

Harry Aoki: a Japanese Canadian legacy through music

by Carolyn Nakagawa

Harry Hiro-o Aoki was the second child born to Sadayoshi and Masa Aoki in the small mining community of Cumberland, BC, in 1921. His older brother, Ted, later became a prominent education scholar, and after Harry came three younger siblings, a brother Tatsuo and sisters Judy and Mary. His parents were Tokyo-trained teachers, sent to Cumberland by the Japanese Ministry of Education. They ran a Japanese school there built for them by the Japanese Canadian community, who wanted “a proper Japanese language teacher from Japan” for their children¹. Unlike most of the Japanese immigrant population, who “came from the lower classes – especially from the agricultural class” and had grown up in “rural areas relatively untouched by modern ideas”², the Aokis’ emigration was prompted by the involvement of the Japanese government in emigrant affairs. It was a symptom of what Ken Adachi calls “the paternalistic attitude of Japan [in that period] towards her people who settled in foreign lands”, where support from the Japanese government “in no small measure compensated for their lack of citizenship rights”³. The Aokis were highly cultured: as Harry has said, “My parents were college graduates. My mother played the piano; my father played violin and read philosophy”⁴. His father was keenly interested in ideas and the interaction of different cultures: he was a calligrapher and “a philosopher very much involved in Taoism”. He disputed both the Eurocentric bias of the time as well as speaking out against Japanese imperialism: Harry recalls that when

¹qtd. in Cheryl Maeva Thomas, “The Japanese Communities of Cumberland, British Columbia, 1885-1942: Portrait of a Past” (master’s thesis, University of Victoria, 1992), 87.

²Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 110.

³Ibid., 124

⁴Xiaoping Li. *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 80-81.

they visited Japan in the 1930s, “[h]e made speeches all over Japan, warning people against the war”⁵.

Cumberland was highly segregated; in his early years, Harry was unaware of racism, sheltered within the Japanese community established there. But this changed drastically when he began to attend public school: he started judo training at age five and eventually became a black belt, not out of interest in the martial art but for protection. “We had schoolyard rumbles. We really had to fight to go to school and to fight on our way back”, he said. This culture of conflict perpetuated ethnic segregation and the enforcement of cultural differences: “We were not thinking like Canadians – we were Japanese in a hostile place – that’s what we knew. I was scared by the dominant society’s hatred of my family and me, so in a way we fit right in the Japanese society”⁶.

Although their original contract with the Japanese government was to teach in Canada for three years⁷, the Aokis lived in Cumberland for sixteen, moving to Vancouver in 1934 to set up Meiwa Gakuen, a Japanese language school which they ran out of their home on Triumph street. Harry attended Britannia Secondary School, where he and his older brother Ted helped them win “the Greater Vancouver rugby championship [...] two years in a row. [Harry] also excelled at track, particularly the 100-yard dash”⁸.

After graduating from high school, Harry worked with a lumber company while his older brother Ted went to the University of British Columbia. It was going to be Harry’s

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dick Isenor, *Land of Plenty: A History of the Comox District* (Campbell River: Ptarmigan Press, 1987), 292; however, Aoki says it was five years in Li 80

⁸ Fiona Morrow, “He overcame wartime internment to flourish as a musician”, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 20, 2013, url: <http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20130220.OBAOKI0219ATL/BDAStory/BDA/deaths>

turn to go to university⁹ when Pearl Harbour was attacked, Ted became one of the 76 Japanese Canadian students expelled from UBC, and the Aokis were forced to relocate away from the coast along with the rest of the Japanese Canadian community. While the rest of the family moved to Iron Springs, Alberta to work on a sugar beet farm, a choice that would allow them to stay together and not have the adult sons sent to work camps, Harry went to Blind Bay, near Salmon Arm, to work in a sawmill, later explaining “I didn’t like the idea of being kicked out, so when I went east I bought my own ticket”¹⁰.

