

# Toru Mitsui goes into retirement

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For the readers of *Popular Music*, the name of Toru Mitsui is associated with the 'Booklist', a column he was in charge of from 1989 to 2002. For many members of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, the meeting he organised in Kanazawa in 1997 is unforgettable. For scholars and students interested in Japanese popular music, his numerous articles in English are the first references to be read. Last March (2005) Professor Mitsui retired from Kanazawa University, where he had taught since 1969. To commemorate his retirement, a *Festschrift* entitled *Popular Music and Academia* (2005B) was published in coordination with a symposium held at the University of Tokyo in May 2004. This is a good opportunity to look back over his prolific career in popular music studies.

## From rock'n'roll to bluegrass

Toru Mitsui was born in Saga (Kyushu) in 1940, the son of a professor of English literature at the University of Kyushu. His favourite instrument in adolescence was the guitar, and he has a clear recollection of touring with a local band for amateur singing contests during a hot summer in the late 1950s. A teenage boy who idolised Eddie Cochran, he worked in several clubs in Fukuoka. *Popular Music and Academia* shows a photo of him in 1958 singing 'Rock around the Clock' in the Fukuoka nightclub Lisbon. At that time, he recalls, he played and sang more than he studied.

Entering the Department of English Literature at Seinan Gakuin University in Fukuoka, he developed his interest in rock'n'roll into a study of the folk culture behind it. The storm of new folk revivals in the US and UK gave him an undeniable impetus as both a student and a performer. In 1962 he submitted his Bachelor's thesis in English, entitled *Characteristics of the Traditional Ballad*. His Master's Thesis, *Another Ballad Metre*, submitted two years later to the Faculty of Literature, University of Kyushu, deepened his penchant for Anglophone folk music. Upon gaining the Master's Degree, he was appointed as lecturer at Aichi University (Nagoya). One of the first things he did in Nagoya was to present and perform on the Appalachian dulcimer at the American Culture Center. In the same year he subscribed to *Sing Out!*, an influential New York folk journal, and joined the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS). Around the same period, his notion of folk music was shaken by Harry Smith's LP Box, *Anthology of American Folk Music*. His earliest papers dealt with the analysis and translation of lyrics of British and Irish ballads.

He was undoubtedly the pioneer of this subject in Japan. But it should be noted that he was not isolated from the local folk music movement, whose staple inspiration came from Bob Dylan, the Guthries, the Seegers, and the Kingston Trio, among others. Many college students organised sing-along music events on campus and in public

halls, and Mitsui often sang and played with them. He was almost the only academic in the movement.

### Enthusiast into archivist

From 1966 to 1967, he studied at the Department of Folklore, Indiana University, one of the first doctoral courses for folk culture in the US. This experience was as decisive as the new folk song movement for his career. While on campus, he came to know Ralph Rinzler (Smithsonian Institute), Ray Browne (founder of the Department of Popular Culture, Bowling Green State University) and other folklorists and popular culture experts. Off campus, he was profoundly impressed by the singing crowd in Washington Square, the bluegrass festival in Roanoke, Virginia, and Bill Monroe's performance in Bean Blossom, Indiana. In a word, this curious student 'ear-witnessed' the explosion of folk and bluegrass music in urban and festival contexts just as he was being exposed to the emergence of a research area that would later be labelled popular music studies. His reports on his American experiences to Japanese magazines marked the start of his journalistic activity. In the course of his career, according to his brief auto-bibliography in *Popular Music and Academia*, he published approximately twenty books, twenty translations, and forty academic papers, in addition to 435 items for commercial and independent music journals (plus a foreign book review column in a monthly magazine, mentioned below), seventy items for non-music journals, 160 articles for newspapers, 135 sleeve notes for LPs and CDs, twenty essays for concert programmes and made sixty radio and television appearances.

