OKI: Music of the Ainu

MAY 4 (WED)  8:15PM
MILLER OUTDOOR THEATRE

Photo: © Maciej Komorowski
OKI: MUSIC OF THE AINU
WEDNESDAY, MAY 4, 2022 | 8:15 PM
MILLER OUTDOOR THEATRE

7:45 PM | Preshow

8:15 PM | Welcome
Patsy Brown
Executive Director | Japan-America Society of Houston (JASH)

The Honorable Hirofumi Murabayashi
Consul-General of Japan in Houston

8:20 PM | Concert
OKI: Music of the Ainu

The North American tour of OKI: Music of the Ainu is produced and organized by Japan Society, New York, and is supported by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan through the Japan Arts Council.
MUSICIANS

OKI
(tonkori/vocals)

Rekpo
(vocals/tonkori/dance)

Takashi NAKAJO
(bass)

Naoyuki UCHIDA
(sound engineer)

Manaw KANO
(drums/tonkori/vocals)

Yoshiko OKI
(manager)
OKI, born to a Japanese mother and an Ainu father, is a tonkori performer, bassist and visual artist. After graduating from the Department of Crafts at Tokyo University of the Arts, he moved to New York in 1987, where he worked as a special effects artist on film productions. Upon his return to Japan in 1992, he first encountered the tonkori—a traditional stringed instrument developed by the native Ainu people of Karafuto, an island now known as Sakhalin located to the north of Japan's northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido. Those days, the instrument was known as an unusual object that was displayed in museums but not actually played, as virtually no performers had inherited the traditional instrumentation skills. OKI developed a technique to play this forgotten instrument, and soon began to create his own music. In 1996, he released his first album Kamuy Kor Nuponpe. Shortly thereafter, he established Chikar Studio to encourage and support Ainu artists, and promote Ainu music around the world. Chikar Studio has since released 23 albums, including titles by the traditional Ainu singer Umeko Ando and the all-female vocal ensemble Marewrew, which sings traditional dance songs called upopo with a modern sensibility. Built upon recordings from around the 1940s and '50s collected by ethnomusicologists, his album Tonkori (2005) brought back the instrument’s sound for modern-day audiences. While valuing both traditional Ainu music and cultural identity, OKI's albums like OKI DUB AINU BAND (2006) and Sakhalin Rock (2010) achieve a genre-fluid music expression that infuses blues, reggae, dub and more. Oki Dub Ainu Band features the tonkori in a band setting with drums, bass, keyboard and dub mixing board. They often perform at music festivals in Japan and overseas, including in Africa, Europe and Asia. In 2019, OKI produced the albums mikemike nociw by Marewrew and Amamiaynu, a collaboration project between Ainu musicians and musicians from Amami—an island located between Japan’s southernmost prefectures Kagoshima and Okinawa. Most recently, in January 2022, OKI's first compilation album Tonkori in the Moonlight was released from a UK label, Mais Um Discos, on both CD and LP. Immediately after its release, the album rose high on world music charts in Europe and has received significant international media attention.

Since his debut album, OKI has continued to feature Ainu lyrics and language in his works. In addition to traditional songs handed down to today, OKI has released original songs in the Ainu language, created with Kuzuno Tatsujiro (1910-2002), a respected and prominent figure in the Ainu community. Further, songs such as “Oroso Omap”and “Tawki”in Sakhalin Rock feature original Ainu lyrics written by the children of the Asahikawa Ainu Language School in Hokkaido. Additionally, OKI's third album, No One’s Land (2002), mixes voice recordings from the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (whose 15th session he attended in 1997) with indigenous guest artists such as singers from Chukchi (the northeastern most part of Siberia) and poets from East Timorese (Malayo-Polynesian and Papuan region). OKI received the Hokkaido Cultural Encouragement Award in 2008. The New York performance of this three-city tour marks his first appearance in NYC since 2003.
ABOUT THE BAND

**Rekpo** is the leader of Marewrew, a female vocal ensemble, whose mission is to revive and preserve traditional Ainu songs called upopo. Since the release of their first mini-album Marewrew in 2010, their activities have grown rapidly. In 2011, the group began producing a festival series titled “Marewrew Festival—Let’s get 1 million people to sing Upopo together!” Guests artists who have participated in past festivals include many well-known musicians such as UA, Kicell, Orutaichi, Haruomi Hosono and Masafumi Goto (ASIAN KUNG-FU GENERATION). Rekpo has performed not only in Japan but in Europe, including the UK’s WOMAD Festival, a leading world music festival. She and Marewrew have joined Oki Dub Ainu Band's concerts in Japan and their international tour.

