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re: music

Torn apart by disaster, bound by jazz

Yoshio and Keiko Toyama see their charity work for young musicians repaid in kind

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

On the morning of April 24, 2011, The Swing Dolphins, a jazz band whose 24 members are all elementary or junior high school students, were getting ready for a concert. Nerves can get the better of any young musician under most circumstances, but this show was different — it was taking place in Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture, and it was their first show after the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, had all but wiped the town off the map.

The bold idea for the show was conceived by a doctor presiding at one of the region's emergency shelters. He thought playing music might be the best remedy for traumatized children.

However, the magnitude 9 quake and resulting tsunami not only swept away thousands of people and their homes, it took much of the Dolphins' musical gear as well.

Then, a week before the show, a large consignment arrived that included trumpets, saxophones and trombones — the result of a generous \$11,200 offering from the Tipitina's Foundation, a musical nonprofit in New Orleans. The gift was a return gesture of gratitude to the Dolphins, who, in the wake of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, raised and donated \$125 to the Red Cross through their own charity concert.

"I was so excited when I saw those shiny, new instruments," recalls 11-year-old Amane Iwabuchi, a trumpeter and the youngest of the Dolphins. At the time, Awane was taking shelter in a gymnasium with hundreds more refugees.

Her mother, Kikuko, says she was grateful, too: "At the time, we were just worried about shortages of food and clothing. But when I saw my child smiling brightly for the first time in weeks, I realized music provided her with something that healed her soul."

The gifts that came from both the Tipitina's Foundation and a host of others (including instrument wholesalers and makers such as Kanda Shokai, Roland and Pearl) were the fruits of an exchange of charity begun by the Wonderful World Jazz Foundation (WJF), created in Japan in 1994 by husband-and-wife enthusiasts Yoshio and Keiko Toyama.

WJF's post-Katrina fundraising campaigns in Japan raised the equivalent of around \$100,000 to aid rescue efforts and help musicians in the U.S. city, which was ravaged by floods.

The Toyamas' bond with New Orleans, however, began decades earlier when the couple, then fresh out of university, pursued a lifelong dream of moving there. In 1968, the newlyweds moved into a small apartment looking out to Bourbon Street in the city's French Quarter, where through a broken window, the sounds of authentic Dixieland jazz could be heard from below. The couple say it was "heaven."

After returning to Japan in 1973, the couple formed Yoshio Toyama & the Dixie Saints — a band that still plays regularly around Tokyo — with Yoshio on horns and vocals and Keiko handling banjo and piano.

"We always felt indebted to the people of New Orleans for their Southern hospitality," recalls Yoshio, 68, at his home in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture. "They always made us feel like family."

The couple visited the city again in 1993 for Mardi Gras. They had been hearing of a rise in violent crime before their arrival, and say they made a shocking discovery when they hit the celebration.

"We were appalled by the shoddy condition of the instruments the marching bands were carrying during the parade," recalls Keiko, 69.

The couple decided to spearhead a musical movement that would hopefully reawaken the spirit of one of New Orleans' most famous citizens (and the couple's hero), the legendary trumpeter Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong (1901-71).

"Since Louis Armstrong himself was born and raised in the ghetto, I always felt there was the potential for another great Satchmo — or more — who could emerge from the poorer areas of New Orleans, if only they had the chance," Yoshio says. "We thought the best way we could help steer kids away from a life of violence and drugs was to turn them onto their rich musical heritage."

This is what led the Toyamas to form the WJF with the slogan: "Horns for Guns." The foundation has so far collected nearly 800 musical instruments from jazz-aficionados across Japan. Much of this gear is in mint condition, and other items have been restored and repaired at significant discounts by Global Inc. music store in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward (the store also converted monetary donations for the Dolphins into playable instruments). Nippon Express then ships the new instruments free of charge.

It is the Toyamas' meticulously structured behind-the-scenes framework connecting hundreds of generous citizens and organizations across Japan that has allowed their foundation to give nearly two generations of underprivileged children in New Orleans an opportunity to cultivate a career — or even simply a creative, less-destructive outlet — through music.

"What's really encouraging today, is that some of the elementary school kids we first handed our instruments to when we started the foundation are adults now, and have started their own local Horns for Guns projects," Keiko says proudly.

Their efforts have not gone unnoticed. Newspaper columnist Sheila Stroup of The Times-Picayune has been following the Toyamas' charity works since 2003. "After Katrina, they did so much to help the professional musicians who lost their instruments," Stroup told The Japan Times via email. "The Toyamas mean so much to us and have been a great blessing to the people of New Orleans."

