

Roy Hirabayashi

Roy Hirabayashi: Activism, Taiko, and Asian American Identity

Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2022

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Roy Hirabayashi, 2011. Photo by Tom Pich.

Abstract

Roy Hirabayashi was born in 1951 in Berkeley, California. He was raised in East Oakland. Both of his parents are Kibei and were incarcerated at Topaz during World War II. He attended Skyline High School where he began playing the trombone. He attended San Jose State University where he was involved in the creation of the Asian American Studies program. There, he became involved with the local Japanese American community and began playing the drums and started a taiko drumming program. In this interview, Hirabayashi discusses his early life, family, his parents experience being incarcerated and returning to the East Bay from Topaz, growing up with Japanese culture, his grade school education, time at San Jose State University, community work, experience learning taiko, running San Jose's taiko chapter, making taiko drums, visiting Japan, the significance of San Jose's Japantown, Asian American identity, involvement in the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute, work as a graphic artist, hopes for the future of taiko, and the legacy of the San Jose Asian American community.

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Project History

After the entrance of the United States into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which mandated the forced removal of Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast into incarceration camps inland for the duration of the war. This unjust incarceration uprooted families, disrupted businesses, and dispersed communities—impacting generations of Japanese Americans.

The Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project documents and disseminates the ways in which intergenerational trauma and healing occurred after the United States government's incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. These interviews examine and compare how private memory, creative expression, place, and public interpretation intersect at sites of incarceration.

Initial interviews in this project focus on the Manzanar and Topaz prison camps in California and Utah, respectively, and pose a comparison through the lens of place, popular culture, and collective memory. How does memory graft differently on different sites? What gets remembered about these sites, and by whom? How does memory differ across generations? Has interpretive work around these sites provided intergenerational catharsis for families of those incarcerated? Does geography and popular culture matter in the healing process?

Exploring narratives of healing as a through line, these interviews of descendants of World War II incarceration investigate the impact of different types of healing, how this informs collective memory, and how these narratives change across generations.

This oral history project began in 2021 with generous funding from the National Park Service's Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant. Most of the early interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Interview 1: January 28, 2022

01-00:00:08

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Roy Hirabayashi on Friday, January 28, 2022. This is our first interview for the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives project, and we are talking over Zoom. Roy, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:30

Hirabayashi: Sure, thank you. It's a real pleasure to be talking with you today. The actual city I was born in was in Berkeley. At that time, my parents were living in Alameda, and, let's see, that was in 1951. I'm a New Year's baby, so I was born on January 1, 1951. My early years, I didn't even know Alameda because shortly afterwards and I'm sorry—I don't know exactly when—but when I was very young, my parents were able to move to Oakland, more on what I call East Oakland. Growing up for me was basically in Oakland, and going to schools from elementary to high school was all in Oakland basically.

01-00:01:19

Farrell: What are some of your early memories of East Oakland? If you remember, what cross streets you were on or maybe some of your sensory memories like sights or sounds or smells that you felt like were pretty emblematic of where you grew up?

01-00:01:35

Hirabayashi: Sure. I always like to specifically say East Oakland. I grew up near the main intersections of 90th and East 14th Streets. The street I actually lived on was Walnut Street between 90th to 92nd. The elementary school I went to is E. Morris Cox and I went to the nearby middle school, which was Elmhurst Junior High School. The high school that I was supposed be going to was Castlemont. Growing up there, from my memory, I always felt it was a safe neighborhood. It was really a changing neighborhood as far as demographics of those living there, a mixture of a lot of the immigrant families, Mexican, Portuguese, Italian, Asian, Chinese, Japanese, and white, and actually still was very mixed when I was very young. As I was just going through basically elementary school at that point, it really rapidly started changing to a predominantly Black neighborhood. During my later elementary school days and middle school days, the neighborhood drastically changed in that way basically. That's what I remember.

01-00:02:54

Our neighbors next to us, growing up, was a Mexican family and as young kids, it's very different than what it's like today. We were just out on the streets playing, just having fun after school on the weekends, and just hanging out with just different neighbors. Our playground was the streets and the sidewalks, and actually in the streets whether it's playing baseball or tag football or just running around the streets basically. It's just how we grew up as kids in the neighborhood.

01-00:03:34

I felt like one of my protectors was actually my neighbor who was again a Mexican family, but he was the oldest son there. He was a little bit older than I am. His sister and younger brother was about my age and the age my sister, so he was one that was, I felt, looking out for us basically as we were doing things, taking care of us in his own way. A big heavysset guy, but he was—looking back—he was like a gentle lamb who just took care of us. He would stand up for us whenever we were being challenged by other folks. I grew up with that. When he finished high school, he joined, I believe, it was the marines actually, and this was right when the Vietnam War was happening. Unfortunately, he was killed in Vietnam and so I never really saw him after that. Our families did stay in touch especially with his mom and dad. His dad had passed away early, but my mom and his mom really stayed in touch as we were growing up after. Anyway, that the neighborhood.

01-00:04:51

There were Japanese families in the area, but it's really spread apart. Naturally with our family, they were really connected to whatever Japanese families were there so that sort of our network of folks that we were really in touch with quite a bit, and they weren't necessarily in my immediate neighborhood but within a few blocks around. We pretty much knew who was around and we would always be helping them or they would be coming over and those kind of things or my parents would visit.

01-00:05:21

Growing up, my parents are, I guess what you would call Kibei, which means they were born here in United States, but their families—both families—went back to Japan early on, so they were raised in Japan from early childhood. All of their schooling was in Japan and then after their schooling, they came back to the US or were sent back. My grandparents on my mother's side never did come back after that, and my father's parents did come back. Basically after World War II, they would come back on occasion. But my father came back first and then my mother was sent back over here, and it was pretty much an arranged marriage between my father and mother at that time. She came back—I believe it was around 1939—just before World War II broke out and she was in probably one of the last boats to come over from Japan that was allowed in. And actually, during the war she was interned. They were married and both my parents were interned in Topaz and so that's how they ended up there. I'm not quite sure exactly where they were living when they were first here. I know my mother's sister was here, the oldest sister was already here, and they were living in the San Mateo area, so they might've been helping them from that point over there.

01-00:06:50
Farrell:

Can you tell me your mother's name and some of your early memories of her?

01-00:06:54

Hirabayashi:

Sure, her maiden name is, Shizue Miyagawa, and she was a small build woman. She's the middle of five kids, which is the like our family. In my family when I grew up, I'm the middle of five kids, so I really identified a lot with her. She had two older sisters and two younger brothers, a little bit reversed than me; I had two older brothers and two younger sisters. But she was vocal in her own way, motherly naturally, but a very strong woman, and had a lot of values that I feel really taught me at least about my own heritage of being Japanese American. She spoke primarily Japanese, and actually for her, it was a little bit difficult. She learned English as best she could and they were just to get around naturally, so she did speak. She wasn't totally non-English speaking, but you could tell that was not her first language. Growing up, she would—most of the time—will be speaking a lot of Japanese to us or at least to the older of us, my brothers and myself. When my sisters came along a little bit later, I think it was a bit more mixed Japanese, English. For me, I grew up listening a lot or being spoken to in Japanese and I would be responding primarily in English so that was my way of communicating with them. But my mom, she really valued the traditions of being Japanese and so things like—what? At that time, we would celebrate what was called Boys' Day and Girls' Day, which is now referred to as Children's Day here. The New Year's naturally was a big event for family gathering. There were different foods that were made during that time. She would spend days laboring over making them, making sure all the different things were prepared. Those are all traditions that she really valued and felt was really important for us all to do.

01-00:09:08

She felt it was important for us to learn Japanese, so she required that we go to language school on Saturdays. I don't even know if my brothers actually went, perhaps they did, but I know me and my sisters had to go when we were growing up basically, so every Saturday morning basically, we had to go to language school. It ended up also where we were going to this one Japanese community center, after the language school, they would have church services. We're Buddhist, but the minister from the Oakland Buddhist temple would come there on Saturdays to give a service mainly to the kids there. They were involved with the Japanese language school and so that's how we got tied into the Buddhist temple pretty much within that respect. Also, because this was all taking place at the Eden Japanese American Community Center or the Japanese American Citizens League that was the main facilitator of that building, a lot of the activities there were built around the Japanese communities especially in the San Leandro, San Lorenzo area or the East Oakland area.

01-00:10:18

Farrell:

Do you know where in the US your mom was born?

01-00:10:22

Hirabayashi:

In the Bay Area.

01-00:10:24

Farrell: In the Bay Area.

01-00:10:24

Hirabayashi: Yeah. Her parents came to Oakland basically, so I believe it was the Oakland area.

01-00:10:32

Farrell: Okay. Do you know what brought her parents here?

01-00:10:35

Hirabayashi: From my understanding, it was the farming, but she became involved, I believe, with a market, grocery type of activities, but they, from Japan, tied into the farming scene. My father's family definitely were farmers in Japan.

01-00:10:58

Farrell: Okay. When your mom moved back to Japan, where was she living?

01-00:11:08

Hirabayashi: Yes, I forgot about that piece. Both my families, father and mother's side are from the Hiroshima area. My mother's family, it's probably a little bit closer to the center city of Hiroshima, at least at that time, and father's family were little bit more outside the area.

01-00:11:29

Farrell: Do you have a sense of when she moved to Japan, like how old she was?

01-00:11:34

Hirabayashi: No, I just know that all of her schooling, so it had to be pre-elementary school, was in Japan. She did not go to school at all; both my dad and mom did not go to school here.

01-00:11:46

Farrell: Did she ever talk to you about what it was like for her to go to school there and essentially spend her childhood and youth there?

01-00:11:56

Hirabayashi: Just a little bit because I guess for her, the memories of what Hiroshima was like at—in that early days to what happened during—after the atomic bomb and everything, she never really wanted to go back and really didn't want to talk much about that. She would make references on occasion, and if you know Hiroshima, at least right now, there's that historic monument, the building that they have preserved that to remember what happened with the atomic bomb. She would refer to the fact that, "Oh, you know my school was close by there and we would go by that building or there and a lot of my friends and families were in that area." Things like this. They definitely were tied into what was going on in that and then she would just say, "But all that's gone." For her, it was not something she wanted to try to bring up or remember.

01-00:12:52

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. When you were growing up, did she work outside of the home?

01-00:13:00

Hirabayashi: No, she pretty much took care of the family and she did not really work, at least early on. After a while in order to help with the finances of the family, she would start to take on small jobs and things. It was things like sewing and then even going out and sort of like a housemaid, cleaning houses in different areas, but that didn't start until probably when I was in junior high school or something, I guess when naturally we were a little bit older. Up to that point, she didn't really drive and so wasn't able to really get around that much. At that point, I just remember she did finally get her license so that was like her big accomplishment, to get a license and pass that test and start driving and things, and actually, she was able take us more around. But I remember early when I was very young, elementary school, in order to go anyplace—we lived in East Oakland but on occasion, we would go downtown to where the Chinatown and Japantown area was or the downtown stores—and basically, we would take a bus all the way down there and come back. I just remember it being a really long trip. It probably wasn't that long, but for me just thinking of it as a long, long day trip to go out and do the shopping and come back home after that.

01-00:14:25

Farrell: It's an excursion.

01-00:14:26

Hirabayashi: Yes, it was for me. [laughter]

01-00:14:29

Farrell: How about your dad? Can you tell me his name and some of the early memories of him?

01-00:14:34

Hirabayashi: Sure my dad, his name is Yoshitomo Hirabayashi, again, also his family is from the Hiroshima area. His parents were more definitely farmers, so when they came here, they were actually in different areas. I know he had some connections with Palo Alto, so when he came back from schooling in Japan, that's where he ended up. He just had talked about where he was with a family and then he just said, "You know I was their houseboy, basically just doing the chores around the house." They let him live there and then took care of him while he was trying to get settled in. I believe early on, my grandparents, they came over as farmers. I know later on, they would come back on occasion after World War II to visit or just to perhaps live for a while, and they were farming or going out to work on farm, say like even Salinas or Watsonville, basically strawberry picking and that kind of the agricultural work. That's what I can remember of my grandparents in that sense from my father's side. His parents, actually, they came back and forth like I mentioned several times, but they ended up just going back to Japan and living there. They both passed away in Japan basically later.

01-00:16:02

My mother's parents I never met because I was told that when I was very young that they both passed away from cancer. Again, not until many years later, I finally pieced it together because I was told right after the atomic bomb happened, my grandfather—my mother's father—would go into the center city, like I mentioned, where they were doing a lot of things, looking for friends and relatives and trying to help. They both passed away, my grandparents on her side; her parents passed away from cancer early on.

01-00:16:44

Farrell:

Do you know how old your father was when he went to Japan? Because I know he went to school there and everything too, right?

01-00:16:57

Hirabayashi:

Yeah. He was also preschool, I believe, when he went. From my understanding, his upbringing was in Japan also.

01-00:17:05

Farrell:

Okay, and did he ever talk about his experience there?

01-00:17:11

Hirabayashi:

Just that in school, he would say—well, in Japan during that time and this is like in the say—especially when he was getting into junior high school and high school for him, so it must be in the '30, the late '30s or so, he would talk about, one of his favorite sports was actually kendo, the Japanese martial art, kendo, and so when he came over here, he actually came and brought his kendo stuff. He talked about when he was being interned, that was the first thing he had to destroy and get rid of because he knew he couldn't take it with him, even though he practiced with the sword they used, which is bamboo stick, he got rid of all that just thinking he didn't want to have people think that he was trying to do something. But that was his favorite thing that he grew up doing apparently.

01-00:18:12

Also during that time when he was at that age and in Japan, the military was really ramping up. They're invading in Manchuria and in China and things and so boys his age, or men his age, were naturally being drafted or taken away into the military, which I never really talked to him about this or my grandparents or things, but I'm assuming maybe that's why my grandparents wanted him to come back knowing that, well, he's an American citizens, so it's a little bit of a tough situation for him because he was born here, but to have to go and serve in the Japanese military at that time considering what was going on was not what they wanted. He was sent back pretty much right after high school as soon as he could leave there.

01-00:19:00

Farrell:

When he came back to the States, do you have a sense of what he was doing for work?

- 01-00:19:08
Hirabayashi: That's when he was a kind of adopted into a family in the Palo Alto area and served the houseboy thing and just to get resettled and started at that point.
- 01-00:19:18
Farrell: Oh, I see. Got it, okay. And then at a certain point, he started to work for Bethlehem Steel, right?
- 01-00:19:26
Hirabayashi: Yes, and that was after World War II after returning.
- 01-00:19:31
Farrell: Okay, got it, great. Yeah, so he came back around '37-'38 and your mom came here at around '39, right?
- 01-00:19:41
Hirabayashi: Correct.
- 01-00:19:42
Farrell: Okay, so they were married for a few years before incarceration?
- 01-00:19:46
Hirabayashi: Correct.
- 01-00:19:47
Farrell: Yeah, okay. I can ask a few other questions about your family but do you—since it's already come up—do you feel like you want to talk about incarceration now or later?
- 01-00:19:47
Hirabayashi: Yeah, I guess it doesn't matter because again, my parents really did not share much about that whole experience, just little bits and pieces. At that time when they were incarcerated, they both were pretty much just Japanese speaking and so I know they just said it was difficult for them because people would question where their loyalty was. Because some even though they're US citizens, because they hardly spoke English, people wondered, well, you grew up in Japan, so where would you end up or what's your choice, where do you belong?
- 01-00:20:44
My father has a brother—well he's passed on—but he has a younger brother and so my uncle, he actually was actually in the military intelligence, MIS. He served during World War II in the military intelligence. My father didn't do that, and that was I think unfortunately it was actually a big disagreement for my father and his brother about what happened for him to be involved with that. To the extent that growing up when I was very young, I didn't even know I had an uncle because my father stopped talking to his brother and so I had no clue until much later. It wasn't until almost high school that I found out that we had an uncle.

01-00:21:38

Farrell: Do you have a sense of what the argument was about?

01-00:21:42

Hirabayashi: I think one of the key things—again, I'm just speculating—my uncle in military intelligence and he was in the Pacific theater since he was bilingual, English, Japanese. Actually, when the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, my father's parents were there and so my father really questioned how could you let that happen. My uncle had no control of that naturally, but he was just basically, "How could you let that happen?" I think and that along with other things perhaps, it was just really a difficult situation.

01-00:22:22

Farrell: Yeah.

01-00:22:23

Hirabayashi: It's like the civil war that happened here in the US where families, brothers were separated simply because of political line in a way unfortunately or an incident.

01-00:22:34

Farrell: Sure, yeah. I was going to ask if—because your parents with their Hiroshima connection and then they were incarcerated, so it's like a double whammy—but if that impacted their feelings about the US or if they ever talked about it?

01-00:22:52

Hirabayashi: My parents, even though they were culturally and linguistically very Japanese, they felt they were very American and so no, I never heard them really question or say, "It was a mistake for us to be here, we should've stayed." I never heard that at all. Again, my father's parents would come back and forth and so I'm sure there probably would've been an opportunity for my parents to go back and follow them, but they never did to the extent that both my mother and father never went back to Japan until—my father never went back. The only time he went back was when his father passed away, and so naturally he went back being the oldest son to take care to funeral, but he only was there for a very short time just to do that and came back. My mother, she would not—she didn't even go on that trip, she didn't want to go, and it wasn't until much later, even after my father passed away, that finally my sisters convinced her we should go to Japan just to see what's left there. My younger sisters and her went at later—much later on.

01-00:24:10

Farrell: Do you know how old she was when she went?

01-00:24:13

Hirabayashi: Gee whiz, I have to ask my sisters, but she had to be probably late seventies, early eighties perhaps.

01-00:24:23

Farrell: Okay, so it took a long time.

01-00:24:24

Hirabayashi: Yeah, it took a long time.

01-00:24:25

Farrell: Yeah. When you were mentioning that there was some distrust, that when they were in Topaz, there were people who were bilingual and were distrusting [of them] because they really only spoke Japanese?

01-00:24:38

Hirabayashi: Right.

01-00:24:39

Farrell: Did they ever talk about their experience there and what that was like to be questioned?