Many Japanese folk and blues fans came to know his name through the analytical notes for the memorable LP and CD boxes of the New Lost City Ramblers (1972), Chuck Berry (1973), the Monroe Brothers (1975), the Decca Hillbilly Collection (1976), Robert Johnson (1990), Jimmy Rogers (1991), the CBS blues series, the RCA country series, and many others. Indispensable for listeners who want to grasp the history and culture of American and British music are his translations, such as Carl Beltz' *The Story of Rock* (Oxford UP, original 1969 / translation 1972), David Dalton's *The Rolling Stones* (Amco Music Publishing, 1971/1973), Michael Gray's *Song and Dance Man: the Art of Bob Dylan* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1972/1973), Georgy Melley's *Revolt into Style* (Allen Lane, 1970/1973), Edward Lee's *Music of the People* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1970/1973), Robert Neff and Anthony Conner's *Blues* (David R. Godine, 1975/1976), Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train* (Dutton, 1975/1977), Phil Hardy and David Laing's *The Encyclopedia of Rock* (Panther Books, 1976/1981), Bill Harry's *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia* (Virgin Books, 1992/1994), Greil Marcus's *Dead Elvis* (Doubleday, 1991/1996), Joe Smith's *Off the Record* (Warner Books, 1988/1995), Peter Guralnick's *Searching for Robert Johnson* (Dutton, 1989/1991), Peter Guralnick's *Last Train to Memphis* (Little, Brown & Company, 1994/1997), and many more. Ranging from biographies to reference books to quality criticisms, these translations have been widely read and have opened the eyes and ears of many aficionados, critics and future scholars of popular music (including myself). Although the boundaries between academia and journalism are more permeable and easier to cross in Japan than in Anglophone countries, Mitsui's breadth and depth as a scholar-writer-translator is rare.

What is surprising is not only the quantity and variety of his activities but also his meticulousness as an archivist. Who could file a collection of over 1,000 articles

chronologically as he did? His archival perfectionism is in harmony with his bibliographical obsession, observable in his serial column entitled 'Review of New Foreign Books' in the monthly *Music Magazine*, the first critical popular music journal in Japan. This column ran from 1973 to 2002, partly in parallel with the 'Booklist' column in *Popular Music* (1989–2002). During these thirty years it functioned as a lamp-post for many critics and students eager to know the latest publications from abroad. The reviews that had appeared in this column were finally edited into the monumental *New Foreign Book Reviews: 5000 Books on Popular Music* (2003A). This Yellow-Page-like book covers everything from fanzines, trivia and gossipy books, statistics, obscure and private publications to academic items mainly in English, yet occasionally in French, German and Spanish. Some of the books were acquired in second-hand bookshops or through personal correspondence with the authors/publishers long before Internet services were available and before popular music books were catalogued as such by the library system. All 5,000 items (plus many others not listed in the book) are preserved either at Kanazawa University or in Mitsui's private collection. Like Liverpool, Kanazawa is likely to be a preferred destination for future popular music pilgrims.

### Historian into essayist

So far, I have put the spotlight on three of Mitsui's faces: those of performer, translator and librarian. But the most important part of his work is his original books, academic research and educational activities. His early books (small in volume and circulation) deal with British and Irish ballads (1965), bawdy songs (1969), Anglo-American folk instruments (1970) and bluegrass (1967). He is especially proud of the last one, which appeared several years before the first textbook on bluegrass in English, Bob Artis's *Bluegrass* (Hawthorn Books, 1975). Mitsui's *A History of Country Music* (1971) and *Black Blues Today* (1977) are still among the most reliable guides to those two American genres for Japanese listeners. He is one of the few who have expertise in both of these folk-derived genres (the majority of blues experts, at least in Japan, know little about country and vice versa). His *Aesthetics of Rock* (1976) was the first book on rock music written by an academic in Japanese.

The overall recognition of popular music studies in the 1980s (exemplified by the founding of IASPM and of *Popular Music*) and the increasing interest among scholars in race, industry, image, gender, technology and politics exerted an influence on Mitsui's work, and he expanded his field of interest to pop music. *The Michael Jackson Phenomenon* (1985) and *The Story of 'You Are My Sunshine'* (1989), both written for a general readership, are good examples of this trend. In the former book, in highly readable style, he explains the racial tensions present in the American entertainment world since the minstrel show; in the latter, he discusses the political use of star status and questions of authorship. Both have extensive chapters on race, copyright and recording in the American music industry, showing non-academic readers the historical and cultural context underlying the famous artist and song, respectively. He prefers argument in a concrete historical context to theoretical abstraction. Rather than citing the intellectual gurus, he always encourages his readers to look into the historical details. Such a stance is sometimes criticised as theoretically weak. But he believes that over-theorisation tends to end in a vacant exchange within a small interpretive community.

