

A DAY WITH TAKU HIRANO

By Alex Pertout



In August and September of 2019, the legendary Grammy Award-winning band Fleetwood Mac will conduct an extensive Australian Tour performing in all cities across the country. On percussion will be Taku Hirano: a highly respected and extremely versatile multi-faceted percussionist. Taku's percussive output is informed by an array of researched areas including orchestral, jazz, Afro-Latin, West African, Middle Eastern, Indian and Japanese repertoire and instruments.

Taku commenced studies in orchestral percussion with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra's principal timpanist Kristan Phillips, continuing with drum kit studies with Alan Dawson and Leon 'Ndugu' Chanler. He then enrolled at the Berklee College of Music, graduating as the first percussion major from that renowned institution. While at Berklee he studied with master conguero Giovanni Hidalgo as well as world percussion experts Glen Velez and Jamey Haddad. He has also spent time conducting research in Japan into the Taiko drumming tradition and in Cuba furthering his Afro-Latin knowledge.

Taku has amassed a remarkable list of recording and touring credits with artists such as Fleetwood Mac, Whitney Houston, Bette Midler, Stevie Nicks, Lionel Richie, Isaac Hayes, Utada Hikaru, A.R. Rahman, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Beyoncé, Giorgia, Lady Gaga, Annie Lennox, Shakira, Willie Nelson, The Temptations, Nelly Furtado, Joe Zawinul, Chaka Khan, Jay Z, Andrea Bocelli, Dr. John, The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Cirque Du Soleil among many others. Taku is a regular contributor to Modern Drummer and Drum! Magazine, an 'Artist in Residence' at the Berklee College of Music and has presented master classes at New York University, Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz at USC, Carnegie Mellon University and at the Loyola University New Orleans. He has developed a multi-percussion stick 'Katana' produced by Vater, as well as the 'Hand-Bale' drum produced by Meinl. He has a personal project 'Tao of Sound' that thus far has released three albums on the Japanese Domo Music Group label.

Here is the result of our conversation:

Photo by Makiko Kobayashi

Taku, so I understand you were born in Japan and then later moved to the USA. What age were you when you actually moved there?

I moved to the USA when I was only 3 months old. My father worked in textiles as a cotton broker for a large Japanese corporation and he was transferred to California shortly after I was born. Later, from age 11, my family moved to Hong Kong on another work transfer and then moved back to the USA when I was 15 years old.

When did you discover your passion for percussion and what was your inspiration to take up these particular instruments in the first place?

My first recollection of wanting to play some sort of drum was around the age of 4. I have no idea why. But by the time I was 4 or 5 and wanted to play, I think I was too shy and afraid to do something incorrectly. I wasn't one of those drummers who recall banging on pots and pans until their parents got fed up and bought them a toy drum kit. In more recent years, I found a photo of myself around the age of 1 or 2 drumming on the bottom of a cylindrical *Tinkertoy* container, which totally blew me away. Finding that picture of me hitting the tin bottom of an inverted canister like a *conga* made me realize that before I let the fear of embarrassment stop me, I had actually found joy in drumming. I'm definitely

blessed that the drumming path chose me and stuck with me.

What type of music were you drawn to earlier on?

I'm lucky to have had parents who really enjoyed music of all styles. In my home I heard classical music, jazz, country, dixieland jazz, Elvis, Johnny Cash, John Coltrane, and even Hawaiian music - my mother played ukelele in addition to playing piano. Not to mention, I listened to whatever was on the radio. When I started my formal education in percussion at age 9, I was already studying piano since age 7, I was into whatever was on MTV in the mid-80s. So, although I started my studies on marimba, concert snare drum and timpani, I also made sure to take lessons on drum kit, as I was keenly listening to all the 80s hits from Toto and Michael Jackson to Duran Duran. Coincidentally, the first live concert I ever attended was Toto on their *IV Tour*; the album *Toto IV* featured the songs *Rosanna* and *Africa*. My private teacher at the time was a huge Jeff Porcaro fan and took me! As you developed skills in orchestral percussion, were you majoring in a particular area at the time?