Harry had learned the piano and violin from his mother growing up as well as his father and his neighbour¹¹, but when he left Vancouver, he was unable to take his violin with him. Instead, he put a harmonica in his pocket, which “kept [him] from going crazy” in the logging camp where “there was nothing else to do”¹². He even put together a band of men who had harmonicas who played at a concert for the community, though they only ever learned one song¹³. An injury in a logging accident before the war ended saved him from being sent east under “selective service”, a program that relocated Japanese Canadian men to fill labour shortages in logging camps on Crown timber land in Ontario¹⁴; instead, he joined his family on a sugar beet farm in Iron Springs, which is where he first taught himself to ski.

Harry became acquainted with a Lethbridge musician during his time in Alberta who arranged for him to take a correspondence course in music with the University of

⁹ Li 82

¹⁰ John Endo Greenaway, “Harry Aoki – a life of music”, *The Bulletin*, July 2008, <http://jccbulletin-geppo.ca/harry-aoki-a-life-of-music/>

¹¹ Mieko Amano, “何でも好奇心「音楽とハリー」”, *The Bulletin*, March 2013, 63; Li 85

¹² Li 85

¹³ Aki Wakabayashi, “Memories of Harry Aoki”, *The Bulletin*, March 2013, 43.

¹⁴ Harry Aoki, interview by Susanne Tabata, Sept. 2009. *Honouring Our People: Stories of Internment DVD* (JCCA); see also Adachi 261 on Nisei being recruited for National Selective Service

Chicago. “I was told by one of my mentors that there was no music for harmonica, so I should learn theory, composition and orchestration, which I did. In the winter there was nothing to do, so I spent a lot of time on it and I got very good marks”, he explained¹⁵. Although a composition he made for the course earned him a scholarship offer, he was unable to accept it due to US immigration laws at the time which had strict immigrant quotas for “Japanese” as well as people from several other Asian countries.

Technically, Harry, born in 1921 in Canada to Japanese parents, was a dual citizen, falling under Canadian citizenship laws by being born in Canada and Japanese citizenship laws by being born to Japanese parents. However, since Canada did not recognize dual citizenship at the time, while on Canadian soil he could not have claimed Japanese citizenship rights¹⁶. However, US immigration law at the time counted anyone who could trace at least half of their ethnic heritage from Japan as Japanese, regardless of Canadian or other citizenship¹⁷. This means that due to racist policies, Harry would have been subject to the quotas in place for Japanese immigrants to the US.

Harry was always clear about his own cultural position: he was a Western musician raised on his father’s favourite musicians, Bach and Duke Ellington, but also strongly marked from his early years by experiences of racial discrimination. He also took a great deal of influence from his father, a highly intellectual man who read different philosophies

¹⁵ Greenaway

¹⁶ Adachi 176

¹⁷ Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America Through Immigration Policy 1850-1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 37-38; see also 33. It is unclear whether Harry was offered a scholarship before or after 1952, but if it was before, he would have been barred as an “alien ineligible for citizenship” (33) due to his race, and after 1952 due to his Japanese ancestry he would have had to apply under the Japanese quota. Harry’s comments on the subject are not specific enough to be certain, but make more sense when considering the post-1952 system.

and was critical of the Eurocentric status quo in the Canada of Harry's youth. Harry's father actively trained his children to critically engage with ideas:

we used to sit there for two or three hours at the dinner table. We were allowed to say anything in our mind. It was a good way to grow up. Everyone was involved in the discussion. We were trained at a very young age to think [for] ourselves and not feel afraid of saying what we wanted [...] This kind of discussion went on even after the evacuation. We got more and more interested in it as we learned more and were able to think more abstractly. There was always a practical, humanitarian bit to the discussions – for example, our responsibility to society.¹⁸

Harry brought this way of thinking into his own activities, especially for artistic events he organized in the community.

Harry always felt angry at the treatment he received as a Japanese Canadian during the war. In Blind Bay, he was approached by a recruiter for the British army about working as a translator, a job which he staunchly refused¹⁹. But he did end up working as a translator after the war for a group of about 200 Issei farmers in southern Alberta, led by his father, who appeared before the Bird commission independently from the appeals organized by the NJCCA²⁰. They succeeded in winning a small settlement, “[j]ust enough to get them started” on their own farms²¹.