01-00:24:51

Hirabayashi: No, I guess both my mother and father, they would say, "It was just cold, it was dusty, it was dirty, it's very hard." Both my brothers actually were born in the camp there. My oldest brother was born in '43 and my next brother was born in '45, so it was just before they left the internment camp. Actually, giving birth and having young children like that there was just, probably I'm sure, even harder for them in a different way. I guess there were rumors that perhaps at the time that if you have children, young children, then your chances of having to go and be drafted like others were being that were less, that you would be released. I'm not quite sure if that's the reason why they had my brothers in internment, maybe it was, but my father was never a person to talk about wanting to be in the military or being supportive or something like that. He just didn't like any of that, both my parents and so they're, if you want to say, pacifist in a way. They just didn't not like violence in that way, and so they just would not talk about it or would not deal with it all really.

01-00:26:19

Farrell: Did your mom ever talk about what it was like for her to be pregnant in the camp?

01-00:26:24

Hirabayashi: No, other than in fact that it was just hard to get, naturally, resources that you would need in order to have a baby and raise a child, that food, milk whatever was not always available.

01-00:26:41

Farrell: Yeah, and did she ever talk about the medical care?

01-00:26:44

Hirabayashi: No, not really no. I don't remember any of that.

01-00:26:50

Farrell: Yeah, and what's your sense of the impact that incarceration had on them?

01-00:26:59

Hirabayashi:

As Japanese-speaking citizens here, I just felt that they really wanted to make sure we, the children, understood who we were as Japanese, Japanese American, and so that's why the language, culture things were really important. But they really wanted us to understand that we are Americans and so they never talked about, "Oh, we should make a trip to Japan, so you can see your ancestors," type of thing; that never came up at all. For one, probably because we never had the money to do something like that, perhaps, but it was never an option to think about even though my father's parents were coming and going back and forth a bit. It was always not really encouraged at all that that you should go to Japan just to learn about your family and history and whatever. But naturally we were, like I mentioned, expected to learn Japanese in language school and things like this and so they felt that was really important that we do that. Growing up at that point though for me is like, well, okay, you've got to do this but I'm not—why? It never really stuck and that's unfortunate. Most of my friends my age, a lot of us had to do that. We were in language school and we were just all, "Okay, we're here, but well, whatever." We didn't really pay attention unfortunately as much as we should have perhaps.

01-00:28:45

But again, I guess some even now, I can basically understand most fundamental conversations because of the conversations I was always having with my parents. When my wife PJ and I, like many times, I'll understand more about the conversation if someone is speaking that it's in Japanese that then she would. But she lived in Japan for a period of time, so her speaking ability is much better than I because I refuse to respond in Japanese, so I never do. We communicate with Japanese friends—I am listening to what they say and she's responding [laughs]. That's the way we were, PJ and I. But again, it's like my parents, they really wanted us to understand that the culture for us was really important, but we needed to also understand that we were living there in America and here in the United States and to understand what that meant to be that and to do our best. Naturally, education was a high priority for them for us to do well in school; they really emphasized that. Both my parents did all they could I believe for all of us, me and my siblings, to get the education that they thought we should try to get.

01-00:30:10

My oldest brother and my two younger sisters, they all went to Cal [UC Berkeley] and graduated from Cal Berkeley, so they're Cal grads. My other brother, he went to what was called Cal State Hayward. I think it's Cal State East Bay right now. But he went there for little bit but never really finished school there, but he just basically began working after that. But all of that was still important, to do well and to support your family as best as possible in that sense.

01-00:30:45

Farrell: Yeah. When they came back to the Bay Area after Topaz closed—because they were at the camp until it closed in '46, right?

01-00:30:55

Hirabayashi: Pretty much, I believe so.

01-00:30:58

Farrell: Okay, so when they came back to the Bay Area—I think when we had talked before, you mentioned that they had a hard time finding housing and so they were really only able to find a place on the naval base in Alameda.

01-00:31:09

Hirabayashi: Correct.

01-00:31:10

Farrell: And your brothers were there too, and it sounds like they were there at least for five years because that's where they living when you were born. Did they ever talk about what that was like to live on the naval base?

01-00:31:28

Hirabayashi: My dad never did, but my mom would just say, "People just didn't like us there" and things like this. Even my brother, my oldest brother who was at that time young, getting into kindergarten and he didn't even speak English when he entered kindergarten. He will even talk about, "Yeah, living in Alameda at that time was really hard, people didn't know who we were, they didn't trust us, and just gave us a hard time."

01-00:32:05

There's a Buddhist temple in Alameda, so the minister there at that time was really the ones that helped my parents and family at that time to get through all of that. They're very supportive in helping them resettle, just providing whatever help necessary and especially since my mom had two young kids and everything. Again, it was tying into the Japanese community those that they knew in order to help each other, and that's how they supported each other to survive basically. It wasn't a larger community at all. My father, he had started to [work at Bethlehem Steel]. Bethlehem Steel was based in Alameda and so that's how he started working there. The steel company was basically around where the naval station was and so that's how he started working there basically early on. But in order to just support the family, my father always did a side job. He basically was a gardener on the side and so after working his shift at the steel plant, he would go out and do a round working in different homes, working on their yards and things.

01-00:33:18

There's a lot of Kibei families. When they came back, that's the business or that's occupation they got into. A lot of them were barely bilingual, primary Japanese speaking, and that was their main skill set they could really do to learn a living was to do gardening, or if they're lucky, get into landscaping type of work. Our network of family friends was basically all gardeners from

Japan. I remembered growing up. All their children were my friends and we all grew up together the same way basically. For us, we didn't really think of it as being something different or bad, we just understood that was what our fathers did, and that's the way they supported us. I guess the only thing we do remember is that we all had to go out and help our fathers during that time, which we didn't all like to do, and so, which is one reason I will do gardening and I guess I'm okay at it, but I hate it. [laughs] So that's what it is.

01-00:34:33

Farrell:

Yeah, that's funny. [laughter] By working at Bethlehem Steel and then on the side as a gardener, your family was about able to save enough money and then eventually moved to East Oakland?

01-00:34:47

Hirabayashi:

Yes.

01-00:34:47

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. I do want to ask a little bit about your brothers too because we haven't talked about your brothers or your sisters. Can you tell me a little bit about [your brothers]? Your two older brothers' names and some of your early memories of them?

01-00:35:02

Hirabayashi:

Sure. There's about an eight-year difference between me and my oldest brothers. His name is Yoshito. Actually, when he was born, he only had a first name, was his Japanese name, Yoshito Hirabayashi and then later on—I need to ask him how he came up with the English name of Steve—but basically his English name is Steve; he goes more by Steve. My other brother, he also only had a Japanese first name, Osamu, but he went by the name of Sam, which sounds like Osamu, I guess. But that's why I need to ask Steve how he got Steve out of Yoshito. They were more closer together because again they both were born in camp just a couple years apart and so growing up for them, they were always close in activities and friends and just doing things in school even and overlapping in school, even, versus me where there's eight years' difference and almost six years' difference between my other brother. I never overlapped with any schooling with them at all; they were always ahead of me. My younger sisters, the sister just below me is not even quite two years apart from me, and then my youngest sister, I believe, just about six years apart from us.

01-00:36:33

Farrell:

What are their names?

01-00:36:35

Hirabayashi:

Oh, my sister under me is Kimie and my youngest sister is June.

01-00:36:41

Farrell:

Were you given a Japanese name?

01-00:36:44

Hirabayashi:

Yes, I have. My first name is Roy, but my middle name is Japanese. Both my sisters have Japanese middle names basically and so it was much different than my older brothers' situation as far as names. How I ended up with a name Roy as a first name? I only could think of the fact that—and my father never really admitted this, or my mom—but he loved cowboy western music for some reason. Maybe because of working at Bethlehem Steel, I'm not sure, but he would listen to that a lot. Actually early on, *Roy Rogers* was a big western show and that's the only reason I could think of how I ended up with Roy. Anyway, I don't know.

01-00:37:35

Farrell:

That's really interesting, too. With your early life, we had talked about how Japanese was the dominant language at home and your parents had a Kibei community. I'm thinking about the stuff I'm familiar with, more contemporarily, like I live in San Francisco and in the Mission [neighborhood], there's a lot of shops where Spanish is the most dominant language. Because your parents were primarily Japanese speakers, were there any stores, or did that dictate where they shopped or their patterns of who they were supporting, where they were going, and where they felt welcomed, that kind of thing? Do you have any knowledge of that?

01-00:38:21

Hirabayashi:

Growing up, well no, actually, I guess in the Chinatown, Oakland Chinatown, it was kind of a Japantown area. I think, again, my mother's parents—my grandparents—that's where they were, in that area working. There was a Japanese market there that I remember going to when were very young and that's where they would go to pick up their Japanese grocery supplies. When I was growing up in Oakland, there used to be this one man who would drive around—and I'm not sure if he's independent or who he actually worked for—but he had a truck. He would drive to the neighborhood and know which Japanese families, where they were, and he would stop in front of the house and then honk his horn, and my mom would go out and he would open up the sides. He would have the Japanese vegetables, the tofu, fish, and all kinds of things. When that started happening, my mom wouldn't have to really go downtown to pick up things because she could get it off of this truck that would come about once a week or something and supply all those basic things. I just remember that happening when I was much younger too because it was just like, wow, all this stuff, you just see it on the truck that was going on. I know that was at least for the Japanese families in our neighborhood, they pretty much depended on that truck to come by and help deliver the Japanese goods to them and that was happening for them in that way.

01-00:40:08

Farrell:

You had also mentioned that your family is Buddhist and were involved with some of the local temples. Can you tell me a little bit more about your family, what the role of Buddhism or being part of that community played while you were growing up?

01-00:40:29

Hirabayashi: Sure. It wasn't like at home that they really made us study the religion in a sense, but at least for me and my younger sisters, we were required to go to these services as I mentioned early. I don't think my brothers really had to do that as much; they were growing up in a whole different situation, I believe, unfortunately. For us though, naturally, we had a Buddhist altar in our home and things like this, and so my mom would—especially for memorial services for her parents and things and holidays—she would always have that set up. She would be telling us, "Well, we need to honor our ancestors," so we'd be doing this. Once I started naturally going to the church services, the ministers would talk more about that. For me, the church actually became a great peer network place because that's where I started meeting a lot of [Japanese people] besides those gardener kids who we grew up with but actually doing things. From the temple and in the language school basically, and the youth programs there that we were getting involved with basically.

01-00:42:01

Those families up, especially in the San Leandro, San Lorenzo area, a lot of those families were tied into the flower-growing business and also the agricultural world in a way. Again, a lot of those folks are also Kibei and so it was kind of real similar backgrounds that all of us were sharing in that respect. But the church, I guess I felt really was providing that anchor for me as far as understanding what community was all about and how important it was to really support each other within the context of what community is. Doing things together, activities, just helping each other generationally, but with your seniors, your grandparents and just your own parents and your own family.

01-00:42:56

Farrell: Teaching the values of respecting your elders, making sure you're taking care of them?

01-00:43:01

Hirabayashi: Right.

01-00:43:01

Farrell: Yeah, respect, that kind of thing. Was language school through the temple?

01-00:43:09

Hirabayashi: No, the language school is tied to—I've just mentioned that the community center I went to was sponsored by the JACL, the Japanese American Citizens League, and so it was from that but hosted there.

01-00:43:24

Farrell: Okay, that makes sense. How long did you attend language school for?

01-00:43:28

Hirabayashi: I started when I was in elementary school. I think I stopped when I was maybe like a junior in high school.

01-00:43:37

Farrell: Okay, so for a long time?

01-00:43:40

Hirabayashi: Yeah.

01-00:43:40

Farrell: Yeah, especially as you get older, it's like extra school, so it's hard to be motivated to want to go. But do you feel like that later in life that that chunk of time you spent at language school was useful to you?

01-00:43:59

Hirabayashi: Yes, looking back, yes, because like I said, certain words or phrases that I understand, and I can piece it together basically the conversation and real simple, basic conversations. I'm glad that we had that experience even though again I didn't enjoy it at the time. Later on, actually, when I got into doing Taiko more, that became really helpful in that way.

01-00:44:32

Farrell: Right. You also were involved with youth services through high school as well. Was that something that you chose to keep participating in through high school, or was that something your parents wanted you to do, or was it both?

01-00:44:47

Hirabayashi: By then, it was really more my choice in a way I guess. Most of those affiliate to what was happening to the church and the youth organizations at the temple, and the ministers there getting us involved in service projects in different ways, or also the adult advisors helping do different things. I just remember early on in, say, junior high school and high school, we would do things like go to the—I guess it's still there in Berkeley—there's a school of blind and deaf there. I'm sure the name probably has changed since then, but anyway, we would go there to do service projects to work with different students there also just to interchange with them. Later on, working with seniors, really got involved with that, mainly did the first generation Japanese who were still living in the area to help them in different ways.

01-00:45:54

Farrell: You mentioned a couple times that the Eden Township Center, the affiliation with the JACL community center, and that you had spent a lot of time there. What were some of the activities you were participating in, and what was the significance of that for you?

01-00:46:11

Hirabayashi: Well, most of it again was around the language school and the church services. They would also, in order to support the community center, have an annual bazaar or their fundraiser. Since we were doing our activities there, we would go and help at those events. Because the minister was from the Oakland Buddhist temple, whenever they were doing their Obon or bazaar and things like this, we would be going to that to help in different ways, mochitsuki at the Oakland temple early on. But as I mentioned, my parents, because they

came back from interment, the Alameda Buddhist temple was such a big help to them and they tried to support that temple also as much as possible. I just remember also going to that temple for different events because my parents would go there to help in whatever way they could. I wasn't really helping at that point, I think I was just more running around having a great time, but we would just spend time at that temple too. But just basically learning or seeing there was that sense of community and what the Japanese community was doing in different ways. The Alameda temple, the Oakland temple, and then the Eden Township Community Center kind of grounded me on what that meant to be Japanese American and that sense of community.

01-00:47:40

Farrell:

And service, did that play a role at all too?

01-00:47:43

Hirabayashi:

Definitely because just helping people and just understanding how important it was to be able to help others because I think that was one thing my parents really understood because so many people helped them when they were having their hardships just surviving, too. They knew that without the help of others, they would have never made it here and so they would always do their best to help people in whatever way they could. Growing up even too, early on, my mom, she was like—I guess going back to wanting to us to be the American way, so to speak, she got us into scouting. My brother just above me, Sam, he got into Boy Scouts before I did and then he actually went all the way to Eagle Scout, so he was really involved with it. For me when I got into scouting as a Cub Scout early on, my mom actually became a den mother in order to help support that and then when my sisters got into girl scouting and then she was helping them in doing that too. For her, it was just doing what it took to help us do what we were trying to understand and be involved within the community in different ways.

01-00:49:14

Farrell:

Yeah. I feel like that also weaves into your work later in life, too, with those aspects of community service and things like that.

01-00:49:24

Hirabayashi:

Sure, yes.

01-00:49:25

Farrell:

I am curious to hear a little bit more about some of the rituals or significant celebrations in your family, Japanese American or otherwise. You had mentioned that food was a really big deal especially on New Year's. Do you remember some of the foods that your mom would prepare for that celebration?

01-00:49:49

Hirabayashi:

My mother's older sister lived in San Mateo and so growing up for us, it was basically her family. I have three cousins in that family and then there's our family with the five kids. The major holidays, it was those two families that

came together, usually, for especially New Year's or even early on, it was Thanksgiving. But the New Year's was the biggest event, and so. I remember early on every year, it would be alternating. We would go to my aunt's house one year, the next year, we'll be at our house, and we'd be going back and forth. Between my mom and my aunt, they would be making all the different foods that we would be having for the dinner and it was all the more traditional things like, the sushi and whatever, but there was also the different specialty Japanese foods that's really more for good luck and longevity and wealth and whatever else. You name it, they had some kind of a little item you're supposed to eat on New Year's Day in order to be a healthy and wise and whatever. They would be making all those different things every New Year's basically.

01-00:51:15

My sisters and I actually started to try to learn some of that as best as possible, and when it came later, actually when my mother and my auntie were getting older, they were saying, "Well, it's just really hard for them to do that." My cousins from my aunt's side—my aunt and uncle's side—were much older than I because they're older than my brother, and so they're much older. It was decided that the within the cousins—basically there was eight of us—that we would rotate every year to host the New Year's dinner so my aunt and my mom wouldn't have to do that. In that rotation every year, we would be responsible for one special Japanese dish that we had to prepare, so we would learn how to do that and be part of it. You only had to host once every eight years for the entire family, and we did that for several rounds actually, but that was for us to really try to keep the sense of family and the tradition going.

01-00:52:23

Looking back, I think when we first started, PJ and I had just gotten married and we started implementing. We were in our mid-twenties and actually my cousins were much older. Looking back, I guess at that time, my mom was only in her fifties, but she was saying, "I'm getting too old." Here I am seventy-one right now and she actually cut out early on things, you know? [laughs] Because much later, we're still doing it way past how old they were when they quit basically. Anyway, it was a wise thing for us to try to take on that responsibility and so my aunt and my mom were very crafty and wise in getting us to do that. But that was the shared experience that we all grew up trying to do so that was really something that was really important. Even though they weren't in charge, my aunt and my mother, naturally, they were definitely in charge when it came to directing how things were being cooked in and quick to tell us when it wasn't right. But that's how we were learning. They still, naturally, were making a lot of specialty dishes that some of us said, "Well, we really don't need that, right." They said, "No, you do," and so they would make it to make sure we had it at New Years. Our tradition, our family really lasted quite a while because that. Unfortunately, because they've all passed on and even some of my cousins have passed on, it doesn't really happen anymore in our family in that way.

01-00:54:05

Farrell:

Did you have a favorite dish to help prepare or learn how to prepare or inversely to eat? [laughter]

01-00:54:15

Hirabayashi:

I loved everything, and so naturally, I would help my mom make the sushi and things like this. Tempura, I love to do that, and making the fried things and learned. Because my brothers didn't get involved with the cooking, I really wanted to learn and did get involved with all that. Again my sisters also, and they were starting to learn all that. I wish I had learned more of the other specialty dishes that was important. I'm aware of it. I guess if I had to make it between my wife and I, we could probably do that still, but it's not something we always do. Markets now, you could basically buy all that preprepared now fortunately, so you really don't have to make it or go through that trouble, but you can still have it. But I enjoyed everything from the black beans and the azuki beans, all that, so everything else.

01-00:55:23

Farrell:

Well tempura, it's hard, it's not the easiest thing.