**Takashi NAKAJO** was born in 1965 in Kanagawa, Japan. Drawn to American and British rock music around the age of 13, Nakajo started playing music himself. By 16, he had formed his first band with school friends, playing blues rock, R&B and blues. After performing with several bands, Takashi became a bassist for the funk rock band Theatre Brook in 1995. He joined Oki Dub Ainu Band in 2007 for its European tour and has been active in the band since then. His other music activities include the band blues.the-butcher-590213.

**Naoyuki UCHIDA** has worked as a recording studio assistant since learning recording techniques as a teenager. In 1995, he joined Dry & Heavy, Japan's pioneer band of roots rock reggae music, as a dub engineer. The band’s unique debut featured dub versions of popular ’70s tunes. Their successful debut opened the door to worldwide performances in Europe and Oceania, and subsequent album releases from BSI Records (predecessor of ZamZam Sounds) in the U.S. and the UK. After leaving the band, Naoyuki has remained active in making dub music, working for several Japanese dub bands, including Little Tempo and Oki Dub Ainu Band.

**Manaw KANO** is a drummer who has joined OKI as a backup band member for WOMADelaide 2017, followed by Taiwan’s PASIWALI Festival in 2019. His own band, ASOUND, released its debut album *Feel It* in August 2021.
I’d like to talk about my grandfather. His name was Ichitaro Sunazawa, and his Ainu name was Tuakanno. In the spring, when the snow was hard and crusty, he used to start searching for a bear in his usual hunting grounds—a mountain in the town of Aibetsu—where, all by himself, he would face down a bear that had just come out of hibernation. When he was lucky enough to take down a bear, he would send a telegram to Chikabuji Village from the post office in Aibestsu. Then, joined by the villagers who would rush there by train to help him, my grandfather would go back to the mountain to process the bear meat. If there was a bear cub—since bear cubs are considered sacred visitors sent by the gods—he would put it alive in his backpack and head down the mountain. As soon as they returned home, the villagers would hold a feast to send prayers of gratitude to the kamuy, or spirit-deities.

When he was happily drunk, Tuakanno often sang the communist anthem, The Internationale, very loudly. Since it was dangerous if the Special Higher Police** heard him, my grandmother Beramonkor would put a futon blanket over his mouth to muffle his voice. Beramonkor was a Christian and used to sing hymns in a high voice. When their Ainu land was about to be taken away from them, Tuakanno and Beramonkor went to Tokyo to lobby the National Diet. As their money ran out, they sold carved wooden bear sculptures (a traditional Ainu folk art) at Ueno Station to survive. When the island of Sakhalin was still Japanese territory and called Karafuto, Tuakanno used to run a business selling Ainu folk art near the Poronay River. My uncle Kazuo told me all of these stories.

The time when the Ainu people used to jump on trains carrying bear cubs and fresh bear meat along with their hunting rifles is long gone. The Ainu peoples’ way of living has faded away. In the process of considering what part of myself I identify with as truly Ainu, I encountered the tonkori—a stringed instrument unique to the Ainu in Karafuto. Since then, I have believed that performing the tonkori is a mission given to me by my ancestors.

As they say, “Music makes the world go round.”

—OKI (April 2022)

** A police unit which existed in Japan from 1911 to 1945 to control political thought and expression.
For more Ainu roots, music, and culture, check out Ainu Mosir, now streaming on Netflix.

Ainu Mosir follows a sensitive Ainu boy, Kanto, as he searches for a spiritual connection with his recently deceased father while navigating his indigenous identity in a changing world. This coming-of-age tale deals with issues around the conflict between Kanto’s personal thoughts, modern Japan, and the ways of his traditional Ainu heritage.

Director Takeshi Fukunaga’s second narrative feature film was created in 2020 as a Japan/U.S./China co-production with non-actor Ainu cast in the lead roles, after being developed at Cannes Film Festival’s Cinéfondation Residence and Sam Spiegel International Film Lab. Ainu Mosir won Special Jury Mention in International Narrative Competition at Tribeca Film Festival and Best Film at Guanajuato International Film Festival.

“Rather than relying on dialogue, Fukunaga allows emotion to shine through musical performances. These scenes speak for themselves, and they build upon the story with quiet power.”

