


# In Memory of Toru Mitsui (1940–2023)

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We came to know the name of Toru Mitsui as a translator of books such as Carl Belz, *The Story of Rock* (original 1969; translation 1972), David Dalton, *The Rolling Stones* (1972;1973), George Melly, *Revolt into Style* (1970; 1973), William J. Schafer, *Rock Music* (1972; 1973), Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan* (1972; 1973), *The Rolling Stone Interviews* (1971; 1974), Robert Neff & Anthony Connor, *Blues* (1975; 1976), Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train* (1975; 1977) and Woody Guthrie's *Seeds of Man* (1976; 1978). The list goes on: Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis* (1991; 1996), Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (1989; 1991) and *Careless Love* (1999; 2007). These books are today recognised as classics of popular music criticism and the authors are respected as the precursors of what we call popular music studies.

Mitsui started playing Elvis Presley's songs in his high school years (while jazz was the symbol for post-war liveliness for those born in the 1930s). He then became fascinated by Bob Dylan and the Beatles in the 1960s. He did not only listen to, dance to and play the new music but also read penetratingly and extensively the books on it. He was a real pioneer of popular music studies in Japan. Mitsui-san, our friend and professor, passed away on 19 February 2023 at the age of 82 in greater Tokyo.

Rock music, as is often noted, was revolutionary not only for sound-making but also for thought-provoking. Rock critics opened a new wave of writing on popular music. The students, criticising the art-oriented exclusivism of musicology, approached rock and its sister genres from sociology, political science, literary criticism and other points of view. Popular music visibly entered universities in the 1980s. The emerging interest in popular culture in academia encouraged scholars to redefine popular music according to new modes and ideas. Mitsui made this musical-intellectual movement accessible to Japanese readers. Understanding the meaning of those books, he loved to translate them.

The significance of translation is often neglected by the anglophone for whom the 'native' (first) language functions unanimously as universal and the translation is but a secondary production. However, without translation, one could not have developed the discussion beyond the language barrier. One should be conscious of the linguistic binarism of English/the rest in popular music and the world of academia more generally. Mitsui's translations prepared a platform for the study of popular music as early as the mid-1970s. It is impossible to imagine today's Japanese Association for

the Study of Popular Music without him. He was logically International Advisory Editor of *Popular Music* since 1983 and elected as the President of IASPM between 1993 and 1997. His monumental contribution to IASPM was recognised in hosting the 9th IASPM International Conference in Kanazawa in 1997.

On the back cover of *Black Blues Today* (1977) Mitsui mentioned that he was 'born a few months before Lennon, a year before Dylan'. It might sound irrelevant for the anglophone reader but the awareness of sharing global popular music (especially that sung in English) was basic to his identity and writing. How to 'domesticate' and 'digest' it, or how to overcome the inferiority complex to (Latino-) American (and European) authenticity, has been argued over by several authors and characterises the history of popular music after 1945.

Born in March 1940 in Saga, Kyushu, he grew up in post-defeat Japan as a sensitive boy. The intensified Americanism after 1945 was his cradle. His passion for American music was so deep that he entered the Graduate School of English Literature, Kyushu University (Fukuoka). He joined country music bands at university, playing the guitar, the flat mandolin, the banjo and the dulcimer. His bands played at dance parties, college parties, Christmas festivities and other events. There are photos of him singing with a band in front of a microphone, playing the guitar and wearing a cowboy hat.

In 1964, at the age of 24, he began working as a full-time lecturer at Aichi University in Nagoya. His interest in music from the southern United States was so serious that he visited Indiana University, Bloomington, between 1966 and 1967 to study with Edson Richmond, a renowned expert on Scandinavian ballads and lore. He met privately with Mike Seeger (he had met Mike's brother Pete in Fukuoka in 1963). Upon returning home, he organised a research group to study anglophone ballads and published books on bluegrass (1967). In 1971 he published a history of country music that became a standard and long-selling book. It was the first of its kind in Japanese. In this way he started writing about music of the American South, while being exceptional within the hobby circle of bluegrass and country music.

