

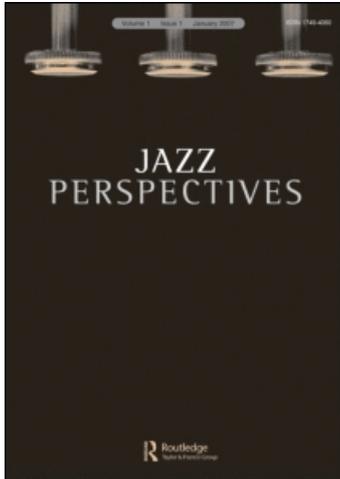
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Jazz Perspectives

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t741771151>

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Online publication date: 16 April 2010

To cite this Article Fellezs, Kevin(2010) '*Deracinated Flower: Toshiko Akiyoshi's "Trace in Jazz History"*', *Jazz Perspectives*, 4: 1, 35 – 57

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17494061003694147

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17494061003694147>

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Deracinated Flower: Toshiko Akiyoshi's "Trace in Jazz History"

Kevin Fellezs

*I'm trying to draw from my heritage and enrich the jazz tradition without changing it.
I'm putting into jazz, not just taking out.*

Toshiko Akiyoshi¹

Across her musical career, the Japanese-American composer and pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi has pursued an ideal of creative transcultural "rootlessness." She has developed this aesthetic by rendering non-jazz influences, drawn most notably from Japanese musical aesthetics, within a jazz context. Across the 1970s, her active infusion of traditional Japanese musical elements into large-ensemble jazz compositions and arrangements reflected her changing attitude regarding both the creative aesthetics and musical affiliations enabled by nationality, ethnicity, and gender, on the one hand, and musical practices, repertoire, and instrumentation, on the other. By viewing Akiyoshi's music through the perspective of this "rootless" ideal, we gain invaluable insight into the production and representation of jazz during the 1970s, a time when transcultural expression was changing the sounds as well as the meanings of the genre.

In this essay, I explore both how Akiyoshi's "rootless" creative aesthetic was a result of her musical experiences, and how this personal history reinforced her nascent mistrust of any presumptive links between authentic jazz and the contentious categories of race, gender, and nationality. Moreover, I argue that the ways in which gender "rules" framed her work significantly affected her aesthetic and career decisions. Indeed, because her professional experiences undermined certain racialist, gendered, and nationalist ideas about jazz, her gradual rejection of those ideas enabled her to "*enrich, without changing, the jazz tradition.*"² I want to be clear: in this essay, I do not present her work or "rootlessness" as a paradigm of a color-blind aesthetic, nor do I mean to downplay the very racialized, gendered, and nationalistic ideologies through which Akiyoshi had to work. This essay is also not meant to be an apologia for a post-racial, post-nationalist multicultural rhetoric. Rather, I want to emphasize the constructed-ness of Akiyoshi's creative work, particularly once she decided to move past the limits that Japanese jazz musicians had placed on their own artistic legitimacy within jazz. Additionally, her alienation from traditional Japanese culture and, in

¹ Peter Rothbart, "Toshiko Akiyoshi," *Down Beat*, August 1980, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

particular, her lack of a direct apprenticeship under a recognized master teacher/composer-musician, attest to the eclectic, rather than the doctrinaire, approach that she embraced. As David Stowe has noted, "In Akiyoshi's case, traditional Japanese music was as much a borrowed tradition as jazz."³ By underlining the processes through which she acquired competency both in jazz and Japanese music practices, I mean to interrogate the assumptions her position as a "female Japanese jazz musician" has conventionally entailed. In truth, given her birth and early childhood in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, China, Akiyoshi could arguably have more readily claimed a connection to a Chinese musical heritage.⁴

Akiyoshi's "Deracinated Flower," from the 1977 album *March of the Tadpoles*, speaks directly to the way in which blending various traditions articulated a sense of rootlessness. As Amy Ducan's liner notes to *March* indicate, the title "Deracinated Flower" is taken from the French term for "rootless" (*sans racine*). Indeed, the samba-inspired rhythmic underpinning to "Deracinated Flower" conveys the cross-cultural musical sensibilities Akiyoshi's sense of rootlessness lends her work. Such rootlessness allowed Akiyoshi to retain her own vital creative agency, so that her work remained influenced, even enhanced, by the various traditions she was incorporating into her music, while at the same time adroitly eclipsing those influences and inspirations. This is not a unique career narrative for musicians (jazz or otherwise) open to innovation, but such innovative impulses are more often engaged with a single musical genre or tradition. By contrast, throughout the 1970s, Akiyoshi's rootless aesthetic permitted new connections between divergent musical cultures—in a distinctly "deracinated" fashion—without staking claims of artistic legitimacy on grounds of racial or ethnic authenticity, or any other originary authority. Rather, her artistic claims rested on a *blending* aesthetic, a desire to "bind it all into one music."

When asked if it was difficult to incorporate the *tsuzumi* (hand drum) into her composition, "Kogun," Akiyoshi tellingly replied,

Of course it was difficult! The point is: if you're just going to use it for the sake of using it, then that's not hard. And it will come out that way: very superficial. But if you turn it into a *blend*, if you bind it all into one music. . . . For example, one thing I like to say is, if you put sand inside a clam shell, you get a *pearl*. You just *bother* the shell a little, so it tries to integrate the sand being there. . . . If you are infusing something into the music, a different element, it should become *richer*—that's the important part. *If you infuse an element and it just remains something else, that's not what I'm trying to do.*⁵

³ David Stowe, "Jazz That Eats Rice': Toshiko Akiyoshi's Roots Music" in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, eds. Heike Raphael-Hernandez, Shannon Steen, and Vijay Prashad (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 291. For the record, Stowe has a different view of Akiyoshi's use of Japanese musical elements, as the subtitle to his essay, "Toshiko Akiyoshi's Roots Music," indicates. However, we both agree that her decision to use Japanese musical elements had more to do with her strong desire to carve a unique place for herself in the jazz world, than as a result of being Japanese per se.

⁴ However, despite being born and spending much of her youth in Japan-occupied China, Akiyoshi limited her engagement of non-Western music to elements gleaned from Japan. Hers is not an Asian, but a particularly Japanese, perspective. The segregation of the Japanese and Chinese populations by the occupying Japanese forces must necessarily be considered as well.

⁵ Both original and added emphases. Quoted in William Minor, *Jazz Journeys to Japan: The Heart Within* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 37–38.

As this response suggests, Akiyoshi's rootlessness is articulated through compositional strategies which often obscure the underlying Japanese sensibilities of her aesthetic. For instance, the sound of the shakuhachi (a bamboo recorder) or the tsuzumi instantly calibrate most Western listeners' ears to Japan—however, this aural image is a Japan that more closely resembles samurai films than the contemporary reality of the country. While Akiyoshi has used the tsuzumi and koto (a zither-type instrument) in her compositions, they do not function merely as exotic sonic signifiers of an aestheticized “Japan.” For example, through her use of recorded tsuzumi performers alongside her big band in “Kogun” (from the 1974 album of the same name), Akiyoshi merges the extended instrumental ensemble into a single unit (a feat that is further aided by Tabackin's shakuhachi-inflected flute work), while the work also clearly enunciates itself as a jazz composition.⁶ In this performance, one can also hear Akiyoshi's use of expressive techniques borrowed from *gagaku* (Imperial Japanese court music) in the work's sectional glissandos, which are juxtaposed against the swing rhythm section. The collective effect is a compelling polyrhythmic tension.

“Kogun” can be used to initially illustrate further facets of Akiyoshi's general aesthetic. This composition was inspired by the story of a Japanese soldier found hiding in the Philippines, unaware that WWII had ended thirty years earlier. Akiyoshi notes that *kogun* means “forlorn force,” particularly in terms of an individual facing larger forces. The parallels to Akiyoshi's own artistic struggles of aligning Japanese musical aesthetics with jazz, a “forlorn force” grappling with a jazz historiography that excluded Japanese women and that had been oblivious to Japanese musical traditions, are, perhaps, too easily available. Still, Akiyoshi's rootlessness in “Kogun” resonates as an uncanny blend of compositional and performance techniques borrowed from jazz and *gagaku* performance practices, articulating a hybrid, pluralistic sensibility. Akiyoshi was busily creating her pearl—a valuable and pleasing aesthetic distillation of her musical inspirations, which did not wish to necessarily display or deny its origins.

