place, where he’s playing, and it was called “Tokyo Jive” [laughs], that’s the name of the group.

Brown: Jive.

Akiyoshi: It was a quintet [chuckles]. And, uh, I would sit next to him and I watched him play. I remember when I tried to play like that, I said, “Very soon, I will play like Matsui-san,” and Matsui-san was the leader and so I got a job with this trombone player who had a band, in another department [store], called Isetan—it’s still there, though, in Shinjuku, up there. There was a ... this was for American people, and trombone player was the leader, Mister Mori. Tōru Mori. I was hired because I played like Matsui-san [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: Like that. Then ... after that, I was ... I was in a ... I was actually, after that I was hired [by] Tokyo Jive, because Mister Matsui got ... he had written some music that became a hit, and he was hired by a movie company. So I was his, you know, predecessor [successor] or whatever [chuckles]. And so ... playing there, there was a pianist named Akimitsu [Yoshitaka].

Brown: Akimitsu?

Akiyoshi: He came to me, he said, you know, um, “Maybe we [should] switch jobs.” And in those days there was a thing called “bebop,” it was already in Japan. And [grumbles], “Bebop, that’s not music,” something like that. So, he was playing with a band called Ichiban Octet...

Brown: [laughs]

Akiyoshi: ... group, and this was a bebop band.

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Brown: Really?

Akiyoshi: So he really didn't want that. He wanted to play swing style piano. And so, he came to me, said, you know, "Maybe we switch the piano, you play there, and I play with this group." And then I said, "Well, I don't know," I mean.... But I thought, "I shouldn't knock something that I don't even know. I should learn, *then* knock!" [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: So, okay, I took a job, I was the piano player with Ichiban Octet. This was the group that was playing in the Shinagawa depot. This was the first, this was predominantly black people. I think maybe it was a sergeants' club, I'm not quite sure.

Brown: You said, where was it? Shinagawa?

Akiyoshi: Shinagawa. And there was a ... today Shinagawa ... today, it's the east side, which is the ocean side, there was *nothing* there. Today it is the most hip place. Even Dean & DeLuca has a store [there]. It's like a really upscale, and uh, [as] famous here as the Oyster Bar in the station, [Grand] Central Station, they have a restaurant over there, the east side. But in those days there was *nothing* there. And then, from that side, there was this club.

Brown: And the name of the club again?

Akiyoshi: I don't remember. As I said, this club is the ... the Ichiban Octet—I don't even know if it had a name, because it was for the Americans, as I said, it was all black musicians, I mean, excuse me, troops....

Brown: Black soldiers.

Akiyoshi: Soldiers. Every once in a while I saw white soldiers, but it could've been a sergeants' club, I'm not quite sure. But it was something to do with shipping, something depot.

Brown: Quartermaster's depot?

Akiyoshi: Yes, that's it, quartermaster depot.

Brown: Now, you mentioned a club, or a camp before, was that Camp Zama that you

Akiyoshi: No.

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Brown: ...said the truck used to come and get you? What was that? Remember, you said you guys would wait for the truck to come and get you and take you to a camp?

Akiyoshi: I have *no idea* where they were.

Brown: [Laughs] Okay.

Akiyoshi: But I know it was in Tokyo. And as I mentioned, I said it would go from one place to another sometimes.

Brown: Yeah.

Akiyoshi: So, I'm not quite sure where they were. I have no idea. I don't even know where Zama is even today.

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: But, so, that was, this was a totally different, one place and so on. This band was my very first bebop band, and they had like, uh, Illinois Jacquet playing, it was called "Jet Propulsion." And he solos, you know, and the introduction was piano, *da-DAH da-da-da-da-da-dan-dan-dan*, something like that. Anyway, this was the first time I *really* felt like I was in a jazz band. It was *really* exciting and we had "A Night in Tunisia," "Oo-Pa-Pa-Da," all these stock arrangements.

Brown: Mmmm!

Akiyoshi: And there was a black trumpet player—I don't remember the name, I don't really think I knew the name—he was, every once and a while, he rehearsed [with] the group. It was an octet, it was led by an old timer, he's a tenor saxophone player, his name was Shin Matsumoto—um, Shintarō, Shintarō? [repeats, Shin is correct]—I don't quite remember his ... first name, but last name was Matsumoto, he was an old timer. He was considered the "Coleman Hawkins of Japan" [laughs]. But it was playing ... that was very, very exciting, it was like this particular one had stock arrangements, so they had, like, the solo was always, you know, someone who played it, it was already written. And Matsumoto-san would play this Illinois Jacquet solo. It sounded so hip to me—wow, that's fantastic! [laughs].

Brown: So you had tenor saxophone, trumpet, uh....

Akiyoshi: Tenor saxophone, trumpet, and there was a G.I., Japanese American—I don't quite remember, I see the face—alto saxophone [probably James Araki] He was the

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saxophone, and the one with the glasses, I don't remember the name, he was the trumpet player. Then there was a ... tenor saxophone. There was a guitar. The guitar player and I had a fight, so that's how I remember the guitar player [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]. What did you fight about?

Akiyoshi: Ah, I don't remember, I think it was I never liked the guitar, you know, they always kinda ... very difficult to play together, unless you have some kind of understanding. And of course I was immature, I'm sure he was immature, too. So we had a lot of problems. But it was ... the drummer ... I wish I remembered the alto player's name, but he was a Japanese American, I think from Hawai'i, I don't remember. But there was, I think, it was an octet, maybe there was a couple of trumpet players, possibly. I don't remember, I don't remember whether this trumpet player wore glasses, then alto, the lead alto, and Matsumoto-san was the tenor saxophone player. There was a guitar and drums ... drummer and the bass player I don't remember who they were, either. But, uh....

Brown: Did they really capture the bebop style?

Akiyoshi: Bebop style? *Probably*. I don't know. I don't remember anything, besides the fact that I was just introduced to it and I couldn't tell one way or another, probably [chuckles]. The first bebop players, at that time, there was young musicians, together they were called CB9, for some reason. They were playing in Yokohama. And they were the ... Jun Shimizu, he was the first bebop player, one of those, you know, broken rhythm, he was the first one. And, uh, I'm not quite sure, but I couldn't probably tell in those days if it was bebop or not. I wasn't even in a position to criticize anyone [chuckles].

Brown: Had you heard, uh, Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie records by this time?

Akiyoshi: No, I hadn't. But they used to sing in "Oo-Pa-Pa-Da," *dah-da-da-dah*, something like that, so on and so on. So, still, I hadn't even heard Bud Powell. That was still.... Then after this ... I was asked to play in another band, called Gay Stars [chuckles], that's a big band. Then there was another one, this was called Six Lemons. It was Six Lemons ... by this time, I was really copying things—by the time when I went to Six Lemons, there were jazz coffee shops sprouting in all places—and around those times, I heard Bud Powell.

Brown: About what year is this now, maybe fift—.

Akiyoshi: I would say '50. I would say '50, '51. I would think '51. But there was an Armed Forces Radio Service, they had a jazz hour, and I heard this "Body and Soul" and

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it's beautifully played, and I said, "Wow, who could that be?" and that was Bud Powell. Since then, I tried to listen to him, and pretty much the same time there was a jazz coffee shop, you know. Those days, records were costing—I think it was the black market, you could only buy in the black market—it was ¥3000. And those days if you were a graduate of an Ivy [League] college and got a job in a bank, the first salary was ¥6000 in Japan, monthly, you know. So you know how expensive the records were. So these were probably bought on the black market from a PX who would buy.... So my learning place was the jazz coffee shop, and I went there and listened to records and tried to learn the tunes. And by that time there were many Bud Powell records and so on. And the place I went most was a in Yokohama, a place called Chigusa. It's gone but.... The owner of Chigusa [Yoshida Mamoru], he actually received a medal from Yokohama city, as a contributor to the cultural scene of Yokohama, something like that. He died quite some time ago [1994]. But most jazz coffee shops were very small; this one was particularly small, maybe like six people, be like, that's it.

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: And I would listen to records. And uh, you know, as I said before, you can't copy by [listening] one time only, so I would have to ask her, ask *him*, I said, "I'm sorry, but could you play that please again?" and he would say, "*Yes!*" and he would do that, and I tried.... So, you know, this is the LP time, so probably quite a lot of his records at one point were pretty, went down! [laughs]

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: But those were very, very important school, you know, places for me, or somebody like ... now, this was, I have another place about, away from here, it's a little small house that I work there, because there's nothing there, you know, no telephone or anything, that's where I usually go to work. But I put it there, but there was.... Quite some time ago, I still had a large ensemble, and someplace, it could be Indiana, I'm not quite sure, [there was] a concert. The presenter came to me and said, "I have a surprise for you, somebody wants to present you something." And this man came with a sketch of me. He sketched while I was listening to records [laughs].

Brown: At the coffee shop?

Akiyoshi: Yes, coffee shop. So he gave this to me and it's in a corner in my, you know, other place. But, that was a ... coffee cost, I think, ¥50 in those days, you know, so you had one coffee then you stay there three hours or something, chart another tune, or so on and so on.

Brown: [Chuckles]

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Akiyoshi: And Bud Powell's record was ... the first one, I think he was 23 years old, his first [as a] leader. And my first recording, which was done by Norman Granz, you know, at the recommendation from the late Oscar Peterson, I was 23 years old, so I thought, "Whoa, this is something!" [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs] Let's go back to when you first got to Tokyo, um, about your impressions of Tokyo, and where you first stayed. Did you have any con ... you had this letter of introduction,

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: you had a job....

Akiyoshi: No, no, no.

Brown: ...but did you have a place to stay? How did you, what was your social situation?

Akiyoshi: My mother's friend was quite wealthy, they had a house in Setagaya, and uh....

Brown: Where?

Akiyoshi: Setagaya, which is like, uh ... here it would be, say, oh....

Brown: Well, I have a map of Tokyo, would it be...?

Akiyoshi: Yes, Setagaya-ku [ward], yes. Setagaya-ku is a more residential area. They have a *densha* [train] from Shibuya station to, on the way to Yokohama.

Brown: Oh, Shibuya. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: They had a house, so I had one room upstairs they rented to me. So, those days ... later, yeah, I also left there and went to other places. But it's always, those days I was always renting one room or the upstairs. Later on, before, maybe a year before I came to this country, I was in Shinagawa, and upstairs.... See, in those days, after the war was ended, many, relatively wealthy people lost income, so they rented out rooms for the income. So there was quite a lot of those, y'know. And, uh, the last one I had, they converted so there was a kitchen upstairs, and things like that.

Brown: So you actually didn't have a piano in your house where you lived.

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Akiyoshi: No. I did not have a piano ‘til, uh, when I was in the Blue Coats Orchestra, so that would be ’50, 1950, I think. I think I went to Tokyo in ’48, so didn’t have any.... But 1950 I was asked to join what was called the Blue Coats Orchestra, and they’re more like....

Brown: Blue Coats?

Akiyoshi: Blue Coats, you know, right. And it was funny ... they were very much in a Les Brown bag kind of thing, more like a dance band, like a middle-of-the-road kind of thing, and they had ... they asked me to join the orchestra, and my condition was, “Give me an advance and I can buy a piano.” So that’s what I did. That’s the first time I had my [own] upright piano. And [at] that time I was renting a room that was six mattress [size], you know, *rokujō*, we call it. And, uh, I had a piano and I had a bed and it was very exciting to me [laughs gaily].

Brown: You remember what kind?

Akiyoshi: Uh, it was called Brückner. I think it was called Brückner. And, uh ... it really didn’t matter to me, whatever, it was okay. But that was called Brückner and.... Soon after I bought the piano, the Blue Coats were playing at a Yokohama place, a civilian club, called the Colonial Club, called Club Colonial, a civilian club. Les Brown and Bob Hope came for a USO tour and they played at the stadium in Yokohama and uh ... for the Americans, you know, you [Japanese] couldn’t get in there. But I kind of snuck in there [laughs]. Anyway, I got to know the pianist, I think his name was Jeff Clarkson. I think his brother used to play with Gene Krupa’s trio, and I think he was the brother. I think he was called Jeff Clarkson. I asked him to come and play for us. And he came to my little place. We all were kind of excited—I wasn’t the only one, there were others and so on—and he played my piano, you know. It was “I Got You [My Love to] Keep Me Warm” or something like that [sings]....

Brown: “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm.”

Akiyoshi: ...and it’s got a little piano solo. I used to play just like that [laughs]. It was very good, that’s the first piano I had, very, very exciting.

Brown: So, that means now you’re working at the Colonial Club in Yokohama. Are you still working with..., are you working in many bands at this time?

Akiyoshi: No, I moved from one band to another quite, probably three months at a time. The longest one probably I was—that is, in Tokyo—the longest one probably was maybe around six months, it was the first band, maybe ... God, uh ... maybe about that much

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with the Ichiban Octet. But most of the time three months with the Blue Coats to Gay Stars. After Gay Stars there was a small combo called Six Lemons. This was....

Brown: Six Lemons? [chuckles]

Akiyoshi: Six Lemons. These were supposed to be the best young players. There were no jazz clubs and there was a new nightclub, which opened in Ginza. The manager was—I forgot the name—he was supposed to be *the* nightclub manager, and he wanted to have all the best young musicians together, a sextet, for playing. And he was asked by ... I mentioned before, Yoda, Teruo Yoda, who was a tenor saxophonist and played quite well—he was more like, somewhere between Flip Phillips and, uh, a little like ... you know, that kind of style, kind of.... So he gathered the musicians and I was elected as the piano player. And so we were there. The drummer's name was Frankie Sakai; later on he became an actor, a movie actor, he actually was quite good at it, he got some kind of award. He died quite some time ago. But he was a natural comedian and there was a song called "Orange Colored Sky," something like that, and he sang. And I really hated it. So he and I had a big fight [laughs], and I left in the middle of the.... In those days I had a hot temper. And, uh, I left and I went back, this was a different place, where I had a room rented. And I heard something in the window, I heard Yoda Teruo, he said, "Apologize to her. Apologize to her. She's only a woman." [laughs heartily] But anyway, this was a sextet, we played, and that time—I'm sure it was [19]50—the nightclubs in Japan, there were always girls, you know, beautifully dressed girls around and *da-da-da*, and that's when Oscar Pettiford came with his troops to play [at] that Ernie Pyle theater. And the Ernie Pyle theater, you [Japanese] couldn't get in, but by that time I'd developed my, what do you call, *okkake*, here they call ... they call, you know, people who follow you, fans, not a fan, but you have another word for it....

Brown: Not a stalker? [laughs]

Akiyoshi: No. I will think of it in a minute. So we call it *okkake* in Japan.

Brown: Like devotee? No?

Akiyoshi: No, uh, *groupie*.

Brown: Groupie! Okay [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: I had groupies, I had American groupies, and they would come ... you know, this was a Japanese club so Americans are not supposed to be there. So I had these groupies, about four of them, they were in the backstage and listening. And this club, downstairs there was a coffee shop, Japanese coffee shops are usually restaurants. Every once in a while the MPs would come. So MPs would come, and they would go

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downstairs [laughs]. So they were the groupies. One of the groupies, his nickname ... we used to call him "Mac," because his whole full name was McCutchen—I don't quite remember the first name [Harry], but McCutchen—and he was an Air Force sergeant or something and he was a jazz fan and one of the groupies. And he told me about Oscar Pettiford's group, and that he would take me to backstage. And he took me to backstage and I saw ... this was the first time in my life I saw people warming up. You know, I'd never seen that, Japanese players [were] never warming up. And ... J.J. Johnson ... this group was Oscar Pettiford, J.J. Johnson, Howard McGhee, Rudy Williams, who I didn't know then, there was [drummer] Charlie Rice, and there was a guitar player [Skeeter Best]. And because it was a USO tour, they didn't have a pianist. But I heard J.J. warming up and that *really* impressed me, and McCutchen, Mac, said, "Well, this is Toshiko Akiyoshi, a pianist," and they said, "Oh, hi, excuse me, I have to warm up," and you know, so.... That was really my first ... "Wow," you know, "a great player like that, playing a long tone." And uh, so I asked ... by the time I was listening to them my job had already started. I could tell Yoda-san was steaming mad that "the pianist is not here." And so I asked them to come to where I worked, it was a nightclub. So ... J.J., Oscar Pettiford—I, actually I have a picture somewhere—but anyway, Howard McGhee, they came, so naturally Yoda-san was very mad, but I came with them so I was forgiven, so to speak. And we had a little jam session. But when I played—at that time I played, I think I played, probably, "Squatty Roo," I have a feeling I probably played "Squatty Roo." And J.J. said, "Ah, so you like Bud Powell!" And uh, I *really* loved Miles Davis, you know [mumbles], I said, "How's Miles doing?" He said, "Oh, you like Miles, huh? He's not working." [laughs] This was, like, 1950. I don't think he was working. That was ... those [guys] were the American jazz scene. The fact is, when I came [to America] in '56 and in '57, I was at the Hickory House for six weeks. Oscar Pettiford used to come almost every night and sit in. And that was the greatest lesson you could ever have. On the other hand, when you think about that, why he could come almost every night, [it was] because he wasn't *working*. You know, nowadays if he was, today people would pay a *premium* to listen to him. So those were the days, I think, in a way.

Brown: J.J. didn't explain why Miles wasn't working? Did he give any indication why?

Akiyoshi: No, he just said, "He's not working," that's all. Anyway, there weren't that many jobs, probably, because Oscar Pettiford, it was the same thing much later, like six, seven years later. But, um, that time ... I started thinking about that I really didn't want to play in a dance band, you know, dance music. You *had* to play dance music, of course, that's what it was for. So I made my own group. I quit and I made my own quartet and ... how I named it, I said it was small, so I named it the Cozy Quartet. So it was called Cozy Quartet, first one. That was my first one. And, uh, 'til then I was the top-paid sideman, sideperson, player in Japan, I was getting ¥50,000, which today ... if I were a little clever, if I were a little more, better minded person rather than just thinking of playing, playing, playing, I would've bought land. I'd have been a billionaire today

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[laughs].

Brown: [laughs]

Akiyoshi: But it's okay. Everything works out. But it was, I just ... that was a departure for me. And after that, I had a very difficult time, you know, economically at that time. But, I didn't stop, so I was somehow ... since then, most of the time, I would start playing at a place like a service club, because you could play [jazz], and my best job was in Yokohama, a place called Seamen's Club. And it was a small ... it was a seamen's club. Almost once a week they had a fight, you know, a big fight. The owner, I think, was a Marine lawyer or something, American, who was married to a Japanese. The lady was a *beautiful* lady, used to be an old titled family's daughter. Anyway, and sometimes the owner would try to stop a fight, and it was [??, laughs], it was *horrible*, it was *awful*. But you could play anything you want. And that was an important place, because it was in Yokohama. Yokohama had a [military] camp. That's where Hampton Hawes was. And not only that, there was Hal Stein, who later on was with Charles, Ray Ch..., not Ray Charles, uh, the vibraphone player, the Teddy Charles....

Brown: Teddy Charles.

Akiyoshi: ...group. And Buddy [Walter] Benton, who no one knew [in] those days, but played really good, you know. And he was the one who used to show me the tunes, like "Indiana." I didn't know the tune, it's like, "Back home Indiana," all those tunes I learned from what we called "Saigō-san," you know, he looked like Saigō [Takamori, famous samurai leader of the Meiji Restoration]-san . So, that was a very important place for me and uh, everything, anything.... And also, going home, I'd stop at Chigusa and listen to records and [have] coffee, and so on and so on. And that was very, very, you know, important. Before that, I have to mention about '53, 1953 I already had my own group, as I said, sometimes [we'd] get a job, I don't have a job, and then I would just be [by] myself. And there was a very popular group called Six Joes.

Brown: Six Joes.

Akiyoshi: Six Joes. And there was, uh, the leader was a bass player named Shin Watanabe. He later on formed Watanabe Productions, *the* production [company]. If it weren't for that production [company], you couldn't have any television program, something like that. It *really* became... and he was a bass player, and he also died, but the tenor player was one of the best, actually, probably one of the two best tenor players, this one we used to call "Sleepy," because he looked like he was sleeping all the time. It was Matsumoto ... maybe, I don't quite remember ... Hidehiko. Hidehiko Matsumoto. And he was a tenor player, and he was a very, very counted player. And there was a vibraphone player, then there was ... anyway, Six Joes, so it was the most popular group.