01-00:55:29

Hirabayashi:

No, the other thing that we started doing—and I really wanted to take it on—was making mochi, the rice cakes, every year. That's something my family didn't do actually growing up—that was something that was more of a temple activity. We would go to the temple to help there. It's not something we did at home. But I decided early on that's something I want us as a family to do and so I started to collect the equipment to do that. That's some things that I still tried to do. The past two years, unfortunately, because of COVID we were not able to get together, but my brother and sisters would still try to get together to do that.

01-00:56:12

Farrell:

Did you use a press or did use the stone to do it by hand?

01-00:56:17

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, no, we were using machines, so it was not like the pounding.

01-00:56:22

Farrell:

Okay, still it's a lot of work either way.

01-00:56:25

Hirabayashi:

Yes.

01-00:56:25

Farrell:

Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing all that. Were there any other holidays or times during the year that were particularly important to your family when you were growing up?

01-00:56:37

Hirabayashi:

Well, I mentioned the Boys' Day and Girls' Day, and my father's parents or my grandmother on that side—she was the one that really encouraged it a bit. Because when we were going up every year, I know I remember for my sisters or for me and my brothers, she would send over some item that was part of that display that you would put up for that. I always look forward or wondered what is it that she's going to send this time. There was a collection of the different things—there's one for Girls' Day and a separate one for Boys' Day—that my mother would put up every year in our home. It became a large collection actually and so inviting friends over and things like this. I even remember when my younger sister was in elementary school, her class coming to the house just to see the display and things like this. That was something my mother was really proud of to have and showing off and different things. Celebrating the Boys' and Girls' Days with those things was really a big deal and an important part of what happened every year too. I would have to say those two days along with New Year's, those three events were for my mom at home, the real critical things.

01-00:58:01

We knew about Obon. We would go actually, but it was not something that was, I guess when I was younger, that I was really involved with actively. I didn't get really active in doing that until I came to San Jose and started college here and gotten involved with the temple here in San Jose. Understanding what that meant to be involved with Obon services and the celebration in the summer and understanding what that meant basically.

01-00:58:36

Farrell:

That makes sense, yeah. Starting down the path where you're getting towards San Jose, I did want to talk a little bit about your education. You went to grade school in East Oakland and that's also when you started to play music as well. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little about—and at the beginning, too, you mentioned, which schools you went to, but in elementary school and junior high, can you tell me little bit about your experience?

01-00:59:14

Hirabayashi:

Sure. Well elementary school, I guess depending on when you were born, you could start in January or start in September. I remember starting in that midyear of January for kindergarten. Although I was somewhat Japanese and English-speaking—still Japanese was the dominant language that I hearing a lot—I just remember going and starting and then a lot of my pronunciation for English was not correct. Early on, my teachers were always trying to correct me and telling me that I wasn't always able to speak correctly and so I was required to—like in first, second, even third grade—having to go to speech classes basically just to correct my pronunciation and things. For me, I didn't understand why that was until I realized much later it's because my mom, that's way she talked and so naturally, that's the way we talk. Certain words in English how she would pronounce was very Japanese and so that's how we would say things. I remember particularly the word "brother" and the word

"butter," basically it would sound the same, and that's how my mom would—for her it was same pronunciation. She knows it's different things, but it sounded the same. That's the one thing I realized early on and I ended up I think because of that split of being held back and being in first grade for year and a half in order to, I guess, suppose you kind of catch up, so to speak.

01-01:01:11

But it was in elementary school, it was in third grade that I started to play music. They had public music programs, which was great then, so I started playing on the trombone basically. I might have mentioned to you the reason I started with that instrument, even though I was really small and short and not very long arms and things, was the instrument for whatever reason, my oldest brother had started playing. We had this trombone at home, and actually, he had already stopped playing at that point. My mom says, "Well, you should learn an instrument, and here we have this, so learn this." So I started with that instrument to play. I enjoyed music, it was always fun and gotten in trouble sometimes because of that, maybe because I just liked it too much basically and things.

01-01:02:04

There's one story I like to tell for my elementary school experience of playing music. Here we're very young, fourth grade or something I guess it was, and there, I think three other friends who were playing music. We decided it will be kind of fun to play Dixieland music, so just to learn and just jam. We decided, here in elementary school right, that during lunchtime we were going to and the auditorium was cafeterium—the same thing—but there was a stage and it was a cafeteria. But during lunchtime, we went on the stage, got our instruments out, and we wanted to start playing "When the Saints Came Marching In," supposedly in our mind Dixieland style. We sounded horrible I'm sure, but we were trying to do this. We started playing and soon the vice principal comes up and starts yelling, "You can't do this, what are you doing?" We just, "Well, we wanted just to play." He says, "Well, you can't do this, so you have to report back here after school, I want you to come back here." We thought, oh man, we're really in trouble here. After school, we came back, and the vice principal says, "You can't be playing like this because it's during lunchtime. You should only do it in your class, and plus, you weren't playing it right." There was a piano there, so he sits down on the piano and says, "Okay, let's try it again." He starts playing the piano with us, and so it was a great experience. We got in trouble, but we're still playing music, so there must be a good thing about this, you know?

01-01:03:46

Farrell:

Yeah. Well, the timing of it and because in the grand scheme of trouble that kids can get in, that's really benign.

01-01:03:54

Hirabayashi:

Yeah. I had to tell that story because that was a pivotal point in music for me. It's like here was a person, a vice principal who could've just really yelled at

us and just made us stop and not want to do music anymore, just saying, "You got to learn to do it right and this is how." That was a great experience for me that carried me through beyond that, after that point basically, and I think one reason is I really wanted to pursue it a little more. That was really, I feel, the launch of my music career even at that early age.

01-01:04:39

Farrell:

Did you feel like aside from him, your band teachers, people were supportive?

01-01:04:49

Hirabayashi:

Early on, elementary school naturally and even when I'd start junior high school, when I first started junior high school, there were pretty much western white male band instructors, kind of your typical—I guess looking back when it was being taught at that time from that style. I mean they're great teachers, they taught me stuff. It wasn't until I guess the eighth grade, my band teacher had to leave, so they brought in a new music teacher to my junior high school where I was at, and that was the Elmhurst Junior High School. His name was William "Bill" Bell and he came in, he had just graduated from college. I think he went to Ohio State. A Black man, very young, and so he just kind of took over. He started a jazz program and that's when I really started to say, "Wow, this is really different stuff and really interesting." He really got a lot of us really more excited about playing music basically.

01-01:05:59

Farrell:

Yeah, I feel like that's really important. As you were talking, I was thinking about—because I grew up playing violin and piano and ended up stopping later on in high school because it was just so classical music focused where we knew that there was a whole other world out there and why aren't we learning that, so it was way less interesting. It's interesting to hear that you had somebody who was like let me show you this other genre of music and what's possible where it's many influences and not the typical western, this is what you should be playing kind of thing.

01-01:06:33

Hirabayashi:

Right.

01-01:06:34

Farrell:

How old were you when you started playing piano?

01-01:06:37

Hirabayashi:

I think I started probably in elementary schools. Maybe about sixth grade or something I started to play. Definitely I was in junior high school, I was taking piano lessons, and again, that was all strictly western classical. My music teacher, I still remember the way she looked. To me, she looked like she was ninety years old at that time. She probably wasn't, but she was this older, white really thin, wry-looking, white woman but very very intense on the classical form, especially Bach. She was really strict on scales and technique and everything, which was important, so I feel that was really good but at that point, my musical interest was shifting, so it was not what I wanted

to be playing. But I hung in there doing there doing lessons because of the fundamentals basically and I feel that was important too. But again on the side, I was just more interested in just doing other kind of stuff.

01-01:07:47

Farrell:

With the trombone—and I know piano is percussion—but were you ever at that point inclined to start learning other instruments aside from piano and trombone?

01-01:07:58

Hirabayashi:

No, those are just the two simply. That was a lot and I felt especially the trombone was definitely my primary instrument. When I got into high school, my music teacher at the high school plus I continued with private lessons from my junior high school teacher because that was his instrument too, it happened to be, it was trombone, so I was taking private lessons from him. They both, my high school teacher and my junior high school teacher, would help me get into other orchestras beside the high school orchestra. They really encouraged me just to play in different ways, and so that was really my main instrument. Yeah, I didn't feel I had time or really there was not much of an interest to learn another instrument at that point.

01-01:08:49

Farrell:

I mean that makes sense, yes, yeah. You ended up going to Skyline High for high school. Can you tell me a little bit about how you ended up going there?

01-01:09:04

Hirabayashi:

Sure. Well, the middle school, Elmhurst by the time I was there, was pretty much a Black school at that point, and so it was getting to be really kind of a tough area of school-wise. I was always being challenged by different kids there just simply for who I was. I felt being a little bit smaller kind of guy, being Japanese, not Black, and just more into music and other kinds of things like that, whatever it might be. I tried to excel naturally academically so naturally some kids really gave me a bad time because of that.

01-01:09:43

In junior high school, there was one day—this is just before I was graduating from junior high school in ninth grade—I was walking home, and I got jumped on by two students from this middle school and they just kind of roughed me up. At that point, my mom, she was naturally very upset, so we went back to school, reported it to the principal and things like this. Then my counselor said to me and to my mom, "Well, you're going to be graduating here, you're going to be leaving and going on to high school, and you're supposed to go to Castlemont, but maybe you might want to consider going to this other high school instead in Skyline." I was graduating middle school in 1966, and so again, things were blurry what was happening. I knew about the Civil Rights Movement was happening, but '64 was the civil rights bill was passed and so the schools had to start integrating at that point, and so that's exactly what was going on in Oakland basically. Skyline was pretty much an

all-white school and so I was probably one of the first of students to be bused up there basically that was from what we called the flatlands from where I lived. Those who were not in the Skyline district to go up there and so that's how I ended up going up there.

01-01:11:12

But the bus I took, I would have to go to Castlemont, which was at that time pretty much an all-Black school. The bus I took would go right past Castlemont, and so on getting on the bus, there was Castlemont kids on there, and they would get off at Castlemont, and I would stay on, so they knew where I was going basically and coming home was kind of the same thing. I was on the bus, and they would be getting on, so they knew where I was coming from. That's what it was basically.

01-01:11:49

Going up to an all-white school, it was really a little bit of a shock and adjustment, just it wasn't my neighborhood, it wasn't kind of the stuff. But again, music was my interest, and they had a great orchestra, they had a great music director there, and he really helped and taught me a lot also, so that was the thing I really latched on to. I just did a lot of music up there, from mainly orchestra stuff but I got into the jazz band there and things like this because I was continuing to do work with my middle and high school teacher too. That was my interest at that point.

01-01:12:33

But it was kind of a tough time because remembering Martin Luther King was assassinated in '68, I was in high school still at that time and there was a lot of activity just going on at the area. Prior to that, at UC Berkeley, the Free Speech Movement in the mid-s-'60s, the antiwar movements was gearing up. I knew when I was turning eighteen—that's when they implemented the draft lottery system for Vietnam. I was in that first lottery system for the draft when I was turning eighteen. All of that was on my mind during high school and getting out at that point.

01-01:13:21

Farrell:

What were your memories of the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated?

01-01:13:28

Hirabayashi:

I probably was in the class at Skyline and then our teacher just announced the news, which was a shock, especially for us of color up there. We're were just, "Oh, wow, this is kind of messed up," whereas most of the white kids there just says, "Oh, oh well." In my mind, I'm thinking, God, how am I going to get home, what's it going to like when I go home, what's happening down there? Going to Skyline was like in this fairyland thing almost because it was just such a totally different environment from where home was. Home was where the Panthers were patrolling the streets and was this very mixed community of color, and so naturally home was where my parents and our Japanese heritage

was. That was not where Skyline was at. To me, I had a lot of questions when that happened, I didn't know what was going to happen next. Was there going to be this riot, were people are just going to be tearing up Oakland and would they come up the hill to where we are in Skyline? Or how do I get home, and even if I got home, do I come back here tomorrow, what should I do? type of things. It was really challenging I felt at that time. It was a little bit of a scary moment that was going on.

01-01:15:12

Farrell: Do you remember what it was like? Did you end up getting home by bus?

01-01:15:17

Hirabayashi: Yes.

01-01:15:18

Farrell: As you were coming back into neighborhood, was there anything out of the ordinary that was happening?

01-01:15:25

Hirabayashi: Fortunately, not really at that point. In the other parts of the city, naturally, things were starting to get agitated but fortunately where we were, it wasn't all that bad.

01-01:15:38

Farrell: How did you end up navigating that, with the uncertainty around how you were going to get home, what it was going to be like, and then if you were going to back the next day?

01-01:15:49

Hirabayashi: Yeah. Most of the students that were growing up from my neighborhood naturally were Black growing up, so connecting with them when they're getting on this bus especially when those we were just started talking together and saying, "What do we do up here and how is this going to work and things and what should we be thinking about when we're on campus and how do we deal with this?" I remember this one friend who said, "We just got to have to kind of walk what we feel the right way and just hold up our head and just do what we have to do." For me, I admired him and said, "Man, that's so easy for you to say, but I don't know if can. I'm not sure if I'm that brave to do that." But I guess for him to be Black and to avoid that whole experience for him, it just empowered him to say we have to be strong, that's what this is all about. It's kind of a learning experience for me on that, that learning experience didn't happen right away. I hadn't really taken in and think about it and understand what that meant for me.

01-01:17:15

Farrell: Yeah, and how did that impact you later on having had that experience?

01-01:17:20

Hirabayashi: Well, it impacted me when I was leaving high school and coming down to San Jose State, realizing this huge antiwar movement was going on on campus.

Students were boycotting classes, professors were boycotting classes, they weren't even showing up themselves. All you heard was every single day, the antiwar rallies were going on, different segments of the minority communities were there, were just doing things, and it was the start of the Asian American and ethnic studies. Different groups were coming together, the Black students were organizing, the Latino students were organizing, and just all kinds of stuff like that was going on at the same time. It was just this cultural shock for me just to realize, wow, I need to really understand who I am as a Japanese American. At that time, Asian American was a very new term, it was just starting to come out, and so just trying to understand what does that mean to be Asian American even. It's how do you deal with this thing being a so-called hyphenated Asian American or hyphenated Japanese American, and how do you define that, what does that mean?

01-01:18:42

I just jumped into the whole scene basically. There were all these different people, and there's a lot of students on campus that was just starting to organize and just attending these different things and just listening to what was happening. I got really involved with the start-up of the Asian American Studies program at San Jose State because of that, just realizing this is really important, more important than other things I thought were important for life. It really shifted me in thinking in that way. Asian American Studies, when we're starting it up, also was not just the academic program, but we were concerned about the communities that we're representing where our families came from. For us, especially at San Jose State, the largest Asian community was actually Japantown, which is not that far away from the campus. Especially those of us were from Japanese American background, for us was really a key thing to connect with. Becoming involved and just trying to understand what's missing, what can we do to help Japantown and San Jose become a better place and connect to that.

01-01:20:00

We started to do outreach programs into the community to establish that. We're all students, naturally there was a lot of questions from the local folks, who are you, why are you here, you didn't grow up here, what's your interest, what are you trying to do, and why and things like this? But we were able to convince a lot of folks that our intentions were honest and good and we just basically wanted to do different things to help in whatever way. One of the first programs that we really start to help launch, which was also starting up in other communities was the servicing the seniors, the Issei, the first generation, many of them who were just Japanese speaking, didn't have a lot of resources and so wanting to help support those folks by just providing recreational programs and things like this, just taking them out on an outing someplace. Programs in San Francisco were starting at the same time, Kimochi, and in the East Bay is a group started there was the East Bay Japanese for Action, now called J-Sei. My brothers and sisters were actually starting to get involved with the J-Sei program, they start there and actually my mom was very active

with them. We're all just doing different things in different ways and on that same line.

01-01:21:30

Farrell:

Yeah, and well, I want to talk more about all of this a little bit more in depth when we get to San Jose State, but before we get further into that, a couple other things: during that time, you had mentioned that Free Speech Movement, and while you were in high school, your brother was at Cal and you would sometimes go to campus and see Mario Savio speaking. Is that right?

01-01:21:59

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, I mean, actually the Free Speech Movement was, what, '64, '66 period? I was actually in middle school, junior high school, and my mom insisted that I needed to really study more and said, "Well, your brother needs to study too and he's going to the library at Cal, so why don't you go with him and stay at the library?" On the weekends—on Saturdays especially—I would tag along with him to do that. But again realizing, wow, we walk on campus in Sproul Hall, and actually just this first entry point, and there's this mass, there's the students, and all this stuff was going on. I just said, "What is all this?" And my brother explained. When I was there, I just tell my brother, "I need to go use the bathroom" and go sneak out, listened, just trying to see what's happening and just realizing all this stuff that's going on around the Free Speech Movement that was happening. This is a rare situational opportunity that in my life, I was able to see some of this stuff going on. Later on, realizing or finding out that my brother actually knew some of those folks because of different things he was involved with and so it was just interesting there was that kind of connection that was going on too.

01-01:23:33

Farrell:

Was your mom aware this was going on when she would bring you to campus or while she would tell you to go to campus?

01-01:23:39

Hirabayashi:

Not really, I wouldn't tell her that. She thought we were staying in the library all day so yeah, no.

01-01:23:50

Farrell:

Okay. Yeah, but that was Berkeley. [laughter] What are your memories of the crowds or if you remember any of what was being said when people gathered, your memories during the period?

01-01:24:10

Hirabayashi:

Yeah. Well of that that period on the Cal campus naturally, it's all college kids, much older than I was at that time since I was basically still in middle school and junior high school. The crowd that was pretty much a white crowd. I mean there were people of color but then you know what, the people of color were the ones that stood out for me at these things. "Oh wow, there's a Black guy there, there's maybe an Asian or Chinese person standing over there or

Asian person standing over there." But it was pretty much a white crowd that was getting all excited about what was going on. That got to me a little bit early on saying, "There's all this action happening around this, but it's coming from a very white, liberal perspective on things." I was trying to understand what that meant. Actually, going to a middle school that was predominantly Black, having to deal with that scene, and then going in town to the Cal campus, which I guess at that time it wasn't really all that diverse considering. I mean the diversity was much different in the mid-60s than it was now, and so it was just a kind of a shock in that way too.

01-01:25:37

Farrell:

It's interesting because when we had talked before, it was around middle school, high school that you had mentioned you got a little bit more interested in history. Did being present for these things, larger things that were going on—on campus but in the world—did that influence your interest in history at all or was that more an outgrowth of the programs you were doing at the Eden Community Center?

