

*Kevin Simmonds*

## The Gospel Truth About Japan

I'M A CLASSICALLY TRAINED musician who's into contemporary opera, British folksongs, Bach and musical theater. (I also have a fascination with *castrati* that goes way back.) The Japanese weren't having any of that. Though they appreciated my rendition of "O Sole Mio," they wanted me to sing something *black*. I rediscovered the Negro spiritual and its contemporary counterpart, black gospel, while living in a small town in northeastern Japan. That's what this essay is about.

I got to Japan because, like many college grads, I can read and speak English. For the past thirty years, thousands of twenty and thirty-somethings have gone to the Land of the Rising Sun to teach English to unwilling Japanese students. I didn't get there like most, however. I'd just finished up the coursework for a useless master's degree in music and was trying to figure out how to postpone writing my thesis, when I heard about a professor looking to send someone to Japan. That was it. Good ole Dr. Kawahito (translation: river-person) was a friend and colleague of the superintendent of schools in Tono, a small city in northeastern Japan. Within three days of meeting him, I was applying for my passport.

I'd always had a pedestrian fascination with the Orient but never did anything about it. I wasn't into *manga* or *anime*, though I did think that Mr. Miyagi's bonsai were cool ("Wipe on, wipe off"). I didn't care that *karate* meant "empty hand" and wanted nothing to do with a language that didn't use the Roman alphabet. Though I'm ashamed to admit it, I thought that kimono looked neat, the women soft and quiet, and works like *The Mikado* and *Madame Butterfly* wooed me purely because of their otherness.

Tono City is known as the folktale capital of Japan. Some of Japan's most famous folktales come from this city comprised of eight villages. The Japanese consider it "old" Japan. Rice fields, mountains and rivers abound. It was my chance to get away from America and all the big-city living I'd been doing up until graduate school.

I'd only been in Japan a few days before making my debut. Everyone wanted to know this black American. Everybody wanted to hear him sing. (Even I was contemplating myself in the third-person: "Who is this black American? What has he brought across the ocean?") Answer: music and more music.

Though my official job was teaching English at all of the elementary schools and at four of the eight junior highs, I sang all the time. I was supposed to be helping children develop their ears for a language dramatically unlike their own; but they cared more about my music and crowded around the piano wherever I went. This was strange. I mean, nobody had ever crowded around a piano I was playing in San Francisco, or Nashville, or New Orleans, or D.C. I'd always received compliments on my singing and won singing competitions and scholarships, but I was never—never—a celebrity I must admit, however, that any non-Japanese person who moves to Japan (especially northern Japan), and has the audacity to live in small town, will gain undeserved celebrity just for showing up. But it was different for me.

I started doing concerts in Tono and eventually started an arts organization so that I could get funding to have my friends come and perform. After all, if the people of Tono liked me, then they were sure to like my friends—the ones who were working professionally all the time and not gigging every now and then like me (between teaching and writing bad poetry).

Within a year, the little organization I'd started, Tono International Arts Association, got money from the Japanese government and also garnered funding opportunities for artists from the National Endowment for the Arts. We sponsored a month-long American Music Festival featuring, as I said earlier, all of my friends: Tony-award winning composer Jason Robert Brown, composer Georgia Stitt, Broadway singers Keith Byron Kirk,

Sally Wilfert, dulcimer virtuoso Stephen Seifert, soprano Valerie Johnson, gospel composer and pianist Melvin Bryant, Jr. and his group, Agape. The festival started on October 6, 2001, less than a month after September 11. It just so happened that the opening concert featured four New Yorkers in an evening of new American musical theater pieces. People came from as far away as Tokyo (three hours by bullet train and another hour by local train) to support and share in this music. The festival raised money for the Twin Towers fund, donated a quilt, and sent the thousand cranes.

A few months later, I received a phone call from a woman with perfect English. She'd heard about the festival (it received widespread attention in the media) and wanted to meet me and talk about gospel. She'd seen my picture in the newspaper and something in my black face told her that I knew black gospel.

Gospel is hot in Japan. Many in that straitjacketed society love the permission that black gospel gives to dance, weep, clap, and sing loud like you mean it. Ironically, Japanese people rarely know what they're singing, what's being sung or what real black gospel is. This is why many so-called "gospel" groups tour Japan every year. Truth is, if you're black, you can go to Japan, sing almost anything, and call it "gospel." It's a cash cow. These imposters also have their Japanese counterparts, mostly young people, who have "gospel" groups or teach high-priced "gospel" workshops.

When I met perfect-English-speaking Chiaki (who'd lived in the States for years, married a GI, and had two kids), she asked me to help her with some "gospel" weddings she'd been contracted to sing at local hotels. She knew nothing about gospel and didn't want to run the scams so many Japanese "gospel" singers do. She wanted me to teach her black gospel.