That said, throughout the 1970s, Akiyoshi's big band music could appear both innovative (particularly for its incorporation of Japanese musical elements) and anachronistic, especially as small-group fusion and free jazz appeared to be undermining the artistic grip of mainstream jazz on the commercial jazz scene. In fact, part of RCA's lack of enthusiasm for promoting her recordings in the U.S. market was due to the label's view that big band jazz was not popular in a commercial marketplace where other jazz styles—especially fusion—had displaced the profitability of even small-ensemble mainstream jazz. But Akiyoshi stuck with her convictions about her responsibilities as a leader of a big band, and throughout the decade, she and Tabackin struggled to achieve a balance between securing enough engagements to maintain the band and reserving time for her to compose.

More significantly, Akiyoshi's efforts to merge her Japanese heritage and her proclivities for jazz mirrored currents in and out of jazz. As historian Eric Porter maintains,

⁶ Interestingly, in this employment of a tape recording of a tsuzumi performance (which came about because she could not find a tsuzumi performer in Los Angeles at the time), she demonstrates considerable foresight into the potential of using prerecorded audio samples as both compositional and performing resources.

during the 1970s, "more than any time before in U.S. history, people of color claimed race as a resource" rather than allowing racialization to function solely as a liability, obstacle, or historical tragedy.⁷ This shift toward cultural self-empowerment by underrepresented groups helped to shape identity politics as an increasingly salient space of progressive social action throughout the decade. Organized around issues of self-determination and self-definition, the demands from newly visible and vocal groups of marginalized people complicated ideas regarding difference.⁸

These trends emerged in jazz as musicians sought either to incorporate their own ethnic heritages as part of their creative aesthetic—as was the case with Akiyoshi—or to explore non-Western or non-elite musical traditions as new sources of creative inspiration. Approaches naturally varied in such pursuits. For instance, the pianist Randy Weston studied African music directly, moving to Africa in order to experience the cultural and material contexts for the music. By contrast, throughout the 1970s, fusion groups like Weather Report incorporated a number of diverse musical traditions from around the globe into an eclectic yet cohesive working aesthetic. Similarly, groups such as Oregon were studying non-Western music from various traditions and subsequently adapting various stylistic elements and devices from these musics in their own jazz compositions and performances. Such cross-cultural trends likewise involved international collaborations, as when white British guitarist John McLaughlin and South Asian tabla master Zakir Hussain co-led Shakti with cross-cultural exchange at the heart of their creative approach, blending jazz with South and North Indian traditions (the latter intent was also a new combinatory musical approach, since the two Indian traditions had maintained separate musical cultures).

Yet Akiyoshi remained aware of the limits her own ambitions to incorporate Japanese elements might eventually face. She observed that

When I decided to draw upon my culture in this way—from my heritage—then I thought about it very seriously in terms of whether it could be a main influence in future jazz. But I decided that it's never going to be that—not in the way Brazilian music, for instance, is a main influence today. You could almost say that Brazilian music changed the whole jazz scene. But I don't think [incorporating Japanese music] could ever happen that way. It's more of a special effect.⁹

Her recognition of the disparity between the adoptions of Latin American and Japanese musical sensibilities in jazz speaks to the difficulties Asian musicians faced in marking

⁷ Eric Porter, "Affirming and Disaffirming Actions: Remaking Race in the 1970s," in *America in the Seventies*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 54. Harold Cruse phrases this situation a bit differently, as he suggests that black politics had shifted from a "politics of civil rights" to a "politics of black ethnicity" in the same time period. Harold Cruse, quoted in Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 15.

⁸ There have been a number of recent works that detail the social and political climate of the 1970s. See, for example: *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York: Routledge, 2000); *America in the Seventies*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber; and, perhaps the best overall survey of the decade, Bruce Schulman's *The Seventies*. Because of their in-depth examinations of United States' culture during the 1970s, these books provide a rich contextual backdrop for this essay, which is concerned primarily with Akiyoshi's struggles for a musical identity in the United States.

⁹ Leonard Feather, "Contemporary Sculptress of Sound," *Down Beat*, October 20, 1977, 15.

out a space that might be named “Asian jazz” in the way “Latin jazz” became a distinct jazz subgenre in the postwar era (indeed, an entire world of specialized substyles and subgenres), while also anchoring itself as a legitimate part of a “real” jazz world.

Akiyoshi was less driven by an interest in creating a body of work that defined her music as different from that of other jazz artists. “Deracinated” and “Kogun” exemplified her belief “that rootlessness is a kind of freedom, and even expresses a kind of romanticism,” thereby opening a creative space she could claim as her own, separate and yet connected to the musical traditions she would blend in large ensemble jazz compositions.¹⁰ Rootlessness, then, denotes the supplemental nature of Akiyoshi’s self-conscious aesthetic. Her insistent declaiming of her Japanese ethnicity—my culture, my heritage, my history—spoke to the slow unmooring of her creative work from jazz or traditional Japanese music, even as she was calling attention to the marginality of her work. Indeed, as she admits above, Akiyoshi was helping to recast the conversation that jazz and Japanese music might enjoy at a time when she felt the result of her work would largely remain a “special effect.” She recognized that while the trend toward exploring personal cultural legacies could often prove empowering to individuals, dominant categories would continue to hold sway, obviating the types of gains both individual and collective efforts hoped to achieve for recognition and non-stereotypical representations in the broader culture. Still, throughout the 1970s, Akiyoshi chose to convey her thoughts about the world through jazz—her “acquired native language,” and a language that she was articulating in increasingly hybridized and non-essentialist ways.

Learning a Native Language

Born in Japanese-occupied Manchuria on December 12, 1929, Akiyoshi was sixteen when the impoverished Akiyoshi family moved back to Japan after WWII. Upon hearing of the need for a pianist at the Beppu City nightclub, she boldly applied for the job, though she had no real interest in, or familiarity with, jazz. At this juncture, Akiyoshi was a classically-trained pianist and only somewhat acquainted with popular dance music. Hired on the spot, she chose to work at the club only because of her overwhelming desire to maintain access to a piano and to sustain and develop her skills on the instrument.¹¹ In fact, she has admitted that she disliked jazz in this period because she mistook the “terrible music” the club band performed for “real jazz,” and because of her studies in the Western concert piano tradition from the age of six. Although Akiyoshi’s knowledge of Japanese music came from both an elder sister, who was a student of traditional Japanese folk dance, and her father, who had studied the Japanese

¹⁰ Amy Duncan, liner notes to Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band, *March of the Tadpoles*, RCA Victor RVP-6178, 1977, LP. Reissued as part of the three-disc set, *Mosaic Select: Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band*, Mosaic MS-033, 2008, compact discs. Samba is a Brazilian dance music associated with Carnival, and *gagaku* is the Imperial Japanese court music tradition (from the fourteenth century forward).

¹¹ She had studied Western classical piano for ten years before taking this nightclub job in Beppu City. Her audition consisted of performing a German tango entitled “Blue Sky.” See Lewis Porter, “‘She Wiped All the Men Out’: Jazzwomen, Part I,” *Music Educators Journal*, September 1984, 50.

Noh theater tradition, she further admits that she was not particularly knowledgeable about Japanese music when she began performing professionally as a jazz pianist.

She recounted to critic Leonard Feather,

When I went to school in Japan, from kindergarten to grammar school, high school, and so on ... all association I had with music schooling was Westernized. It happen[ed] with all my generation and younger. [Because of this situation,] *Western music is not really foreign*, and on top of that, I was studying [classical] piano since I was six, so that added more [Western influence] to [my musical training].¹²

As she notes, the reorganized educational system of occupied Japan was a key element of the Allied forces' plans to introduce—some might say indoctrinate—the Japanese populace to Western culture as part of broader political goals. That said, the Japanese often read those efforts in unintended ways and developed their own strategies for listening to and making “Western” music.

In this postwar period, Japanese youth were listening to Japanese popular music that mimicked or integrated Western, particularly American, models. Akiyoshi's comment that “Western music [was] not really foreign” indicates the intrusive position that U.S. popular music, including jazz, held in post-WWII Japan. While jazz was purportedly “not foreign,” Akiyoshi—like a majority of her generation of Japanese jazz musicians—located this music's origins and creative impetus in the United States, and, more specifically, within black American culture and aesthetics. As E. Taylor Atkins notes in his study of jazz in Japan, “if I have hammered home the idea that Japanese are convinced of their own inauthenticity [as jazz musicians], it must be conceded that they have continued to play this music.”¹³ Likewise, for most of her formative years in Japan, Akiyoshi was disposed to think of authentic jazz in similarly nationalist and racialized terms, a view that positioned her as an outsider to the very tradition into which she hoped to contribute.