I studied classical percussion intensively from the age of 9 until 17. My mother wanted me to study piano for at least two years before beginning any instrument of my choice, so

I had a private piano teacher from age 7 to 9. Then at age 9, I started on marimba, concert snare drum, timpani and drum kit. When we moved to Hong Kong, I studied with the principal timpanist of the Hong Kong Philharmonic from age 11 to 15. During that period, my main goal was to get accepted to Juilliard for percussion. My older brother, three years my senior, who played clarinet and oboe, also studied classical music intensively and trained towards Juilliard with the principal clarinetist of the symphony orchestra in Hong Kong. I kept developing my orchestral percussion skills right through high school, performing with the school orchestra, as well as city honour bands and orchestras, California Youth Philharmonic and in pit orchestras for musicals.

What influenced you in the early development of your Afro-Latin American percussive knowledge?

I was initially introduced to Afro-Brazilian percussion through my first private percussion and drum kit teacher Brenda Myers at age 9. Although later I moved to Hong Kong, I kept in touch with her and she introduced me to the *pandeiro* and *cuica*, as well as to recordings of Airto, over the phone. I was absolutely mesmerized, as it was so different from my classical percussion studies. Upon moving back to the USA at age 15, I spent



Photo by Justin Wysong



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the last two years of high school at Roosevelt School of the Arts in Fresno, California. They had a very strong jazz program, so I not only joined the jazz big band and jazz combo on drum kit, but also the Latin jazz/salsa band on multi-percussion. It was during this time that I studied Afro-Cuban percussion, such as *bongos*, *congas* and *timbales*, as well as Brazilian instruments. I started on auxiliary percussion, *cencerro*, *güiro*, *claves* and *bongos*, and then quickly moved to *congas* and *timbales*. During this time, I kept up my studies in Brazilian percussion, learning all the various instruments and patterns in the *Batucada* repertoire.

My first influences as a student were Poncho Sanchez, Ray Barretto and Mongo Santamaria, as well as the recordings of Cal Tjader and the Fania All-Stars. To this day, I recommend students listen to this material to gain an understanding of the fundamentals and musicality. This early exposure was enhanced by visits to our school from percussionists such as Afro-Cuban music historian John Santos from the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles session percussionist Jerry Steinholtz, and Ramon Banda, Poncho Sanchez's *timbalero*. Jerry Steinholtz, in particular, would show us grainy videotapes of legendary *conga* players such as Tata Güines, Los Papines and my future teacher Giovanni Hidalgo. In hindsight, it blows my mind that just two years later at the Berklee College of Music, I was to become one of Giovanni's students.

What was the actual music program that you enrolled in at the Berklee College of Music? Initially, I enrolled as a drum kit major. This is because when I first was accepted, Berklee only offered drum kit, classical percussion and jazz vibraphone as percussion-related principal instruments. Halfway through my college tenure, hand percussion was offered as a principal instrument. I switched and crammed a four-year curriculum into the

latter two years of college by attending classes year-round. I also became Berklee College of Music's first hand percussion degree graduate. When you studied with Giovanni, what were the areas you concentrated on? Did you also explore the incorporation of snare rudiments into hand technique with him?

I studied with Giovanni Hidalgo for four years, which luckily also coincided with his four years at Berklee. I enrolled in every group class he taught. I also took weekly private lessons. He would be on campus two days a week, and I tried to hang out with him as much as possible, grabbing lunches and sitting in on duplicate classes in my free time. He truly provided me with my foundation of Afro-Cuban playing. We covered technique, multi-conga playing, as well as playing both secular and folkloric/sacred rhythms and repertoire. My classical and concert training definitely gave me a head start over other students in those classes. With concert and marching snare drum chops in my hands, it was easy for me to conceptualize his rudiment-based techniques. Also, I was good at sight-transcribing rhythms and was able to amass a binder full of lessons, rhythms, exercises and phrases that he would come up with on the spot. One of my fondest memories is the lessons where we would set up four congas and face each other playing patterns. Since he's left-handed and I'm right-handed, we were able to play opposite each other, and he would systematically take me through patterns and exercises face-to-face.