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Then, 1953, the first live house, jazz club in Tokyo, and....

Brown: Live house?

Akiyoshi: Yeah, live house, the first one. Um....

Brown: Where was it in Tokyo?

Akiyoshi: They're called "live houses" in Japan.

Brown: Where was it in Tokyo? What section?

Akiyoshi: West, Ginza. Ginza, *nana-chōme*, *roku-chōme* [city block 7 or 6], second one, *roku-chōme* [block 6]. Ginza is seven *chōme*, but the second one, and the west side of the main street. Main street of Ginza, west side, and uh.... [It] opened October 15. The man asked the Six Joes, you know, Watanabe-san, to play the [opening] night, and there was a charge of music, another was, he was ... daytime. So he came to me—he always liked my playing—and he said, "You get the best ones you want to get," you know, maybe like a quintet to play in the daytime. I played from, like, 12 to 6 or something. And he [Watanabe] played from 7 to 11, something like that, I don't know ... I'm not quite sure of accurate hours, daytime. I had an evening, already had a job, and I had a quartet, and that's the first time Sadao Watanabe, who is very famous today, he was maybe 18 years old, and I had him. He was the *first* one who sounded like a bebop player. He sounded very much like Jackie McLean, that kind of *sound*, you know. Anyway, so ... when [Shin] Watanabe-san asked me to do it, Sadao Watanabe was a little bit too ... it's not quite, quite ... so at that time there was a more established alto player and there was another tenor player who played very well, Miyazawa, Akira Miyazawa, who was also very a good player and had a quintet in the daytime. So, November 3, I don't remember, 1, 2, 3, or 2, 3, 4, or 3, 4, 5, I don't remember, but three days, Norman Granz brought JATP [Jazz at the Philharmonic] to Japan and played the Nichigeki, which no longer exists, but in Yūrakuchō. This was the first group that came to Japan to play for a Japanese audience. Before that, there was, I said, Oscar Pettiford's group, and the Gene Krupa Trio was there, and actually, Satchmo's group was there, too. But they were all USO tours.

Brown: USO tours.

Akiyoshi: So, this was the first one. And, uh, Oscar Peterson's trio, and Ella Fitzgerald, you know, and all these ... Flip Phillips, Ben Webster, I think was there, I don't know. But Roy Eldridge, and Charlie Shavers, I think. But, anyway, they came and played. And someone brought—I wish I know who that is, because I couldn't possibly, how I can thank him, I don't know, but [he was] Japanese, I know—he brought Oscar Peterson and

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Flip Phillips to this live house when I was playing. And we ... so he listened to [me] a bit and came to me while I was playing and said, “Are you playing somewhere tonight?” and I said, “Yes, I’m playing *dah-dah-dah-dah*,” and he said, “Okay, I’ll come again, because I have to go to work now.” Then he came again [in the] evening, to a place that was called Club New Ginza, it was mostly for the Americans, and it was kind of like a ... balcony, stairs, you know. And he came and he listened and he played, too, he played, too. And he said, “I want you to come at three o’clock to the hotel,” and I said And he ... told Granz, he said, “You should record her.” That’s how my recording came, you know. And ... this is also like, say, luck was involved, I think, in timing, because if the live house wasn’t open, he would not have [had] an opportunity to listen to me. So everything is kind of timing, you know. So I consider myself very lucky that the place was open at that time and that I was asked by Watanabe-san to have my group play, you know, quote-unquote “all-star,” you know [chuckles], quintet, whatever it is. So, everything I think had a lot to do with timing, and luck was involved, you know.

Brown: Before we go on to your recording, um, who else was in the rhythm section of your quintet, this “all-star” quintet?

Akiyoshi: You’re talking of ... my ...?

Brown: The one that you got together....

Akiyoshi: Oh, there was a ... drummer and bass player were from my quartet....

Brown: From your quartet?

Akiyoshi: My quartet, yes....

Brown: So who were the original personnel of your quartet, your first group?

Akiyoshi: Quartet is ... Jun Kawaguchi—he also died, he was a young man, but—he was then a bass player. We used to call [him] “Omasuzu,” that’s his nickname. And he couldn’t really understand, you know, the things ... I had to write it, all the notes, so it’s the kind of right notes to play....

Brown: So you had to write out all the walking bass [lines]? Everything? [laughs]

Akiyoshi: Yeah, all the walking bass, ’cause he wasn’t a walking bass player. I don’t really know how many walking bass players existed in those days, you know. But, uh, at least there was somebody—Watanabe-san was [one of them]—they understand the [chord] changes and so on. This man didn’t quite understand everything. So ... and I had my particular way I wanted to hear. I didn’t want to hear certain notes. So I,

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consequently I had to write all the notes [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs] You have to write everything you want to hear!

Akiyoshi: Yeah, right, exactly. So, that was a ... so everything, I think, all had to do with the timing.

Brown: Yeah, absolutely. So ... Oscar Peterson recommends to Norman Granz that he should record you. So then what happens? So you met Norman Granz, at this point? Yeah.

Akiyoshi: Yes, I met ... he said, "I usually listen to a player before I record it, but Oscar said that I don't have to listen to you. We have to go to Hong Kong, but a week later [we'll] come back, so you select the music by that time," and so on. And, uh, we recorded from midnight, "I'll give you Oscar's rhythm section," which was that ... and of course Oscar didn't have drummer, so JATP—in Oscar's trio there wasn't any drummer—so JATP had, J.C. Herd was the drummer. So J.C. Herd, and Herb Ellis, and Ray Brown, that was the rhythm section.

Brown: So how *was* that?

Akiyoshi: I don't really remember, I think I was like *this* [probably makes a face], of course.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: I really didn't think I could *play*, you know. But once we started playing it was okay. But ... he would say, "Play six choruses," like that, and I have no problem playing those—I used to play 20 minutes, *wah-wah-wah-wah*, you know. And, uh ... one thing about the Norman Granz recording is that—I didn't think about it in those days, but later on I thought about—now, who am I? Ray Brown, Herb Ellis, you know, J.C. Herd, I mean they were like *real giants* of jazz players. They have nothing to play; Norman wouldn't let them take any solos or nothing. It's *all piano*. *All piano*. That's the way he liked to record. So, he liked to record someone, if he's featuring somebody, he features somebody, that's it. If you notice about Oscar Peterson trio recordings, it's pretty much like that, you know.

Brown: Feature the, yeah....

Akiyoshi: Yeah, that's how....

Brown: Well, I'm looking at the discography entry for your ... *Amazing Toshiko*

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Akiyoshi. That's the title of the record [laughs].

Akiyoshi: Is it? No, *Amazing*, I don't think that was the one, though. I think the first one was a 10-inch [LP], the pink ... the cover, [there was] a flower coming out of the piano.

Brown: Hmm [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: Is that what it says, *Amazing*?

Brown: Well, that's what it is in this, this is the Tom Lord discography. It has the listing of tunes. First tune that is listed is "Toshiko's Blues."

Akiyoshi: See, *that* is Norman's fault.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: Because *that* is a Bud ... a Bud ... [sings] *da-da-da-da-da-dahh*, Bud played that one.

Brown: Uh-huh.

Akiyoshi: I think it's called "Bud's Blues" [composed by Sonny Stitt]. *But* probably *he* didn't copyright it.

Brown: Ahh.

Akiyoshi: So Norman gave *me* credit, which I got ... you know, I needed that like a hole in the head, everybody thinks I stole it. But I had *nothing* to do with anything. That was really a drag.

Brown: So did you pick all the tunes, all the tunes that were recorded?

Akiyoshi: Yes, yes.

Brown: So this is *your* repertoire, then.

Akiyoshi: Yes, yes.

Brown: And you have "Squatty Roo"....

Akiyoshi: Yes.

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Brown: ... “Laura,” “Shadrach,” “I Want to be Happy,” “What is this Thing Called Love?” What were ... so when you got ready to make this recording, can you describe the process? You have these other three, as you say, great jazz musicians. So what’s the process? You just get into the studio and just play, or did you rehearse, or did you talk about the tunes?

Akiyoshi: No, we never rehearsed. We just went there and played. So he just ... he didn’t like to take many takes, Norman, you know. He’d just say, “Play once,” then he would say, “You play six choruses,” like that. And some had a bridge—some music doesn’t have a bridge, but some tunes have a bridge—sometimes the bridge was taken by the drummer or something like that. But other than that, there was no one, no one played solos.

Brown: How was the feeling with the other musicians, how...?

Akiyoshi: Oh, they were *very* supportive. Of course, they knew how *nervous* I was, you know. So ... they were very, very, very supportive. I’m grateful for that. And it’s just uh ... I don’t really remember anything, because I really nervous, and I was like *that*. But, I was playing a lot before that, you know, before this happened, so I had no problem playing, and once you’re playing it’s fine, but before you’re playing, you get really nervous. But it was, you know ... so, it went like that and.... Lew, sometime, a long time ago, first time he listened to that record, he said, “Boy, you used to play very fast!” [chuckles]

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: Yeah, I used to play very fast [chuckles].

Brown: I know that you mentioned, you know, the lineage of Teddy Wilson and Bud Powell. What about Art Tatum? Does he figure in?

Akiyoshi: Art Tatum was something that was ... when Norman Granz, after recording, he went back to the States and he sent me tons of Art Tatum’s [records], because he recorded for [Granz], so he sent them to me. And ... his recording ... actually, frankly speaking, I neglected to say, but I heard his record before that, playing, uh, “Begin the Beguine.” And, uh, I think it was, I heard it at a jazz coffee shop, and it was really amazing technique, the way ... and I think I sort of was.... But also, I heard “Elegy.” This is a *masterpiece*. I mean, I ... I’m not the only one: apparently Norman Gran... I mean, excuse me, Oscar Peterson really thought so. I understand he used to play that, you know. I have no chops to play that, but I mean, Oscar has and he used to play that all the time. And Ray Brown used to kid him and say, “Hey, hey, Oscar,” you know, “Tatum is here!” And he would say, “Oo-oo,” and stop or something. It made him feel

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like that, [so] Tatum must have been really great. I didn't get to hear him in person. But most recordings, it was really ... I was amazed [at] his ability, and he would play one after another, and if I know Norman Granz, he probably didn't have a take two, everything *blah, blah, blah*, and it was so many standard tunes and so on. But, it didn't really hit my heart. The one who hit [my] heart was Bud Powell. He was the one, you know, who *really* hit my heart. He not only had enormous technique—later I learned that he was actually classically trained, which I didn't know that—but his ... his ... uh ... *actuation*, he had a very unique way of accenting a certain beat. It was a very ... his own. Although he's not exactly a smooth player, he was really ... and he was real dynamic. But he also ... he was another tree, family tree from Tatum. He came out directly from Charlie Parker, so he's basically the first bebop player, so he played very much, his early ... if you listen, it's very much like Charlie Parker, except he doesn't have to breathe, you know.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: But he had ... and I really love the way he played ballads. He was such, he's got such a male romance and inborn ability, and I always thought, [swooning voice] "Oh, beautiful, ahhhh!" [chuckles]

Brown: [Chuckles] So were you happy with the recording once you heard it back, your first recording? I mean, 'cause now this is *your* document.

Akiyoshi: No, I had *no feeling whatsoever*.

Brown: [Laughing] Just numb, huh?

Akiyoshi: Yeah. All I know was, it sent me ... the review, I think it was *Down Beat*, said I had three stars, which I think was pretty good, you know, first one. And the *cover* got *five stars!* [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs] The flowers coming out of the piano?

Akiyoshi: Yeah, yeah, yeah! [laughs]

Brown: Okay, um, [recording engineer interrupts] ... okay, sure. Break time. Look, the sun's out! Amazing! Returning again. While we were on break, we were talking about the possibility of..., while Toshiko was performing in the clubs in Tokyo, it's entirely possible, my mother was a native of Tokyo, Shinagawa, and my father was stationed there, and that's where they met, it was dancing in those service clubs. It's entirely possible that my parents met while Toshiko was performing [laughs]!

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Akiyoshi: Yeah! It's entirely possible [laughs].

Brown: I think that's extraordinary. Um, I'll definitely have to tell my mom about that [laughs]. So ... you've done your first recording now, uh, you've gotten, this is your first exposure in America, you've gotten a review by *Down Beat*. So what happens next?

Akiyoshi: Nothing happens.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: [Laughs] Actually, after that, my life was the same as before: I was still barely paying the rent, and so on and so on. And, meanwhile, as I said before, there were a lot of American troops were drafted and stationed in Japan, and one of the persons was from Boston. And his name was Tony Teixeira—I understand he's also deceased—but he was a guitar player. And he said, “You know, you should write a school, there's a Berklee School of Music, and you should write, maybe they can bring you over to the States.” And I really wanted to go to the States, for the reason, 'cause I'd been copying the music from records and I'm listening to players, and by '52 or '53, I'd become sort of like the biggest, you know, frog in a very small pond, so to speak. And then I couldn't really ... as you know, jazz is a social art: if you are surrounded by better players, you become better at it. So, at this particular point, maybe I was the biggest frog in a small pond, but I was just starting. I was just ... there were so many things that I wanted to be able to play with these players whose records I'd been listening to all the time. And it would be great if I went to the States, I'd be able to play with them, I'd be able to learn much more and *blah, blah, blah*. So, I had written a letter—I'm sure it was terrible English [laughs]—but I got [it] proofed by, it was the guitar player, Tony read it and he said, “Well, I guess it's okay,” you know, “It's fine.” And ... at almost the same time, that's when my record came out, also, 1954, I believe, and so on. So ... the school was like about 350 students, it's not like today. And the founder was Lawrence Berk, Mister Berk was probably looking for something to advertise the school, and uh, here comes the record, my record. And in those days, if you said a Japanese plays jazz, it was like, something as if, “REALLY?” You know, you couldn't believe from today. Especially if it was a *girl*. And it's really like, uh ... and *Norman Granz* recorded it. So there was a lot of reason for people to maybe pay attention, what have you. So the school, basically, gave me a full scholarship [to] advertise the school. And in those days you couldn't come to the States unless you had a student visa or a working visa, one or the other. And uh ... I still remember the student visa was called an F-form visa, something. Anyway, that finalized ... and in '56, January, I came to this country. It was Pan-American number one.

Brown: [Chuckling] Okay.

Akiyoshi: Four-propeller engine.

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Brown: How many days did it take? I know when I first went to Japan it took three days: first from San Francisco to Hawai‘i, then to Wake Island [laughs]. How long, what was your trip?

Akiyoshi: You know, I can’t remember, but I’m sure there were *bom, bom, bom* [many stops]. What I remember about it is that there was hardly anyone on the plane.

Brown: Mmm.

Akiyoshi: And it was three seats, three seats. And I was ... also, stewardesses were very kind, not like today. Today it’s like army surgeon or something.... But they were very, very kind, and there were just not many people. That I remember. And ... what I remember is from, it was Los Angeles to Boston—I’m sure it stopped many places—but I was sleeping and I woke up one day, landed and take off and so on, *blah, blah*. And I got into Boston at two o’clock in the morning, Sunday morning. January, I’m not quite sure, 11th or 10th, somewhere around there. But it was a long trip, I know. But it was very exciting to me. I’d never flown before, so... [chuckles].

Brown: I want to talk about your experience: at this time, was it still called Schillinger House, or was it already called Berklee?

Akiyoshi: It was called Berklee School of Music, because Schillinger House—and Mrs. Schillinger objected to that, to use the Schillinger name—so Mr. Berk changed it to Berklee. Lee was his son, who is already retired. When I went to school he was a little boy. And uh ... so Berk-lee School of Music.

Brown: Um, I’m going to return us *back* to Japan, because there was something that was written about *you* and your days in Japan, in Hampton Hawes’ autobiography....

Akiyoshi: Ah, ah, ah.

Brown: ...called *Raise Up Off Me*. And page 62, he’s talking about, he was talking to a woman, a Japanese woman, and she says, “I’ll take you to the Harlem Club, where’s there’s a girl, Toshiko, plays like Bud Powell.” So, um, the Harlem Club, could you talk about that? Do you remember the Harlem Club?

Akiyoshi: Well, what I remember is that there was a bass player called Nabil Totah.

Brown: Uh-huh, “Knobby” Totah, yeah, yeah. *Arabian*.

Akiyoshi: He was active ... it was Yokohama’s, stationed in Yokohama, I’m not quite....

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Either 293rd Army Band, or 289th Army Band, I don't know which one, which. But it was ... he told me, said, "You know, Hampton Hawes is coming. We are trying to get him into *our* camp." So, to make the story short, so he came. And, those days we had a lot of sessions, jam sessions at night. So he came to sessions. And, as you know, he was very sick, and he would play, and that was my first meeting with Hamp, was that session, that time. Then it was ... his job was in the Army Band, because there was no piano—those days, the boats came in to the harbor at Yokohama that the band had to play for, and his job was to play cymbals [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: I don't know how well he played the cymbals, but that was his job. And uh, at that time I mentioned that I was playing at the Yokohama Seamen's Club, so he used to come down and I asked him to play and he would play. And I would listen to him play and try to learn a lot, as much as I could. It was because, you know, probably the first noted musician as far as ... because before that there was Shelly Manne, I think it was Shorty Rogers, probably was the leader, the writer. They called them something "Giants" [Shorty Rogers and His Giants] or something, something, an L.A. band, it was a group. They played and Hamp played a solo ... I don't quite remember the tune [sings], something like that, you know. And he had such a crispy way of playing, you know, his touch was very crispy, it was very, his own. It was fantastic, and so here is the person I heard on the record, and here he is in Yokohama, and I tried to learn as much as I could. It was a pity, the fact that he was very sick while he was in the camp, still. So he had a lot of problems, you know. He was probably one of the *sweetest* men that I probably have met. And in later years—*much* later, *much* later—and I was in an apartment that was in Greenwich Village, 10th street, and he got an engagement at the, uh, the Village Vanguard, for two weeks. And it was very ... he hadn't played in New York in a long, long, long time, and he came to visit me, and he had a new recording, with strings [*Hampton Hawes Plays Movie Musicals*, recorded 1969]. And he came to visit me, he wanted to give it to me. But he had his record in newspaper, to cover [it] up. Now, most players, they will show people, so that they can see it! He was kind of like that; he was a very sweet person, and he wasn't, you know, an aggressive person, and uh, he was a very unique [in his] playing. I think he influenced a lot of people and I am among those. It was great that he came to Yokohama! [laughs]

Brown: Hm, well, he described seeing you, he said, and I'm quoting: "...then this little chick in a kimono [chuckles] sat down at the piano and started to rip off things I didn't believe, swinging like she'd grown up in Kansas City." So, you obviously made a big impression on him, and then he goes on to discuss, he said that you guys became very, very good friends, very close friends, and then he says that you went on to America and made it big. But he says he has—let me see if I can read it—uh, "Toshiko..." oh geez, I'm sorry.... Uh, he talks about a possibility of you two doing duets and what he says is

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that it didn't happen. Uh, "Later on she made it on her own in the States. Anyway I soon discovered she dug me for myself and we developed a lasting friendship. The American consulate arranged for us to play a concert together and the response was so good, they contacted the Army to see about sending us on tour—Toshiko in her kimono, me in my slick American uniform—figuring it might help improve relations between the two countries, which were touchy at the time with the occupation still on. But somebody squashed the idea...." So....

Akiyoshi: Oh, I didn't know that. Oh, what a pity. He didn't tell me. But that would've been great, a great experience for me. He was a really, really unfortunate person, died very young.

Brown: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so I wanted to make sure we covered that, since he did talk about you. I think this is one of the few accounts of somebody actually *seeing* you performing in Japan. So, now you're in America [laughs], you're in *Boston*, of all places!

Akiyoshi: Yeah, I'm in Boston, right.

Brown: Now you're taking lessons. So talk about what it was like being in that school, and taking lessons, and who the teachers were, et cetera.

Akiyoshi: Well, first, as I said before, I landed at two o'clock in the morning, Sunday morning. And uh, three men, the first time I met: it was George Wein, uh, the founder, Lawrence Berk, then George Wein's Newport festival's public relations person, called Harry Paul. Those three people came to greet me at the airport. Then, I learned that evening was the Bud Powell Trio's last day at Storyville, and I said, "Boy, that's something!"

