



Taki Masuko

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Percussionist and improvisor **Takaaki (aka, 'Taki') Masuko's** drive to discover what things, images, and feelings sound like has infused his musical voice with unique flavor. An unconventional and versatile drummer with a passion for twisting time, banging on metal objects to hear their colors, and blending the old and borrowed with the bold and new, Masuko remains best known as the source of the "astonishing centrifugal force" and "breathtakingly complex rhythms" (*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*) that made Ithaca, NY's alt rock-mountain-music unit **The Horse Flies** an internationally beloved cult band. His forty+ year career spans solo work, recordings, live performances, and collaborations across five continents with artists including **David Byrne, Les Miserable Brass Band, Satoko Fujii** and **Natsuki Tamura, Richie Stearns, the Zamir Chorale of Boston, and Telltale Crossing**, among others.

BEGINNINGS

Born in 1952, Masuko soon disappointed his mother, a professional organist, who had fantasized he would become the bowing-half of a violin-piano duo with his sister. Though he dabbled in violin and danced to opera and ballet scores in the living room throughout childhood, then routinely snuck out of his boarding school dorm to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes in Tokyo jazz clubs as a teenager, Masuko didn't consider making music professionally until Ginger Baker's sound on Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love" EP led him to take up drumming at 19. He graduated from the Osaka University of the Arts, receiving its Distinguished Performer award, in 1978.

While finishing university, Masuko freelanced with the Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagoya Philharmonic Orchestras, where he encountered the sonically-adventurous compositions of Krzysztof Penderecki and Harry Partch. Inspired to experiment, Masuko began improvising free-form compositions, mixing the vocabulary of contemporary orchestral percussion with what he was learning of Noh drumming from Master Takayoshi Hoshi.

Masuko came to Boston in 1979 to study improvisation with Ran Blake and George Russell, among others, in Gunther Schuller's Third Stream Program at the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC). Increasingly interested in jazz and world music, Masuko added to his list of influences legends such as Max Roach, Monk, Eric Dolphy, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk, as well as countless unnamed musicians on recordings he studied of music from the Afro-Cuban, Balkan, Brazilian, Venezuelan, Columbian, klezmer, Irish, and Turkish traditions. Fascinated with hand drums, Masuko studied West African dance and drumming with ethnomusicologist David Locke, and Arabic music and percussion with Karim Mohammed. From there, one opportunity led to another.

Early COLLABORATIONS

Studying at NEC introduced Masuko to many future creative collaborators, including:

- Ben Wittman, Alan Williams, Greg Porter, Mauricio Villavecchia, and Susan Botti in the NEC-founded art rock band, **Danse Real**;
- Jazz pianist **Claire Ritter**, with whom he would later record six albums, some alongside jazz notables Steve Swallow, Ran Blake, Dave Holland, and Stan Strickland;
- The founding members of **Les Miserables Brass Band**, with whom he would record three studio albums, play festivals such as Jacob's Pillow (Becket, MA), The Last Laugh (Montreal), and Heimatklänge (Berlin), perform with Lester Bowie and The Klezmatics, and tour with **David Byrne** in **The Knee Plays** in Brisbane, Chicago, New York City, and Tokyo in 1988;
- Multi-instrumentalist Andrew Blickenderfer, who along with violinist/actor, Johannes Ammon, co-founded the free improv trio, **Sabana Blanca**, best known for bringing music to classic silent films in cafes, art galleries, and at the Harvard Film Archive.



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THE HORSE FLIES

In 1986, while on a salsa gig at the Pinewoods Dance Camp, Masuko first jammed with the old-time string band foursome who would become his primary musical collaborators for over thirty years: **The Horse Flies**. After stretching their Americana roots sound by adding session players to their debut album *Human Fly*, The Flies wanted to add a permanent drummer, and were instantly taken with Masuko's percussive creativity and passion for groove.

After recording 1989's *Gravity Dance* (MCA), a top-40 record on the Gavin and CMJ charts also nominated for a New York Award, *Rolling Stone* hailed the new Flies as "a band that's earned a buzz" for their "swirling, addictive songs." *The Chicago Tribune* called their distinctive sound "a melange of rock, folk, and minimalism" and *The Village Voice* deemed it "[d]emented, post-modern mountain music."

Masuko toured and performed with The Horse Flies throughout the US, Canada, and Europe at clubs, theaters, festivals, and events including, among others:

- CBGB's (New York),
- Telluride Bluegrass Festival (Telluride, CO),
- Festival International de Louisiane (Lafayette, LA),
- Independence Days (Berlin, Germany),
- Big Beat Festival (Vienna, Austria),
- Smithsonian Festival of American Folk Life (Washington, DC),
- Philadelphia Folk Festival (Philadelphia, PA),
- Vancouver Folk Festival (Vancouver, Canada),
- Winnipeg Folk Festival (Winnipeg, Canada),
- Tonder Festival (Denmark),
- Falcon Ridge Folk Festival (Hillsdale, NY), and
- Grassroots Festival of Music and Dance (Trumansburg, NY).

The Horse Flies also appeared on US television and radio programs, such as MTV News, MTV's *Week in Rock*, NPR's *Prairie Home Companion*, *E-Town*, and *Mountain Stage*. To date, The Flies have recorded three other commercially-released albums with Masuko: the critically acclaimed *Until the Ocean* (2008, Pest Control), *In the Dance Tent* (2006, Live and Kicking), and *Two Traditions* (1999, Callin' the Kettle Black).