What are the other areas of world percussion that you also decided to research further?

I was so fortunate to have great teachers in specific percussion disciplines that really moulded me. Upon entering Berklee College of Music, apart from my four years of private lessons and classes with *conga* master Giovanni Hidalgo, I also took drum kit lessons with various teachers - as well as with the famed Alan Dawson - privately, and also

studied North African, Middle Eastern and South Indian frame drumming, *tar*, *bendir*, *kanjira* and *riq* privately with Jamey Haddad and Glen Velez. Although I don't have an opportunity to play those instruments as often as *congas* in the pop/rock realm, they continue to be a passion.

When did you delve into the wonderful Taiko tradition?

I studied with the top *Taiko dojo* in Tokyo for a summer. I was in Japan working with Hikaru Utada, Japan's top pop artist, and we literally had five days off every week for two months. It turned out that my father's schoolmate was the president of the Japan Taiko Federation, and so she helped facilitate my training. I only scratched the surface, but it left an indelible mark on me as it brought me back to my heritage. I have since played *Taiko* in non-traditional settings, including with Oscar-winning film composer A.R. Rahman on his *Slumdog Millionaire* world tour, at the White House for President Barack Obama, on the *'Michael Jackson The Immortal World Tour'* by Cirque du Soleil, and even on remixes for Kanye West.

When did you visit Cuba and what did the studies you engaged in there consist of?

After college, I travelled to Cuba in the spring of 1998 on a break from touring early in my career, through a program held at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA), the Cuban National School of the Arts. I studied under Roberto Vizcaíno Guillot, the percussionist for Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba. Through that program, where we learned both popular and folkloric rhythms, I also had the opportunity to hang with Vizcaíno at his home, where I got to study his unique multi-instrument playing techniques that he became famous for, in his tenure with Gonzalo Rubalcaba with Horacio 'El Negro' Hernandez on drums. He and Horacio made that drum section sound like six players! In my free time during that month I tracked down Jose Luis Quintana 'Changuito' and went out to his home for private lessons, which was all on *congas*. Having studied with Giovanni for those years prior was a huge help in terms of technique already in my hands, sight transcribing, and picking up and assimilating information quickly. I went in very intimidated, having heard all of the stories of how hard 'Changuito' is on students, and was relieved that he took a liking to me and even invited me to his local gigs.

What was your first break back in the USA into the freelance touring percussion arena and how did it develop from there for you?

I moved to Los Angeles from Boston in 1996, a year after graduating from Berklee. I reached out to as many people as I knew, including fellow Berklee student Lil' John Roberts, who had left to begin his career a few years earlier, and also to my mentor 'Ndugu' Chancler, who I had studied with since age 17 both at his home in Los Angeles and through the United States Percussion Camp. Lil' John had

just come off of the *Velvet Rope* world tour with Janet Jackson, and was instrumental in getting me on my first tour. This was with R&B artist Tevin Campbell, who was produced by both Prince and Quincy Jones. I landed this first tour two weeks after arriving in Los Angeles. 'Ndugu' recommended me for my first local gig, it was with a jazz band that featured him on drums, Patrice Rushen on piano, Robert Hurst on bass and Bennie Maupin on sax from Herbie Hancock's Head Hunters. From those initial stages I continued to develop my career by networking on the local scene and trying to meet as many people as possible who were doing what I wanted to do - that is, tour with major artists.

Looking back, what do you feel are some of your highlights over your remarkable and extensive touring experiences?