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: The day I landed, that was his last day. And Edward Thigpen was the drummer, who was drafted and was in the Korean War and he had a relief and came to Tokyo and sat in. See, the jazz world is very small, and so anybody who was drafted in Tokyo, whatever it is, in Japan, they'd say, "If you go to Tokyo, if you seek for her group, you can sit in and play." So that's the way it'd always been. So most of the people who came they always kind of let me know they were there, and Ed was one of those and he sat in and played. So, I knew he was with Bud, and he was there with Bud Powell, and I really thought that was something. And, as far as the school is concerned, uh ... my problem was that I really didn't speak the language that well. But, the good thing about music is that, it's not like studying English literature, so.... [laughs] That was ... but most of the time ... the one that I started from first, at the very beginning, which I

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know just about anything that they had to tell me. The only things that I didn't know was the Schi— ... also they used to teach the Schillinger System. They don't do that today, but that's something that I didn't know, so.... To some degree that was very helpful to me and it was ... it kind of accumulated my knowledge a little bit about certain relationships between music and mathematics and what have you. So on, so on.

Brown: So you already felt comfortable with music theory? You'd already ... basically taught yourself music theory?

Akiyoshi: Yes. So ... but, what they ... if you know about music history—I'm sure you do—but, the point is, the theory comes *after* the composition, always. So modern theory and traditional theory is *different*. Music was so ... theory is, put a very simple way, is analyzing what happened in music, and make a theory out of it, which is not exactly, you know, exactly, in my mind. So it doesn't matter. If you are a musically oriented person, you learn by yourself and it still ends up musically. And if you studied, you're not a musical person, no matter how much you studied, you will not be able to create music. Music is something like ... painting is the same thing. It's *good* to have the knowledge, but you don't *have* to have it. That's what I think.

Brown: Okay. Before we continue with the school, I want to go back and talk about you seeing Bud Powell...

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ... because I wanna know what ... did you meet him? Did you talk to him?

Akiyoshi: No, I was ... yeah, you know, because I knew Ed. So Ed, at the intermission time, Ed came to me and said, "Why don't you sit in?" you know. And at this time—it was a propeller [plane], so, I don't know, maybe three days or whatever it is, left for departure—I hadn't *played* piano for probably like four days or something. And uh, I sat in, I think I probably played "I Remember April" or something like that—that's what *I* think—but I'm sure I didn't really play that well, because as I said, you know, I hadn't played the piano. But I heard Bud Powell laughing his head off behind me, and I finished and I ... he took all, a deep bow. He took a deep bow. And ... this I have to mention: later on—and there was something about Bud Powell, I had some degree of, uh, something—because when I played in Philadelphia, in a place called Showboat, with a trio, he would play at the Band Box. In those days there were quite a lot of jazz clubs in Philadelphia, and they were walking distance [from each other]. He used to come down and listen to me. And he'd forget to go back to his job. And he had a bodyguard, because he was, you know, he had a problem and so on. And, before that, it was even, uh, the Hickory House, sometimes he'd play at Birdland, and he would come to listen to me. And uh, same thing, you know, he'd forget to go back, but.... The *reason* he was

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listening to me was not the same reason I would listen to him or any other people. Those days, I would listen so I could learn something. His case was ... he heard somebody playing, obviously had [his] influence—and especially in those days, I played like Bud Powell—and “Here [is someone who] obviously got a lot of influence from me, and it’s somewhere that I haven’t been.” Now, today a jazz musician goes to Japan maybe every few months or what have you. But the first jazz group [that] went—outside of Jazz at the Philharmonic—was in 1961, Art Blakey, in January. *This* was the first one. After that, you know, there were many groups. But, so—I’m talking about ’56, ’57, ’58—no one [had] been in Japan and naturally he hadn’t, and obviously he felt comfort, I think, because he had a very difficult life. Um, I read a book written by a Frenchman, and all these things led me to believe he had a very difficult time. And uh, it would comfort him, I think, you know. So he used to come listen to ... one time, he came to Hickory House, he came and I asked him to sit in and he [??], then he went upstairs—there was an upstairs inside the bar—he played a little bit. That was nice. But it’s always something ... then of course later on, he moved to Paris in 1958, and I got my first job at the Blue Note in Paris in 1964. Uh, April, “April in Paris”—it was nothing like that, though. Cold [laughs]. Anyway, he had tuberculosis and he was in a sanitarium under the care of Francis, Francis Paudras. He would come, Sunday he would go to Francis’ loft and Francis would take him back on Monday, or something like that. But he ... I think he really wanted to go home, and finally he went back to the States. But, because Francis knew that I was kind of a disciple of Bud, he had my recording, the one ... uh ... the Storyville recording [*The Toshiko Trio*, 1956], with some of my compositions. One is called “Studio J” [on *The Many Sides of Toshiko*, 1957]. That’s the room where we used to learn, you know, tunes, Studio J. And Bud listened to that and he said, “Did you write that?” and I said, “Yes,” and he said, “You’re the best female piano player.” He said that to me, and that would carry me for a *long* time; when I had a hard time, almost quit, I’d say, “Well, Bud Powell said that, so I must have something,” or something. But, because of that, I wanted to form the big band, because Lew wanted to *do* something, you know, not [that] I wanted to have a big band, so my job was to write the music, and that’s why I have “Studio J” orchestrated. Many bands like that. They especially like the shout chorus. So I have quite fond memories of Bud. I feel like it’s really karma, the fact that he always seemed to be playing when I was playing there. And it was ... the first time I heard him in person, it wasn’t like, uh, you know, his prime time, but it was amazing that ... to ... not ... like almost like automatically moving, you know. I’m *sure* he practiced *a lot*, you know, when he was in his young days, otherwise it wouldn’t be like that. And I heard, uh, some tapes made in Paris, and it was this incredibly fast Bach tune [sings], so he had things in the head and, uh, every once in a while that came out. What I understand, altogether four times he had electric shock treatment, which is not exactly kosher, I don’t think. He had a really difficult time, I think.

Brown: Well, we’re gonna return to your experience at Berklee, but I’m looking at the discography, and it’s listing as your second recording *The Toshiko Trio*, and it’s Paul

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Chambers and Ed Thigpen....

Akiyoshi: Yeah.

Brown: ... and this says it's Storyville, Boston, recorded in Boston, 1954. Is that correct?

Akiyoshi: No, New York.

Brown: New York. But it *was* in the States in 1954?

Akiyoshi: Ye—19, no, not '54....

Brown: Should be later.

Akiyoshi: '56, I think.

Brown: Should be '56. So, we should get in touch with Tom Lord and let him know. Okay.

Akiyoshi: '56, I don't know, George Wein was at that time music director, A&R man for Storyville recordings. So, we did two recordings in New York. One was [with] Paul Chambers—Miles had some kind of problem with his throat, and they weren't working—so Paul Chambers and Ed. Another one was with Roy Haynes and Oscar Pettiford. Ooh, that was really something. Yes.

Brown: [Chuckles] Yeah. Well, the discography continues with several other recordings in Japan....

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ... but we'll come back to that, maybe tomorrow. But I want to continue on, since we're already at Berklee, so to go ahead and talk more about ... you said that you got there, you're taking lessons, you already were familiar with a lot of the....

Akiyoshi: Yes, already I knew, but one thing about the—I think the Japanese, they don't say anything, I mean, I didn't—that year, there was a Jazz at the Philharmonic that came to the Symphony Hall, and Norman Granz told Oscar, Oscar Peterson came to see me, and he said, "You should be playing, not [be] in a school," you know. And uh ... and he was very nice to me, and I probably would've liked to do that. But I came with a full scholarship and I didn't have enough heart to do that. So, I guess it was a ... sometimes I wonder if I would've liked ... most of the students came, especially from Europe,

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someone like Joe Zawinul, somebody like that came to Berklee, then you know, got out very quick, very fast and so on, so on. But. I don't think he came with a scholarship. In my case, you know, I felt like I had an obligation. So that was ... and sometimes I wonder about if I'd got out and if I were playing, I wonder if I'd have been a more, you know, noted pianist, whom everybody would look for, as some kinds of pianists were. But at the same time, I think probably I wouldn't be writing, or whatever it is, you know. I think everything worked out the way it was supposed to work out. So that was, so I wasn't ... but I really wanted to get out. My reason for getting out was to get the diploma from, I mean, to get the Schillinger test passed, so that's what I did three years later, and I got out of the school in three and half years, so.... But most of the time I was, like ... for example, summertime, uh, there were six weeks, and sometimes I was at the Hickory House, and the first year, I was playing with a trio, which was, at that time at the school there was Jake Hanna—a *great* drummer who lives in Los Angeles—and uh, Gene Cherico, who was a *wonderful*, wonderful bass player, who died quite some time ago. But, uh ... trio, we used to travel and go to different places. And it was '57, '58 we were at the Hickory House for four, you know, six weeks or so. So mostly I was playing, [??] 30 hours or more [a week] of playing, playing different places, so on.

Brown: So this recording, *The Toshiko Trio*, that was George Wein? That was George Wein's session?

Akiyoshi: Yes, George Wein's session.

Brown: And ... do you remember much about that session? You had, you know, Paul Chambers and Ed Thigpen....

Akiyoshi: No, the material, was all ... I chose. What I remember about it was, I had written a thing called, uh, "Lazy Day." It was a lazy day, Sunday afternoon, so it was "Lazy Day." It has, like, a little bridge, it has a little, the bass had to play certain things, you know. And Paul Chambers went *duduladah*, and he said, "Lemme try to figure out the fingering," and went *bru-bru-bru* the second time, and I said "Wha—!" you know.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: "Wow, he's really, really good." That's what I remember. My only regret is at that time, Norman Granz actually offered to record a duet with Ray Brown, that he'd rather I came [t]here. But in order to do that I had to fly to Los Angeles, and the school rejected that, so I couldn't do that. That was ... there are two things that I really regret, because the school didn't give me the permission to do. This is one. Another one was Oscar Pettiford, when we recorded that year, you know ... Oscar had, before I left Japan, Oscar had two recordings of kind of large ensembles, which was kind of unusual: two French horns, and he was playing the cello, and so on. And uh ... there's some harp, and

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it was kind of interesting music [reissued on the CD *Deep Passion*]. He had a two-week engagement at Birdland, and he offered me a job to be the piano player. And then, the school rejected that. The reason was, if I were to play in New York I had to be the first, I had to be the leader, or something like that. I didn't want to be a leader and somehow I was pushed into [being] a leader. I wasn't ... I like, I would be the happiest person if I were a great sideman, side player.

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: And uh ... that was ... but, I guess everything worked out the way it worked out. I learned a lot of things about *being* a leader. So, that's okay.

Brown: There are some very interesting titles on this LP. You have "Soshu no yora," and....

Akiyoshi: "Soshū no yoru."

Brown: They must've misspelled it.

Akiyoshi: "Soshū no yoru" is a Japanese pop tune [composed by Saijō Yaso and Niki Kitao]. Pop music. "Soshū" is the name of a place in China [Sūzhōu]. *Yoru* is "evening," as you know. "Evening of Soshū," that's how it's supposed to be.

Brown: [Chuckles] Okay. And then you have "Kyōshū"?

Akiyoshi: Hmm?

Brown: Another one called "Kyōshū"?

Akiyoshi: "Kyōshū." *Kyōshū* is like a nostalgic, you know, nostalgic ... uh, for where you came from, you're kind of a little homesick. Little bit homesick, it's kind of like that.

Brown: And then "Homework." I don't know, was that a...?

Akiyoshi: Huh?

Brown: Called "Homework" [chuckles], "Homework."

Akiyoshi: "Homework"?

Brown: Yes, so [chuckles] maybe somebody else took liberties with the titles. Or maybe

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somebody needs to redo this [discography] [laughs].

Akiyoshi: No, that “Groove for Toshiko” is not the same thing, as that one.

Brown: Oh, the *other* one. See this is actually, this is the real title....

Akiyoshi: This actually, uh....

Brown: I think what I’m trying to highlight here is that you’re *composing*, so, several compositions, but we’ll talk about that later in the interview, your process of composition, et cetera. But the fact that, you know, you have several originals on this session, so....

Akiyoshi: Yeah, right. I think it’s, I started writing because, when I came to Boston I used to, of course, I used to go every night to listen, and in those days like, uh, even the big bands, like Duke’s band or Basie’s band, would stay for two weeks, you know, at a club. You can’t think of that today, but.... I was always sitting in, I decided that when I, if somebody asked me to sit in, I was going to sit in. You know, I decided that. So, I used to sit in with, Max [Roach] would let me sit in, Miles would let me sit in, so on, so on. So ... but Diz had a big band in those days, and Phil Woods was, I think, lead alto, and uh, Melba Liston was playing trombone. Anyway, uh, I was sitting in, playing, and I heard, “Powell! Powell!” When I played people said, “Aw, she’s Bud Powell! She’s Bud Powell!” And I started thinking, I said, “I guess that’s no good, I have to, you know, to try to find my own idiosyncrasy.” One of the [reasons] I started writing, one of the things that, I think, that’s the reason I started writing, to develop my own idiosyncrasy. So writing was something I was never interested in before.

Brown: Was your experience at Berklee, did it, um, uh ... highlight or advance this compositional impetus of yours? Did it help you in any way, or...?

Akiyoshi: I think it helped me to reorganize my thoughts. But, I used to have ... you see, before that, I came to this country, in Japan I had a nonet for the broadcast only. For the ... NHK had a jazz program....

Brown: We didn’t talk about that. Maybe we should....

Akiyoshi: Yeah, so ... I had a nonet. Those days I was influenced by, like, having a good French horn player, you know, things like that. And uh ... there weren’t any Japanese French horn players that I knew of, so I had an American, uh, French horn player who had been drafted. We used to record at midnight for three programs, taping, so on, so on, and I was, used to write. Also, it was trial-and-error writing, you know, I never learned to write. But some of them worked out okay, and so on. And uh, so I was

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writing before I came to this country. So, when I had this orchestration class with Herb Pomeroy, and he said, “Well, you’re not supposed to do this *yet!*” you know, he said things like that.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: [Laughs] So, uh ... it helped me to reorganize what I did. I did ... in other words, if I were to teach, that would’ve helped. You know, I have no interest, but if I were to teach, that was organizing your, in other words, organizing, *systemize*, and that would help [me] teach. But, as I said before, music, it’s not necessary to have all that, uh, all that knowledge and all that. It’s good to have knowledge, I think, but, it doesn’t have to.

Brown: Who were some of the other students that you were in classes with? You mentioned several profe—, uh, teachers....

Akiyoshi: Yes. Gene Cherico. He was, he had a natural ear. He used to be a drummer. And when he was in the service he got in a car accident that hit a train, and he almost lost his life. So anyway, he, the arm, the surgeon took a bone from [his] hip and replaced the arm, and he suggested he play the bass, pull the bass, to help [recover]. That’s how he became a bass player. So, I’m not saying because of that, but he had a natural beat, he was really a ... you know, but he had a *tremendous* ear. He didn’t know much about theory. And uh, sometimes I’d ask, “How do these changes go?” and he’d say, “Well, I don’t know, I play a B-flat and I...” [laughs]. And Jake always had a beautiful sound; he knew how to tune the drums, he was just fantastic that way. I mean, he still probably is. And uh ... so we had a very good time, you know, playing together. And that was a good ... there was a young player, at that time he was eighteen years [old] or something. I’m not quite sure, there were two of them, one was called Jimmy Mosher, alto player—I think later on maybe he played in Woody Herman’s band or something. But anyone was, when I was in school, there weren’t any ... [tiredly] uh, God ... the most students were on the G.I. Bill, so they were not exactly, you know, little children. They were on the G.I. Bill and a lot of them already were professionals. But there weren’t that many jazz players; I think it was mostly players in the big bands or something like that. Herb Pomeroy had a big band at school. Later on, he had a recording called *Band in Boston*, two of them [the other being *Life is a Many Splendored Gig*]. It was a very good band. Great writing came from Jaki Byard—boy, he could write! And uh, it was a very exciting band, so I used to listen, every Monday night they played and I used to listen to that. But all the other times I went to Storyville [laughs]. And learning the tunes, it was Studio J and that was on the first floor, a large room, and we had to learn tunes, [chord] changes, and things like that. You know.

Brown: Was there a piano teacher there or...?

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Akiyoshi: Pardon?

Brown: Piano teacher? Was there a piano teacher?

Akiyoshi: Oh, *yes!* When I went to school, Mister Lawrence Berk arranged for me to have piano lessons with Madame [Margaret] Chaloff, who was the mother of Serge Chaloff. And she was the student of a famous piano teacher, Madame Van Guelph [sp??]. And she was teaching at Boston University, so I had to go there to have a lesson. But, she was wonderful because she taught me, more than anything, she taught me how to practice. That was [??]. But the school really wanted me to become like a, you know, virtuoso player, because I had to play—I remember, there was Cacciatore, I think, it was concerto, I think it was—anyway, I was *struggling* trying to play it. And I had to play for Arthur Fiedler in daytime [chuckles]. Arthur Fiedler said, “You shouldn’t be so like that, you should be [coos], walk out a little bit, look at the sky,” you know, *blah, blah, blah*, things like that. But uh ... I really wanted to be at Birdland, first of all, you know. I wanted to play at Birdland, but the school wanted me to play at the Hickory House, because that had more merit or something, for pianists. Maybe they paid better, I don’t know [laughs]. But all those Birdland things, I could do that *after* I left school. And at that time [my] manager was Oscar Woodstein, he was the manager, Oscar Woodstein. Later on, I learned from Francis’ book that he was Bud Powell’s manager, which I didn’t know that. And Oscar Woodstein hired me quite often, [for] which [I’m] really grateful. And I have no way of knowing the reason, but I suspect—after I read Francis’ book, that he was the manager [for Powell]—that ... Bud left the States in 1958, so I think maybe [I] reminded him of Bud. Maybe, maybe that’s why he hired me all the time or something. In those days, two groups, you know, so I didn’t have to be [the] drawing power. I was able to be in Basie’s band and my trio, or sometimes it was Miles Davis and my trio, things like that, so.... Pee Wee Marquette was the announcer and uh, he would mispronounce my name.

Brown: How did he pronounce it?

Akiyoshi: I ... *Tokisho* or something. I didn’t know he was doing that purposely. You were supposed to give him money. I didn’t know that. Gene Cherico told me, so I said, “Okay,” so, and after that everything was okay.

Brown: [Laughs] Well, I wanted to ask you about, you know, you said that while you were in Boston you got a chance to play with people because they were on extended engagements. You said you played with Miles and Max Roach. What were those experiences like?

Akiyoshi: Miles, he would let me sit in. But when I went, he would lean on the piano

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and he'd watch me, my hands, like this, and I was like *this* [demonstrates nervousness], you know. And he said to me, "Are you nervous?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, don't be. But I felt the same way with Bird." That's what he told me. Now, Miles was not exactly the way people think, he's an evil guy, so on, so on. But he's not exactly like that, you know. He was a nice man; I think it depended on whom he was speaking to, he probably, that's what it was. But, as I said, if I sat in he'd say, "Powell! Powell!" you know [chuckles].

Brown: [Laughing] Right.

Akiyoshi: And Max Roach was ... he always played, firstly, always incredibly fast. That was his style. So, first day, it was the second day? The pianist disappeared or something. So there was a pianist living in Boston, called Joey Master, he was noted, I guess, so he was subbing. But he [Max] always played fast, so [chuckles] Joey came up to me and said, he said, "You want to sit in?" so I said [?? laughing]. Firstly, Max always played fast. And uh, the first time he had, uh ... Clifford [Brown] and, uh, Sonny Rollins....

Brown: And Richie.

Akiyoshi: Yes, Clifford [Richie] was ... uh, Bud's brother.

Brown: Yeah, Richie Powell, right.

Akiyoshi: Yes. And uh, anyway—I think it was George Moro on bass....

Brown: George Moro on bass, that was the, that was that quintet.

Akiyoshi: But Clifford Brown was ... if you met him, I was so surprised, because if you met him on the street, you would never guess he was a jazz player. He looked like a—and he was so sane [serious] too, he was very sane—he could've been an insurance company [salesman] [laughs]. I think he was, Max was quite, quite ... attached to Clifford, because when he died by car crash, he really was, Max was crushed, you know, so..... But that was the group. Actually I had a photo in Birdland, I was sitting in—somebody has it, anyway. Max never said to me, "She's Bud Powell," but I'm sure....