In 1969 he got a position at Kanazawa University, where he worked until his retirement in 2005. Kanazawa, known for its beautiful park, gardens and castle, looks like a snowy hermitage-city in the Hokuriku area, mid-northern Japan. He loved its quiet yet vivid life, and the close connection with local journalism and broadcasting. He broadcast a 150 minute long programme on a local station dedicated to John Lennon a week after his assassination, during which he sang John's songs on guitar. Lamentably we have no recording of this special broadcast.

Mitsui-san was known outside academia for his essays on American culture. Handy readable books were his favourite form. For example, *Michael Jackson Phenomenon* (1985), published in the year of *We Are the World*, spotlighted the superstar in relation to centuries of the history of race in showbiz and within the context of Motown culture. *Stories of 'You Are My Sunshine'* (1989) narrated a socio-political overview of Louisiana (and the South) concealed beneath the brightness of the song, exemplified in the first recording by the Pine Ridge Boys (1939) as well as in opportunistic secondary uses of the song by Jimmy Davis during election campaigns and for 'homecoming' gatherings in his chapel in Beach Springs. A chapter on authorship was drawn from his presentation at the 6th Annual Country Music Conference (Mississippi State University, 1989) and thus tied his academic work to

a general readership. This book shows his enduring enthusiasm for country music, too.

His interest in the subject area extended beyond music. *Jeans Stories* (1990), another pocketbook, dealt with the folk history of casual clothing, presenting an argument that linked immigration to the United States, the textile industry, folk and blues musicians, and cultural representations of the working class. *Columns: The United States on B-Sides* (1986) is a collection of his newspaper columns about the incredible miscellanies he happened to find in the American media punctuated by sharp comments questioning the stereotypes of a powerful United States shared by the common readership. His writing style was characterised by a contrast between general theories (of American race, urbanism, fashion, for instance) and particular objects. Exploiting his scrupulous biblio-hunting, he skilfully sketched the unexpected details of everyday life in the United States.

Rock and folk music challenged consumer-oriented music journalism. Founded in April 1969, during the student movement, *New Music Magazine* called for a new cohort of music critics. It was directed by Toyo Nakamura, an energetic critic, limitless record collector of world music, and keen reader of alternative journals vibrating from the rock movement and blues revival. Mitsui saw Nakamura for the first time in 1966 just before his Indiana trip. Surprised by his gigantic library, in 1971 Nakamura commissioned a regular column on the arrivals of foreign books. It continued until 2002 and the entire texts were collected in one book, *Five Thousand Imported Books on Popular Music* (2003). It must be the largest book list on popular music with comments by a single author in any language. He donated over 5,500 books to Kanazawa University, resulting in one of the largest libraries of popular music in the world. Unbelievably it was complemented by a list of Japanese books, *Catalogue of Books about Popular Music Published in Japan 1886–2008* (2009), which contains over 6,700 items. In the same year this was published, he also revised the 1981 translation of Phil Hardy's and Dave Laing's *The Age of Rock'n'roll* (1976) and like these two authors, he was an encyclopaedist of popular music studies.

He was so meticulous that he self-published in 2012, two years after retiring from university, a chronology of his publications since 1961, including newsletters, independent journalism and liner notes, and incorporated presentations going back to 1955 that covered school bands and choruses, non-academic conferences and radio appearances, drawn from his collection of newspapers and photographs. We are overwhelmed not only by his tireless activity but also by the closeness of his data collection. We 'read' – rather than 'refer to' – the long list because he often added quotes from his diaries on the day of a presentation. He had a so-called collector's mind, characterised by the continuous attachment to specific items, and the systematic preservation of them. He was persistent. It was fundamental to his research method.