His perspicacity on the details of American everyday culture is better revealed in essays such as *Column: the B-Side of America* (1986) and *The Story of Jeans: the*

*Emergence of Global Culture Made in America* (1990). The former chronicles ordinary American life as seen through such lenses as newspapers, television, streets and commodities, whereas the latter narrates, with much intriguing trivia, the transition of American farmers' work-wear to global and urbane fashion, from a sign of revolt to that of stylish consumption.

## Folk around the world

In 1983 Mitsui was appointed to the Editorial Board of *Popular Music* (he was also on the boards of *Popular Culture in Libraries* since 1993, *Perfect Beat* since 1994, and *Popular Music History* since 2004). In the same year he published his first article in this journal (1983), which discusses the reception of the British pop group Japan among Japanese female fans. In parallel with his ties to *Popular Music* and IASPM since the mid-1980s, he has increasingly presented papers in the international arena. This trend was proportional to his rising interest in popular music in Japan. It is not unusual for travelling and working abroad to lead one to discover previously unnoticed or unappreciated characteristics of one's own national culture. Mitsui's move toward Japanese popular music was stimulated both by his own reflection on the meaning of 'foreign' music, and by the requests of American and European academics eager to know more about an area of music that had been poorly circulated and little discussed. For example, in 1995 he was invited by Charles Hamm and Alan Tansman (a Japanese literature specialist) to Dartmouth College to give a course titled 'Popular Music in Japan'.

His English papers are aimed at improving the unbalanced circulation of knowledge on Japanese music. In these papers he has discussed, among other topics, a form of street song in late-nineteenth-century Japan whose ideological leaders were inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1993A), the class shift of bluegrass music from the working class in the US to the middle class in Japan (1993B), the formative period of Japanese copyright law and its lack of compatibility with vernacular practices of publication and authorship (1993C), folk-inspired pop music with electric instruments (1996), an overview of the Japanese music industry with emphasis upon the process of urbanisation of indigenous (folk) sound structure and incorporation of Western elements (1997A), Okinawan pop as 'domestic exoticism' in Japanese mainland media (1998C), changes in the image of America in the history of country & western in postwar Japan (2001), and the importation of Tin Pan Alley sheet music and its impact on Japan's record industry towards the end of the 1920s (2004). He was guest editor of the Japan issue of *Popular Music*, Vol. 10/3 (1991), editor of *Popular Music: Intercultural Interpretations* (the Proceedings of the Kanazawa Conference of IASPM, 1998), and co-editor of *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing* (Routledge, 1998). It is hard to summarise his works in a few paragraphs, but one can note his persistent interest in folk music and its electrification and industrialisation.

## Educator

In 1987 he co-founded the Japan branch of IASPM, which was restructured to be the Japanese Association for the Study of Popular Music three years later. He was naturally elected as the first president of this association. In part thanks to JASPM, the

1990s saw a gradually increasing presence of popular music studies in Japanese academia, though to a lesser degree than in Anglophone countries. To trace the development of popular music studies in Japan, one could not do better than to read Mitsui's English annotations (1984, 1988<sub>A</sub>, 1991, 1993<sub>D</sub>, 1995, 1997<sub>B</sub>, 2003).

In 1993 Mitsui, in addition to his courses on English language and literature, began teaching theory and methodology of popular music research in a newly founded Masters course in the Department of Music Education at Kanazawa University. This new position reinforced his connection with the domestic associations of musicology and music education. Consequently, Mitsui was invited as a guest lecturer and speaker by various music departments in the 1990s, while he in turn often invited scholars of popular music to his department. Together with a few others, he made popular music studies a part of the Japanese academic community.

