

nobuko
miyamoto
120,000
stories



DISC ONE: 2020

1. We Are the Children 4:16

© 2021 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – C. K. Iijima)

2. Not Yo' Butterfly 4:19

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

3. Caman 6:27

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

4. Tampopo (Dandelion) 6:08

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

5. Somos Asiáticos 5:26

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – C. K. Iijima)

6. Ichigo Ichie 4:37

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – Y. Fujimoto – P. J. Hirabayashi)

7. What Is the Color of Love? 7:26

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

8. 120,000 Stories 5:02

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

9. Meditation on a Lotus 8:31

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

10. Black Lives Matter 5:59

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

11. What Time Is It on the Clock of the World? 3:49

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(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – J. A. Pérez/ASCAP)

12. To All Relations / Tala'a 'I-badru 'alaynā 3:03

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(Arrangement, additional music and words by
N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

DISC TWO: 1973–2013

1. Yellow Pearl 3:02

© 1973 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – C. K. Iijima)

2. Free the Land 3:36

© 1973 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – C. K. Iijima)

3. West to East 5:04

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(B. Yee/EmploYee Music, BMI)

4. Beckoning 3:31

© 2021 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(R. Baba/Ruba Music, BMI)

5. American Made 5:10

© 1983 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – B. Yee/EmploYee
Music, BMI)

6. English Lesson 6:20

© 2021 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – D. Nakamoto/Poi Dog
Music, ASCAP – Y. A. Park)

7. Pilipino Tango 7:23

© 2021 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – D. Nakamoto/Poi Dog
Music, ASCAP – J. De Vega)

8. To All Relations (Mitakuye Oyasin) 6:24

© 1997 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

9. Fortunata 6:30

© 1997 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP)

10. Yuiyo Bon Odori 3:48

© 1999 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – Rev. M. Kodani)

11. Mottainai 3:38

© 2016 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – D. Nakamoto/Poi Dog
Music, ASCAP)

12. Cycles of Change 4:27

© 2012 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – Q. Flores/BMI –
M. González/BMI)

13. Bam Butsu – no Tsunagari (10,000 Things, All Connected) 6:26

© 2016 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
(N. Miyamoto/Ayyubi Music, ASCAP – C. Castro/BMI –
Q. Flores/BMI – M. González/BMI)

*This recording is part of the Asian Pacific America series,
produced in collaboration with the Smithsonian Asian Pacific
American Center.*



who is nobuko miyamoto?

quetzal flores &
derek nakamoto

FandangObon, Los Angeles, 2015
Photo by Mike Murase

Nobuko Miyamoto is a third-generation Japanese American songwriter, dancer, theater artist, and activist. She is a generational leader whose songs and dances have crossed borders and united communities with a fire for justice.

The title of her new album evokes the approximate number of people of Japanese ancestry who were incarcerated in camps run by the US government during World War II: 120,000. Accused of no crime, most of these people were American citizens, and most were forcibly removed from communities on the US West Coast. In 1988, the federal government acknowledged these events as a “grave injustice,” the result of “racial prejudice, wartime hysteria and a failure of political leadership” (Civil Liberties Act of 1988). But in the intervening decades, even after people were permitted to return to their homes starting in 1945, families were torn apart, communities dissolved, and Japanese culture stigmatized.

A small child during World War II, Nobuko came to voice through the revolutionary movements occurring in the US and abroad in the 1960s. Through motherhood and marriage, she lives an experience of intertwined Black and Japanese families, communities, and histories, which are the foundation of much of her work as an artist. Her activism in the early 1970s led to the co-creation of the iconic album *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America* (Paredon,

1973). From the stage, protest line, and Buddhist temple grounds, Nobuko continues to explore ways to reclaim and re-spirit our minds, bodies, histories, and communities, using the arts to create social change and forge solidarity.

When Nobuko mentioned that Smithsonian Folkways wanted to do a retrospective record with her, we immediately asked, “Do you have anything new you want to offer?” Nobuko is ripe with experience, wisdom, and creativity. We jumped at the chance to participate in an album of new and reimagined compositions by this master artist.

This double album compiles Nobuko’s past and present work. We designed the arrangements around her performances, which include collaboration with a group of artists from diverse musical traditions who share her commitment to the social power of music. This recording is a reminder that we need to build strong relationships with our elders, listen to their stories, enable their expression, and grow from their contributions. The reinterpretation of old songs reveals the contemporary resonance of lyrics written decades ago—they demonstrate how one person’s story can be many people’s stories—and the new songs demonstrate Nobuko’s unceasing passion and creativity. We’ve got plans for you, Nobuko!



120,000

Nobuko as a child with her family in Brigham City, Utah, 1945. Photo by Harry Hayashida, courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto

stories

nobuko miyamoto

Nobuko performing in *Flower Drum Song* on Broadway, 1958. Photo by Will Rapport, courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto

I grew up never hearing a song that sang me. As a third-generation Japanese American, I was a child uprooted by our forced removal from California during World War II. I heard songs I loved on the radio. Songs that filled my loneliness, gave me joy, made me want to dance. I didn't realize I was missing my own song.