01-01:26:12

Hirabayashi:

I think they were probably all kind of tied together, just wanting to learn more about myself as a Japanese American and trying to understand how I fit in. Again, the term Asian American wasn't coined till about 1968 and so this is pre-Asian Americanist, if you want to call it that. The identity thing was really more of me being Japanese American, that question. I was really trying to understand myself in the context of living in a pretty much Black neighborhood and then going to a pretty much all-white school, and then having to navigate between all that. A lot of my family friends are basically Japanese and then hearing a lot of Japanese language being spoken at home and with the friends and their parents and just having to navigate what that all meant.

01-01:27:17

Growing up early, I guess one thing I have to say, even when I was in elementary school, the point about shame or being aware of being Japanese was, for me, a big point. Because it was taught basically by my mom. I'm trying to say just because sometimes for lunches we would have the normal sandwich, whatever, but sometimes my mom would say, "Well, I didn't have bread, so I gave you these musubi instead with the pickle inside." For me, okay, no big deal, but when I got to school and took this thing out, people were wondering, what is that? This is in elementary school, just being questioned, "What are you eating? What is that? It's stinky and it smells and it looks funny. How can you eat that kind of thing?" Those kind of things just started to make me realize, wow, am I Japanese or am I American? I love eating this stuff, so I'm not going to throw it away, but how can I say this is okay? Those little things would start to make me question who am I, how do I justify who I am, and what does that mean, and so it just grew on me as I was going through elementary, junior high school into high school.

01-01:28:52

Farrell:

Did learning the history about Japanese American history, about American history—or conversely Japanese history—did that help you with some of the identity questions you were grappling with?

01-01:29:06

Hirabayashi:

Yes, it did, and that didn't really start more so in depth until college though, getting into the Asian American Studies type of things where academically, really starting to look at that and what that meant. Prior to that, it's just basically stories within the family or friends, whatever, or perhaps the temple and things like this.

01-01:29:31

Farrell:

Yeah, and that makes sense too. When you were in middle school, high school, did you ever learn about incarceration? Was that something that came up as a topic?

01-01:29:47

Hirabayashi:

Not in school, no, not really. Yes, naturally just knowing from what my parents—what little they would say and or perhaps the defensive my parents feel, they would always refer, "In the camp," "In the camp, we had to do this." For us, we didn't understand what camp meant.

01-01:30:09

Farrell:

Hearing those conversations but also you're not learning about it in school, that probably had to be a weird thing.

01-01:30:18

Hirabayashi:

Right.

01-01:30:18

Farrell:

There's no representation of the textbooks about these things.

01-01:30:21

Hirabayashi:

Right, right.

01-01:30:22

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. As a bridge to get us to San Jose, so you were still playing music in high school. You were in the orchestra, you participated in, you said, symphonies and playing some concerts, and you were interested in pursuing music as a career. Can you tell me a little bit about the conversation you would have with your parents about turning music in a career and studying it college?

01-01:30:50

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, I mean, naturally, my parents, they really wanted us to academically succeed and get into that something that would put us on a financial track so that we'll be successful in our lives. When I started to ask a question, "What if I went to music school? What would that be like? Is that possible?" Actually the schools I'm thinking about were back east, so financially it would be a big

question. I had no idea whether or not I could actually get into something like that, and I'm talking about Juilliard or something like this. That was on my mind and so my mom said, "Well, I don't know what that is and I don't think you could do that, what are you going to do with it afterwards? You can't do that." I guess there was that piece of it, but there was that financial question too—how would I even be able to pull this off financially too knowing my parents really didn't have the money to do that and how would I be able to do it on my own? There was a question if I'd even get in, right.

01-01:32:04

So that's when I decided, well, okay, then I'm going to go to a school where I could get into engineering program and do something that probably is more what my parents would like. I chose San Jose State because I didn't want to live at home because my older brothers, they commuted from home to go to school and so I didn't want to do that. I wanted to get away at least, but I didn't want to go so far away that I couldn't come back home. San Jose, even though I had never really even been to San Jose prior to that, I just said, "That seems like far enough away but close enough to still come back home on the weekends." When I was looking into so-called programs, I really thought engineering—actually it was chemical engineering—I thought would be really interesting and San Jose State really had a great engineering program. IBM was thriving down here, so a lot of that influence was happening on campus to the engineering department and things like this. I should've gone into electrical engineering at the time, but I didn't know what happened. Anyway, so that's what I chose. But I realized quickly the first semester that math and calculus and physics was not my forte, and that's what we had to study or any of those things and so I gave that up real quickly. I wasn't a very good student.

01-01:33:30

Farrell: Yeah, so you started in 1969 as the chemical engineering major and you were in that major for about a semester, is that right?

01-01:33:39

Hirabayashi: Right.

01-01:33:40

Farrell: And then you switched to pre-med?

01-01:33:42

Hirabayashi: Correct.

01-01:33:43

Farrell: How long were you in pre-med for?

01-01:33:45

Hirabayashi: Another semester I guess because I realized I still had to take the same calculus and physics classes, which I hate. [laughter] Plus because of what was going on in campus and just the whole identity stuff, that didn't make

sense to me anymore to be taking those classes and doing that, going into that kind of field.

01-01:34:18

Farrell:

Yeah, and when you got to campus in 1969, can you tell me a little bit about what the climate was like there?

01-01:34:28

Hirabayashi:

As I mentioned, the antiwar movement was at its peak on the campus, and what I didn't realize was that nationally, there was all these things going on other campuses. But San Jose State was the so-called declared student central for the antiwar movement at that time, especially the student union, basically the students had taken it over. They're just making posters or whatever and all kinds of stuff that's just constantly being produced and handed out or people just talking and just rallies just happening constantly almost every single day all day long it seems like almost. Different people were coming on campus to also organize in different ways. I remember in that first year, Cesar Chavez was on campus, organized the farm workers movement, and then actually the Black students were organizing different things, and just trying to get different programs or different platforms were being pushed forward.

01-01:35:36

But one thing I really noticed was there was all this other stuff happening, but not really an Asian or Japanese presence in that way. I discovered this group of people who were starting this organization—I believe it was called the Progressive Asian American Coalition—and it was a group of students and they were just trying to politicize on campus basically. They were also really involved in trying to establish the Asian American Studies program on campus. When I got involved with them, I felt, wow, okay, they're speaking more what I want to learn and understand and they're talking more about things that I should try to learn and understand. At that time, being Asian was very political in sense—it wasn't just being Asian American, but it was understanding what was happening in Vietnam or Southeast Asia but also in China with the cultural revolution going on, everything like this. Being so-called politicized in different ways was the important thing for being Asian at the time, understanding all that. Folks I was getting to know were really in different levels of all of that basically.

01-01:37:06

Farrell:

The people that you were meeting, did you find that they were grappling with some of the same questions about identity?

01-01:37:12

Hirabayashi:

Yes, we were all. Some of us were much more articulate in being able to talk about that naturally, but others, I think we were all searching for own identity and what that meant and trying to figure out how we best fit into that.

01-01:37:31

Farrell:

Did you find it pretty easy to create or to find a community there when you first started even when you were doing engineering and pre-med?

01-01:37:44

Hirabayashi:

Yes, I mean I was discovering what was being said and what they're doing made more sense and it was really important to understand better. I realized that for me, what I was good at doing is doing not like the front-end organizing but more the back-end organizing of stuff and so like the paperwork details, just getting stuff done and that kind of thing. That's how I got involved and especially when the Asian American studies program started up, when I started to helping out there, I just got really involved with the actual administrative part of it versus the other operational sides of the things. I got really good at that I felt just organizing and keeping things together in that way. That skill set I guess just helped me all along ever since then, just understanding how to manage things in different ways.

01-01:38:51

Farrell:

Were you ever involved in any of the boycotts with boycotting class or any of the rallies?

01-01:38:58

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, especially when we were trying to institute the Asian American Studies program. It was interesting because at that same time, San Jose State was a little bit behind what was happening at Cal Berkeley, especially San Francisco State, because in '68 is when you had the Third World Strike and that the Third World Liberation Front strike that was happening. They were able to start their programs basically in 1969. We were at San Jose State, the Asian American Studies program and the Black Studies and then they actually had a Mexican American Graduate Studies program were all starting in 1970, so we're a year behind all of them. What was interesting for us is again, the Latinos got a graduate program, the Black students got a BA program—Black Studies instituted—but for the Asian students, we only got a minor program. That for me was, trying to push that because I came a little bit after that, but I was always questioning why do we only have a minor program? The Black students had a BA program, much more faculty allotment, they have a really nice office building at this facility. The Latino students or the Mexican students, they had this graduate program, they also have all this other faculty, and we were struggling with not even one faculty allotment. We're dividing this up with five people basically. So what happened? There was a lot of naturally volunteer effort just to make things happen in order to make the programs survive, which is why I jumped into the admin side of things.

01-01:40:49

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like to make sure the program survived, how you were working with the administration, how you were trying to pull faculty so they could figure out what the coursework would look like and all that?

01-01:41:06

Hirabayashi: Right. There was a faculty coordinator, Dr. Kichung Kim. He actually didn't even teach really in Asian studies classes, but he was the coordinator for the program, and he was actually in the English department. He was the person that lead the program administratively on paper basically. But he allowed the students really to run the program, which is why we as students were really actively involved. Even in going out and finding out what faculty members we should try to bring in, to hire in to teach the different classes, the students were heavily involved in looking at who that was or even sitting in on interviews to do that and just organizing on campus in different ways. As a student, as an undergrad student, a lot of us were involved in that process and also questioning why were there such inequities between what we are getting at the Asian students versus what the Black and Latino students were getting.

01-01:42:15

At that time also for the educational opportunity program, what they called EOP, it was a very segregated program. There was a Black and a brown program, but there was no Asian American EOP program and so I raised a question why isn't there an Asian American program? They were basically, well, there isn't enough Asians here, you're all getting in, you're academically sound. We were arguing against that but we had to lobby to just create our own smaller but at least an Asian American component. We ran it through the Asian American Studies program, which was different than say the other EOP programs. We were just trying to build that structure around what it meant to be having an Asian American Studies program on campus, but that was all student driven basically.

01-01:43:14

Farrell: With the program, was that establishing the minor or was that taking the minor to being now a major?

01-01:43:20

Hirabayashi: Basically, it was still a minor program only, yeah.

01-01:43:25

Farrell: How were you finding the faculty, especially since it was so student driven?

01-01:43:30

Hirabayashi: Yeah, well again, we're being very active in the community and not only just San Jose but also what's happening in San Francisco or the East Bay side like at Berkeley, at Cal, and also Los Angeles. Through the community, we're looking for faculty members who taught at least in the Bay Area within that context of community. We looked at a lot of people who, especially at San Francisco State at that time, were teaching there also or at UC Berkeley and trying to lure them to come down to teach a class for us in San Jose.

01-01:44:07

Farrell: Was that effort pretty successful in drawing them?

01-01:44:10

Hirabayashi: Yeah, because they were only coming in for one class to teach so for them it was a very part time. It worked, and most of them would just do it for a semester. We were rotating all the time who was coming in and so there was no permanent faculty member on board basically.

01-01:44:27

Farrell: So then were you technically an Ethnic Studies major with a minor in Asian American Studies?

01-01:44:33

Hirabayashi: Myself? Not really. I think I spent more of the time just doing that but not so much. No, I wouldn't say that's my major or minor. When I shifted out of the engineering stuff or whatever, I shifted into philosophy and psychology basically thinking, well, because there was no major program in Asian American Studies, had there been one probably I would've maybe, but that wasn't really an option basically.

01-01:45:07

Farrell: Okay, that makes sense. As the minor was being created, what kind of classes were being taught?

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Hirabayashi: Within Asian American Studies?

01-01:45:21

Farrell: Yeah, sorry, within Asian American Studies.

01-01:45:24

Hirabayashi: We were offering a lot of the community-organizing type of things, and actually, we had a Japanese American history class, a Chinese American history class. The three major Asian ethnic groups were Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino, so we were trying offer history classes within the community around that and then also community organizing. We brought in, mainly it was some teachers from San Francisco that are heavy into that also, to teach organizing in the Asian American communities context and doing those kind of the entities. A lot of it was still around history, organizing, and then there was the social justice pieces.

01-01:46:12

Farrell: Did you ever take any classes in the African American Studies?

01-01:46:17

Hirabayashi: I actually did because I was curious about actually what are they teaching and how is that different from what we're probably offering and who are they over there. I remember taking two different classes. One was like the Black community organizing class and we had to write and do a project. Naturally for me, it was Japantown, so I don't know if the professor enjoyed that because he was trying to push a Black perspective, but anyways that was where I was coming from, so he had to understand that, right. But the

principles and the philosophy and the understanding of the organizing skill sets were basically all common, so it was still a great experience.

01-01:47:08

Farrell: Yeah, and I too am thinking about coalition building as well, being able to support each other even though you're coming from your own perspective.

01-01:47:19

Hirabayashi: Right.

01-01:47:20

Farrell: Yeah. As you were doing that, were you starting to learn more about American history as it pertained to Japanese Americans, including some of the stuff like about incarceration or like prewar, postwar—that kind of thing?

01-01:47:42

Hirabayashi: Yes, definitely. Collectively as students, we were all trying to learn more about that bringing in and actually through the department, the different speakers who we would try to host on campus or different events that we would host on campus. It was all focused around folks that could present that. At that time also, there was a start-up of Asian American studies conferences or gatherings and different kind of events in that way on different campuses and so we were trying to go to all those different things.

01-01:48:21

Also in those days actually, there was just the whole start of what was happening within the—especially in San Francisco and a little bit at Berkeley, but San Francisco Japantown and San Francisco Chinatown, Manilatown—there was so much going on around mainly redevelopment and we were really trying to help and support that even though they were in San Francisco and that wasn't happening in San Jose, but we just wanted to understand what that meant so it wouldn't happen in San Jose. But as you know, San Francisco Japantown is so different than what it is. I don't know if you've ever been to San Jose? Oh, that's right. It was so different, and the two are just so different in style and look and everything.

01-01:49:10

Farrell: Yeah, it's really interesting. I feel like with redevelopment—so I'm from the East Coast and people talk about redevelopment a lot and how it really disrupted neighborhoods—but it's interesting when you come to the West Coast, it's pretty buried. People don't talk about redevelopment and the impacts that it's had very often. It's interesting that was wrapped into some of the stuff that you were doing while you were at San Jose State.

01-01:49:36

Hirabayashi: Yeah, that's a big issue.

01-01:49:37

Farrell:

Yeah, and some of the things that you were learning from looking at San Francisco as like a case study about this. How were you all thinking about applying that to San Jose to make sure it didn't happen there?

01-01:49:49

Hirabayashi:

I was realizing for myself at least that San Jose Japantown was just structurally very different than San Francisco in the way—I guess there was no big corporate entity that came in to try to develop it as a tourist entity spot, and that's what was happening with San Francisco Japantown. That's what Chinatown was really like before in a sense. Although San Francisco Chinatown has more shops and independent things happening, but it's really this touristy atmosphere that's going on there and so definitely San Francisco Japantown went heavy in that direction. For San Jose, we never felt that was really the purpose or the reason why we have a Japantown and what people came to Japantown for. I always felt that San Jose Japantown is a destination, but it's not a tourist destination. It's a destination for our community to hold our community together. The church there, the Methodist Church, the Buddhist church, the community festivals all happen there, the restaurants, the stores, key agencies, the senior center, the JACL, San Jose Taiko. We put our footprint into Japantown basically.

01-01:51:18

Farrell:

Yeah, that's really interesting. I do want to talk a little bit more about some of the community work that you were doing and the service but probably next time since we're running out of time today. I do want to talk more about your involvement in music, but maybe we'll start with that next time.

01-01:51:35

Hirabayashi:

Okay.

01-01:51:36

Farrell:

I do have a couple of reflective questions but is there anything else that you want to add to this section of what we've talked about so far?

01-01:51:46

Hirabayashi:

I guess only that for us growing up and living in that time, it was just so much happening. For me personally, just trying to learn so much about identity and what that meant. As I mentioned, being called out, "Are you a socialist, are you a communist, or are you really an American? Who are you and what are you and where do you stand?" Some of my friends at the time were very strong pro-Mao folks at the time and so just following that, that became like a big theme for a lot of Asians—the younger Asians—at the time just understanding that. Actually the antiwar situation what was happening in Vietnam was the big issue because around the early '70s and shortly after, Asian vets were coming back who had served in Vietnam, coming back and also starting to live or work in the community. The issues they were having, having the experience of having been in Vietnam and in the war and then some of them came back pretty messed up and so just having to deal with that

and just helping folks get through all that. It was just a big learning experience for us all.

01-01:53:20

Farrell:

Yeah, it's quite a time. I mean you were by circumstance involved in so many such significant historical moments especially in the Bay Area too, that's all this stuff is happening at a time in your life where you're old enough to be thinking about the impacts and that kind of thing. Given the things you experienced when you were growing up and identity questions, what did it mean to you to find the community when you got to San Jose of people who were going through the same things, thinking about the same things?

01-01:54:00

Hirabayashi:

To me, it was really exciting and I really felt comforted that there were people that were actually asking similar questions that I was asking. When I started to share this naturally with my parents, especially my mother, she always fearful that, "Well, you don't want to rock the boat. You don't want to be the person standing out. You don't want to get arrested definitely, you can't be doing anything bad." She was always afraid that we would be out there rioting and getting arrested and things like this. But at the same time when the service program started up in East Bay and she became involved with a similar type of programs but in the East Bay within the Japanese community, I would be to tell her, "This is what we're doing in San Jose too, so it's no different than you going to help other seniors to make origami or flower arrangement or something. So here, you're supporting the same kind of causes that we're trying to do." I think she better understood what that meant basically under the term of community organizing and supporting the larger community, and that didn't mean that we were being hoodlums on the streets and so just creating a bad time for people basically.

01-01:55:30

Farrell:

Yeah, and with the community in mind and the aspect of service and helping people, how do you feel like or what was the meaning of that for you that you grew up with these things, that you grew up with a community, that you grew up with service in mind, and then you were, as a young adult, these formative years that you're carrying this idea with you? What did that mean for you to be able to use something that you learned in your younger life into your adult life?