Meanwhile, he edited two anthologies of popular music studies translated from English, *Research on Popular Music* (1990<sub>B</sub>) and *Popular Music Studies* (2005<sub>A</sub>). The tables of contents of these two similarly titled books suggest the outline of his courses in Kanazawa. The former collects six papers that first appeared in *Popular Music* (by Philip Tagg, Iain Chambers, Richard Middleton, Peter Wicke, Antoine Hennion and Will Straw), while the latter contains selected items from the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World Vol. 1 (Media, Industry and Society)*.

Mitsui's excellence in education is well displayed in *Popular Music and Academia* (2005), whose contributors are mostly selected from among his academic 'offspring', institutional or self-declared. The chapters deal with, for example, academic research on popular music as seen from the standpoint of journalism (Tôyô Nakamura, the founder of *Music Magazine* and one of the first editors-researchers who knew Mitsui by 1966), a discursive and political analysis of American and British rock journalism (Tadashi Igarashi), a review of jazz studies since the 1990s (Shuhei Hosokawa), the sociological prolegomena to the meaning of groove (*nori*) in mass behaviour (Hiroshi Ogawa), chinoiserie in Japanese wartime song (Edgar Pope), friction between mainstream popular music and niche genres (Mamoru Tôya), gender representation and narrative structure in video clips of 'visual rock' (Kyôko Koizumi), the aesthetics and anti-ethics of plundering (Satoshi Masuda), and the consumption, re-production and domestication of rock'n'roll in the working-class bikers' subculture (Masahiko Ôyama). The wide selection of topics is already indicative of the range of Mitsui's teaching. The authors surely owe much to their conversations with Mitsui in classrooms, cafés, bars, restaurants and conference venues. Teaching popular music in universities (under the generic names of cultural theory, media theory, contemporary sociology, applied musicology and so on) has now become commonplace in Japan. Mitsui's tireless devotion has been indispensable for this change. It is the task of his former students and colleagues to keep the discipline challenging.

I will conclude this homage (by an author who is usually opposed to hero-worship in the popular music press) with an episode that shows Mitsui's generosity. Last May while packing my belongings for the move to Kyoto, I came across, at the bottom of miscellaneous files, some forgotten photocopies of Robert Johnson's lyrics. Mitsui had sent them to me around 1988, in reply to my request to send me the words of Phonograph Blues (which sounded indecipherable to me, and which was not transcribed on the jacket of my America-released LP) as material for my dissertation on recorded sound. Having imagined that all he had to do was to photocopy a page of a certain blues anthology, I believed that my request was a simple one. But Mitsui's letter was unexpectedly thick. It contained pages from Samuel Charter's *Robert*

Johnson and Michael Taft's *Blues Lyric Poetry* (with Mitsui's negative comments), together with his own transcription and translation from the Japanese release of Robert Johnson's LP. The latter included his hand-written corrections and notes. It is clear that he, upon receiving a letter from me, listened a few more times to a piece he had attentively listened to dozens of times before, in order to improve even further his transcription and translation. (His didactic intention of teaching me the difficulty of blues poetry was obvious, too.) Many others must have received similar gifts from him over the years, ungrudgingly prepared despite his heavy academic and journalistic duties.

Toru Mitsui is not the only powerhouse who has helped to form popular music studies in Japan and to connect the local community of scholars here to an international network. However, without his achievement of over forty years, it would have been a more superficial community and more isolated from those of other countries. In the 1960s he learned new approaches to American and British folk culture, which laid the foundation for much research on rock and African-American music in the 1970s. Thanks to his books, translations and foreign book reviews since this decade, Japanese students were so well prepared intellectually that they were neither astonished nor overwhelmed by the growing discipline called popular music studies in the subsequent decades. His English publications have taught international readers that Japan not only has a huge music industry but also has been prolific in quality publications on popular music. He has built bridges between academia and journalism domestically, and between Japan and other countries internationally. No one else could have accomplished such an enormous and difficult task.

To him, certainly, retirement does not mean a farewell to intellectual production. His work list continues to expand. In a recent email, he told me that he had met an old friend in Fukuoka to play American folk music together as they used to do. Retirement from one section of his life means a return to another one. Perhaps we can soon expect his first CD?

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