When my family was released from camp, I was called JoAnne rather than Nobuko, my real first name. I was exposed to classical music and studied ballet. I thought the Japanese music my uncle chanted was weird. I was lucky to have a Black music teacher at my grammar school, Mrs. Jackson, who believed children could sing Bach chorales. And so we did! I was also blessed with a scholarship at American School of Dance, which led to a career in films and on Broadway. At 18 I was in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical



Flower Drum Song, singing directly to the audience, “Chop suey, chop suey....” I didn’t know why I was feeling uncomfortable. There was something in the way those delighted folks looked at us. In a flash I realized, WE were “chop suey”—Chinese food for white people!

That started me questioning: How come I’ve never seen a show that tells my story? Why do I have to play these silly “Oriental” roles? My solution: Cross the color line. Maybe in this way, I could use my talent and be seen as someone besides an “Oriental.” In the early 1960s, I “passed” for Puerto Rican in the film *West Side Story*, where I was cast as one of Maria’s friends. It felt pretty exhilarating, but it also revealed a fear: I could sing in a group, but alone, I was afraid of the sound of my own voice. This led me to my singing teacher, Dini Clarke, an African American musician from Washington, DC. In the mid-1960s, while Watts was burning, he shared stories across his piano of discrimination he endured as a Black man. And he introduced me to Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, Carmen McCrae, Nina Simone—Black women singers who knew how to tell a story with a song.

Singing my song was not simply a matter of learning vocal technique. Breaking out of my silence was a process of understanding and undoing the oppression that put a muzzle on my people in this country. In 1968 I helped the Italian filmmaker Antonello Branca to make a docu-

drama about the Black Panthers. This project took me across another kind of color line, into the Black struggle. In Harlem, I met activist Yuri Kochiyama, who introduced me to Asian Americans for Action. I was blown away by this intergenerational group of radicals who were taking a stand against the US war in Vietnam. Among them was Chris Iijima, an articulate young activist who was one of their leaders.

In 1970 we went to Chicago to an historic first gathering of East and West Coast Asian activists. After intense meetings with the Panthers and urban Native Americans, a few of us late-nighters were cooling down. Chris Iijima brought out his guitar. I didn’t know he played. He didn’t know I sang. Somehow we stumbled into making a song. It seemed the only way to sum up the communal feelings of that moment. The next day, before this large congregation of activists, Chris and I sang, feeling a force beyond our own. It was the song we never had, the song we’d been waiting for. We were just there to deliver it.

The many songs that followed led Chris and me to become troubadours, later joined by “Charlie” Chin. Sharing and learning with Asian American communities across the country, we were creating a voice for our people. We were not only performing, we were organizing, digging for our roots, defining our dreams to transform ourselves and our world. Our rootedness enabled us to sing our stories across cultural boundaries



Nobuko dancing in film *West Side Story*, 1961.
Photo courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto



in a language of the spirit. It helped us create solidarity and support for struggles of other people of color. This was the fertile ground that birthed the 1973 album *A Grain of Sand* (Paredon).

Having our own song changed my life. It transformed how I saw art and what it could do in the world. It started me on my life's path as a community "artist."

It has been a long journey, but I'm not rocking chair-ready. I am an elder, a grandmother, a cultural activist, and still a song maker. Smithsonian Folkways has given me a beautiful opportunity to share with you *120,000 Stories*. That's a lot of stories, but not nearly enough. It is the number of Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in America's concentration camps during World War II. But it also symbolizes the stories untold, the songs unheard, ignored, missing from our cultural stratosphere.

I sing for those like myself, who grew up without their own song. I sing for those different than myself, to share my story. I sing to open space for more songs, more stories—to reveal our humanity, our interconnectedness, and to touch the soul as only a song can do.

Charlie Chin, Nobuko, Chris Iijima
rehearse in the kitchen of Folk City,
ca. 1971. Photo by Bob Hsiang

DISC ONE/ 2020

track notes

This album contains two discs. Disc 1 presents new songs and new interpretations of old songs, all recorded in 2020. Disc 2 is an archaeological excavation of old recordings from 1973 to 2013, including songs from *A Grain of Sand*, bands, musicals, *obon*, and our community arts organization Great Leap. — Nobuko Miyamoto

1. We Are the Children

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano, B-3; Asiyah Ayubbi, Nancy Sekizawa, Carla Vega, Lynne Fiddmont, Valerie Pinkston, Lamont Van Hook, backing vocals

This is one of the first songs Chris Iijima and I wrote at the birth of the Asian American movement, a powerful moment of awakening to reclaim and define ourselves. I felt it was worthy of reinterpretation after so many years. It still sings its relevance. As people of color, we still need to sing a song for ourselves.



Caricature of Nobuko Miyamoto and Chris Iijima
Drawing by A'misa Chiu, courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto

2. Not Yo' Butterfly

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, Fender Rhodes; Juan Pérez, bass; Tylana Enomoto, violin; Mike Penny, Sean Miura, shamisen; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drums; Asiyah Ayubbi, Nancy Sekizawa, Carla Vega, backing vocals

In 2019 street banners lined Los Angeles's La Brea Avenue, advertising *Madame Butterfly*. That 1904 Puccini opera's story of tragic Cho Cho-san, a Japanese geisha abandoned with child by her American lover, still hounds us today—*Susie Wong*, *Miss Saigon*, and more, all written by white males. So, now it's my turn to challenge the stereotype. My great-grandmother was from a samurai clan and the power behind my family. She was not, and I am not yo' butterfly!

