

# Searching for the Sound

Hailing from California, John Kaizan Neptune is a player of the *shakuhachi*, a traditional Japanese instrument with a history of more than 1,000 years. The unique musical world he has created through collaboration between the *shakuhachi* and other instruments has gained popularity not only in Japan but also around the globe. Masaki Yamada interviewed Neptune.



I had never heard music like it before. The *shakuhachi* notes scampered around, sometimes sounding like a flute, sometimes like a clarinet, against a complex rhythm played by a traditional Indian drum called a mridangam among other percussion instruments, a guitar and a bass. The *shakuhachi* was being played live by John Kaizan Neptune, to the accompaniment of a CD of his own compositions recorded in India.

Neptune had this to say about the appeal of the *shakuhachi*.

“The *shakuhachi* is a very simple instrument: just a piece of bamboo with five holes. But the range of possible sounds is truly amazing. And as well as being a musical instrument, you can use it to express the sound of the wind or the song of birds. I was enchanted and enthralled by that flexibility.”

Neptune first encountered the *shakuhachi* when he was a university student. Wishing to pursue his love of surfing, a hobby since his elementary school days, he entered the University of Hawaii, where he majored in ethnomusicology.

“Partly because I had been a drummer in a rock band in high school, at university I was interested in learning the Indian tabla. But at that time in Hawaii there was no one to teach me. So I learned *shakuhachi*, my number two choice. When I think back, in a sense I have surfing to thank



John Kaizan Neptune crafts a *shakuhachi* in his home workshop. The harvested bamboo is allowed to dry for at least two year before he begins the creation process.

ALL PHOTOS TADASHI AZAWA

John Kaizan Neptune plays his shakuhachi in the bamboo grove he cultivates near his home. The jazz band collaboration album "Bamboo" released in 1980 was awarded the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs National Arts Festival Excellence Award. This was the first time that the award had gone to a jazz album, and the first time it had been presented to a non-Japanese artist.



for my encounter with the shakuhachi.”

In 1973, Neptune took a leave of absence from the University of Hawaii to study shakuhachi for one year in Kyoto. He then returned to Hawaii to complete his degree, moving back to Kyoto following graduation. After completing a further two years of study, he received the *shihan*, or master’s certificate in the Tozan School of Shakuhachi. At that time, he was awarded the honorary name *Kaizan*, or “Sea Mountain.”

In the 1980s, Neptune began touring and recording albums in earnest based on the theme of the encounter between the shakuhachi and other instruments. By learning and collaborating with music from different parts of the world, he began to take the shakuhachi to places yet unexplored.

“I made an album that incorporated different musical cultures out of a desire to extend the possibilities of the shakuhachi. My first collaborative project was with a jazz band. Later, I performed with a string quartet in a church in Germany, and experimented with a project between the shakuhachi and ethnic instruments in India. All of these are my original compositions and arrangements. Collaborating with music from different countries in this way gave me a renewed sense of the as yet unexplored and limitless possibilities of the shakuhachi.”

Neptune has recorded twenty-three collab-

orative music performance CDs, which are on sale in North America, Europe and Asia. Listeners overseas often comment on the very fresh sound of the shakuhachi and the way it fuses naturally into the backing tracks.

Today, Neptune has made his home in Kamogawa, Chiba Prefecture, one of Japan’s best surfing spots, where he maintains and cultivates his own bamboo grove and creates hand-made shakuhachi as well as other original bamboo percussion instruments.

“I began making shakuhachi out of a desire to create my own original sound that I can’t get from ready-made shakuhachi. But I never seem to be able to get a sound that satisfies me. I’ve been practicing for more than forty years and made more than two hundred shakuhachi, but so far that sound eludes me. I’ll probably continue searching for it until I die.” HD

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*Masaki Yamada is a freelance writer.*