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# Akira Tana

## Personable percussionist

RANDY SMITH hears tales from one of the drummers mostly widely travelled in the swing and bop circles of the 1970s and 80s, among older generation survivors such as Zoot Sims, Sonny Stitt and James Moody



“Akira Tana is an extremely talented musician ... highly respected by me and his peers ... a beautiful, respectful human being whose family and mine have been close for many years”. These laudatory words came from the then 89-year-old saxophone legend Jimmy Heath in response to an emailed request for comments about the time Tana spent as drummer for the Heath Brothers band. A similar query sent to piano veteran Junior Mance (87 years old) yielded this emphatic statement: “Akira is a damn good drummer and he can keep time with the best of them as he is the best”.

Such remarks help one appreciate why Akira has been the choice of so many musicians for working gigs and recording sessions. A very short listing of his important musical collaborators includes Art Farmer, Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, Sonny Rollins, Dizzy Gillespie, Jim Hall, Johnny Hartman, Jimmy Rowles, Kenny Burrell, Jackie Byard and Claudio Roditi. Also on his resumé are extended stints with the Heath Brothers, Paquito D’Rivera, the Art Farmer-Benny Golson Jazztet, and James Moody. And with bassist Rufus Reid, he co-lead a group called TanaReid that toured and produced a number of recordings over a nearly nine-year period in the 1990s.

Among his recent projects is Otonowa, which

translated from the Japanese means “sound circle”. The group was formed in the wake of the 2011 Tohoku, Japan earthquake and tsunami disaster. Along with like-minded colleagues Art Hirahara (piano), Masaru Koga (reeds) and bassist Noriyuki “Ken” Okada, Otonowa has released an eponymous album featuring fresh jazz versions of Japanese folk melodies, and also made several benefit tours of the Tohoku region.

So how did Akira Tana arrive at this point in his career? To find out I arranged a Skype interview. Here are some highlights from an enjoyable encounter with this charming and personable jazz artist. To begin with, I confirmed his birthdate of 15 March 1952 in San Jose, CA, and asked how his parents, both Japanese immigrants, had influenced him: “My mother was a tanka poet, and played koto and piano .... so in terms of artistic influence, it was probably from my mother”.

Akira’s mother rented him a snare drum when he was still in primary school, his initial encounter with a percussion instrument. He also had piano lessons and played a bit of trumpet. He began playing drums in rock bands early on and first evinced interest in jazz when he acquired a copy of the Miles Davis LP, Miles Smiles.

With Sonny Rollins: ‘This was the first time I had been out on the road playing that kind of intense music, and so it was very physically and mentally draining, but it was a valuable experience ... we’d be playing two-hour sets because he just gets going and he doesn’t stop’

“I was in a rock band, probably in the 8th or 9th grade, and the guys in the band were a couple years older than me. So he [fellow band member] didn’t like the record and he sold it to me for a dollar. I heard Miles Davis and it aroused my curiosity because I didn’t understand what they were doing. But the sound was overwhelming”.

While attending Boston’s Harvard University in the early 70s, Tana cultivated a friendship with drummer Billy Hart that sparked his nascent interest in jazz percussion. Hart suggested Akira seek out veteran drummer Alan Dawson at Berklee College of Music. There followed one and a half years of intensive tutelage under Dawson that taught him techniques and exercises he employs to this day, both in his own teaching and in his playing.

Following graduation from Harvard in 1974, Tana entered the New England Conservatory of Music where he gained a solid grounding in classical percussion. He also gigged whenever possible: “I spent a majority of my time learning orchestral percussion while doing any kind of gigs to support myself, including playing for strippers down at the Combat Zone in Boston – they used to have organ trios”.

During these Boston years in the mid-to-late 70s, an acquaintance with drummer Keith Copeland led Tana to temporary jobs with established jazz musicians including Helen Humes. Recalls Tana, “Whatever work he [Copeland] couldn’t do he would ask me to sub for him, and one was Helen Humes with Major Holley and Gerry Wiggins”. Other notable associations included providing rhythm for the likes of Sonny Stitt and Milt Jackson. The week-long Stitt date proved especially memorable.