01-01:56:01

Hirabayashi:

I guess it was an important time for me to decide what direction to do, what was more important. It started out, like I mentioned, engineering just to make money basically and then music because that was my passion and then community organizing because realizing, wow, we're really helping people. I do have to mention that during this time in the early '70s after I started college or going to school and got involved with the San Jose Japantown community and I got involved with the San Jose Buddhist Temple, there was a period of time when I was actually working for the Buddhist church that I was seriously

thinking about becoming a minister. That was on my mind too, what that meant, how do I fit into that realm of work and what would that mean. Is that something should I do or not to do and why or why not? So that was all going on at the same time too.

01-01:57:01

Farrell:

Yeah. Well, I'm definitely excited to continue the conversation when we talk next time because I feel like we're on the verge of so much stuff happening after that. But thank you so much for sharing all of this. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you and I appreciate how much you shared about everything.

01-01:57:22

Hirabayashi:

Oh, thank you.

Interview 2: February 25, 2022

02-00:00:06

Farrell:

Okay, this is Shanna Farrell back with Roy Hirabayashi on Friday, February 25, 2022. This is an interview for the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Project, this is our second session, and we are talking over Zoon. Roy, welcome back. When we left off last time, we were talking a bit about your time at San Jose State, and you were in school from 1969 to 1973. I think when we had first talked, you mentioned that you fell love with the community there, and you never left. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what it was that you liked about the community?

02-00:00:55

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, sure. For me growing up, as I've mentioned, growing up in Oakland, the Japanese community is really spread out all over the place and there was no real physical, I guess what we could consider, Japantown, in Oakland at the time. There was the church and the Eden Township Cultural Center, whereas when I came to San Jose Japantown, I saw it; that's where there were stores and different things, and there was just a physical area, a geographic area where a lot of the Japanese community lived. The major church is the Buddhist temple and the largest Japanese American Methodist Church was there and just different services and things. That was an experience I never had growing up or never saw before and realizing that was something that was missing in my life, it was really important.

02-00:02:00

But at that same time in looking at what Japantown was, it was a very sleepy Japantown basically. I tell this story where I felt at that time where at seven o'clock at night, I could walk down the main street there, Jackson Street in the middle of the block with a blindfold on and not worry about getting hit by a car at all. That's how slow everything was in the evening there. During the daytime, there actually was things happening, but it was not a very active community in that sense. It wasn't like what I experienced for San Francisco Japantown, which is really kind of a touristy type of atmosphere there. It was realizing that the San Jose Japantown really is a place where people come, the community comes too, and it's not really for tourists, but it's for the local folks just to come. They will come for the restaurants, they'll come for the churches, they'll come to the grocery stores that were there and the manju shop, the tofu, so those are the things they came into Japantown for.

02-00:03:07

During the week, it was just different activities. Weekends, Sundays was really the bigger day in Japantown because that's when the churches were active, people were coming to the services and there was a lot of different activity going around the churches at that time. I just came to kind of fall in love with that idea that this is something that's really precious. It's so different than the other Japantowns I've seen in LA or in San Francisco. Physically, it just looked like I was thrown back fifty years basically because it physically

hasn't changed much as far as the buildings and everything, and there was no major corporate type of entities involved or storefronts and things like this involved in the community. It was very all local family operations, owning the property, running the businesses, and just supporting what Japantown was all about.

02-00:04:08

And then getting to know the people once I was able to start getting involved, just the storeowners, the active people in the community within the churches and things, realizing they all were there because they just had a shared compassion and passion for really just wanting to keep Japantown alive within their perspective of what that meant. I just felt that that was something so important also that I would like to try to be part of basically. Such a long answer.

02-00:04:44

Farrell:

No, that's great, that's great. At that period of time, what was the breakdown of different ages you would see of the people who were spending time there? Was it many generations or they tended to be older or younger?

02-00:05:01

Hirabayashi:

There was a group of students from San Jose State that were involved with Asian American Studies and that's how I got involved with Japantown. We were looking for how we could engage with the community, and so what we realized was the one population of folks that seem to be there and a little bit abandoned in a way, were the seniors, Issei, the first-generation Japanese. Those were the people we decided that was our target audience initially. The students, we formed an organization, and we'd started to talk about, well, what can we do, how can we help the seniors in our community here, what's important for them, what are they missing, and what is it that we could do to aid them in any way.

02-00:05:53

A lot of the Issei at that time, they still were pretty much Japanese speaking. They understood perhaps English, but they were primary Japanese speaking, and naturally much, much older. Some really didn't even have family or very limited family support, and a lot of single men in the community. They would just be hanging out on the corners, on the streets, and in front of different stores where there were benches and things. We just got to start to talking with folks and then wanting to understand their stories, where did they come from, where were they at during the war, which camp were they put into, and what was their experiences during that time. Because we were all young Sansei or Asian Americans at the time, so we were very curious. We wanted to fill the historical gap that we didn't know about, and just trying to find these seniors, the elders who would be willing to share that story, not all of them did or to a limited extent. Naturally, they didn't know who we were, they didn't quite trust at first and those kind of things, so it took a while just to get to know them. As we would walk around or come into Japantown and support

the businesses too, we would say hello and just try to hang out with them too if they'll let us. Also, again, getting to know some of the businessowners who pretty much knew everybody, so that was very helpful too.

02-00:07:30

Farrell:

Yeah, I was going to ask if some of the elders were open to sharing some of those stories or if they were a little reluctant? For the people who would open up, what were some of the things that you learned from them?

02-00:07:45

Hirabayashi:

It was just more why did they come to America, we're asking those questions, and then where was their family. Actually during the whole of internment process or time, what was that like for them and why or how did they come back to San Jose, what brought them back to San Jose. A lot of them were involved with the agricultural business or industry was within San Jose, and that was one of the main reasons that they even came to the area. As I think I mentioned before, San Jose was predominantly an agricultural area for the Japanese to come and settle here. That was their big thing that they came for or got involved with and so a lot of them were farmers. The ones that we're meeting that were just a little bit isolated were those who were basically working for other families or other people. They didn't really get into the opportunity of owning their own property, own farm, or things like this. I guess we felt they were the more targeted audience that needed or population that really needed the help versus those families who were a little bit more successful.

02-00:09:09

Farrell:

During those conversations with them, were you able to get a sense of what their needs were, what things they needed the most, how you could support them?

02-00:09:18

Hirabayashi:

Well, we decided just to be simple. We thought we were trying to create recreational activities for them, something that they could just enjoy themselves doing something. We just started out just having—whether it's just playing cards with them or checkers or things like this, just different activities that we could actually do within Japantown and then eventually just trying to plan like afternoon trips for them where we would actually gather some of them and go to a park or something that they didn't have a chance to go to or things like this. Eventually starting to have a larger kind of community gatherings or a picnic or something just to get other organizations or people involved with trying to support the activities.

02-00:10:09

Out of all these things, the organization Yu-Ai Kai, the senior services evolved, which is now still an important part of our community, and that provides lunch services and all the social services now for the seniors.

02-00:10:27

Hirabayashi: At this period of time, were you living close to Japantown or were you living closer to campus?

02-00:10:33

Hirabayashi: When I first started, I was living more towards campus area and then I decided, and a group of us decided, to find a place and live in the Japantown area, so a few of us started to find apartments in the area to live in Japantown. My freshman year definitely I was on campus during that time and then especially the sophomore year, I was more that way. After that, I decided to move into Japantown with some friends, so from that point, I was pretty much in the Japantown area. That's about 1971 I started to move and live in the Japantown area.

02-00:11:23

Farrell: Okay, okay. We'll talk a little bit more about the community activism in a few minutes, but one thing we didn't talk about last time was the music you continued with and the scholarship when you were at San Jose State. You had gotten a call from the music director who wanted you to play the horn in the marching band. Can you tell me a little bit about that experience, playing in the marching band and the scholarship?

02-00:11:55

Hirabayashi: Right, sure. As I mentioned, I really wanted to do music but decided to put it aside. When I arrived down at San Jose State, I have no idea how they even tracked me down, but one of the band directors called me and said they were trying to restart their marching band. They wanted to actually do basically an all-horn and percussion ensemble, and so it wasn't going to be your typical marching band. My musical background up to that point was more in the classical sense, so again, I decided that was not really something I was interested in doing. But then he said, "Well, we'll offer you a semester scholarship," which was I believed at that time seventy dollars and to me that was a lot of money; it basically paid the tuition for that semester. Looking back when I tell younger folks now that was my semester scholarship, they'll say, "You mean for one class or one unit or what was that?" It's just the scale is so different now. But it was very important for me because I didn't come from a real wealthy family, so I was trying to figure out and do my best in whatever opportunities that were there to make my own money. I figured I need to do it. Naturally, my parents would love the idea that it's a scholarship so that even though it wasn't a lot of money. I jumped at it basically saying, "Yeah, okay, I'll do this."

02-00:13:39

When I joined the band and when I got into the marching band thing, it was a brand-new experience for me musically. It's very military style of regiment and things and discovering what they're putting together was really on that level of how they instruct and train and the discipline that's required. It was so

different than being in an orchestra or a concert band or a jazz band that I was involved with before.

02-00:14:12

The other thing I realized was that the other students they were bringing into the band, this marching band, a lot of them were involved in a drum-and-bugle-corps scene. San Jose and Santa Clara has a really big drum and bugle corps and you know the Santa Clara Vanguard, which I was not really totally aware of either. Drum and bugle corps is this whole culture of music and entity on its own. They're all great musicians, that's one thing. You wonder, well, drum and bugle corps, yeah, but these guys, they were all amazing musicians, but they were also crazy as far as so dedicated to this marching band thing. They just really got into that part of it, and so it was just a really different kind of learning experience of discipline and also teamwork I guess you could say because everyone has to be totally in sync and just learning that whole process and what that meant, and the amount time and effort it took to really coordinate all of that. Most of the other folks actually understood what that was and how to do it. I was learning from scratch, so I was trying to figure it all out, and so I was getting yelled at a lot because I had problems marching, staying in line with them. It was only for one semester, the marching band is basically your football season, but within that short time span, I just learned so much about how music could be looked at in a different way in that for me to be so negative about thinking, well, it's a different form so maybe they're not that great. But learning that these are amazing musicians that on aside, they'd just outplaying me all the time basically. I learned a lot musically just from that experience basically.

02-00:16:25

Farrell:

Did you enjoy the structure?

02-00:16:27

Hirabayashi:

At first no, but I think after the fact, I guess, I just realized there's a lot there to learn and understand and what that means in order to keep an ensemble together and what kind of rules and things need to be in place in order to keep a group functioning in that way. I didn't enjoy naturally the real hard-core discipline. I mean there was one time where we weren't doing that well and was starting to rain, and they had the entire band out on the field. The conductor had said, "Stand at attention" and so we all just stood there and it just started to pour. He left and we couldn't leave, we're just standing in the rain in attention for I felt, to me, like an hour. Probably it was only like twenty minutes but no one moved, no one moved, and I was just wondering, is someone going to move first, what would happen if I move first, and what does that mean. That was the discipline of the band and what that meant and the dedication of the band that they were willing to follow this conductor and do exactly what he said to that extent. In music, in orchestra, you followed the conductor, but there's a different kind of discipline. In orchestra you get yelled at if you played the wrong note, but you're not going to be standing in the rain

in attention. It's just a whole different kind of concept of what that meant to be conducting.

02-00:18:00

Farrell: Yeah, and the types of performance are different too.

02-00:18:03

Hirabayashi: Yes.

02-00:18:04

Farrell: Yeah. I do want to talk a little bit about what led you to get involved with taiko drumming. Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that that started around 1971 when you started to get involved a little bit more with community activism, and it sounds like this is also when you have started to live in Japantown. From what I understand, the local Buddhist temple was looking for someone to help with the youth programs?

02-00:18:36

Hirabayashi: Correct.

02-00:18:36

Farrell: So you were working with some of the different churches. Can you tell me a little bit about that and how that led into your early foray into taiko drumming?

02-00:18:46

Hirabayashi: Right. After getting into the Japantown area, we were starting to work with the temple with different activities and different community groups. At that time early on, there was young new minister that came to the Buddhist temple, Rev. Hiroshi Abiko and so we got to know him because he was brand-new. He was young and so energetic and wanted to get his help and support and just be in touch with him. As I got to know him, he was really talking about how can we get more of the youth involved in different things within the temple, just to get them back involved and doing things.

02-00:19:30

What had happened I guess the Buddhist temple, the churches, they operate and are organized in a what they called districts of their churches. San Jose at that time was in what they called the coast district, which included Mountain View, San Jose, Morgan Hill, Gilroy, Monterey, and Salinas. Actually, overall nationally there was a talk about trying to do a national youth directorship program and they wanted for each district to hire on a part-time youth coordinator to help activate that. When that program was being initiated, the reverend suggested to me, "Maybe you should look at this thing to apply for it." I thought, wow, I'm really into supporting the church to the help organize and bring folks, younger folks back into the temple. I thought would be a great, great opportunity to do what I felt was my way of community organizing within the church.

02-00:20:42

So I did apply and I got the job. The reverend says, "Well, one activity that this group in Los Angeles is doing is they started a taiko group." Again, I knew what taiko was just through the festival growing up, but I never played before. He suggested we get in touch with them, and what he knew, the minister, the reverend there, and that we should meet with them and just learn more about how they're doing and what that meant. We did that and decided that we would try to start a group in San Jose. The Reverend Abiko was starting to put this idea out to us in about 1972 or so and I knew that in order to do that, the two of us to be difficult and then also after learning that you need to really buy some materials to build drums, and there's a way to do that, but still it would be costly to do that. I needed to find a partner or someone else to help fundraise and so I did find another friend, Dean Miyakusu who was also involved with the temple, but he was a great organizer too.

02-00:21:52

The two of us along with the reverend decided to move forward to try to do something. We started really planning in the early part of 1973 and in the summer of the '73, we threw a fundraiser to raise some money to do that and we were successful. At that time, we thought it was a lot of money. I think we earned maybe a little over a thousand dollars or something, but it was enough for what we wanted to do, we felt, to getting things started. We immediately contacted the Reverend Mas Kodani at the Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles who had started the Kinnara Taiko group to ask him for his help and assistance. We went down to LA and met with him, he showed us how they build their drums and where they bought materials, and just bought a bunch of stuff and brought it back to San Jose and immediately started to make our own drums. This was, too, with the idea that we wanted to start this youth group at the temple.

02-00:22:59

This was happening in July and August of '73, and by September when the Sunday school classes were starting back up, we started to get the youth involved and just letting them know, "This is an activity we'd like to offer and if anyone's interested, please just join in." It was an after church, after-service activity, so we are able to gain some younger folks, mainly junior high school and high school kids to come in and start participating with us. We were starting to do that every Sunday to create that, so that's how the group got started.

02-00:23:37

Reverend Abiko was really key for us because Dean and I really never played taiko before. Dean wasn't really that much of a musician, but he was really interested in doing it. I probably had the most musical background as far as music was concerned with the three of us, but naturally, the reverend had the cultural content and he had lived in Japan and he knew what taiko was from there and also within the concept of the temple what that might mean. The three of us were great partners.

02-00:24:10

Farrell:

Yeah, and I'm wondering because I realized that we hadn't really talked about taiko and what it means and the meaning of it and what makes it different. Could you tell me a little bit about that for people who might listen or read this interview later who might not know?

02-00:24:29

Hirabayashi:

Oh sure, okay. Taiko is basically the word for the Japanese drum. It's a generic word for all the Japanese drums, and when you start to look at what that means, there's many different drums and different shapes and sizes, but the word taiko just literally means Japanese drum. Actually, that word wadaiko is the correct term for the Japanese drum. We just decided to use taiko within that concept to really try to create an ensemble of playing together just using the drums. Historically for taiko in Japan, it was connected to the temple because if you would go to most temples, you would see a drum sitting in the altar area and it was used to accompany the chanting and the services and the celebration. Naturally during Obon, the summer festival, the taiko just accompanying the dancing and the singing that was going on.

02-00:25:30

But in Japan, classically it was used in the more classical forms and different art forms, the naturally Kabuki theater or the Noh theater, you hear the drum being used within the ensemble, or even the more older art form, the gagaku music, the Japanese court music, the taiko, the drum is part of that. Ensemble drumming, the idea is just taiko itself playing together without the other instruments. Actually even in Japan, it's relatively new, new meaning it didn't start till about 1951 in Japan under the direction of Daihachi Oguchi from the Osuwa Daiko group and in the Nagano area. He is given credit for creating the concept and the idea of what we refer to as kumi-daiko, or ensemble drumming. Basically it's just using taiko as a group entity playing.

02-00:26:27

We approached it from that perspective that we wanted to create doing taiko in that way. The first group to start here in the United States was the San Francisco Taiko Dojo under Seiichi Tanaka and he started in 1968 in San Francisco. The reason he started is he's an immigrant from Japan, and when he came to the San Francisco area, he realized in the festivals—mainly the Cherry Blossom Festival—there was no sound of the taiko being played. He said, "In Japan, you would always hear the drum, the taiko being played, but we don't have that." He wanted to start that and create that sound and that experience of taiko in the festival.

02-00:27:06

About the same time though in Los Angeles was a group of folks under the direction of a Reverend Mas Kodani at the Senshin Buddhist Temple. They were starting to create a temple group there through their Obon things. San Francisco taiko they say it did start in 1968 in Senshin. The Kinnara Taiko group started in 1969. I think actually there was a lot of overlap in time there.

But anyway, these two groups basically started at the same time, real different formats and entities. Kinnara was basically out of the temple and based in the Buddhist philosophy and the San Francisco Taiko was really coming from the festival of drumming coming from Japan.

02-00:27:52

When we wanted to start taiko, we were following what Kinnara was doing because Kinnara was the group in Los Angeles. Reverend Mas and the folks there figured out you could take a wine barrel, put a cowhide on it, and that could be created as a Japanese taiko. Whereas the San Francisco taiko, in order to start, they had to buy their drums from Japan, which is very expensive. A traditional drum from Japan is actually a single piece of wood, a tree trunk that's hollowed out in order to create that drum and so we didn't have those kind of resources, money, or skill set to do that. Kinnara design was a critical piece for how taiko grew here in North America, or outside of Japan basically, because we are able to take that concept and start designing and making our own drums here.