Early in her Beppu City engagement, an ardent jazz record collector singled Akiyoshi out from the rest of the nightclub's band. He told her that she had the potential to become a great jazz musician. Despite this encouragement, her real interest in jazz was sparked only after this fan played Teddy Wilson's recording of “Sweet Lorraine” for her. Following this exposure, she became obsessed with “real jazz,” as she described it, distinguishing this new world from the music she was performing at the time. When her father found out about her work in Beppu City, he was angered and dismayed that the daughter he was hoping might become a medical doctor was whiling away her hours at a dance club.

Despite her family's disappointment, Akiyoshi moved to Tokyo to be at the center of Japan's jazz scene. She formed her own group in 1950. Like her contemporaries in the United States, Akiyoshi learned jazz through a combination of listening, transcribing, jamming, and on-the-bandstand training. Determined to learn “real jazz,” she began to transcribe V-Discs she heard while working at U.S. officer's clubs. Soon there-

¹² Emphasis added. Leonard Feather, “East Meets West, or Never the Twain Shall Cease: Toshiko Akiyoshi and Lew Tabackin,” *Down Beat*, June 3, 1976, 17.

¹³ E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 42.

after, the Armed Forces Radio Service introduced her to American musicians such as Bud Powell.¹⁴ Akiyoshi recalls,

You couldn't buy much in those days; no records were available for the Japanese ... [T]here weren't any records I could buy. Nothing. You could only buy things like that on the black market. Some American soldiers would buy records and then sell them to the jazz coffee shops. That's how jazz coffee shops developed in Japan, providing a place for someone like me [to] go and listen to records. That was the only outlet.¹⁵

While this essay cannot detail the impact of the U.S. military presence in postwar Japan, it should be noted that there was significant public contention between Japanese proponents of Western music, including jazz, and those Japanese who sought to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of this overwhelming presence. (The preservationists notably included famous authors such as Yukio Mishima and Jun'ichiro Tanizaki.)¹⁶ That said, both sides of this debate tacitly shared ideas regarding the incommensurability between the West and Japan.

Given Akiyoshi's non-black, non-American status in a Japanese jazz culture that privileged black American jazz musicians, such personal concerns about her authenticity as a jazz musician also initially compounded her estrangement from traditional Japanese culture. While Japanese jazz artists had been struggling with issues of authenticity for decades, by the time of Akiyoshi and the arrival of other post-WWII Japanese bebop musicians on the country's jazz scene, there was an "emerging consensus [that] equated African American ethnicity with authenticity of jazz expression,"¹⁷ as Atkins has noted. A conversation between African American pianist Hampton Hawes and Akiyoshi in the early 1950s (when he was stationed in Japan to lead the 289th Army Band and she was emerging as one of Japan's rising young jazz talents) suggests her struggles with the racialized and nationalistic sensibilities that circulated among Japanese jazz musicians of the day. After asking Hawes for instruction in playing the blues "authentically," he told her, somewhat teasingly, "I play the blues right because I eat collard greens and black-eyed peas and corn pone and clabber." She revealed her

¹⁴ Steven Moore, "The Art of Becoming a Jazz Musician: An Interview with Toshiko Akiyoshi," <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0043.307>. Accessed January 4, 2010. (Originally *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 43 [Summer 2004]: 392–403.)

¹⁵ *Ibid.* So-called jazz cafes in Japan were places where jazz devotees congregated to participate in a unique practice of silent listening. Where jazz enthusiasts in the United States and elsewhere frequently encourage an enthusiastic physical and communal engagement with the music (through both actual dancing as well as simply physically moving heads and feet to the beat and groove), Japanese fans embraced a decidedly sober encounter with the music. Listeners would come into a jazz coffee shop, place a record on the turntable, and quietly sit—often with closed eyes—listening in their own private space, and foregoing any interaction with other listeners. The heated debates between various jazz factions were limited primarily to the pages of *Swing Journal*, the leading Japanese jazz journal, which is still published today.

¹⁶ Briefly, Yukio Mishima was a post-WWII Japanese author, playwright, and political activist. *Sun and Steel*, trans. John Bester (New York: Grove, 1970), remains one of his more well-known works in the West. While autobiographical, this book was meant as a call to return to the purifying aesthetics of *bushido*, the way of the samurai. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki was a Japanese author and polemicist who led the philosophical and literary counter to what was perceived as a growing Western hegemony. Tanizaki's ode to Japan, *In Praise of Shadows* (New York: Leete's Island Books, 1977), is an ardent defense of Japanese aesthetics. See also Atkins's *Blue Nippon* for a discussion of the "war on jazz" in Japan during WWII, which is recounted in detail in chapter four.

¹⁷ Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 196.

earnestness, however, by asking him, "Do I have to go to the United States to get [such food]?" Hawes, who was vociferous in countering essentialist notions of black creativity in jazz, eased her concerns by revealing, "All you need is the feeling. If you have the feeling, you could eat Skippy peanut butter and play the blues right. And if you don't have the feeling, you could eat collard greens and all that so-called Negro food all the time and sound corny."¹⁸ Such close contacts with black American jazz musicians, many of whom (like Hawes) encouraged her to continue studying jazz, eventually gave Akiyoshi an increasing sense of her own "adoption" into the jazz world.

As Atkins notes in an article entitled "Can Japanese Sing the Blues?," Hawes's view that jazz musicianship was a universally accessible set of musical practices mirrored the "Occupation-era assumption that America's culture was somehow 'universal' and applicable to all peoples," as long it was approached "with the 'right feeling.'"¹⁹ Akiyoshi's warm personal recollections of Hawes clearly underscore her appreciation for his firm belief that she was a "real" jazz musician. Yet, while her transformation into a native jazz speaker was assisted by a number of North American jazz musicians (including fellow pianists Hawes and Oscar Peterson), the careful marketing of Akiyoshi by promoters George Wein and Norman Granz (who dressed her in Japanese kimonos in her early American concerts and public appearances) emphasized the fact that her national and ethnic background was distinct from "real" jazz and American culture writ large.

Crucially, while the circumstances of postwar Japan meant economic hardship, political constraint, and a sense of cultural loss for many of its citizens, its government subsidized many aspiring Japanese musicians by employing them in American servicemen's clubs. Aspiring Japanese jazz musicians saw such gigs as essential for their artistic development because they enabled first-hand access for listening to and performing with African American jazz musicians. Akiyoshi's informal training in jazz entered a more intensive stage when she was brought into contact with the black jazz musicians who were part of the 289th Army band. As Akiyoshi recalled,

The 289th Army band had Bonnie Wandents who was a wonderful tenor player. I learned many tunes from him ... Usually those players [who taught me] were black musicians. And they had something like bebop charts. ... In those days, for some reason, there were separate white clubs and black clubs. The Enisiyo Club [where I was working with the Ichi Ban Octet] was a black club ... This one group supplied us with all the bebop arrangements—you know, "52nd Street Theme," "Night in Tunisia," and tunes like that. They would rehearse us and that's how we learned the music."²⁰

Akiyoshi was eager to learn from black American jazz musicians, and such artists are consistently positioned as generous mentors in her various autobiographical recollections. Though she would later make her name in the United States recording and

¹⁸ See Nat Hentoff, *The Jazz Life* (New York: Da Capo, 1975; repr. 1961), 72–3. Also see Hawes's autobiography, *Raise Up Off Me: A Portrait of Hampton Hawes* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2001; orig. 1972), for more regarding his ideas about jazz performance, performers, and practices.

¹⁹ Atkins, "Can Japanese Sing the Blues? 'Japanese Jazz' and the Problem of Authenticity," in *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Timothy Craig (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 28.

²⁰ Moore, "Art of Becoming," n.p.

performing with white jazz musicians such as Charlie Mariano and Lew Tabackin, during this period her primary contacts were with African American jazz musicians. This was due both to the fact that she performed in the segregated servicemen's clubs that catered to black military personnel, as well as the prevailing attitudes of Japanese jazz musicians who viewed black American musicians as more authentic than white American musicians, and she therefore actively sought out black musicians for instruction and guidance. Additionally, Akiyoshi recalls that during her formative years in Japan, "There were always black musicians. I never got any kind of encouragement from white musicians."²¹ It is significant that these musicians were specifically residing in Japan because of their status as American soldiers. Akiyoshi's jazz mentorships occurred not because of cultural diplomatic efforts or formalized educational opportunities. Rather, she met these musicians as the result of a racially segregated U.S. military presence, and this social context further heightened the blackness of jazz culture for Japanese musicians. By acquiring black market jazz recordings through clandestine distribution networks and learning jazz on borrowed sheet music, Akiyoshi notably increased her outsider status, even in postwar Tokyo, and even as she created musical works within a subcultural realm of Japanese musicians sensitive to jazz's foreign orientation.

