

# Miyumi Project is good big, but sometimes small is better

By Andy Downing  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Even though the Miyumi Project is best known for its festival shows—massive productions in which the group can swell to as many as two dozen members, including a small army of *taiko* drummers—the best time to hear the crew explore new musical frontiers is when it performs as a more scaled-down ensemble. Such is the case when bassist Tatsu Aoki brings his long-running, East-meets-West jazz improvisation project to the Velvet Lounge this weekend.

“Generally when I do the club shows it’s about seven or eight of us,” says Aoki, who immigrated from Japan to Chicago in 1978, to study experimental film at the Art Institute and pursue a career in music. “I think the smaller combo is much more fluid and there are more improvised ideas built into the show. The larger ensembles require more structure because when you’re playing with many musicians you need to have a bit more specific direction.”

The comfort level between the bandmates aids the musical exploration; a number of the group’s key members, including Mwata Bowden (baritone saxophone) and Amy Homma (*taiko* drums), have been playing with Aoki for more than a decade. As such, Aoki describes the musical interplay between the musicians as “a family conversation.”

“It’s not about the solo or what-not,” he continues. “It’s about the collective sound we create together in the moment.”

Miyumi Project’s sound is rooted in traditional Japanese folk music, which Aoki describes as “cyclical”—closer to the blues than jazz in its use of repetition. Drawing inspiration from the festival music he grew up with, the bassist creates a loose framework that serves as an anchor for the group’s free jazz explorations. “I set up with my *taiko* drummers this motif from Japanese folklore,” says Aoki. “So you have the same background things happening, and then you’re free to do whatever you want on top.”

Early on, the group struggled to find acceptance among jazz audiences because the music frequently sounded like something from another time and place. Aoki



Tatsu Aoki (left) on the bass leads his Miyumi Project, which blends Eastern and Western music into a jazz melange. TRIBUNE PHOTO 2008

## Miyumi Project

Small group, big ideas

**When:** 9:30 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Velvet Lounge, 67 E. Cermak Rd.

**Price:** \$15; 312-791-9050

## Owen

Kinsella’s intimate core

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday

**Where:** Beat Kitchen, 2100 W. Belmont Ave.

**Price:** \$15; 773-281-4444 or [ticketweb.com](http://ticketweb.com)

says the typical reaction was along the lines of, “Wow, this is strange.” Still, the bassist persevered because he had a clear idea of what he wanted to accomplish. Indeed, an ongoing part of Aoki’s mission is to preserve Eastern musical traditions—even as he incorporates Western instrumentation and ideas.

It’s true that, in many regards, the Western world dominates global popular culture. “The Simpsons,” for one, has been dubbed into languages as varied as Ara-

bic, Spanish and Czech. Along these lines, Aoki noticed that often, when musicians integrated any sort of Eastern influence, it was forced to bend and shift, taking on more traditionally Western characteristics. “Generally, Western music is very bad at adapting,” he says. “A majority of the time, that Asian instrumentation is customized for the Western idea. I wanted to reverse that in the Miyumi Project.”

## Owen

Chicagoan Tim Kinsella (Joan of Arc, Aloha) makes his long overdue return with “New Leaves” (Polyvinyl), the latest album from his long-running solo project, Owen. Its first single, “Good Friends, Bad Habits,” finds a seemingly more mature Kinsella ruminating about cronies who “indulge like Hemingway”—the implication being that he has moved beyond that silliness. Now a husband and father, Kinsella shows similar musical restraint, lacing the tune with dreamy synths and a muted guitar solo that ripples through as fluid and metallic as mercury.

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