

Artist Spotlight

Get to know:
Kenny Endo

By AmberRose Ramos



Kaneko, Endo, and Watanabe above with
MBAW's Director of Development
Suhail Arastu and MBAW's Artistic
Director Anya Grokhovski

Back in April, San Antonio was host to three captivating artists: Kenny Endo, Sumie Kaneko, and Kaoru Watanabe. Of their multiple performances here, one sponsored by Musical Bridges Around The World was located at San Fernando Cathedral in the heart of downtown.

It was a full house and there was no doubt that the audience left with their musical appetites fulfilled. Sitting through such a powerful performance piqued an interest in the artists. How did they get into traditional Japanese and Hawaiian based music? How long had they been playing? After a little research and communication with the artists, these questions were met with answers.



Mr. Endo after the Sakura concert

Kenny Endo is at the vanguard of the taiko genre, continually paving new paths for this Japanese style of drumming. A performer, composer, and teacher of taiko with numerous awards and accolades, Kenny Endo is a consummate artist, blending Japanese taiko with rhythms influenced from around the world into original melodies and improvisation. Originally trained as a jazz musician in the Asian American cultural renaissance of 1970s California, Endo began his taiko career first with L.A.'s groundbreaking Kinnara Taiko, then with the renowned San Francisco Taiko Dojo, the first kumi daiko (ensemble drumming) group outside of Japan. In 1980, he embarked on a decade-long odyssey in his ancestral Japan, studying and performing with the masters of classical drumming, traditional Tokyo festival music, and ensemble drumming. Endo has the honor of being the first non-Japanese national to have received a natori (stage name and masters license) in hogaku hayashi (classical drumming). In the hogaku world, Endo is known as Mochizuki Tajiro.



Questions with Mr. Endo

**How did it all (career wise) start?
What got you into the drums? Why taiko?**

Have been into playing and hearing drums since I was 4 or 5. Played drumset and Western percussion up until when I started playing taiko (1975). Always enjoyed the sound and the emotions that drums brought out in people.

What inspired you to explore the Jazz(y) side of music?

As an American involved in taiko, I was exposed to many types of music growing up. Jazz was (and is) definitely one of my favorite styles.

**Do you play any other instruments?
Any other current musical interests?**

Play shinobue (bamboo flute), various percussion, and a little piano (mainly to compose on)

Two pieces that you played on Sunday (April 10) were in honor of the spirits that make up your drums and the spirit of Hawaii and its people. You seem to be in tune with music and with life on a spiritual side. Even during your TEDx Talks presentation you mentioned that people must go back and find their roots; to get in touch with their spiritual sides. Have you always followed that mindset that “everything has a meaning and a purpose”?

Yes, and people need to express that somehow. My style is to express them musically.

If you weren't a musician, what else would you like to be doing?

Healing art (doctor, writer, visual artist)

Of all the places you've visited, which one has made the biggest impression?

Bhutan (for the amazing people and scenery), and Russia (to realize people are the same everywhere), Bali (amazing culture and people)

What pushes you to keep playing?

Need to improve

**Favorite musician?
Any musical influences?**

Yo-Yo Ma- cello, Herbie Hancock- piano, Tony Williams- drums –Am influenced by many musical cultures from around the world.



I read (on your website) that you are the first non-Japanese national to receive a natori (stage name and master's license) in hogaku hayashi (classical drumming). That must be a very big honor. How does the process of choosing or rather being given a natori work? Did you have to achieve a certain level of skills or have a certain amount of experience? How did you get the natori Mochizuki Tajiro?

A natori is both a stage name (in the classical field in Japanese music) and license to teach. I was given the name by my teacher, Mochizuki Bokusei. When they feel you are ready, you are told it's time. It's not a thing you decide on your own.

Do you have a mentor that has made the most impact on your musical style or rather do you try to find individuality in the music that you write while incorporating what you've learned?

Have been influenced by many composers and music groups. To name a few: Carlos Jobim, Herbie Hancock, and Weather Report.

Of all the pieces that you've written so far which one is your personal favorite and why?

Don't have a favorite but try to make each one better than the last

You just celebrated your 40th anniversary as a taiko musician this past October with your Ten-Ten performance which was held on 10/10/2015. What a big feat! Congratulations. How was it celebrating that milestone in your career? Do you feel that you've learned a lot from your music and the people around you?

Yes, 40 years seems like a long time but there's always something to learn and ways to improve as a musician and as a human. Have learned a lot from my teachers, fellow artists, and students alike.

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*Thank you to Mr. Kenny Endo. This article would not be possible without your memorable music skills and your help.
Good luck with everything in the future.*

Biographical Sources:

<http://www.kennyendo.com>



A little about the reporter:

AmberRose is a nature lover who enjoys learning about different cultures and languages. She has been studying Japanese for four years and plans to attend university where she will major in Environmental Science and Asian Languages. She is currently serving as an intern for the Japan-America Society of San Antonio.