Brown: Well, he had *Richie!*

Akiyoshi: Huh?

Brown: He had Richie, his *brother*, on piano!

Akiyoshi: Richie was ... what I understand is that Bud Powell taught Richie. Bud was

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actually formally trained and uh....

Brown: What did you think of Richie's playing? Did you hear him much?

Akiyoshi: Yeah, he played ... you know, played well, just like everybody else. Actually, I liked, I liked ... the first time when I was here, Miles' group was Paul Chambers and Red Garland, uh, Philly Joe [Jones]. That was something. I really thought it was ... that was like a modern, what do you call, Basie's famous, you know, rhythm section, except no guitar player. But uh, it was really fantastic.

Brown: Was Coltrane in the group, too?

Akiyoshi: First Coltrane, then it was a short while, he was replaced by Sonny Rollins. He was there briefly, then Coltrane [came] back. But before Coltrane, after he [got] back he would sit in a lot, and that's what the people know [as] Coltrane today. But the first Coltrane, when I heard, he was a little more like Sonny Stitt, kind of like that. Except he had his own little voice, you know; I mean his tone was a little bit different. But he was kind of a Sonny Stitt-type of player.

Brown: And you also had a chance to play with Roy Haynes, or sit in with Roy Haynes?

Akiyoshi: Oh, Roy didn't have a group.

Brown: Yeah, that's what I suspect, so....

Akiyoshi: He was working with Sarah Vaughan. He was playing, backing for Sarah Vaughan those days, so.... But he was voted [one of the] ten best-dressed men by *Esquire*!

Brown: [Laughs] *Esquire*.

Akiyoshi: Oh, you know about that? [laughs]

Brown: He *and* Miles, both.

Akiyoshi: He was a sharp dresser.

Brown: Still is! [chuckles] Okay, well, I think probably this is a good time to stop....

Akiyoshi: Very good.

Brown: ... and we can move on after your Berklee experience. But we want to pick up

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with talking about Hickory House, how you got those engagements, and now you start your *real* career [laughs].

Akiyoshi: [Modestly] Well, I don't know....

Brown: In America, at least.

Akiyoshi: Yeah.

Brown: Today is June 30th, 2008, and this is day two of the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History interview with composer, pianist, arranger, bandleader Toshiko Akiyoshi, at her home in Manhattan, New York. *Konnichi wa*, Toshiko-san.

Akiyoshi: *Konnichi wa*.

Brown: So when I was making the introduction, you kind of made a grimace. Did I not, did I leave something out? Composer, pianist, arranger, bandleader....

Akiyoshi: No, I think you said too much [laughs].

Brown: Too much [laughs]. But, um, these are your accomplishments; they're very well recorded, so we have to at least honor ... *some* of them, at least, so....

Akiyoshi: Thank you.

Brown: When we left off yesterday, we were talking about, you had just finished your tenure at Berklee School, and you were now going to launch your professional career. But, you know, you did talk about that you were already performing in Boston and also in New York ... you played at Storyville?

Akiyoshi: Uh, Storyville, I started to play Storyville in '56, March, from Thursday to Sunday. And uh, in those days, most clubs had two groups. So the main group from ... both in a seven nights' term, plus a matinee. So, but shorter hours than in New York: New York, those days, was 10 to 4, and Boston was 9 to 1, and seven nights, plus the matinee Sunday afternoon. So, um, I started to play, but the main group was from Tuesday to Sunday. And uh, that was very good for me, because I could hear also ... um, the school thought—I think George Wein, actually, thought—that I should have a horn player, so there was Boots Mussulli, who used to be an old timer with Stan Kenton's band.

Brown: What's his name again?

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Akiyoshi: Boots Mussulli.

Brown: Mussulli.

Akiyoshi: Boo—Boots Mussulli. He was retired and he was from Milford, Massachusetts. And he was ... I heard with a small group, recording, you know. He had impeccable technique, but for an Italian, he was very cold, kind of a very intellectual player. It was kind of like totally opposite of somebody like Charlie Mariano, who was much more hot-blooded a player. Boots was much more, kind of, intellectual, cool player, and it was very good for me that he was there. I used to ... you know, I used to, when I played, I thought I did something wrong—in *my* mind—made a mistake, I used to put my tongue out, you know, like, “Aww!” like that [laughs], so Boots said, you know, “Don't do that. Your mistakes are good: you're trying to build something from what you thought you made [was] a mistake.” He was very good for me, advice and so on. It was good.

Brown: And so the Storyville, was that something that was arranged through Berklee? Did they arrange...?

Akiyoshi: Yes, yes, so....

Brown: And then you also said that you went to New York to play at the Hickory House. How did...?

Akiyoshi: That was '57.

Brown: Okay, so this was later.

Akiyoshi: So, well, I mean, that ... the school asked *the* booking agent in New York called Joe Glaser—the biggest one [client] was, I think, Armstrong. Anyway, Joe Glaser's office handled my affairs and they're the ones [who] booked my trio at Hickory House. I said this yesterday, but I really wanted to go to a place like Birdland, you know.

Brown: Right.

Akiyoshi: But the school thought it was a better place, it was supposed to be a higher profile for a pianist. But, I had a lot of problems at the Hickory House; it was six weeks, two years in a row, '57 and '58. But they were always, “Play show tunes! Play show tunes!” Because most of ... that's a steak house, if you remember. And um, the stage was in the middle part; there was a circle bar, and the stage was on the inside of the bar, so the people look at [you] like.... And usually, most of the people came to eat, have some dinner before a Broadway show or whatever. After Broadway show they'd come

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back, either they would have dinner *or* a drink or whatever it is. That's what, I guess, the theme was. Most of those places you had to play a lot of show tunes, and I didn't know too many show tunes, and we'd play Bud's tunes or Monk's tunes, things like that, you know, they always really ... "Play show tunes! Play show tunes!" And I ... I, up 'til today I think I was booked in the wrong place. But ... I don't blame them. I think there's a place—I didn't know then, I do now—but there's a place for that kind of ... somewhere between a cocktail lounge and a jazz club, uh, different from a Five Spot or a Half Note or a Birdland, and that goes in a different category. I know *now*, but I didn't know *then*, so I was playing things that they probably didn't want to hear [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs] Did you ever get to play Birdland during this period?

Akiyoshi: Oh, after I got out of school....

Brown: Ah, okay.

Akiyoshi: ...and I think I mentioned yesterday, the fact is I was very lucky, that was Oscar Woodstein, who was my manager at that time. He hired me quite often. So that was really ... and, you know, I was saying before there were always two groups, and uh, even though I was there.... See, New York was a six-night town, and no matinee, but long hours. But, always the main group was there—I wasn't, I didn't feel that responsibility for drawing people. But he always, *often* hired me. I'm grateful today.

Brown: Do you remember some of the groups that you were on the bill with? The other groups?

Akiyoshi: Oh yes. Sometimes it was Miles' group—only it was, John Coltrane was there *after* Sonny Rollins. That ... the old Birdland's band room, backstage, it was like what we call ... Japanese have a saying, "a bed for an eel." In other words, long and narrow. And that's where the backstage was. But when it was Miles' group, they all played very long solos, except Miles didn't play long solos. But ... he'd [Coltrane] play a long solo, then it was ... Coltrane would get off the stage and go backstage and try and woodshed. And so you couldn't really use the room [laughs]! That was a funny way ... and also, Birdland was a very interesting place: that was the only place then, backstage there was a little bar for musicians. Set up for musicians. And those days I wasn't drinking, so I don't know how much it cost; I think it was maybe half-price or whatever it was. And uh, and those days it was the only club that took intermission ... excuse me, charged admission, was Birdland. That was the only place. Every place, uh, some places may've had cover charges on the weekends, but they didn't have anything [on weekdays]. But Birdland, you go step down, *dun-dun-dun*, then there was a little window just like a movie theater. I think it was \$1.30, I'm not quite sure, though. Somewhere around there. Then you go in there, there were three different sections. You're looking at the stage and

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on the extreme right is the bar. That's where you ... I think a drink was somewhere like 90 cents, it wasn't quite a dollar, I think, you know. Then the next section was just chairs only, where you didn't have to drink, you just—everybody had to pay admission—but if you sit there, you could sit all night, not spending any more money. Then, the third one, which was the main part, where they had the tables. They had a cover charge—I believe it was \$5, I'm not quite sure. I think it was \$5—and that's where people could sit at a table, but then you had to pay a cover charge. But it was the three ... it was very good, the fact is, if somebody was really into a certain group and they wanted to hear without paying too much, there was a place where you could just sit, you didn't have to order any drinks. So that was a kind of unique place, I think, you know, for a long, long time.

Brown: How was the piano at Birdland?

Akiyoshi: The Birdland piano was not that great. It was never gre ... I don't think they [pianos] were their own, I think customarily they used to rent the piano from a piano place, and periodically they'd change. I remember much later, I was hired at Top of the Gate as a soloist, in between other groups. And uh, it wasn't a Steinway, but one time they had a Steinway that was a ... this piano *really* liked me! And we got along *really* well, and if I'd had the money I would've bought it. But, it seems to be customary, they kind of change, except the Half Note always had the same piano, I think. But the places, the Top of the Gate, they usually changed the piano. Probably same thing at Birdland, I'm not quite sure. But they had, at *least* they had a grand piano. If you went outside [New York], like Philadelphia, I usually played—first time was the Blue Note, then after that it was a place called Showboat—but they were all upright. They didn't have grand pianos. And most of the keys were ... *most* of the places, it was upright piano. Some places ... there was a place called, uh ... I think it was called the Dew Drop Inn, I'm not quite sure, I think it was called Dew Drop Inn, in New Jersey. It was basically an organ room. But Sunday afternoons they had a jam [session], jazz. And I was hired several times but they always had a guest player—one time it was Jimmy Heath, another time it was, I think, Diz—but this piano, a few strings were missing [laughs]. Things like that. I guess, some things have progressed today: at least you don't have pianos like *that* today! [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs] You talked about a double bill with Miles Davis. What was your impression of John Coltrane? Did you ... get to know him ... very well?

Akiyoshi: [Coughs] Well, the first time I heard of Coltrane was in Los Angeles. And uh, with Miles' group with ... that was the first time I heard, uh....

Brown: Paul Chambers?

Akiyoshi: Paul Chambers. And I think he'd just joined, '56 January, because I'd heard

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probably heard every record when I was in Japan, and most of the players I knew. But I'd never heard of Paul Chambers. And uh ... boy, I caught the last set and he played, took a solo, and I was "Boy!" He sounded so good, I said "Ahh," and I didn't even *know* the person, I thought, "My God! What a country!" you know. People who had no names played that great! That wasn't the case, I found later on, but something like that. And Coltrane ... I think I may've said this before, he sounded more like, a little close to Sonny Stitt, then um.... One short period, Miles had Sonny Rollins, and after Sonny Rollins he came back, John Coltrane came back. After that, it was a different Coltrane. He was woodshedding almost *all* the time, he was just practicing all the time. And that's what everybody knows, you know, Coltrane today, I think.

Brown: So, uh, going back to the trajectory of your career: so, you're starting to get a name, you're playing the major clubs. Are you starting to tour at this point? Oh, maybe I misrepresented this.... [laughs]

Akiyoshi: No, actually, you know, after I got out of school and I moved to New York, my very, original intention was, after I finished school, I should go back to Japan and I was supposed to, uh, I thought I should, uh ... give to fellow musicians, you know, to pass on something that I have learned. But when I finished school, I didn't realize, and it was just, "Boy, what did I do? What did I accomplish? What did I learn?" I realized that I hadn't *learned* anything. I said, "Well, gee, I don't think I can go home now," so I moved to New York. And after I moved to New York, I was just like everybody else, you know, just barely paying the rent. It's kind of interesting, because I'm basically kind of shy—I think it comes up from my upbringing—so I had somebody come in from the other side, and I knew who they are, who he is, or most of the men, the players. I'd say, "Oh, I don't think he knows me, and if he says 'hi,' I think I might say 'hi.'" You know, something like that, never.... So when I moved to New York, I decided that I was going to push myself to say "hello," you know. So there's Birdland ... and when I moved I was staying in a hotel called Hotel Bryant.

Brown: Bryant. Where was...?

Akiyoshi: It was 54th and off Broadway. And uh, there was a ... 52nd and Broadway, as you know, was Birdland. But, it wasn't the corner, there was Birdland. There on the corner was a coffee shop and one day I went there to have some breakfast—in my case, a late breakfast—and I saw Slide Hampton sitting in there. My first reaction was, "Oh, I'm going to go home," but then I decided, "I think I'll go up," and I said, "Hello." He said, "Oh yes, please sit down." Then he said—this was kind of interesting—he said, "You know, I used to think you were stuck up! But I know you are shy." So I realized that people *do* think that way, and I had to go up and say "hello." And also at the same time, in later years, even today, some people, I think ... you know, like a little ... they think they take themselves seriously. And uh, then think about what Slide said, and say,

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“Maybe they’re shy,” so I give them the benefit of the doubt. So that was good that he said that.

Brown: You’re starting to become a New Yorker now [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: Mm, I don’t know; I was just like any other New York jazz musician who didn’t have much name and was struggling. You know, I was, I became a part of it.

Brown: So, um, so this is into the late fifties now. So in 1959, kind of a lot of changes happen in your life.

Akiyoshi: Uh, it did?

Brown: Uh, well, you married Charlie Mariano.

Akiyoshi: Oh yes.

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: Yes and uh, right. And that ... we moved to New Jersey. And we formed a quartet. Before that, I was always with a trio, so we had a quartet. But it was the same time.... And, my job was not only that I had to call Joe Glaser’s office every once in a while, to say, “Do you have anything for us?” ‘Cause as it was, they’d forget, so it was something periodically, I had to do to do that. That was ... I wasn’t quite comfortable with that, but it was, that was necessary. And sometimes they’d say, “Oh yes, we have some place in Pittsburgh,” or things like that. But it’s amazing, actually, [that we] survived. Always, something came up, so that we could pay the rent.

Brown: How did you meet Charlie?

Akiyoshi: School. He was ... when I was still in school, he was in Shelly’s group, Shelly Manne’s group in Los Angeles. But he was originally from Boston. And uh, he decided to come home. So when he came back to Boston, he started teaching school. That’s how I met him, you know.

Brown: And it ... you had a quintet as well as a quartet with Charlie?

Akiyoshi: No, quartet.

Brown: Just only a quartet?

Akiyoshi: Just a quartet.

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Brown: Okay, so that needs to be corrected ... the *Grove* lists a quintet, as well. And you had personnel, was Gene and Jake first, or no?

Akiyoshi: No, the time when we had a quartet *together*, Jake was already, he'd left school—I think he was playing with Woody's band—it could be, I think it was Woody Herman's band. It could be Maynard's [Ferguson], I'm not quite sure about that part. But, so, Gene Cherico, always he had a knack for finding a drummer. We had a job in Hartford, a place called High Brein [sp??] Lounge—or Few Brein [sp??], I don't know how to pronounce it—it was a beer company or whatever. Anyway, we were looking for a drummer, Gene said, "Oh, there's a drummer, Eddie Marshall," you know, "he is really good!" And he was about twenty-, maybe, two years old or something. "We should try him!" So we went to High Brein Lounge and he came—he's from Springfield, Massachusetts—so he came and sat in and played. I really liked it, of course, and Gene ... usually bass players and drummers, if they're getting on well, that's a good rhythm section so.... And Eddie was *so nervous* [chuckles], he spilled water onto Mariano's lap. He still is a very good friend of mine and also I, you know, often play with him, and uh ... there's something about when you're young, when you play together for a while, it's always something special. So after that, it was Eddie and Gene, that's the group we went to our first Japanese trip, to Japan, the concert trip to Japan was '61. That was the first one, after five years in this country, it was the first time I was back in Japan. And it was Eddie and Gene. And it was the same thing the second time, I think. So, he, then he was drafted, Eddie was drafted into the Army, and for a while he was away. And he came back and we ... at that time, and then we played together, we played [as] a trio quite often. And of course, Gene went to Frank Sinatra....

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: [Laughs] And Eddie and Gene both were at one time with Stan Getz, and one day I got a call from them, somewhere, and they said, "Toshiko, you got your rhythm section back."

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: They decided to quit [laughs].

Brown: Well, I know Eddie, of course, being in San Francisco. He's a great friend and also he's a great, great inspiration of mine. I have my idea of what makes Eddie great; what would you say were the hallmarks, or what was it about his style that you like?

Akiyoshi: Well, first of all, I think it's that he has a good beat, which is very important to me. Sometimes it's ... this is something that is ... it's not mathematically.... And also,

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not every drummer is for every somebody. In other words, if a drummer's great for somebody else, it doesn't mean great for me. There's a certain mystical, certain things there, and it was something you can identify, you know, together. Eddie's great part was that he's also very open minded: he's a very intelligent man, and uh, he also, he's the first drummer that *I* know—I *met*, that is—who played soft with the sticks. He really had a beautiful touch, and he was, as I said, he was very open minded, he was very susceptible to many different things. He still is.

Brown: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: So we are very good friends, I would like to say. You know, he said, the other day, he was saying—I don't know how he said it—he said, “Tooo-shiko, I am getting old” [chuckles].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: I don't know why he said that!

Brown: [Laughs] What was your impression going back to Japan, after having not been back in four years?

Akiyoshi: I was very, very worried about it, because five years I was away, and I didn't know if people would remember me or not. And also this time, we were going back with our original music, most of my original music, which was not done in those days in Japan. People always played, you know, somebody else's music or standards, things like that. So I had to explain about the music: explain to the point where it was easy to understand and, you know, some kind of guide for listening. That was ... but when we landed at Haneda—those days, Haneda airport—and the plane was about four hours late. But there were people waiting and I was *really* surprised. You know, there was, like, cameras and journalists were there, and a lot of fans were waiting, and I was really surprised about that. So, in those days, the tour was a very long dis—, that time it was six weeks long. And in 1963, we went back again, with the same promoter, also six weeks. But now, if you have a tour, so usually they say, I don't know, if you have fourteen concerts, that's pretty, pretty long.

Brown: So six weeks, you must've toured....

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ...outside of Tokyo as well? What kind of...?

Akiyoshi: Every [kind of] places that you can think of, I think.

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Brown: [Laughs] Okay.

Akiyoshi: And those days also, I think it was, um, union—uh, Rōon [abbreviation for Kinrōsha Ongaku Kyōgikai, Workers' Music Council] they called [it]—labor unions had music activities. And those were the ones that had, like, sort of like a network for going to places, and I think that was the main, you know, outlet, yeah.

Brown: Because when you were talking about the scene in Japan, the jazz in scene in Japan before you left, um, how that it was mostly centralized in [the] Tokyo area. Now were you able, did you go to ja-, was there a jazz scene in Ōsaka...?

Akiyoshi: Different places, right.

Brown: ...or Nara, or other places? So you went all over Japan.

Akiyoshi: Right, yes.

Brown: So that time, by [the] sixties, there were many different clubs in different cities, jazz clubs.

Akiyoshi: Yeah, not ... [they were] all concerts.

Brown: All concerts.

Akiyoshi: I don't think we ever played a club in those days, you know, they were all concerts. In sixty, '61, uh ... Art Blakey went in January—his group, [Jazz] Messengers—and we went there in March. So, but after that, Art Blakey, every year, he would go to Japan, and that was the beginning of the American players going, [to] start going to Japan.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: He was *really* popular in Japan.

Brown: Did you consider your tour successful? Did your, the audience enjoy your music?

Akiyoshi: Apparently it was successful, otherwise we would not have gone back in '63. Excuse me. [Goes to see about periodic beeping sound]

Brown: Is that a smoke alarm?

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Akiyoshi: [Track starts in middle of sentence] ...same, six, uh, six weeks. And that time I stayed, because [in] '63 I was pregnant with my first child, and I was a little worried about having a child in this country. I wanted to be near my mother. So after that I just stayed, and I was due in August, so I just stayed there and had my child, which is ... now she has her own family and own group.

Brown: Could you say her name?

Akiyoshi: Monday Michiru.

Brown: Say it again, please?

Akiyoshi: Monday, you know, like Tuesday, Monday, Tuesday...?

Brown: [Chuckles] Okay.