DANCE + TEACHING

Answering a knock on his NEC practice room door introduced Masuko not only to a modern dance student seeking a drummer, but also to a new means of exploring gesture, rhythm, and improvisation that would prove a key part of his career. Masuko's facile groove and responsiveness to dancers made him a much sought-after dance accompanist at colleges, such as Boston Conservatory, Boston University, Emerson College, and Harvard University, and for studio classes at The Boston Ballet, The Dance Complex, and Green Street Studios, among others. Additionally, after adding percussion, The Horse Flies sound attracted an array of dancers—including the **Second Hand Dance Company**, who frequently joined them on stage in the 1990s. Under the moniker The Second Hand Band, Masuko, along with cello-innovator **Hank Roberts** and fellow Flies **Richie Stearns** and **Peter Dodge**, improvised music for the company's performances at NYC's New Victory Theatre.

Meanwhile, accepting an invitation from **Ran Blake** to teach at NEC in 1989 put Masuko on the path to becoming a respected drum teacher and introduced him to new collaborators. For twenty-six years, Masuko taught drums, percussion, and ensembles at the Longy School of Music and other colleges and community music schools in the greater Boston area. While at Longy, Masuko's work with celebrated Dalcroze teacher **Lisa Parker** led to relationships with music educators in Japan, for whom he routinely offers frame drum clinics and movement-and-music workshops.



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RECENT COLLABORATIONS

Masuko met early music vocalists **Cristi Catt** and **Daniela Totic** as Longy graduate students, and has since performed, recorded, and toured with them in many ensembles, including:

- **Tapestry**, Catt and Totic's award-winning women's vocal ensemble,
- **HourGlass**, their early music-meets-world folk ensemble with "string wizard" Andrew Blickenderfer and guitarist Tom Noren
- **BalMUS**, a Balkan-driven world fusion group founded by flautist Nicola Radan;
- **Le Bon Vent**, accordionist Jeremiah McLane's French-influenced sextet, and
- **Telltale Crossing**, the trio's experimental alternative world-fusion project with rotating collaborators including Richie Stearns, Peter Dodge, and Corey DiMario.

Masuko and his one-time NEC student, avant-garde pianist Satoko Fujii, and her experimental jazz trumpeter husband, Natsuki Tamura, remain frequent collaborators on performances and projects, such as:

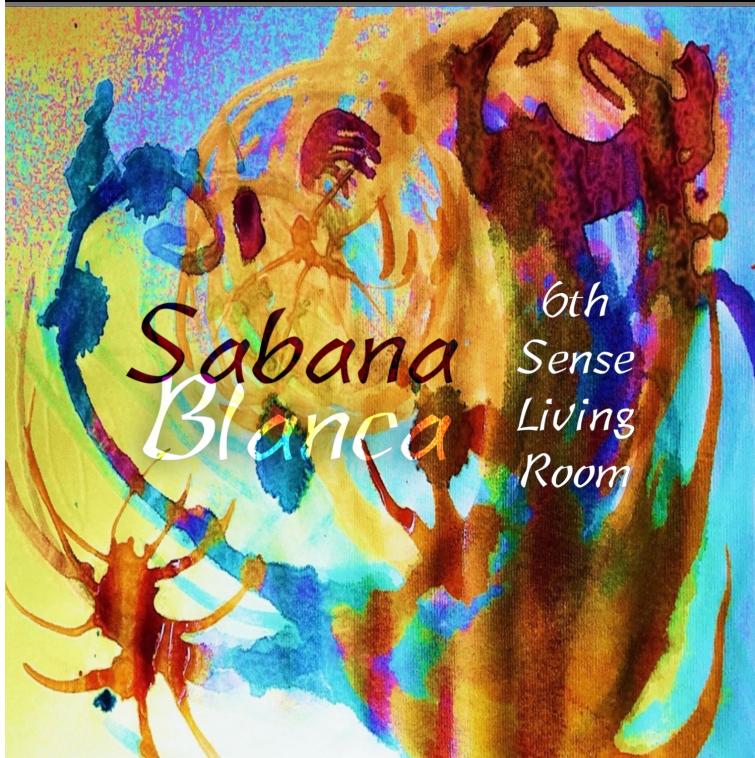
- **Hakidame ni Tsuru**, their improv troupe with percussive dancer Mizuki Wildenhahn,
- **Hada Hada** Tamura's 2003 album, and
- **Senzai Ichigu**, their upcoming free improv album with Johannes Ammon.

Sabana Blanca Releases New Album: *6th SENSE LIVING ROOM*

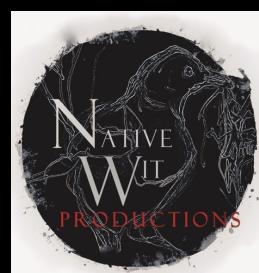
Featuring Takaaki Masuko, Johannes Ammon, & Andrew Blickenderfer

*Free Improvisation * Acoustic Sound Painting*

Bandcamp Presales Begin Friday, October 6, 2023 * Full Album Available Friday, October 31, 2023



6th Sense Living Room, the new release by percussionist Takaaki "Taki" Masuko's free improv trio, Sabana Blanca, will delight fans of spontaneous composition, chamber music, and world folk music alike. *6th Sense*'s five acoustic sound paintings capture why this trio—completed by violinist Johannes Ammon and bassist/cellist Andrew Blickenderfer—flourished on the avant-garde fringes of Boston's contemporary classical music scene during the late 1990s. Using a palette of percussion, strings, off-the-cuff vocalizations, and unrestrained imagination, Masuko, Ammon, and Blickenderfer blend post-modern orchestral colors with the sounds of our most primal human impulses to render an instinctively motivic conversation that will surprise listeners with its intentionality and playfulness.



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