3. Gaman

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano, pipe organ, vocals

My friend Reiko Sato told me of her experiences as a young girl confined for four years in the Gila River concentration camp, one of the ten War Relocation Authority sites where 120,000 Japanese, mostly American citizens, were incarcerated during World War II. *Gaman* is a Japanese wisdom ingrained in us as a way to endure hardships. Today, too many young people are confined in camps—in Jordan, Kenya, Pakistan, the US, and beyond. They must have their own kind of *gaman*.

4. Tampopo (Dandelion)

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano, synth bass; Kenny Endo, taiko, percussion

The dandelion is reviled as an invasive weed. But looking at my garden, it dawned on me that we Asians are that pesky, unwanted yellow flower that changes form and survives in the harshest environments. This song was originally written as a Japanese Buddhist *obon* piece, a circle dance performed by hundreds of *tampopo*, coming together to remember our ancestors. Here I am honored to sing with master taiko drummer Kenny Endo. In the late 1960s, taiko in America emerged with Kinnara Taiko (Los Angeles) and San Francisco Taiko Dojo, connecting young Japanese Americans with our roots. It continues to evolve with hundreds of taiko groups in North America. Endo was one of the first and foremost Japanese Americans to train in traditional music in Japan, and was the first foreigner to receive his *natori* in classical drumming. Taiko, known for its thunderous sounds and martial-arts-like movements, is played by Endo on this track with utmost subtlety. It's our first musical reunion since the early '70s, when we were in the band Warriors of the Rainbow. The song opens with arranger Derek Nakamoto's sensitive and penetrating touch on piano. We are all dandelions.

5. Somos Asiáticos

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano; Quetzal Flores, guitar; Juan Pérez, bass; Joey De Leon, congas, bongo, cow bell; Cava Tenorio González, Gabriel González, Martha González, backing vocals

On the Upper West Side in New York City, just down the street from my apartment, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans were in a housing struggle they called “urban removal.” We Asians joined up with the organization El Comité, squatting in abandoned buildings and moving in poor families rent-free. El Comité also helped us take over a storefront for an Asian American center we named “Chickens Come Home to Roost.” In our liberated local coffee house we met Latin American musicians who performed *nueva canción*, songs that supported political struggles in their homelands. They inspired our first song in Spanish. What a thrill to bring alive “Somos Asiáticos” again with Quetzal, Juan, Derek, and Joey De Leon, who brought the Nuyorican spirit into the studio!



6. Ichigo Ichie

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Kenny Endo, taiko; Derek Nakamoto, synth bass

The song was created on a snowy day on Sado Island, Japan, with Yoko Fujimoto, singer with KODO, and PJ Hirabayashi, co-founder of San Jose Taiko. We were on a writing retreat for our Triangle Project, “Journey of the Dandelions.” My first visit to Japan also took me to my ancestral home, Fukuoka, to meet my family. *Ichigo ichie* is a Japanese idiom meaning “each moment once in a lifetime,” and that it was for me. Commonly associated with the philosophy of tea ceremony, *ichigo ichie* is easily applied to the fleeting nature of improvisational music. We also play with the Heart Sutra, “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”



bottom left: Graphic depicting Nobuko and Chris in NY Squatters' Movement, 1972–73. Artwork by Tran Bui, courtesy of Great Leap Archive

top left: Triangle Project: Yoko Fujimoto, Nobuko Miyamoto, PJ Hirabayashi. Photo by Kevin Higa, courtesy of Great Leap Archive

above: Nobuko sings “Jan Ken Po” with kids, including her son Kamau (left). Photo courtesy of Great Leap Archive

7. What Is the Color of Love?

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano; Juan Pérez, bass; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drums; Gerald Albright, saxophone

Having an Afro-Asian child in the 1970s was not common either in my community or the outside world. I had to figure out how to raise my son, Kamau, when his father's life was taken while trying to establish Malcolm X's Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in Harlem. We straddled two worlds to heal and make our life whole. In Los Angeles, we had support from my Asian comrades and folks in the Black arts community in Leimert Park. In New York, we had his father's family, the Jeffreys. Kamau's awareness of racial difference came early, and his instinct for justice was something he didn't have to be taught. Plus, he never ran out of questions.

8. 120,000 Stories

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals, piano; Derek Nakamoto, Wurlitzer electric piano, B-3, vocals; Mike Penny, shamisen; Juan Pérez, bass; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drums; George Abe, fue

This song came to me when survivors of Japanese American concentration camps began, in 2019, to stand up against the US government's treatment of asylum seekers and the separation of children from their families. It was created as music for an *obon* circle dance, using the body as a means of memory and connection between Asian American and Latinx people. This recording could only include a few stories, but when performed live, we invite others to share more.

9. Meditation on a Lotus

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals, piano; Derek Nakamoto, Fender Rhodes, synthesizer; Juan Pérez, bass; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drums; Tetsuya Nakamura, harmonica

In the courtyard of Senshin Buddhist Temple, Reverend Masao Kodani, or Rev. Mas, as we call him, used to grow a lotus plant in a barrel. Each summer exquisite flowers bloomed, making their way through the murky water, reminding us how we mortals should make our way through the mud of our crazy lives to blossom in enlightenment. I confess I'm a lousy meditator, impatient, too distracted. But I keep trying. I guess that's why they call it a practice.