Akiyoshi: That's because she was born on a Monday, so I named her Monday. Michiru is a Japanese ... Michiru is like uh, you know, tide it comes, high tide? That's ... it's like ... we call it *Michiru*. *Michiru* means something that's little and it gets fuller, so I was hoping that she would get mature as a human being as she got older, so on, you know, that's what....

Brown: And what was her birth date?

Akiyoshi: August 19th.

Brown: August 19th, 1963?

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: Uh-huh, okay.

Akiyoshi: I'm not quite sure she appreciates that [laughs]..., saying that, though!

Brown: Well, her mother gave *her* her birthday, so she can give her birthday, too.

Akiyoshi: No, but she is a singer and a writer, and it's different than, you know I always say it's different from a musician, because they ... also, they have a different union, you know [laughs].

Brown: Different union? [laughs]

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Akiyoshi: That proves [it]!

Brown: It's all economics. So, um, lets' go back: so in '62 you went to Japan, in '63 you went to Japan, but in '62 also, something significant happened in your life.

Akiyoshi: Sixty-what?

Brown: '62? 1962?

Akiyoshi: Two?

Brown: So you went to Japan in '61-'62...?

Akiyoshi: '61 and '63.

Brown: '63? So, '62 something ... this is when you played with Charles Mingus?

Akiyoshi: *No*, no.

Brown: No?

Akiyoshi: Playing with Charles Mingus was *after* I was separated from, uh....

Brown: Charlie?

Akiyoshi: ...Mariano. So, it's much later. I, I.... It has to be after '64....

Brown: Has to be after '64?

Akiyoshi: ...because in '64 Japan had the Olympics....

Brown: Right. I was there, too [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: So, no, I was there, uh....

Brown: Duke Ellington came, too.

Akiyoshi: Oh, yes, yes.

Brown: Yeah, I remember.

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Akiyoshi: So it has to be after that.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: So the Mingus.... When Mingus asked me to join, I was *really* alone and struggling. Barely paying the rent. And uh, my daughter was with my sister in Japan, and—I think she'd just started kindergarten or something, kindergarten or grammar school, I'm not quite sure.

Brown: So she was born in '63, so let's go back....

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: So, for the record, make sure that, in *Grove Dictionary* they have it listed as '62, that is *incorrect*.

Akiyoshi: Okay, now, she was born in '63, so it has to be, with Mingus, it *has* to be after '66. That's what I think.

Brown: Okay, okay. So ... so let's go back. In '63, you give birth to your daughter, so you stay in Japan?

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: For how long?

Akiyoshi: From there, in '64, uh, Mariano and I went to Europe for ... we had a club engagement in Paris for four weeks, and then two weeks in each, one in Copenhagen, and another one in Sweden, at the Golden Circle, I think it was. In Denmark was, you know, more [of a] market. Then we went back to Japan again, so that ... uh, '63, and '64, that's when the Olympics.... And I had a little project. We had a concert, the project with.... And we were trying to get, saying this is.... Um, you know, people have.... In those days, I thought—I still feel the same way, but—people have very poor ears. In other words, since printing was invented, eyesight, everything, all the information goes from the eyes, but—I don't if that's the reason or not—but the ear has never developed. So, people have a difficult time understanding music, and I thought maybe I could do something with *movement*. So not dance—but it is dance—but you don't see the dancer. It was a shadow. So I had this project and I had a concert and it was, the screen was behind us, and the dancer would dance *behind* the screen. So that's what comes out as a shadow, the movement. And it would help ... I thought that might help music for the listener, and help them to kind of maybe understand the music. They don't have to understand, but *appreciate*, the music. That's what I thought, and this was something I

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have done one time only. But I think that was a pretty good idea. But anyway, so I had this Japanese traditional dance company, but “traditional” meaning not *real* traditional, but kind of modern pro-.... It’s very strange, but it’s not a ballet, it’s not a *modern* ballet, but it is modern traditional dancing. That’s kind of a funny way to say it, but there was a dance group—it was kind of a noted group—so I asked her to participate and she was very happy to do that. So that was done while we had, Japan had the Olympics. So after that, um ..., Mariano realized that he couldn’t really ... have enough activity in Japan, so he wanted to come back to the States. So we came back to the States at the end of ’64. It could be ’65. I think end of ’64, whatever it was. So all that time from ... so I would say a year in Japan. My daughter was born in August, then it was the following year. The following year, I think maybe it was close to winter, possibly, because.... Now I think it was close to winter—probably the end of ’64—because I remember I knit her clothes in yarn, so I think it was winter.

Brown: And when you came back to New York...?

Akiyoshi: We settled in, uh, New Jersey. And shortly after that, uh, Mariano and I were separated for private reasons. And uh, that ... then it was very difficult, a difficult life for me started, because if you’re a jazz player, you have to travel. You can’t stay in one place. And I couldn’t travel because my daughter was three-and-a-half, three years, three-and-a-half years old. Lemme see: no, one ... one-and-a-half, yeah, one-and-a-half years old. So ... and I didn’t have enough money to have a housekeeper, because.... Jazz players, it’s hard to get a babysitter, because New York—as I said before—you worked from 10 to 4 in the morning. And there is no babysitter who will come for that particular hour. So you really needed a live-in and I just didn’t have that kind of, you know, funds. I didn’t have the money. So, ‘til today I think the most important things, you can’t solve by money; but money can solve a *lot* of problems [chuckles].

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: So unfortunately, that was ... so I think my daughter had a very, very difficult childhood. And then finally I decided, my immediate sister didn’t have any children, and she wanted to know if I would send her to ... send my daughter to her so she would.... And I then thought about it, and then I decided maybe I would send her. Maybe meanwhile, maybe I might be able to come to the point where I could get more jobs or something. But uh ... so she was in Japan ‘til, uh ... first grade, beginning of first grade, I think it was. The beginning of her first grade, she was there. Seven years old, it probably was. Yeah, three to seven years old. But unfortunately I didn’t ... I didn’t, uh ... become like a household name. Somehow, I mean, there were *always* some jobs, you know. I ... I, meanwhile I had to like ... uh, I was hired to do some festival, and ... for example, in the afternoon I was put into a trio with Elvin Jones, and then it was, uh, Miroslav [Vitous] had just come from, uh....

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Brown: Czechoslovakia.

Akiyoshi: Yeah, Czechoslovakia, he'd just come and there was this ... I don't know how that happened, but I was hired to do things like that. But, you know, one job, it doesn't really support...[laughs]. But *somehow* I always had a little job and [it's] amazing to me when I think about it: the fact is that somehow I paid the rent. But it never came [to] more than that. And even though [chuckles]—this is, I think I'm kind of, sort of like a really simple-minded person—because it never occurred to me that I could go to Berkeley and teach. It *never* even occurred to me. And that's, a lot of people *did*, you know, go to teach. And a lot of musicians teach over here at schools, too. But um ... [chuckles] so I think I'm pretty simple-minded, the fact that I, and it's amazing, the fact that it never even occurred to me [laughs].

Brown: Maybe it wasn't something you were interested in.

Akiyoshi: Probably not. And sometimes Japanese journalists, jazz journalists, said, "You could come back to Japan, and you'd be a star!" And *that* didn't even occur to me, either, you know!

Brown: So I guess it was during *this* time then that you did play with Charles Mingus. Is that correct?

Akiyoshi: Yes. I was just playing solo at the ... the solo started as a ... actually, I was going to have a day job, because, you know, children don't grow younger, they get older, and need, uh ... need the funds to raise them. And my prospects as a jazz player weren't that great, so I thought, "Well, I probably need a day job." So I paid \$100 to init— for a computer programming school. It was four months at a time, and I was in the middle of it, so I had to wait for the time when they started a new one [term]. And, meanwhile, I went to the Jazz Gallery, the Five Spot, you know, it's in ... and there were Joe and Iggy Termini, who were the owners, brothers. And Joe came up to me and said, "Do you feel like playing solo?" And he said, "I just can't afford to have two bands anymore, two groups anymore, and if you play solo maybe you can play intermission here." That's how I was saved and I didn't go to computer school.

Brown: [Chuckles] Thank goodness!

Akiyoshi: [Chuckling] I think about it, I say, probably the Buddha said, "Don't go, I'll get you some job." So this job, it was a long time. Then when finally the Five Spot closed, Art D'Lugoff of the Gate, Top of the Gate, you know, Village Gate, and Top of the Gate was used most of the time was [for] trio jobs. And so Art said, "Come play at my place," so I was playing solo there, also. In those times, John Lewis used to come in

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and I didn't even know John was there, you know, but he used to come in to, I don't know, listen to ... well, he used to come in, but anyway.... So, when I was doing that, Mingus came to me and said, "Why don't you join my group?" And uh ... before that, I must mention about John Lewis, though, because this probably ... I'm not quite sure, I'm kind of a little bit mixed up as far as that is concerned. Mingus asked me ... could be, that could be first.... Um, "Why don't you join my group?" And I said, "Why? There are so many good players," and he said, "It's true that there are a lot of good players, but you're a new name," he said, "You're a new name, and a new name is very important to the group." Now, that really impressed me, because Mingus, he could've said to me, "It's good for you, you'll get recognition," which I *did*. Uh, "many people will notice you," and like this. He could've said that to me, but he *didn't*. You know, he was ... many people, I think, disregard that part of Mingus, you know. They always ... it's more fun to talk about the *other* part of Mingus [laughs], so probably that's what they always talk about. But he was like that. So I joined the group and then was ... that was kind of an interesting experience, the fact is, because ... for several reasons. One—I think I mentioned yesterday—he rehearsed, the rehearsal was at his apartment. And uh, he didn't have any music: he sang and we all had to learn that. I think that's the best way. But it was a small group, and so on. And, when I joined, immediately we had [a gig at] Pep's in Philadelphia. Pep's was around the corner from the Showboat where I used to play with a trio, but Pep's was a bigger club, you know. And ... I think Pepper Adams was playing; and uh, there was a trombone player—I'm trying to think—it could be Garnett, I don't quite remember. It could be Garnett Brown, I don't know. But one point ... when I first had joined, there was Booker Ervin. I used to call him "Long John Silver," because he looked like Robert Newton [laughs]. So ... and Rich Williams was on trumpet. So when we went there ... so we were there two weeks. Two weeks ... the front line changed, you know. So the second week, Mingus would say, "The next weekend, Basie's band comes, and we gotta, so we really have to rehearse." So we were rehearsing many tunes, and so they came for a couple days, the weekend that Basie's band was there, and we ... he never played the ones we rehearsed [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: It was really, kind of like that. And uh ... then at some point, we were at the Newport festival, but not in Newport, it was Cliff Manor, I think it was called. Cliff, uh ... it was more like a protest....

Brown: The alternate festival.

Akiyoshi: Yes, it was a little ... out at that place. I think it was something like that. And uh ... we also, there was twice—I have a picture—so we played at Newport up front, on the main stage, but maybe another year, probably, we played the protest place. But the one that I have [chuckles], the one photo was I was playing the bass. And he had a tune

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called “Eat That Chicken,” and it’s in A-flat. And [sings], “eat that chicken, eat that chicken, eat that chicken now,” and he always played piano on that one. He wanted *me* to play the bass. So [laughs], we were doing that and somebody took a photo and it was at Newport. So I remember that. We did one year, one year we were playing the main Newport, another year it was the other place, and I don’t quite remember when was when. Somebody was writing a Mingus book, and he kind of reminded me I was there two different times with Mingus. So I guess he’s probably accurate, I don’t quite remem—. But at one point it was a quintet—this one for quite a long time was a quintet—Larry, uh, Lonnie, I think, Hillyer....

Brown: Oh, Hillyer, yeah.

Akiyoshi: ...uh, the ... uh, McPherson.

Brown: Oh, Charles McPherson.

Akiyoshi: Yes. He was such a sweet man! He’s the one and uh ... Charlie McPherson. So those two were the quintet. And this one [Mingus] kept quite a long time as a quintet.

Brown: And of course, Dannie Richmond on drums?

Akiyoshi: Hmm?

Brown: Dannie Richmond on drums?

Akiyoshi: Dannie Richmond was, but ... see, those days, when you had a drug [arrest] record, you couldn’t play Philadelphia. So Dannie couldn’t play Philadelphia, he would have somebody else, and ... I don’t quite remember who he had, but ... Mingus and Dannie Richmond were more like they were a couple: they’d go *so well* together, they could change the rhythm pattern and so on together, and so.... And Dannie was a *very* nice man. He was a really nice man, and Lew had some trips [with him] in Canada, a couple times, together. But he loved duck, and I cooked the duck here sometimes. He a really nice man, though, but that was Dannie Richmond. I just uh ... I couldn’t stop missing my music, so I quit.

Brown: So what year was that? What, what time period?

Akiyoshi: I’m trying to think what year it was, because after I quit a white lady was the pianist, but then Mingus called me and wanted me to come back. And maybe it was because, he said, “I have a concert,” you know, “I have a recording,” I mean, “I have a recording.” And uh ... “So I want you to come back.” And this was ... the first intention was to record at the Five Spot, then it got ... it was a tuba player—I forgot his name, he

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usually played at the Radio City Orchestra. Um, I don't think he was a jazz player. But anyway, a tuba player. Then, you know, the next thing, it gets bigger, bigger, bigger, and the next thing you know it's a Town Hall concert. And you have everything: two drums, two guitars, two pianos [chuckles]. Snooky Young was the lead trumpet player, and we were rehearsing from 12 o'clock. And the music was not ready [chuckles]! And it was already four in the morning, back to the elevator going up, Snooky looked so insecure, "What is going to happen!" you know [laughs]. That was the famous, famous....

Brown: Album [].

Akiyoshi: Concert.

Brown: Sure. So for the larger ensemble, how did Mingus, did he still recite all the parts to everybody? Or did he write any charts...?

Akiyoshi: No, he never did.

Brown: Never did.

Akiyoshi: But the Town Hall concert, yes. Town Hall concert [October 12, 1962], it was at the rehearsal, there was an arranger. And I remember one arranger was [Gene Roland] ... he used to play what they call "peck horn" [alto horn], and he wrote like it was arranged for ... the Kenton band or something. Anyway, he arranged, he did not write. He said, "That's not what I told him to ... orchestrate," he said, "Cost me \$500 and he doesn't come up [with it]," *blah, blah, blah*, and there were things like that. But uh, it was a really ... no music was prepared. So when we were at the Town Hall [and it] opened, there were copyists there—I don't know if you've heard from other people—there were copyists in the middle of the stage. And Mingus said, "Well, this is a recording session. If anybody has heard it's a concert, you should get your money back." So everybody was trying to get their money back, and then the mob police had to come out [chuckles], in the street. And it was ... but Mingus' strongest point was he would, at that particular spot, even if it was a concert, he would *sing* what to do. You know, like say, "*Whap!*" so on, so on. He's playing and he said, "*Whap!*" and he sang and that is what the trumpet player had to do, and so on. He came up at an instant, uh, phrase, he would come up with something for the musicians to play. And that was, he was at [his] best. It was really, you know, he was really a special ... I think really special ... probably you could call [him] a genius. He was like, [in] an instant he could come up with.... He could make music very exciting. So ... that's something like a ... I always felt like his music reminded me of Mexican painting, you know: very colorful, very strong.

Brown: Do you feel like you were influenced by...?

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Akiyoshi: Oh, definitely. I think I was influenced by him quite a lot.

Brown: And did you have a good personal relationship with him?

Akiyoshi: I like to think so, yes, yes. Somebody tried to say, somebody said that Mingus, uh ... put the lid of the piano over my hand. He never *did* that. If he did that I probably wouldn't have a hand [laughs]. You know, people come up with all kinds of stupid lies. He wasn't ... but he was very nasty to other players. You know, sometimes if he didn't like [something or someone], he'd kick the drums and things like that [laughs]. So, he had two different personalities.

Brown: Maybe nowadays they would say he was bipolar. But who knows? I don't know, but we know that he died from Lou Gehrig's disease.

Akiyoshi: Oh, really? I didn't know that.

Brown: Charles Mingus?

Akiyoshi: Huh?

Brown: He died from Lou Gehrig's disease?

Akiyoshi: Oh, Lou Gehrig's disease? I didn't know. You know, he used to have like a big bump in the arm....

Brown: Oh.

Akiyoshi: ... and he was in the hospital—uh, Mount Sinai—and I went to see him. And he was *so big*. He was walking from there, so big that he looked almost feminine. And uh, uh ... it was some kind of lump, *real big* lump, and um....

Brown: On both arms?

Akiyoshi: No, on one arm.

Brown: One arm.

Akiyoshi: One arm. I didn't know what it was.... When I had my very first Town Hall [concert]—first and only—that is, '67. 1956, when I came to this country—I think I mentioned that—in 1966 I was, as I said, I was barely paying the rent, and '66, uh, New Year's ... the Japanese always think of New Year's Day, you get introspective, you

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know. “What did I do? I’ve been in this country for ten years. What did I do? I didn’t do anything. Maybe I will have a concert,” you know, “maybe I’ll have a concert; maybe people might notice if I have a concert.” So it took me a year to prepare, basically, the funds. And at that time someone asked me if I would do ... uh, the Holiday Inn circuit, it was hotel lounges. And uh ... so I ... I went to this—I had to do an audition—to this apartment and an old man was there and there was a piano. And I played and he said, “Oh, you’re a jazz player!” And I said, “I don’t sing,” so—*those* places, of course, you sing—but I don’t sing, so I don’t know. But he said, “Oh, it’s fine, fine. But you just have to play a lot of arpeggios!” [laughs] Said, “You have to play that arpeggio!” So anyway, I got the job. It was ... the greatest thing about the job, I was getting \$200 a week, but no overhead: hotel and food were paid [for]. And I didn’t have my apartment, I was still staying at a hotel here, so I didn’t have that either. So there was no overhead. And it was ... very soon I had about \$3000 and I was.... Those days, a house, you could buy a house for \$15,000. And it was six months later, I was thinking, “Gee, if I gig for another six months, I may be able to buy a house.” But I didn’t do that, anyway [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: I needed about \$3000 those days to—isn’t that something? So cheap, you can’t think of it today—the Town Hall concert. And that was a self-produced concert. Then it took me a year to prepare. And ... then, uh, that time the mayor was [John] Lindsay, that was the mayor. And for some reason, he named that particular day [October 7, 1967] as the “Jazz Day” of New York. Now, *that’s* my luck! My God! You know, as I said, I prepared from a year *before*. And about a couple months before, whatever it is, and he said it it’s “Jazz [Day].” So they had like a black-tie, invitation-only kind of jazz concert at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art]. Then there was a free concert at Central Park, things like that. And ... [gasps] ... all the jazz critics, of course, came to my concert. And also *Mingus* came to my concert, with a camera. I thought that was a *really*, you know, great gesture. And thanks to John Wilson, he wrote a really good review. But ... it didn’t do anything! It didn’t do any good. After that, I was *still* barely paying the rent! [laughs]

Brown: Did you have good attendance, though?

Akiyoshi: I won’t say that. Maybe half? Uh, because there was ... I had to sell.... See, this is interesting: I had a friend who used to with Martha Graham’s dance company, a Japanese woman, and she said, “Well, you know, you can do it. It’s a little hard, but if you just go to a Japanese company and bow, then they will buy tickets,” and so on. In *those* days, there were not that many companies. But I would have to go from one company to another, they would buy five tickets here, three tickets here. That took like ... most of the companies, they only had offices only. Not like today, you know; today

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it's like *poo!*—I can sell 250 tickets in one company [chuckles]. But it was like this, so I had to go from ... 9 in the morning to 5, usually about three companies I could cover in a day. Then, from 4 o'clock I would write. And from ... almost six in the morning, I would write. I had five music [charts] to write, for the big band, that is. So, that was like ... probably that was the hardest, and uh ... when I finished the concert, I was like *whew*, like really, because I don't think I could do that today [chuckles].

Brown: [Laughs] [Phone rings, plays Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*] I guess it's a good time to take a break! I guess you really *do* love Beethoven! So Toshiko-san, also significant about the Town Hall concert is you meet Lew Tabackin, yes?