02-00:28:47

Farrell:

Yeah, I'm really curious to hear more about how you were approaching making your own drum and especially because you're new to drumming, there's probably a lot that you were learning at this period of time. Can you tell me about and how you approached making drums especially thinking about how in Japan? It's a hollowed-out tree trunk, so it's a single piece of wood compared to a wine barrel, which is a few.

02-00:29:12

Hirabayashi:

Right. Well, the group Kinnara when they first started, basically they literally just took a wine barrel with the band—the metal band still on it—and cut off the end and then stretched the hide on one end to begin with. They didn't even have hides on both sides of that barrel, their earlier drums, which was real different naturally than the Japanese drum. When we took that idea, we started to look at and realizing seeing what a real taiko from Japan looks like, the shape and how it's built, we were in San Jose, trying to figure out how can we duplicate the drum from Japan but using a wine barrel here in US. Basically, our main thing we wanted to try to do was build a drum or reinforce it enough so that we could take the metal bands off of it because naturally a barrel when you take those bands off, it collapses, [laughs] it just falls apart.

02-00:30:13

We had experimented on that, and Kinnara, their first drums actually were not even oak barrels. I think they were even pine or other hardwood type of thing. We discovered this one, the French oak wine barrel, which was being used more in the wineries up in Northern California. It was a much heavier, thicker wood, a stronger wood naturally being oak. Also French oak is not quite as dense as American oak, so it was real similar to the Japanese wood that they would use in Japan to make a drum. Also, the way they were making those

French oak wine barrels, it was a little bit more in the shape of what a real Japanese drum would look like without having to reconfigure it that much.

02-00:31:02

Naturally, the challenge was, well, how do we still take the bands off without the barrel falling apart? We are able to come up with the idea that we would try to figure out this reinforcement rim that we had to insert on the ends of the drum. It was a solid piece of wood basically that we had to cut out and insert and then we pinned or dowelled each of the staves into this solid piece insert and then we cut the middle insert out to make it hollow in that way. It sounds a little complicated. I could send you a diagram, too, if it's simpler.

02-00:31:44

Farrell:

It's really interesting, and I've actually been to a cooperage before, so I've seen those barrel be assembled. I actually am following everything you're saying because I was like, yeah, how do you get that to stay together without the band? That's really interesting.

02-00:32:00

Hirabayashi:

Right. It was a lot of experimentation to do that, and naturally it took a lot of work. We had to do a lot of sanding and finishing work on the outside even to make it look more even. But doing those inserts, we found out that was a great way to stabilize the barrel in most cases to keep it together, so we could take the bands off. Early on, we actually didn't even take the barrel apart or glue the staves; we basically were just using how it was. Later, we would actually take the barrel apart and reglue it and put it back together and then do this insert and pin it, so it was even a stronger barrel at that point.

02-00:32:48

Farrell:

Yeah, and some of those barrels too aren't even glued together, it's just pressure.

02-00:32:54

Hirabayashi:

Right, in most cases, they are just pressure.

02-00:32:57

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. How did all of that affect the sound of the drum?

02-00:33:03

Hirabayashi:

Right, and so we assumed that what we were was going to be much different than a real drum. We knew there were so many other variables. We knew a barrel type of drum was going to resonate versus a single piece of wood, but we also knew that the skins or the hides that we're able to use or getting and how we're doing that whole process was still a mystery to us in how they actually did it in Japan, the traditional taiko makers in Japan, how did they treat that skin, how did they get it to be so even in thickness and whatever, all that kind of stuff. We assumed or just knew that our sound because of the skin, the barrel itself was going to resonate and sound different. But for us, the general sound of the drum was close enough to what we felt a taiko would be

like. In most cases—I don't want to say it's equivalent to a real Japanese drum—but we came very close. We were able to, over time, not only what we were in San Jose or other but other taiko makers started to—other groups and the taiko makers in the US who were using that same concept really enhanced that process, and people are doing amazing work now with that. Kinnara started the idea, we enhanced it, and other folks just took it to another craftsmanship level, which is I guess an art form, how it develops right.

02-00:34:45

Farrell: Definitely.

02-00:34:47

Hirabayashi: We were proud we're there early on in that process.

02-00:34:51

Farrell: It's an instrumental part of that process to figure out how to make that work. Were you buying barrels from wine country or using barrels that couldn't be used for aging wine anymore?

02-00:35:04

Hirabayashi: Early on at the very beginning, we were buying wine barrels—just the smaller ones— and there were times actually we were scrounging because we didn't have a lot of money. Whenever we saw just a barrel sitting on the side of the road, we just asked, "Are you using that?" And so, "No, we're going to throw it away," "Okay, we'll take it." Some were wine, we found some whiskey barrels, which are even more difficult to work with. They're oak barrels, whiskey barrels are usually oak, but they're also burnt on inside or charred and so scraping that out, and naturally if it's an old barrel it's still very strong smelling, the whiskey or whatever, it was a big task in order to clean those barrels out to make it work. They weren't quite the right size or shape-wise either, but we felt, well, a free barrel is a free barrel, we'll do what we can do to make it work for us. We experimented a lot with everything we could find.

02-00:36:10

Farrell: Yes, yeah, I can also imagine the char because American whiskey barrels by law have to be charred, so I can imagine that that would also affect the sound too.

02-00:36:24

Hirabayashi: Yeah, because it's not even and some places were as more charred than others. We were trying to scrape that out, but that actually worked to an advantage because we realized the Japanese taiko is not smooth inside. They actually will, on purpose, put the different indents on it, so the sound will bounce around a little bit more versus just back and forth. That's like being in a cement room, right, where the sound would just bounce back and forth. If you start putting in barrels, it would start going different angles, kind of soften the sound in a different way. Perhaps, in a way, it was okay, but still that was a huge process.

02-00:37:08

Farrell:

Yeah that's really interesting. I'm also curious about how you learned how to play? You hadn't played drums really before this. Can you tell me about how you approached learning?

02-00:37:22

Hirabayashi:

Right, so musically even what to play—I mean what music do we play? When we first started, the people, students under the Reverend Abiko, he was just showing us rhythm patterns that he knew from Japan, so it was very simple and just very repetitive. When you listen to actually Japanese folk music, it's very repetitive anyway, so this is what we were doing. But what happened with the group at the temple is that once we started going at that, I knew there were students or other friends who were at San Jose State and within the community other musicians that might be interested in doing this, so I started inviting other folks in to join in and come take a look. When that happened actually, they were pretty good musicians just locally, and they just took over basically. Unfortunately, all the junior high school and high school kids just stopped coming because they were just overwhelmed with what was going on.

02-00:38:32

For us at that time musically, we were just freeform jamming, just there was no form, there was no set patterns in a way. We just were doing whatever we felt, whatever happened, happened. Anyone and everyone could come and join in, so there was no limitations of who could participate and that's how we were just playing. After we started and this class has been doing things since '73 fall, by February, March of the next year in '74, it was a different group of people. The reverend said, "Well, we should play at Obon," which was in July of '74. We said, "Well, we really don't know what to play, but we will just play this one song that we knew." So that's what we did. We went out there and just played this one song, had a great time. After we were supposed to play, there was other activities going on naturally, but then after all that, we came back on and started playing again, and that went on for, I don't know, a long time, so people were not very happy that we were just doing this [laughs] after the fact. I'm sure if you didn't know what it was and you just heard, it was just like a bunch of guys just playing on drums. They wouldn't know the difference if it was African congas or whatever. But we were just having a great time and that whole experience for us to be playing with that kind of energy. There was a structure sort of, but that was really playing with abandonment. There was no ego involved, we're just all having a great time and fun, and that's what really launched us off to want to do something.

02-00:40:39

Farrell:

Yeah, and I'm wondering too—you had mentioned different rhythm patterns, and I'm thinking about eastern versus western music, circular versus linear. Is that something that you started to explore a little bit—the differences—or did that come later?

02-00:40:56

Hirabayashi:

No, we did start to explore early on, and since most of the friends I was inviting in to play had some kind of musical experience—they were coming from more of the jazz, Latin, Afro-Cuban background—we had some great folk—writers and players—so they were coming in with polyrhythms, different time signatures, and whatever type of stuff, just doing different things very early, which was very different. We didn't realize at the time, but it was very different from what they do or what taiko sounded like in Japan as I mentioned, which can be very repetitive in most cases. That, to me, was what created the San Jose taiko sound because we were creating what we felt, without knowing, but just creating our own sound using what we called the Japanese drum. Knowing that this barrel with a cowhide that we found locally was not a real Japanese drum, and the music that we're doing comes from roots of Afro-Cuban, jazz, Latin, whatever rhythm patterns and also using other instruments —our version what we called the Japanese taiko like a cowbell, a shekere, or different things was not Japanese taiko. We felt we were establishing pretty much early on that we're, in Asian American sound, using what we've called the Japanese drum, the taiko, our version.

02-00:42:34

Farrell:

Yeah. I can't remember if this was maybe in our pre-interview or our last interview, but you had mentioned that you were thinking that this could be the voice for Asian Americans. I think that that's a unique identity in your group versus whether that's tied to the church or tied to tradition or something like that. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you thought this could be the voice?

02-00:43:03

Hirabayashi:

Right, and growing up musically, I didn't listen to Japanese music even though at times actually my parents would play different Japanese folk songs and different things. Naturally we would hear it at the Obons and things like this, but that was not my go-to thing or turn on as for playing and that we're listening to. Naturally, getting into college and stuff and as young Asians or Japanese Americans that when we would have parties or whatever, the music we listened to was not Japanese music either. Our influence or my influence in growing up was naturally what we heard in the Bay Area, at least for me. The Bay Area just has every opportunity of music you could ever want to hear, it's just all here, and so that was just a big advantage for us in doing that. But realizing when we go to different parties, we're getting into the R & B and the Latin soul or whatever stuff, but we're not doing the Asian or Japanese American type of stuff, so what is that identity for us. Again, realizing that when taiko started and people started to get interested and wanting to actually listen to it and follow it, to me, it really became that voice for the community and knowing that we could use the instrument to really help bring people together.

02-00:44:45

As San Jose Taiko, we started to develop a group and doing different events. We knew we could be that calling voice and so it was not an issue for us. Many times, okay, there was an event, and the organizers says, "Well, can you be the ones to start out, be the first ones to play just to bring people together?" Sure, that's what we could do, that's our best thing and so it was that calling voice that was really important. It wasn't so much that we wanted to be the entertainment, so to speak, but we wanted to bring people together to build the community basically.

02-00:45:27

Farrell:

Yeah, and I think what you're saying too is emblematic of it doesn't have to be just one thing. Like the Asian American community, it's certainly not just one thing, it's many things, and also the influence of what's around you too. It sounds like there's a direct correlation with your taiko group with that kind of idea, that it's many things.

02-00:45:48

Hirabayashi:

Right.

02-00:45:49

Farrell:

I don't know if I'm putting words in your mouth, but—

02-00:45:52

Hirabayashi:

No, no that's very true, yes.

02-00:45:53

Farrell:

Okay, and in those early days, how often were you in touch with LA, especially since you went to that seminar before you got the San Jose group off the ground?

02-00:46:06

Hirabayashi:

Well, because of Reverend Abiko's relationship to the temple or the Reverend Mas in the other temples, through him, we were able to stay in touch quite a bit. Naturally you're getting to know the other members of Kinnara group who are lifetime friends that we've known for over fifty years now. They've always been very supportive, very helpful, and we've always tried to stay in touch with different things.

02-00:46:34

The Kinnara group, I just want to give them credit for the fact that that's a Buddhist taiko group, and in developing taiko here in North America, I feel they don't get the credit that they deserve for really helping to popularize taiko in North America. It started naturally through the temples of Japanese-American communities, but when you look at the roots of how taiko groups started—the first twenty or so—many of them started because of the temple, which means because of what Kinnara was doing. That's across the country, not only in California and that's really an important thing. I feel for San Francisco taiko, he developed a style that was a festival drumming and a much different kind of style and discipline, but then again, what San Jose taiko was

doing or what we were doing was coming, again, from that little bit more musical, Asian American realm. We really emphasized creating the music, the sound, and developing that, and composing, and how to really present that on the stage was our interest.

02-00:47:49

Farrell:

I'm thinking about how you started to recruit more people because you mentioned when you first started, by the next year, it was a different group of people. How did you go about spreading the word, getting people involved, getting people excited?

02-00:48:04

Hirabayashi:

It wasn't like we were trying to get hundreds of people involved, we were just trying to get a group of folks, and it was all word-of-mouth. At that time, I think like myself, many of the other Asian Americans, younger Asians of my peer group, we're all curious, what is my identity, what can I do that connects me to who I am? The idea of the taiko was part of that, so it really drew a lot of different people. Not everyone that came stayed. The people came and went in different ways, but we did have this real open-door policy, letting anyone come and play, whatever, and participate for as long or as little as they wanted. We didn't really have that kind of structure at all to regulate things if you want to stay for the group. I feel that because of that, there was a lot of people who did just come and go and were just interested, and out of that naturally, there was a core group who really were interested, and became the core group for us.

02-00:49:20

Farrell:

Yeah, it's interesting to hear you talk about that because I know with some other groups in different parts of the Bay Area, the commitment level they require—some places require that you have to attend "this" many practices before a performance or things like that. It sounds like there was a lot of flexibility in what you were doing because it's for the community.

02-00:49:43

Hirabayashi:

Right. Oh well, definitely, that's how we started out. It's much different now naturally for at least San Jose taiko. There's other community groups who are probably a little bit looser in that format than how we were originally. But for San Jose taiko, it has naturally changed in many different ways, but that was the start.

02-00:50:06

Farrell:

Yeah, can you tell me a little bit about how that's developed over time?

02-00:50:12

Hirabayashi:

Well, we started to realize, again, we could be a real strong Asian American musical voice so with that, then what did it mean for us to be that identity? Starting to also learn about what groups were existing coming from Japan and what they're doing and how they're performing. There were a couple of major groups that were starting to tour through the US in the mid-70s or so—about

'75, '76, '77—one group in particular, this group called Ondekoza, from Japan. A professional ensemble from Japan, they're just very disciplined, amazing musicianship, and things, using taiko, the Japanese dance and other instruments and things, but predominantly just the taiko was a focus. We were able to befriend the company and just learn more about how they operate and what that meant, and they were a collective of individuals, a commune so to speak. They live together on the island of Sado, Japan and were creating their own musical form, so they were all basically there, that was their livelihood, how they were doing things. We realized we couldn't create that same atmosphere in San Jose, but even that we couldn't achieve their level of proficiency or playing. But at the same time musically, we felt that we still had a sound that was equal or could be equal to what they're offering, but our own sound at the same time.

02-00:51:59

We had started as a group to think about we could still be this festival group, we're just out in the streets every summer playing at the different community festivals, or we could start to really, really practice, so to speak, all right, and really develop our skills and work towards how we could actually develop into a more ensemble that could be doing concerts or performing in that way. I had been working with some other nonprofits, so realizing in order to do that, we need to incorporate the group as a nonprofit and build the infrastructure of an organization in that way and then see how we could get funding grants to start helping with some of the things we want to do, to buy more equipment or whatever it took. Group-wise, what did it take to organize practices better? We needed to practice more and find a more permanent place because we're at the temple, but that was getting difficult. We actually had to leave the temple because they couldn't facilitate or accommodate all the practice time that we wanted. They had events and things or like a family service or a funeral or whatever, then we would be canceled out basically. We had to figure out and find our own alternative space to move on from there, and that's why we left the temple basically for one reason.

02-00:53:32

All of that was starting to happening in the later 1970s and the early 1980s and so I guess we're getting better, but at the same time, our members are still coming from the idea that we just like to play at the Obon, the street festivals, and that's where I just enjoyed doing it the best. When we started to do our own annual so-called concerts—we have one concert a year—people felt, wow, that's too much work, can we do that, it's just too intense for me. People were coming and going a little bit, but there was again a core group of people who really wanted to pursue that.

02-00:54:15

In the summer of 1982 the group Ondekoza had split up and a new group called Kodo was developed. In 1982, the new group Kodo, which was actually comprised of all the members from the former group on the Ondekoza was going to be launching their first US tour and so they contacted us. The leader

of the group contacted me and said, "We're looking to launch a tour, but we would like to have some help, does anyone from San Jose taiko want to join and help us on this tour?" I said, "Wow," and I talked to PJ—and actually we're married at the time—and I said, "I really want to do this." I was working, at the time of this, I was able to get leave from my job, and I went to Japan to work with this group Kodo for about six months.

02-00:55:15

We toured the US for about six weeks—I'll say almost six to eight weeks—and it was a national tour for them. They went across the country, all the major universities, and then we went back to Japan and there was another about six, seven weeks there that we toured. I was able to tour with them there and I stayed with him a few months afterwards and to just practice with them and just be with them, so it was about almost six and a half months that I was with the company. It was just an amazing experience just to see how a group like that functioned, what it took to really be so disciplined, organization on stage, and traveling, and touring. I was their production and stage manager on the tour, so I learned a lot about that, the logistics of that.

02-00:56:05

When I came back home, "I said, I don't know if we could be a Kodo, but we could definitely do our best to try to be something like that here in the US. We would have to be naturally at a different scale, but I feel we have the talent and the music to do something." Other members of the group naturally weren't quite sure if that's what they wanted to do. Some members thought, wow, let's do it, but again, it was how do we build the infrastructure to do that? Are we going to all quit our jobs to do this musically? It wasn't going to be possible. It took a few years and some people were not as patient to hang in there because they were just wanting to do it as quick as possible, and others just didn't want to do it at all, so they left. But we are able to move it forward eventually and actually start touring and doing more of that. In 1989, I guess, we were able to actually sign on with a booking management company, and so from that point, that's when we started to get national recognition to start touring basically. It was a slow growth, but we had a management company who was willing to work with us, so that's how we just built our touring capacity of doing that.

02-00:57:27

Farrell:

When you went to Japan, where was the group based?

02-00:57:31

Hirabayashi:

Sado Island.

02-00:57:32

Farrell:

Okay, oh right, you mentioned that, okay, okay.

02-00:57:35

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, which is off to Niigata coast side, the Japan seaside.

02-00:57:40

Farrell:

Okay, and was that the first time you had been to Japan?