“Sonny Stitt, he was pretty drunk, and James Williams, the pianist, and I were fairly young compared to his generation. But the bassist, John Neves, was of Sonny’s generation, so there were a couple times when Sonny would turn around and start screaming at me and James, and of course, we were intimidated, first of all, by his genius, but also by his behaviour. But John Neves knew how to deal with that, and when someone wolfed at him he wolfed right back, and he told Sonny, ‘Shut the fuck up and play’. Which he did, he turned around and just played”.

Perhaps the highlight of Akira Tana’s Boston

sojourn occurred in 1978 when he had a chance to work for one of his idols, saxophone great Sonny Rollins. Again, the invitation came about thanks to a friendship with a fellow musician, Jerome Harris, a Rollins bassist at the time.

“Sonny was kind of in between bands and drummers, so Jerry said ‘Sonny is conducting auditions for drummers in New York, you want to go down and try out?’ So I went down there, showed up at the rehearsal studio – I was the first one there – and Sonny and I just played duets for a half hour, 45 minutes, or something like that. That was like a dream come true, you’re in the same room all by yourself with Sonny Rollins! There were two or three other drummers, piano players, guitar players, but he asked me to stick around all day. I stuck around and at the end he came out and asked me if I could do this two-week tour with him”.

Working with Rollins proved an intense experience for the young drummer: “I had been doing a few things around town with Helen Humes and people like that. This was the first time I had been out on the road playing that kind of intense music, and so it was very physically and mentally draining, but it was a valuable experience ... we’d be playing two-hour sets because he just gets going and he doesn’t stop”.

The musical alliances Akira forged in Boston facilitated his transition to New York City when he moved there at the end of the decade to begin his professional career. Much of his success hinged on being in the right place at the right time and maintaining a positive attitude.

“I remember speaking with Julian Priestler, and he was saying about working in New York ‘It’s kind of like networking, you have to let people know and be in a situation where people will know you’re available to work’. That’s what he was saying – you make your own opportunities, you have to be visible”.

As a freelance drummer in New York throughout the 1980s, Tana’s increasing visibility, along with his reputation as a reliable percussionist and band mate, led to numerous playing and recording opportunities. Memorable among the latter were three Pablo albums he recorded with Zoot Sims, two of which featured Jimmy Rowles on piano. These sessions were relaxed affairs.

“Zoot said ‘This is a recording session’, so you show up, set up your drums, and you play. He calls the tunes, no rehearsals, and you just played. It was great working with those guys. Jimmy’s an incredible composer, piano player, worked with Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, all these people ... so I feel very blessed to have had these associations and actually recorded with these people and have it documented”.

Not everything on the Pablo dates was as seamless as working with Zoot and Jimmy, however. “About those sessions, the thing I remember most is working with Norman Granz. We were set up in the big RCA studios

they used for big orchestras, Toscanini and all those people, and we were really spread out. I couldn’t hear the piano, I couldn’t hear anybody. I was in a corner on the other side of the room, and so I asked Norman Granz ‘Can I have a set of headphones? I can’t hear anybody’. And he started giving me this lecture that I didn’t need headphones, that musicians from a different era never used headphones and stuff like that. It kind of upset me a little, and I said ‘I can’t hear what Zoot’s playing, I can’t hear what Jimmy Rowles is playing, I need to have a set of headphones’. So he gave them to me so I could hear. That’s probably something I’ll never forget about the recording session”.