Over the next few months, I found out just how impossible the idea of a "gospel" wedding is in Japan. Despite the lengths the Japanese go to copy Western weddings—the obscene white waterfall-of-a-dress, the white preacher, the chapel, the dusty hymns—it was impossible to fit gospel into any of it. That's the problem, really—fitting gospel neatly into anything. It just can't be done. Gospel music, at its roots, isn't for show. It's for praise

and worship. And when that's going on, especially in the black church, it isn't tidy and predictable—two essentials in a highly ordered Japan.

We did what we could, and the weddings became fairly popular. We did one at least every weekend or so. Chiaki took our partnership to the next level and asked me to start doing gospel workshops. I told her I would teach real black gospel, not stomping and hollering, and there would be absolutely no feather boas. No Electric Slide gospel. No singing "Oh, Happy Day" (made famous in Japan by Whoopi's *Sister Act 2*). The teacher in me also insisted that I would teach about the history of black gospel, beginning with Negro spirituals. Chiaki agreed to my terms. We did several of these workshops and all who came—businessmen, teachers, doctors, dentists, bar owners, housewives, office ladies (that's their official title in Japan)—came for different reasons. Some came just to see me—the *gaigin* (foreigner); some came to sing their souls out like the nuns in *Sister Act*. A few Christians (less than one percent of Japan is Christian) came to sing as they'd never sung in church. One of my favorites, the hip-hop-crew Japanese (who just love black people), also showed up.

We sang Negro spirituals, African songs, traditional, and contemporary gospel. We'd do this for three or more hours straight. I'd walk around the room while Makiko (a jazz pianist with a penchant for playing black gospel with soul) called down the Spirit with the Yamaha grand. I'd weave between the singers as they sang and rocked.

Sometimes it was a challenge to get them to open their mouths and let go of their bodies—to let the music dance them. Chiaki translated my explanations of the meaning of the lyrics and the rich history of these songs. Some asked questions but most just sat there, eyes fixed on me, expecting something like a miracle to be flung before their eyes—something electric and mighty different.

I did about four of these workshops before returning to the States, after two years of living and singing in my beloved northeastern Japan.

A couple of months later, while living back in San Francisco, I got a call from Chiaki. After I left Japan, many of the workshop

participants wanted to continue singing and were actually considering entering a gospel competition. She called to ask if they could name the group after me. I was humbled and got a real kick out of the honor. I told her that I would come back and help prepare Simmonds Company if they won the regional competition. They did.

When I arrived to rehearsal, everyone was excited to see me and thankful that I came all the way back for them. I received my Simmonds Company shirt—a sleek black tee with my loopy signature emblazoned in white and slanted like a star's. I couldn't believe they'd lifted my signature and created such a weird feeling in me. I felt a little like I was going to hell for their sins.

Chiaki had been working hard on two pieces for the competition in Tokyo: "Love," a lovely Kirk Franklin piece, and a really hokey up-tempo arrangement of "Amazing Grace"—risky but too late for me to do anything about. Besides, the band was tight, so I thought we could at least look good doing a down-home-in-the-country-gospel processional from the wings of Tokyo's Sun Plaza Hall. (Problem: I couldn't get everyone to walk and clap in unison.) Then I settled for just getting everyone on stage and hoped for the illusion of rhythm. (Problem: I couldn't get everyone to clap and swing—*right left right left*—in unison.) I finally told everyone that the important thing was to have a good time and that I was proud they'd gotten so far. I also reminded them that gospel isn't about perfection but about imperfect voices singing to a perfect God. I'm sure they heard what I'd said but they were determined to get it right anyway. They had special rehearsals—without me—just to work on clapping, marching, and swinging in unison.

The day of the competition I had to sing at a "gospel" wedding for one of Chiaki's good friends. It was in the morning, so the group went to Tokyo for the sound check without me. The wedding, which took place at a hotel chapel modeled after what must be one of the gaudiest medieval chapels in all of Europe, was one wacky experience. I sat at the keyboard and watched as two twenty-something Japanese men (dressed as though they were ready to pull a sword from a rock) played shiny sackbuts to

announce the arrival of the fair couple. The only other foreigner around was James, the preacher. He was too busy performing the ceremony to joke with me about this weird enterprise and how oblivious the Japanese were to the sheer cheesiness of it all.

I arrived at Tokyo's Sun Plaza and met the group in the dressing room. All the other groups were warming up and primping. It was a motley crew: a female quartet that sounded like they should've been at the Grand Ole Opry; a rock-gospel singer with a Tina Turner 'do; a choir with golden robes and sequins; a choir praying fervently to Jesus. And then there was a very nervous *Simmonds Company*.

I took the group outside, and we formed a circle. I told them again that we were there to sing from the heart and have some fun. Yes, it was the All-Japan Gospel Competition and yes the winning prize was 100 *man* (about \$10,000). None of that could matter though. As we practiced our songs, folks on the street stopped to listen. We looked around at them, at each other, and knew something for sure: we win every time we sing. Two hours later, we took second place.

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