Akiyoshi: [Inhales] Yes. That, that was kind of funny in a sense, because I was looking for a tenor player. As I said before, I was preparing for the whole year. Now ... uh, Clark Terry had a big band in those days, and they used to play, uh ... I think it was every weekend, at the Half Note [which] used to be on Spring Street. Half Note was Spring Street. There was a piano player, the pianist was Don Friedman. But Don got some job in Queens somewhere, it was some place where, kind of, long term or something. So the manager of Clark's band at that time, his name was Bob Messenger. And he called me, he said, "Well, Don cannot make it. Can you sit in?" So I was subbing, I said, "Well, it may be interesting to read the music, but I haven't read music for a long time." So, okay, I went there. And ... if you know the Half Note, the middle was the bar, a circular bar, and the band was upstairs. Now, the room was two, divided in two, one side and another side. Then when the big band went on the top, the rhythm section was on this side, the horn players were kind of spread, so to speak. So, I was there, and Clark started with a D-flat blues or something like that. So I had to play [mumbles], then Clark played something, then it was, I heard a tenor player play, and it was, boy, that like knocked me out! It was an interesting combination: we're talking about this, like '67, you know. And ... it had Lucky Thompson's family tree, which was very rare to hear in those days—I guess it still is today. But what he played was like a semi-cross between Coltrane and Sonny Rollins....

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: ...you know, a cross between that [mimics sound]. "Why that? Who could that be?" [mimics sound again]. So, make the story short, that was Lew, and that's the first time I met him, and then I said, "I want to cop him for my concert." And he sorta agreed, *but* ... there was, Thad [Jones] and Mel [Lewis]'s band had a swing tour in California, and Lew was asked to go. I think it was, that time I think it was somebody else who couldn't go or something, because Lew wasn't really a member. So of course, naturally, three weeks against one job, he went there, so he didn't play my concert [laughs], he didn't play my concert. But that's how I met him. Then, uh, I would have some, periodically I would have some jobs, for example, Hartford had a jazz society, and

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they asked me to come and play, and with a horn player. So that was the first time, actually this was the *first* time we played together, quartet. And ... so, Jake, he was, Jake Hanna was living in New York at that time and he didn't have anything, so he said, "I think I'm gonna come listen to you." So he was coming with us, and Lew was with somebody else—you had to take a ... you have to drive there, so on. So as I said, I didn't know him, I'd just met him, so I was kind of a little cocky, and I said [chuckles], I said, you know, "I'll play trio for a few numbers, then I will announce you and I'll bring [you] over, so you play," you know [laughs]. So, okay, so I played, then I [said], "Lew Tabackin," and he played tenor—he *really*, he played a *long* solo. He still does, but he *really* ... what he played, it knocked me out! Then he started taking [out] the flute, and I said to myself, "Oh my God," because most great saxophone players play terrible flute. So I thought, "Oh my God, I'm going to hear some terrible, sad flute" [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: They said it was "Willow Weep for Me," and it was like his ... as you know, his flute, you know, he's got a *beautiful* sound....

Brown: He's actually providing the soundtrack for your oral history right now! [laughs]

Akiyoshi: [Laughs] It's a *beautiful* sound, and that was a real surprise for me, I said, "Wow!" So that's how I met [Lew] and we played together. Since then, if I have something, you know, a quartet situation, I always asked him, because he was free-lance and also he was, he had one leg in the studio. And he was with, uh ... Clark Terry's band. And Clark Terry's band, this was the one—I think they went somewhere, either North Carolina or Georgia, one of those places—and they met at midnight at a bar, uh, 40-something Street, it's moved up, uh, what do you call, famous, I think.... The bus there, everybody took that, and they drove all night to get to one concert and then came back. I think there was very little money. And uh ... those were the days. You couldn't do that today [laughs]. But I remember that he was usually with Clark's [band]. And I used to be, became a regular sub; for example, Clark had a job in Baron, Club Baron, which was in Harlem—uh, it could've been 130th and Lennox, it could've been 135 and Lennox, I'm not quite sure—that was around there. They used to have a place called Small's Paradise and I played there a couple times with Mariano's quartet. But this was [in] much later years and Clark had a ... played at the Club Baron. This was also, the stage was upstairs, you know [chuckles], but what's interesting, those days, really, because you see the same faces, you know, two, three times a week. I think a drink was somewhere like 80 cents or so, and there was no cover charge or anything. And they would tell you, said, "Well, you sound good tonight!" or they said, "You sounded better last night!"

Brown: [Laughs]

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Akiyoshi: [Laughs] And it was like ... it was ... you can't, you don't *have* that today, you know. You don't have that kind of rapport. First of all, going one time to a jazz club today, you are looking at, two people, you are looking at close to \$100. So, things like that ... it's something that you go to listen to some group that you like, and one time. You know, you don't keep going for two or three times. You can't ... economically, it's not feasible. So it was a very different scene in those days from today. Anyways ... when I started going with Lew, and we decided to get married, at that time Lew was working with *The Tonight Show* band.

Brown: Yep. That year was 1969? That correct?

Akiyoshi: Uh, '69, '70.

Brown: Okay.

Akiyoshi: '70, no, no, '70, '71, around then.

Brown: That's when you got...?

Akiyoshi: Because he had ... Doc Severinsen had a small band to go up, so he was a member of that, had like six singers or something, that kind of thing. And uh, and then they moved to Los Angeles. So that brought us to move to Los Angeles, '72, summer. And, at that time I decided I was going to quit because I, because ... I didn't really make any impact, you know. I tried hard, I had my concert, got a good review and everything, but it didn't really change my life. And uh ... so I decided maybe I should quit, because the world doesn't need another piano player, you know [chuckles].

Brown: But, but, Toshiko-san, didn't you go to Japan again, for Expo 1970, before you went to move to Los Angeles?

Akiyoshi: Oh yes, the 1970 Expo [in Ōsaka], there was, the music director, the name was Miss Watanabe, and Watanabe Productions, *very* big production [company], and she ... that [was] more like a real pops—you know, what Japanese call “talent” [*tarento*], because television and *blah, blah, blah* kind of things. She always said, “I respect [what] you do, but it's not, you know, not for my production.” So when she was assigned to be music director of the festival, and she called me up, she said, you know, “I can have you for this,” so this is good. That's how I was invited, for quartet. And that time there was a group [that] came from France, too, uh, Daniel Humair, I remember, he was the drummer at that time, uh, came to Ja... Ōsaka, you know, World Fair. And uh, I had Lew, myself, Mickey Roker, and Lew's very good friend called, um, Bob, Bob, Bob ... I will think [of it] in a minute.

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Brown: Bass? On bass?

Akiyoshi: Yes, bass.

Brown: Bob Cranshaw?

Akiyoshi: No, no, he's very active, but this man is ... more or less stopped playing, uh, I would think. But, the four of us. And we just went for ... I don't think he's a very noted person. Um, I will ask Lew.

Brown: Not Bob Hurst, though.

Akiyoshi: Huh?

Brown: Bob Hurst?

Akiyoshi: No, no.

Brown: Bob's too young.

Akiyoshi: No, it isn't, no. Daugherty! Bob Daugherty.

Brown: Bob Daugherty, uh huh, okay.

Akiyoshi: Bob Daugherty, Bob Daugherty, and he was the one. He was kind of a friend of Lew and so on. So we were there just for the, that fair, world fair.

Brown: One event?

Akiyoshi: No, I think we played maybe three days or something like that. I don't quite remember. But it wasn't one ... but just in and out for that, we didn't have any tour or anything. So that was '70. And ... that was the first time Lew had been in Japan, and for a very hot August, summer. Very, very hot and very unpleasant.

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: So, anyway. So that was the first ... and then, as I said, it was '72, he ... and uh.... I was, as I said, I was going to quit, I decided. So I burned everything: my folder for the PR, you know, things like that, they were union things. I burned everything and I decided....

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Brown: [Incredulous] You said you *burned* everything?

Akiyoshi: Yeah, so, I was going to quit. So *dah, dah, dah*, so we left—you know, my child, she was at the second grade by that time—anyway, we moved [in] July '72. And we were staying at Leonard Feather's home 'til I found some, we found some apartment or so on. And uh, we found a house in nearby Burbank, where he had to go [to] work, because he doesn't drive and I had to take him, so it had to be near Burbank....

Brown: Lew doesn't drive?

Akiyoshi: No, he doesn't. He doesn't drive, so I'm the driver [laughs]. Anyway, then, shortly after we moved, Jimmy Lyons, who was a producer at that time at the....

Brown: Monterey [Jazz Festival].

Akiyoshi: Monterey, and he called me, said, "John wants you to be in part of a 'piano playhouse.'" And uh, because John Lewis was the director at that time, the music director. And that kept me ... stopped me from ... quitting. So I had a few times like that before, because Joe Termini offered me [a job] to play solo, so this was ... John offered me the playhouse. That time it was Billy Taylor, John Lewis, and Erskine Hawkins, and myself. There was that ... and I, this was the first time I played Monterey. I'd never played Monterey before. So that saved my career, so to speak, and John was.... So anyway, he was a very important person in my life, and I didn't know him then, not much, but he used to come to—I think I mentioned before—when I was a soloist at the Top of the Gate, he used to come around quite often. But I just said "Hello," and that's about all. So I got to know him after that, and found out he loves wine and, you know, and I collect wine. So, he became a very good friend. His wife Mirjana Lewis is an accomplished, a very accomplished harpsichord player, and uh, also a wonderful cook. So Lew and I would go to their home, or they would come to our house, and so on, and became very, very good friends. But he was really ... little things like that kept me alive. He used to say, he said, um, "When people identify with your music, you should *always* play it. You should *always* play it." And he said, "In my case, I think it's 'Django.'" That's what he said. So he said that he *always* played "Django." So, my case, it was "Long Yellow Road," I guess. So ... in Japan, they always say, if I don't play that, some fan will say, "I don't feel like I heard you," so they kinda expect me to play that. So I always play that. Lew calls it my signature tune. But John was really helpful to me. And one time he said, uh, "You know, why don't you write a tenor lead?" 'cause he played, when we were there he played a record, it was Coleman Hawkins playing the lead. I don't quite remember the music, though, tune, but.... So I had a couple of music [pieces] that were tenor leads, and uh, so that was a little bit different, you know, gives a different color, so to speak. So ... I think I was also very much influenced by—because when I used to listen to Modern Jazz Quartet, when it came out, first came out when I

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was still in Japan—he was still playing standards. The first one [*The Quartet*, Savoy MG 12046] had “All the Things You Are,” things like that, it was very different, and nothing like ... you know, I mentioned before, I was into Bud Powell, and this was like *totally* different. And it was *so* European and I felt like ... [sighs] “Maybe this man would like to become a European.”

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: So ... after we became very good friends, Lew and I had our twenty-fifth anniversary, and I figured, “Well, we won’t have a fiftieth anniversary, so maybe we’ll have a big party.” So we had a party at the Essex House, and invited a few people, and so on, and of course, John and his wife. And on occasions like that, people make a speech, you know. And so John stood up and he said, “Toshiko infused, employed, infused Japanese culture, so *I* don’t have to do it.” And he said that. And then I, that’s when I realized, that’s what he’d been trying to do. Because everybody knows jazz is a fusion between European and African culture, born in this country, but he really wanted to have more universality, I mean, more European culture into.... Of course, his wife came from uh, the uh, now it’s gone ... uh, what do you call, separated in two....

Brown: Yugoslavia?

Akiyoshi: Yugoslavia. So things like that had a lot to do with it. But also his music, you know, he was ... more, becoming more, more and more like a universal [??], so on. I realized my thinking was so shallow, and so.... He really um ... highly ... thought of me as, some of the music that I have, like “Kogun,” for example, or “Minamata”.... You know, he actually used “Kogun” as material, teaching material at Harvard when he was teaching [in the] summer. I have nothing but fond memories, and then I have ... today, you know, I have, I like to have two sides: I still have, heavily, I have a lot of influence from Bud Powell, I think I do—but I probably don’t play like [as well as] *him*—but also I have a lot of influence from John, the fact [is], I like to have both. John was a very economized player, meaning each note has meaning, has a heavy, heavy weight, a lot of weight, and that’s something I would like to be able to do. So I like to have both sides. So he’s been a very good ... uh, teacher, in a sense, so.... I’ve been very, I think lucky. The fact is I came to this country when the music scene was still very *open*. Not like productions are like today, so you could sit in, if you know the tune, you could sit in, and most of the tunes I knew. So, that’s the best lesson you can get, you know, playing with great players. And they were very nice to me and very supportive. I came at a very good time, and I think that is my asset.

Brown: Well, you brought up two very important, uh, uh, things that we should try to discuss in more detail. One is influence, you know, what you were saying is, looking at cultural influences in music....

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Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ...and then also looking at the formation of your first orchestra. So....

Akiyoshi: Oh?

Brown: Your first big band, the formation, the creation of your first big band.

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: How did that come about? We know that you are now in Los Angeles....

Akiyoshi: So, we moved to Los Angeles because of Lew's job, in '72, summer. And Los Angeles had not much activity there. You know, I remember Hampton Hawes used to, we ... shortly after that, Hamp invited us to their home and his wife made a ... I think I never had a great taco like that in my life! Anyway, so he was very, actually, complaining a bit about the fact that the jazz clubs—for example, there was Dante's in North Hollywood—but they were more like outlets for studio players, you know. So he was pretty much complaining the fact that they weren't hiring real jazz players, whose *livelihood* depended on playing. And uh, that place was more like an outlet for studio players, so that they could play a little bit or something like that. So, not much [of a] jazz scene. Then Lew found out, uh, he was asked, there was a union [that] had a rehearsal room, and uh, he was asked to ... most of the time those rehearsals were done by the writers who were trying to get into studios or movie thing or so on, to try out some of the music. I think that's what it was. But ... I forgot to mention the fact, after the Town Hall concert, I felt very comfortable, I thought I'd like to write for the big band because ... I could express more, then, because you have more color, so on. But there wasn't any place that—at that time the union in New York didn't have any room; today they do, but they didn't—and uh, the rehearsal done by [for] this Town Hall concert, for example, the cheapest place you could get was \$30 an hour and you needed three hours and so on. So, once you start a band—I really thought, “I wish I could start a band”—but once you start, you have to keep it, and I really didn't have that kind of money. So that was that. So when we moved to Los Angeles, I wasn't, I had forgotten all about this, and then Lew came home one day and said, “I know you haven't written but about five music [compositions],” which was for the Town Hall, and “Maybe I'll get the musicians, so maybe we'll play your music,” you know. It was something to do; so he was very frustrated with not much jazz scene, so I think he wanted to be close to that. So ... those days, 50 cents for two hours and 45 minutes at the union. Now it's \$5.00 [chuckles].

Brown: [Chuckling] Fifty cents!

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Akiyoshi: But 50 cents, so I said, “Well, that’s, we can afford it.” That’s how it started in 1973, spring. And he got all the musicians, and it was a ... took about six months to settle down. Some musicians didn’t want to put up with the music; some musicians, I didn’t think were appropriate, you know, so on, *blah, blah, blah*. So that’s how the band started, not as a *working* band. It was just to get together and so on, and I thought if I could probably develop my repertoire and I was kind of getting my, more and more ... it’s kind of hard to explain, because you don’t really come to a conclusion overnight, you know. Sleep and then it was, “Yeah, that’s what I’m going to do,” no. But the many, many years I kind of felt like I really wanted to express, maybe, a point of view, my point of view, not just ... there’s a tune and you improvise on [it], you know, having a good time, nothing like that. But that’s—nothing wrong with it—but I wanted to ... my point of view, for example, because I’m very interested and I’m very ... susceptible to social issues. Which is, most of the time, social conditions many times were dictated or geared by government policy. So, all those things have always been part of my interest, and I wanted to ... see, I’d like to think this one is, I think this way. If I were a writer, I would write in words, but because I’m a jazz musician, so I like to spell it out in jazz music. So, I would start thinking like that, you know, and.... So when Lew suggested we do that, and then I thought this was a good opportunity for me to ... so meanwhile—this was ’72—I’m sorry, ’73. And in ’73 we started, and uh ... going every Wednesday morning from 10:15 to.... And doing this, I accumulated a little at a time, the music and so on. And they were coming, everyone ... and I started thinking, “I’ve got to *give* them something. They’re giving me, you know, to play my music,” so I thought maybe I’d.... I knew some recording producer in Japan—basically he was a classical recording producer—but he was a good friend of mine. So I wrote and said this was happening and would he be interested in recording. So he said he would be interested in recording. So in 1974, I think, Duke died.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: And uh, after Duke died, *broom-broom-broom*....

Brown: Harry Carney died, everybody [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: It was like following him, so to speak, like that. And uh, Nat Hentoff had written sort of a memoir or memories of Duke in, I think it was *Village Voice*, and uh, when I read that and it.... You know, sometimes the little things have to be triggers and he was talking about how Duke was, how proud Duke was of being a black American, and his music [was] based on his race, a lot of ‘em, you know: “Black Butterfly,” what have you, “Black and Beige [Tan] Fantasy,” so on, *blah, blah, blah*. And even [if] you know it, still somebody said that. And that triggered me to, I should look [at] my heritage, ‘cause um ... the normal belief in Japan was, to be Japanese and play jazz was a *handicap*. That’s the way, that was the normal thinking. And uh, I was thinking, I said,

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so when I read it I said, “Well, I’m a jazz player; I’ve been playing since I was sixteen years old, and so on, *blah, blah*. I’m not a bad player, I have probably more experience than a lot of young American players, but I have a different heritage.” And uh, “I look at my heritage as my *asset* rather than my handicap, and maybe I can bring something into jazz tradition,” which it was, Japanese culture never was part of that. Maybe I could try to infuse something; maybe that would be my job. So, that’s what triggered me, and at the same time, there was a Japanese soldier was discovered in the Philippine jungle. It was nearly thirty years, he didn’t know the war was ended. In fact, I think he has written a book—it’s a very interesting book. But anyway—Lt. Onoda, Second Lieutenant Onoda [Hiro]—and I was writing for the flute piece. I needed a flute piece for the recording. And uh, and also at the same time, my father was a student of *nō* play—I think I mentioned that earlier—and he used to, also he was a student of *tsuzumi*, which is a Japanese four-headed [drum]. And I always liked the sound, you know. Actually, I like all drums, I guess, but I really liked that sound, and I was thinking it’d be really nice to use that, you know. So I thought I’d like to use that, maybe it would be great with the flute, and ... so I had a tape sent from Japan. This was like a demonstration tape, a demonstration tape for the *tsuzumi* playing. And they have all kinds of ways of playing; this was the Kanze [-ryū] style of playing [chuckles].

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: *Nō* players, you know, so they showed.... I took ... It took me ... boy, ten years to put them together in one segment, so that would be ... and it was music, fit to the music, where they fall and so on. And that was “Kogun,” came as “Kogun.” And when I did that and we recorded this on eight-track....

Brown: A-track [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: Eight-track. Very low budget and eight-track, and in a place called Sage & Sound Studio, in Hollywood, that was nearby [chuckles]. Anyway, uh ... when I wrote this one and on the way through we did, I thought it was ... Japan, they were gonna put me down, you know, they were really gonna.... Because Japanese jazz fans, they want, more of purist [approach]. One, they like small groups—I don’t blame them, I feel [the] same way [chuckles]. And, two, they don’t like, you know, they’re purists, they like ... something like that—Japanese, you know, drums or what have you—“what’s this?!” you know. They, I thought they were *really* gonna put me down, and I thought, “Well, go ahead and put me down. I don’t really care.” So that’s what I ... and that became an all-time seller. My records never *sold* [laughing] ‘til that time!

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: One and, this one was a *big band*! One, two, that’s something that no one had

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ever done before, and no one ever *heard* something like that. And both [were] against, you know, sales, but it became [an] all-time seller. The first sale was, I think, it was 30,000. So, you know, jazz in *those* days, if you sold 5,000, it was considered good.

Brown: Still today [laughs].

Akiyoshi: So [chuckles] ... so that was—and I was *really* surprised, wow!—so that was my milestone.

Brown: 1974, *Kogun*, mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: And I thought, “I wish Duke were alive. I wonder what he would say?” I was thinking about that. Duke was always very uh, ... grandeur. He came a couple of times to the [Berklee] school when I was at school, and I had a terrible cold. And he would say [deep, elegant voice], “Oh, poor child. My dear, I have to send you to my doctor.”

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: You know [chuckling], things like that, he was....

Brown: Well, a couple of things that have come up. First of all, I just want to fill in some details: where *was* the rehearsal facility that you used, in what part of L.A.? Was it in North Hollywood, or was it in Burbank, or...?

