

KIMBERLEY HUGHES

“For me, creativity is what we eat, see, hear, and feel on a daily basis. I draw inspiration from the creativity that I find on the streets, during my travels, and from everyday actions like gazing at the sky, or feeling the wind.”

n a recent early autumn Friday night in Tokyo’s Shinjuku district, a quintet performing at the Pit Inn jazz club seemed to expand the limits of musical and physical possibilities. The Lithuanian-Norwegian avant-garde jazz ensemble Mockūnas-Mikalkėnas-Berre Trio, who were joined onstage by two guest musicians, had clearly decided that nothing was out of bounds. As they approached their frenzied crescendo, the trio’s pianist reached up and began maniacally scratching the instrument’s inner strings. Meanwhile, its reed player spat and screeched into not one, but two saxophones—simultaneously—as its drummer, and guest guitarist Ohtomo Yoshihide, both began sawing on their instruments with bows. And there in the center of it all stood Paris-based musician Nakano Maki, frenetically playing her clarinet while waving it around in circles inside what appeared to be a spiraling vortex of sound.

Nakano, a seasoned performer on both saxophone and clarinet, was back in Japan for her annual autumn tour. When we met the following week on a rainy morning at the Canal Café in Tokyo’s Iidabashi neighborhood, she remarked that the foray into free jazz was in fact a bit outside of her usual style. She had played a decidedly calmer set the previous day alongside a *shamisen* player at Akagi Shrine in the adjacent Kagurazaka district, which is also known as the home of the expat French community. Parked on the shrine grounds during her show was a food truck from a nearby restaurant selling *galettes* from the seafaring Bretagne region, where as Nakano poignantly explained, an ongoing relationship of mutual assistance had been forged with Japan’s Tohoku region following their respective natural disasters.

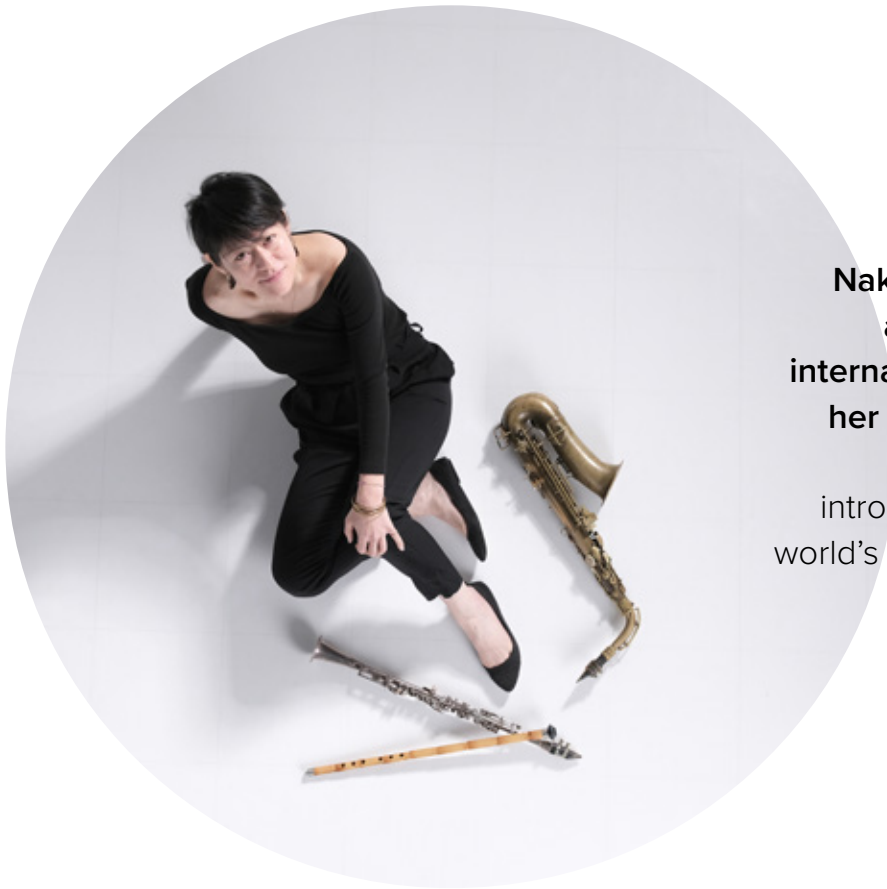
A native of Nagoya who has lived in Paris since 2002, Nakano is clearly rooted deeply in both countries. She has worked extensively with numerous artists in both Japan and France, playing everything from Middle Eastern to West African styles, and traveling around the world to perform both solo and collaborative shows. She also introduces the work of numerous overseas artists through her internet radio show, and has invited many to perform in Japan. Also a poet, avid foodie and chef, Nakano has spearheaded additional projects including the creation of “traveling haiku” videos, where she plays her instruments outside in nature, and writes a haiku in Japanese and French that is reflective of each specific locale. She also created an online compilation of recipes and music videos titled “Where there is food, there is music: Recipes for food and song as slices of life,” for which she interviewed 18 different worldwide musicians regarding their favorite recipes.