Echoing that sentiment in 2008, Jacquelyn Clarkson, the current president of New Orleans City Council, saluted the Toyamas for their relentless work helping urban



All that jazz: Student jazz band The Swing Dolphins practice on musical instruments donated to them by the New Orleans-based Tipitina's Foundation last year. TAKAO SASAKI

youth by awarding them "keys to the city." And in recent years, Yoshio Toyama & the Dixie Saints have become one of the annual highlights at the city's Satchmo Summer Fest, where bandleader Yoshio — who mimics his mentor's gravelly voice (and huge smile) on tunes such as "Hello, Dolly!" and "What A Wonderful World" — is now known as the "Japanese Satchmo."

With all that goodwill stored up, it didn't take long for New Orleans' musical community to decide it was their turn to help after the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Among the first to rally support was Wilbert Rawlins Jr. He was the bandleader at Carver High School in 2003 when the Toyamas presented his ensemble with 39 trumpets, saxophones, tubas and trombones from Japan. Rawlins organized a benefit concert to aid Japan last April.

"The Toyamas always gave us everything they could offer even if it was just the two or three instruments they had left," he told The Japan Times in a phone call. "So when that quake hit Japan, I knew it was time to give back."

It wasn't until the Tipitina's Foundation got in touch with the Toyamas, however, that they learned about the Dolphins' April 24 concert date, and swiftly delivered the much-needed money to supply the young musicians with the instruments they lacked. Later, the foundation sent an additional donation of more than \$6,000 to another Miyagi Prefecture-based youth jazz band called the Tagajo Bright Kids, providing them with new instruments.

The Swing Dolphins' bandleader, 53-year-old Joichi Suto, says he feels bad about not being able to provide anything in return for all the blessings that his band has received from the people of New Orleans. Suto, whose dreams of opening a jazz bar on Kesennuma's main promenade were thwarted by the tsunami last year, is currently living in Sendai and seeking employment.

"Sadly, even after a year, most of us are still trying to recuperate and rebuild our lives," he says. "So what I always tell my kids during our rehearsals is that the best way to show our appreciation is to practice as hard as we can — and I know the children understand. I can see it in their eyes."

At their comeback concert last April, The Swing Dolphins delivered that message loud and clear. With just a week of rehearsals after receiving their new instruments, the young band played outside a local

gymnasium to a 500-strong audience of both quake survivors and members of the media. And when the band launched into a rousing rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In" with the Toyamas (who drove 500 km north for the event), their testament of gratitude and hope was seen and heard worldwide: Both NHK and U.S. television network NBC documented the event. The band also expressed their appreciation to overseas friends in a message posted on YouTube.

Today, The Swing Dolphins are in full form again. After playing jazz festivals from Sendai to Yokohama last year, they are now in constant demand. Despite their ongoing struggles at home to rebuild their lives, their musical aspirations are stronger than ever.

As for the Toyamas, they did not escape entirely untouched by the Great East Japan Earthquake. Their home and neighborhood in Urayasu — built on an area of reclaimed land where the quake triggered some liquefaction — suffered a lot of damage and was still undergoing heavy reconstruction at the time of this interview. When asked what the couple have in mind for the future, Keiko replies with an understandable "I'm actually feeling a little drained from all these activities."

Yoshio, however, has one more dream in the works. It's a long shot, but he points out that he fulfilled an adolescent wish when he asked Louis Armstrong backstage at a concert in Kyoto if he could play a few riffs on his trumpet and the maestro agreed. This time, Yoshio hopes that with the help of sponsors he can organize a couple of international shows.

"I'd really like to see the young post-Katrina players perform together with the Kesennuma kids in joint concerts held in Sendai and New Orleans," he beams. "Now wouldn't that be a wonderful world?"

Yoshio Toyama & the Dixie Saints will perform March 10 at Ikspiari at Tokyo Disney Resort in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture (1 p.m., 2:30 p.m., 4 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.; [047] 305-2525), March 14 at the Hub Asakusa in Tokyo (7:20 p.m., 8:30 p.m. and 9:40 p.m.; ¥1,600; [03] 3847-8896), and March 16 at the Hub Shin-Urayasu in Chiba Prefecture (8 p.m., 9:10 p.m.; no charge; [047] 381-5207). For more information, visit <http://members3.jcom.home.ne.jp/wjf/wjfenlishtop/indexeigo.html>.

For information on The Swing Dolphins, visit <http://swingdolphins.wordpress.com>.

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NEW ORLEANS SCHOOL BANDLEADER WILBERT RAWLINS JR.



Play it back: After organizing a drive in Japan to get new musical instruments to the victims of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, the people who Yoshio (left) and Keiko Toyama helped then have now organized their own efforts to donate musical instruments to victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

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