By 1953, Akiyoshi was leading a nonet. The ensemble included a French horn ("like the Miles Davis group") and was gaining status in the Japanese jazz world, as is evidenced in the fact that she was given her own half-hour radio broadcast.²² Her club band was popular in part because she was known for welcoming American GI musicians onto the bandstand, and allowing them to sit in with her band. Such openness proved mutually beneficial—while American jazz musicians received a chance to perform and maintain their technical skills, she was able to learn from visiting American jazz musicians directly. As noted by Atkins, during this period, Japanese jazz musicians viewed African American musicians as the most authentic practitioners of jazz, followed by other American musicians (including both European and Asian Americans). Japanese musicians, no matter their skills, were always seen as the least authentic performers and were thus never seen as innovators. Yet, in fact, these sessions often revealed the shortcomings of the supposedly superior American musicians. She recalls, "I got tired of everybody coming and sitting in, somebody who doesn't even play well but because they're American they think they can play."²³ As this suggests, such experiences undermined nationalistic or ethnic essentialist ideas about authenticity and ability in the jazz world, and this situation thus notably increased Akiyoshi's confidence in her own performance skills.

1953 proved significant for Akiyoshi as she was launched into the larger jazz world beyond Tokyo. In that year, Norman Granz brought his Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) tour to Japan. That year's tour notably featured pianist Oscar Peterson. Peterson heard Akiyoshi perform at a club, and he subsequently recommended her to Granz.

²¹ Ibid., n.p.

²² Feather, "Contemporary," 13.

²³ Quoted in Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 183.

Granz soon produced her debut recording, *Toshiko's Piano* (also known as *Amazing Toshiko Akiyoshi*), which made Akiyoshi the first Japanese jazz musician to record for an American label. The band for this release featured guitarist Herb Ellis, bassist Ray Brown, and drummer J. C. Heard—in other words, Peterson's rhythm section at the time. Yusuke Torii, a scholar of Japanese jazz, notes that part of Granz's cultural agenda in the original (i.e., U.S.) JATP concert tour series was to encourage and highlight crosscultural participation by establishing integrated concert jam sessions (meaning, with both black and white musicians).²⁴ Granz's subsequent interest in promoting a Japanese woman performing jazz, then, would seem to be a natural outgrowth of his view of jazz as an example of U.S.-styled democracy and its meritocratic ideals.

In 1956, *Toshiko's Piano* was released in the United States. This development helped her to earn a performance scholarship at the recently expanded Berklee School of Music (which, up until 1954, had been known as the Schillinger House of Music), the famous Boston-based institution for the study of jazz and popular music. Part of her scholarship arrangement included a management contract with jazz impresario George Wein. Thus, while a student at Berklee, she secured employment at Wein's Storyville club as the house pianist. Here she gained valuable bandstand experience, and she also notably performed with a number of established jazz stars, including Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Sonny Stitt, and Charlie Mariano.

Akiyoshi and Mariano married in 1959 and were soon recording and touring with a quartet under their shared leadership. Mariano had been interested in integrating various Asian traditions with jazz, and the music he created with Akiyoshi hinted at their shared interests in Asian musical heritages.²⁵ During their marriage—which lasted until 1967, the year of Akiyoshi's pivotal Town Hall concert—the couple traveled and worked between Japan and the United States (mainly in New York City). The Akiyoshi-Mariano group made a number of recordings, including a 1964 big band session that featured bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Jimmy Cobb.²⁶ Akiyoshi also maintained an active solo career in this period, recording a number of small group recordings made for Victor in Japan-only releases. Among these, the 1961 album, *Toshiko Meets Her Old Pals*, featured a number of prominent Japanese jazz musicians, including saxophonist Sadao Watanabe. Other releases included the 1961 trio outing, *Long Yellow Road* (a different recording than the later Akiyoshi-Tabackin big band recording of the same name), with drummer Eddie Marshall and bassist Gene Cherico, and the

²⁴ For additional information on Akiyoshi's early career in Japan, see Yusuke Torii, *Swing Ideology and Its Cold War Discontents in U.S.-Japan Relations, 1944–1968* (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 2007), and Atkins, *Blue Nippon*.

²⁵ Mariano studied the Southern Indian wind instrument, the nadaswaram, from his travels to Asia in the early 1960s.

²⁶ The Toshiko Mariano Quartet recorded regularly throughout the early to mid-1960s. Their recorded output includes: *The Toshiko Mariano Quartet* (Candid CS-9012, 1961, LP; reissued as Candid CCD-79012, compact disc; with Eddie Marshall on drums and Gene Cherico on bass); *In West Side* (Nippon Columbia NS-1001, 1963, LP), which was organized around a collection of songs from the musical, *West Side Story* (with Albert Heath on drums and Gene Cherico on bass; a slightly different version of this recording was released as *East and West*, Victor BVCJ-7420, 1963, LP, with the same personnel); and *Toshiko Mariano and Her Big Band* (Vee Jay VJR-2505 [US release], 1964, LP; reissued as Vee Jay VJ023, n.d., compact disc). I outline her solo work in the text above.

1963 *Fascinating Jazz*, with Mariano and a lineup of Japanese jazz musicians. In the latter year, she also performed with fellow pianist Steve Kuhn on a provocative recording titled *The Country and Western Sound of Jazz Pianos*. Less an “East meets West” than a “country ’n’ western meets jazz” recording, the two perform a number of country music songs within a jazz context. The album is also notable for Akiyoshi’s performance on a celeste and Kuhn’s harpsichord work.

As Yusuke Torii observes, Akiyoshi’s early jazz career in the United States was not predicated yet on her musical fusion of Japanese and jazz aesthetics but, rather, on her representation as a sort of “Japanese war bride.” This interpretation can be partly gauged in her public appearances in a traditional kimono, which reinforced Americans’ exoticized stereotypes about Japanese women.²⁷ Ironically, she rarely wore a kimono while living in Japan, having counted herself among those Japanese youth who wore the latest Western fashions. Such fashion statements were held to be a sartorial sign of the modernity and cosmopolitanism of these youths, who were ever alert to both the posture of forward-leaning progress and the “hipness” that the West represented in post-WWII Japan.

Akiyoshi also embodied an emerging internationalist ideology in which difference could be celebrated. In direct contrast to Granz’s earlier kimono-centered dressing of the pianist, the cover of the 1958 album, *United Notions with Toshiko and Her International Jazz Sextet* (a recording that included cornetist Nat Adderley), presented her in a modern hairstyle and dress, seated at a piano. However, on this cover, all the musicians are shown alongside flags of the nations from which they originate as well as the English-language name of these respective countries (just in case you were unfamiliar with the nationality of each flag). Therefore, while she was no longer presented in a kimono, Akiyoshi’s nationality—and, implicitly, her ethnicity—were foregrounded, thus reminding the listener that these differences, even if benign, made a difference.²⁸

Uprooting a Native Jazz Speaker

At one point in the 1960s, Akiyoshi almost gave up on her pursuit of a career in jazz. As she recalled in 1976,

I thought, well, at least if you’re American, you are justified, let’s say, to be a jazz musician [because] jazz is American music. And, I thought, here I am, I’m Japanese and a woman ... playing [jazz] in New York. I never thought I was a bad player but there are so many great players, too. And I looked at it and I had to really think about where my position is, what my role would be. And, somehow, it [seemed] kind of pathetic and comical, the fact that here is a Japanese little girl trying to play jazz. I felt very insignificant. [I had to ask myself] Did I *do something*? Did I make any kind of revolution [in the] jazz world?²⁹

²⁷ Torii, *Swing Ideology*, 127–9.

²⁸ Interestingly, Carl “Doc” Severinson, who performs on the opening track, “Broadway,” is not shown on the cover.

²⁹ Quoted in the film, *Jazz Is My Native Language: A Portrait of Toshiko Akiyoshi*, VHS, produced by Renée Cho, Rhapsody Films, 1983.