02-00:57:43

Hirabayashi:

Yes, it was, it was the first time. For me, it was a real learning experience in many different ways. Sado is a very rural type of area, it's no real big city, and at that time, very few foreigners had gone, really lived there, or were in the area. For me for who I really didn't speak Japanese that well—I mean I look Japanese naturally, but once I open my mouth, they knew—who are you? That whole experience and realizing, ah, well you know, I am Japanese, but no, I'm not Japanese and so that whole identity was a culture shock of being a Japanese American in Japan. Again, the customs and the knowledge of what I knew or that I grew up was from what my parents knew, which was from basically coming from Meiji area or time of Japan. In the '80s it had already changed quite a bit and so even words that my parents had used with me that I would use with them, they would say, "Wow, you're like really from the country," or "That is so old-fashioned, where'd you learn that?" or "Why are you saying that?" Even just different, other customs, they didn't understand or were surprised that our family here in the US still celebrate New Year's to that extent, doing what we did for the food and celebration or the other events just because they didn't do that.

02-00:59:24

Farrell:

Yeah, that's interesting how things evolved there or differ regionally versus what you grew up within your family and preserved as part of their traditions. You had mentioned that you were married to PJ at this point when you were involved with the company. Was she involved with taiko at all?

02-00:59:49

Hirabayashi:

Oh yeah. PJ went to UC Berkeley and after going to Cal, she decided she wanted to go to Japan too. We had met earlier before then and she was actually involved in some of the projects I was talking about working with seniors and things but mainly up in the East Bay, Berkeley area. But after graduating from Cal, she wanted to go to Japan and find her roots, so speak, and so she and two other friends just left and went to Japan for over a little over year. She lived there doing different things and then came back. She grew up in the Fremont area, maybe through high school and stuff, but her family, after when she was in college, moved to Los Angeles because her parents went down to help PJ's grandmother. When PJ returned from Japan, that's where her family was, her parents, so she went to LA and was down there.

02-01:01:00

I told her, "We're starting this taiko group and you might be interested at some point to come up." That was in the earlier part of 1973 or so, and then she said, "Well, I'm looking for a job and stuff." A friend of mine who was at San Jose State said, "There's this job opening with the city at San Jose planning department as interns. They're looking for minority women basically, if you

know anybody." I wrote her a note saying, "Hey, there's this possible job opening. If you want, take a look at it," and so she applied. She got the internship, but we didn't realize that or she didn't realize too that this internship meant she really needed to be in the master's program at urban planning at San Jose State. This late August, almost September. We had started school already and so she realized I need to be in this master's program in order to do this job. We were able to get her in the master's program immediately through my friend there and so that's why she ended up getting her master's in urban planning, which she had no plans of doing, and then moved to San Jose and got into working at the planning department but was able to start playing taiko with us.

02-01:02:29

Farrell:

I can't remember if I asked you this before now, but how did you originally meet PJ?

02-01:02:35

Hirabayashi:

Oh, okay. Well, we naturally both have our little bit different stories on that. But anyways, what it was is right after I graduated high school, again that story about going into engineering versus music, I'd said, "Maybe I should take a class during the summer session right after high school." I thought maybe a computer science class would be great. I went to Cal State Hayward—oh, well, it was called Cal State Hayward at the time—and I signed up for this computer class and PJ was in the class. She was attending Cal State Hayward and she was, at that time, a math major, so in her mind, she thought, well, learning about computers might be really useful too. We're both clueless about what was going on. It was a basic FORTRAN programming class where we had to use punch cards and whatever, so you would use like a whole box of cards just to do an addition problem of two plus two basically. Anyways, it was just learning that whole system and trying to do that and so that's how we first met, and we got to know each other within that summer basically.

02-01:03:45

And not knowing, my brother actually, my oldest brother, he had returned from the service and decided to go to Cal State Hayward to get his credential in teaching. He was up at Cal State Hayward too when, in the fall, I left for San Jose State. My brother was at Cal State, PJ was there, and that's when they started to work on doing the organizing within the East Bay on their senior project and so he got to know PJ also within that context.

02-01:04:21

Farrell:

What year did you get married in?

02-01:04:25

Hirabayashi:

We got married in '75.

02-01:04:27

Farrell:

Okay, and then in the '80s is when you had traveled to Japan for the tour?

02-01:04:34

Hirabayashi: Right.

02-01:04:34

Farrell: Okay, got it, okay, just trying to get a sense of the timeline.

02-01:04:37

Hirabayashi: Sure.

02-01:04:37

Farrell: Makes sense. That's great that she was involved in taiko as well, so thank you for sharing all that. One thing I think we had discussed a little bit was that you would drum at some redress event, is that right?

02-01:04:56

Hirabayashi: Right.

02-01:04:56

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved in those and what some of the of the events were?

02-01:05:05

Hirabayashi: Right. Well San Jose early on quite a number years ago started the Day of Remembrance activities, event, which was usually held, if not on, around February nineteenth. In San Jose, the Japanese community, there was a group of folks here who created the Day of Remembrance pretty early on, and so when they first started it and we were doing taiko naturally, they wanted what naturally was called cultural entertainment. They knew we were doing taiko, so they always invited us in to come and perform at the Day of Remembrance and so we would always support that, to go there to do a short performance. But also part of the deal or event was they would do this procession in Japantown town to recognize and honor those who were in camps, at different internment camps, in the community that were in those different camps and also Japantown itself. Part of the event was this entire group or those attending would do a procession through Japantown and back into the temple where the jam or the event was being held.

02-01:06:26

During that process, as far as San Jose taiko, we would provide the musical cadence for the procession. We were always part of providing that musical context for that. It was something we've always wanted, so we always do support, and we just had it. It was just a virtual event but it was a DOR where San Jose taiko still is there to lend support by providing some video clippings of some of the music. We feel that's why it's been one of the other very important events for us to be supporting in the community here.

02-01:07:08

Farrell: Yeah, and actually, were you referring to this past weekend, the 2022 Day of Remembrance?

02-01:07:14

Hirabayashi: Right.

02-01:07:15

Farrell: Yeah, yeah, and that was about a week ago, a little less.

02-01:07:20

Hirabayashi: Right, yeah.

02-01:07:20

Farrell: Yeah, so you've stayed involved in those then?

02-01:07:25

Hirabayashi: Yes. I think there's been only one that we—I can't even remember why—that we were not part of the DOR program over the years. I forget get what year, it's close to thirty or something, so it's quite a few.

02-01:07:44

Farrell: When you were, during redress, playing at those events, were there a lot of people from the community who would attend or was it not as much a community thing and just a certain facet of people?

02-01:08:02

Hirabayashi: Initially, it was small, in my opinion, in a way. But the activists or those who were really involved in the community naturally would be there and be participating. Over the years actually, the Japanese community has really tried to connect and support other communities that are in distress or having their own challenges. The Muslim community naturally was being supported, the Latino community for the immigration issues and things like this. Over the past ten years especially, or especially since 9/11, the attendance for the DOR, or the Day of Remembrance, has really increased where before I think we were happy maybe if a hundred people come. Now it's like standing-room only. It's so amazing that so many people come out now to support, and it's not just the Japanese community, still naturally quite a few from the Japanese American community come, but just different folks from the larger communities coming out for this event too.

02-01:09:12

Farrell: Yeah, it's interesting thinking about post-9/11 or even in a post-2016. Would you also play at events surrounding, like after 9/11, in support of the Muslim community? Or after 2016 with some of the immigration issues? Were you involved in any of that?

02-01:09:33

Hirabayashi: I guess if you're referring to rallies or protest marches and things, no, not exactly, but naturally, if any of those communities were doing events that they wanted to several multicultural presence of others—and taiko is pretty well known—we were being invited to a lot of those different things, the events or activities or festivals maybe that they were hosting themselves. So, yes, we would help and try support as many groups as possible.

02-01:10:09

Farrell:

Okay, that makes sense, and that also I think fits into some of the original vision of this is things that are around us too—you're in participating in the community and that kind of thing. I lost my words there but yes. One quick question before I get there, is did your parents ever attend any of the taiko events you were participating in?

02-01:10:38

Hirabayashi:

Because my parents lived up in the East Bay side, they didn't come down that often actually; other than our concerts when we started doing those later, that they would come to those events. But not so much for our community events or even Obon, things like this, they would not come down for that to hear, to watch, I guess, I don't know, for different reasons perhaps. For my mom especially, it took her quite a while to understand why we were doing taiko to the extent that we're involved with it. Just doing it while we're still working a job, naturally she said, "Okay, it's something you do for fun," but when we quit our jobs to do it—that was our job—it was difficult for her to understand what that meant and how are you going to live, that whole question, and not realizing what the impact was that we were trying to do.

02-01:11:51

My father unfortunately passed away quite early when he was fairly young, so he didn't get to see a lot of stuff that I was doing later on. But when I received the NEA, National Heritage Fellowship Award, my mom wasn't able to go to Washington to see that, but she was aware of what that meant. My two sisters actually went to see that whole celebration, so naturally, they came back, and we told her all about it and things. I gave her the booklet and everything, and she saw what was happening and showed her the video that was available and everything. I think in her own way, at that point, she was really understanding, okay, I get it now, probably. I don't regret that they never came to see us perform. They would come for, again, our concerts, our major shows and things. My dad wouldn't come all the time, but my mom, for her, it was a little bit hard for her to understand why we're doing it.

02-01:13:08

Farrell:

What was her reaction when you received the NEA Award?

02-01:13:13

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, she as very proud at that point, yes. She didn't realize that something like that could be achieved and what that meant, and she didn't understand how big of award that was really. But just the fact that I was being recognized in Washington, DC, basically for her was just, wow, okay. That piece alone for her was impressive.

02-01:13:46

Farrell:

Yeah. Did she start to understand at that point a little bit more about why you were doing this?

02-01:13:52

Hirabayashi: Yeah, I think so, yes. She knew that when we started, there was very little taiko around and then she also knew that there were so many other groups. She would on occasion, in her own way, say, "Oh, there's this other group in El Cerrito now, do you know them?" I said, "Well, we helped them a little bit." She said, "Oh, okay." It's like, "Oh, what about this other group that's in Eden Township, do you know them?" "Oh yeah, we know them too." She's, "Oh, okay," so she was testing me—are you for real, do you know all these people? [laughter]

02-01:14:32

Farrell: That's funny. [laughter] And also too, she's paying attention, right?

02-01:14:36

Hirabayashi: Yes, yes. Yeah, I mean she would read the Japanese paper, and we'd be in the paper quite a bit, so she reads it. I didn't realize—I guess I should really say this—later on, she gave me this whole box of newspaper clippings from the Japanese papers and said, "Oh, you know, I should give these to you." There was a whole box of clippings that she had saved and so I knew that she was tracking us.

02-01:15:04

Farrell: Yeah. The clippings were when you were featured in the newspaper?

02-01:15:08

Hirabayashi: Yeah, San Jose taiko or just the group, yeah. They would all be cut out and just stuck in this box. I still have the box.

02-01:15:19

Farrell: Oh, oh, that's really wonderful.

02-01:15:21

Hirabayashi: Yeah, I'm going to be passing it on to the Smithsonian. I don't know if I mentioned to you, the Smithsonian is going to be collecting archiving our documents.

02-01:15:29

Farrell: No, I didn't know that, but that's fantastic.

02-01:15:33

Hirabayashi: Yeah. We've been selected for them to come and collect from us at some point.

02-01:15:39

Farrell: Oh, that's fantastic. Did you just find out about that or have you known for a while?

02-01:15:43

Hirabayashi: We've known it, actually. We knew about this before the pandemic, and they're planning to actually schedule to come, and they actually already made a site visit to evaluate whether or not we had enough for them to collect. They

had a curator and one of their researchers come out and visit us, and so the paperwork and everything, from what I understand, has been done and then the pandemic hit, so everything stopped on that end. They're behind on their collection on that end unfortunately because of all that.

02-01:16:14

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, but that's really exciting. I'm really glad to hear that that's going to be archived somewhere, especially at the Smithsonian. Do you remember when you found out that you were first nominated and then the recipient of the NEA Award?

02-01:16:32

Hirabayashi:

Yes. Well, there was different people that's telling us all the time that you should put your name in for the nomination and things. Seiichi Tanaka had received the award actually earlier before us and so we were thinking, well, he's already received it. Look, they're not going to honor more than one taiko person, but other folks said, "Well, you should really consider it." I had a friend who was working in San Jose City Hall and so she was willing to help submit the application for us, so she helped push us to do that. Naturally, we had to help provide a lot of materials for her and things, but we were able to gain quite a few different people to write letters for us and to actually submit that application. It wasn't like we didn't know this going in, we were totally aware, but we thought, this is going to be a long shot.

02-01:17:35

But when were awarded, I do remember I got a call from the director of folk and traditional arts at NEA who I had met before, so I kind of knew him. He said, "Oh, just want to let you know, I'm sure you're aware that you've been nominated, and now your application went in and want to let you know you've been selected." I had asked him, "Are you sure you're calling the right person?" It was hard to believe—that was something that was really happening for us. For PJ and I, it was like we struggled so long with developing taiko to really validate the work that we were doing because, again, we were always being challenged that we're not authentic, we're not for real, we didn't really study from masters in Japan, we're making our own version of the taiko here. The sense of tradition for some people was not there for what we were doing basically. When we received the award, we just felt, wow, finally, we feel that we'd been validated for the work we've been doing, and it's coming from the NEA folk in traditional arts division.

02-01:18:55

Farrell:

Yeah, that's significant and also really interesting especially tying back to what you said when you first visited Japan, how things moved forward there. Here, you're moving that forward so you're keeping in step with what's happening anyway, and it's not just fixed in time.

02-01:19:17

Hirabayashi: No. Actually, I feel now what we do here in America or outside of Japan, it's totally influencing what's going on in Japan now. There are groups now in Japan who are making their own wine barrel type of drums, and even though their traditional drum makers are going to that format. Because the access to trees or wood, the Japanese wood is not there anymore, and so ecologically it's much better to do a barrel versus a solid-piece drum, and so they're doing that. Musically, we were so criticized for using other instruments besides what we call the taiko, and so now other groups are just using anything and everything that what's taboo for us now is common. Yeah, I just have to say we kind of led the field.

02-01:20:17

Farrell: Yeah, and what's that been like for you to see that, those changes happen after you're forming your identity with that and the identity of the San Jose group? What's it like for you to see people follow in your footsteps, and also now, there's 500 chapters, to also see taiko grow in such a big way?

02-01:20:45

Hirabayashi: We're honored that we were part of the early push to get things started and just helping to develop the art form here. At times, I think I'm getting over a little bit more, but naturally, I feel that that people don't know exactly what we've done to help establish different things. Our work to help design the actual barrel drum here, what that meant for others to take it on. Musically, to create that taiko program that so many of the people are copying in different ways and that the sound and whatever and instrumentation or whatever. All of those things that we were doing so long ago that others were not doing, and now it's so commonplace. Folks don't know the roots of it all. I guess that kind of question that we're asking right now or I'm starting to ask other folks, do you understand the history of taiko, from your own perspective what that means. It's like do you know the history but it's also a question like who tells the story and how is it told basically.

02-01:22:14

Farrell: Yeah, I think that's a really good point is what you're saying and where it's coming from says so much about that. Speaking of preserving history and who's telling the story, how it's being told, you were also involved with the cultural and the historical preservation of San Jose's Japantown. Can you come in a little bit about your involvement with that?

02-01:22:45

Hirabayashi: All right, sure. Well, that's always been a big interest for us to make sure that San Jose Japantown doesn't turn into LA or San Francisco Neomachi thing. How do we prevent redevelopment or big companies coming in and buying the entire Japantown and redoing things? The cultural and historical preservation of what Japantown looks like has been important for a lot of folks in the community, and we were able to form this group quite a few years ago, in the early 2000s, I guess. I think about 2002, 2003—[coughs] excuse

me. A group of folks in Japantown from different organizations came together to create what we called the Japantown Community Congress of San Jose, and basically it was representatives from all the major organizations and institutions within Japantown. The core thing was the cultural and historical preservation. Actually, at that time, the three Japantowns. San Francisco, LA, and San Jose were able to get some state-funded money in order to do some projects to help push that forward. It was John Vasconcellos who's the state senator at the time, was able to push a bill through that gave each Japantown, it was about a million dollar funding source that split up, it was about 300,000 per Japantown in order to do something.

02-01:24:19

San Jose Japantown, at that time we decided, well, we needed to form an organization, which is why this thing formed in order to get the money. We needed to partner with the city agency, which was the Redevelopment Agency of San Jose at the time, in order to be able to get the money and spend it. Then we needed to decide what we wanted to do with it. We decided that we wanted to create historical landmarks or benches or what you saw when you're walking around Japantown. Those were all put into place because of the congress. On the corner of Fifth and Jackson, there's the Issei stone and the Wall of Values and all those things were part of the what we wanted to develop in order to help give the historical context for what Japantown is all about. The benches and those rest stops we have, what we called the Ikoi no Ba stops just like the one in front of the museum and one in front of Issei Memorial Building, and that one monument in front of the Issei Memorial Building was all part of that funding. The organization, the Japantown Community Congress still exists. We're still watchdogging naturally what goes on in Japantown and making sure historical preservation still happens.

02-01:25:38

A big challenge for us now is actually making sure all those benches and those elements that we put in, which is now twenty years ago, which are already starting to have its own issues of staying clean or whatever to preserve them, so we're trying to meet. The maintenance of all those different things is our agenda now too. That's been a big thing for us, and I guess an important part of that is to get the city to recognize Japantown as a historical area, which we've been able to do that as an entity to be the one major group that if the city were to have a question what goes on in Japantown, they come to the congress to ask that question. We're in touch with our city council member and naturally the mayor in order to always keep that communication going.

02-01:26:30

Farrell:

Yeah, and you can get a real sense of how that's woven in too, as you were just describing, as you're walking around. It's all there, it's not hard to find, and so you get a real sense of a place I think by those things. I'm completely blanking on the cross streets but the plaque as well with incarceration where a lot of the families went to—I think it was Hart Mountain in that area. Even

just having all of that history woven in, and a lot of seeing the temple and having the museum there, it's all within walking distance too.

02-01:27:14

Hirabayashi: Right, right.

02-01:27:15

Farrell: Yeah. Another thing, actually speaking of the San Jose Japanese American Museum, I may have missed a word there, but I'll say it, the San Jose Japanese American Museum. You were working as a graphic artist and you helped typeset and design the format, layout for one of their books, *Japanese Legacy*. Can you tell me a little bit about that project?