Harry, in contrast, went on to work as a logger and an electrician, eventually taking a job with BC Hydro, where he was recruited for special work after a test revealed that he was able to keep seven trains of thought running simultaneously²². During this time period and into the 1960s, he also worked as a ski instructor. While he was still in Alberta, the concertmaster of the Calgary Philharmonic, impressed by his skill at the harmonica, had

¹⁸ Li 84

¹⁹ Wakabayashi, 5-43

²⁰ Adachi 327

²¹ Harry Aoki, interview by John Endo Greenaway and Gary Cristall, “Interview: Harry Aoki”, *The Bulletin*, July 2008, <http://jccabulletin-geppo.ca/interview-harry-aoki/>

²² Aoki, interview with Tabata

advised Harry to take up playing the bass, an instrument with which he would never be out of work. Harry had deferred the advice, though, because of the expense of a double bass. He finally ordered one for himself when he broke his leg skiing in a competition and needed something to alleviate his boredom; it cost \$198 and was made of plywood²³. In this way, Harry became the only bass player in Prince George²⁴. This is also where he met Jim Johnson, a musician working as a schoolteacher, with whom he would later tour as the group Moods of Man.

Working with BC Hydro eventually brought Harry back to Vancouver after a fifteen-year absence. Once there, he was one of the first to join the Professional Musicians' Union as a harmonica player, and played harmonica for at least one film soundtrack. His use of Japanese melodies astonished those who were present, including conductor John Avison, who thought he was a genius composing on the spot.

In 1965, Harry and Jim Johnson started playing together regularly under the name "Moods of Man" in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island. Qualicum Beach was a small town, but a popular vacation spot, so they ran a coffee house out of the village hall for three summers. They caught the eye of the CBC there, and soon were making regular radio appearances and recording eighteen episodes of a TV version of their act. For three years following, they toured in schools and other venues across the continent, spending a lot of time particularly in Saskatchewan and Alberta and even going as far as Inuvik, while keeping their day jobs²⁵.

²³ John Endo Greenaway, "Harry Hiro-o Aoki 1921-2013", *The Bulletin*, March 2013, <http://jccbulletin-geppo.ca/harry-hiro-o-aoki-1921-2013/>

²⁴ Harry Aoki, interview by Alan Matheson, excerpt: "1942 internment; how he started playing bass", *Jazz Street Vancouver*. Coastal Jazz and Blues Society. <http://www.jazzstreetvancouver.ca/artists/40>

²⁵ Gary Cristall, "An Unusual Partnership: Harry Aoki, Jim Johnson & Moods of Man", *The Bulletin*, March 2013, <http://jccbulletin-geppo.ca/an-unusual-partnership-harry-aoki-jim-johnson-and-moods-of-man/>

Sometime around the late 70s, Harry, along with a band that included Jim Johnson and their friend Elmer Gill, played a concert together at a UBC conference as a last-minute fill-in when the scheduled speaker missed his plane. The multicultural music ensemble was then invited to play at a conference on multiculturalism at the University of Lethbridge, where the Alberta Minister of Culture saw them play. Impressed, he invited Harry to be music director for the cultural programmes around the upcoming 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton.

It was a huge undertaking, involving auditions across the province of artists from various cultural traditions. Due to his initial difficulty in getting artists from different cultures to collaborate, Harry brought in a coach from the Calgary Ballet to work with the different groups of folk dancers, and requested that the coach intentionally push the dancers beyond their limits. It was a tactic to break down their egos: show them what they didn't know and couldn't do, a common ground for them to start working together. And it worked: at the end of the 8-month period of preparations and performances, he remembers them crying, knowing that they would likely never have a chance to perform together again²⁶.

Harry also formed his own group of musicians for the Games, the Alberta Folk Ensemble. The group included musicians from 19 different ethnic groups, and when they got together, they "spent more time in bull sessions than in rehearsal"²⁷. The group

²⁶ Harry Aoki, *Harry Aoki and the Gang of Seven*, VHS, May 25, 2000. Western Front archives.