I have so many! Playing with Fleetwood Mac - both back in 2003/2004 and this current 2018/2019 world tour - is definitely a highlight. Also, my time with Whitney Houston is dear to my heart, as it was my first big international tour. My four years with Lionel Richie taught me so much in terms of stage presence, professionalism and performance. My three stints with Bette Midler, 2004/2005 World Tour, 2008/2010 Las Vegas residency and the 2015 USA/UK tour, were fun and technically challenging, as I had to dust off my classical chops, reading charts and playing mallet and timpani parts, as if I were in a theatrical pit.

Do you have a fairly standard set up of instruments you take on tour?

For a general pop/rock gig, I have a template of *congas*, *bongos*, *timbales*, percussion table with handheld instruments and overhead cymbals, as well as electronics if needed. For tours, I often have the luxury of weeks of rehearsals, so I can fine tune the rig for my needs of that particular show, incorporating specialty instruments, getting rid of superfluous items, and creating a custom setup. For television dates, award shows like the Grammy's and television specials where I play in the house band, I have to adhere not only to space and audio input limitations, but often have a slew of artists to back up in various genres. For that, I have a basic two *conga*, *bongos*, percussion table, electronics, cymbals set-up, sometimes *timbales* if required. This general setup allows me to pivot and cover parts as authentically as possible.

How long have you been incorporating percussive electronic pads? Do you feel that this area has developed to a point where it satisfies your touch?

I started using electronic percussion interfaces early in my career, starting with the Roland SPD-11. This was out of necessity for a tour, where the music called for various sounds, such as handclaps and finger snaps. I wasn't necessarily ever against using or integrating electronics into my rigs per se, but never

used any simply because I couldn't afford the equipment. As more pop gigs came and my career grew, I developed my arsenal through experimentation. I feel that the field of electronic percussion has progressed considerably since I first started using the gear more than twenty years ago. In that time, we've seen the development of Roland's V-Drum platform, mesh headed pads, reliable triggering, usb sample uploads directly into hardware, software samplers, and expressive instruments such as Korg's Wavedrum, Sunhouse's Sensory trigger system, and ATV's amazingly tactile aFrame instrument.

Where are you based these days? Are there opportunities there for you to perform and record locally?

I am based in both New York City and New Orleans, with homes in each city. I was based in Los Angeles for years and the bulk of my work still comes from that city, though, so I often am in all three, I like to say that I'm *tri-coastal!* East Coast, Gulf Coast, West Coast. My wife's job as a journalist and news anchor brought us from Los Angeles to New York almost ten years ago. She is originally from New Orleans, so we have always had a home there.

Although the bulk of my work still revolves around Los Angeles, whether its television work, sessions, or tour rehearsals, I have started getting more work in New York. I was a member of the house band for the weekly television show *Showtime At The Apollo* (FOX), hosted by Steve Harvey and taped at the iconic Apollo Theater in Harlem. I do local jazz gigs with my own band in New York, as well as the occasional recording session. In New Orleans, I occasionally do gigs in town, including with my in-laws, the Neville family. Also, the Dr. John gig was based there, so we would rehearse and travel from New Orleans

as our hub.

How did you develop your personal 'Tao of Sound' project, and what exactly did that entail at the beginning?

'Tao Of Sound' came about as somewhat of a fluke. Technically it is the name I gave to the production partnership I created with my friend and fellow Berklee alumnus Daniel Pearson. Daniel is a bassist, producer, engineer and songwriter that arrived to Los Angeles from Boston at the same time as me. I was approached by the head of a Hong Kong-based record label to create music for clubs and lounges at hotels in China, in the 'chill-out' lounge music vein of *Buddha Bar*. I approached Daniel as I thought it was the perfect opportunity to work together and launch a partnership. We composed and recorded twelve world music-infused lounge tracks, and just before we delivered the album the label folded. I remembered that the president of a Japanese boutique label based in Los Angeles had given me an open offer to do an album. I approached him with the idea of not necessarily doing a 'Taku' album, but instead signing 'Tao Of Sound' as a duo and delivering him the album we had just completed. The tracks went in line with their line-up of Asian world music and New Age - this label is also home to Kitaro, a pioneer of the New Age genre and winner of multiple Grammy awards. At the same time, we were also busy composing music for sound libraries for various companies as well as remixes for artists. In the last decade-plus, Tao Of Sound has released three albums.