Rev. Mas's lotus
Photo by Nobuko Miyamoto



left: Van Troi Anti-Imperialist Youth Brigade, pre-march rehearsal prior to Nisei Week Grand Parade takeover in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, August 22, 1972

Photo by Alan Ohashi/Visual Communications Photographic Archive – George T. Ishizuka and Harukichi Nakamura Asian American Movement Collection

reclaiming our heritage

Reverend Masao Kodani

At the start of the 1940s, Japanese nationals and their American-born children lived in *de facto* segregated ethnic communities in the three Pacific Coast states. In the underlying Japanese culture that flourished in these communities, which were largely Buddhist in religion, the performing arts were particularly prominent. Buddhist temples, along with growing numbers of Christian churches, were central gathering places—their social halls filled with traditional Japanese music, dance, singing, and poetry groups. At the same time, the second-generation youth, the *Nisei*, were growing up in public schools and absorbing “dominant” American culture with their non-Japanese American peers.

After December 7, 1941, the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, anything traditionally Japanese became immediately suspect. In the months leading up to the mass removal of West Coast Japanese Americans into concentration camps, the FBI investigated and arrested community leaders and teachers of Japanese culture. The tradition of performing arts as an essential part of being truly “educated” died in the camps. A whole generation was made to see their cultural heritage as inferior or as a liability.

After World War II, Japanese American commu-

nities were reborn in a more American format and with increased numbers of Christian converts. But starting in the 1970s, Nobuko Miyamoto was among the pioneering Japanese American artists who reminded us of what had been missing since camp: a generation of adults who sang, danced, and produced theater. At long last, we were able to recover our performing arts. We remembered and embraced the arts as the civilized activity of expressing what cannot be expressed in any other way, and not simply as an activity relegated to children.

In the same spirit, at Senshin Temple in Los Angeles we endeavored to reclaim Buddhist ideas and attitudes. The temple’s relationship with Nobuko Miyamoto continues to be a mutually benefitting, mutually educating, and mutually enjoyable journey. She was one of the first people to look at what was lost and to include it as an important part of what she is—a crucial process for all people of non-European heritage who have come to America. It is not a matter of pride or being ashamed of who we are, it is only to see what is—good, bad, positive, negative, sad, and joyful.

Gassho

Reverend Masao Kodani is a retired Jodo Shinshu Buddhist minister from Senshin Buddhist Temple in South Central Los Angeles. He is the co-founder of Kinnara Taiko, the second taiko ensemble organized in the United States.

10. Black Lives Matter

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals, piano; Juan Pérez, bass; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drums; Gerald Albright, saxophone; Asiyah Ayubbi, Nancy Sekizawa, Carla Vega, Lynne Fiddmont, Valerie Pinkston, Lamont Van Hook, backing vocals

This song is dedicated to my husband Tarabu and his mom Mamie. It is an homage to the Black Lives Matter movement that continues the struggle against the systemic violence toward Black people. Having Mamie live in Los Angeles with us in order to avoid the long winters of her home in Buffalo, New York, was a gift that put me next to a century of Black history. When Mamie was 107 years old, Tarabu took her back to Mississippi, 100 years after her family had fled the direct threats on her father by the Ku Klux Klan. I stood on the very spot in Ellisville where his friend John Hartfield was lynched before 10,000 people. I wondered, what kind of hate did it take to do this to another human being? Mamie overcame her childhood fear and became a symbol of courage as a lynching survivor. She died at 111, a spirit of resilience and pure love. Mamie taught me that our lived stories are important to share, and you are never too old to be relevant! Thanks, Mom.

11. What Time Is It on the Clock of the World?

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Juan Pérez, Turbo Didley; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drums; Quetzal Flores, jarana; Derek Nakamoto, Wurlitzer electric piano, B-3, upright piano, synth bass; Tetsuya Nakamura, harmonica; Asiyah Ayubbi, Nancy Sekizawa, Carla Vega, Lynne Fiddmont, Valerie Pinkston, Lamont Van Hook, backing vocals

Grace Lee Boggs, activist/philosopher, often posed this question in her talks. If she were still here, she would be asking: if the world can stop in its tracks for COVID-19, why can’t we do it for Climate Change? Grace, who lived to be 100, knew what time it was in 2000, when she invited me to her Detroit. To most it’s a broken city, but it was her laboratory, her classroom, most of all, her community—a place of dreamers, urban visionaries, artists, and organic gardeners. Using my art to help rebuild and re-spirit Detroit was my environmental awakening. This song brings together Grace’s challenge and the inspirational music of the great bassist Juan Pérez, who composed this song on an old cigar box that was “upcycled” into a Turbo Didley. Waste nothing!