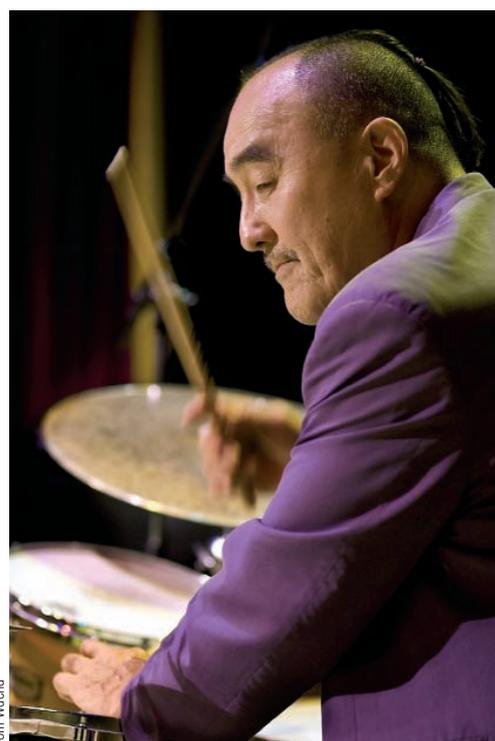
Other associations following Akira’s move to New York included working with people like Art Farmer and Carol Sloane. An extended gig with the Heath Brothers, Jimmy and Percy (1979-82), resulted in several LPs that helped establish his name. It was a busy time for the drummer, and he was in the recording studios often. One memorable session was James Moody’s *Sweet And Lovely* date in 1989.

“He [James] was saying ‘There’s a friend of mine that’s gonna come in and record with us, he should be showing up pretty soon’. He didn’t tell us who it was – and I think he was just messing with us – but it was Dizzy. So Dizzy came in and recorded three or four songs, and I remember one – it was a kind of shuffle blues – and they started scatting and singing and the engineer, Jim Anderson, was able to create something that sounded like a vocal track. They got nominated for a Grammy for best jazz vocal that year”. (Dizzy Gillespie appears on two tracks with Moody, *Con Alma* and *Get The Booty*, the latter being the shuffle blues Tana references, recorded by Dizzy as *Sumphin’* on the 1957 Verve Duets album featuring Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt.)

At the dawn of the 1990s, Akira Tana’s main concern was TanaReid, the group he co-led with bassist Rufus Reid for nearly nine years. The pairing yielded several successful albums, despite the challenge of their being members of what he refers to as the “in-between” generation of jazz musicians.

“There was an older generation that got a lot of notoriety from just surviving all those years, and then there were the young lions like Wynton and Branford that were getting a lot of press. So players like us, we’re not getting quite the exposure that the others were

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Tom Weicha

getting. But it was a great experience; we got to tour and play our music”.

Since moving back to the San Francisco Bay area for family reasons at the end of the 90s, Tana has maintained an active presence on the local scene while making the occasional Japan tour. And though he admits to missing the musical challenge of being a big-city, New York jazz musician, he remains philosophical about his life choices: “I get a chance to do stuff that’s fun, but to survive you have to do work that you’re not particularly excited about ... so you could do it and complain about it ... you know, if you’re gonna feel that bad about doing something, then you shouldn’t do it”. Not a bad philosophy to live by and one that ensures this consummate percussionist’s presence on the jazz scene for a long time to come.

## Selected discography

### As leader

Otonowa, Acannatuna Records  
 Moon Over The World, with Ted Lo & Rufus Reid (Sons of Sound)  
 Secret Agent Men, with Dr. Lonnie Smith (Sons of Sound)

### As co-leader

TanaReid: Back To Front (Evidence)  
 TanaReid: Yours And Mine (Concord)

### As sideman:

Al Cohn: Overtones (Concord)  
 Claudio Roditi: Gemini Man (Milestone)  
 Heath Brothers: Expressions Of Life (Columbia)  
 Heath Brothers: Live At The Public Theatre (Columbia)  
 James Moody: Sweet And Lovely (Novus)  
 Zoot Sims: I Wish I Were Twins (Pablo/OJC)  
 Zoot Sims: The Innocent Years (Pablo/OJC)  
 Zoot Sims: Suddenly It’s Spring! (Pablo/OJC)