As noted, Akiyoshi began her U.S. career by conforming to the stereotype of the submissive, post-WWII Japanese female. This position was obviously antithetical to normative constructions of jazz artists, and, thus, if a career were to be pursued along these lines, it would very likely remain external to the dominant narratives of jazz history.³⁰

In her analysis of the ways in which legitimacy in jazz is gendered, Ingrid Monson writes,

The symbolic intersection of masculinity, music, and race perhaps explains the persistence of jazz as a fraternity of predominantly male musicians. While many women have successfully crossed the gender barrier, many cite their technical musical prowess as having compensated for the symbolic liability of their gender. [Pianist and composer] Mary Lou Williams, for example, has remarked, "You've got to play, that's all. They don't think of you as a woman if you can really play."³¹

As Monson suggests here, the overlapping strains of gender and race reveal a discursive project antithetical to the inclusion of non-male, non-black, and non-white musicians as "real jazz musicians." Williams's willingness to subsume her gender beneath displays of virtuosity pointedly reveals the way in which she recognized the gendered stakes at play in the jazz world. In other words, in the decades following the war, musicians and critics had normalized heterosexual masculinity and U.S. nationality in jazz music to such a degree that it inhibited the possibility of musicians external to such a construct to be heard as bona fide jazz musicians.

Yet the international orientation of the *United Notions* album points to emergent cultural possibilities in jazz trends of the mid-1960s, and this project also reveals a growing confidence in Akiyoshi's own "trace in jazz." Indeed, she had changed significantly in the period between her kimono-clad appearances on a 1956 *What's My Line?* game show and her 1966 return to the United States (after a 1963–1965 stay in Japan). In retrospect, it is perhaps too easy to hear the determined resolve beneath the evident disappointment in Akiyoshi's dismissive parting (she claims to have said, "Goodbye forever, Japan") after her failed attempt to invigorate a jazz scene there brought her back to the United States.³²

On her return to the States, she became the pianist in Charles Mingus's band, and performed with his group throughout much of 1966. That her skills as a "natural jazz speaker" had been honed in the masculine world of jazz can be seen in a Mingus band performance of "Fables of Faubus," a composition that the bandleader wrote as a protest against the segregationist stance of then-Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus. Mingus was famous for his aggressive, even violent, behavior onstage towards band members whose performances he found unsatisfactory. In this performance, he

³⁰ I am thinking here of dominant cultural representations of Asian females, particularly in popular culture. See Laura Hyun-Yi Kang's essay, "The Desiring of Asian Female Bodies: Interracial Romance and Cinematic Subjection," *Visual Anthropology Review* 9 (1993): 5–21, which confronts this issue in a close reading of the film, *Come See the Paradise* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1990).

³¹ Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48 (Fall 1995): 405.

³² Quoted in Atkins, "Can," 213.

required Akiyoshi to participate in the call-and-response vocal sections of the piece.³³ One night, when he called out, “Name me someone who’s ridiculous,” rather than responding with “Faubus,” she responded, “*You’re* ridiculous, *I’m* ridiculous, we’re *all* ridiculous,” and then continued playing.³⁴ In this moment, Akiyoshi challenges the fundamental concept of the composition by replacing—indeed, implicating—Mingus, herself, and audiences in her response to his call. Her frustrations are forthrightly pronounced. In this action, she voices frustration with the difficulties she had to negotiate as she sought to leave behind the “Japanese little girl” image her earlier handlers had tried to employ as a path to wider public recognition.

Somewhat later, in 1976, Akiyoshi described jazz as “aggressive,” admitting, “masculinity is one of the essences that jazz music has to have, for my taste—you know, hard-driving. This is important.”³⁵ This masculine orientation toward aggression and a “hard-driving” aesthetic within jazz culture underscores the role that gender performed in her understanding of not only the requirements for “real” jazz but also her place within—or, more accurately, outside of—the jazz tradition. Still, as indicated in her self-description as a “Japanese little girl” outsider in jazz, such feelings of “ridiculousness” fell heavily on a woman who was not only seeking to carve out a viable career in jazz but, perhaps even more presumptuously, hoping to create compositions in which her “trace in jazz history” would be pronounced and notable.

In 1967, after a year of planning, Akiyoshi produced and presented a concert in Manhattan’s Town Hall as a showcase for her talents. This event implicitly challenged her positioning as someone external to the jazz tradition. In a program entirely devoted to her original compositions, Akiyoshi performed as a pianist in both solo and trio

³³ Pianist Hampton Hawes describes Mingus in his autobiography, *Raise Up Off Me*: “Now Charles [Mingus] is a strong cat with a temper; on his own trip and unpredictable. There are people who are afraid of him. Been known to lift drums over his head like Atlas holding the world and throw them off the stand ‘cause he didn’t like the way the cat played” (105).

³⁴ Brian Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), 134. Akiyoshi’s feelings for Mingus were disclosed explicitly on her Ascent recording, *Farewell* (RCA Victor RVC RVJ-6078, 1980, LP; reissued as Ascent ASC-1000, 1980, LP, and BMG KP06560, 2003, compact disc), with the track, “Farewell (to Mingus).” This number is an openly “heartfelt tribute,” as Leonard Feather describes in the liner notes. It begins with introductory passage for flutes and muted, lower-register brass. The theme itself is stated by Tabackin’s warm, Lester Young-inflected solo that features both an airy vibrato and languid pacing. The rich support that Akiyoshi gives the tenor saxophonist—with deep long tones in the brass and saxophones—is complemented by the doubling of the tenor’s statement by the flutes. Akiyoshi’s piano solo follows. Its first chorus pares the ensemble down to a piano trio. Akiyoshi’s two-handed solo conveys both strength and sensitivity, and this passage merges the characteristics that Mingus embodied throughout his music and his life. Mingus’s autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1971), attests to his complex personality. As he wrote in the passage that begins the book, “In other words, I am three. One man stands forever in the middle, unconcerned, unmoved, watching, waiting to be allowed to express what he sees to the other two. The second man is like a frightened animal that attacks for fear of being attacked. Then there’s the over-loving gentle person who lets people into the uttermost sacred temple of his being and he’ll take insults and be trusting and sign contracts without reading them and get talked down to working cheap or for nothing, and when he realizes what’s been done to him he feels like killing and destroying everything around him including himself for being so stupid.” (Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 1.) While *Beneath the Underdog* should not be read as a straightforward memoir, Mingus aptly describes himself as a mixture of strength and sentiment, cold-eyed realism and soft-hearted sentimentality, which was expressed in the range of his work from the boisterous “Fables of Faubus” to the tenderhearted “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat.”

³⁵ Feather, “East,” 38.

settings, as well as conducted a big band. The concert and its preparations dramatically transformed her career ambitions. She became increasingly convinced that creating a library of original music might be the best path to legitimize her particular position within jazz. In this idea, she began to think of how she might carve a unique place for herself within—and, in some ways, “without”—a jazz tradition.³⁶

While composing six orchestra charts for her Town Hall concert, Akiyoshi discovered a latent affinity for the big band ensemble. Aesthetically, she had long desired more timbral and textural color for her music beyond that provided by solo and trio piano formats or small-ensemble jazz groups such as quartets or quintets. As seen in her subsequent work, and particularly in her mature compositions for the Akiyoshi-Tabackin big band, her arrangements often feature uniquely voiced five-part harmonies written specifically for the various sections of the band, and in particular she has often used the woodwind sections in boldly idiosyncratic ways. Moreover, as jazz critic Leonard Feather once aptly observed,

What is so important about [the Akiyoshi-Tabackin] orchestra was that it was the product of one mind and one creative force. Everything is composed and arranged by the same person [Akiyoshi]. That has never happened before with any other big band. Not even Duke Ellington wrote all his compositions and arrangements.³⁷

The March of the Tadpoles

Akiyoshi had to wait five years after her self-produced Town Hall concert before she could realize her dream of establishing a big band. In 1972, her fortunes were altered when her husband, saxophonist Lew Tabackin, was hired for the Doc Severinson band. This work also included the Severinson band's steady gig of performing on NBC's *Tonight Show*. Tabackin's job required the couple to relocate from New York City to Los Angeles—a move which proved to be the serendipitous catalyst she needed to fulfill her desire to enlarge her compositional and arranging palette with a big band.

Upon moving to Los Angeles, Tabackin informed Akiyoshi that the Musicians' Union Hall rehearsal space was available for use at a nominal fee. This was a luxury they could not afford in New York City and which prohibited the formation of a big band at that time. The inexpensive rehearsal space in Los Angeles, however, provided her with the capacity to hone the unique vision she held for a big band. Beyond the question of rehearsal space, the couple still faced the difficulty of how to assemble and maintain a large jazz-centered ensemble in the music business climate of the 1970s. It took a year for Akiyoshi to stabilize an ensemble, and this goal was largely accomplished through Tabackin's reputation and connections. Because of his influence,

³⁶ That Mingus harbored no ill will can be evidenced by his attendance at her Town Hall concert later that year. This appearance seems to suggest his support of her efforts at creative independence—an endeavor he continually attempted to realize throughout his own career. In her interview with Steven Moore (Moore, “Art of Becoming”), Akiyoshi acknowledged Mingus's significance for her, stating: “I don't think Bud [Powell] or [Charles] Mingus realized that they have had a big impact on my career. They probably meant [their compliments and encouragement] very casually, but what they said meant many things to me.”