12. To All Relations / Tala'a 'I-badru 'alaynā

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Asiyah Ayubbi, vocals, darbuka

My son Kamau, who became a Sufi Muslim, an imam, and a chaplain, has enriched our family's cultural and spiritual influences. This duet weaves together Lakota wisdom and a traditional Islamic song. "To All Relations" came to me after an invitation to the Many Winters Gathering of Elders in 1992 (see Disc 2, Track 8) and was blessed in ceremony by Lakota elder Wallace Black Elk. "Tala'a 'I-badru 'alaynā" is a welcoming song, one of the oldest in Islamic culture. It is said to have been sung over 1,450 years ago to receive Muhammad in Medina after he was exiled from his home in Mecca. I sing with my granddaughter Asiyah, who as a young girl was encouraged by Sheik Hisham Kabbani to help create a girls' choir in their Michigan mosque. Their group, Az-Zahra, has made three albums and performed internationally. In a time plagued with cultural divides and fear of those seeking refuge, we sing a message of welcoming, peace, and unity.

Nobuko and her granddaughter
Asiyah Ayubbi perform at a
Los Angeles obon festival.
Photo by Daren Mooko Photography





DISC TWO/ 1973 — 2013

Nobuko demonstrating at the United Nations building with the Republic of New Africa, 1973. Photo by Yuri Kochiyama, courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto

a grain of sand

Barbara Dane

In the early 1970s, as the war in Vietnam intensified, people at home in the USA looked for more effective ways of expressing their opposition. The first time I heard JoAnne (Nobuko) Miyamoto, Chris Kando Iijima, and William “Charlie” Chin was during a performance Ed Pearl had organized at the Ash Grove, the legendary Los Angeles music venue, offering a view of Asians as individual, flesh-and-blood persons rather than as the numbers and victims to which the Vietnam-era press had reduced them.

The program began with a group of Vietnamese students, sent to California to be trained as loyal bureaucrats for when they returned home to serve the US-backed dictator Nguyen Kao Ky. The very act of showing up that night to demonstrate their rejection of that notion may have cost them their visas and ended their careers, if not worse, but they bravely sang and then quickly left.

With skillful musicality, Nobuko, Chris, and Charlie delivered a clear look at the daily challenges of young Asian Americans, sharing their outlook based on the big picture and situating their struggles in the ranks of other embattled parts of society. I didn’t hesitate to make a date to record them. Their message of self-determina-

tion and solidarity was a perfect fit for our label, Paredon, and its mission of embracing and giving voice to the underserved in this xenophobic and unjust society.

When I met Nobuko in the ’70s, I hadn’t known that their album would later be considered the first such musical expression from the Asian American community, and I am deeply grateful that she and the others created it and then allowed me to present *A Grain of Sand* on Paredon. Nobuko has always been a cultural leader. Whatever she offers—as a singer, dancer, choreographer, poet, organizer—is made with grace and wisdom. Even after 50 years her creative powers have only strengthened and grown, spinning out new tools to help us all survive in these troubled times.

Barbara Dane is a musician, activist, and the co-founder of Paredon Records.

1. Yellow Pearl

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Chris Iijima, vocals, guitar;
William "Charlie" Chin, guitar; Attallah Ayyubi, conga
From *A Grain of Sand*, Paredon 1020, 1973

Chris Iijima had a genius for making the political poetic. This song, part of the album *A Grain of Sand*, turned the derogatory term “yellow peril”—which described Asians as a menace to European and American societies—into a pearl, a jewel, a thing of beauty and resilience. We saw the Vietnamese resisting the US invasion as an example of the power of the small. We claimed our identities as Asian Americans and challenged the notion of being a “minority” by connecting to Asians around the world.

2. Free the Land

Nobuko Miyamoto, lead vocals; Chris Iijima, vocals, guitar;
William "Charlie" Chin, guitar; Attallah Ayyubi, congas, backing
vocals; Mutulu Shakur, backing vocals
From *A Grain of Sand*, Paredon 1020, 1973

Yuri Kochiyama was a “citizen” of the Republic of New Africa, the organization formed from the philosophy of her friend Malcolm X. She pulled in Asian American activists to support their struggles. Two spirited New African brothers, Mutulu Shakur and Attallah Ayyubi, often greeted us with their slogan, “Free the Land!” Both sing the chorus of this recording, and Attallah played congas. I still visit Mutulu, who has spent more than 30 years as a political prisoner. Attallah,



above: Poster for benefit concert by Chris Iijima, JoAnne (Nobuko), Charlie Chin, 1971 Artwork by Tomie Arai, courtesy of Great Leap Archive

right: “From Harlem with Love: A Mural for Yuri and Malcolm” created by artists/activists inspired by the legacies and deep friendship of Yuri Kochiyama and Malcolm X. Photo by Nobuko Miyamoto



the father of my son Kamau, was killed while in the process of establishing the mosque Malcolm planned in Harlem.

Free the Land
Dr. Mutulu Shakur

“Free the Land” was the slogan of the Republic of New Africa, an organization begun in 1968, and Asian American artists Chris Iijima and Nobuko Miyamoto made it the chorus of a powerful song. Recording it for 1973’s *A Grain of Sand* became a collaboration, with the participation of New Africans Attallah Ayyubi and myself, and from it grew a national alliance between the Black and Asian communities that remains strong today. (The album’s songs were also my son Tupac’s early childhood lullabies.) Nobuko reminds me of the foundation of my being. She reminds me that culture is a political weapon, a liberation force for the spirit.