Shuhei Hosokawa writes:

I met Mitsui for the first time around 1985 in Kanazawa. Our meeting, together with a group of sociologists of music, led to the inauguration of the Japan Branch of the IASPM in 1987. Mitsui was automatically elected as the President because he was almost the only member who had a regular position in academia. The connection with IASPM intensified his international activities, as he participated in IASPM International Conferences (1989, 1991, 1993, 1995 and 1997), and this led to a special Japanese issue of *Popular Music* (1991). To introduce the emerging field of popular music studies to domestic readers, he selected the literature published in

the early volumes of *Popular Music* (by John Shepherd, David Horn, Davie Laing, Paul Oliver and Peter Wicke) under the title of *Popular Music Studies: Interdisciplinary Frontier* (2005). It became an important source and was often referred to by professors and lecturers in the study of popular culture.

For an international readership, he co-edited (with myself) *Karaoke Around The World* (1998), edited *Made in Japan* (2014) and authored *Popular Music in Japan* (2020). The subtitle of this last book, 'Transformation inspired by the West' was the key concept in his historiography of popular music in Japan. He argued for a process of *mélange* between vernacular and imported music-making on various levels. This book was partly drawn from his last Japanese book, *History of Western-oriented Popular Music in Postwar Japan, 1945–1975* (2018), a dense national chronology of jazz, chanson, Latin-American dances, Hawaiian hula, rhythm & blues and soul, country, musicals, rock, among many others, with analytical comments on contemporary articles in newspaper and magazines. This book looked like a musical retrospective of his own life since it described how music from the United States and UK, disseminated through radio, record, concert tours and other channels, formed the taste of the public as well as stimulating young people to get tuned in with the new sound that he had grown up with.

Yusuke Wajima writes:

I was born and raised in Kanazawa, the provincial city where Mitsui worked. My experience is one example, if not the most typical, of how a professor appeared from the perspective of the students' generations and should be forgiven for being a personal account.

For a music-loving high school student living in a provincial town around 1990, *Music Magazine*, to which Mitsui had contributed since its first issue in 1969, was an indispensable source of information. It was almost baffling that the writer there, who introduced a vast number of English-language books every month and translated the often-esoteric essays of Greil Marcus – in other words, who knew anglophone pop music intellectually better than anyone else – lived in the small town I wished to escape from. I also became a regular customer at the import record shop that I heard he sometimes visited, but I never had the chance to speak with him personally. A few years later, I revisited that record shop during my spring break when I was attending graduate school in Tokyo, studying art and aesthetics. When I told the owner that I was thinking of writing an MA thesis on music, he told me that I should go and see Professor Mitsui right away, and he phoned Mitsui on the spot to arrange a meeting. This illustrates how well known and loved he was in the local music scene. When I went to see him the next day, he introduced me to the texts he used in the seminar – Longhurst's *Popular Music and Society* and Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* – and gave me the names of several researchers from different majors at my university and encouraged me to join in their classes. Mitsui's willingness to accept me as an extra student and share generously his intellectual resources was surprising to me because I belonged to an old-fashioned graduate school which was authoritarian and closed. Mitsui was gentler and calmer than any university faculty member I knew.

In the late 2000s, when I returned to my hometown for the holidays, I frequently met and talked with Mitsui, who continued to reside in Kanazawa after his retirement. As I was researching Japanese counterculture discourse in the 1960s for my doctoral thesis this was both research guidance from a leading figure in the field and an interview with one of the influential writers who had introduced the

American counterculture and its musical expressions to Japan. He often said, 'It's been a long time since I've talked to anyone outside of my family, so my words may not come out well'. But based on his organised records and memories, with humour and sharp insights, he gave me detailed information about cultural figures and venues in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka at the time, recalling such fascinating episodes as Pete Seeger's visit to Japan and the events leading to the first issue of *Music Magazine*.