Do you also conduct master classes?

I have taught master classes at Loyola University College of Fine Arts in New Orleans and New York University's Steinhardt percussion department. I am an artist-in-residence at Berklee College of Music. When



Photo by Justin Wysong

I'm not on tour, I usually go up to Boston for a week every fall and spring semesters and work with Berklee students in the various programs there, such as Professional Music, Music Business, Music Therapy and at the Percussion Department.

Percussion-wise what are you currently developing or interested in developing?

That's a tough one! In my drum clinics and master classes, I often tell students that at this point it's about what I like to refer to as 'damage control.' I tell students to practise and experiment as much as possible while they can, because when they get into the 'real world' there is very little time. For a working percussionist, our job is to have a high level of proficiency in many instruments and genres of music. Also, many hand percussion instruments require a lot of physical energy and can inflict strain and injury. In order to do my job well, I make sure to practise yoga, work out, stay healthy, and keep my chops up on as many instruments as possible. That means keeping up fine motor skills on a practice pad with sticks, endurance training on *congas*, and fine tuning quality of tones on everything from *congas* to *tabla* or frame drums. On tour, there is no time on an instrument other than maybe at sound-check. Unlike a guitarist, who can take an instrument back to the hotel room, many of the instruments I make a living performing on are too cumbersome, not to mention in a flight case on a truck until show day. Only on tour breaks do I get a chance to stretch out, whether that be an occasional afternoon of practice, 'damage control' to make sure everything is working and fluid, or creating music through recording, or playing my own gigs with my band.

What particular percussion instruments do you feel more drawn to?

Three instruments in particular: 1-*Congas*. Through my years of study with Giovanni, *congas* became the instrument I could express myself best on. All the greatest musical moments of my life and career have included this instrument. 2-*Udu*. The first time I heard an *udu* drum was on Sting's *Nothing Like The Sun* album, featuring Mino Cinélu on percussion. Shortly after that, I heard Alex Acuña use it on a soundtrack project. I was both blown away and mesmerized at how an instrument could sound so fluid and tactile at the same time. Later, I discovered *tabla* and other instruments that had similar characteristics, but it was the *udu* that led me down the path towards that palette of sounds, and the players who employed it in popular and jazz idioms, such as Mino Cinélu and Trilok Gurtu, both great influences of mine. 3-Tambourine. An often-underestimated instrument. In the last decade, I really took the time to investigate playing styles beyond classical techniques and the simple pop/rock shaking. I looked into Gospel playing as well as the distinct styles and rhythms in New Orleans. Touring with Dr. John,

I got to really check out drummer Herlin Riley's techniques and second line and Mardi Gras Indian rhythms. Herlin also played with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, where he often did a feature solo on the instrument. During rehearsals and sound-checks, we would do impromptu tambourine jams, which were so insightful! Living in New Orleans part-time and being married into the iconic Neville family, I am blessed to be around the true essence of the local music.

This current Fleetwood Mac tour is taking you around the globe - what are your current highlights from this experience?

For this tour, the highlight has really been having friends come see the show in almost every city. For example, friends from my school in California, or middle and high school in Hong Kong that I've been in touch with for years only through social media. Many now live all over the world, and I've had a chance to catch up with so many classmates in person through this tour. Obviously, it is such an honour to get to perform onstage with such an iconic band. I first met Stevie Nicks in 2000, when I performed as a sub on one of her solo shows during a tour break from Lionel Richie. She remembered me and recommended me to join the band in 2003.

I really love playing with her and she holds a special place in my heart. Mick Fleetwood and I have an absolute ball playing together, so it is so fun for me to be back with the band after a fourteen-year break from them. I played with them in 2003/2004, and not again until this current 2018/2019 tour, Fleetwood Mac had not used any percussion in the meantime, and I was off touring with other artists. In that time, though, I had toured with Stevie Nicks on her various solo tours and also with Lindsey Buckingham for his solo tour. But to get to once again play alongside Mick Fleetwood has been such a treat.