³⁷ Quoted in the film, *Jazz Is My Native Language*.

musicians were willing to show up to audition and to subsequently rehearse—without any real promise of work—for a band that was led by an untested, female, Japanese big-band composer and arranger. She was also relatively unknown as a jazz pianist, particularly on the U.S. West Coast. Because of this situation, as she confessed to Leonard Feather, “some ... musicians thought it was too much pressure and they didn’t feel it was worth it. But other musicians could relate to [my situation] and they could feel some love for the music, and [they found the music] ... was challenging, [so] they stayed.”³⁸ As with Mary Lou Williams, musical virtuosity trumped gender as Akiyoshi’s complex compositions and arrangements ultimately convinced fellow musicians of the artistic viability of her ensemble.

In 1977, Akiyoshi characterized large ensemble jazz as a type of music created from the deep relationships forged between composers and specific musicians. Across the 1970s, she began to compose with the specific musicians of her band in mind. As she explained, “I think it’s a writer’s dream to be able to write on a personal basis, and a legitimate writer nowadays, I think, is like a non-existent art ... I have a strong feeling about this, I really do. This is a part of jazz that shouldn’t be lost.”³⁹ A noteworthy example of this approach can be found in “The March of the Tadpoles,” from a 1977 Ascent album of the same name, for which she composed a trombone soli section at the request of her trombonists. At this time, this section included Phil Teele, Bill Reichenbach, Charlie Loper, and Rick Culver. She had initially recorded this tune under the title “P. B. and Lee,” and the number was a reworking of the standard “All the Things You Are.” Akiyoshi’s willingness to accommodate her band members’ interests resulted in lending a slightly more formal cast to this arrangement.

In such musician-based writing, Akiyoshi echoed Duke Ellington, who was celebrated for having composed specifically for his sidemen, and for often incorporating their personal riffs (heard in jam sessions or between numbers at rehearsals). Similarly, as Akiyoshi did here, Ellington was also known for regularly reworking older material into new compositions and arrangements. In a related vein, Akiyoshi featured Tabackin on many of the cadenzas in her compositions. She has stated that she liked to do this because “he’s one of the few players who can play without accompaniment. He’s a real cadenza player and does [it] so well, so I should take advantage of it.”⁴⁰ She felt that such musician-centered composing practices could be traced to an earlier time when, “if a super musician came up and was so extraordinary in his capabilities, the writer would come up with something suitable to this particular artist ... But I think there’s a lot of jazzmen today who have really lost this [art]. It’s an unfortunate thing to see.”⁴¹

Akiyoshi has also emphasized the desire to work with musicians who wanted to perform in the band because they loved the music, not simply to collect a paycheck. Nevertheless, because she suffered economically throughout her early career, particularly as a self-employed single mother, she remained acutely sensitive to the economic

³⁸ Feather, “Contemporary,” 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Feather, “East,” 17.

situation of her sidemen. In interviews throughout the 1970s, she often mentioned her sense of responsibility in obtaining work for her band and she exhibited no ill feelings to band members who took other jobs to either fill in the time between the infrequent engagements of the big band or because they were more profitable than performing with her ensemble.

The circumstances of her initial hiring of Tabackin for her 1967 self-produced concert proved to be an unquestionably important occasion for her, and this history illustrates the depth of her commitment to such musician-centered ideals. She recalled,

[When] I discovered Lew [Tabackin], I said that that was the guy I want. He said, "Yes," and then he got a job with Thad [Jones] and Mel [Lewis] doing a couple of weeks on the West Coast and so he cancelled [on] me. For him, like any New York musician, they have to make a living. It is the same today. If you have a two week job instead of one, you take the two week job. That is the way it goes (laughing).⁴²

While Akiyoshi remained aware of her band members' economic worries, part of her determination to hire musicians who were actively engaged with her music also stemmed from an attitude that she honed in Japan, where the bebop contingent—of which she was one of the primary leaders—insisted on the art status of jazz music by rejecting gigs they felt were either too commercial or too pop-oriented (and, obviously, these rejections were often to the economic detriment of the careers of these musicians).⁴³

As noted, Akiyoshi hoped to position her music in a significant, if liminal way. In 1976, she stated, "My main job is to keep creating some music that will be a little different from the mainstream of [an] American [jazz] tradition. If I keep doing this enough, then [my music will] leave some kind of trace in jazz history—someday, hopefully."⁴⁴ By transforming herself from a Bud Powell-influenced pianist into a big band composer, orchestrator, and leader, Akiyoshi notably looked to Duke Ellington, who challenged limits for black creativity, as a model for her artistic aspirations. On reading a Nat Hentoff column on Ellington's passing in 1974, Akiyoshi found renewed inspiration in the bandleader's iconoclastic approach to large ensemble jazz. She even confessed, "Spiritually, since I started writing for big band, my main influence is Duke Ellington. One of the reasons that I truly admire and respect him—aside from his being a great writer—is that his music was deeply rooted in his race and he was proud of his race. That encouraged me to draw some heritage from *my* roots."⁴⁵

From 1977 to 1980, the Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin big band was left without a major label record contract despite their remarkable three-year run in the U.S. market

⁴² Fred Jung, "A Fireside Chat with Toshiko Akiyoshi," *All About Jazz*, April 20, 2003, <http://www.allabout-jazz.com/php/article.php?id=291> (accessed August 12, 2008).

⁴³ See Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 195.

⁴⁴ Feather, "East," 39.

⁴⁵ Original emphasis. *Ibid.*, 17. Additionally, the only big band recording of the Toshiko Akiyoshi Jazz Orchestra to feature compositions not written by Akiyoshi is *Tribute to Duke Ellington* (BMG/Novus-J, 1999, compact disc), which features a three-part "Tribute to Duke Ellington Suite" as well as performance of Ellington's "Prelude to a Kiss," "Day Dream," and "I Let A Song Go Out of My Heart," all arranged by Akiyoshi. This 1999 release remains outside the scope of this article, though it is an important indication of Ellington's influence on her musical life.

with both Grammy-winning RCA albums and broad critical acclaim. Ironically, the liner notes to their final RCA U.S. release, the 1976 *Insights*, concludes with an anecdote about a celebration at her home with her band for winning two 1976 *Down Beat* critics' polls—one for “Big Band Deserving of Wider Recognition,” and the other for Akiyoshi alone, who was likewise recognized as an “Arranger Deserving of Wider Recognition.” Undaunted by being dropped from RCA, Akiyoshi and Tabackin formed their own record label, Ascent, and they pursued a strategy established earlier by jazz musicians such as Roach and Mingus.

Though re-released by Ascent in 1982, the album *Salted Ginkgo Nuts* was originally a 1977 Japan-only release on RCA Victor Japan. The liner notes to the Ascent reissue included a brief missive from Lew Tabackin, which read, in part,

Those of you who have followed the development of our organization are well aware of our continued problems with American record companies. This problem, however, is not unique to musicians, who strive to maintain artistic integrity. From time to time, Ascent will be resurrected to help maintain our momentum and to fill existing gaps in domestic availability.⁴⁶

Not only do the band's Ascent recordings represent Akiyoshi's troubled relationship to the music industry in the 1970s, but they also reveal a deepening articulation of rootlessness through her fusion of jazz, Japanese, Brazilian, and other musical cultures in her compositions.

Rootless, Not Route-less

A self-described perfectionist, Akiyoshi felt compelled to maintain an impossibly high standard of creative achievement. In 1976, she explained her situation to Leonard Feather:

Personally, the biggest thing right now that I have to deal with is that my case is a little harder since I am not an American. Not only am I not an American, I am a minority race. I believe in seeing things the way they are, and for minorities, it's hard in this country. If I were a male American and wrote a hundred tunes, if thirty of those tunes were super and the rest mediocre, I could get by ... But in my case, I can't afford that. Whenever I write, each one has to be good. I really don't think I can afford to produce any music which is not up to a certain level.⁴⁷

Staying true to her belief in jazz as a valuable cultural idiom, Akiyoshi was more concerned about the aesthetic evaluation and ultimate artistic value of her work than its commercial appeal or popular status. In truth, Akiyoshi's determination to maintain her high standard of musical quality carried economic consequences. Her sidemen demanded higher salaries due to the difficulty of her charts, which required extra, paid rehearsal time, and thus also hindered her band's touring ability. She also demanded doubling in the reeds section, where players could be asked to perform on three or four instruments in a given set. Still, in order to see the band succeed, she needed to do more

⁴⁶ Lew Tabackin, liner notes to *Salted Ginkgo Nuts*, Ascent ASC 1002, 1982, LP.

