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Film Review: Finding Her Beat 彼女たちの太鼓—蘇る鼓動: A Journey to Discover an Identity as a Taiko Artist

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Finding Her Beat 彼女たちの太鼓—蘇る鼓動:
A Journey to Discover an Identity as a Taiko Artist

Reviewed by Minae Savas

Film Information
Title: Finding Her Beat
Directors: Dawn Mikkelson and Keri Pickett
Producers: Shiho Fukuda, Dawn Mikkelson, Caroline Mariko Stucky, and Jennifer Weir
Year: 2022
Length: 89 minutes
Genre: Documentary, Music
Original Language: English
Educational Distributor: GOOD DOCS

An ancient Japanese cultural practice performed by men
Evolved into a performance art after World War II
Came to North America in the late 1960’s
Embraced by Asian Americans
Over 400 groups in North America
Professional taiko players are almost exclusively men

The film starts with the words of the powerful prologue above. It reminds us of the path that female drummers had to follow through the male-dominated world of taiko to discover and embrace their identities as taiko drumming artists. Finding Her Beat is an account of a team of female taiko drummers, convened by Jennifer Weir, the Executive Director of TaikoArts Midwest based in Minnesota, in an effort to put the spotlight on talented drummers of marginalized genders. Weir recounts her story as a Korean adoptee from North Dakota and her passion for taiko drumming: “To me, it is an amazing gift that taiko has brought into my life. Not only do I get to play taiko, and get to have an artistic life, an artistic career, [but also] I want to give back to the community, to the next generation, and to the other artists.”

Spearheaded by Jennifer Weir, leading female taiko artists from Japan and North America joined forces to form a troupe, HERbeat, to perform in a concert in Minnesota on February 29, 2020. Star players included Megan Chao Smith, Jennifer’s wife and an independent taiko artist; Chieko Kojima, a founding member of Kodō Taiko Performing Arts Ensemble, based on Sado

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3 See Powell (2012) for further discussion of Kodō Taiko Performing Arts Ensemble.
Island, Niigata, Japan (Bender, 2012); Tiffany Tamaribuchi, a taiko master from Sacramento, CA; and Kaoly Asano, a founder of GOCOO,\(^4\) a taiko drumming group from Tokyo.

In the first part of the film, the location shifts back and forth between various places in Japan and Minneapolis, Minnesota, highlighting backstories of the above-mentioned leading HERbeat members. After introducing Jennifer’s family and her TaikoArts Midwest members, the film shifts focus to Chieko Kojima and her Kodō members from Sado Island, Japan. While gazing at one of her young female members, Chieko recalls memories of when she was young. When she first talked with her parents about quitting her job and joining a taiko group, they were strongly against the idea. Estranged from her family, Chieko became a founding member of Kodō only to find out that taiko was only performed by men. Frustrated with being discriminated against because of her gender, she says, “I was just an appendage. A side role…For a while, I wanted to quit every day, every day. But if I did so, it would be a men-only taiko group. Need to change from the inside.”

Years later, Chieko created a new style of taiko, Hana Hachijo, originating from the style of taiko developed on Hachijo Island. Then, the camera is turned on Tiffany Tamaribuchi, a star taiko player from California, on a mission to recruit Chieko to join their troupe to perform in Minneapolis. Being successfully reunited with her old friend, Chieko, Tiffany is then introduced to Chieko’s fellow Kodō members. Tiffany recounts how Cheiko’s Hana Hachijo style of taiko had become very popular not only in the U.S., but also around the world. Tiffany mentions the twentieth anniversary of the foundation of the Hana Hachijo, and Chieko casts her mind back to those early days: “Before, I was frustrated as I could not do taiko because I was a woman. This time, I thought, ‘Why don’t I create something only women can do? Create something that men will be unable to do? In a way, revenge.’”

In Nagano, Japan, Tiffany meets with Kaoly Asano, another Japanese taiko artist. It’s clear Kaoly develops a feeling of closeness to Tiffany, who shares her loneliness and vulnerability as a

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\(^4\) For more information regarding GOCOO, see Matsue (2016).
leading taiko player. Kaoly explains, “When standing as a leader, you will need to keep the highest motivation, maintain the highest energy, and stay in front…Otherwise, the members will not be able to follow. But, when you do that, you are always alone, right? By knowing you, Tiffany, I finally felt that I was not alone.”

With 15 days left before the show, the film location moves back to Minneapolis. The countdown begins as HERbeat members start arriving in Minneapolis and gathering at Jennifer’s house. Each scene highlights the hope, passion, excitement, struggle, frustration, tension, and exhaustion that all members experience as they get closer to the performance day. This countdown structure is highly effective to let the viewers feel they are there together with the performers, closely observing how the members develop a bond of understanding between themselves day by day.

The HERbeat troupe is dynamic and diverse. They speak different languages and grew up in different places in the world. They have disparate voices and performing styles. Yeeman “ManMan” Mui, an independent taiko artist (Los Angeles, CA) boldly divulges information about themselves: “I’m not American. I’m not Japanese. I’m not Japanese American. I also don’t identify myself as a woman. I left Hong Kong where I was raised and grew up. I moved to Hawaii to study taiko.” The documentary shows how these marginalized drummers navigate through differences in perspectives and cultural backgrounds.

Embracing differences, Jennifer weaves their distinct styles together into a HERbeat performing style. Jennifer’s speech summarizes HERbeat’s aspirations: “The goal is for you to be you, the best you. And it is my job to weave it together for the concert. So, you don’t have to become something you are not. Just be yourself. I will try to weave us all together. To be something even bigger.” The success of the concert is encapsulated in this image. It highlights the moment when all their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives come together to celebrate the accomplishment made by all those involved in HERbeat’s endeavor.

Finding Her Beat is a fascinating documentary for taiko lovers, yet it is a challenging film for viewers to watch. To fully understand the implication of their words, it requires knowledge of the history of taiko drumming in Japan, the transgression of gender norms by contemporary taiko players, and the complexity of Japanese and Asian American identities.
The art of taiko has evolved by blending cosmopolitan and regional performance techniques, allowing for innovation and creativity (Bender, 2012; Matsue, 2016). Yet, despite the increasing number of contemporary women taiko players, aesthetic standards derived from the original male-dominant taiko drumming have continued to prevail in the sphere of taiko performance. Tracing the emergence of ōdaiko (literally “big drum”) in the influential taiko ensemble Sado no kuni - Ondekoza, a precursor of the Kodō, Bender (2010) elucidates the association of ōdaiko with the image of ancient Japanese men and nature. He points out that performances of ōdaiko came to epitomize the masculine ethos and appealed to rustic Japanese values at the heart of the group’s mission (pp. 844-845). Because of this infiltration of a masculine ethos into taiko performing, talented drummers of marginalized genders continue to feel compelled to display powerful masculine drumming or, conversely, to accentuate their femininity in line with dominant gender norms, which has resulted in audience reactions of titillation or abhorrence (Bender, 2012).

This documentary celebrates HERbeat’s liberation from such a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity in the taiko performing arts. Finding Her Beat highlights the essence of taiko performance by exploring the layers of nonlinear stories behind the leading members of HERbeat. By doing so, the filmmakers effectively create dynamic, vibrant rhythms in the film. It is significant that there is no narrator in this documentary. The complete absence of men’s voices in this documentary evokes memories of their experience in the male-centered taiko world, where these marginalized drummers were silenced for years.

References