What are your individual artistic future aims?

In the last year or so, I've come to realise that what fuelled my passion right before my career launched was playing jazz and jazz fusion with my Berklee friends. I have put together a core band of New York jazz musicians and have been booking my own shows when on tour breaks. With just a few shows under our belt at respected jazz clubs in NYC, we have built a following. I hope to keep the momentum going by recording and bringing my band not only across the USA in jazz clubs and festivals, but also overseas!

www.TAKUpercussion.com

www.youtube.com/TAKUpercussion

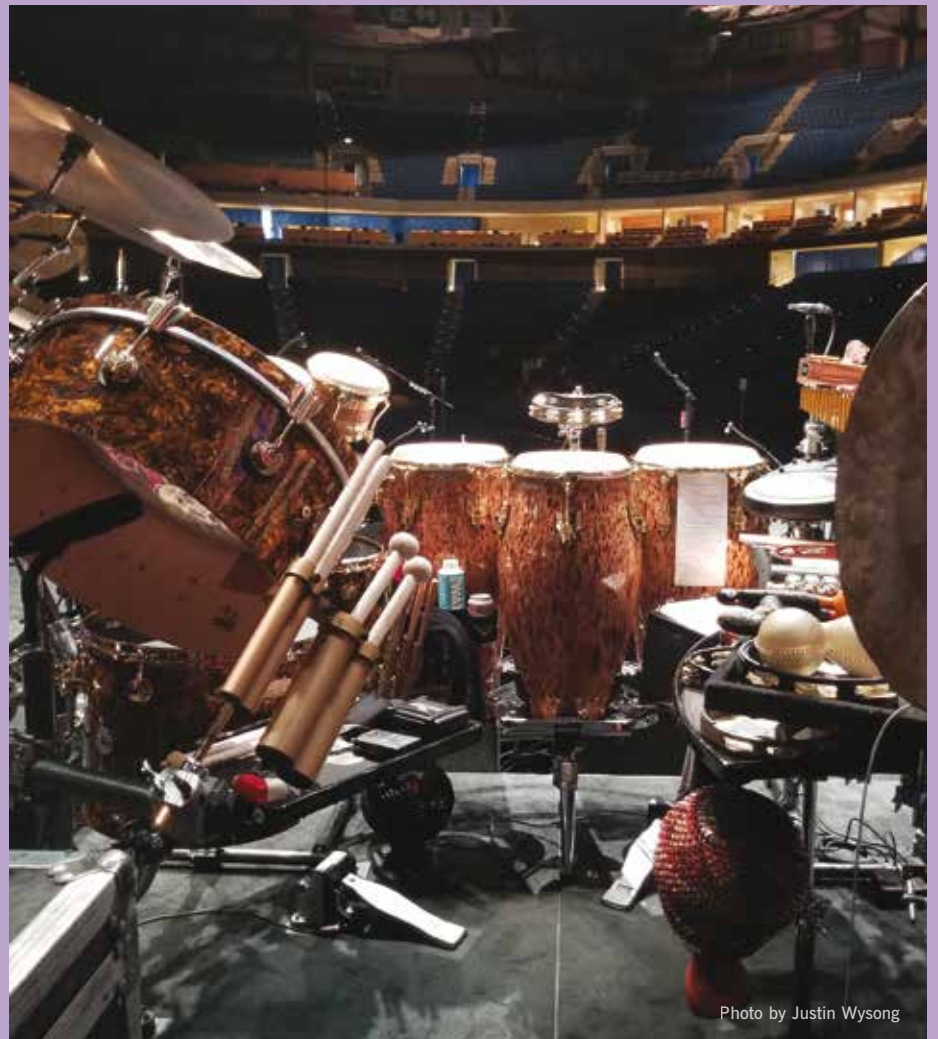


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