Mutulu Shakur is a doctor of acupuncture, an activist, and writer. As of 2020, he continues to serve a 60-year sentence in federal penitentiary, though he was due for mandatory parole in 2016.

3. West to East

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Benny Yee, piano; Russel Baba, saxophone; Gary Fitzgerald, bass; E.W. Wainright, drums
Recorded 1977 at Cherokee Studios. Previously unreleased.

Warriors of the Rainbow, a multi-ethnic band led by Benny Yee and myself, had many iterations from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s. The musicians from this band hailed from Northern and Southern California. We treasured the rare times we had to rehearse and gig together. Benny’s “West to East” needed no words to express the passionate energy of this time of cultural awakening. Our process of decolonization was more than mental. We weren’t just talking freedom, we were being it with our music.

4. Beckoning

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Benny Yee, piano; Russel Baba, saxophone; Gary Fitzgerald, bass; E.W. Wainright, drums
Recorded in 1977 at Cherokee Studios. Previously unreleased.

Russel Baba exemplified the spirit of Warriors of the Rainbow. Here I had the pleasure of singing with his unique creativity as a writer and improvisational musician. At the time, Russel was also becoming a master taiko player along with his wife Jeannie Mercer, training with San Francisco Taiko Dojo under Sensei Seiichi Tanaka. They later moved to Mount Shasta and established Shasta Taiko.

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Poster for benefit concert organized by Progressive Productions of Lincoln Detox Acupuncture in 1979. Design by the Madame Binh Graphics Collective, courtesy of Great Leap Archive



5. American Made

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano, synthesizers, backing vocals; John Barnes, Fender Rhodes, Moog bass; Luis Conte, Dan Marfisi, percussion; Michael Paulo, alto saxophone; Marva King, Deborah Nishimura, and Tony Rita, backing vocals
From *Best of Both Worlds* album, *Great Leap 001*, 1983

When theater company East West Players asked Benny Yee and me to create a musical, we jumped at the chance. We didn't know how to write a script, but figured we'd tell the story through songs: a rock opera! *Chop Suey* was the inaugural theater production of Great Leap, the community arts organization we founded in Los Angeles in 1978. This show-stopper ballad, first sung by Deborah Nishimura, captured the feelings of so many young people who wanted to get the hell out of their Chinatown and be accepted as who we were as both Asian and American. This track was recorded for my first solo album, *Best of Both Worlds*.

left: Warriors of the Rainbow: Russel Baba, Nobuko Miyamoto, E.W. Wainright, Benny Yee, Gary Fitzgerald. Photo by Carroll Parrott Blue, courtesy of Great Leap Archive
right: *Talk Story II* musical: Deborah Nishimura, Michael Paul Chan, Young Ae Park, Jose De Vega, Nobuko Miyamoto. Designed by Magda Diaz, courtesy of Great Leap Archive

6. English Lesson

Young Ae Park, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, keyboards, synthesizer programming; Nobuko Miyamoto, Deborah Nishimura, backing vocals
From *Talk Story II* musical, *Great Leap*, 1989

Young Ae Park, a remarkable modern dancer and inventive choreographer, was born in Korea and came to the US with her family as a young child. She created "English Lesson" first as a modern dance piece—one in which she sang and danced this story of an Asian immigrant woman taunted by her white boyfriend. This collaboration later became part of Great Leap's *Talk Story II*, a musical that wove together a collection of songstories portraying an array of Asian American experiences. The production played at San Francisco's Theatre Artaud and the Los Angeles Theater Center in 1989.



7. Pilipino Tango

Jose De Vega, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, piano, synth bass; Nobuko Miyamoto, Deborah Nishimura, backing vocals
From *Talk Story II* musical, *Great Leap*, 1989

Jose De Vega, the actor/dancer who played Chino in the film *West Side Story*, became *Great Leap*'s choreographer/director in the 1980s. He co-wrote and performed this songstory as a tribute to the Manong, the Pilipino men who came to work and study in the first half of the 20th century. Because of restrictive immigration and anti-miscegenation laws, many remained single and without families in their old age, living only with their memories. Jose was one of the early victims of the AIDS epidemic. This piece, a part of *Talk Story II*, captured his extraordinary artistry.

8. To All Relations (Mitakuye Oyasin)

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals, singing bowl; Duncan Pain (Lakota), prayer and Native American drum; Derek Nakamoto, keyboards, synthesizer programming; Danny Yamamoto, djembe, drums; Francis Awe, talking drum; Kell Elifson, electric guitar
From *To All Relations* album, *Bindu*, 1997

Since the early days of the Asian American movement, we have been welcomed into circles of Native peoples who have shared their wisdom with us. We helped organize and support their struggles, such as the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, when we delivered medicine and supplies. In 1992, I was invited by a Native sister to the Many Winters Gathering of Elders in San

Pedro, California. "Mitakuye Oyasin" was said before each elder spoke their wisdom. I was then invited to participate in the women's *inipi*, the sacred sweat lodge. When one crawls out of the *inipi*, they are reborn. This song came to me in that instant. It was blessed by Lakota elder Wallace Black Elk in ceremony. Within this track you hear his grandson Duncan Pain speak a prayer in Lakota.