Akiyoshi: You’re talking about in Los Angeles.

Brown: Yes.

Akiyoshi: It was the union.

Brown: It was the union hall, okay.

Akiyoshi: Union. 47, Local 47 union, and they had a rehearsal room. And New York didn’t have it. And as I said, it was 50 cents; today I think it’s \$5.00.

Brown: But was it located downtown, or was it located where you were living?

Akiyoshi: No, Vine Street.

Brown: Vine Street. You know where it is?

Akiyoshi: Uh, I guess that’s North Hollywood.

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Brown: You know where it is, okay. So it hasn't changed, it's still there, same place.

Akiyoshi: Yes, same place. It's still there.

Brown: Okay. And, *more* importantly, um ... blending in the *tsuzumi* sound: did you have any kind of harmonic or tonal considerations? Or what was your thought process in blending it into the jazz orchestra?

Akiyoshi: No. No, because they usually, fairly ... they don't have like a high-tone; but they usually have a certain sound. They're usually more or less the same. They always work in pairs: the one is *ko-tsuzumi*, small one....

Brown: On the shoulder, mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: ...which goes on the shoulder; and the big one goes on the hip....

Brown: *Ō-tsuzumi*, mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: ...and oddly enough, the big ... small one makes a lower sound, the bigger one makes the high sound. And they always work together. And I always liked the sound, you know, so this was something that the first time I used. And when, uh, I had other ones, for example, "Minamata," for example, Kanze [Hisao]—we call it *iemoto*, the one at the head of that particular style of *nō*, you know, singing—he's deceased, but I asked him to sing it for me, for this particular song, um, music. So it was ... the *tsuzumi* sound is pretty much the same, all things. I think if you hear, maybe three or four different *nō* plays and if you hear that sound, it's pretty much the same.

Brown: Yes, but you know—as probably you and I know, maybe some people who hear this—in *nō* drama, the *tsuzumi* players also have *kakegoe* [literally "hung voice"], right? The vocalization: *OOOoooooh* [mimics].

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: So *that's* what I'm talking about.

Akiyoshi: Oh, they make the great sounds to concentrate ... uh, the energy, then hit [the drum]. And always the small *tsuzumi* player does that. And the smallest, er, the biggest one, they usually have a short, very short, low note sound. They go [low voice] *oooooh*, something like that. But the one who makes the long, high-pitched [call], that's to concentrate the energy, then they play. The good players sound really, really nice on it. They, uh ... have a Japanese paper, that's cut in a little bit, and they put that on the other

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side [of the drum] to change the pitch the way they like, at the point where they like. That's what they do. But as I always, you know.... Anyways, so that was my milestone.

Brown: So when you make the recording, but how can you tour this? You have to take these artists with you to tour, to tour, to recreate this piece when you're touring.

Akiyoshi: I have a tape.

Brown: [Laughs] Ha!

Akiyoshi: But twice we had real players, in Japan. That was a luxury. And also here at the concert ... uh, uh ... the one time was at Carnegie Hall [recorded and released as *Carnegie Hall Concert* by Columbia in 1991], and then another time at Sankei Hall in Japan, they had a real player. But most of the time, for example, we used to play every Monday night at Birdland in New York, and every Monday night, and I had a tape recorder set for that and prerecorded. So, yeah, that's ... you know, if you are a classical organization, you can afford to have, their budget will provide it, even though it's like a twenty-minute piece of music and all you need is one note [chuckles], they will, that musician was hired. We don't have that kind of luxury, so....

Brown: So now, I'd presume that you look at 1974 as a ... this is now the land—, this is the turning point in your career. Do you now feel that you were successful as a jazz musi— did the success of *Kogun*...?

Akiyoshi: I think I did [to] some degree, yes, I do. I have—as far as music is concerned—I have close to 100 pieces of composition. And uh, the most important, to me, I think, probably the important music compositions would be ... they all have Japanese kind of ... herita—Japanese culture is weaved in. And also one is *Hiroshima: Rising from the Abyss* [2001], that one has a Korean flute player [Won Jang-hyun, playing *taegŭm*], who was also employed, so it has.... But I've always preferred ... I'm very careful, I've always been very careful. In other words, there are many music—especially nowadays in Japan—said, well, put Japanese culture [in]. Somehow, it's not, in *my* mind, it's not working in all respects. When you use something that wasn't there before, you have to be *very* careful: it's like ... you still ... somebody listens to it and says, “*That* is jazz music, but it's a little bit different.” You know, some different color. I think it's coloring: Japanese culture, you can only do coloring, not like some, like, Brazilian music, you know, took over the jazz scene at one point. But not like that, just coloring. But it is like, has to be ... for example, if you eat something, something that doesn't belong, like a stone or whatever it is, and [gets] stuck in your throat, and it ... it can't be like that. Music has to be something without any uh ... problem, any um, ... *teikō*, um ... resistance ... it has to go natural, natural in the ear. And just like something unnatural in there, something there that doesn't belong there, it's gonna [get] stuck. And

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it shouldn't be like that. So, [you] have to be very, very careful, which is, I think I have been very careful. So there was *Hiroshima*, that's ... "Minamata" is... "Minamata" [from *Insights*, 1976] actually ... uh, *Down Beat*, gained their album of the year, which was very nice. It was a long time ago.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: Anyway, that and ... most things.... I have even, some of the things that are *very*, very old-fashioned, it's called "Relaxing at the Zell am See," not the Camarillo [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: But um—Zell am See, which is a famous ski resort in uh, Switzerland, uh ... no, Austria, excuse me, Austria.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: And uh, it has real old-fashioned music, you know. In the middle of it there is a woodwind [passage] and there's uh ... *tsuzumi*, and it worked out very good. You know, there was ... Lew said, "If you can swing *that*, I'll buy you dinner." So, he had to buy dinner! [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs] Well, sounds like you were, uh, very conscious, and even concerned, about the audience reception your music, particularly in Japan, by integrating these Japanese elements into your music.

Akiyoshi: No, I wasn't concerned. As I said, I *felt* like they were going to put me down.

Brown: Yeah.

Akiyoshi: And I didn't really care.

Brown: Right.

Akiyoshi: I said, "Go ahead."

Brown: What about your concept about how the *American* audience would receive your music?

Akiyoshi: How...?

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Brown: Did you have any idea, or any concern about Americans receiving your music?

Akiyoshi: Not really. I ... of course, I hoped people would find, would identify with the music. That's the way we get uh ... you know, reputation or highly regarded, or whatever it is. But, [the] main thing's to me always been—for my entire career, whole career—it is, I have to be very, very true to me. I'm the first listener, as far as the writing's concerned. I'm the first listener. So if this won't ... I want to convey certain ... some music is, as you know—"Kogun," too, but there was "Minamata" and "Hiroshima"—all those are like *programmatic* music, which Duke used to write, but not that many, you know. Uh, and that means you have a *message*: you have a *story* to tell. And that message has to be in to the listener, the correct way, and in order to do that, I'm the first listener. So I have to be able to identify with the music. How [do] I do that? That's the way the work is, it's from the back. And ... main thing is always, I have to be true to me, and hopefully people will identify with the music. But if I'm not true to my music, I'm not worthy. I mean, all these years of playing, you know, all the work will be wasted. So I always think like that, you know.

Brown: Just like you say that Japanese jazz fans are more purist, they want to have *authentic jazz*, right? Coming from America. They presume that jazz is an American music, and the authentic music is from America? Authentic jazz?

Akiyoshi: I'm not quite sure about [if] *authentic* is the right word. I think they don't really heard ... now that they don't, you know, they have great respect for me. But the point is, never done it before. And they always ... the mainstream jazz fan is usually interested in the individual players, which I agree. I feel the same way. And uh, so, but, when you're writing for a large ensemble, there's an old way of saying, "A band is a book is a book is a book." So it's *composition*, which is not exactly how many ... improvisation will be limited, and the whole compos— it goes into a different category, you know, I think. And uh, but at the same time, it is like, player and writing, it's like a jockey and a horse. Like Duke never had a tenor solo 'til Ben Webster joined the band, so there's always, the great bands—like Basie's was well known, it was [because of] Pres [Lester Young]—you know, always you have to have a great player. Otherwise the music doesn't have ... that highest ... uh, how do you say? ... high merit as music, *jazz* music. So there was a ... long time ago there was a discussion in Japan—I was still in Japan—can you call [it] jazz if they have no improvisation at all, and it was all ensemble? But it's swing, it's called.... But I think you *can* call it *jazz*, but at the same time, it's not very attractive, you know, it's not very attractive. Because if the improvisation is the only merit of jazz, there's a lot of 'em, and all this. You know, concerto of cadenza for [Isaac] Stern was improvised, everything like that. So, there was a lot of those ... European music has all that. But as Duke says, you know, "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing"....

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Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: ...so that's a *part* of it, you know, that's the way....

Brown: Right. Well, I think you're bringing up the issue that jazz is more than just any one particular element or any one thing. It is a lot of different things: it's swing, it's blues, maybe a blues-base, it's improvisation, many different things. But I want to talk to you because, when I listen to *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, 1991, the piece for the children ["Children of the Universe"], which is, I believe, Hiroshima....

Akiyoshi: Oh yes.

Brown: ...I hear the way you're voicing the orchestra: it's almost like the whole orchestra is acting almost like, from *gagaku* [music of Japanese imperial court], you have like the, what I consider severe portamento [sings], it's almost like *hichiriki* [double-reed bamboo flute] to me.

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: So....

Akiyoshi: *Hichiriki* is a little different, but I know what you mean. But "Children of the Universe," that one, uh ... that ... I kind of like that melody. It's kind of like [sings] *tee-ah—ta*, but ... that one is like, is probably more like explanatory. First you start with flute and *tsuzumi*. So you hear very traditional Japanese, because Japanese think it's *bending* a note, you know, and uh ... and a *tsuzumi* player. And you hear that, then when the band comes in, the same melody, but uh ... they would have different ... uh ... 'cause it's harmony on top. It's different, you hear different things: the melody is there, but you know when it comes to the bridge, that's when the tempo starts and then the bridge, and right there it's just the old-fashioned jazz music, the ballad, like that.

Brown: Right. But it sounds like you're mixing in—through phrasing, also some of the chords, the way the chord, you know, sustained chords—to me sounds like *shō* [mouth organ] and then like *hichiriki*. Not *really*, exactly, to imitate, but use some of the idea of, you know, the phrasing, so....

Akiyoshi: Oh yes. The first one was "Sumi-e."

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: That one I had written for the '67 concert ... you know, 1967 Town Hall concert. It was called "Sumi-e" and that was, I was writing in the middle—as I

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mentioned before—from 12 o’clock to 6 in the morning I was writing. And uh ... somehow I started hearing this *gagaku* sound and uh ... it took me quite an effort, but that was played by trumpets. Because I used to hear Japanese trumpet players bend a note, you know. And so that’s what’s typical Japanese *gagaku* sound: in other words, two together, two together, like this. And ... comes up top, while the melody’s still going, the same thing, now that was a very repetitious melody, keep going and third time they have these things, weaving comes in. And uh, I think it worked out well, but that’s the first time I did that, you know. And when the first time with the band—Lew got the musicians together in the band in Los Angeles—first time we rehearsed, the trumpet players were saying, “We can’t bend the notes.” I said, “Oh yes you can, because I’ve seen Japanese trumpet players do it, so if Japanese can do [it], you can do [it]” [chuckles].

Brown: Miles Davis did it all the time.

Akiyoshi: But that’s one of ... very first one. But uh, the one ... um, the tribute to Duke Ellington, that was commissioned by the Monterey [Jazz] Festival, 1999. You were there. And the second movement, which is “Eulogy,” it was, the start was the same thing: *gagaku*. And it was like that. And it was ... when the tenor comes in, it was a real ballad, in *my* mind. It’s like, almost like, “What’s happened?” like this. But it was, the second time you play you get into.... So there’s an introduction that seems to ... and when you repeat there’s something added, next time you repeat there’s something added. Something, and it comes to a certain point, and it comes to a very traditional ... whatever. It takes ... takes a lot of effort, but uh, that’s what the writer’s *supposed* to do, you know. I’m not writing for a jingle! [chuckles]

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: I’m not facing a deadline. So I always felt like I’m fortunate to have the kind of situation that I could take all the time in the world, so that I can always correct it if I didn’t think it was right. *That’s* the thing about the writing: you know, you playing and you can’t correct it. I say, “Oh dear, why did I do that! It’s gone!” [laughs]

Brown: [Laughs] You know, when I think of other artists, particularly composers and musicians who are blending East, or Japanese, and Western concepts, I think of Tōru Takemitsu. I don’t know if you’re familiar with....

Akiyoshi: Yes, yes.

Brown: ...because he was already blending not only concepts—

Akiyoshi: Yes, yes.

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Brown: ...the way, the structure of the music—but also traditional Japanese instruments.

Akiyoshi: We were very good friends, because he really liked jazz. When he got the ... fellowship from—I forget the name, it was a famous one and all—he said he wanted to study with Duke Ellington, and they thought he was joking. You know, I mean, it's a real snob, classical field, but....

Brown: I think Richard Stoltzman said this in an interview in *Down Beat*: that—I think it was a Fulbright scholarship....

Akiyoshi: Fulbright, yes, that's it.

Brown: ...in the late fifties—and they thought he was going to choose Copland, or, you know, some other more *classical* composer, and he said no, Duke Ellington, and they just ... and I think they withdrew it.

Akiyoshi: No, I don't think John Coltrane was there at that time, yet, that time, I don't think he was. I don't think so.

Brown: Oh, I didn't say ... no, I didn't mean ... I didn't say John Coltrane [chuckles], no, no.

Akiyoshi: Oh, oh, okay, sorry. But anyway....

Brown: I said Aaron, Aaron Copland.

Akiyoshi: Oh, yes, right. That's what they said and it was ... but he, he wanted to, so.... But his *November Steps* is the classic one and he liked to use the *biwa* [lute, similar to Chinese *pipa*]....

Brown: And *shakuhachi* [bamboo flute].

Akiyoshi: ...but he was such a *sensitive* writer. He—I think we might have been the same age, I'm not quite sure [Takemitsu was born in 1930, ten months after Akiyoshi]—he was a very frail person and drank quite a lot, so he had to be very careful about eating and so on. And he said, one time he said, “Well, why don't we write together?”

Brown: Hmm!

Akiyoshi: And I said [sheepishly], “Well, I don't know.” I can't write what he does, and he can't write what I do. You know [chuckles], that's what I was thinking, but he was....

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My unfortunate thing was the last time we were having a temper and I said—because he was writing a lot of movie music—and uh, “Do you like writing movie music?” and he said, “Oh, yes!” So ... one thing is I remember *Kaidan*, Japanese [movie] *Kaidan* [1964]—that changed the whole movie background music and he was kind of revolutionary with things—but he started writing some for American, you know, movies and so on, *blah, blah, blah*, but if he didn’t do that, he would’ve done more ... music for listening. It’s not what we call “cue writing,” not that, but we would have more Takemitsu music, you know, I think about [that]. But somebody said he *really* loved movies, so it was kind of, it was natural that he wanted to write for movies. But uh ... he’s one of the, I think, maybe one or two Japanese composers who actually comes down to the, you know, level, the international level, as a contemporary writer. Very, very sensitive writer.

Brown: [Receives cue from recording engineer] Okay. So, Toshiko-san, we’re talking a lot about now, as composer....

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ...I think that you have really changed, uh ... you’ve had an impact on the vocabulary of jazz and tonal color, by bringing in the cultural elements from Japan. Um, but obviously you have a great regard and love for some of the people who came before you, like in 1978, you made a recording dedicated to Billy Strayhorn [*Tribute to Billy Strayhorn*, released in 1982 on Jazz America].

Akiyoshi: Oh yes!

Brown: So, talk about, you know, Strayhorn, please.

Akiyoshi: I think that was a trio, my playing on.... I think Strayhorn is some— ... his music, I wish I could really digest well. Somehow, his music had a more ... different, uh ... dimension. I mean, Duke was always a great writer, but his music is more, uh ... suited with singing, maybe, to words, and so on. But I think Duke’s greatness was probably orchestration. [?? Track begins in mid-sentence with syllable *ui* 憂い, possibly the Japanese term for sad, gloomy], you know, a Japanese, it has a ... it’s a more different dimension; his music is something [that] has ... for example—let me thinking about the things, you know. The music would, say, “Isfahan” really sounds like *there* [Iran]; and things like “Lush Life,” where it’s ... “Daydream” is something that Strayhorn’s family, somehow they heard the record and they really liked the way I played, so I tried to listen to what they liked about it. I’m only playing very short [laughs], I didn’t realize I played so short. That’s such a long time ago, you know, over twenty some-odd years ago. But his music was something that ... for example, Lew plays it really well. I wish I could digest it really well. Many of his music [pieces] let me

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think about certain things, that particular music. It's not hunky-dory, happy-happy, or anything like that. It was, of course, his last one, "Blood Count," it really sounds like a blood count, you know. He's one of probably ... I always thought he was like as great a jazz writer as Monk, but Strayhorn has ... one doesn't have to be a jazz musician to appreciate or understand or, you know, the music. For Monk's music, you kind of have to be a jazz connoisseur to appreciate his music, I think. But Strayhorn's is music I always ... liked and I wish I could—even now—I wish someday, I probably hope to digest his music and do some justice to his music in my playing.

Brown: Well, obviously, as you said, the Strayhorn family saw some, saw your music, your interpretation of Strayhorn as very, very valuable, so that's great. You know, when you were talking earlier about John Lewis and how he brought in a lot of, you know, Western classical influence....

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: ...more, I know he loves Bach, you know, and very formal, very formalized, and more Germanic tradition, whereas Strayhorn, also very much influenced by classical music, coming more from the French tradition.

Akiyoshi: But the difference is, I think, is that John was a *player*.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: I think—I know Strayhorn played the piano—but he's not noted as a player. I know he had a couple recordings, but John Lewis was a player. Also, [what's] interesting about John Lewis, his compositions are very European, but ... for example, like, say.... He has written a duet, as you know, with Hank Jones—he respected Hank Jones like *mad!* So although the duet was like traveling, or it has *so* much European influence; but when he comes to solo, he's, everything is, his root has always been blues. That's what *I* think, you know, so that's a very interesting combination. I think that's one of the reasons, maybe, when Bags quit—Milt Jackson quit at one point, one time he quit—and he disbanded [Modern Jazz Quartet], someone, I'm sure there were several critical musicians or whoever who suggested to him, "Why don't you use this guy or that guy," you know, great vibraphone players, and so on, but John wouldn't hear of it. But because, I think, that's the way he believed, the way music has to be played. So it is a difference between he and Strayhorn, in some respects, I think, you know, something like that. Of course, John's music is something like, very clean [laughs]—*transparent* is not a good word—it's like, but *crystal*, kind of. Strayhorn's music is *darker*, to me. It's more, like I said, multi-dimensional. I wish I knew the right words, the right English words for John's music, you know, like a certain....

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Brown: Why don't you say it in Japanese? Maybe we can get somebody to translate it later. Go ahead.

Akiyoshi: Yeah? Uh, *tōmei* ... *tōmeisei* ... *tōmeisei* [transparency, clearness, crystalline], uh ... *tsukitōru* [penetrating], *tōmeisei* meaning *tsukitōru*, it's like something like ... it's like, uh [chuckles, frustrated]. I don't know how to say in English.

Brown: It's okay, we'll....

Akiyoshi: Yes, *tōmeisei*, *sei* is ... um ... that's what I think, John's music, I always feel that that has that quality, and.... It's pretty much like, that's the way he plays: he plays very ... little [few] notes and to some degree it's deliberate. All notes weigh a lot, and I think that's something that ... in Strayhorn's case, that's not his forte. I wish ... for example, like, I *love* Bud Powell, as you know, and I know quite a lot of his music, but his music is never that ... uh, it's mostly, it's bebop-oriented, harmonically a little bit intricate, but it's really instrumental music, rather than uh, ... like Strayhorn's music—well, maybe it's written on an instrument—but it's not really instrumental music. It is a composition that is saying something, and that's the difference. Uh ... he's really a rare, rare, rare, great writer.