Nakano points out that all of her creative pursuits in fact share the same root. “I view food and music as being one and the same,” she notes. “For me, creativity is what we eat, see, hear, and feel on a daily basis. I draw inspiration from the creativity that I find on the streets, during my travels, and from everyday actions like gazing at the sky, or feeling the wind. It’s about how both lead you toward new discoveries and encounters with people, and also toward new sounds and creations.”

paris-based musician
nakano maki

sharing soulful
creativity through
universal connections





Nakano brings the colors and flavors of her rich international experiences to her Open Radio program, where the music she introduces comes from the world's deepest corners—and often from its streets.

Nakano certainly walks her talk in this regard, engaging in a seemingly superhuman level of collaborations. Her three-month Japan tour has seen her crisscross the country, performing in 18 different prefectures and holding shows everywhere from temples to renovated warehouses, organic cafes, and mountaintops; while working with an array of artists including filmmakers, poets, writers, and anthropologists, as well as other musicians.

The ability to make such connections while transcending both geographical regions and musical categorizations is what makes the multi-talented Nakano so intriguing as an artist, and as an individual. She tends to avoid musical categorizations altogether, emphasizing that she is not concerned with particular genres, but rather, individual sounds. She also explores such concepts in her bi-weekly internet music program, Open Radio, where she plays roots music from around the globe interspersed with her own commentary—and which she synchs to the moon cycles by hosting editions during its full, new, waxing and waning phases. “The sun is too bright to look at directly, but the moon is more accessible,” she muses. “We can find connections with it, which then in turn offers us a chance to feel our own emotions.”

Nakano’s deep sensitivity began in childhood, as did her musical disposition. She found herself being drawn toward the sounds she heard outdoors in nature during visits to her grandmother’s *mikan* (tangerine) orchard in Iseshima, Mie prefecture, such as flowing streams and her voice echoing off the surrounding mountains. She also had a deep intuition at an early age, she recounts, with regard to her future life course.

“When I was around five or six years old, I remember suddenly experiencing a deep knowing that I would someday live in France,” she recalls. “And later, while getting out of my father’s car when I was about eight, an image appeared of a saxophone—and I knew in that instant that I would one day play that instrument.”

Nakano indeed began playing both alto sax and clarinet in her high school’s big band ensemble. She further developed her musical proclivities after high school by working at a jazz bar, which was owned by a drummer. Following a period of studying Art History at Showa Women’s University, she was finally ready to head to Europe. To save money for her voyage, she took a job doing nude modeling for various artists around the Tokyo metropolis. “Having to stay still for such a long time was difficult, but it offered excellent pay,” she notes. “And although my body was engaged, my mind was totally free.”