⁴⁷ Feather, “East,” 38.

than put together a group of enthusiastic musicians—she had to convince critics and audiences that her compositions were also worthy, if she was going to maintain a viable professional career.

In a 1976 interview, Akiyoshi pointed to a number of ways in which Japanese music aesthetics informed her compositional strategies.

I have used some Japanese instruments, but that's a very obvious infusion. If people listen very closely to my writing, they can hear a lot of more subtle infusion[s]. For instance, take the trumpets: from first trumpet to second trumpet, I'll move the interval a whole step. Then I will go a minor third down to the third trumpet; from there to fourth trumpet, it will be a whole tone down. That kind of thing. It's not done much in Western writing, but it's sometimes very effective.⁴⁸

In her early work with the band, Akiyoshi quickly moved beyond simply tacking on Japanese instrumentation to a big band's conventional lineup. While more obvious Japanese elements—such as her use of *minyo* (Japanese folk) melodies or Noh musicians—were discernible signs of a Japanese influence, her use of Japanese musical elements was often more subtly evocative. For example, her themes are often accented in unusual places, and she has acknowledged this tendency derives from the influence of the Japanese concept of *ma*, which concerns the use of space, on her musical sensibilities.

The Japanese aspects could also be obscured by their use within jazz forms. For instance, while structurally a blues form, “Henpecked Old Man,” a composition from the album *Kogun*, was inspired by a traditional melody from a village in Japan known for “its henpecked men and its cold winds.”⁴⁹ In this example, the connection to Japan is both literal and literary, but with Akiyoshi exposing and refracting that connection by framing the Japanese folk melody within a bluesy, Ellington-inspired tone poem. As noted, Japanese themes pervade her compositions of this period. These materials can be heard, for example, in such numbers as “Children in the Temple Ground,” “Kogun,” “Village,” “Long Yellow Road,” “Sumie,” and “Minamata.” The relation between these Japanese inspirational sources and their adaptations in her compositions can be readily seen in the example of “Sumie,” from the 1976 recording, *Tales of a Courtesan (Oirantan)*. One evening, when she was composing “Sumie,” a tune she described as a “simple melody[,] twelve bars long (but not a blues),” she began to hear this material as a “traditional *gagaku* sound.” On this, she observed:

It's a form of very close harmony; and I heard it with a melody in my mind, repeating and repeating, and this Japanese sound matched it very well, in my head. It sounded very musical and very natural to me.

I had the idea of writing this sound for trumpets. Like, say, you have two fourths: G and D, along with F and C. So the first trumpet would play G, the second, F, the third, D, and the fourth, C. It's a very close sound; then you have to bend it. Years ago in

⁴⁸ Feather, “East,” 17.

⁴⁹ Leonard Feather, liner notes to *Kogun*, RCA Victor RVC RCA-6246, 1974, LP. This recording has been reissued as part of the three-disc set, *Mosaic Select: Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band*, Mosaic MS-033, 2008, compact discs.

Japan, I used to hear trumpet players doing a lot of note-bending, both upward and downward. You have to slide into and out of things, using the valves very carefully.

So I was anxious to hear this because I never heard anybody do this before. But the first time I heard it, it was a disaster. Eventually, though, the trumpet players learned how to slide half way decently, and all of a sudden it sounded just beautiful. I was actually deeply touched, I remember.⁵⁰

This description highlights that the challenges of integrating Japanese music aesthetics into jazz did not rest entirely on Akiyoshi's shoulders alone. Nevertheless, in the later context of her big band appropriations of such inspirations, her charts placed additional aesthetic and technical demands on band members. As previously noted though, Akiyoshi was fortunate to "have musicians who think that music is a little more than just earning money."⁵¹ As such, her ensemble's exuberance in executing her serpentine yet highly melodic lines and complex arrangements is evident throughout their recorded oeuvre.

In the liner notes to her *Insights* album (released in Japan in 1976 and in the United States in 1978 on RCA), Akiyoshi tellingly comments that "musicians are powerless, in the sense that they are unable to change the world socially. However, they may feel very much concerned about what is going on around them or what has happened in the past, and they can express their feelings through their writing and playing."⁵² Despite such claims of powerlessness, her understanding of the role of the musician as a social critic has consistently placed her music as a voice for awareness and concern. In fact, the number of compositions explicitly concerned with social realities has increased since *Insights* and belies her statement about musicians' non-musical effects, including those deemed political.⁵³

Her sense of rootlessness not only informs the way she often obscures the Japanese elements in her jazz compositions but also provides her with the capacity to combine musical elements from cultures in which any claim of authenticity she might make would be specious. Rootlessness allows her the freedom to enlist elements from distant cultures in her work as blends or infusions without having to adhere to conventional notions of cultural legitimacy. For instance, the Ascent recording, *March of the Tadpoles*—a title that references a colloquial Japanese allusion to musical notes as

⁵⁰ Feather, "Contemporary," 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵² Feather, liner notes to *Insights*, RCA Victor RVC RVP-6106, 1976, LP. Reissued as part of the three-disc set, *Mosaic Select: Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band*, Mosaic MS-033, 2008, compact discs.

⁵³ While outside of the concerns of this particular essay (as it focuses on the 1970s), Akiyoshi was approached by Nakagawa, a Buddhist priest from Hiroshima, about composing a piece to memorialize the 1945 atomic bombing of his city. For this commission, Akiyoshi wrote a three-part suite entitled *Hiroshima: Rising from the Abyss*, which was released by RCA in 2001 (reissued on True Life Entertainment 10008, 2003, compact disc). Recent recordings such as *Let Freedom Swing* (Hänssler Verlag, 2008) indicate her continued use of her music to promote socially progressive ideals. The 1976 album, *Insights*, also features a politically-themed suite entitled "Minamata," which was composed as a response to the industrial mercury poisonings of the Minamata village (as a result of chemical runoff into the Minamata Bay from the Chisso Corporation's manufacture of fertilizer and plastics). Since most of the villagers ate the fish from the waters surrounding the village, they were among the first to feel the effects of the concentrated poisons that accumulated in the fish. Recent recordings such as *Jazz Matinee: Let Freedom Swing* (Hänssler 093203, 2008, compact disc) demonstrate the continued use of her music to promote socially progressive ideals.

tadpoles—including the composition, “Notorious Tourist from East.” As the liner notes reveal, this number was “inspired, or rather provoked” by a visit to Tijuana, Mexico, by Akiyoshi and her sister. The two were surprised by their ill treatment by Mexicans in Tijuana, and Akiyoshi found this cross-cultural exchange to be a ripe subject of inspiration. This composition provides a Latin-tinged musical response complete with congas and castanets. The number is musically notable as a propulsive vehicle for Tom Peterson’s explosive tenor sax solo.⁵⁴ More importantly, “Notorious” expresses Akiyoshi’s interest in engaging, even collaborating, with other cultures and she uses this composition’s propulsive Latin jazz energy as a way to reach out to her one-time Mexican antagonists.

Given her time spent with Mingus in the year prior to her Town Hall concert, it is interesting that she followed his lead in using a weekend spent in Tijuana as inspiration for a composition. However, the two musicians could not have had more divergent tourist experiences, a fact that is reflected in their respective creative works. Where, for instance, Mingus was prompted by what one can assume were pleasant memories of a notoriously debauched weekend, Akiyoshi (as noted) was “provoked” into composing. Indeed, Mingus spends a whole album—his 1962 *New Tijuana Moods*—detailing his experiences.⁵⁵ In such compositions as “Ysabel’s Table Dance,” Mingus conjures up a vastly different image than that of Akiyoshi and her sister walking around Tijuana confronting unexpectedly hostile Mexicans. Yet Akiyoshi’s and Mingus’s compositions utilize many of the same musical elements (e.g., the highlighted use of castanets, a vigorous Latin rhythm, and an arrangement that moves between Latinized and straight-ahead jazz sections), and therein lies the rub. While Mingus was personally connected to a larger Afrodiasporic music culture that encompassed Latin America, Akiyoshi made no complementary claim.⁵⁶ It is in the way that each musician was perceived by audiences and critics—as well as their own self-identification—that a reading of their respective uses of musical elements gains any distinction. Again, the ways in which her positioning—i.e., her self-image as a “Japanese little girl”—influenced her visit and the high time Mingus enjoyed as a black American male in the same town convey the professional differences that Akiyoshi and Mingus faced in the jazz world. To be fair, Mingus never felt that he himself received his fair shake from jazz critics or the music industry, but I raise my point about the personal racial and gender perspective of Akiyoshi to show how the distinctions in their relative positions opened or closed opportunities for transcultural exchange in distinct ways.