Brown: So maybe *clarity*? I'm not sure that's a good word. But um, in thinking of, um ... John Lewis and Billy Strayhorn, influence of European music, um—also the way you talk, you know, as a composer, also as orchestrator and arranger—there's *so* many different things [that] go into shaping the music. Now, you have somebody like Gil Evans, who mostly is known as orchestrator, arranger, rather than composer.

Akiyoshi: Right.

Brown: Uh, could you talk about his music and/or influence, from Gil?

Akiyoshi: No, I'm not, I really didn't study his music much. All I know is that he was, before that he was writing for, I think it was a dance band, I forgot ... Claude Thornhill.

Brown: Claude Thornhill.

Akiyoshi: And uh, but ... he knew Miles. I think that's what he has written, orchestrated for the two [LPs], as you know, *Sketches of Spain* and others and so on. But his whole group—he had it for quite some time—but it didn't really have that kind of impact. But I think he's ... [hesitates] I hate to say this—all due respect—he needed Miles to show his full capabilities as an orchestrator, maybe, you know. He was a very sensitive writer. He's not a ... one of the things I always missed, he was very sensitive, but he didn't have a real dynamic thing, you know, and it was like, uh ... Duke has it, Frank Foster's music

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has it, you know, a real kind of dynamo. But he had written, I think, arranged, orchestrated, I think it was strings, um, Bill Evans played? It's beautifully orchestrated. Things like that: he was a beautiful orchestrator, I think, very sensitive. But ... I'm not ... also, this is, I just thought about something that.... Before Gil Evans came out, I think European writers really couldn't get with it. They couldn't identify [with] Duke's writing and Foster's writing, what have you. And Gil Evans, the way he orchestrated, European writers, they could identify [with it]: "Oh, I can do that." I think it's a ... in that respect, I think he's more like a *bridge* to the European writers. Some of them came back here, some American writers, with very European writing. I don't know if I make sense.

Brown: Oh, no, absolutely.

Akiyoshi: You know what I mean?

Brown: Oh, yeah, absolutely, I mean, uh.... We interviewed Hale Smith. Do you know Hale Smith? Did you...?

Akiyoshi: No, I'm afraid not.

Brown: Oh. Anyway, he's a classical composer, uh, African American, and he worked with Eric Dolphy; he also worked with Mingus. But, he said, yeah, well, Gil Evans, you can trace the direct influence back to a European classical composition, just like the *Aranjuez*, you know, the *Concierto*, certain things like that, there's already a European precedent, he just kind of recasts it in a jazz language. So it's true, it's a bridge, because you see the original source, he just recasts it, so....

Akiyoshi: Right, that's why I think that, so that's why now a lot of European writers start writing and pretty much, some of the writers here, I'll say, "That sounds European" [chuckles]. You know, I think about that, something like that.

Brown: Well ... even somebody like who we were talking about—John Lewis and Billy Strayhorn—but even ... you know, so we saw different ways of European classical influence, you know, concert music influence. But even Bud Powell wrote a through-composed piece, "The Glass Enclosure." This is not a jazz piece [chuckles].

Akiyoshi: No, *but*, it is *not* a European piece.

Brown: Right.....

Akiyoshi: No.

Brown: ...but it's through-composed [chuckles].

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Akiyoshi: [Calling to husband] Lew-chan! Could you do me a favor? Take the champagne out from freezer and put it in the fridge. I don't want them to freeze. Sorry.

Brown: [Laughs] No problem.

Akiyoshi: The ... I think "Glass Enclosure"—one of my favorites, and I've never played it, I don't think I can play it—but I heard somebody play it. But ... if you hear it, even though no one, if I never heard the piece, and if I hear it, I can tell it's Bud. I can tell it's Bud Powell, because....

Brown: How?

Akiyoshi: ...it's the punctuation, harmonize, also the way he ... you know, he has a very unique way of punctuating things and always been a very, very muscular player, a real dynamic player. And his *touch* was like that: it was not a, you know, like Teddy Wilson or somebody like that [chuckles]. He wasn't like that. I don't consider that to be European music, in *my* mind, no. And also, it may not have the pulse like that, but every once in a while there's a pulse, you know [sings]. That's a pulse to me. That's like a, it's real ... but it doesn't sound like European music, in *my* mind.

Brown: Mm-hmm.

Akiyoshi: But he's ... he wrote so many tunes, but I think they were, they were all very good. But it's totally different from ... I think what a lot of bebop players have written is totally different from something like a Strayhorn; bebop isn't a story, telling you something, not that much. Charlie Parker has written so many, but they're riffs, so many, you know, riffs, *da-da-da-da*, and so on. So it's not quite the same thing, I think.

Brown: Mm-hmm. Well, it definitely shows some other influence other than strictly through, uh, through jazz influence. You know, again, it's just getting ... like for example, I want to ask you some other infl— you know, you can like somebody; that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to influence what *you* do.

Akiyoshi: I, you know, what I think is that as soon as we hear something you like, I think you are influenced right there. It may not be....

Brown: Conscious?

Akiyoshi: ...obvious influence, but it's not only music. But I was very influenced by ... there was a time when it was called "happening. I guess the word *happening*, you know, they are ... Robert uh, uh ... Hamburger, you know, big hamburger [chuckles], those

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days. And by watching this, observing, if you have the money, you can put a quarter in the box. If you don't, you don't have to. That kind of thing was going around there, maybe at the time I was a student living in what they call Soho today. Those days it wasn't Soho [chuckles].

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: Um, but I'm very much influenced by things like that, I'm sure. And I like painting. I don't understand anything about it, but I like painting. And by ... anything that ... you look ... uh ... read, could be observing a social issue—even if it has nothing to do with music—it's a social issue, a political scene, you know, all those things if you observe it, I think they all influence.... I, personally, I think I was influenced quite by everything. Other than that, if it's not, I wouldn't be able to, I wouldn't be producing things like *Hiroshima: Rising from the Abyss*, or “Minamata,” or something like that. It's coming, maybe not [as] notes, but I ... the message and so on. So everything I see, or touch, observe, and if it gave me some kind of feeling, I was influenced right there by, you know, different meaning, maybe.

Brown: Well, let's talk about your piece about Hiroshima, since you talked also about how you have a political awareness, as well. So this piece, when you were first commissioned, you made comments that, that ... something to [the effect], “Why should I write about this tragedy?” What's the connection?

Akiyoshi: Yeah, you're talking about the Hiroshima piece. Well, that was commissioned by a priest—who was here not too long ago, in New York, with his son—but anyway, he's a jazz fan. He has quite many, he's very aware of my music that I have written, uh, “Minamata.” That's why he asked me. It was 1999 and I was in the midst of writing for the tribute to Duke Ellington and it was—excuse me, 1998—so I told him, “I'm kind of busy,” and he said that he would wait, and he sent me a photo ... uh, [mumbles], it's somewhere here. The photo was taken three days after the bomb was dropped, and, uh—I mentioned earlier, think yesterday—that I was born and raised in old Manchuria, today China. And uh, I never had an air raid experience or anything like that, and then after we came back to Japan, the whole family in 1946, I started playing immediately in the dance hall. And also, at that time, there wasn't much talk about this bomb dropped by the Americans. I think, probably, Japanese journalists and government and so on were very sensitive about not writing things like that: we were, you know, right after the Occupation time, so I think that's.... So it never even occurred to me. And then later on, after I came to this country, I heard news about some of the girls who were victims came here for treatment [the so-called Hiroshima Maidens]. I heard all that. But I didn't really think much of it, to tell you the truth. So when he gave me this photo, and I was so shocked, because I had never seen anything like this. So ... I wasn't quite sure if I could write something like this. And first of all, we were looking at it—that was done in '46, 194—

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5....

Brown: The bombing? '45.

Akiyoshi: ...1945, and here we are in, you know, 1998, and, first of all, when that bomb was dropped, many, many people died, and horrible, horrible ... can you...? First, does it have any *meaning* writing music like that? And uh, I didn't see much of a purpose in writing music like that. I didn't think I could write [it], and I was going to decline. Then I was just looking at a page and ... the one page that I missed, it was a young woman [who] was underground, so she wasn't affected, and she came out, and she just looked a little bit, uh, and smiled a little bit. And it was such a beautiful face—I know I have a picture of her somewhere, I'll find it—anyway, uh, and then when I saw that, I said, “I can write that.” And it was, also ... even though the photographer who took this photo, he also has written a series *Full of Hope*, you know, *Face Full of Hope*, and it was *definitely* a *beautiful* photo. I said, “I can write that.” It was like, we have to have hope no matter what. Maybe, *more* reason you have to have, the *more* ... horrible the situation, then you have to have more hope. Like, uhhhh ... uhhhh ... Lama, great....

Brown: Dalai Lama?

Akiyoshi: Dalai Lama. He said, “Well we can't live without hope,” which is very true. And I thought, “I'm going to make this more like a piece of anti-war, anti-nuclear weapon, weapon-anything, and it was ... and we will not ... uh, give up hope that someday maybe people will tolerate each other [chuckles slightly], and at *least* there's no war. And we keep *saying* that, we keep just *saying* that to the world, you know. *That's* the way I wanted to write, and I think that's, that's what I think I wrote. So it's a very long piece, a 24-, 25-minute piece, and it's just ... some of the war, and after the war, these people with mothers were talking about their ... memories, so on, so on. And the very last part, and it was the hope. This place was a short one, but to me this is the punch line.

Brown: [Chuckles]

Akiyoshi: I thought, “Well, this is a piece of hope, so I'd like to play it in the 21st century,” and I said, I started writing in 1998, so.... And uh, so we did: 21st [century], 2001, August 6, in Hiroshima. Then we had a little tour after that—maybe five or six concerts—then came back to the United States, and then, of course, after that's 9/11. I still remember, that was a Tuesday morning, because we played Monday night, you know, Monday night, always, and we'd just come back from Japan, we had such a ... I had a terrible time trying to sleep and so on. And uh, finally, I had kind of started sleeping, then the phone rang, from my daughter. And I heard Lew say, “Really?! Wow.” And he went up and put the television on, and I said, “Oh my God, what's he

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putting on the television for? I'm sleeping," and I looked, and then already, you know. So, that was 9/11. So after that, we always played at the very end of—Monday night, or even if I play someplace else, it doesn't matter where it is—I always play that "Hope," that part, maybe about two minutes or so. Very short. So that's what we do in—that's what *I* do [laughs]—any, uh, any situation. No, I think ... you know, you were mentioning before that, when you have many compositions, which one is your favorite. People ask that, it's just like uh, you were saying, it's just asking somebody, "Which of your children is your favorite?" and it was.... But it's something that probably ... important compositions for me are probably "Kogun," "Minamata," and *Hiroshima*, pieces like that. And, I would like to think, "Children of the Universe," because that is ... you know some— ... I don't even really listen to music and—*jibun*, you know, my own—it's a long time passed, maybe a couple of years or so on. And then I listened to it. And sometimes, even though at that time I thought it was good—that's why I recorded or played it or so on—some music is ... gee, I don't know, I mean, uh, a little ... it's not that much impact, some music like that. And then some music *stands*, and I think time is the kind of judgment, judge of the music, I think, you know, the composition. "Children of the Universe," and then, I had written that one in '81, or '80, one of those years, and ... it still stands okay today. I listen to it. So I feel very good about [it]. Many times when the years pass, you know, twenty years later, and I say [sucks breath, sounds anxious], "I don't know, this maybe ... a little too light-handed," or something like that, so.... I think those ... all of them are very long [laughs], very long pieces.

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: It's getting longer and longer!

Brown: Well, the pieces you mentioned—as you stated earlier—you are a socially conscious person, it's reflected in the music, particularly in the titles you just said were important to you. [Takes deep breath] When I look at Duke Ellington, yes, as we talked earlier, he was very much influenced by his cultural, uh, background. But also, Duke Ellington had a very strong spirituality, particularly in his later period.

Akiyoshi: Oh, yes, of course.

Brown: So, for me that means humanity. Uh, spirituality means humanity.

Akiyoshi: Yes.

Brown: So I see that in your music, as well. Do you feel that there's any kind of cultural influence in this consciousness of yours? You mentioned Buddha before; do you feel that Japanese culture or maybe just your early upbringing has had an impact on the way you view the world?

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Akiyoshi: I would like to, I would like to think it does. I was mentioning earlier, that anything you observe—it doesn't necessarily have to be music—but it could be anything you observe and you felt something, right there you are influenced by [it]. So, that includes everything: political scene, government, policymaking, and social issues, what have you. So I would like to think my music will have all that, you know, digested in myself and comes out. I would like to think that.

Brown: Well, I think your music *speaks* that, so....

Akiyoshi: Thank you.

Brown: [Laughing] ...I think you got that covered! Um ... also, uh ... let me take just a quick break, just a minute. Um, here in 2008, it's a very interesting year for America: we have a woman running for president....

Akiyoshi: Oh, president, yes.

Brown: ...and a black man. And when I think about your career—again, my mother's Japanese—I think about her experience. I know her experience directly, coming to America, being Japanese, in the aftermath of World War II, where Japanese people [were] viewed as the enemy—even Japanese Americans, viewed as the enemy, because they were put in the [relocation] camps. So I'm wondering: you come as a Japanese person and woman. Do you, how do you ... when you reflect back, look back—'cause lot of times you don't recognize it when it's happening—do you feel that that worked against you? Obviously, in some ways, it worked in your favor, like you said you got the scholarship from Berklee 'cause they could advertise, they used you for advertising. Do you feel that these, that you being a woman and Japanese worked *against* you in America, whether it's just being a jazz musician, or just the way you were treated socially?

Akiyoshi: I think, uh, you know, I never thought about it 'til, uh, this woman issue came out—I think it was [Germaine] Greer or someone like that from, uh, England—that started this feminist *blah, blah, blah*. I never really thought about being Japanese as ... a handicap or as a ... so on, 'til ... there was a newspaper in Boston. I was getting a lot of attention: I was getting a *Mademoiselle* award [in January 1958] or things like that, or became an ASCAP member. And uh, the journalist who was writing, he wrote—I don't quite remember the exact words of that one—but basically what he was saying was, "Why is she getting all this attention? A lot of good Bostonian jazz players, they're not getting any limelight," or things like that. So, I thought about, well, we have a saying, it says: "stick out nail will be beaten" [laughs], so I guess that's what it is! You know, and [track begins in mid-sentence] it was a big band. It was just the first time when ... I think

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was seventy-, say sixty—I think it was '74, uh, September. That's what I think. It was a Friday night and there was a lot of attention. And it was some paper—I'm not quite sure, I don't remember which paper, San Francisco or Los Angeles paper—but the paper, it said, "I question her 'authenticity.'" That was, that was ... so, there were things like that: "it's obviously because she's Japanese," you know, "it's not authentic." But that's why, when in 2007 I received the NEA Jazz Master and you have to make a little speech, and I mentioned the fact that I came a long way from being written ... about "question her authenticity," to what is the highest honor of a jazz player. Because I think sometimes it gets that kind of things because it's ... we also have a saying: "a little bump above the eyes can annoy" [laughs]. So it, like, annoys some people to get [??]. But if you're a pioneer—I guess I *am* a pioneer, I think....

Brown: Mm-hmm!

Akiyoshi: ...you get all the heat. But that comes with it, so you have to accept, you know, everything. That's the way I think. I was ... there was a lot of those ... I decided to have a very simple rule that I decided to have for myself. It is, one, if I have no control over what somebody else will say something, or like, say "Oh, she's Japanese," or I'm Japanese, I *have* no control [over that], I'm a woman, I'm a *jazz musician*, you know. But I won't worry about it if I have no control. But if I have control over [it], and then if it's, I don't like it, I correct [it]. You know, those two things. So, if I have no control over [it], I decided not to worry about [it]. But at the same time, that sounds so wonderful and easy [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs] Well, there *is* ... [laughs harder] ... well, there's always, since we are in America, and we are dealing with music, there's always the business side of things. And that ... and during the course of this interview, you've talked about the challenges of dealing with the business of this music. And nowadays, we're in the midst of this huge change from the analog to digital and the internet, and many of the landmark recordings you've produced are no longer available, or at least conspicuous in the marketplace. So obviously the business is something you've had to negotiate. How do you feel—do you feel you were successful in dealing the business, and if not, what would you change?

Akiyoshi: I don't do that. I don't do that, because I'm not capable. So I just, uh, if anybody were interested, they probably *will* offer something. It it's not, that's the way it is. I can only do what I can do, which is to try to do my best to write music or play better than yesterday. It may not be always that way, but at least I can try, you know. That's all I can do. And that gives me full time, you know, every day. It's full time for me, so....

Brown: So once you become—this is what I learned from Red Callender—if you become a musician, he said, you're al—... you know Red Callender, right? That's Charles Mingus' teacher, so uh....

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Akiyoshi: What?

Brown: Charles Mingus' teacher. He said, "If you become a musician," he said, talking to me, "you will always be a student. You will never be a master." You believe this?

Akiyoshi: Oh yes. Yes. I think you *try*. All you can do is try. Because there are always ... if you did something that you really wanted to correct, or achieve something, as soon as you achieve that, there's another one in front of you. Never, you know, um, fortunate. But I think that's good. It's ... I feel sometimes fortunate that way that I'm a musician, because there's *always* something to do.

Brown: Well, Toshiko, during the course of this interview you've talked about this career, this amazing career of yours. You're, you know—as you say yourself—a pioneer. You had overcome so many things, whether it's cultural, whether it's musical, or whatever, um, but yet you've succeeded, you know.

Akiyoshi: [Laughs modestly]

Brown: And the way to measure that is your own, what you feel is your own success. And also you have been recognized: the Nanri award, you said, was the first award, and when you had your big band in Los Angeles, you got many Grammy nominations....

Akiyoshi: [Laughs modestly]

Brown: ...so what were the other awards that meant something to you?

Akiyoshi: I think it probably meant something ... *all awards* mean something, because, as you know, music is not a sport: there's no such thing as number one or number two. But when you have an award or you have certain things, it's because they are paying attention to what you do. At the same time, if they don't like you, they're not going to vote for you. So there's some *love* involved; so you *are* loved by many people, so on, and you are pay ... people pay attention to your ... what you do. *That's* where the value lies. So I have ... all awards mean a lot. But, I must say, for me, it's the Master, Jazz Master, because that comes from America, which is ... I'm not an American citizen, and, as I said, it came a long time, a long way from being written "not authentic" or what have you [laughs]. So [for] jazz musicians, it's an achievement getting National Endowment [for the] Arts to ... by recognize and given a fellowship, Jazz Master Fellowship, I think that's about the highest I can ... you know. I really, uh, when that phone rang—it usually comes earlier and they say that you shouldn't talk 'til the official announcement and so on—but when they said it, I thought, "Is this confirmed?" First of all I said, "Is it confirmed?" and she said, "Yes, it's [confirmed], congratulations," and *blah, blah, blah*.

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And then, because ... I have a ... Lew always said—and often I mentioned at the Birdland, you know, thing—Lew always said I am “demographically challenged” [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs]

Akiyoshi: So I didn't really think I could get things like that, so ... I think that's about the highest, you know. I'm very, very grateful. I think that's ... I have to be, I don't know if I am worthy. I have to ... I can try [laughs].

Brown: [Laughs] Well, I think, because you received the award, the jazz world *knows* that you're worthy. And so, Toshiko—unless you have anything else you want to add to this interview—I just want to say, on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters award, just want to thank you so much for allowing us to come into your house to document your life for the historical record. Um, we hope that this will be shared with many future generations to come, so they understand that a woman from Japan can come to America and become a master of American music.

Akiyoshi: Thank you very much for asking. Thank you.

Brown: Thank you so much. *Domo arigatō gozaimashita.*

Akiyoshi: *Dō itashimashite.*

Transcriber's note: Ms. Akiyoshi was interviewed in her second (or, really, third) language, English. In the interview she usually uses present-tense verbs in talking about past events. However, to avoid confusion and enhance readability, when appropriate I have transcribed her verbs in the past tense. I do this out of utmost respect for Ms. Akiyoshi's fluency and expressiveness, so as to draw attention to the content of her narrative, and not to allow negligible grammatical idiosyncrasies to distract the reader. Whenever possible, I have inserted in brackets [] short annotations and supplemental information from Ms. Akiyoshi's 1996 Japanese autobiography and my own research. Transcribed by E. Taylor Atkins, Professor of History, Northern Illinois University, USA

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