Entering the Conservatoire de la Ville de Paris, Nakano says that she was advised to first study the French language—which she began absorbing by leaving her radio on day and night, even while sleeping. She obtained her degree and deepened her language skills, and also began collaborating with numerous artists. These included oud player Yann Pittard, with whom she formed a unit called KY (from the Japanese *ki*) to perform songs from French composer Erik Satie and compose original works, as well as to record film soundtracks. “I switched to playing the metal clarinet when I realized that my sound was too loud and intense to pair with the subtle instrumentation of the oud,” she recalls.

And while she may not normally play free jazz, Nakano’s styles have spanned everything from the slow and languid to the experimental, whether in her solo works or her extensive artistic collaborations. These have included projects with balafon player Moussa Hema, with whom she performed in Burkina Faso and Mali, and at the Festival Africolor in Paris. She also joined the A.R.B.F. (“Anti Rubber Brain Factory”) collective launched by bass player Yoram Rosilio, where she forayed into Sufi and Mediterranean music. Additionally, she has worked with musicians including Syrian flautist Naissam Jalal, Egyptian oud player Mustafa Said, and pioneering Lebanese hip hop artist Rayess Bek.

Nakano brings the colors and flavors of her rich international experiences to her Open Radio program, where the music she introduces comes from the world’s deepest corners—and often from its streets. “My show could not possibly be further removed from the world of the Grammys,” she once noted. Her musical and food explorations have included songs from her travels to Réunion Island, along with a recipe for a traditional spicy citrus paste; and music from a Syrian artist, which she followed with a description of a local dish featuring lamb kebabs with sour cherries.

Although Nakano remains unconstrained by national borders, she is sharply aware of the sociopolitical forces that have continued to shape the landscape of our world’s human relations. “Before I went to France, my feelings were actually quite complicated. On one on hand I was anxious to go—but on the other, I disliked the bourgeois image of the country that was projected here of brand names, the Rive Gauche, and a world for white people only,” she recalls. “It was only after I learned about the country’s complicated history from the musicians that I played and toured with that my interest became greatly piqued, in terms of both the negative and positive aspects of France as it actually was.”

Delving into painful histories such as those of slavery and colonialism, Nakano also highlights the ability of music to trace this history—and to offer the possibility for healing through awareness. On one recent show she played a string quartet rendition of a 1905 piece from Austrian composer Anton Webern, which she prefaced by explaining that all

sounds are vibrations connected to other phenomena—falling leaves, for example—and then wondered how closely we are now attuned to the vibrations from the presently ongoing war in Ukraine.

Transcending the limits of language by grasping at the verbal expression of spiritual truths, Nakano once theorized about the matter of immigration on the European continent by saying, “Rather than looking at bloodlines, I believe it is more important to focus on the simple fact of being in a certain place at a certain historical moment in time”. On another show, she ended by saying, “Underneath this round moon, I just feel so grateful for the existence of so many different kinds of people.”

Nakano’s musical influence also transcends species, as she says that animals regularly react to her outdoor practices and performances by approaching her and then stopping to listen. “The natural environment in Japan is incredibly beautiful,” she says. “You can also find it within the cities, including Tokyo’s *shitamachi* neighborhoods, which are dotted with *torii* (shrine gates) in a *feng shui*-like style. They feel like the footprints of our ancestral generations.”

One of Nakano’s favorite pastimes is to browse old record shops and bookstores, which she says tend to thrum with universal energy by attracting the people one is supposed to meet—and by letting her know which among the wares she is meant to connect with. “I really feel that we don’t choose information; it chooses us,” she says.

Nakano concludes our interview by noting a favorite Japanese concept, *ichi-go ichi-e*, which refers to the necessity of appreciating the impermanence of the only moment in existence—that of the present. She then adds that a similar idea was also once voiced by American jazz artist Eric Dolphy, who said, “When you hear music, after it’s over, it’s gone in the air. You can never capture it again.”

Follow Nakano Maki’s works and latest projects at her official website <https://makinakano.mystrikingly.com/>, and listen to her Open Radio internet show at <https://www.mixcloud.com/makinakano/>.