Impressively, he said that living far from Tokyo allowed him to read and write books at a faster pace, freeing him from the connections and factions of the music industry centralised in Tokyo. He also said that he was able to do this because he got a job as an English teacher at a local university at the young age of 24, and that it would have been difficult for him to find or continue a job at a university today where liberal arts programmes and humanities departments have been dismantled. I also remember him saying that because he grew up near the US base in Fukuoka he had plenty of exposure to American music and culture and never felt that he was behind Tokyo and other major Japanese cities. It was an eye-opener for me, as I had uncritically thought of Tokyo as a gateway to foreign culture. As an English teacher in a local university, Mitsui was naturally connected to the Anglo-American world through books and records. This was very different from other writers on music, who worked within the domestic cultural industry centred on Tokyo, and this, in turn, was one of the main reasons why Mitsui's work received a distinguished reputation within journalism. The fact that Mitsui was born and raised in Fukuoka and worked in Kanazawa may also have influenced the very low concentration of Japanese popular music studies in Tokyo, compared with other academic disciplines, and the Japanese popular music scene itself.

Mitsui was in his late teens in Fukuoka, Japan, at about the same time as Lennon and Dylan, when he was struck by the impact of American vernacular music – country, folk and rock 'n' roll. He then disseminated the significance of the English-speaking stars of his generation, who shared the same musical experience, to the next generation of pop music lovers through elaborate translations. The intellectual presentation of rock, folk, blues and country through English-language books, without much connection to the Japanese music scene, was accompanied by a tendency towards culturalist reception, valuing music as an imported canon. However, there is no doubt that this intellectual affection for popular music in the English-speaking world has also provided the soil for the emergence of many popular music researchers in Japan. The generation whose interest in pop music was aroused through Mitsui's translations, and who were eventually trained as academics under him, has formed the core of Japanese popular music research to this day. *Made in Japan* (2014) is a compilation of papers already published in Japanese by these successors, translated into English by their respective authors and meticulously edited by Mitsui.

In hindsight, his position is aligned with the axis of influence from the English-speaking world to Japan, and his bilateral and unidirectional perspective might be open to critical reconsideration. However, the publication in English of popular music research from the Japanese-speaking world by Mitsui and his successors, such as *Karaoke Around the World* and *Made in Japan*, provided an opportunity to join the circle of research exchanged with neighbouring Asian regions where English is the provisional lingua franca. In particular, the 'Made in' series from around the world marks the emergence of popular music research that crosses regional and

national borders. A quarter of a century after the 1997 Kanazawa conference of IASPM organised by Mitsui, the second IASPM conference in Asia was held in Daegu, Korea, in 2022. The importance of correlating pop music cultures from different parts of Asia, which to some extent share the influence of English-speaking popular music but have distinctly different experiences, was confirmed at the Made in Asia roundtable held there. Naturally, Mitsui was due to attend this roundtable discussion with the editors of the Asian volumes of the Made in series, but owing to his age he cancelled and appointed me as his representative. In doing so, Mitsui-sensei, I believe, has given us the following task: to reconsider the history of the reception of English-speaking popular music in Japan in the second half of the 20th century, which he himself embodied, not only within Japan but also in context of the Asian and global experiences of his time. Through this task, the magnitude of his work and his existence itself will be recognised anew.

We both remember vividly that Mitsui-san was always intrigued by the latest mode (J-pop, punk, hip hop, idol, karaoke and whatsoever) yet remained faithful to bluegrass and country music, his teenage enthusiasm. His last known band performance was at the 'Jam Session in Memory of Mike Seeger (1933–2009)' in 2010 at the Hokuriku Bluegrass Festival in Johana City, near Kanazawa. Before performing 'Fiddlin' Soldier', his favourite tune, he talked about his exciting meeting with Seeger in 1966 at the second Bluegrass Festival in Virginia. His last known publication is 'Published Collections as the Sources of Ballad Tunes Sung by an Enthusiast in Japan' in the *Journal of American Folklore* (vol. 135/537, 2022). The website summarises it as a 'delightful personal account about how ballads travel across time and space through individual initiative, recordings, song books, and accidental encounters'. This semi-autobiographical article expresses his return to the starting point of long road. Now we read it with sorrow and gratitude.