9. Fortunata

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, keyboards, backing vocals; June Kuramoto, koto; Jesse Acuna, berimbau
From *To All Relations* album, *Bindu*, 1997

This song responds to the tragic suicide-hanging of ten-year-old Fortunata, an indigenous child who lived on a reservation in Mato Grosso, Brazil. She was the youngest among many suicides driven by the "slash and burn" policies that robbed her people of their forest homeland. These policies are still in place today, in spite of the fact that Brazil's forests are considered the "lungs" of the earth.

Talk Story II musical: Deborah Nishimura,
Michael Paul Chan, Young Ae Park,
Jose De Vega, Nobuko Miyamoto. Photo by
Shane Sato, courtesy of Great Leap Archive



10. Yuiyo Bon Odori

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Sharon Koga, shamisen; George Abe, flute; Johnny Mori, taiko
From *Gathering of Joy: A History of Bon Odori in Mainland America book/album, Senshin Buddhist Temple, 1999*

In 1974 Reverend Masao Kodani of Senshin Buddhist Temple in South Central Los Angeles gave me the use of their social hall to teach dance. It became the spiritual home for me, my son, and my organization Great Leap. It was where we rehearsed and launched many projects. Reverend Mas had a clever way of teaching Buddhism. In 1984 he gave me an assignment: create an *obon* song in English. He wanted younger Japanese Americans to understand why we danced in a circle to remember our ancestors. At the time, I didn't know much about Japanese music. He gave me some recordings and said, "Write the song." When we performed "Yuiyo" (just dance) with 1,000 people of all ages, dancing in concentric circles, I felt us embody the Buddhist teaching of "interconnectedness."



Rev. Masao Kodani participating in *bon odori*.
Photo by Nobuko Miyamoto

11. Mottainai

Nobuko Miyamoto, Nancy Sekizawa, vocals; Derek Nakamoto, keyboards, backing vocals; Carla Vega, Rev. Masao Kodani, backing vocals; George Abe, bansuri; Sean Miura, shamisen; Danny Yamamoto, taiko, drums
From *Joy, Remembrance, Death: Obon Music for North America book/album, Southern District Dharma School League, 2016*

With the growing awareness of Climate Change, I wanted a way to bring the voices and traditions of people of color into the conversation. *Mottainai*, a Japanese word meaning "it's a shame to waste," came to be used by Wangari Maathai, Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Prize winner, who said it expressed African values of caring for the earth. Our song became popular and is regularly danced at *obon*. The accompanying music video (part of our "EcoVid" series) has helped spread consciousness about "greening" Buddhist temples in our community.

12. Cycles of Change

Nobuko Miyamoto, vocals; Martha González, vocals, percussion; Camilo Moreno, percussion; Quetzal Flores, guitar; Juan Pérez, bass; Tylana Enomoto, violin
From "Cycles of Change" *EcoVid* music video, Great Leap, 2012

Originally released as a music video on our "EcoVid" series, this song focuses on bicycling as a means to lighten our carbon footprint. It also became a crazy fun collaboration with Quetzal Flores and family. His partner Martha González is not only a great singer, but a great comedienne. And their son, Sandino, just a child then (now a musician in his own right), joined us in telling the story. That project made us all *familia* and created a partnership that continues to this day.

13. Bam Butsu – no Tsunagari (10,000 Things, All Connected)

Rev. Masao Kodani, introduction; Nancy Sekizawa, Martha González, Nobuko Miyamoto, Carla Vega, vocals; César Castro, guitar, vocals; Sean Miura, shamisen; Danny Yamamoto, taiko; George Abe, yokobue; Juan Pérez, bass
From Joy, Remembrance, Death: Obon Music for North America book/album, Southern District Dharma School League, 2016

This song brings together participatory *son jarocho* music and the accompanying dance tradition of fandango (both with Afro, Cuban, Indigenous, and Mexican roots) from Veracruz, Mexico, and Japanese Buddhist *obon*. It became the catalyst for the annual FandangObon Arts & EcoFest, an event that convenes local Mexican, Asian, African, and Muslim American communities into one circle at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) in Los Angeles. The song opens with “Atomic” Nancy Sekizawa, whose dynamic voice weaves together the feeling of the Japanese songs she heard on the jukebox in her parents’ Atomic Café in Little Tokyo and the 45s she programmed into the jukebox to make it a punk haven in the 1980s. She is joined by César Castro, born in Veracruz, who is the very spirit of *son jarocho* music, and songbird of the band Quetzal, Martha González. Together they make “Bam Butsu” a song that compels you to dance and feel—all things connected!



FandangObon poster, featuring artwork by Jose Ramirez and Qris Yamashita, courtesy of Great Leap Archive



(L to R) Nobuko Miyamoto, Nancy Sekizawa, Carla Vega, Asiyah Ayubbi, and June Kaewsih perform for FandangObon at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, Los Angeles, 2015. Photo by Mike Murase



FandangObon 2015: (L to R) Adriana Delfin, Columba B. Maldonado, E. M. Abdilmumin, Nobuko Miyamoto, and Martha Gonzalez. Photo by Mike Murase

production/ recording credits

Produced by Derek Nakamoto & Quetzal Flores

Disc 1:

recorded, mixed, and mastered in 2020 by Chris Sorem at The Nest Studio, Los Angeles, CA. Additional recording: Tropico Union, Los Angeles, CA, and Stagg Street Studio, Van Nuys, CA, by Glenn Suravech; NMG Studio, Gardena, CA; Artivist Entertainment Studios, Los Angeles, CA; and Bright Music Studios, Castle Rock, CO