02-01:27:42

Hirabayashi: Sure. Well, I was working with a printing company called Communicart at the time. Long story short, I got into graphic design and I was managing for this shop, basically what we called the preproduction, which is all the graphics design and what we would call prepress before it actually goes on to the printing press work. Part of that was just working with anyone that came in. Most of the clients were coming [in saying], "Oh, I need a brochure or a business card or something like this." But Gary Okihiro, who was a professor at Santa Clara University at the time, he was working on this book and so he approached the owners of the company Communicart. He had this book that he coauthored with another person and he wanted to print it, so would Communicart be willing to put the graphics or designing and put the book together? Basically, the typesetting—we need to set all type in and then lay it out and do all that work and then get it printed—so we took the project on.

02-01:28:57

Since I was the lead design personnel, it was given to me as a project to do all the typesetting. I actually had to type all the text and then design the book to what it looked like and then do the layout and pasteup for it all. It took a while to do that. I mean that was the first time I ever—like I mentioned, most of projects I was doing were pretty simple things, single flyer sheets. A whole book was little daunting of a task just to figure that out and then the amount of work and things, but I'm very proud with how it turned out. We were fortunate we had some great people that was supporting the project and everything, and it just came out really well at the time.

02-01:29:54

Farrell: Have you stayed involved with the museum since then?

02-01:29:57

Hirabayashi: I'm not actively involved with it, but naturally, we support the museum in whatever way we can. A lot of the original members actually who started the museum, had passed or are no longer around unfortunately. Like everyone else, the past two years with COVID, it's been really tough for the museum, so things are just starting to open back up. But through the community

congress—because they're represented in the congress, too—we're always in touch about their activities and sharing what's going on in that way.

02-01:30:35

One of the activities that the congress does also is what we call it a summer internship program for college students. Right now, the Japanese American Museum is probably the lead on that internship program because we actually have the interns, at least the past of couple summers, were working primarily with the museum to support their activities. It's been really important to be connected with them in that way. PJ has actually worked a little bit more with them. She's been trained as a docent to do things there. I've done the historical walks for the Japantown area just because of the stuff I know about Japantown too.

02-01:31:17

Farrell:

Yeah, that's great. The day I was there were actually quite a few people. This was during the pandemic and there were quite a few people there. It was nice to see that people were coming in. One thing I wanted ask about is—so we talked a little bit about you going to Japan for the first time. Have you returned since then?

02-01:31:44

Hirabayashi:

Oh yeah. Fortunately, I've had many different kind of opportunities to go back for different things. We actually took San Jose taiko there on two different tours. One was a performance tour we were able to go on in the late '80s and then the last time we took a group, it was more of an educational tour in a way because it was just before PJ and I were stepping out of our role as the leadership for San Jose taiko. We wanted to pass on the contacts of the people we knew in Japan to the members of the group, so we took most of the group over on a tour to visit different places and meet different people in groups. Also just going over on individual, other small projects or whatever, PJ probably has travelled there more often than I have, but I think I've been there at least almost a dozen times over the last forty-five years or whatever.

02-01:32:43

Farrell:

Yeah, it's a significant number of trips.

02-01:32:47

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, I've been fortunate.

02-01:32:48

Farrell:

Yeah. What it's like for you to travel there? You had mentioned some identity things before where when people look at you versus when you speak, there's a different reaction. Aside from that, what's your experience been like going there and thinking about your family's history and that kind of thing?

02-01:33:12

Hirabayashi:

Yeah, I might've mentioned earlier that my family is from the Hiroshima area, and I've never really visited Hiroshima yet, and that's something that's on my

list I need to really do. For whatever reason, I haven't done that even though I've been to Japan many times. Taiko doesn't really take me to that area of the country anyways, but that's a not a good excuse, I guess, for not going. But anyways, I guess now because Japan, especially over the last twenty years to me, has become so international in a way versus when I first went in the early '80s, it's much easier to travel around naturally to just get around and whatever. I guess one of the last trips that I was able to go on—or two trips ago—PJ was there actually on a fellowship, so she was doing some work. We were in the Kyoto and we were asked to serve on a panel to talk to the students at Doshisha University there. One of our friends was teaching a class there.

02-01:34:23

I'm telling you the story because I thought it was really interesting because these students were so interested in our background as being Japanese American, which never really happened before, to me at least. What was even more interesting is the fact that when I mentioned that I grew up in Oakland and the neighborhood I grew up in is where the Black Panthers were organizing, they were just fascinated with that. And not only fascinated but they knew about the whole Black Panther movement and what that meant. Again, that was something that I had never experienced about Japanese, younger Japanese students really even caring about. This trip was in 2014, so it's a little while ago, but still it was definitely pre-George Floyd and all this other stuff, but it was just curiosity that these students from there had this interest in what was happening in America in that way.

02-01:35:32

I became a celebrity because I grew up in Oakland and experienced what the Panthers experience was all about. I couldn't even answer their questions really other than from my own perspective, right, because they actually knew a bit more about the Panther more than I did. [laughs] But that was just mind-blowing that that's what going on now. Also I guess culturally, I always find Japan interesting as far as how they interpret or view other cultural groups or music even. Like I mentioned earlier, growing up in in the Bay Area, any kind of music you will want to hear or see, it's really easy, or learn, you could find teachers or go see it happening. In Japan, if they want to see an African drum group, they don't have access, so they're bringing groups from Africa; that's their context for what it means. They really go back to their root cultures of how they interpret things. I find that really interesting too because it's a very different perspective on how they view and understand and learn what culture is about within that context versus how we view within the context of what we determine as multicultural perspective.

02-01:36:56

Farrell:

Yeah, that's really interesting. That's a really interesting illustration of the differences, and also I am constantly pleasantly surprised about the youth today and the things that they know. They know about the Panther party in Japan and that's pretty cool.

02-01:37:16

Hirabayashi: Yeah.

02-01:37:16

Farrell: Yeah. Have you ever been on pilgrimage before?

02-01:37:24

Hirabayashi: A long time ago just in Manzanar, just real briefly, but that's the only one. I've never gone to any others since then.

02-01:37:34

Farrell: Is there any particular reason for that, or just it hasn't happened?

02-01:37:40

Hirabayashi: It's just timing-wise for whatever reason. PJ has been too perhaps more than I have. We actually were scheduled to go to Manzanar to do something there in 2020, so that's the year of the pandemic. For the first time, we were supposed to go there to perform and do something and then naturally it got canceled.

02-01:38:05

Farrell: Yeah, that all makes sense. Do you know if any of your siblings have been on pilgrimage?

02-01:38:15

Hirabayashi: I think just my oldest brother perhaps. I don't think any of my sisters have gone to anything, no.

02-01:38:23

Farrell: Okay, got it, okay.

02-01:38:24

Hirabayashi: My parents never went to anything.

02-01:38:26

Farrell: Is that something you are interested in doing in the future?

02-01:38:30

Hirabayashi: Yeah, I mean especially Topaz since that's where my folks were and especially now since there's so much controversy that's going on unfortunately. I think I mentioned to you Jonathan Hirabayashi who I'm related to—he's my landlord—is very active with what's going on there too. He's always telling me about different things that he's involved with there and or providing information and things like this. I do want to get over there at some point.

02-01:39:03

Farrell: Yeah. I mean it also will be interesting, maybe things will change there in the next couple of years too based on everything that's happening now.

02-01:39:10

Hirabayashi: Yeah.

02-01:39:11

Farrell: And an evolving situation at this point.

02-01:39:14

Hirabayashi: I hope so. I just always feel there's two sides to every story, and this incident, unfortunately not all the sides to the stories have come out effectively. Some people were really reacting violently in a way to what they feel was incorrect without really knowing perhaps what was happening.

02-01:39:41

Farrell: With the Wakasa Memorial removal?

02-01:39:43

Hirabayashi: Right.

02-01:39:44

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it'll be interesting to see what happens, how that unfolds further.

02-01:39:52

Hirabayashi: I agree. Hopefully it all works out, just people get to a better place on what it's all about.

02-01:39:59

Farrell: Yeah, I think so and it's an important site.

02-01:40:04

Hirabayashi: Yeah.

02-01:40:05

Farrell: Yeah. I do want to ask you some reflective questions, but before we get to that part, is there anything else that you want to talk about that we haven't covered yet?

02-01:40:16

Hirabayashi: Let's see. No, I guess there could be, but no, I'm good, nothing offhand that jumps out for me right now, so yes.

02-01:40:27

Farrell: Okay, yeah.

02-01:40:30

Hirabayashi: I guess the only thing is maybe what I'm doing more a little bit right now. I don't know if I've mentioned I'm leading the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute. It's actually a leadership program that I helped start with two other people. Let's see, 2008 was the first class, so about 2006 and '07 we were organizing to create this leadership program here and realizing that artists of color were not really getting access to a lot of the funding and opportunities that were going on within the city in San Jose or the area. I personally had a chance to actually be involved or go through some of other leadership programs but realizing all of them were pretty much not really catering to the

activities or events or experiences I've had as the artist of color basically. We felt that it was important to create a program of color for artists that would help them in their own leadership roles within our community here, and so we created this program called the Multicultural Artist Leadership Institute or we refer to it as the MALI program. It's currently in its thirteenth year of operating.

02-01:41:55

From the beginning, I've been advisor and I helped start the program, get it off the ground. I was leading San Jose Taiko, so I really couldn't be involved in directing it and so it was passed on to some other people to direct. Just before the pandemic, the person that was coordinating the program was stepping out to leave for another job. The program was based at the School of Arts and Culture at Mexican Heritage Plaza and so they knew naturally—I was involved with the advising still—so they asked me if I would be willing to step in to help temporarily fill the leadership role of the program, so I did that. This in the fall of 2019, I started to do that, and they offered me to come in and actually start working on the program as part of staff, part-time in the February of 2020, and so naturally in March 2020 it had been closed down. Anyway, I've been running this and still trying to keep this program together under the pandemic. It's still functioning and actually recruiting the next class, which is of the fourteenth class to start in May. I'm very proud of this program because it's really created about 140 artists of color within our community that's within our network now that's gone through the classes. A lot of them have gone on to different jobs or leading the organizations or executive directors at their organizations now and just are great advocates for the arts. We're pretty proud of that program right now.

02-01:43:36

Farrell:

Yeah, that's really fantastic and it's a great program for people to go through. You've been able to keep that going online or digitally during the pandemic?

02-01:43:51

Hirabayashi:

Yeah. Initially when it first happened, we had a class that was meeting in person, then we had to move it to Zoom, unfortunately, which was a horrible ending for that class. The following '21, I decided a class like that really can't function on Zoom, so I postponed operating class and then restarted it afterwards. The current class actually been meeting in person and so we've been able to do that so far.

02-01:44:23

Farrell:

Oh, that's great.

02-01:44:24

Hirabayashi:

It's a small class, there's only eight members, so it's doable in that way.

02-01:44:29

Farrell:

Yeah, that's great. Does that come with any exhibit space where they can show some of their work or is that not really part of it?

02-01:44:39

Hirabayashi: Yes and no. The School of Arts and Culture has a lot of different facilities and so we naturally make it available to the artists in whatever genre of work they're doing. That's what we hope, that they're able to bring back their work to the school or to the community in different ways. The School of Arts and Culture is just one of the places that they can do that. We have a 500-seat theater, a gallery space, outdoor performance spaces, so there's a lot of classroom spaces to teach, so there is a lot of opportunities there. It's been a great situation for me just to move on to another level of organizing and helping to mentor other folks in different ways.

02-01:45:21

Farrell: Yeah, and that's one of my reflective questions for you is, is what it's meant to you to work so closely with the community in San Jose, the Asian American community, the Japanese community, the community of artists there, seniors? You've worked in so many different capacities with the community.

02-01:45:40

Hirabayashi: Right. I guess my working style is I like to help in whatever way possible. I've been in leadership roles naturally, but I really prefer to be more in the background of things. I enjoy being in a supportive role versus the lead role, so if there's any chance I could push someone out in front to be the spokesperson, I'll do that. I feel like I work more effectively in that role, in that way, and especially now, especially in my capacity where I am in my age and just where I'm at in my life basically. Even with this position currently at the School of Arts and Culture, when they ask me to come on and work—first it was temporary, so I said fine. Then they'd say, "Well now we really want you permanently." It is a part-time job, but it's a permanent position now. I had to really think about whether or not I wanted to do that because really I was hoping to find someone else to take over and not be so involved in that. But they really want to hang on to me, so it's nice to be wanted in that way I guess and to have a purpose and be able to do a lot of things. I'm realizing there's still so much more to do and so that's what's important. This has just given me another opportunity to be involved with that.

02-01:47:21

I'm still involved with the Japantown Community Congress organization, so naturally on that part, the historical, cultural preservation at that level. Even with San Jose taiko, we're trying to build a building—I think we've mentioned to you before in Japantown—so that's still in the works. I'm hoping that will be completed in a couple years still. Those are big projects still on the horizon that I'd like to see finished off, and that's where I'm at right now with those things.

02-01:47:53

Farrell: Given the breadth of your work and how long you've been at this, what are some of the things when you look back that you're the proud of?

02-01:48:03

Hirabayashi:

I guess again just starting programs, helping to start different programs and being able to step out of them after they got going. Being there when we're trying to do the senior services activities, and that rolled into this organization Yu-Ai Kai. It was not just me, it was a group of students that we were all pretty active at the time, but naturally, it took a little work at that time to get that stuff organized and going. But then for the like Yu-Ai Kai, when they discovered in looking back in their history that there was this group of San Jose State students, which I was part of, that was doing that. They had no idea. But for me, it's not important that people do know that I was part of that or even starting the San Jose taiko basically now because the leadership has changed over.

02-01:49:06

In the taiko world, naturally people just still do look at me as part of San Jose taiko, but I think that for me is still not even the importance of what that meant, that means. For me it's more important if there was a way I could still support the larger community within the taiko world, I'm more willing to do that. One of the things I've been doing within that context is I was part of starting this Taiko Community Alliance, which is a national organization here and so I'm on the advisory committee for that. And last year, with one of the other members of that organization, Derek Oye, he and I cotaught a leadership class for the taiko community. Those are the kind of things I love doing, just helping people get involved with stuff and giving them the tools to move on and do their own thing basically.

02-01:50:04

I guess if it's awards, naturally the NEA have recognition. How can I not say that's the biggest thing? [laughs] And then again that's the Smithsonian, the American History division of the Smithsonian, came to us to say we want to document your archives, that's amazing.

02-01:50:30

Farrell:

It really is, yeah. Looking back too, what does it mean to you to have found taiko and then created this chapter and helped influence so many other people who are interested?

02-01:50:51

Hirabayashi:

I'm sorry?

02-01:50:53

Farrell:

Looking back, what did it mean to you to find taiko and then you get involved and expand people's interest?

02-01:51:02

Hirabayashi:

Well, people when they look at what we've done or I helped do, they always tell me, "Well, you really built your own competition. If you're the third group, you could've just taught people and make them be part of your group rather than trying to help them start new groups," or "Why were you so open

with your information just to share?" For me especially was I wanted to help develop the art form basically, and I was not interested in having a hundred mini San Jose taiko groups joining around. It will be a very boring art if that's what it was basically. [laughs] I never thought of creating the competition, but it's really building the art form, building the field. I guess even in business, people say competition is good. If you want to look at that, it kept us on our toes. I always felt that we should be honored that people are copying, and so I say if they're always copying you, that means you still have something worth giving. I still see people copying us, so I feel honored in that way.

02-01:52:25

Farrell:

Yeah, and on that note, what are your hopes for the future of taiko whether that's the San Jose chapter or in general?

02-01:52:34

Hirabayashi:

I guess my big concern right now, it's a little bit about going back to the history, who knows the history, who's collecting that, and who's telling the story? I would hate to see taiko become like the next yoga or karate thing where people are just doing it without the context of what it really means and where it came from and the history of all that. Or it has been capitalized in different ways that it becomes just a commercial event. Understanding the roots of taiko for me, the history is where I'm looking at to try to spend a little bit more time to get into that and making sure people understand that and somehow be able to share that.

02-01:53:28

And then PJ have been talking. Next year is our fiftieth anniversary of playing taiko, 2023, so it's fifty years for San Jose Taiko but from PJ and I it's fifty years of playing taiko. We're thinking maybe we should go out and try to tell our story of why we do taiko and what's important, and what is our history behind that and what did we go through to bring taiko to where it is and how view what taiko is now.

02-01:53:59

Farrell:

That would be incredible. My last question for you for today is how do you hope that people will remember or think about the history, the legacy of the Asian American community in San Jose?

02-01:54:21

Hirabayashi:

Well, I hope that people will understand the depth and the variety of what that means within the concept of what Asian American means. Unfortunately, the term Asian American, as you probably know, it's as a political term that was developed actually from Cal in the late '60s basically, so it came out of UC Berkeley there. It was a term that was generated to help unify and create a stronger powerbase for the people of Asian descent basically. But at the same time, what that has done, I feel and we're realizing too is it has—unfortunately it raised the history and the identity of us as individual Asians being Japanese or Chinese or Filipino or Korean or whatever now there are many that are

here. Unfortunately, with the Asian hate crimes and things like this going on, we all unfortunately get lumped back into that one category. I walk down the street, they don't know if I'm Chinese or Vietnamese or Japanese, so whatever, but I could be attacked simply because I'm Asian.

02-01:55:45

How people relate, blaming Asians here or Asian Americans here for what happened unfortunately in China for the pandemic, for the COVID-19. That whole incident, it's just a great example that's happening now to what we need to be afraid, and so how do we protect ourselves and how do we elevate ourselves so that people understand who we are as Asian Americans here in America and what does that mean.

02-01:56:19

Farrell: Yeah, and understand the nuances of that too I think.

02-01:56:25

Hirabayashi: Right.

02-01:56:26

Farrell: Yeah, which I think goes back to what you're saying about the importance of who's telling the stories.

02-01:56:33

Hirabayashi: Right.

02-01:56:33

Farrell: Yeah.

02-01:56:34

Hirabayashi: So thank you for all the work you're doing; you're helping us tell our story.

02-01:56:38

Farrell: Well, I thank you for being so willing to share your story. I really appreciate it, I feel like I've learned a lot. It's been a pleasure to talk with you so I really appreciate it.

02-01:56:50

Hirabayashi: Oh, thank you.

[End of interview]