²⁷ Harry Aoki, quoted in Regina Yung, "Harry Hiro Aoki: Exploring Outside the Box", *Ricepaper*, 6.2 (n.d.; c. 2001?), n.p.

continued to play together and be available for bookings well after the Games were over, as late as 1982²⁸.

Throughout his career, Harry valued playing with musicians from different cultural backgrounds, from Jim Johnson's roots in the soul tradition and other jazz musicians to Klezmer musicians and players from Greece and Romania, where he visited twice. He is often quoted as saying that "music is one of the first places where racism breaks down", but it's more than that: in every person, there is "two or three percent that you can't get to" or imitate, an ineffable and unique cultural essence that Harry always held to utmost value in his fellow musicians and artists²⁹. Harry used music as a means "for him to go beyond his personal situation...a universal language between people" that would help them transcend the "human mistake" of racism³⁰.

The extreme rarity of opportunities for artists of different cultures to interact and create together was something that became apparent to Harry during his involvement in the Commonwealth Games. The desire to continue providing such opportunities led him to pursue what he envisioned as the Jasper Intercultural Arts Centre in the 1980s. He found some interested investors in the oil companies, and even met with Joe Clark, who was enthusiastic about the idea. So were the people in the town of Jasper, where Harry had moved in anticipation of the new centre. Unfortunately, the group of people enthusiastic about the centre was "too powerful to be practical"³¹, and their various visions pulled the project in different directions and kept it from moving forward. While the group struggled

²⁸ *Alberta Performing Artists 1982-1983*, 118; <https://archive.org/details/performingarts198283>

²⁹ Harry Aoki, *Harry Aoki and the Gang of Seven*.

³⁰ Judy Hanazawa, interview with Sheryl MacKay, "Shelagh Rogers, Oscar nominee and tribute to Harry Aoki", *North by Northwest*, CBC, Feb. 24, 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Local+Shows/British+Columbia/ID/2338342167/?page=11&sort=MostRecent>

³¹ Harry Aoki, *Harry Aoki and the Gang of Seven*.

to establish a definite direction for the centre, the oil crisis caused many of their major backers to withdraw funding, and the project was never realized.

Harry returned again to Vancouver in the early eighties, making himself known on the local music scene and inviting many fellow musicians to jam sessions in his basement suite near Oakridge Centre. In 2002, at the age of eighty, Harry once again joined the board of directors for the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association, a role which he first took on in 1974. He continued to sit on the board, attending different conferences and events such as the renaming of "Jap mountain" near his birthplace of Cumberland to "Nikkei mountain" and the yearly Obon tour to Cumberland and other Japanese Canadian gravesites. In 2006, Harry became vice-president of the JCCA, a role which he held until his health made it necessary for his position on the board to become honorary.

Harry's main endeavour with the JCCA was a revival of the spirit, if not the scale, of the failed Jasper project, in the form of the First Friday Forum and Coffeehouse, first held in July 2002. Hosted by the JCCA, its original venue at the Nikkei Centre in Burnaby later changed to Tonari Gumi in East Vancouver. Upon debuting the event at the Nikkei Centre, Harry wrote, "the existence of the Centre is a result of the racism that caused our [Japanese Canadians'] evacuation in 1942. I thought we should consider initiating a program to address the ongoing problems of racism in a form that was accessible to the audience"³². His band, the Gang of Seven, initially served as a "flagship" group for the evening, and Harry would invite a variety of other artists to come perform. Using the "pan-cultural language" of

³² Harry Aoki, "First Friday Forum & Coffeehouse", *The Bulletin*, July 2002.

music as a starting point, Harry would also speak and lead discussion on cross-cultural exchange and issues of racism.

Harry hosted the event for several years before declining health made it increasingly difficult to maintain his leadership role. Around this time, a dedicated group of musicians, supporters, and collaborators, known collectively as the Aoki Legacy Group, worked together to preserve and honour his many years of creating music and connections across cultures. In 2008, a concert was held in his honour at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver; at that event, the Group announced that an Aoki Legacy Fund would be established in partnership with St. John's College at UBC to support cross-cultural initiatives in the arts and foster Harry's dream of intercultural understanding. Harry Aoki passed away on January 24, 2013 at the age of 91.