Additional mastering by Ruairi O'Flaherty for Echo Mastering

Disc 2:

tracks 1 & 2 recorded in 1973 by Jonathan Thayer at A-1 Sound in New York, NY; tracks 3 & 4 recorded in 1977 by David Hines at Cherokee Studios in Hollywood, CA; track 5 recorded in 1983 by Craig Burbidge at Nakamoto Music Group, Inc. in Los Angeles, CA; tracks 6 & 7 recorded in 1983 by Craig Burbidge and Derek Nakamoto at Spindle Top Studio, Los Angeles, CA; tracks 8 & 9 recorded in 1997 by Derek Nakamoto at Bindu Studio, Santa Monica, CA; track 10 recorded in 1984 by Glen Nishida at Pacifica Recording Studios in Los Angeles, CA; track 11

recorded in 2011 by Derek Nakamoto and Glenn Suravech at Suburban Soul in Torrance, CA, NMG Studio in Los Angeles, CA, and Konscious Studio in Santa Monica, CA; tracks 12 & 13 recorded in 2012 and 2013, respectively, by Quetzal Flores at Artivist Entertainment Studios in Los Angeles, CA.

Additional mastering by Denny Fongheiser for Sonic Bliss Productions

Annotated by Nobuko Miyamoto

Album cover photographs by Michael Becker

Gerald Albright appears courtesy of Bright Music Records

Smithsonian Folkways executive producers: Huib Schippers and John Smith

Production managers: Sojin Kim, Logan Clark, and Mary Monseur

Editorial assistance by Carla Borden

Art direction, design, and layout by Visual Dialogue



above: Nobuko Miyamoto and her family, 2019. From top left: Kamau, Asiyah, Muhammad, Malika, Ahmed, Tarabu, Nobuko, Noora. Photo by Zohair Mohsen

left: Nobuko's mother's family, the Nishimuras, in Fukuoka, Japan, ca. 1919. Photo courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto



left: Nobuko (being held, left) with her family, Los Angeles, ca. 1940. Photo by Harry Hayashida, courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto

top right: Nobuko performing at memorial for Grace Lee Boggs in Oakland's Chinatown, 2016. Photo courtesy of Great Leap Archive

bottom right: Nobuko with Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama at UCLA. Photo courtesy of Great Leap Archive



top: Co-producers Derek Nakamoto, Quetzal Flores. Photo by Daren Mooko Photography

right: Core Disc 1 recording team: (L to R) Chris Sorem, engineer; Quetzal Flores, co-producer; Abe Lagrimas Jr., drummer; Juan Pérez, bass; Tylana Enomoto ('son), violin; Derek Nakamoto, co-producer; Nobuko. Photo by Deborah Wong



top: Nobuko recording "Somos Asiaticos." Photo by Daren Mooko Photography

right: Background singers: (L to R) Asiyah Ayubbi, Nancy Sekizawa, Carla Vega. Photo by Nobuko Miyamoto



Smithsonian Folkways is:

Cecille Chen, director of business affairs and royalties; Logan Clark, executive assistant; Toby Dodds, director of web and IT; Beshou Gedamu, marketing specialist; Will Griffin, licensing manager; Kate Harrington, production assistant; Madison Hart, royalty assistant; Fred Knittel, marketing specialist; Seth Langer, licensing and marketing assistant; Helen Lindsay, customer service; Mary Monseur, production manager; Jeff Place, curator and senior archivist; Sayem Sharif, director of financial operations; Ronnie Simpkins, audio specialist; John Smith, associate director; Jonathan Williger, marketing manager; Brian Zimmerman, sales representative and fulfillment.

Thank you!

This project came into being under the guidance of two superb musicians and beautiful human beings: producers Derek Nakamoto and Quetzal Flores, who gave me the loving support to create this, my first solo album in 20 years. A special thanks for the time and care that Derek put into the arrangements to take these songs beyond my living room piano to share with you. It was a joy for this ol' gal to step into the recording studio with such brilliant musicians, my homegirl singers, and guest artists who so generously shared their magic to bring these songs into their fullness. My gratitude also goes to

Sojin Kim and Deborah Wong, two selfless geniuses who, behind the scenes, caringly nudged this project into fruition. I would like to acknowledge Barbara Dane of Paredon Records, who recognized early the importance of Asian Americans having our own song. Recording the album *A Grain of Sand* preserved our music as part of our collective memory. Collaborations with artists like Dan Kwong and others in my Great Leap family and beyond have kept more songs coming. Being a “community artist” has given me the privilege of working with many communities of color and their struggles—students, immigrants, environmentalists, gardeners—expanding my world, my work, my songs. I’m grateful to the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center, who gives us space to grow projects like FandangObon, bringing together Latinx, Black, and Muslim communities, opening endless possibilities. Mentors Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, and Rev. Mas Kodani continue to be inspirations in my work. And finally, to my own family, my husband / partner / teacher Tarabu, my son Kamau and his wife Malika, and my four grandchildren. I sing for you.

About Smithsonian Folkways

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

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