

# Tambourine

Japan's folk music mail order company has celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2007. **Paul Fisher** dropped in.



Tambourine's Kiyoshi Funatsu and some dodgy old vinyl

It's 1989 and I'm about to go to Japan for the first time. Our Editor scribbles down a couple of names, addresses and phone numbers of subscribers who he says I might want to look up. Little does he know that they are both out in the middle of nowhere: little did I know I happened to be going to the prefecture capital of Kumamoto, a reasonably short bus ride away.

I arrive unannounced in one of the villages, Uchinomaki and speaking no Japanese, make a phone call to Naoyuki Iwami of the record shop Discpoint Jam, one of those subscribers. He understands me enough to work out that I've arrived literally thirty seconds away at the bus station. We go to his shop, where he calls the other subscriber, Kiyoshi Funatsu of the 'mail order music shop' Tambourine, who an hour or two later turns up to whisk me away to his house and office in another nearby village.

When we arrive, there's a sign next to his front door with some Japanese writing in English, and the words 'Welcome. World Music'. I never quite understood if that was a permanent fixture or hastily made for my impending arrival at the home of British folk music in Japan.

In 2007, Tambourine is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. "Until the early '70s when I was a university student, I mainly loved rock music," explains Kiyoshi. "In 1972 a music café opened near where I was working and I first heard British folk music there. They introduced me to another

music café for British and American folk enthusiasts called Black Hawk. Tadaaki Matsudaira, the Director of Black Hawk, also a music writer and broadcaster, introduced many folk-type musics from the UK and USA with passion and intelligence, there and in music magazines and on the radio. I heard lots of British folk albums by singers and groups like Nic Jones, Wizz Jones, Sandy Denny, Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span, Pentangle, Martin Carthy, Shirley Collins, Anne Briggs, Ralph McTell, Nick Drake, Trees, Dick Gaughan, Dave Burland, Shelagh McDonald and Ian A Anderson." Yes, that man again.

I wondered what it was about the music that appealed to him. "The English feel and taste. I was charmed by something elegant, mysterious, deep and dark in the stories and sounds of the words and music." And was British folk known at all in Japan at that time? "No, not much. Albums by big names were released in Japan and British folk albums were often reviewed in rock and guitar magazines. Most writers always rated them very highly, and among them, Tadaaki Matsudaira was special."

"I started the mail order music shop as a hobby when I opened a music café called Tambourine in my home town of Fukuoka, thirty years ago. There was a boom in singer-songwriter music at the time. Black Hawk was the seismic centre of the boom and they called this type of music 'human song'. As soon as I wrote some articles for the magazine *Small Town Talk* published by Black Hawk, many 'human song' enthusiasts started to buy

records from my mail order business, which soon became my main job. Later in 1983 I moved to Tokyo and I started a folk and world music magazine called *Pao* with my friend and Asian music specialist Kyoji Hoshikawa. Tambourine then got many more customers who were interested in folk and world music and I too was enthusiastic about music from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia as well as folk music from Britain and Ireland."

When we first met, the term 'world music' had just caught on in Japan and was experiencing a boom. How did British folk fit into that and did it help his mail order business? "Yes. It was the period when my interest in music had become wider. I found lots of great music and sold a lot of CDs. British folk music became more widely noticed by other folk and world music fans. Many British folk fans opened their ears to other European folk music and African music. Irish folk music became surprisingly popular after this boom."

I wondered what he put the success of his mail order business down to. "I was lucky. There have been good customers, suppliers and music magazines around me for thirty years. I have not been interested in any trends. All I have done is show my customers the stuff that I was moved by and sold it to them through the mail order catalogue."

A bit surprisingly, Kiyoshi has bucked the trend by continuing to sell more via his trusty paper catalogue than through his website. He cites some of the biggest all-time sellers as Lasairfhiona, June Tabor, Richard Thompson, Dougie MacLean, Dochas and Rachel Walker. And among the more recent popular items have been CDs by Julie Fowlis and Lisa Knapp.

When I used to go to his house in the early 1990s, his extremely quiet young daughter, Sayaka, would usually be there. She was obviously, however, absorbing the music that was constantly on in the background. Last year, Tambourine released the company's first album, *Spirited Harp* by Sayaka Ikuyama. "My daughter wanted to study Irish harp and step dancing. She learnt from various harp players during short stays and between 2000 and 2002 studied the Irish harp in Galway. Last year, she made her solo harp CD."

After thirty years, is his enthusiasm at the same level? "Yes, and I might still have the same enthusiasm for another thirty years or more. Great music always gives me enthusiasm to work and I then want to let my customers know about that music from my heart. Tambourine will continue as long as music continues to move me."

www.tambourine-japan.com