⁵⁴ The number became the title track to a 1978 quartet recording, *Toshiko Plays Toshiko* (released in the United States as *Notorious Tourist from the East*, Inner City IC 6066, 1979, LP; the album was released in Japan on the Discmate label but under the title, *Toshiko Plays Toshiko*). The recording featured her big band compositions rearranged for this quartet, which included trumpeter Steve Huffstetter, bassist Gene Cherico, and drummer Billy Higgins.

⁵⁵ Charles Mingus, *New Tijuana Moods*, Bluebird RCA 68951, 2006 (orig. 1962), compact disc.

⁵⁶ For example, one of Mingus’s close friends, trumpeter Theodore “Fats” Navarro, recalled in a *Down Beat* interview, “[Mingus] knew all the places where they had jam-sessions. He used to go to some Puerto Rican places, some Cuban clubs, too, and sit in with the Cuban bands” (quoted in Brian Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography* [New York: Da Capo, 1982], 36). Mingus also collaborated with various Latin musicians such as Cándido Camero, Cal Tjader, and Sabu Martínez.

While not as expansive as Mingus's *New Tijuana Moods*, "Notorious" begins with a short introverted introductory passage that gives way to Latin American rhythms, propelled by congas and drums. This opening captures Akiyoshi's introduction to Mexico by contrasting a mood of relaxed anticipation with the spirited exuberance of the main body of the number. The unison lines of the ensemble carry the arrangement into a fuller engagement of Latin American rhythmic sensibilities as castanets provide a rhythmic texture that appends an even more Latinized coloration to the composition. The accompaniment figures beneath the solos further demarcate the connections between jazz and Latin American music cultures, imbuing the work with a crosscultural sensibility that speaks less to a purity of form or idiomatic consistency than to a hybridized coherency. As noted, Akiyoshi recognized the strong connections between jazz and Latin American music sensibilities, which she felt were stronger than those she forged between Japanese and jazz aesthetics.

"Notorious" is more than simply a musical bridge between Akiyoshi and Mexico. I argue that this number represents a personal acknowledgement that she will always be, in some way, an outsider, or an alien, to her adopted culture of jazz in ways that Mingus did not feel or need to justify in his own career. By extension, with regard to his various Latin American stylistic appropriations in *New Tijuana Moods*, Mingus's use of such elements can be seen as organic, a fraternal reaching out to an Afrodiasporic culture in which he could claim membership. In contrast, Akiyoshi could not use the more explicit Japanese music elements from her compositional palette to comment on her experiences in Tijuana. Rather, by evoking typical Latin American musical elements, she is exposed as a perpetual foreigner. In this situation, she is forced to acknowledge the relative signifying value that those foreign musical elements allow her.

Despite this self-consciously "foreign" musical perspective, "Notorious" also reveals Akiyoshi's boldness in her use of musical elements drawn from a variety of cultures. Her sense of rootlessness acquitted her of any artistic reticence she might have held at one time in her career in appropriating musical elements from "non-native" sources. However, as I see it, she chose to show her antagonists that she was capable of meeting them on their own cultural turf—and, musically speaking, that foreignness is in the ear of the listener and not embedded in the "music itself." Such rootlessness, in fact, might help both sides—she, as well as her Mexican hosts—to overcome the wary yet naturalized responses to difference in order to share, rather than confront, cultural and ethnic differences across the limits of identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to reemphasize the idea that Akiyoshi's rootlessness does not denote a "route-lessness." Rather, this rootlessness depends on her acknowledgement that the use of seemingly culture-bound musical elements and aesthetic sensibilities—both those that would seem to be external to her own ethnic, racial, or gendered background and those that would seem more "natural"—is derived from direct, personal experience (practice, close listening, transcribing, personal interaction with musicians, etc.) rather than any sense of an inherent cultural heritage or racial prerogative.

Akiyoshi has emphasized the “social aspect” of learning jazz in her early days, recalling,

Oscar Peterson used to come every night when I was at the Hickory House in 1957. It was a big lesson for me because he used to sit in. That kind of thing makes jazz a social art; it's not like classical music. That social aspect of it, the musicians sitting in and playing with you and for you, made me learn how you're supposed to feel.⁵⁷

This social aspect helped her forge personal relationships within the jazz tradition through associations with musicians such as Peterson and Mingus, two important figures who not only encouraged her performances but who eventually permitted her to feel free to innovate, thereby giving her the roots for a vision that ultimately transformed big band jazz into new shapes and forms.

As I have argued, in spite of her overall rootlessness and her interest in her own ethnic heritage, the African American jazz heritage remained central to her overall musical aesthetic, even in those compositions that employed Japanese musical sensibilities or instrumentation, or that dealt with Japanese themes. This multifaceted relation between jazz and her own personal perspective is indicative of her notion of an “infusing blend,” which in its rootlessness refuses to allow notions of idiomatic purity to dominate while simultaneously permitting those traditions from which she is drawing to mark her creative work. In describing her creative process, Akiyoshi aptly articulates this broader musical aesthetic:

Years ago, Shelly Manne was talking about dissonance ... originally it would be played like this (snaps fingers in medium four) ... but then you would feel like (imitates sliding horns, with tempo cut in half) ... like a spacing. This is very Oriental thinking. Rather than counting the time, you feel the time and you learn it. Indian music is a little more visual—a little more clear than Japanese music. They have this space, but at the same time they're very rhythmical. Japanese music is not quite so tangible—a little more abstract. I feel this in a very natural way in jazz, which would have a swing feeling but would also have this spacing. I try to put those two things together and it gives a very definite kind of feeling.⁵⁸

As argued previously, such compositional complexity was borne out of a rootless hybridizing aesthetic that took shape as a personal reaction to the constraints of nationality, race, and gender that were placed before her. Showcasing a bold, innovative artistic individuality which was willing to challenge idiomatic sanctimony while still venerating jazz and Japanese music traditions, Akiyoshi's “rootless” creative work ably argues for a unique “trace in jazz history.”

This paper has underscored the connections between her musical works and her identity, and she herself has likewise stressed the importance of such connections. For instance, she writes in a preamble to a published music score:

⁵⁷ Moore, “Becoming,” n.p.

⁵⁸ Feather, “Contemporary,” 14–15. I have retained the original wording of the published interview. However, it seems as if there has been some inadvertently awkward editing that merged a discussion of dissonance with rhythmic feel. That said, my point is to highlight Akiyoshi's sense that wedding Japanese rhythmic sensibilities to jazz's swing feel is “natural” rather than incompatible or detrimental.

If I have developed my music to the point where a listener can sense my attitudes—that is, my history as it reflects Japan and as it reflects what I’ve learned of America in the past twenty years—if the listener can hear my history *and my individuality*, then I have accomplished the solution.⁵⁹

In searching for her own musical identity and a place within jazz culture, Akiyoshi blended jazz and Japanese music aesthetics. In doing this, she ably demonstrated the possibility of rootlessness in her compositions. These works, and particularly her seminal compositions of the 1970s, revealed the robust links that could be formed between musical traditions that had been viewed as so disparate in nature as to be incompatible. Throughout the 1970s, Akiyoshi’s compositions pointed beyond such debilitating stereotypes and, in the process, showcased the ways in which rootlessness could offer jazz musicians new connections with broader horizons and enriched understandings of their place(s) in the world.

Abstract

In this essay, I explore composer and pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi’s articulation of a transcultural “rootlessness” which she developed by rendering non-jazz influences, drawn most notably from Japanese musical aesthetics, within a jazz context. Her active infusion of traditional Japanese musical elements into large ensemble jazz music compositions and arrangements throughout the 1970s reflected her changing attitude regarding the aesthetic or musical affiliations enabled by nationality, ethnicity, and gender, on the one hand, and musical practices, repertoire, and instrumentation, on the other. By hearing the music Akiyoshi created through this “rootless” approach, we gain invaluable insight into the production and representation of jazz during the 1970s, a time when transcultural expression was changing the sounds as well as the meanings of the genre.

⁵⁹ Emphasis added. Quoted in Porter, “She Wiped All the Men Out,” 50 n37. According to Lewis Porter, Akiyoshi’s thoughts were titled “Inspiration” and were printed on the folder of every Akiyoshi chart published by Kendor Music.