- The New York Times
ABOUT JAPAN-AMERICA SOCIETY OF HOUSTON

Japan America Society of Houston (JASH) is the leading organization that connects Houston’s diverse community, local businesses, and individuals to advance the mutual interest of American and Japanese peoples. Our programs in language and education, arts and culture, and business initiatives and networking provide opportunities for collaboration and important people-to-people exchange. Visit jas-hou.org for more information, or follow JASH on Facebook (JapanAmericaHouston), Instagram (@JapanAmericaHouston) and Twitter (@JASHouston).

ABOUT JAPAN SOCIETY

Japan Society (JS) is the premier organization connecting Japanese arts, culture, business, and society with audiences in NYC and around the world. In over 100 years of work, we’ve inspired generations by establishing ourselves as pioneers in supporting international exchanges in arts and culture, business and policy, as well as education between Japan and the U.S. This year, Japan Society is celebrating our heritage through the 50th anniversary of our landmark building, designed by the late architect Junzo Yoshimura, with the launch of a new distinct modern logo and visual identity. Visit japansociety.org for more information, or follow JS on Facebook (JapanSociety), Instagram (@japansociety) and Twitter (@japansociety).

ABOUT MILLER OUTDOOR THEATRE

Houston’s Miller Outdoor Theatre in Hermann Park is unique in the United States, offering an eight-month season of professional entertainment that is artistically excellent, culturally diverse and always FREE of charge to the public. This is the largest “always free” program of its kind in the country.

Miller Outdoor Theatre offers the most diverse season of professional entertainment of any Houston performance venue, and it’s all FREE! Classical music, jazz, world music and dance, ballet, Shakespeare, musical theatre, classic films, and much, much more are included in this year’s outstanding line-up. Relax in the covered seating area or enjoy a pre-performance picnic on the hillside. All performances at Miller are family-friendly!

The theatre is located on approximately 7.5 acres of land in Hermann Park, site of the Houston Zoo, the Garden Center and the Museum of Natural Science. Seating is provided for 1,705 patrons and 20 wheelchair spaces, plus a sloping lawn that accommodates approximately 4,500 more on blankets or lawn chairs.
JASH BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Minoru AIZAWA  
*General Manager, Houston Branch, Mitsubishi Corporation (Americas)*

Satoru AKAMA  
*President and CEO, Goodman Global Group, Inc.*

Debra Tsuchiyama BAKER  
*Managing Partner, Baker Wotring LLP*

Laird DORAN  
*Vice President, Government Relations and Senior Counsel, The Friedkin Group*

Glen GONDO  
*CEO, Gondo Company Inc.*

Joseph A. HAFNER, Jr.  
*Retired Chairman of Riviana Foods Inc.*

Akira HAYASAKA  
*Southern States Regional Officer, Mitsui & Co. (U.S.A.), Inc.*

Atsuki KAWAKAMI  
*GM, Tubular Products Group and General Manager Houston Office, Sumitomo Corporation of Americas*

Yuzuru NAGAWA  
*Vice President and General Manager Houston Office, All Nippon Airways (ANA)*

James D. PRAPPAS  
*Director, Kane Russell Coleman Logan PC*

Akira SAITOH  
*Advocate of Japanese culture*

Miwa SAKASHITA  
*Japanese businesswoman*

Hiroko SATO  
*Retired Japanese language professor, Rice University*

Yoshihiro SHIRAIWA  
*President, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries America, Inc.*

Nanako TINGLEAF  
*Advocate of Japanese culture*

William H. WEILAND  
*Retired Partner, Vinson & Elkins, LLP*

---

JASH OFFICERS

Laird DORAN  
*President*

Yuzuru NAGAWA  
*Vice-President*

James PRAPPAS  
*Secretary*

William H. WEILAND  
*President Emeritus*

---

JASH STAFF

Patsy Yoon BROWN  
*Executive Director*

Dylan COFFEY  
*Programming Coordinator*

Lauren HURLEY  
*Administrative Assistant*

Ikuyo KATAYAMA  
*Membership & Volunteer Secretary*

Midori UKITA  
*Japanese Language Program Coordinator*
SPECIAL THANKS TO

The North American tour of OKI: Music of the Ainu is produced and organized by Japan Society, New York, and is supported by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan through the Japan Arts Council.

The Houston performance of OKI: Music of the Ainu is sponsored in part by the City of Houston through the Miller Theatre Advisory Board.